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Sociological Theories

In discourse we typically refer to sociological theory as an entity and to sociological theorizing as a recognizable activity. We write articles and books and teach courses on sociological theory, and some of us say that we specialize in theory. In one sense such statements are misleading. Every item of empirical research in the field, however narrowly defined and circumscribed, is rooted in general propositions about human beings and society and contains the seeds of abstract reasoning and normative evaluation. These elements are often implicit but never absent. For this reason, theory should be regarded as an integral *aspect* of sociological inquiry rather than something separate from it. In another sense, however, theory is distinguishable. It is legitimate to consider the relations among the general elements in their own right; in doing so, we enter the realm of sociological theory.

The objectives of this chapter are two: first, to make some general remarks about sociological theory (at the beginning and the end); second, to lay out a rough, but comprehensive, map of theoretical thinking in contemporary sociology (in the middle). Each objective demands more than the total space allowed, and it is perhaps foolhardy to attempt so much. However, one cannot appreciate contemporary theory without addressing both objectives.

The Nature and Varieties of Sociological Theorizing

History and Theory

We frequently distinguish between the history of theory (or thought) and systematic theory. The former traces self-conscious thought about society

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- Sociological theory is useful insofar as it enters into *general public discourse*, as one of the voices supplying intelligence, debate, and controversy to that discourse. In this sense sociological theory has a definite ideological aspect. Critics of the field may regard this aspect negatively–whether as reinforcing the *status quo* or as undermining it–but the general point is that sociological theorizing never occupies a neutral place in its sociocultural contexts.

The Issue of Accumulation

Sociology, including its theoretical aspects, is normally represented as a social *science*. Historically, the social sciences grew up as an effort to adapt the models and methods of the natural sciences to society, and most practitioners comfortably describe themselves as social scientists. In this connection, it is often asked whether social-scientific knowledge grows in a cumulative sense.

The scientific model of accumulation usually held out for comparison is that scientific knowledge, including theory, has validity only in a temporary sense. It is continually being displaced, absorbed, or replaced by the additive accumulation of new empirical discoveries and their theoretical interpretations. Accordingly, the history of science is of interest mainly as a matter of curiosity, not validity, because science is forever being rendered invalid by its own progress.

It has been argued (Kuhn 1962) that this idealized model does not apply even to the natural sciences; certainly it does not apply to the development of theoretical knowledge in sociology. The dynamics of sociological theory seem to be something like the following. From time to time, scholars formulate a timely, original, or creatively synthetic statement about social relations or society–for example, the idea of linear, or progressive, evolution. This statement excites immediate interest if it emerges in an appropriate intellectual or societal context; or it may lie dormant for a while, to be activated only when its time comes. In any event, the interest that is excited invariably gives rise to a number of theoretical and empirical challenges to the statement and the assertion or reassertion of alternative interpretations. Such criticisms, in their turn, invite statements of defense, adaptation, and elaboration of the original statement on the part of its advocates. As an outcome of this process, a perspective, an approach, or even a "school" takes its place in the history of theorizing. Over time that school may endure, be discredited, be revitalized, or be transformed as it is combined and recombined with other ideas and perspectives.

The history of sociological theory, as well as the current state of sociological theory, is the precipitate of dozens, if not hundreds, of such intellectual episodes. It is a history of invention, elaboration, synthetic combination and recombination, vitalization and revitalization, and occasional death of theoretical perspectives. This history is thus *not* one

of additive accumulation–replacing the old by the new in light of more adequate or valid knowledge. It is, rather, a history of increase in numbers, complexity, and enrichment of more or less systematically expressed perspectives, frameworks, and theories about human society. It is also a history of continuous flux, as theoretical knowledge undergoes internal shifts through invention, controversy, and debate within the field and as it responds to the changing conditions in the societies in which it is generated. Finally, at any given moment, the map of sociological theory is a complicated mosaic, an aggregated product of that flux, rather than a rationally accumulated pattern. What coherence it possesses arises mainly from the interpretations of those scholars who subsequently discern patterns in its development.

A Contemporary Map of Sociological Theories

Sociology, a discipline of enormous scope, is divisible in several ways: first, in terms of subfields classified by content–stratification, sociology of the family, sociology of poverty, environmental sociology (see chapter 1); second, according to methods–mathematical, statistical, comparative, experimental, ethnographic (see chapter 3); and third, by alternative (sometimes competing) theoretical perspectives or paradigms. In this chapter I concentrate on the third.

