

Perspectives

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Annual Meeting Short Course

LEADING EDGES IN SOCIAL THEORY

Dean Gerstein David Sciulli
National Research Council Univ of Michigan

At the 1986 Annual Meeting, we offered a six hour short course entitled "Leading Edges in Social Theory." In contrast to earlier editions of the course at annual meetings, which were designated "refreshers in sociological theory," we selected for presentation a series of current research problem areas viewed as theoretically promising, vigorous, and of multidisciplinary significance.

The course began with a canvass of current intellectual trends across the disciplines of social science, noting some of the present main prospects for theoretically significant advances, followed by a presentation of selected problems centering around choice, agency, and decisionmaking. In particular, we reviewed analytical approaches to the problem of order (the problem of freedom) incorporating concepts of norms, interests, authority, and preferences. Included here is a partial sketch of our overview and discussion of societal constitutionalism.

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1. A Canvass of the Disciplines

In 1978 Gerstein wrote that sociology today "is occupied by two co-existing but largely nonconversant main camps: one rallied to the computer technology of survey research; the other holding to the naturalism of symbolic interaction. Around these camps, at various distances, are tents pitched by special sects: blockmodelers, biologizers, conversation analysts, critical Marxists. There is no longer a theoretical core, such as Parsons provided in the bygone postwar era. Only its ghost: almost universal criticism, thematic or latent, of old 'structural-functionalism.' The center no longer holds." Not much has changed in a decade, though a certain revival of functionalism is becoming audible, dealing especially with questions in the Weberian/historical and Durkheimian/deviancy traditions.

Of the related disciplines, economics and psychology are the most successful--more successful than sociology by any conventional measure of size, wealth, power, or prestige. The intellectual strength of these fields derives from the fact that, in each, theory and method are closely integrated across large central stretches of research interest. There are now looming a couple of areas in which a merger of economic and psychological research interests is occurring, namely (a) experimental economics, in which market situations involving multiple agents are simulated under closely controlled (and readily varied) conditions, and the resulting behavior observed and recorded; and (b) studies of the psychology of choice behavior under uncertainty, which put the mathematical axioms of rational homo oeconomicus to direct test and proceed to develop modified logics of calculation that better resolve the decisionmaking "paradoxes" that are observed.

Political science is distinguished from other social sciences by the outstanding quality of its disciplinary leadership. The field seems now to be in the midst of a profound shift away from its close alliance with sociological thinking on interest group conflict and voting behavior, which dominated the 1950s and 1960s, toward models and methods more characteristic of microeconomics. This is especially evident in theories of collective choice, which apply to legislative and bureaucratic decisionmaking. There is, on the other hand, a strong line of concern with agenda-setting, which is implicitly focused on procedural, institutional, and hence sociological matters.

Anthropology is divided. There is a physical side, interested in human origins and especially the coevolution of physical capacities, ecological patterns, and technological behavior. And there is a cultural-social side; the most interesting frontiers of research in the latter involve public symbolism, such as ideological formations in contemporary societies, in historical records of the West, and in non-Western cultures. In general, the traditional anthropology of village-based cultures largely free of Western influence, the traditional core of field methods and theory, is dissolving, and the frontier

work on urban and/or Western systems is bringing younger anthropologist into much closer contact with history, political science, law, and demography.

2. Societal Constitutionalism

David Sciulli discussed the relationship between pluralism in the United States and neocorporatism in Western Europe and Latin America, as a backdrop for introducing societal constitutionalism, a new framework for comparative political sociology. Societal constitutionalism rests upon normative-procedural concepts from Talcott Parsons, legal theorist Lon Fuller, and Jürgen Habermas; respectively, these are the concepts of procedural institutions (collegial formations), procedural duties (legality) and procedural reason (communicative action). This does not involve old concerns about written constitutions, divisions of governmental powers or forms of government. Rather, it proposes a uniquely sociological way of distinguishing between arbitrary and responsible exercises of collective power in modern societies. Rather than assuming that a country is "democratic" if elections are held or political parties compete for public offices, and that a country is "authoritarian" if this is not the case, societal constitutionalism distinguishes analytically between instances of social integration, which are based upon actors' genuine mutual understanding of shared normative duties, and instances of social control, which are based upon actors' manipulated or latently coerced subjective acceptance of commands or seemingly objective (structural) constraints.

