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New Directions in Sociological Theory: The Growth of Contemporary Theories

By Morris Zelditch, Jr.

The program for this year's miniconference will consist of three invited sessions organized by the program committee and two open sessions, one of papers on "topics in sociological theory" and one of roundtables.

Theoretical growth is the theme of the miniconference. Its purpose is to assess how far contemporary sociological theory has grown, where it is in the year 2000, and where it is going. The focus of the conference is at what might be described as the middle level of sociological theory, theoretical research programs. Such programs are neither single "theories" in the textbook sense of a system of interrelated concepts and propositions addressed to a single empirical phenomenon, e.g. the functional theory of stratification, nor grand metatheoretical structures, such as functionalism, structuralism, or rational choice theory, which define the field, conceptualize its fundamental nature, and justify its methods of study. The territory occupied by theoretical research programs encompasses, on the one hand, more modest issues of theoretical strategy that are more immediately at issue in empirical research, such as how to select problems, how to solve them, and how to assess the solutions. Merton's "paradigm" of functional is an

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Theory in the Curriculum

Using Textbooks in the Classroom

Editor's Note. Over the last few months I asked a mostly random sample of theory section members to offer ideas about using theory textbooks in the classroom. I asked which textbooks they use, if any, and why they use them; if they eschewed such texts, I asked them to explain that as well. The first set of responses appeared in the January 2000 issue of *Perspectives*. The remaining are in this issue, with an additional commentary by David K. Brown in response to the first set. Further comments and dialogue are welcome!

Nontraditional Textbooks

Patricia Leavy, Boston College and Curry College

I teach a diverse population of students including traditional undergraduates, adult learners and police officers. In order to appeal to this wide audience I have found that traditional textbooks are largely ineffective. Those I have used generally summarize the positions of each theorist including only minimal primary quotations. Additionally, they do not usually cover a wide range of theoretical perspectives requiring the

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More Commentary On Using and Not Using Textbooks

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use of additional books. Given this framework, the result is that I often spend too much class time discussing the author's position as opposed to the work of the theorist. This is often at the demand of my students who question the reliability of the author's interpretation of a text they have not themselves read. As a result I have searched for a different kind of textbook.

Now, when teaching both classical and contemporary social theory courses I routinely use *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* edited by Charles Lemert. I consider this to be a "nontraditional" textbook. The book is organized into six sequential historical periods and covers a tremendous range of theories/theorists. The bulk of the text consists of excerpts, ranging in length, from the writings of each theorist. Prior to each writing, a concise biographical sketch of the theorist is provided. Using this sort of text allows students to grapple with the theorist's writings directly while providing enough context to make this task manageable. Additionally, the scope of the book is such that I am able to use it as the sole text in a variety of social theory courses.

No Suitable Textbooks

Jerald Hage, University of Maryland

One of the forgotten areas of classical sociology theory is social or societal

change. Today one sees a revival of interest in this topic in a variety of ways with debates about globalization, structural adaptiveness vs. inertia, and evolution as well as paradoxically the theories of institutional embeddedness, organizational isomorphism, and national systems of innovation. In addition, there are number of books that appear with the words societal change. My own view of a theory course is that it should attempt to create new hypotheses about critical—both within the discipline and the real world—issues. Ideally, and here I part company with most members of the theory section, these theories should be formal ones tested with data as well as illustrated with telling examples. For this reason, I would not use any of the theory books presently available on the market.

Relative to this theme of societal change, I teach a course called technology and society in a honors program here at the University of Maryland. The course is organized around the dialectic between how technology changes society and how society changes technology. This latter perspective is usually ignored but is well represented in such stylized facts as the absence of high speed trains in the U.S. and biotech in Japan; countries vary in the areas in which technological change and innovation occur. The course attempts to specify when one or the other perspective is correct. This dialect also allows me to handle a number of thorny theoretical chestnuts such as the defi-

nitions of post-modernism, evolution, adaptiveness, failed evolution, equilibrium, moving equilibrium, etc.