Three qualifications are in order at the beginning:

- The map I am about to draw suffers from a certain ahistoricity; it is cross-sectional, with few references to the origins and development of the map's different parts.
- My own geography–like that produced by anyone else–involves some arbitrariness, because there are many legitimate ways to slice the theoretical pie. The work of Max Weber, for example, can legitimately be classified as "phenomenological," "structural," "middle-range," and "conflict" theory; Weber could therefore be located on one or many parts of the theoretical map, depending on the salience given to each of these facets of his work.
- The presentation of a map with distinct territories should not conjure up the imagery of a field occupied by multiple armies of scholars, each mobilized tightly around a theoretical perspective. Some scholars define themselves in that way, but most tend in practice to be somewhat eclectic in their theoretical choices, perhaps stressing one perspective over another, but also borrowing from and combining approaches when the intellectual problem at hand seems to demand it.

Now to the map itself. The fundamental division is between macroscopic perspectives that focus on organizations, institutions, societies, and culture and microscopic perspectives that focus on individuals' social psychology and interactive processes among them. In practice, the two levels overlap; all macroscopic theories contain at least

implicit psychological assumptions, and most microscopic theories assume broader societal parameters within which micro-processes transpire.

Macrosociological Theories

The most frequent contrast is between theories that stress social integration and those that stress social conflict.

Integration theories The main tradition falling under this heading is structural-functional theory, traceable through the works of Herbert Spencer (1897), Emile Durkheim (1947 [1913]), Bronislaw Malinowski (1955), and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and culminating in the formulations of Talcott Parsons (1951) and Robert Merton (1968b). All these regard society as a structure of mutually interrelated parts which are sustained, in varying degree, by equilibrating mechanisms. The structural-functional perspective is also associated with the consolidation of modernization theory in the decades following the Second World War. This theory treats the developmental process as breaking through tradition-based obstacles (located mainly in religion, tribe and caste, community, and kinship) and replacing them by the more "modern," differentiated institutions (including democratic governments) found in the developed countries. One other theoretical formulation–"the end of ideology" (Bell 1960)–also falls roughly under heading of functional analysis. Exponents of this point of view, which appeared in the post-Second World War decades, argued that a new consensus had been achieved in Western societies, in that workers had achieved political citizenship, the bourgeoisie had accepted the welfare state, both had accepted the democratic process, and the ideological issues dividing the Left and the Right had been reduced to marginal differences in emphasis over governmental ownership and economic planning.

The structural-functional perspective came under assault in the turbulent years of the 1960s and is still the target of criticism from radical and critical sociologists and from many sociologists in developing countries. The full apparatus of structural-functional analysis (including a systematic classification of functional prerequisites, the idea of societal survival, and stable equilibrium) does not survive intact, but much research still relies on a number of central ideas associated with it, namely:

- Institutions serve a positive purpose in the ongoing societal effort to guarantee that its main goals are realized.
- Institutions manifest a "strain toward consistency"; for example, the contours of higher education are shaped by the functional needs of a high-technology, service-based economy.
- Strains and contradictions in institutional life set up equilibrating processes that change these institutions in adaptive directions; for example, when both

parents in families enter wage labor in large numbers, alternative systems of socialization (extended kin, child-care institutions) tend to materialize.

- A principal form of change in developing societies is structural differentiation, the development of more complex and specialized social structures (Alexander and Colomy 1990).

The weakest aspect of structural-functional analysis in contemporary thinking is the idea that integration is achieved through consensus on common values, a view associated mainly with Parsons.

