Chair's Message

Social Theory Beyond the Academy: Intellectuals and Politics

Charles Lemert
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The much rumored resurgence of interest in theory should not be surprising. The academic generation now coming into its own includes many whose first sociological ideas dawson not in the academy, but in the streets, churches, and campuses where, as 60s activists, they challenged and rethought then prevailing social doctrines. In 1962 the opening words of the Port Huron Statement captured the vision of many who are today practicing social theorists: "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit."

Sociology, and most especially social theory, is fundamentally changed since the 60s. Few could reasonably deny that sociological thinking must change or respond to powerful new theoretical traditions -- feminist theory, a revived and radicalized political sociology, world systems and development theory, social historical studies, cultural studies, among others ranging from orthodox Marxism to the sociology of emotions. It is especially impressive that those working in these areas share and cooperate across perspectival boundaries. It is a long way from the fabled hegemony of late fifties functionalism and the wide-eyed, pluralist enthusiasms of the mid sixties.

Social theory has become more sophisticated as members of the new generation are more empirically grounded and mutually respectful than we believed our predecessors had been. These accomplishments may be due, at least partly, to values learned in our youth -- an intense political commitment, a struggle to work collectively, a desire to rethink the idea of a good and just society, and an authentic, if awkward, openness to the continuing challenges of the excluded -- women, people of color, the third world.
It has been a good generation’s work. Yet, those achievements are under attack, most prominently by William J. Bennett and Allan Bloom who are disgusted by the 60s legacy in social thought. Bloom thinks we are foolish. In *The Closing of the American Mind* he complains that "not a single book of lasting importance was produced in and around the movement." Bennett, Reagan’s education czar, thinks we are dangerous. He laments the extent to which university students and faculty have taken seriously one of the our generation’s more reasonable ideas, that college curricula should teach world – as opposed to white, male European—perspectives.

However ominous one may think they are, Bennett and Bloom must be taken seriously, and especially so by theoretical sociologists. They are correct to say that 60s social ideas are influencing and polarizing today’s students. What sociologists should worry about is that the most influential ideas are not sociological in origin. Indeed, some of the most compelling social theory written today has little to do with sociology. The two most striking examples are literary theory and feminist theory. Works like Sandra Harding’s *The Feminist Creation in Science* and Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying*(c) Monkey are, respectively, strong theories of scientific knowledge and Afro-American literature enacting an explicit but extraneous social theory. Both argue that the social experience of exclusion and difference, of women and American blacks, is foundation for a reconstruction of social understanding. Bennett and Bloom know enough to recognize the importance of such notions. Do we sociologists have a clear explanation for the fact that new social theories come from outside our discipline?

To make matters worse we are also under assault from within. Russell Jacob, a respected left social theorist, denounces the 60s generation in academia. He insists, in *The Last Intellectuals*, that we have passed into an obscure professionalism while abandoning the political responsibilities of the public intellectual. Jacob exempts no one from his scorn – neither deconstructionists nor the leading social theorists of the day.

Ironically, these criticisms attack social theory where it has made substantial scholarly advances: politics and its understanding of the social role of intellectuals. Surely, a refreshing political perspective is central to most of the new theoretical traditions in sociology, quite explicitly in research on elites, social revolutions, theories of the State, and comparative political economy. Likewise, the sociology of intellectuals, though less visible, has made important contributions beyond earlier Marxist and sociology of knowledge views of the social basis of ideas.

Yet, our critics force us to ask if we have effectively considered the relationship between our work and the contributions of social theory to a wider society. Bennett and Bloom fear that we may have made too much of an impact, while Jacoby thinks our discourse is so turgid we are unlikely to make any. The truth no doubt lies somewhere between these two extremes on a scale of undeniable importance.

A generation whose formative experience was in the 60s is naturally interested in politics and intellectuals, especially if, as academics, intellectual work is the means in mid life to continue the politics of youth. Yet, having successfully incorporated these themes in our intellectual work, it seems time to consider more fortuitously how that intellectual work bears on the world beyond the academy, and thus to pull together the themes of both moments in our generation’s life.