Textbooks in Survey Courses

E. Dean Conley, MAXIMUS, Inc

I think there is value at all academic levels in reading theory in the original sources, and I have always included some such experience in every social theory course I have taught. On the other hand, social theory, to me, is about "ideas in use," not—perhaps like the topic of a literature course—ideas as primarily products of their authors and times. Of course, origin and context are important, but the primary value of a socio-theoretical idea is whether stated in a certain manner it makes any sense in trying to understand some part of society, not whether it is "what Weber really said or meant." I also think a survey course has some obligation to present students with a survey, and if the best road map is a textbook, then I use it. However, a "professor" has the right, even obligation, to emphasize his or her perspective as long as that doesn't discriminate against any particular student or fail to provide the product being advertised in labeling the course a "survey."

So, I use a text—but I control the text rather than letting it control me. I do this by using a full survey approach, but I am not afraid to come out with my preferred perspective—it shows that I am really "engaged" as a social theorist, not just sitting on the sidelines watching the show go by. I can do that without proselytizing or being unfair to those who don't share my enthusiasm. I purposely use the word "enthusiasm." Sociological theory is important, it's interesting in itself, and it really can make a difference in whatever we are doing to try to understand and even influence our social worlds. I make that the main

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Perspectives is the newsletter of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association. It is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October. The deadline for all submissions is the fifth day of the month before publication. We welcome news and commentary as well as announcements about conferences, journal information, calls for papers, position openings, and any other information of interest to section members.

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Some Proposed Criteria For Evaluating Social Theory

Thoughts from the 1999 Award Committee Chairs

Editor's Note Last year I asked the chairs of our two award committees if they would attempt to formalize some of the criteria they and their committee members used in going about the task of selecting award winners, and then to share their thoughts with readers of *Perspectives*. Both Ira Cohen and Jeff Olick found this difficult to do without getting into the particulars of their efforts, but each offered an alternative. Jeff Olick offered to write more generally and subjectively about what he likes and dislikes in social theory; Ira Cohen got to thinking about what makes certain theoretical works (the classics) so distinctive and powerful. Each offers a way to begin thinking about what makes for good theory.

What Is Classical About Classical Social Theory?

By Ira J. Cohen

Recently I have been serving as general editor for a new series of books designed to recover the continuities between classical and contemporary social theory. The premise of the series is that from Marx, Weber and Durkheim to Habermas, Foucault, and Bell our most respected theorists have collectively engaged in a multi-themed effort to make sense of the deep currents that generate the ever-changing surface features of modernity. I believe that in recent years a variety of circumstances have led us to forget that ever since the classical era ended at the close of World War I leading theorists in each generation have reconstructed, augmented, and renewed an agenda inaugurated as early as 1776 when Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*. This agenda can be justified easily on practical grounds. For better or for worse, and quite often for better *and* for worse, it has fallen to social theory to define the problems and prospects of modern ways of life and institutional orders. Social theory has always been pragmatic in this sense. Modernity perpetually confounds common sense. What could be more practical than explaining modernity's irrationalities in rational terms?

But as I began to think about the continuities of classical and contemporary social theory, I was nagged by a sense that this was not the full story. I am mindful that many classical theorists framed their works in untenable philosophies of history and most of them assumed epistemological principles that failed to account for the social construction of their own theoretical methods. But my doubts originate elsewhere. The differences between classical and contemporary theory that concern me start with a question that first puzzled me in graduate school: What is classical about classical social theory? If the classics remain relevant to the questions about modernity that we ask today, why maintain a categorical boundary that segregates classical from contemporary works at all?

The most widely cited essays on the differences between classical and contemporary theory circle around the question of what qualifies a work as a classic without ever really questioning the categorical distinction itself. I think this is because they stipulate practical utility as a criterion. If we invoke practical utility as a criterion, then the distinctively classical character of classical theory is likely to remain at least slightly out of reach. Why? Because practical utility is a contemporary standard. If classical theories differ substantially from contemporary works, then their classical qualities set them apart from our concern with the practical and sociological needs of the day. Of course, it can be argued that the

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On Judging Theory

By Jeff Olick

Is good sociological theory like good art and obscenity—you know it when you see it, but it is hard to say just why? After all, any criteria for evaluating the relative merits of theories derive from the evaluations one has already made. Theory allegiances, moreover, almost always involve more than the reasons we are able to articulate for them: Let's face it, a sympathy for Theodor Adorno over James Coleman, for example, is ultimately as much a matter of cultural sensibility and personal style as it is reasoned philosophical choice. Nevertheless, it might still be useful to offer a few considerations on the matter that don't involve throwing up our hands and saying there is no accounting for taste. At very least, we should be willing to put our taste cards on the table.