Elements of structural-functional analysis also survive in some recent theoretical perspectives. One is "population ecology," a perspective that invokes classical Darwinian principles. Its main application is in the area of formal organizations, in which the birth, growth, transformation, and death of economic and other organizations are seen as resulting from an interaction between the adaptive strategies of organizations and the constraints (mainly resource opportunities) in the environment (Hannan and Freeman 1977). A second is "systems theory," long associated with the idea that all natural, human, and social systems manifest the same principles of functioning. Its most important contemporary expression is found in the work of Luhmann (1982), who has carried forward some aspects of Parsons's theory and has generated theories regarding functional differentiation and the self-production of systems (*autopoesis*), as well as their evolution. A third perspective is "neo-functionalism," associated with Alexander (1985) and others. This approach stresses the interrelation of societal activities, analysis at the social-structural level (macrosociology), deviance and social control mechanisms, and structural differentiation as a central principle of social change. What is "neo" is the acknowledgment that cultural consensus is not the core integrating mode in society, but rather that coalitions, interest groups, and other agencies of conflict play a key role in social dynamics; that personal interaction must be taken into account as the basis of social-structural processes; and that sociology should deal not only with "systems" but also with "action." In a word, neo-functionalism builds a kind of bridge to theories that give a central role to conflict, theories which we will now consider.

Conflict theories It is appropriate to begin with another statement bridging the integration and conflict perspectives. This is found in the thinking of Georg Simmel as consolidated by Coser (1956). Coser's starting point is a criticism of the functional view (mainly Parsons's) that conflict destabilizes the social order. Coser argues that conflict often constitutes the basis for community and unity among combatants and that conflict with an outside group (as in war or civil strife) is a solidifying force. In one sense this argument is an extension of the functional approach itself, because of its continued preoccupation with integration. In any event, Coser's aim is to incorporate various types of conflict within the functionalist perspective.

Most conflict theories in contemporary sociology derive from the formulations of Karl Marx: that all historical societies–and notably bourgeois capitalism–are based on an economic mode of production that produces a bipolar system of social classes, one exploiting, the other exploited. By virtue of that relationship, the classes stand in a relation of irreconcilable conflict with one another. This conflict, moreover, is the engine of historical change in Marx's theory, insofar as the ultimate victory of the exploited class ushers in a new type of society and a new phase of evolutionary history (Marx 1913 [1859]; Marx and Engels 1954 [1848]).

It is evident that the Marxist perspective has been an enormous intellectual and political force. It spawned a vast array of Marxist-inspired theories in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it became the informing ideology of Communist, Socialist, and other left parties in most advanced and developing countries; and it was (or is) the legitimizing ideology for the former Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, almost all Eastern European countries, and other countries such as Cuba and North Korea.

In recent decades the influence of Marxism has experienced a decline among Western European and (to a lesser degree) North American scholars and a virtual demise in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where the Socialist and Communist regimes erected on Marxism-Leninism have collapsed dramatically. Nevertheless, the materialist class perspective still finds expression in theoretical writings and political outlooks of scholars from the Third World and among some Western scholars. Among the latter, however, its vitality is seen not so much in its presentation as a total theory of society (with the exception of the theory of monopoly capitalism) but rather in its application to specific areas. Among these are Wright's (1985) statements on the continuing determinative influence of economic classes; Braverman's (1974) and Burawoy's (1979) analyses of change and domination in the workplace; certain interpretations of contemporary race relations in the United States–for example, the internal colonialism model of Blauner (1972), which borrows heavily from the neo-Marxist theory of colonialism; the interpretation of gender domination as a special manifestation of the capitalist domination of labor (Hartmann 1976); and the "new criminology" (Taylor *et al.* 1973), a perspective based on the premise that the definition and punishment of crime are mainly in the interest of the continued capitalist domination of the oppressed classes.

Most other contemporary conflict perspectives maintain one or more elements of Marxism, such as the idea of oppressing and oppressed classes or the idea of group conflict. These theories either abandon so many other elements of Marxism or combine them with so many non-Marxian ideas, however, that they can scarcely be said to be "Marxian" without overstretching that perspective. One example of this kind of theoretical formulation is that of Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), who rejects the fundamental Marxian proposition that economic relations are the basis of inequality in

modern society and criticizes the Marxian theory of classes derived therefrom. At the same time, Dahrendorf retains the idea of domination as an organizing principle, tracing that domination, however, to a differential position in a relationship of authority (thus giving his work a Weberian cast). He also retains ideas similar to those of Marx to the effect that class groups based on authority relations gradually crystallize from latent interest groups into action groups as the interests become manifest through ideology, consciousness, leadership, and organization and that these groups are the main vehicles for conflict and change.