1. What is the public responsibility of intellectuals?
2. Which social theoretical ideas have political power in the current situation?
3. How do new departures in social theory – like feminist theory, critical theory, ethnometaphysics, postmoderation, among others – inform our understanding and critique of ideology?
4. What in the present situation are the theoretical foundations of social criticism, of political engagement, and of politically responsive social knowledge?

These questions are neither unique to our time or exhaustive of those that could be asked. But our critics give us cause to bring them back to the fore. The Section’s 1989 miniconference, *Social Theory Beyond the Academy: Politics and Intellectuals*, will provide occasion to explore them more fully.

**Section News**

1989 Miniconference

Charles Lemert, section chair, announces that the theme of the 1989 miniconference will be *Social Theory Beyond the Academy: Politics and Intellectuals*.

1989 Theory Prize

Samuel W. Kaplan
Bryn Mawr College

The Theory Prize Committee of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association has set February 14, 1989, as the deadline for nominations for the 1988-89
competition. The annual prize goes to outstanding work in sociological theory. The selection committee operates in a broad, pluralistic, non-sectarian fashion.

Any article, paper, or book chapter, including dissertation chapters, whether published or not, may be nominated, providing only that it is no more than fifty pages long and has been completed or published in the last two years. Authors are encouraged to submit their own works.

Nominations must include a short cover letter identifying the author and title. Five copies of the text must be included. If possible, the text should not reveal the identity of the author(s).

The members of the prize committee include Samuel W. Kaplan, Bryn Mawr College; Chair Roslyn Bologh, CUNY, College of Staten Island; Randall Collins, University of California at Riverside; Victor Lidz, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania; and Alan Skol, University of Kansas. Nominations should be sent before February 14, 1989, to Samuel W. Kaplan, Theory Prize Committee, Department of Sociology, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010.

Change in Publication Schedule for Perspectives

Perspectives has been operating on a March, June, September, December publishing schedule. Beginning with this issue Perspectives is moving to a January, April, July, October schedule. This is more practical given the timing of the ASA meetings.

1988 ASA Conference

The ASA Convention: A Scene for Feminism

Patricia Ticineto Clough
Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus

I arrived at one of the ASA mini-conference sessions on feminist theory expecting a performance. I came more to see, anticipating, at least, a look into the work of Dorothy Smith whom I knew of but had never seen and Jessie Bernard who I had seen years ago, and of whom I knew I could expect a display of feminist determination. Our would speak first; the other last and I suspected that what would come between them would be enveloped by them, giving it the shape of feminist political conviction within a feminine psychic embrace.

Her hair severely pulled back from her face, her features were nonetheless not sharp. More than features, her face was made up of a surface, smooth and calm: an insistent receptivity for the absence of lines that would fix an identity in traces of experience. Dorothy Smith, in the few moments of a presentation gave a sense of her project. Re-reading Durkheim's The Rules of Sociological Method, she was shifting her efforts from constructing a methodology which would not introduce an artificial objectivization into the sociological representation of social processes to focus instead on clarifying sociology's articulation as a mode of representation, part of the ruling apparatus. One could easily imagine that Durkheim's text was not to be read for its methodological orientation but re-read for its institutionalization of the sociologist's scientific authority, its textualization of ideological practices of authorization. It was to be understood as a text among others, "a constitutional work of sociology," of constituting sociology as "a world-port." The presentation was a sketch; it sketched the audience in a space, making the space around us visible—the large auditorium, the mirrors behind the speakers, the podium, the stage, the lobby of the Peach Tree Street Mall—as a space apart, a conceptualizing, institutionalizing space to which she had come, to trouble it with the world of experience, the experienced world of women. Her arms gestured a surround; her hand indicating and indicating what was to be seen around us, as she fractured the space with that woman's face, a synecdoche signification for the whole body, itself fractured by the podium, the authority of sociology. She had come in to risk taking a place in opposition to the whole edifice of sociology—to bring it down." Not even feminist sociology was to be spared, as she pointed to the insistent phallogcentricism of a socio-logic, even when being made to serve the study of women's lives. The sociological concepts, the methods, the articulation of demonstration, often perversely, transformed that feminist project. Even methods against positivism, for preserving experience—ethnographic field work, life history, case study—everthing had to be re-visioned, considered again in the name of experience. Then, let there be something more subtle in presentation, something more evocative in address, something more chilling or self-disturbing than merely speaking in the name of—even in the name of those with whom one is oppressed. And when in the name of experience, the textual moment is reflected as constituting a discipline, the very concept of experience is made itself, to tremble.

