TALMUDIC EXEGESIS OR IDENTIFICATION WITH THE AGRASSOR?

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In characterizing the field of sociological theory as suffering from a self-diagnosed "multiplicity of personality disorders," James Coleman Chathers (Perspectives, January 1993) applies a bit of psychiatric terminology to commentary on the theory area. The general thrust of his remarks, however, and in particular, his derogatory comments about the "exigency of classes" suggest that another clinical concept might be more apropos "identification with the agrassor."

As argued by Anna Freud, the concept refers to the defense mechanism in which individuals struggle to defend themselves against the condemnation and criticism of threatening paternal figures by taking on the aggressor's hostile attributes and nursing these back up against other persons.

It seems to me that there has been a fair amount of this process going on in the theory area for the past few years. Chathers' denunciation of "exigency" and related activities views a view that some in the theory area are increasingly visiting in articles, exchanges, and reviews of one another's work and-one with considerable assem- bly in recent cycles is a view that critics outside the field have long expressed, namely, "the silliness about what, good Heber, Weber, Marx, Parsons, and the rest is pretty superficial to the real sociological use of analyzing the social world."

That some would hold this opinion is not surprising. Disciplines and subdisciplines thrive on misconceptions and negative stereotypes about other fields with which they have no familiarity. Economists' inspective sociologists and develop sociological work; social theorists trivialize the work of methodologists and sociologists (who are outside the theory area and devotes little time to the work of Durehms and Parsons and still less to research on how to balance their interpretive social theories as social agents. This is academic business-as-usual and often incommensurable, at least until scholars in the developed areas feel the need to appease the skeptics. When, for instance, they seek funding from panels of econ- omists and assimilate their perspectives or when they do not need to be concerned with the actual process of people's lives."

This state of affairs partly explains, I think, the recent increase in the theory area. Rather than simply taking uninformative outside attacks with a grain of salt or working for a more informed appreciation for the proven value of the area's interpretive modes of inquiry, members of the theory area have spent targeting one another in the rush to adopt the outlook of critics. Andrew Chathers does likewise. Chathers' response to empirical researchers who find little use of these methods in documents of the class to help them understand what they are examining in a response of complete agreement: a proposal for theorists "to attend to the world around them," "to raise interesting and important questions about the observable social world," and to simply abandon the "Talmudic exegesis of classes by long-dead scholars."

When the alternatives are presented in this stark manner, it is easy, if, to side with Chathers. But why accept this false choice? Most methodologists accused of fostering an abstracted orientation would raise the charge by challenging the opposition of method and theory, which their critics assume. But Chathers, rather than challenging the categories of theory critics accepts that "attending to the world" is an observational activity separable from the intellectual methods in which the social scientists is situated and the "theoretical and important questions" were independent entities existing outside of the problematic/paradigm/epistemologie/cognitive frameworks/innovations/thrivas of the intellectual fields where the social scientists work. Since drunkards as we Veber, Parsons, and Members (among many others) have denied the practice of observation this kind of inde- pendence from theory it is curious to find Chathers embracing the contrary opinion. This, though, is thoroughly consistent with his view that "dead fearboxes" and "contemporary European" have little to teach us.

In any case, to raise the specter of "Talmudic exegesis" is to verge on the kind of indiscriminate use, calling sometimes practiced by others with familiar, interpretive research. Work in the areas of sociology that Chathers adumbrates—urban, medical, political, etc.—is highly valuable in its value. The same obviously holds for scholarship focused on the ideas of "dead dead" sociologists. Many years ago, Robert Merlon remarked that "the study of classical writings can be rather disappointingly useless or wonderfully useful." Has the second possibility really vanished? GramSCI, we have all seen share of marginalized DeadHeads or Weber papers, but what serious reader has not benefited from Lukes, Jones, or Alexander's work on Durkheim, Heits's work on Spencer, Jem's analysis of Mead, Garfunkel's work on Bob, Heisss, Beidler, and Kubers's written on Weber, or Leving's work in Simmel and Parsons?