Before suggesting my criteria, however, I think it is important to mention a few points of difference between judgments of quality within a theory school and judgments of quality between theory schools. Even if one rejects the premises of a school of thought, it doesn't mean there aren't differences in quality within this school of thought. Of course, theory schools are sometimes so esoteric both substantively and stylistically that it can be difficult for an outsider to tell the difference between a good and a bad effort. At the limit, moreover, it might be hard to take

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seriously even the best effort of an approach you consider to be fundamentally wrong. Sometimes we deny that qualitative differences within a school matter at all: We are often tempted to argue that the worst version of a theory we approve of is better than the best version of one we don't, or that the worst version in fact reveals the bankruptcy of the best. This, for instance, was what physicist Alan Sokal claimed he had done by getting the editors of *Social Text* to take a bogus send up of radical constructivist science studies as the real thing.

Personally, however, I have little patience for those who dismiss entire schools of thought out of hand (though I too have had my moments!). And I am equally frustrated by presentations that don't need to dismiss other schools of thought because they are so busy refining an orthodoxy that they act as if there are no other relevant theories. Imperialism and esotericism are twin enemies of good theory and intellectual community, fundamentalism as dangerous in academia as it is in politics and religion. Note this doesn't mean I advocate substantive eclecticism, that is, the use of contradictory frameworks for different theoretical problems. It just means I like to see theorists casting their conceptual nets widely. No one school is the sole source of all good ideas, nor are any established schools totally devoid of any worthwhile insights. If this were the case, life would be very dull indeed.

Here then, broadly stated, are three criteria I think appropriate for evaluating both particular works of theory as well as entire traditions of theoretical inquiry. I think sociological theories should be useful, valid, and erudite. These are, of course, immensely vague and contestable labels.

Usefulness can be assessed operationally or conceptually, in terms of expla-

Plans for August Miniconference

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example. On the other hand, theoretical research programs also encompass whole systems of theories (rather than a single theory), such as social identity theory, network exchange theory, or institutionalism, together with models of their empirical applications to diverse, concrete phenomena.

The proceedings of the miniconference will be published by Rowman and Littlefield as *New Directions in Sociological Theory: The Growth of Contemporary Theories*. What the box below shows is more or less its table of contents—not the titles of the papers, which are not yet final, but at least the participants and their topics. All of the participants have accepted the committee's invitation to present at the miniconference. The actual sessions will be organized differently, designed to mix and match papers in a way that gives a greater sense of the diversity of both their levels of analysis and their types of theoretical growth. The actual program will appear in the July issue of the newsletter.

Miniconference Topics and Presenters

New Directions In Sociological Theory

THEORIES OF INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES

David Heise on Affect Control Theory

Guillermina Jasso on Distributive Justice

Joseph Berger and *David Wagner* on Expectation States Theory

Thomas Fararo and *John Skvoretz* on Integration of Theories

THEORIES OF NETWORKS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Ron Burt on Structural Holes

Gerald Marwell and *Pamela Oliver* on the Logic of Collective Action

Mayer Zald and *John McCarthy* on Resource Mobilization Theory

THEORIES OF INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIETIES

Peter Blau on Heterogeneity and Inequality

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita on Political Institutions

Jack Goldstone on Revolutions

Ron Jepperson and *David Strang* on Institutionalism

Immanuel Wallerstein on World-Systems Analysis

nation or understanding, formally or substantively. There is usefulness within sociological work (e.g. does the theory help us do our work or is it needless abstraction or hair-splitting?) as well as the usefulness of theory to society (does it address compelling issues or matters of antiquarian or narrow scientific concern). There are no easy answers to these questions (I took a stab at it, but my first paragraph ex-

ceeded the word limit for the entire essay!). Let me just say that, for me, a variety of approaches count as useful. There are many different moments of sociological research, and many different activities count for me as sociology. These include verification and speculation, comparison and narration, characterization and testing, among others. Perhaps the only general claim

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What Makes Good Social Theory?