Whether Western formal democracies are becoming more integrative or more manipulative (or even more authoritarian) and whether corporatist or communist societies are becoming more integrative or simply more subtle in controlling their populations can not be presumed or determined a priori by received typologies or by a regime's degree of popular acceptance at one point in time. These are strictly empirical issues, and societal constitutionalism provides a framework of concepts designed to permit dispassionate multidimensional analyses free of Europocentrism, Cold War ideology, and North/South divisions. These analyses can explore whether the integrity of procedural institutions is actually being maintained in corporations, governmental agencies, universities, professional associations, public boards and commissions, public or private research institutes, and literary and artistic networks of modern societies, despite the persistent pressures of encroachment generated in all modern societies by processes of rationalization, bureaucratization and functional differentiation.

Sciulli's own thesis is that genuine social integration in modern societies can only be recognized, described and evaluated by researchers or by actors themselves if it takes place within what Parsons called collegial formations, which are a unique form within modern social, economic and political institutions. Any and all substantive actions taken by collegial formations must remain consistent with the eight principles of procedural

legality that Lon Fuller specified, in order for the integrity of these forms to be maintained. In contrast, organizations based upon bureaucratic chains of command or members' democratic votes can readily take substantive actions that violate the integrity of Fuller's principles while remaining true to their bureaucratic or democratic forms. Moreover, to the extent that what Habermas calls communicative action, or reasoned social action, can possibly be realized in modern societies, it can only be realized within collegial formations that honor the integrity of Fuller's principles. Thus, societal constitutionalism specifies how Habermas' theory may be brought to practice, despite Habermas' own acknowledged inability to do so.

ALERT -- The journal History of Sociology has reached a critical point and is in desperate need of more subscribers (individual \$20; institutional \$40). Contact Anne Sica, University of Kansas.

Current Directions in Theory

WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS AS A SOCIOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Immanuel Wallerstein
Fernand Braudel Center
State University of New York at Binghamton

Robert Merton a long time ago distinguished six types of work often lumped together as "sociological theory." One of them was "general sociological orientations" that involve "broad postulates" which indicate types of variables to be taken into account. This, he said, was quite different from sociological theory proper which involves "scientific laws" which are precise and internally coherent. Although Merton warned against the dangers of "premature insistence on precision" which could "sterilize imaginative hypotheses" and the possibility that the pressure for logical consistency has on occasion "invited logomachy and sterile theorizing," there seems little doubt Merton intended us to move away from mere general sociological orientations towards precise, coherent scientific laws.

What I and others have been calling "world-systems analysis" definitely fits the label of a "general sociological orientation" and is in no sense a pretension to the establishment of scientific laws. We do not however apologize for this as an inadequacy. We consider rather that the prime intellectual issue of the current period (let us say, 1970-2000) is the reevaluation of the "general sociological orientations" under which not only "sociologists" but social scientists generally have been operating since perhaps about 1850 and certainly since 1880 or so.

In an article I have written for the forthcoming Giddens-Turner volume, Social Theory Today, I listed seven such orienting propositions, and my reasons for skepticism about each. They have to do with the distinctions among social science "disciplines," the distinction of the nomothetic and the

idiographic, the concept of "society," the defining characteristics of "capitalism," the linked concepts of the "industrial" and "bourgeois" revolutions, the nature of "progress," and the definition of "science" and therefore of "social science." I will not repeat here the details of my argument, but reproduce merely my two concluding paragraphs:

"History and social science took their current dominant forms at the moment of fullest unchallenged triumph of the logic of our present historical system. It is a child of that logic. We are now however living in the long moment of transition wherein the contradictions of that system have made it impossible to continue to adjust its machinery. We are living in a period of real historical choice. And this period is incomprehensible on the basis of the assumptions of that system.

World-systems analysis is a call for the construction of an historical social science that feels comfortable with the uncertainties of transition, which contributes to the transformation of the world by transforming itself into a mode of illuminating the choices without appealing to the crutch of a belief in the inevitable triumph of good. World-systems analysis is a call to open the shutters that encumber us from exploring many arenas of the real world. World-systems analysis is not a paradigm of historical social science. It is a call for a debate about the paradigm."

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY; A Report from the Editor

John Wilson
Duke University

Volume Seven of Current Perspectives in Social Theory has just been published. The variety and sheer adventurousness of the essays contained in the annual expresses all that is good about the current state of theoretical activity in the profession of sociology (and on its margins) and upholds the standards set by its founding editors, Scott McNall and Gary Howe, back in 1980.

