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Message from the Chair

Communicating with Non-Theorists

By Janet Saltzman Chafetz

As the new chair of our section, I want to use this opportunity to inform you about my plans for next year's Theory Section program and to suggest a few things for our collective consideration. My miniconference title is "Communicating With Non-Theorists." The following is a brief synopsis of my thinking on this issue and my plans for how the conference will be organized.

What makes sociology a discipline is neither our research methods nor our subject matters, both of which we share with a variety of academic and applied fields. Rather, it is the ways in which we interpret, understand, and explain the diverse phenomena we examine—our theories and concepts—that give us relatively unique vantage points and constitute our *raison d'être* as a field of scholarship. Despite this, theorists, who devote their intellectual energies precisely to developing these vantage points, are substantially ghettoized within sociology, speaking largely to one another. Moreover, we generally do an inadequate job of developing theoretical understanding, sophistication and appreciation among new generations of sociologists, with whom we typically do the opposite when it comes to research methods (construed broadly). We all bemoan the outcome: too many theoryless research papers with no more than a ritualistic nod in the direction of some theory at the outset of the paper. On the other side, I believe that many of those whose energies are empirically-focused

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1998 Section Awards

Molm Wins Theory Prize

By Murray Webster

The 1998 Theory Prize for the best book in sociological theory was awarded to Linda D. Molm for *Coercive Power in Social Exchange*. Molm's book is a treatise on coercive (punishment based) power in exchange. She constructs a coherent theory of the use of coercive power in social exchange relations based on a program of experimental research conducted over a decade. The results of this program of research are ultimately surprising and, in some cases, counter-

intuitive. Perhaps the most striking finding is that coercive power can be a highly effective means of increasing one's rewards in an exchange relation, especially if a power-disadvantaged actor uses coercive tactics to punish the non-exchange or low level of exchange of a more powerful partner. Molm's findings also clarify why coercive power may be ineffective if it is used too infrequently or in a non-contingent manner.

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Theory in the Curriculum

Markovsky to Study Graduate Theory Training

Barry Markovsky, currently the program director for sociology at the National Science Foundation and professor of sociology at the University of Iowa, has been awarded a small grant from the ASA Teaching Endowment Fund to examine what is taught under the label "Sociological Theory" in sociology graduate programs.

Markovsky will gather information about required and elective graduate course offerings in theory from among the top fifty graduate programs in the United States. The core of the study will consist of short telephone interviews with the theory instructors themselves, from which he will gather information about the content of each instructor's courses. When the study is finished, the machine-readable raw data will be available at no cost upon request to any interested researcher. A version of the project's rationale and aims is reproduced here.

Graduate Theory Training in the Leading Sociology Programs

By Barry Markovsky

The idea for this project grew out of interest and concern with the way *theory* is conceptualized, taught, and perpetuated in American sociology. In learning about sociological theory, vastly more undergraduates than graduate students are exposed to such work through their college courses. Arguably, however, sociology persists as a discipline through the transmission of its theoretical substance and values from professors to graduate trainees. Those trainees go on to become professors, a new generation of students is trained, and thereby the cycle is perpetuated. Moreover, to the degree that those trainees emanate from a subset of more prestigious departments, the character of the discipline may be shaped by the way theory is taught, produced and repro-

duced in a relatively small number of programs.

The question at the heart of the project is this: *Among the country's most influential graduate training programs, what is being taught in the name of "theory"?* At first blush, this may seem a trivial problem. After all, we know already that most programs require a *Classical Sociological Theory* (or comparably named) course for their first year graduate students. In it, graduate students typically survey the field's classics to varying degrees of depth and breadth. Coverage includes Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, plus a limited selection of other scholars determined by the instructor's predilections.

Beyond these basics, however, a perusal of departmental web sites indicates that the theoretical landscape is not particularly uniform. Most departments also of-

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New Blackwell Volume from 1996 Miniconference

Papers from the 1996 Theory Section miniconference have just been published in a volume entitled *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics*, edited by Alan Sica. Blackwell Publishers has now released four edited volumes containing papers from the most recent Theory Section miniconferences. All are available for purchase, and all royalties go directly to the section. To order, call toll-free (800) 216-2522 or fax (781) 388-8210 or write Blackwell Publishers, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148. Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 0-631-20955-7 Paperback, 0-631-20954-9 Hardcover.