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I accept in this regard a rejection of generalization. Nothing turns me off more than the claim that only X counts as “real” theory while all else is metaphysics (the claim from one camp) or scientism (the claim from the other).

Usefulness of theory beyond sociology, moreover, is no easier a matter. There are no objective criteria of relevance and importance—importance depends on whom you ask and when you ask them. Alas, I find no way around this subjectivity and variability. I don’t want to reduce the value of sociological theory to its contribution to solving pressing social problems. But theory has to be interesting to me, and just because what is interesting to me is subjective doesn’t mean that it is completely relative or that I can’t argue with you about the relative value of different subjects. One of my teachers in graduate school always asked the same questions at job talks: “So what?” Perhaps not the friendliest question for nervous candidates, but the question itself, along with “What next?” seems to me the most important one we can ask of a sociological theory. Good theory for me is relevant theory.

For me, good theory is also valid theory, though validity is no easier a matter than usefulness. Good theories, we are often taught in the first year of graduate school, are parsimonious theories (though we are more likely to learn this in a statistics class than in a theory class). I disagree, at least somewhat. Since theorizing is always a matter of reducing reality, the argument goes, we cannot reject parsimony by claiming that the world is complicated and parsimonious theory damages our sense of that complexity. Some good theories are parsimonious theories, but not all theories need be parsimonious. Reductionism is unavoidable only with a particular conception of theory.

Theory, for me, must not only be extrapolation from complexity, a leveling of difference between cases, but can be a guide to appreciating that complexity. Claiming that good theory is parsimonious theory already assumes a particular and narrow limit of what theory is at all. I am no fan of reductionism as a theoretical strategy, particularly when the theorist denies that validity is important (James Coleman, for instance, does this at the beginning of *Foundations* when he argues that the value of rational choice procedures is not to be judged on whether or not they rest on valid assumptions about human beings and social life; others make the same move from methodological structuralist positions). We may be able to increase usefulness within narrow contexts by reducing validity. This is why usefulness is not my only criterion of good theory. If it were, sociological theory is merely a kind of management science. I recognize that some colleagues favor this approach. I don’t. For me, sociological theory must also provide meaning. Good theory for me is multidimensional theory.

My third criterion is even more contentious: Good theory for me must be erudite. I am well aware of the dangers of erudition for its own sake, a tendency particularly well-developed in sociological theory. Sociological theorists often seem caught between the rock of ancestor worship and know-nothingism—endless exegesis of ancient texts or presentist generation of propositions. I believe, however, that we have a lot to learn from both the successes and mistakes of our predecessors. To me, it often seems like there is all too much reinvention of the wheel in sociology. Erudition, moreover, includes not just a reading of the history of one’s own approach, but wide reading in other (even competing)

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classics are more instructive than useful, which is to say they set standards of intellectual excellence that the rest of us try, or should try, to emulate. But, as much as I agree that the classics are instructive, this still begs the question of why social theory regards some works as classics. Why not call them exemplars or founding works?

Some may see this as simply a nominalist argument. But I think that we call certain sociological works classics for very sound reasons. Since sociology borrowed the term “classic” from the humanities, a return to the etymological source in the humanities is appropriate here. Consider a brief comparison between three widely acknowledged classics: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the finale of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the “Ode to Joy,” and Picasso’s *Guernica*. What could these works that differ profoundly in form, content, cultural background, and historical context possibly share in common as Western cultural classics? Three closely interrelated qualities come to mind.

First, each of these works is saturated with cultural meanings that draw together and surpass the prevailing wisdom of their time and place. Each of them rewards attention with insight on every conceivable level from their commentary on the human condition, to their historical context, to their producer’s mastery of technique and detail.