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Organisational Structure and the Logic of Collective Action in Unions (Jerry Lembcke and Carolyn Howe)
Inequality and Association: A Biased Net Theory (John Skvoretz and Thomas Fararo)
Bringing History Back In: The Historicity of Social Relations (Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee)
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Habermas and Kohlberg: Morality, Justice and Rationality (Anthony Cortese)
Mass, Media, Mass Media-tion: Jean Baudrillard's Implosive Critique of Modern Mass-Mediated Culture (Briankle Chang)

Both tyros and shellbacks are listed here, and the essays draw on paradigms as diverse as symbolic interactionism, historical materialism and structuralism. Some authors are intent on testing theory in novel ways, others seek to develop new theories or re-think received traditions. The volume contains lively, imaginative, and catholic debate. Volume Eight, which seeks to emulate its predecessors, will soon be put to bed. Its contributors write from Australia, England, the Federal Republic of Germany, Canada and the United States. Theorists discussed include Giddens, Parsons, Homans, Benjamin and Lukes; topics theorised include power, ideology, gender, and the state.

Current Perspectives in Social Theory is an especially important resource for members of the Theory Section of the ASA because it is one of the few refereed outlets exclusively intended for theory essays. Indeed, one of the few criteria of exclusion for consideration by the annual's board of editors is that the paper does not directly (not necessarily solely) address theoretical issues. Its format as an annual makes it particularly suited to theory. Much theoretical argument takes a long time to unfold. It is difficult to compress within the format required of a journal. Not only is an annual able to allow the space that theoretical essays usually need but it also permits time for dialogue and debate between author and editorial board. And yet the regular publication schedule of an annual, and its ready visibility, ensure that contributions are timely and relevant.

A glance at the table of contents of the seven extant volumes reveals that a considerable number of section members have been published in Current Perspectives, including the two most recent Presidents. However, section members can provide a service to their colleagues by reminding them of the availability of this opportunity to publish theory papers and, of course, remind their libraries of the necessity of subscribing. Future issues will contain subsections devoted to particular theoretical issues, but members of the section should not hesitate to submit papers on any topic as long as they believe that the project is intended to advance the state of social theory. Deadline for submission of papers for Volume Nine is November 15th, 1987. Papers should be submitted to John Wilson, Department of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27706.

Announcement

The Theory Groups of the British Sociological Association and German Sociological Association are conducting a joint conference on "Social Structure and Culture." The meetings will be held June 18-20 in Bremen, West Germany. An excellent series of papers is scheduled and Americans are welcome to attend. For information, contact:

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Open Letters to Theory Section Members

The Theory Section might want to consider instituting an annual letter of commendation for achievement in the translation of foreign language theoretical works (whether books or articles, classical or contemporary). People deserve recognition and honor for opening avenues of access without which serious American theoretical scholarship might wither or revert to an ill-informed parochial enterprise. Perhaps a small committee of multi-lingual senior theorists might be identified and organized to superintend the project. Much translation is done in the U.K. and some also in Canada and Australia. Perhaps a joint project with other national sociological associations might be developed. A session at the Theory Section Meetings might be devoted to the history, problems, and prospects of translation. It might even be possible to obtain a subsidy from a major publisher of translations.

Ira Cohen
Rutgers University

Calls for Papers

1988 GERMAN-AMERICAN THEORY CONFERENCE

For the third time the Theory Section of the German Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association are going to hold a conference on sociological theory. Previous conferences were held in June 1984 (The Relations between Micro and Macro) and in August 1986 (Social Change and Modernization). The forthcoming conference is scheduled to be held in Bremen, West Germany, in June of 1988, and will deal with theoretical issues of interest in the sociology of culture. This notice is a call for expressions of interest in participating. Those interested should write to: Professor Neil J. Smelser, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, giving a tentative title and brief description of the paper they would intend to present. Seven American, seven German, and several other participants will be chosen.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Current Perspectives in Social Theory is now accepting papers for Volume IX. Materials are encouraged from all theoretical perspectives and ranging from metatheoretical discussions to issues of theory application. Deadline for Volume IX is November 15th, 1987 and three copies (ASR format and style) should be sent to the editor: John Wilson, Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Department of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27706.