What is Social Theory? The Philosophical Debates

Edited by Alan Sica

Philosophy's Tutelage of Social Theory: "A Parody of Profundity"?

Alan Sica

Mapping Postmodern Social Theory

Robert J. Antonio

A Thesaurus of Experience: Maurice Natanson, Phenomenology, and Social Theory

Mary F. Rogers

A Social Epistemology of the Structure-Agency Craze: From Content to Context

Steve Fuller

Making Normative Soup with Non-normative Bones

Stephen Turner

Criteria for a Theory of Knowledge

Jennifer Croissant

Examples, Submerged Statements, and the Neglected Application of Philosophy to Social Theory

Stanley Lieberson

Loosening the Chains of Philosophical Reductionism

Steven Rytina

Social Order and Emergent Rationality

Michael Macy

Theoretical Models: Sociology's Missing Links

John Skvoretz

Sociological Models

Paul Humphreys

Culture and Social Structure

Peter Blau

Election Results

Zelditch Chair-Elect, Emirbayer and Somers Elected to Council

Morris Zelditch was elected during the spring 1998 elections as chair-elect. He will begin a three-year term with successive one-year terms as chair-elect, chair, and past chair. Zelditch is currently professor of sociology emeritus at Stanford University. His substantive interests are in theories of status, power, authority, and rewards, and his most recent work has been on legitimation processes under conditions of dissensus. His methodological interests are in strategies of theory construction and on understanding theory growth.

Mustafa Emirbayer and Margaret Somers were elected to three-year terms as council members. Emirbayer teaches sociology and historical studies at the New School for Social Research. He has published several recent articles on social-network analysis, culture, and agency. He is also completing a book entitled *Relational Pragmatics*, which draws upon ideas from classical American pragmatism and contemporary relational sociology in elaborating a new theoretical strategy for social and historical inquiry. Emirbayer is interested in causality and causal mechanisms; he would like to see sociological theory engage more deeply than it has with this topic, and take on the challenge of thinking ever more systematically about explanatory mechanisms. Margaret Somers teaches sociology and history at the University of Michigan.

Study on Theory Curricula Launched

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fer—and some require—a course on contemporary theory, and here we would expect to see much greater variation in content. (Information on content rarely is given at the web sites.) Furthermore, every department offers its own idiosyncratic mix of elective courses with varying degrees of emphasis on theory. Finally, a relatively few programs offer a course in theoretical methods or theory construction and, in rare cases, require it of their graduate students.

The preceding discussion implies an ordering of priorities for graduate training: (1) core classics, (2) contemporary theorists, (3) a substantive mix, and (4) theoretical methods. Beyond this crude and somewhat speculative ordering, we really cannot be sure what sociologists of the future are being taught. It seems to me

that a relatively modest project could provide some extremely valuable information for the discipline regarding the propagation of its core ideas across generations of scholars. Is the next generation of scholars acquiring the tools necessary to develop social scientific knowledge? Is there anything resembling a standard course of theoretical training? Is the dim view of sociological theory held by scientists of other disciplines attributable to the way theoretical methods are taught in our graduate schools?

The project should help to answer questions such as these. Additionally, it will inform us as to what extent leading programs are promoting sociological theory mainly as the review and discussion of classical perspectives, or as a methodological tool kit shared by all the sciences, or both.

What is Being Taught in the Name of “Theory”?

New Study Examines Theory Section Members’ Theoretical Orientations

An article in the Fall 1998 issue of *American Sociologist* examines divisions among sociological theorists based on data gathered from over half of our section members. The abstract is reproduced below.

Current Theoretical and Political Perspectives of Western Sociological Theorists.