Second, each work is infused with spiritual values. By spiritual I mean that Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Picasso found ways to stir the passions that make abstract values and moral dilemmas come alive as matters of surpassing importance not only to the mind, but to the heart and soul as well. Shakespeare evokes the all-too-human ambivalence at the point where moral responsibility and personal courage are

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supposed to converge. Picasso brings home the fear and pain and anomic chaos that make war an epitome of human evil. Beethoven makes us feel the awe-inspiring spiritual power of universal human solidarity as a social ideal.

Third, because these works are both saturated with insights and capable of stirring the human spirit, succeeding generations have laminated them with additional layers of meaning that their creators may not have had in mind. Picasso, for example, could not have anticipated the meaning *Guernica* has taken on for viewers who have been frightened by nightmares of nuclear destruction over the past fifty years. Beethoven had no way to foresee the political significance of the "Ode to Joy" for multitudes of people throughout the world who heard it performed at the newly-fallen Berlin Wall.

Return now to classical social theory. Despite the fact that the humanities and sociology are different intellectual species, of the three qualities classics in the humanities share, two are very generally recognized to apply to the sociological classics as well. First, anyone who has lectured in classical theory knows that the texts of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as well as Tocqueville, Simmel, and Smith make a very densely meaningful syllabus indeed. We teach our best students not only each theorist's own ideas, but the philosophical, historical and political contexts in which they wrote. We take care to note their methodological techniques and the details in their conceptual definitions. Many of us teach only three or four theorists in an entire term. Second, the classics inspire seemingly endless interpretations. One only needs to browse through the most frequently cited commentaries from, say, 1950 or 1975 to know that none of us today read any of the pre-World War I classics in the same way as our predecessors. Too

Candidates Nominated for Section Offices

Integrated ASA Elections Scheduled for May

The Nominations Committee has completed its work and forwarded to the ASA its slate of candidates for Theory Section offices. The two candidates for chair are Gary Alan Fine and John R. Hall.

The four candidates for two slots on the Theory Section council are Robert Antonio, Patricia Ticineto Clough, Barry Markovsky, and Cecelia Ridgeway.

All candidates have agreed to serve, and have forwarded biographical information to the ASA offices in Washington.

Section members will receive a single ballot sometime in May for all ASA and section elections. Candidate profiles will arrive with the ballot.

The Nominations Committee members are Charles Smith (Chair), Janet S. Chafetz, Martha Foschi, Peter Kivisto, and Jeff Olick.

Candidates for chair:

Gary Alan Fine
John R. Hall

Candidates for the council:

Robert Antonio
Patricia Ticineto Clough
Barry Markovsky
Cecelia Ridgeway

Nominations Invited for New Editor of *Perspectives*

The publications committee of the Theory Section (Gary Alan Fine, chair, Morris Zelditch, and Janet Chafetz) is inviting applications and inquiries from section members interested in becoming the next editor of *Perspectives*, the section's newsletter. The current editor, Joe Hopper, will publish his last issue in July 2000, and the first issue under the new editor will be in October 2000. Term of appointment is three years. The newsletter has been one of the central functions of the section, and has been recognized as one of the best section newsletters in the association. We hope to continue that tradition.

If you have any interest or wish to nominate a colleague, contact Gary Fine (g-fine@nwu.edu; 847-491-3495), Morris Zelditch (zelditch@leland.stanford.edu), Janet Chafetz (jschafetz@uh.edu), or Joe Hopper (jhopper@midway.uchicago.edu).

many interpretations and interpretive reconstructions have intervened. Too many events have altered the hermeneutic horizon.

