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Perspectives

Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section
volume 27, number 1, January 2004

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The Theory Section and Theory Satellites

Michèle Lamont, Harvard University

I want to reflect briefly on the current state of the field of sociological theory, based on my observation of recent trends in who is teaching sociological theory in the top ten (or so) sociology departments in the country. Although top departments represent only the top of the iceberg, it is informative to take a close look at what they are doing because they train a number of sociologists who go on to take academic positions and influence research in the discipline. This impressionistic analysis is meant to complement the more systematic study of the content of graduate theory training in the top fifty sociology departments conducted by Barry Markovsky, as well as the 2000 survey of the theoretical orientations of Theory Section members by Steven Brint and James La Valle.¹

My reflections are based on a simple email survey: After having identified the top ten sociology departments using the website of *US News and World Report*, I contacted one person who teaches theory in each of these departments and asked her who had been teaching theory courses in the past five years.² I used departmental websites to collect information on the fields of specialization of these individuals and to complement my previous knowledge concerning their areas of scholarship.

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Announcing the Lewis A. Coser Award

The Theory Section of the American Sociological Association is happy to announce the Lewis A. Coser Award for Theoretical Agenda-Setting.

The Award will be awarded on an annual basis. It is intended to recognize a mid-career sociologist whose work, in the opinion of the selection committee, holds great promise for setting the agenda in the field of sociology. While the award winner need not be a theorist, her or his work must exemplify the sociological ideals Coser represented. The hope of Coser's family and of the Theory Section is that this will be a prestigious award in the discipline in general, not just among theorists, and that it will serve to reinforce the centrality

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Cultural Studies as a Preliminary Step Toward Human Science

Thomas J. Scheff, University of California Santa Barbara

Most advances in knowledge have occurred when some brave soul broke out of her/his routine. De-routinized, the learner is able to see a problem where none existed before, and apply a new approach to it. Freud's work provides one example. Trained in medical routines, his understanding of neurosis made little headway at first. But the case of Anna O, as mishandled by his mentor, Breuer, shocked him out of routine. He deduced that what the patient had needed was not intervention on the physician's part, medical or otherwise, but a sympathetic listener. This insight changed his own practice, and became the basis for psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

Durkheim's study of the social bases of suicide provides a second example. In a single stroke, he founded modern social science. He formulated a new problem and attacked it in a new way: by combining theory (anomie), a qualitative method (anthropological observations of particular cultures), and a quantitative method (comparative statistical analysis of suicide rates). Largely on the basis of this single study, Durkheim was and still is a charismatic figure for sociologists.

As Weber has taught us, the usual fate of charisma is routinization. In the current social and behavioral sciences, however, the three approaches that Durkheim integrated so successfully have become routinized into separate specialties, with little interaction between them. Theorists review

classic theories or develop new ones. Qualitative methodologists conduct descriptive ethnographies or analyze conversation, and quantitative methodologists apply numerical analysis to atheoretical or social problems.

In this format, new problems cannot be approached in a new way, since the researcher has a prior and constraining commitment to theory, qualitative or quantitative methods. Perhaps these prior commitments, routinizations, are the main reason that the social and behavioral sciences have made so few advances. Our graduate programs continue the process of routinization by training students to become specialists in one of the three approaches: theory, qualitative, or quantitative methods. A similar point can be made about the complete isolation of the disciplines into separate routines, like the blind men and the elephant. How can we begin a process of de-routinization?

Cultural studies might offer a step in this direction, as a support for building science, rather than as a competitor. The main task in current social science may be conceptual, and therefore, pre-scientific. The scientific approach to human universals is organized in terms of theory, method and data, but usually the basic issue is the formulation of the problem and the concepts before theory, method, and data can be mobilized. We all live in the

assumptive world of our own culture. The vast number of assumptions on which cultures are based are hidden by routine adherence to convention.

The grip that established routines have on science has been nicely caught by the philosopher Quine (1979):

"The neatly worked inner stretches of science are an open space in the tropical jungle, created by clearing tropes [metaphors] away" (1979, p. 160).

That is to say, it usually happens that before scientific procedures are applicable, a ruling trope has to be overthrown. Quine's formulation captures the radically intuitive element necessary for scientific advance. Tropes are linguistic/mental routines that both reflect and hide cultural assumptions that are taken for granted.