By Jane T. Lord and Stephen K. Sanderson

While sociological theorists frequently express concern about theoretical fragmentation and the politicization of sociology, little research has been done to demonstrate the actual state of the field. In an earlier study of sociologists in general, Sanderson and Lord found a high degree of theoretical fragmentation and a close correspondence between sociologists’ political views and their theory preferences. The current study extends this line of analysis to sociological theorists. Data gathered from over half of the members of the ASA Theory Section show sociological theorists to be enormously divided with respect to their preferred theoretical perspectives, their conceptions of the most important social theorists, and their stance on modern theoretical debates and controversies (such as the virtues of postmodernism). As was the case with sociologists in general, political ideology was the strongest correlate of theory choice, and gender was less closely related to theory choice than would be expected. From these data, a picture is painted of the current state of social theory as we approach the next millennium.

Engaging the Exemplars or Touting the Top Ten?

By Andrew Abbott

The editor of *Perspectives* has asked me to respond to the six lists of “top ten” theory books printed in the last issue. Alan Sica (who solicited the lists) has added the request that I tell *my* top ten.

Let me start with some truth in advertising. I have read 7, 3, 6, 4, 2, and 3 of the books on Sica’s lists, counting those of which I have read all or a substantial part. (I do *not* give these figures in the same order as the lists appeared in the newsletter.) So if these works really are “indispensable to a theorist’s education,” I am a less-than-half-educated theorist. Indeed, I am not a theorist at all in the section’s usual sense of the term. I do not teach courses in theory. I don’t subscribe to *Sociological Theory*. If I were asked what are the major debates of current theory, I could talk about “structure and agency,” “feminist contributions,” “realism and representation,” and so on, but I don’t know the theory scene in any detail.

I *do* theory—at least I think I do theory—but I don’t read it. My advice to Alan Sica’s graduate student would be to study the book of social life itself. As these lists show, real theorists study people, not concepts. The Holy Trinity of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were all data-driven readers of pamphlets, reports, ethnographies, histories. The work of Goffman, Douglas, and Sahlins grew out of the rainswept Shetlanders, the nondefecating Lele, and the proud Fijian chiefs. On these lists too are substantive historians and culture critics like Mannheim, Dilthey, and Said. (I won’t dignify Foucault—who made up his data—with the name of historian, but at least he sometimes *pretended* to be one.) All of these people engaged

first with real life, and only then with other theorists.

To be sure, there are “pure thought” types on these lists, both philosophers and sociological theorists. Aristotle, Kant, Smith, Hegel, Hobbes, Dewey, perhaps Habermas: these are philosophers who wrote specifically in a tradition of abstraction. But even of these, Aristotle, Smith, Dewey, and maybe Hegel could all pass as data-driven. As for the sociological theorists like Parsons, Merton, Luhmann,

“My advice . . . would be to study the book of social life itself. . . . Real theorists study people, not concepts.”

and Turner, these are the least important people on the lists and, moreover, in general *their* best work is data-driven: Merton’s sociology of science, Parsons’s essays on American society, and so on.

So what do I think a sociological theorist should take to the desert isle? The *Statistical Abstract*? The Human Relations Area Files? No, but maybe *The Mediterranean*, *Middletown*, *Montaillou*, *The Making of the English Working Class*, and, if we need some books that don’t start with “M,” perhaps *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, *Homo Hierarchicus*, *The American Occupational Structure*, *Slavery and Social Death*, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, and *Lineages of the Absolute State*.

If it were *insisted* that one take books of “theory,” I guess I would lean towards the books that have in fact foundationally shaped the way we think about human society in our time (as opposed to books that have foundationally shaped sociological theory): *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, *The Savage Mind*, *The Second Sex*, *Suicide*, and, if some works beginning with other than “S” are required, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*, and *Mind, Self, and Society*. Since I feel that social theory foolishly ignores the aesthetic di-

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A controlled experimental setting was developed and then through careful, planned variation in key factors (e.g., structural power balance or imbalance, availability of options to reward and to punish, etc.) systematic results from a long series of experiments were obtained to test hypotheses derived from the theory, or formulated to help develop the theory. The book represents a model of the type of disciplined theory that can be produced from sustained, sequential, cumulative programmatic research.