Another major conflict perspective which derives in part from the Marxian tradition is the "critical school" of sociology. Mainly German in origin–and within Germany, stemming mainly from Frankfurt–the critical school arose in the interwar period as a confluence of Marxian, psychoanalytic, and various cultural perspectives. Its more recent expressions are found in the works of Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Marcuse (1964) retained the Marxian notion that contemporary European and North American societies are divided into the two great classes of the oppressors and the oppressed and that oppression is related to the capitalist organization of the economy. However, because of the rise in affluence through technological advance, the distribution of wealth through welfare, and the continued transfer of wealth from the Third World to the advanced countries, the proletariat has become passive and is no longer a revolutionary force. Rather, domination works through technological manipulation by big government and is sustained through the mass media, which perpetuate a kind of false consciousness of material well-being in the population. As a result, the masses are subdued, and conflict is rare (except for occasional defiance and violence by outcast racial minorities and the unemployed underclass). The apparent consensus that exists is only a superficial cover for domination and suppressed conflict.

In a related statement, Habermas (1975) regards the main agency of domination in post-industrial capitalism not as class in the Marxian sense, but rather as the technical-administrative apparatus of the state, based on instrumental rationality. This apparatus intrudes on the life-world of individuals and groups and distorts it in an overly rational direction. The state involves itself in the organization and manipulation of the economy in its "steering performances." In addition, the state enters the economy directly, providing education and training, supervising and maintaining the infrastructure of transportation and housing, and sustaining huge military forces. The state secures the loyalty–often passive–of the populace by assuring a flow of consumer goods, providing welfare, and controlling the media. At the same time, Habermas viewed the technical-administrative state as constantly facing crises such as inflation, financial instability, failures of planning, administrative paralysis, failure to deliver on its promises, and the erosion of cultural values such as the work ethic.

Two additional lines of theorizing are consistent with the renewed emphasis on the state. The first is the work of Skocpol (1979) and others,

who–under the rubric "bringing the state back in"–have reasserted that the state assumes an autonomy (not recognized in Marxist theory) and becomes a prime mover in the processes of bureaucratic growth, social domination, and the development of revolutions. The second is the European literature on the new social movements (Eyerman 1992). Noting that "new" movements such as the women's, environmental and anti-nuclear, anti-war, counter cultural, and racial-ethnic movements are not class-based in the Marxian sense, writers have attributed their rise largely to the bureaucratic state's intervention in the fabric of society and to cultural domination by the knowledge industry and the mass media.

Another feature of the classical Marxian world view is that culture (philosophy, religion, ideology) is derivative from the economic substructure in society and functions mainly in the interests of the dominant economic classes. Several recent theoretical developments have attributed greater independence to culture, however. One line of development concerns the analysis of cultural codes themselves, building on the seminal work of Lévi-Strauss (1963) and others; this view pervades cultural sociology in both the United States and Europe. Another line of development stresses the fusion of culture with power and domination.

Much of the impetus for this last view stems from Gramsci (1971). Himself a Marxist, he nevertheless assigned independent significance to the notion of "cultural hegemony," a process by which the ruling classes in society achieve domination by persuading the subordinate classes of the correctness of their cultural, moral, and political views through avenues such as the educational system and the mass media. Two French theorists, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, have elaborated the power–culture link in various directions. Foucault (1980) was concerned especially with the significance of knowledge as a pervasive mode of domination–he maintained that power and knowledge are one and the same–in society's structural relations. His particular analyses treat the exercise of knowledge/power in medical, psychiatric, and correctional settings. The macrosociological theory of Bourdieu (1984) also stresses the struggle among classes in society. This struggle involves an economic element, but Bourdieu himself gave more weight to a cultural or symbolic dimension. Different classes possess different levels and kinds of "cultural capital"–generated through socialization, formal education, and "cultivation"–which serves as a major resource in the assertion and defense of class position.