Many examples of obstructive tropes have occurred in the history of physical science. Brahe, the Danish astronomer, spent his adult life trying to determine the orbit of Venus. He made accurate observations of the position of the planet during his lifetime, but he assumed, like everyone else, that the planets revolved around the earth. For this reason he was

The Beginning of an Era: Sociological Theory a Generation After the Cultural Turn (A Reponse to Seidman)

Isaac Reed, Yale University

Steven Seidman's dramatic narrative of the "end of an era" (*Perspectives* vol. 26 no. 4) has four protagonists who failed in their grand ambitions to reorganize social research due to tragic flaws. Scientific theory refused to "seriously engage the general social ideas" that it implicitly assumed. Discursive theory detached itself from empirical research and became commentary. Identity theory could not codify itself since its central concept is "notoriously shaky." And postmodern theory never escaped the generalist mode it was critiquing, remaining "merely" deconstruction and never advancing a feasible research program of its own. Seidman connects the aspirations of these modes of theorizing to the desire of disciplines to "develop general theories that integrate research and concepts into a unified body of knowledge." With the failure of these projects, Seidman concludes, we have entered a new era where fields, not disciplines, are the important intellectual communities, "concretized theory" the order of the day, and thus theory as we knew it is over.

Though I will develop different ones in this essay, Seidman's four categories of theory are a compelling ideal-typical account of the field. However, the paths theory has taken since the 1960s have a much deeper and more

internal relationship to the rise of concrete theory than Seidman suggests. Concretized theory and the emergence of fields does not indicate the end of theory so much as it points to a moment in theory's own history that theorists failed to develop and articulate, and thus to a new and vital project for social theory. For while the systematic accounts of the social that characterized the grand theory of the sixties generation may be over, the task of reflexively articulating the conditions for sociological knowledge in a post-Geertzian era has only just begun.

The 1960s saw the linguistic turn in philosophy become the cultural turn in social science. Social theorists energetically took up the task of re-examining the critical and analytic frameworks that had structured theory and research, and came to radical conclusions that upset disciplinary consciousness. But the disciplines did not disappear, rather they acted as mediating discursive formations for the dispersion of questions about culture, subjectivity, discourse, and interpretation. Anthropology saw its greatest generation break from its objectivist past: Geertz, Sahlins, Turner, and Douglas permanently severed cultural from physical anthropology. Sociology rejected structural functionalism in the name of the subjectivity, knowledge, and emotions of the agent: Goffman,

Garfinkel, and Blumer founded microsociology. On the European continent, structuralism, and most importantly, the not-yet-entirely-post-structuralist Michel Foucault, changed the word from Paris by formulating a sociological and historical account of the development of Western forms of subjectivity as a direct attack on the metaphysical foundations of phenomenology and existentialism. Gadamer, Apel, and Habermas constituted a dialogue between hermeneutics, pragmatism, and Marxist critical theory that inaugurated a post-Adorno world by reopening questions concerning the relationship between science and politics, empirical knowledge and moral reflection. Adorno's debating partner was also surpassed; the Kuhnian revolution rendered Popper's philosophy of science untenable by presenting science as a social practice and a historically and culturally bounded knowledge formation.

This was the cultural moment in social theory, and it was characterized by both excitement and uncertainty. Its relationship to the political aspirations of its articulators, and to the political events of the time, has been well documented. But this moment cannot be reduced to its various political motivations and social conditions. It must also be understood from an internal perspective. Rampant uncertainty

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[For this edition of Perspectives, I asked three ethnographers to share their views of the relationship between theory and ethnography. - Ed.]

The When of Ethnographic Theory

Gary Alan Fine
Northwestern University

One of the charms of ethnography, contributing to the enticement of field research, is its power as description: “bringing back the goods” on spaces far removed from the places of its audience. Indeed, this spying on Otherness was assuredly crucial to the justification and influence of the earliest constructions of the domain of “anthropology” by missionaries, travelers, and explorers. These tourists found that their curiosity matched the urgent desire by national elites for political control.

While a cogent descriptive strain continues to exist within field research, as the methodology has been integrated into the heart of social science research an enlarged generalizability and theoretical elaboration have displaced meticulous description as the primary goal of the ethnographer.

In my recent essay (Fine 2003), “Towards a Peopled Ethnography: Developing Theory From Group Life,” I made the case that ethnography should properly be grounded in theory. I proposed seven characteristics of what I labeled a *peopled ethnography*. I exhorted my colleagues that a peopled ethnography is 1) theoretical, 2) built on other ethnographies and research studies,

**What is Description?
(One Ethnographer’s View)**

Marjorie DeVault
Syracuse University

As a committed fieldworker, I sometimes find myself asserting, “I’m not a theorist.” But I also get huffy when sympathetic listeners reassure me that “your work is theoretical” – if that weren’t obvious. My commitment to fieldwork is a commitment to investigation. For me, that implies both empirical study and reflexive theoretical examination. But this understanding of fieldwork might also imply a conceptualization of theory rather different from the one that has been dominant in the era of quantification.