The Theory Prize is awarded annually to recognize outstanding work in sociological theory. Members of this year’s committee were: Murray Webster, chair, Karen Cook, Stephen Turner, Henry A. Walker, and Harrison White. Approximately fifteen books were submitted, and of those, eleven were judged suitable in topic and content to be considered in detail. Some of the other books contributed to an understanding of methods of theory testing, summaries of theoretical knowledge in a field, and theoretical analyses of historical events. Molm’s work was judged, overall, to provide the strongest contribution to theory building of the set of high quality books considered this year.

Editor’s note. The Shils-Coleman Prize for the best paper by a graduate student went to Wayne Brekhus at Rutgers University. Full information was not available as of press time, but will be forthcoming in the next issue of *Perspectives*.

mension of life, I would take *Art and Illusion* as well. Also ignored are emotions, whose best investigators are without question novelists; I would take *Anna Karenina*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Middlenarch*.

It really doesn’t matter whom you put upon the list. The great ideas of social theory are few but pervasive. One finds them in young and old, and shy and bold,

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Theorists and Non-Theorists

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return the compliment by bemoaning another outcome: theoretical work whose relevance to their research is at best obscure and at worst irrelevant.

The Theory Section miniconference in 1999 will be devoted to trying to begin the process of bridging this gap between theorists and the rest of our discipline. One of the three sessions will be set aside for considering how we might better educate graduate students who will not become self-defined theorists to more thoroughly incorporate theory into all aspects of their work. A second session, to be organized by Jon Turner, will be devoted to the topic of how theorists can better communicate with policy-focused researchers. The third session I will organize and I am looking for papers that demonstrate by example, rather than by abstract "oughts," how theorists can better communicate with researchers in the various substantive fields of sociology. I am accepting submissions for this session; only a couple of papers will be invited. Papers concerning any substantive area in sociology and representing any theoretical perspective(s) will be welcome, as long as they focus on how the theory is directly useful to researchers in that area. There will, of course, also be an open paper session (to be organized by Joan Alway) and a roundtable session. Next year, unfortunately, our section day will be the last day of the ASA meetings. Please try to plan for that and avoid the natural temptation to leave earlier.

Two issues came up at this year's business meeting that I would like you to think about. First, there was unanimous and

Miniconference and Theory Section Call for Papers

The 1999 program will consist of a miniconference comprised of three sessions, an additional open "topics in theory" session, and a roundtables session. Please submit papers for the topics and roundtables sessions to organizers by January 10, 1999. Papers submitted to the open session of the miniconference (organized by Chafetz) must be received in draft form by December 15, 1998.

Miniconference: Communicating with Non-Theorists

I. Communicating with Researchers in Substantive Areas.

Open Session. Papers submitted should demonstrate by *example*

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Department of Sociology
Phillip G. Hoffman Hall
University of Houston
Houston, TX 77204

II. Communicating with Policy-Oriented Researchers

Invited Session.

Organizer: Jonathan Turner

III. How to Better Educate Graduate Students about Theory

Invited Session.

Organizer: Douglas Heckathorn

Topics in Sociological Theory

Open Session.

Organizer: Joan Alway
Department of Sociology
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124

Roundtables

Open Session.

Organizer: Harry Dahms
Department of Sociology
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306

enthusiastic sentiment for the creation of a new prize for a publication that is between about five and twenty-five years old, whose importance may not have been originally recognized but that has had important "staying power." I shared that enthusiasm at the time, but when I began to think about it later, I started to see some problems with it, not the least of which is how one evaluates "staying power." I suggest that we use the pages of this newsletter to consider the issue further. Second, it appears that the section may

have as much as \$9000 in reserve, money that is currently "just sitting there." ASA will not invest money for a section unless the amount reaches \$10,000. If we could raise the additional funds, then our yearly budget would be enhanced by about \$500 as income from the investment. I ask you to think about how we may go about raising the additional funds. We could have an "event"—a raffle or whatever—or a bunch of us could just donate \$25 each, or Let me know your thoughts on this and any other issues that concern you.