With Dorothy Smith's initiating a project, still ahead for feminists, of deconstructing sociological discourse, there could be no surprise in Joan Acker's voicing that sense of sociology's still-missing feminist paradigm shift, even though since 1984, when Stacey and Thorne first noted the missing feminist revolution in sociology, the gendering of all social relationships had become a near common place among the theoretical assumptions of social science. With paucities of gender analysis here and there,
distributed about sociological texts, feminism had become
the difference within, which reconstitutes the academic
discipline, extending its discursive domain. Feminism thus
normalized, makes it easier for young women to see their
professional survival as surviving as feminists within
sociological discourse. Joan Acker presented us with the
irony of the common sensical fit between a distorting
discourse and the distortion of lived relationships of
subordination: a normalized variable analysis of gender
most often engages the latter distortion while disavowing
the former.

And so it might seem that we were at the beginning
again or rather at another scene, a prior scene when so
many of us had stood in the midst of men, masters of
various discourses and melded lists of names, women's
names. We sighted the record at first, merely insisting
that women had always been there among men, trying to
authorize 'their own' texts. Our lists meant to de-legitimize the rational order, which only inscribed
names of kings, priests, generals, male philosophers.
Edith Kurzweil, the compiler of 'difficult' structural and
post structural theories, had come to thread a
relationship from feminism through psychoanalysis to
social theory. She weaved a surface for an alphabet of
names, a list of women who struggled against the
master-texts of Freud who named sexuality, repeatedly
stumbling over female sexuality and of Lacan who took
the position of the feminine, the impossibility of the
full-visioning of desire, as the very condition of possibility
of the psychoanalytic project. The list was of women who
struggled with a discourse in which feminism had always
been the difference within, a list of women caught in the
between of politics and sexuality, a list of names within
a discourse always absent women, but which yet noted the
impossibility of woman's speech, her action and her own
name except through the indirectness of her sexual transfer
as property. There was this list of women who knew the
need to struggle against their exclusion but whose
recognition of psychoanalysis draws our attention to a
criticism of uneasy identity, to a de-mythologizing of an
ideology of presence, informing the concept of
experience. They uneasily locate within psychoanalysis,
within its unconscious, a criticism of representation as an
adequation of reality.

There was such a list and Edith Kurzweil read it.
Yet, how could such a list, how has any such list stood
up to, resisted recuperation? How can a list, other than
by its repetitive performance, steady itself outside the
institutional arranging of who shall speak and whom shall
be spoken to or about? Norbert Wiley presented for his
part in a work, co-authored with Christine Chambers.
His gesture to correct Lacan by reformulating
object-relations theory, making it nearly synonymous with
the Petro-Mead tradition, was made in this scene, a
gesture for women (the written text made no claim to be
a feminist text). What must have appeared in the context
of writing to be an innocent choice—feminist or simply
theory—was in his presentation, made to become
deliberate. His performance settled on a posture,
unsettling any apparent easiness in the adjustment of
classical sociological theorizing to feminism: he used his
analysis to advise women about theorizing about women.

What was to have been for women was his warning
against Lacan's "unofficial theory" in which anatomy is
indispensable: the instincts of psychoanalytic theory, a
problem, especially for women. He criticized literary and
film critics for ignoring Lacan's weak spot(s). To the
weaknesses, especially of Lacan's speculative mirror stage,
he had come to bring evidence, empirical, observational
evidence about child development. But feminist film
 critics have found Lacan's mirror stage useful as an
allegory of the itinerary of male desire not as a theory of
child development. Feminist literary critics have drawn
on Lacan's theory of the phallic as transcendent
signifier because his theory critically deconstructs the
order of the visible, the seeming, the apparent. Both
literary and film critics have made much of and with the
psychoanalytic distinction of instincts and drives, a
distinction upon which the social or sexualized body is
seen as propped upon, not reduced to biology. These
feminists, then, are to be read for the temporary release
which they example, from a commitment to empirical
theories of child development and sexual institutions, for
in the end, these are subversions of the very notion of
the unconscious. There is now that list of women, Edith
Kurzweil had read many of their names, women who have
urged a turn from an economy of accumulating evidence
for generalizing a theory of man.