Some ethnographers pursue field-based studies in order to build theory. The grounded theory approach associated with Anselm Strauss and his students, for example, aims at mid-level theoretical propositions to be tested, while Michael Burawoy and his students have more recently developed an “extended case method” designed to contribute to theories of social change and state control. The former efforts are generally compatible with symbolic interactionism, the latter with marxist approaches. Some researchers treat ethnography as an empiricist tool, using it in projects directed at developing or testing existing formal theories of

Theory by Way of Ethnography

Andreas Glaeser
University of Chicago

I cherish and practice ethnography as a way to develop theory. The reason is that I find it uniquely suited to empirical work based on a particular ontology which has from pragmatism over phenomenology to practice theory become something of a vanishing point for the production of social theory. It often travels under the label of the “duality” of the social and can be stated thus: On the one hand, everything social comes into being exclusively through the embodying interactions of real people in particular times at concrete locations; on the other hand this can happen only by virtue of their drawing on already existing social arrangement (relations, ideologies, practices, the built environment) which are thereby reproduced or changed. From this perspective, the social as our peculiar mode of being has to be conceived and analyzed in terms of a dense thicket of partially independent and partially interacting processes with varying temporalities producing the semblance of “structures” within a sea of “events.” What we are interested in with such processes is not only the differentiation of their concrete local unfolding, but the very

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3) focused on groups in routine interaction, 4) based on multiple research sites, 5) dependent on extensive observation, 6) richly ethnographic and conscientious in its representations, and 7) based on a fundamental distance between researcher and researched. Within the divisions of ethnographic research, this approach is set firmly within what John Van Maanen (1988) has termed the “realist tradition.” While certain elements of confessional ethnography, interpretative ethnographies, and the other approaches that Van Maanen suggests are legitimate, my assumption is that, although all knowledge is constructed in some measure, field researchers can present truth claims that generate sufficient levels of consensus with interpretations of an obdurate reality as to be useful. We can be *cautious naturalists* - not forgetting the ways that truth is built, but not ignoring that truth is a legitimate end of communities of knowledge.

For much of this century (Hallett and Fine 2000) generalizations and theoretical expansion have been part of the mandate of the qualitative sociologist. In my own ethnographic projects I have attempted to develop a theory of small group culture through examining Little League baseball teams, claimed that culture and nature were intertwined by traveling with mushroomers, explored the socialization to social problems theory through high school debate, and examined the creation of models of authenticity through folk art markets.

But what is the origin of this theory? Sociologists have tended to divide the world of theory construction into two hostile camps: inductive theorists and deductive theorists - those who uncover theory and those build theory. In its pure (and exaggerated) form the “inductives” gather data without having - at first - a clear or compelling focus. The assumption is that by nestling up to the social scene and the events observed, the canny scholar will eventually come to recognize a set of regularities that can then be applied to other groups. This approach has been most famously and influentially presented in Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. During the period during which data is collected and subsequently analyzed, researchers apply the “constant comparative method” and “theoretical sampling” to determine if the inductive claims from one domain and at one time have application elsewhere.

In contrast, others, relying on deductive theory development strategies borrowed from images of experimentation and survey research, take an distinctly different approach. They create theory without a body of data - at first. This model suggests that the researcher will have a clear idea of the topics and even potential findings of the research prior to entering a field site. The data verify or disconfirm the “hypotheses” that researchers have proposed. The ritual of methodology legitimates broad truth claims.

The conflict essentially boils down to whether “theory” comes before or after one’s field work. However, the way in which the dichotomy has been proposed is fundamentally misleading. It is not possible to separate deduction and induction in the way that has been suggested, particularly as regard to field research.

Part of the problem is to unpack the concept of *hypothesis*. A social scientific hypothesis is nothing more than a verbal expectation that a researcher believes can be justified through empirical evidence and presented rhetorically to persuade an audience of peers. From where do hypotheses derive? The answer is that they derive from lived experience. Put another way, the ideas that become established as hypotheses are plausible because they accord with the life experience of the researcher, and, as a result, hypotheses are formed through induction, and only then becoming used for deductive purposes.