"Social science progresses? On the contrary! Current social scientists understand their social world *less well* than previous ones understood theirs, for social research has vastly increased the number of social facts that compose the social world relative to the complexity of the social theories available to explain them."

—Murray S. Davis, from *The World Turned Inside Out: Pointillistic Reconceptions of Human Experience*

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in second-rate monographs as surely as in classic texts. There *is* beauty in extreme old age, but there is also no point in showing too much respect towards the highly titled few. Texts in which the great ideas are elegantly set forth fill our libraries to overflowing. As individual works, they'd none of 'em be missed.

Alan Sica is thus unwise to fly his plan whereby young men [sic] might best be steadied. What, then, of engaging the exemplars?

If the aim of theory is reflection about society "as it is," not "as it is constructed by theorists," our main attention as theorists should be on society itself. We need theory proper in small doses and for particular reasons. In thinking about those reasons, we should recognize that engagement with great theory plays different roles for scholars of different ages. At the beginning of a career we read theory for guidance in forming our own frameworks for explanation. At mid-career, we are too busy with our own theories to find other people's anything but confusing. Later on, as we confront the inevitable failure of our own work, we reread others with a newfound respect.

The idea of lists, then, is not as unwise as it seems. But its virtue is other than Sica thought. Young people *should* read great work, but not for its "necessary" content. The first great works of theory read by a young person are the material from which he or she will build a lifetime's tools of explanation. And what is crucial is not that these first-read works be the classical ones, or the politically proper ones, or the necessary ones, but that they be rich enough to fertilize a life's reflection on the dreamy realities of human affairs. It matters not that they cover a particular content but that their arguments be cogent, beautiful, challenging, subtle, and, above all, that they be accessible to a young adult mind filled with energy, idealism, and overconfidence.

See **GREAT WORKS** on Page 8

Ten Essential Texts Published over the Last Twenty Years

By Ira Cohen

The lists of sociological theory's essential texts solicited by Alan Sica (*Perspectives* July 1998) at the request of Christopher Schmitt include many texts too worthy to ignore. Who can possibly argue with the inclusion of titles by Smith, Marx, Weber, Mead, Durkheim, Dewey, and Simmel, except to nominate others by Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Schumpeter? However, all of these theorists published their best sociology well over fifty years ago. Only Randall Collins' and Steven Seidman's lists suggest an abundance of contemporary texts. The other four lists, totaling forty titles, nominate only five published in the last twenty years, and perhaps three or four more that have appeared since 1965. By comparison, when Parsons began publishing in 1929, *Economy and Society* was less than ten years old. Merton wrote his first essay, "Recent French Sociology," only seventeen years after Durkheim died.

While the classics deserve every protection from the likes of those who label Weber, Durkheim, and others "dead, white, male Europeans," I was dismayed that agenda-setting contemporary titles by Habermas, Mann, and Bourdieu received only one nomination each, while Alexander and Giddens received none at

all. Collins is right that reading one's way into the depths of the classics remains essential for serious students of social theory. But equally, students need to fix their sights on where analytical, normative, and speculative theories are headed, and where modernity demands that they reconstruct or push beyond the best ideas that the classics have to offer.

The imbalance toward the past on most of the lists of essential readings may very well leave newcomers like Christopher Schmitt depressed about the prospects for doing contemporary theory themselves. But they would be misled. Contrary to

Jonathan Turner, when I think of essential theoretical works published over the last twenty years quite a few titles come to mind. Therefore, to help students make their way to the theoretical frontier, and to help them fuse classical and contemporary horizons, I nominate a list of ten essential theoretical titles published (or translated into English) over the past twenty years. The list proceeds in ascending chronological

order. Dates in brackets refer to the first American publication. I could extend the list to fifteen or twenty titles with some

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Ten Recent Top Theory Texts

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975 – just a bit more than 20 years old)
2. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978)
3. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (1979)
4. Jeffrey Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Four volumes: 1982–1983)
5. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Two volumes: 1984, 1987)
6. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (1984)
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1984)
8. Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Two volumes: 1986, 1993)
9. Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society* (1992)
10. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age* (Three volumes: 1997–1998)

More on Weber and Values

By Stephen Kalberg

In his commentary in the April issue of *Perspectives*, as in his miniconference lecture the previous summer, Vandenberghe restates a series of misunderstandings and simplifications regarding Weber's sociology and political views that have been re-cycled now for more than thirty years. Repeatedly, he confuses Weber's sociological writings with his political writings on Germany. Ironically, some aspects of Vandenberghe's preferred position actually resemble closely Weber's own views.