Lacan has been for feminists, an irritating ally
against American ego-psychotherapy, even against
object-relations theory when it invites using feminism as
an empirical corrective of already existing social
psychological theory. What was to have been for women,
what Norbert Wiley capably argued so to "normalize Lacan
for sociology," is not for feminists who at this time are
focused on the development of psychoanalysis as a
socio-political historical moment which reveals the limits
of representation against which the human sciences
propose themselves in their positivity. Feminists, critical
of psychoanalysis, nonetheless take up with it in its
positionality in a slant with that concept of reality as
only what can be empirically established.

But problematizing the very notion of experienced
reality is no mere indifference to women's experience,
rather, it is the seeming of an indifference to the
positivity of social science of human experience. Those
feminists apparently most focused on making visible the
often invisible world of women's experience have always
had that sense of making a scene to bring forth out of
the factual, the counterfactual of excluded others. Although their ‘practical’ orientation might make them allergic to the ‘high-theorizing’ of relaxing epistemology to feminist style, their crafting of a style of their own is with what they have fixed the imagination of other feminist scholars. When last I saw Jessie Bernard, I was in an audience of only women sociologists. Then, she talked of her career, how it was that she had come to write about women: her life, the scene with which to characterize the inner curve of other women’s lives. Then, after her presentation, we walked among ourselves, aglow with the sense of her enabling us as a path breaker, a founding mother, for some even a grandmother.

But now she seemed uncomfortable, hesitant when she referred to Norbert Wiley’s work as the Lacan and Chambers’ paper. But when corrected, she insisted that she knew what she was doing. And later there was some comment, a mere passing remark, something to the effect one man’s correcting another man’s theory. I’m suspicious: I don’t expect much. This easy dismissal came to appear more deliberate, intensified, when at the end of her comments, she focused only on the women presenters. She summed up their efforts for feminism, her remarks endorsing them, leaving the male theorist outside, for a mere moment of exclusion. The softness of her face, framed in silver gray curls, seems now only to masquerade the sharpness of her critique. Her remarks had their effect on the audience. Not this time was there among the women an immediate sense of being enabled, but rather a first sense of this mixed audience, framed in discomfort: a disconcerting encouragement.

“Men in feminism,” an expression coined at the 1984 Modern Language Association meetings, to give notice to the considerable number of males who are consciously deploying feminist thought in their work, gives some indication of just how hot feminism has become in academia, at least in the humanities, including cultural studies. In these disciplines, feminism is part of the epistemological trembling brought on by post modernism so that it is perhaps no surprise that men would take up positions within feminism, even to protect themselves, there, during the changes which are meant to have so profound an effect on them, by effecting the very definition of culture(s) and the methods of analysis.

Men in feminism is not so much an unwelcomed development of a women’s movement. Its disturbance is rather a discontinuity that it proposes between changes in academic discourse and changes in women’s lives, even women’s lives in academia. That is, it situates the problem of relating theory and politics, the problem of grounding politics in a community recognized by the fractonality of its oppression, the specificity of its experience. As feminists take up the challenge proposed by Dorothy Smith of deconstructing sociological discourse, that men will consciously conjoint ‘our’ theorizing, will challenge only one face of ‘our’ identity. There will also be the increasing pressure to recognize the fictiveness of experience, constructed in relationship to forms of identity. This recognition will not only be an effect of a post structural, deconstructive stance toward theory but of the effective interruptions of ‘our’ identity by its very overdetermination in terms of sexual orientation, race, class and ethnicity. All of this demands a heightened sense of political theactrics so that when there is a performance of feminist theorizing, when there is a feminist making a scene, we will, because of the contradictions and discontinuities of ‘our’ identity, nonetheless, be able to return to and be enabled by the worlds of women, reminded again of taking risks, of making noise, of becoming unbecoming.

Thanks to Ruth Wallace for the way she chose to use her security of position, her seniority, for staging a scene for feminism at the ASA convention.