But the remaining quality, the spiritual depth of the classics, is less often acknowledged. My guess would be that this neglect stems from an embarrass-

ment with discussing spiritual matters in public that seems as strong today as it did when the Enlightenment *philosophes* denounced metaphysics and religious faith. Discussions of spiritual matters sound awkward. It is as if we are making a confession of faith that is too personal to find its way into our

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The Spiritual Qualities in Great Sociological Theory

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work. Be this as it may, evidence of spiritual depth in the sociological classics is too rich and abundant to deny. Marx certainly did not conceive capitalist alienation and exploitation and the fetishism of commodities in dispassionate terms. Even in translation, his writings are infused with a passion for justice in the face of a society that systematically visits human misery on the oppressed. Weber has a very recognizable spiritual subtext as well: viz. the meaninglessness of modern culture and the amoral efficiency of modern forms of rule and domination. He may have been methodologically and personally averse to displays of passion, but his moral condemnation of a culture that lacks the capacity to inspire meaningful hope among the suffering and moral vision for great leaders comes through to his readers nevertheless. Durkheim came closest of all to writing openly about the spiritual qualities of social life. He may have exempted his own sociology from moral philosophy on methodological grounds, but does anyone doubt Durkheim's passionate conviction that human beings both need a moderate degree of spiritual solidarity, and lack that solidarity in modernity due to corrosive egoism and disruptive anomie?

Like many of the social phenomena we study, the spiritual passion of the classics often is seen but unnoticed. While we might be reading the best works from before World War I today based solely upon their brilliant insights into modernity, I doubt that we would be calling them classics if they failed to evoke spiritual passion. After all, many of us still read Michel's *Political Parties* and Cooley's *Social Organization*, but neither work has a spiritual dimension that speaks to readers in our time, and I think this is why neither work measures up to full classical status in many readers' minds.

The best students we have often approach the classics with a sense of awe. If I am right, there is some justification for this. The sub-texts of awe-inspiring meaning are as strong in Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, as they are in Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Picasso. I think I should emphasize that I intend no strong analogy between the humanities and social theory. Theater, music, and painting each have their own ways of evoking passionate convictions about moral and philosophical matters, social theorists have their own ways as well. Moreover, I freely concede that the classics in the humanities evoke spiritual reactions as part of their primary intent, while social theorists would be unforgivably irresponsible to sacrifice even one analytical insight or logical implication for the sake of the best-intentioned effort to stir the reader's soul. Every one of the classical social theorists maintained they were practicing science. And so they were in the sense that they never allowed their passionate convictions to distort the theoretical rigor of their sociological arguments. Yet their genius rests in their ability to maintain their firm, analytical grip on social life while they infuse their sub-texts with beliefs based upon some of the most profound values Western culture has to offer. And most remarkable of all, the spiritual implications of their words continue to resonate in our time just as much as in their own.

Is it possible to imagine social theorists writing classics today? Or is a contemporary classic an oxymoron? Leaving aside the fact that it takes some time before the full implications of a classic become clear, there seems to me to be no reason in principle why theorists should be unable to write classics today. But in practice very few have been written since the end of World War I. Some might nominate Mead, or Parsons or Habermas, but they all seem too dry to me. I think certain works by Norbert

Elias will be regarded as classics some day. Perhaps, if an interpreter manages to adduce the proper implications from the works of Erving Goffman (who sometimes seems cold and amoral to me) his *Interaction Ritual* may rise to a classical position. To my mind this part of Goffman's work brilliantly translates Durkheim's belief in the centrality of the cult of the dignity of the individual into the disattended maneuvers of everyday life.

Why should we suffer from a classical drought? The question calls for a sociological explanation that I cannot supply here. But the absence of many classical social theorists, like the absence of many contemporary playwrights, composers or painters with classical ambitions, is most likely one index of the effects of the increasing tempo of "creative destruction" endemic to modernity over the past eighty years. The point is nothing new, of course. Durkheim already recognized before the turn of the twentieth century in his concept of the anomic division of labor that the structural networks of modernity grow much faster than modern spiritual values. Perhaps, as Weber implied, modernity at large has left all passions behind once and for all, even as capitalism, bureaucracy and the rest continue to thrive. But however this may be, the sociological classics we have inherited from the past remain the only secure spiritual moorings our discipline has, or is likely to have for some time to come. And this above all is why we call them classics.

Ira Cohen edits a series called Modernity and Society, which will be published by Basil Blackwell over the next several years. It consists of volumes coupling original essays by prominent scholars with selections from primary texts that demonstrate links between classical and contemporary theorists. The editors of the first four volumes include Robert Antonio, Mustafa Emirbayer, Steven Kalberg, and Ira Cohen.