Although Weber insisted that social scientists must separate facts and values in their research, Vandenberghe's conclusion that this sociology is designed to study "factual, logical and technical issues" and has "nothing to say about practical issues" goes too far. On the one hand, attempting to understand subjective meaning belongs to the very core of Weber's methodology, as does an effort to explore the values people hold (e.g., the Calvinist, the Buddhist) and the ways such values motivate action. On the other hand, Weber viewed the clear analysis of the social scientist as offering inestimable insight, knowledge, and clarity, all of which are indispensable, he was convinced, for the solution of complex practical problems.

Vandenberghe then asserts that Weber opposed arguments about ultimate values. No, not at all. Rather, he argued that the social sciences will not—and should not—allow us to decide with certainty which values are superior. We cannot prove scientifically that those of the Sermon on the Mount are "better" than those of the Rig Vedas. In this sense, and in

this sense alone, values are "irrational." But this raises the next question.

Weber's entire sociology is characterized by Vandenberghe as standing against choices. In light of Weber's reasons for opposing the view that the social sciences should pronounce a set of values as true, this is an odd (though not uncommon) interpretation. Weber saw our autonomous decision-making powers as ominously threatened by a caste of functionaries and technocrats in bureaucratic organizations and wished vehemently to oppose the development of another caste of specialists: the social scientists who would define truth and hence further deny autonomy to individuals. If these castes held sway, choices would be restricted by the social ossification that followed.

Vandenberghe then confuses matters by referring to Weber's types of domination as "principles of legitimization." More importantly, he misconstrues Weber's definition of the politician. Far from seeing politicians alone as appropriately retaining "the determination of the ends which are to be reached," Weber believed that politicians must be strong actors in order forcefully to undertake a task benefitting all: to restrain the aggrandizing powers of functionaries and technocrats. In doing so, they would, he hoped, (especially if they were charismatic leaders) carve out a dynamic "free space"—a civic sphere—within which citizens could then debate, make autonomous choices, and exercise political rights. Only then would choices become viable and individuals mature, or mündig: decisions could be made with reference to the individual's own standards

and values—just as Vandenberghe wants. Weber was convinced that only decisions made in this manner would call forth persons able to take responsibility for their actions, as he desperately wished.

As for an "inclination toward caesarism:" Does not the defense of autonomous decision-making and the opposition to its appropriation by elites fundamentally make Weber "a democrat at heart?" If the delicate phenomena called democracy and citizenship are to appear in a substantive manner, multiple constellations of sociological preconditions, Weber knew well, must be in place. "Normative validity claims" won't do it.

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confidence that all will still matter thirty years from now. Beck's *Risk Society* and Castells' *The Information Age* are less well-known than the first eight texts, and therefore require a word of justification. Beck's speculative theory of a "second modernity" is broadly influential in Europe. In the nominated text, he uses contemporary changes in the popular awareness of risk to speculate on the transformations of modernity since the end of World War II. Castells trilogy is a *tour de force* on both theoretical and empirical grounds. I am quite certain that *The Information Age* trilogy will emerge over the next decade as an essential text on globalization/localization, the decentralization of network society, the restructuring of gender identities, the rise of the fourth world, and a good deal more on modernity and society.

