

## Classification Of Social Phenomena

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### I.

It is the first work of a new science to describe and classify the phenomena which it is to study, and the success with which this is done, is in some sense a criterion of the advance which a science has made. If sociology were to be judged today by such a criterion, it would indeed take low rank. Perhaps it presents no more vulnerable point to those who question its claims to be a science at all, than this very confusion as to the definition and classification of the objects it would study. Not infrequently sociologists have committed the logical error of using more than one principle of classification. When Comte asserts that the individual, the family, and "society" are the social organs, it is apparent that the list is by no means exhaustive, and secondly that the organs enumerated are in no sense homogeneous. Apart from such logical blunders, students of society have conspicuously failed to agree on any one classification, and this failure to agree on some common foundation has proved almost fatal to any real progress in the science.

The importance of a true system of classification is indicated by Mr. Mill's<sup>1</sup> statement of its purpose, to "give us the greatest command over our knowledge already acquired, and lead most directly to the acquisition of more." And Mr. Jevons<sup>2</sup> states the purpose to be "primarily to disclose the correlations or laws of union of properties and circumstances."

Almost any method of classification serves this purpose to some extent, but science seeks the best method. The theory of evolution has wrought a great change in the logic of natural science by demonstrating that there is one really natural method of classification. According to this theory, organisms of different species have sprung from a common stock, and wherever the genetic relation can be discovered it determines the natural classification. This method is comparatively simple and easily applied in the case of biology, and even of botany; in geology and astronomy it is not impracticable; but in chemistry, for instance, it is quite useless. I believe that sociology belongs to the same group of sciences, in this respect, as biology. The evolution of social activities and social institutions bears some resemblance to the evolution of organisms; and if we can trace the complex phenomena back to a few simple sources we have the key to the genetic, natural classification that we seek. The classification thus reached will be final (for the present state of our knowledge), and it can but be suggestive to the student of s...

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