The situation is equally complex as regards to a justification of induction. The impossible ideal of induction is to enter a field site as a stranger without preconceived ideas - the sociologist as Martian. Yet, as a function of the lived experience of the researcher, each site has a set of expectations associated with it. Not only are sites not selected randomly, but a researcher’s experience of a site is linked to the stereotypic imaginings of the

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collective or organizational behavior (and the increasing interest of policy researchers and funders in qualitative data suggests that such deployments of “ethnography” are on the rise, producing what I fear may become increasingly truncated versions of ethnographic investigation).

By contrast, my own ethnographic goals are more descriptive. I want to find out what happens and how, and I want to use ethnographic methods of presentation to tell others about how it happens. My approach is broadly phenomenological, rooted in the descriptive studies of Chicago-school ethnography, the efforts of ethnomethodologists (and conversation analysts) to inventory and explore the practices of sustaining a social reality, and the newer “institutional ethnography” approach arising from Dorothy Smith’s work toward what she now calls “an alternative sociology.” As I understand them, none of these schools of ethnography attempts to “build theory”; each has as its primary goal finding out about social interaction and coordination: what people are doing, and how they do it together. But I want to resist the notion that this activity is adequately captured in formulations like “mere description.” I want to argue that the practice of ethnography relies (and must rely) on “insider” theorizing, and that a corpus of ethnographic work can constitute a body of theory as well as mere description.

I spoke recently to a seminar of Ph.D. composition and rhetoric students. They sent questions they wanted me to address, and I found one of them especially compelling: Is ethnography

like jumping off a cliff? I suppose it may be for some of us – perhaps for some ethnographies more than others – but it certainly hasn’t been for me, and I felt that the question nicely captured the gulf between beginner perceptions and those of an experienced fieldworker. As I thought about how to respond, another metaphor came to mind and clicked into place. It’s like taking a walk, I told them, going to some place I haven’t been before. I may well do that with anxieties and false starts, but I proceed with the knowledge that I will take one step at a time, that I will see paths opening up before me, look for signposts, choose forking paths along the way, and so on. The payoff, of course, is exploring new territory. So I’m interested in what’s new, but I have a history of walking and watching that comes along with me.

The “history of walking and watching” this metaphor refers to is my knowledge of social coordination and how it works. It’s a stock of knowledge, built up over time, that comes from numerous sources: reading theory, as we all do, but also reading many ethnographies, reading lots of fieldnotes, watching everything, and learning (as a practitioner) from the moment-to-moment experiences of living in my daily social worlds. Becoming a sociologist entails an introduction to what we often refer to as “the sociological imagination” – we’re all inducted into that fictive unity in various ways through our initial training, and then we’re off on journeys of investigation, confirming, extending, and reshaping initial understandings not only through further reading and

research but through our located, practical experiences as “insiders” in webs of social coordination.

Ethnographers learn to pay attention to ourselves as instruments of investigation, and we’ve seen a huge, creative, and useful flood of writing on this kind of reflexive thought in the last three decades. But I need to clarify that my use of the term “insider” here is not meant to reference either of its most common usages: I am not concerned here with similarity of social identities nor with explicitly autobiographical approaches. Rather, I point to the researcher as always an embedded participant in social relations, and therefore a practitioner of the very methods of coordination s/he studies. We don’t choose to be “insiders” in this sense; we can’t escape the position; it doesn’t give automatic access to the insider positions of others; what the term implies here is an ontological and epistemological situation that sets the terms of any social research. Phenomenological and “institutional ethnographic” fieldwork makes this inevitable situation a resource rather than a problem, relying on the ethnographer’s social competence as a guide toward interpretive analysis.

Those of us who teach ethnography often intervene when students complain about spoiled fieldwork episodes and try to discard the data they don’t like. “It’s all data,” we

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principles underlying their dynamics which may have some bearing on understanding other local processes. If so, then ethnography, that study of human interaction in real time and real space through direct observation and/or historical reconstruction, would be the congenial, even felicitous approach to shed light on the innings and outings of process. And thus it should be the tool of choice to develop social theory.

To be sure, some of the finest social theory is built more or less systematically from ethnographic observation. Durkheim's sociology of knowledge, Bourdieu's practice theory and Sahlin's historical structuralism are cases in point. Yet the potential of ethnography as an incubator of theory has not been fully realized. This is the case even though good theory is deeply dependent on some kind of ethnographic imagination,¹ that is a translation in terms of concrete interaction. Rather than investigating the historical reasons why its potential has not been realized, I want to point to ways in which ethnography can be made theoretically more productive.