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The Great Works of Social Theory

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On this test, the books of these lists fare ill. Many of them are heavily written and argued. Kant? Hegel? Gadamer? These are cogent?—yes. Challenging?—yes. Subtle?—no. Beautiful?—only to those who know and love the Germanic tradition already. Would anybody read *Economy and Society* as a first book in social theorizing? Lives there a twenty-one year old whose social theories will be set alight by Spencer? or, God help us, by Parsons? One of the characteristics of the theory books I listed above is that they have the self-contained and elegant character that makes them wonderful places to start. Every one of them contains lots of real facts about social events. Every one of them can be read alone. Every one of them illustrates a mode of argument. Every one of them is pillageable for concepts and frameworks that will stand the test of time. Such are the books young people should read.

When we are middle-aged, theory plays a different role in our lives. To be sure, there will be a talmudic few who spend their careers notating classics. It may even be useful to have some authors who digest great theories into small palatable bits, although mistaking such people for major theorists is something sociology ought to grow out of. But neither of these types of work has much to do with a real theorist's midlife; that concerns the social world, not social theory.

At midlife, the theorist needs to read occasionally—for stimulation—a classic or exciting work that s/he has not read before. (Of course s/he won't have read most major theoretical works before because s/he will have been thinking and learning about the social world so much that s/he won't have had time.) At midlife one's sense of such great works is a mixture of admiration and jealousy. By now our own theoretical frameworks are (or should be) so complexly interwoven that

the freewheeling borrowing of earlier years no longer makes sense. Great work now curiously seems *more* monumental, more object-like, precisely because having written substantial work ourselves we realize how constructed and precarious such objects are. It is all the more frustrating that we recognize such work as constructed, yet cannot quite see around it. Mozart threatens us more, not less, when we see he was just another man.

As our careers close, this jealousy fades. We see at last that we like others were merely the temporary custodians of the endless—and largely unchanging—core of social theory. And a lifetime of teaching people who either miss the point or get it too literally has persuaded us that merely to have preserved that living heritage for another twenty years is a major accomplishment. It is likewise an accomplishment to have somehow, in spite of our top ten lists and our wooden controversies, raised a few students who have learned from us not what we wanted them to learn, but what it was most important for them to learn. These are our successors, who will reject us, then become us.

Of a sudden we are less impatient with the work of others. We read them again, with new and humane respect. And perhaps it is now time to reread—with open eyes at last—those talismans whose work for reasons accidental and deserved has become the heart of our tradition. Now is the time for Plato, Marx, Darwin, Kant, and Aristotle. In some ways, there is no point in reading such authors earlier; their importance lies less in their texts, great though these be, than in what later generations have made of them. One can really know their personal achievement only after a lifetime struggle of one's own.

Underneath this discussion of the various "ages" of reading are two more general ideas about differing modes of engaging the classics. First, there are diverse contexts for reading great work.

There is a continuum from reading writers for what they said, in their time, about questions as they understood them, to reading them in our words, for what their writing says to our concerns now, more or less decontextually. Paradoxically, the former reading is more humane and universal, while the latter—often driven by meliorist politics—is self-centered and literal. Second, and this has been my emphasis in the earlier parts of this argument, engagement with great work is always personal, by particular people at particular moments. The three-stage theorist's life cycle that I postulate won't fit everybody. But whatever the order, if the engagement with great work is not personal, it fails. If such work be read simply so that it can be properly cited or deftly dropped in conversation, the reader should leave sociology. S/he has no vocation.

Labeling a work as exemplary or classic is largely arbitrary, as we all know; there are few if any writers whose work is historically irreplaceable. Moreover, our own work is itself contingent, unfolding through a changing life. Unless we are intellectually dead from our youth, its themes and motifs change subtly, even radically, as we age. It is this dual contingency—in us and in what we read—that seems central to me in the experience of reading great work. To read great theory well is to get past the objective quality we assign to books in our youth or even sometimes at midlife. It is to see them as they are—the everyday products of another person's wrestling, yet again, with the angels and devils of social life. To read well is to understand such books not as objects but as subjects, so that we too can become subjects, can enact social theory for yet another generation. It is this "subject reading subject" quality that is suppressed by "top ten" lists. They change great thinking into dead thought. As so often, Elizabeth Bennet put it best: we all love to instruct, but we can teach only what is not worth knowing.