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focus of the course, so how I use a text will fall into place as the secondary consideration that it is.

I've recently become interested in railroad history. Some of the best social historians I've met are model railroaders, men and women who can't wait to get back to their basement layouts and try to "model" the Los Angeles freight yards (or, whatever) "as they really were" in the late 1940s. Ultimately failing in that, they try to capture or create something about how they were—or might have been—that can be communicated in miniature. They struggle and press on, driven by a "positive" attraction to what they are trying to do. Theorists are a lot like these model railroaders, and in teaching a course we are inviting our students to join us for a time on our journey.

THEORY, TEXTS, AND INSTITUTIONS

David K. Brown, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

I have taught theory at several types of institutions—a selective liberal arts college, a research university, and several middle-of-the-road public universities. I am convinced that text selection depends on what I realistically can expect in terms of student preparedness for the course.

At the University of Illinois-Urbana, for example, students generally have tackled sophisticated, original sources in other courses prior to taking the theory course. Upper division courses commonly have five or more such books. Even the Introduction to Sociology course that I teach has five theoretically-inclined books: Calhoun's *Sociology*, Collins' *Sociological Insight*, Ferguson's *Mapping the Social Landscape*, MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It*, and Rubin's *Families on the Fault Line*. Under these circumstances, it is not only

permissible but provident to assign, say, *The Protestant Ethic* (perhaps with *The Religion of China*), *The German Ideology*, *Primitive Classification*, *Discipline and Punish*, or *Distinction* in the undergraduate theory course. Many students at Illinois and similar schools will go on to graduate study, so they can anticipate and embrace the need to develop theoretical acumen through original texts. The culture of the institution develops and supports such predilections.

By contrast, students at institutions of average or lesser prestige may receive minimal exposure to primary works in their courses. Textbook learning of more or less descriptive materials may be the modal form, even in upper-division courses. At one school, I actually was limited to ordering just two books by a text rental system. Student cultures at such institutions also markedly differ from other schools. Many students simply refuse to read the majority of assignments. Since few students plan to attend graduate school, they tend to be more interested in Marx' relevance to work places than in the methodological nuances of his Grundrisse. The assignment of full-length, original texts under these conditions often meets with revulsion, anger, and withdrawal on the part of students who, for no particular fault of their own, simply are not in a position to appreciate the material. In these cases, I normally have chosen a well-written, basic text, such as Collins' *Four Sociological Traditions*, to get them acquainted with theory. I use a reader that offers accessible glimpses of master works that probably would be too tall an order if assigned in their entirety. I also have used provocative essays, such as those contained in Kivisto's *Illuminating Social Life*, to stimulate discussion. This admittedly limited strategy works well enough that students come away with an appreciation for theory, and a desire to learn more—perhaps even from original texts.

We should come to terms with the opportunities and constraints that accompany theory teaching in different institutional settings, and remember that few of us are teaching in the salon culture of 18th century Jena. Robert Bierstedt once advised me that little could be gained from reading Weber in translation. That comment was an exaggeration, as are blanket proclamations that secondary discussions of theory lack instructional value.

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approaches. A second, and more important, aspect of erudition is historical and geographical erudition. The most dangerous theoretical error, as far as I'm concerned, is the naturalistic fallacy—mistaking a current or local state of affairs for essential reality. Here I return to the problem stated at the beginning, that any criteria for evaluating theory are inevitably the results of evaluations one has already made: for me, sociological theory must grasp the process-relational nature of society, that units of analysis are historically and socially constituted. Historical and geographical erudition reduces the tendency to build theory with fixed, pre-social units, be they modern rational individuals or reified collectivities such as nations and states. Good theory for me is thus developmental theory in these two senses—development of theory traditions and historical development of analytical units.

In sum, for me good theory is relevant, multidimensional, and developmental. This doesn't mean that any particular paper has to spend equal space on each of these aspects, merely that it must gesture towards them. There is perhaps no perfect balance, but certainly minimal levels of each seem to me to be necessary. Upon reflection, these are the qualities I value when reading theory. Perhaps I don't know what good theory is, but I know what I like.