Two final conflict-based perspectives have arisen from a critique of theories of modernization. Both have an international flavor. The first is dependency theory, associated with Fernando Cardoso and other Latin American writers (Cardoso and Faletto 1969). Arguing that development is not rooted primarily in intra-societal forces such as entrepreneurship and the overcoming of traditional obstacles, these theorists stress that international capital, multinational corporations, and debt give direction to economic change and shape patterns of class domination and conflict in

the developing countries. Whereas early formulations stressed that international capital prevented or warped development, newer variants have analyzed cases (e.g., South Korea and Taiwan) where robust and successful economic development has occurred within the context of dependency. The second perspective is world-systems theory, associated with Fernand Braudel (1979) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974). It is based on the premise that both the modern and the contemporary organization of societies are based not on indigenous conditions but reflect the shifting system of economic relations *among* societies. In particular, any historical period is characterized by the presence of a core (e.g., Great Britain in the nineteenth century, the United States in the post-Second World War decades), a periphery (colonial countries, Third World countries), and a semi-periphery of involved but weaker countries (e.g., Mexico and Argentina at the present time). At its most extreme, world-systems theory would write the internal histories of societies as ramifications of the international economic forces impinging on them.

Microsociological Theories

While social psychology and social interaction have long been parts of sociology, the 1970s witnessed a "microscopic revolution" in which theories based on interpersonal interaction were either revitalized or invented. These were brought forward as competitors to macrosociological theory, which, it was claimed, "reifies" social life as abstract organizations, structures, and cultures.

Exchange and rational choice As the names imply, theories of this kind borrow from the fields of economics and psychology. Homans's social behaviorism (1974), for example, incorporated the principles of the maximization of utility and diminishing marginal utility from economics and the principle that regularities are based on connections between influences from the external environment (stimuli) and items of individual behavior (responses) from psychology. In particular, Homans argued that the more a person is rewarded (reinforced) for performing a certain act, the more solidly will that act be established in his or her pattern of behavior. The "exchange" component of Homans's theory arises from the assertion that two or more persons will behave toward one another in accordance with the principles of reward as reinforcement and that all types of interactive relationships (e.g., cooperation, authority) can be understood and explained as manifestations of such exchange. Another variation on exchange theory, that of Blau (1964), also relies on economic ideas of exchange, but his version is more nearly "social–structural" in character in that it envisages exchanges among persons located in organizational and structural positions and includes explicit analyses of the development of social differentiation, power structures, and collective values.

Rational-choice theory also arises from the application of psychological and market models current in economics to types of behavior and institutions not considered primarily economic. Becker, the economist, argued (1976) that the principle of rational calculation pervades all human life and applied that perspective to such diverse topics as racial discrimination, marriage choice, crime, and drug addiction. The most ambitious sociological statement of the rational-choice perspective is that of Coleman (1990). Starting from the utilitarian view of the actor as maximizing, rationally calculating, and unrestrained by norms, Coleman moved to wider settings and generated derivative analyses of interpersonal exchange, market and authority systems, collective behavior and social movements, and corporate and institutional structures.

Micro-conflict theories The first illustration of this approach is found in the work of Collins (1975). His theory involves two or more actors in a situation of scarcity, oriented not to exchange but to gaining dominance over other actors. However, he envisions interaction as more than a simple power struggle, because he acknowledges and develops possibilities for negotiation and compromise. The existing distribution of power in the larger society is a kind of aggregated result of thousands of settled micro-conflict situations. The second illustration was developed in one subfield of sociology, deviance and social control, and generally goes under the headings of labeling theory (Becker 1963) or stigma theory (Goffman 1963). Whereas functional theory treats deviance as originating in individual motivation and as in violation of some societal norm, labeling theorists regard deviants (and deviance in general) as produced by the exercise of power of agents in positions of social control (doctors, judges, law-enforcement officials), who enforce their definitions upon "deviants." The problem of deviance thus emerges as a kind of struggle over meanings–indeed, a power struggle–with the more powerful usually able to impose their definitions, though those labeled "deviant" develop strategies to subvert or manipulate those meanings. New social structures are created as authorities assign deviants to a kind of disadvantaged underclass.

Phenomenological theories Several microscopic approaches are based on the premise that the study of social reality must be based on the meaning systems of individual actors. An illustration of this approach is symbolic interactionism, rooted in the pragmatic philosophies of John Dewey, Charles Cooley, and George Herbert Mead and given later expression in the work of Blumer (1969). In one respect Blumer's starting point was a negative polemic: that human behavior cannot be characterized as the product of internal or external forces such as instincts, drives, social roles, social structures, or culture. Instead, the notions of subjective meaning and the self are central. Meaning is found, moreover–as the name of the perspective implies–in the interactive process. Individuals communicate with one another, create and derive meanings, and act on them

accordingly. In addition, an individual engages in meaningful communication with himself or herself, making the same kinds of indications as are found in interaction. These processes are complicated, involving the reading of others' meanings, revising meanings on the basis of such reading, guessing others' readings, and modifying one's anticipations and behavior in line with these processes. Enduring social arrangements are treated in large part as joint actions and the "fitting together" of meaningful activity in more or less stable ways.