I deliberately refer here to examples that represent different orientations toward the study of the classics. By no means are the theorists mentioned one roundabout way or how one engages in interpretive research or needed to be interested in the opening wide. Rather than buying into the attacks of critics, commentators on the theory area would do well to expand the collective recognition of the range of current interpretive practices and the benefits to those in and out of the theory field. There have been some notable statements along this line (years ago by Mead and Simmel, more recently by Alexander's essay on the "Centrality of the Classists"). But Chathers bypasses these. The only value she seems to attach to the
in the face of these concerns in regard to just what sociological disasters can accrue through a liberal orientation to European thinkers outside of the bounds of sociology, we have the piece by Janet Saltman Chafetz in the January 93 issue of Perspectives, who describes any of the questions is necessary and wants to reaffirm traditional ("neutralistic") or new ("sociological") views. This piece is the sociological interpretation of the "queer" approach on Murray Bloom and he is the "cultural" queer. Her "queer" never reaches the level of critique; the present a "typology" based on various distinctions and precocious characteristics, the then

sustainable theory," and there is no reason why the theory should be able to accommodate all the interests raised in Chafetz's essay—getting aside fears of a multiple personality disorder. In discussing the familiar observation that earlier theorists like Marx and Durkheim were driven by "substantive interests," the essay was not fearful of the general trend toward serious interpretive concerns (Marx with the political economists, Durkheim with Kenneth, Mommsen, and Saint-Simon, etc.).

Granted, the time may be approaching when the barriers of specialization force through to the theory area to concentrate more exclusively on these interpretive or empirically-focused research, but Chafetz's proposal to purge from sociology the study of social changes and to return to the field of institutional history push specialization the wrong way. Chafetz's proposal neglects the fact that, while institutional historians and sociologists share certain topics and methods, they approach the past with very different questions in mind.

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ON CHAFETZ ON THEORY
James D. Milley
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THE EDITORS TALK


Moody. I'd like to talk about the responses to her essay.

Douglas. I was unfamiliar with the usage "bête noire" and, in the era of editor, felt compelled to look up the usage in Fowler's Modern English Usage where I read "Those who wish to use the phrase in writing must not presuppose that the gender can be varied." It is improper to use the phrase to refer to positions, and I wonder if, as an author and feminist in sociology, Chafetz wants to abandon positions with masculine ambivalence. The absence of this awkward usage raises an interesting subject. Critical distance, for instance, Feminist positions in sterile terms. Chafetz has surprisingly neglected an interesting problem for both theory and gender-studies. Does position represent a particular constituencies? A new kind of ideological? How do feminist theories who are committed to positivism reconcile this tension? Along this line, it is interesting to note the sick writer in Fowle's pedagogy, "WRONG: From the very first, he found the same problem that has always been a mystery to me: it was his bête noire."

Moody. Haynes and Harding, cited in Charles Smith's essay, also raise the issue of masculinity science. It is a sociological version of concerns about the differences between "masculine" and "feminine" literature. I wonder if Chafetz would regard this as an interesting and important question?

Douglas. I thought the most important part of Chafetz's essay was its conclusion. "One first task is to raise important questions about the observable social world—here, elsewhere, now, and historically." From which comes those interesting and important questions of the observable world? What emerges? If theoretical sociologists use to distinguish interesting and important questions from dull and insignificants? Can the observable cont. on page 5

Pears and Scraps
"in certain cases there is more truth in the allegor than in the coil. To present objects with more exact gen- eric forms would be to dazzle names and render it unrecognizable" (Gustave LeBon, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind [New York, Georgia-Leon, 1912, p. vii]

"here I would like only to add the suggestion that the arts of perception an individual effort at awakened consciousness which heretofore developed that its capacity to manipulate one's behavior... the winner is likely to have the advantage over the loser." (George Goffman, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life [New York, New York: Doubleday, 1959], pp. 8-9)

"If science differs from metaphor in detecting faces and relations between facts, the problem of the same cases is to the problem of what the significance of the possibility of the facts actually is epistemology, has been discovered, may be itself with as unrealized problem that now to be dealt with by those initially interested in the sociology of the social" (Stephen Feinerman, Knowledge and Human Interaction [Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1994], p. 81)

"Discourse, Engel argues, is a continuous process of transition from one definition into the other... But he does no mention even the real interaction, namely the Historical relations between subject and object of the historical process, let alone give it the prominence it deserves." (George Lakoff, "What is Eroticism in History and Class Con- nectives: Studies in Marxist Dialectics" [London: Martin Press, 1988], p. 2).
Books to Consider


This anthology of primary readings in theory is divided into three sections—The Classic Tradition, Contemporary Sociological Theory, and Modernity/Post Modernity. The reader contains notable selections from Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Tocqueville, Weber, Simmel, Mead, and Mannheim; then Parsons, Dahrendorf, Blau, Schutz, Berger, Blumer, Gouldner, and Smith; and, finally, Habermas, Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty. The reader serves students by providing a first selection of primary texts in the history of sociological theory and the recent developments in social theory. (K. Doubt)


The annual is devoted to the investigation, management, and termination of conflicts at the interpersonal, intergroup, interinstitutional, and international levels. Volume 2 covers such topics as intra-psychic conflict, substance abuse, small group conflicts, crime and delinquency, adversarial media, terrorism, and diplomacy. An introductory essay by Gitter draws on Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Brandenburg to define human social conflict. (Volume 1 is available for $35, or $45 for both.)