Report on Sociological Theory

Norbert Wiley
University of Illinois

Sociological Theory is doing well. There are about 1444 subscriptions, a heartening number, but libraries are still too low (about 200) for the long-term stability of the journal. Overall expenses are about $24,000 and income is also about $24,000. And the quality (and diversity) of the articles is holding well. It looks like the ASA, which has weak marketing skills, will lease the journal to Blackwells, which has strong marketing skills, though this should not hurt the journal for our purposes. Blackwells likes ST precisely for the qualities it now has.

I am stepping down as editor at the end of 1989, and the new editor designee will be chosen at the winter meetings of the ASA Publications Committee (early December) and Council (January). The job takes me about a quarter time, though it is very satisfying. Randy Collins did an incredibly good job getting the journal launched and through the first few, difficult years. I tried to follow Randy’s policies (diversification, a nudge toward empiricity, a push-pull-push on the quality threshold), which included convincing his board to stay on. The American community of theorists is full of talent, and I have no doubt the next editor will do an excellent job.

To be considered for this position, you have to be nominated (17 people were already nominated at the August Publications Committee meeting) to Bill D’Antonio of the ASA or Caroline Persell of the Publications Committee. Everyone nominated receives a letter from the ASA, asking if they accept nominations and also
inviting a letter to the Publications Committee, outlining the nominee's views on their possible editorship. It helps a great deal to write a fairly lengthy, serious letter. Those active nominees - say a dozen - are then voted on by the Publications Committee. Their ordered shortlist - say, of three names - is then forwarded to the Council, which makes the final selection. I hope a lot of strong candidates accept nomination.

In any case let me say what a pleasure it has been, editing this journal. The American theorists are clearly on the move. Our journal, ST, is on its way to becoming the world center of social theory. And remember, social theory nowadays is not just going on in the social sciences. The language departments, literary criticism and philosophy are also moving, rather aggressively, into social theory. I think our job is to organize and lead the whole, complex social theory process, with ST gradually becoming the central medium of the discussion.

Eastern Meetings

David Schulli
University of Delaware

Jonathan Turner was among the most provocative presenters at the annual meetings of the Eastern Sociological Society, March 11-13 in Philadelphia, insisting in blunt terms that social theorists should render their ideas consistent with principles of positivism and the scientific method. Turner presented his thesis at a thematic session organized by George Ritzer on meta-theory which was held on the second day of the meetings. Turner was questioned, of course, but questioning was tame as compared to the provocation of the thesis. Other participants in the thematic session were Edward Tiryakan, who dealt with a reworking of modernization theory, Jeffrey Alexander, who emphasized the need for hermeneutics in theory and research, Norbert Wiley, who addressed the object domain of meta-theory and why there is renewed interest in it, and Ritzer, who categorized classical theorists in terms of meta-theoretical "paradigm." A formally organized two-hour question and answer period followed the presentations.

The first evening there was a plenary session in appreciation of Robert Merton, including candid and well-received remarks by James Coleman regarding Merton's influence both as a teacher and a theorist. Among the sessions on the two succeeding days were ones devoted to the Social Relations Department at Harvard (with Robert Bierstedt discussing papers by Lawrence Nichols, William Buxton, and Barry Johnson at a session organized by Frank Wilson), sociological theory (chaired by Charles Lemert, with papers by Louise Lopman, Harvey Griesman, Ernest Killeker, and discussion by James

Farganis and Janet Hillson), post-modernism in theory and the arts (chaired by John Robinson and Richard Brown, with Sandra Meyers, Judith Balf, Rolf Meyersohn, Remi Clignet and Maurillo Munoz participating), and a "debate in theory" involving Harold Renbarger, Victor Lipsz and Mark Gould regarding Parsons and his critics over the years.

Book Announcements (Notify Perspectives of new publications)


Donald Levine, The Flight From Ambiguity, University of Chicago Press, now available in paperback.

James Rule, Theory of Civil Violence, University of California Press.


Nominating Committee

Janet Chafetz, University of Houston
Karen Cook, University of Washington
Michael Haucke, University of Arizona
Christopher Prendergast, Illinois Wesleyan University
Ruth Wallace (Convener), George Washington University

Membership Committee (ad hoc to increase the Section membership)

Deirdre Bodee (Convener), Washington University
William Kuvlesky, Texas A & M
Anthony Cortese, Illinois State University