A related perspective is ethnomethodology, associated mainly with Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodologists likewise rejected social-structural accounts, in that they involve reification and lose sight of the realities of close interaction. The ethnomethodological perspective envisions a free, practical, improvising, negotiating actor who, in interacting with others has at his or her disposal a variety of action plans and "rationalities." The task of the ethnomethodologist is to investigate the lines of action taken, the accounts given for this action, and the ways that taken-for-granted understandings guide action. The structure of social reality is not given but is continuously constituted, reconstituted, reproduced, and accounted for in interaction. One line of research of ethnomethodologists has been to discover–or create–situations in which interaction is broken by ignoring or violating understandings of interaction and to track how existing meanings are restored or new ones negotiated. For this reason ethnomethodologists have been described as "microfunctionalists" who study the equilibrating processes of social interaction, just as macrofunctionalists focus on these processes in the larger society.

Habermas (1987 [1981]) has also generated a synthetic statement known as "the theory of communicative action," based partly on phenomenological sources. It is a theory of communication associated with individuals' and groups' life-world, which is a level of society set off from the world of cognitive instrumentality and rationality that is embodied in formal organizations–especially the state apparatus–in post-industrial society. Habermas regards communicative action as an "ideal speech situation" in which free (unconstrained) individuals engage in argumentative speech and thereby create objective definitions and intersubjective constructions. The criteria for validity of communicative action are not rational in the scientific-instrumental sense but, rather, are found in the truths that arise from the moral, aesthetic, therapeutic, and expressive dimensions of interaction. Furthermore, Habermas views communicative discourse as liberating individuals from the distortions of an overly rationalized world and containing the potential for criticism and reconstruction of that world.

A final theoretical statement by Berger and Luckmann (1967) is both phenomenological and microsociological in its origins but also journeys to the macrosociological level and back to the microsociological. According to this view, in the interactive process people stabilize what is an inherently complex and unstable–if not chaotic–world through a process of

typification and objectification of social situations. The medium for this process is language. By a further process, objectifications are reified and given the stamp of legitimacy as they are forged into institutional and cultural expectations. Specialists in the definition and maintenance of "social reality" also arise. The circle is completed when this constructed reality of society becomes the basis for socialization and social control–processes carried out "as if" the constructed social reality were objective and real.

Some Qualifying Comments on the Map

Upon completing this tour of theoretical perspectives, which could have been more extensive and elaborate if space had permitted, the reader is likely to experience a certain weariness and frustration. The coverage of sociological theory is immense; its diversity is such that one searches in vain for unity; and most of the theoretical positions enunciated include a critical stance toward many of the rest. In many respects such perceptions are justified; sociological theory *is* sprawling, fragmented, and divided by polemic. To counteract this negative view to a degree, I now introduce a thread of continuity by venturing a few observations on the state of "theory in practice"–that is, on how sociologists regard theory in their ongoing empirical research.

Most sociologists would describe themselves as, in principle, favoring one or more of the perspectives found on the map and not favoring others. Statements of preference of this kind tend to highlight differences among sociologists. However, it is also clear that when theoretically informed investigators turn to the analysis of specific intellectual problems rooted in social reality, they are almost inevitably forced to "compromise" the purity of their first principles and incorporate others. For example, Durkheim's empirical studies of suicide (1951 [1897]) and Weber's empirical studies of religion and economic action (1958 [1904–5]) have much more in common than their methodological manifestos (Durkheim 1958 [1895], Weber 1949 [1904]), which are polemically opposed on almost all theoretical and methodological scores. The same can be said of most empirical research. Despite metatheoretical and substantive differences in starting points, the complexity of social reality and the methodological constraints of empirical investigation invariably force the investigator to break from the rigidities of first principles. In a word, empirical research imposes a tendency toward eclecticism and partial theoretical synthesis.