This is really two books in one. The second book (pp. 177-548) is a collection of Park's writings on atrocities in the Belgian Congo (five essays ca. 1904-1907), Black America (four essays and an exchange of letters with Booker T. Washington), the German Army ("the most perfect military organization in the world"), Sombart, Sumner, and great teachers. The last essay, a first-person account of Park's encounters with William James, John Dewey, and Booker T. Washington, is a delight of the first order. These essays have been omitted from previous collections for want of sociological content; a misconception Lyman quickly lays to rest. The first book is Lyman's exposition of the writings. The first book, largely biographical in organization, will be valuable to those unfamiliar with Park's life before joining the faculty at the University of Chicago in 1917. A superb volume which deserves a wide readership. (C. Prendergast)


This reinvention of the now-classic work published in 1958 by Werner Stark (1909-1985) offers an interpretation of the thought of the major figures associated with its development. (E. Doyle McCarthy)


This work applies various philosophical, literary, and linguistic theories to the analysis of the discourses of everyday life. Its explanation of the elements and processes of language use synthesizes European structuralist theory and semiotics with American pragmatist theory. A companion volume to the author's Signifying Acts (1985). (E. Doyle McCarthy)


...genuinely succeeds in communicating the sociological imagination ... and would serve as a wonderful catalyst for an extended discussion on rationalization, modernity, and a number of related issues" (P. Kollok).


The first English translation of a book which has been widely recognized in Europe as a major contribution to the important intersection of social theory and human geography. Weiber's original analysis sounds the death-knell for the idea that geography is "the science of the spatial" and opens new horizons in the study of social space and action. Drawing upon a phenomenological perspective, the author develops a discussion of Popper's critical rationalism. This epistemological debate is then linked to the sociological action theories of Pareto, Weber, Parsons, and Schutz. In the words of one reviewer, "this is a bold book ... [which] will rank in its thoroughness with such classics as those by Castells, Lefebvre, and Harvey." For members of the Section, it offers a fresh approach to action theory and an excellent window on spatial debates within human geography and social philosophy. (D. Boden)

...Dogmas and Heresies

"For the effect of intimidating averters: with the world as the raw material, one can eliminate the human element in the action altogether. Their usual characteristic is that the campaign of some time or another will be an abrogation science in all its exploratory science must be concerned with events, and errors do not occur in the world of neutral objects. Duhem's doctrine is so far as he takes this decision, because, as Michael poon, it is a form of pure interpretation" (Tillich, Duhem, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago: University Press, 1969, p. 445).

"Americans believe in facts, two by two" (McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, New York: Random House, 1964, p. 170). The reason is perfectly clear. It is in this belief that we, in the social realm of life, are divided. There are two types of people in the social realm of life: those who believe in facts for what they appear to be, and those who believe in facts for what they appear to be. The former is the type of person who believes in facts for what they appear to be, and the latter is the type of person who believes in facts for what they appear to be. (R. McCombs)
WHAT DISORDER?
A Response to Clafzer
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CUNY

If one ever doubted that there was a need within sociology for theo-
dization, perhaps considered activist issues to be of lesser impor-
tance on the discipline, they need only to read ,Chafzer's latest piece. So-
ciological Theory: A Case of Multiple Personality Disorder.
What Disorder? cont.

problem, however, is not the way of theorizing that Chafetz criticizes, but the way in which it is done. Chafetz's comments relating poor theorizing to poor teaching and lack of more substantive interests are probably correct. But bad sociology—be it theory or anything else—will always predominate. Why should we expect sociology to be any different than law, medicine, or music?

More troubling to me, however, is Chafetz's explicit judgment that there is no need for a theory section, journals, or required courses. It is this tendency to legislate for others, coupled with the "True Believer" tone of her piece, that gives me pause. I do not see sociological theory as a "Case of Multiple Personality Disorder" except as far as life embodies just this sort of condition. I see a mixer as quite normal, if not exactly sure inspiring. I have not yet decided how I would diagnose Chafetz's disorder with the situation.

REFERENCES


The Editors Talk cont.

Doubts, I wonder, if only for the sake of argument, is there to Noam Chomsky or Ronald Dworkin in our midst is theoretical sociological better than theoretical linguistics or theoretical jurisprudence because it lacks charismatic figures? Chownes: James M. Riley asks whether not Chafetz's article is an attempt to silence voices that are too different from his own. We cannot speak for Chafetz (in the next issue she has the opportunity to speak for herself), but we believe that it is important to listen to a full range of voices, even those which sound authoritarian and dogmatic.