Furthermore, most of the theoretical perspectives reviewed here do not exist in some kind of pure state but are adapted continuously according to particular circumstances. For example, as theoretical perspectives, most of which have originated in Western Europe and North America, move to countries and regions of the world different from those of their origin, they are modified. They are combined and recombined with one another and

shaped to apply to perspectives, outlooks, and conditions distinctive to those particular countries and regions. It is also to be expected that as these countries develop universities, academies, and other institutions that facilitate social inquiry, more independent theorizing will develop. It is a matter of contemporary debate as to the degree to which sociology is unified versus the degree to which there are distinctive national and regional sociologies (see chapter 1); surely the correct view is that contemporary theoretical sociology is a complicated mosaic, incorporating both universal and particular intellectual and social forces.

We should also acknowledge several activities and outlooks that counter the tendencies toward polemic opposition among theoretical positions. First, insofar as sociological research becomes increasingly interdisciplinary–and many signs point in this direction–interpretative perspectives that might be considered opposed in the abstract tend to blend together. Second, the contemporary scene reveals a number of serious efforts at theoretical synthesis. Among these are the following:

- the attempt to generate analytical and empirical links between the microsociological and macrosociological levels (e.g., Alexander *et al.* 1987);
- the effort to weld theoretical linkages between the purposive efforts of individuals and groups (agents) and the social-structural context in which they reside (Giddens 1984);
- the attempt to create focused theories, which nevertheless draw from a variety of perspectives; feminist theory, for example, while in large part formulated in conflict–domination terms, also incorporates other viewpoints, including the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1992).

Third, the past two decades have witnessed a decline in the polemic warfare that characterized sociology and many of the other social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s. The mood more characteristic of the 1990s appears to be one of "peaceful pluralism"–an acknowledgment that sociological inquiry legitimately harbors a diversity of perspectives and methods, even though clear preferences are apparent among identifiable groups of theorists and empirical investigators.

On Reading Sociological Theories

My career as an academic sociologist began with teaching a course in systematic theory at the University of California, Berkeley, in the fall of 1958, and I have continued to teach such courses over the decades until the present time. In this period of study and teaching, I have developed a series of questions that, in my estimation, are essential to understanding and criticizing sociological theories and comparing them with one another. I conclude by offering them to readers for reflection:

- What model or imagery of scientific knowledge informs or guides the efforts of a theorist or theoretical tradition? The reasons for asking this question are two: first, the social sciences developed historically in the shadow of the natural sciences and in most cases modeled themselves on them; second, sociology and the other social sciences continue to justify their legitimacy in academies and universities by the claim that they are social *sciences*. It is thus difficult for any theory not to take the canons and methods of science into account. This is not to say that all theories model themselves on a positivistic image of science. Some clearly do–rational-choice theory, for example–but the informing assumptions of many social theories are explicitly critical of positive science. Even when the orientation toward it is negative, however, some model of science remains as a point of reference.
- What specific formal and substantive elements of scientific imagery are incorporated or rejected? This query is a specification of the first.
- What is the theorist's conception of the individuals and groups that constitute the subjects of theorizing? Are they seen to be active, neutral, or passive as agents of change and history? Do their outlooks matter in the formulation of scientific knowledge (behaviorists say no, phenomenologists say yes)? In short, what is the theorist's image of human nature?
- What is the theorist's conception of his or her own role in the generation of sociological knowledge? Active or passive? Conservative, neutral, critical? This question arises because social scientists are, inescapably, intellectuals situated in society and invariably reflect on the implications of that fact.
- What is the theorist's commitment concerning the primary level of analysis–cultural, social system, social-structural, group, or individual? Closely related, what is it *about* that level–integration, conflict, freedom, oppression–that is most salient?
- How adequately does the theory fare with respect to *logical* canons of clarity, internal consistency, logical closure, and coherence between first principles and derived propositions? How adequately does it fare with respect to *empirical* canons of assembling evidence, assuring the reliability of that evidence, and demonstrating the validity of claims contained in propositions? Even theorists who deny the relevance or even the possibility of logical and empirical discourse invariably find themselves engaging in this kind of discourse, and their work can be assessed according to its canons.

If the student of theory asks such questions in a thorough, probing, and dispassionate way, that person will be well on the way toward charting his or her own map of sociological theory and toward stating, with reasons, a set of theoretical preferences.

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