The first is a very self-conscious focus not on people and places per se, but on people and places qua interest in the dynamics of processes. This does not mean that one has to drown the local in the abstract. On the contrary: the aim is a dialectic where the development of a more general theoretization of processes informs an account of the stability or change of local phenomena while their intricacies systematically guide the development of more abstract processual dynamics. The result is no longer just "rich description," but rich description which is self-reflexively

built on a theoretization which in turn is unthinkable without the description itself. In this way the acceptance of the ontology of duality necessitates a different mapping of "ethnography" and "theory." Thus in my first book (Glaeser 2000) I simultaneously address the questions of "Why does Germany remain divided after unification?" and "How can we think about processes of identity formation?" In my new book (provisionally entitled: "The Power of Recognition: Making Realities in the Secret Police and the Opposition of Former East Germany") I tackle the question of how certain understandings of the world gain and lose credibility by investigating how this has happened among secret police officers and members of the opposition in former East Germany. Once processes move to the center of attention, it becomes immediately apparent that they can be studied in a variety of social contexts which are not all equally suited in bringing to the fore their dynamics. Thus fieldsite and theoretical agenda need to be carefully adjusted to each other (cf. Glaeser, 2000).

Moreover, the excessive reliance on the face-to-face paradigm of interaction has led many ethnographers to take the question of appropriate context for the investigation of "what is going on here" as given. This, however, is highly problematic, for although actions are local in time and space and thus always in an adjacent context, they are often answers to happenings quite removed in

space and time: people argue in a particular way as not to appear like Plato; they respond to the economic demand originating on other continents; by cheating on their partner they try to get back at a parent. Ergo ethnographers need to attend much more to the projective articulation of actions, the ways in which particular actions get attended to or selected, possibly bundled and transformed to become in effect (not per se) projected from some time/space coordinates to others. This includes what we typically call "media," the transportation and communication technologies as well as the practices, disciplines, ideologies and institutions which are interwoven with them and make them work. But it also includes the organizations which produce such forms of projective articulation, since obviously a large number of them are produced today by bureaucracies and corporations (in a very important sense projective articulation is what they do). Finally this includes the various ways in which history gets historicized – that is, the ways in which past happenings get reconstructed in remembrance. Context is indeed key. Alas in view of the omnipresence of projective articulation the delineation of relevant context is a rather complex task. Since every projective articulation is local, however, ethnography is well placed to handle it if it full-heartedly embraces the consideration of transtemporal and translocale effects.

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Some Reflections on Hero Worship and Direct Experience in Sociological Theory

David Boyns, California State University Northridge

[Note: Perspectives will be profiling a promising young theorist in every issue. - Ed.]

Maligned by its students, neglected by its practitioners, and obscured by its architects, theory is sociology's Gordian knot. As sociological theorists of the twenty-first century we inherit the unenviable position of maintaining, developing, and sometimes demolishing, a body of knowledge that has grown increasingly fragmented, multifaceted, and disregarded. At the same time, however, we are fortune's child. We are the beneficiaries of the incredible insights - and admittedly sometimes the ignorance - of our sociological predecessors. In addition, we are endowed with a changing contemporary world replete with new sociological riddles that require innovative theoretical inquiries and solutions. However, while twenty-first century theorists perform their craft at the cusp of sociology's second *fin de siècle*, paradoxically we still rely heavily upon theoretical ideas developed in the nineteenth century. Routinely, we faithfully pay tribute to the theoretical contributions of Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Spencer, Simmel and Mead (and now DuBois and Gilman) in our work and in our classrooms. Theory in sociology is often criticized for this, for its "hero worship," its tireless reliance upon classical statements developed over a century ago by the "saints" of sociology. In many ways sociological theory operates more

like a religion, building upon the wisdom of its initial prophets, and less like a science, discarding timeworn thinkers and ideas that have succumbed to pragmatic exhaustion and obsolescence. As Donald Levine writes, the classics in sociological theory have a "problematic status" compared with other disciplines as "physicists no longer read Newton, economists no longer read Adam Smith; why are we reading [and teaching for that matter] our old classics?" Chemists do not rely on the theories of medieval alchemists, astronomers do not rely on the geocentrists, so why are sociologists so notably anachronistic? This issue poses some interesting dilemmas for contemporary sociological theory. How do we make our ideas relevant, not only for our students and non-sociologists, but for our more empirical colleagues? The increasing separation within sociology between theory and research seems endemic, and unfortunately much of theory seems to be a practice done for its own sake. But, as one of my teachers, Randall Collins, often remarked, regardless of the methodological sophistication and innovation of a sociological study, the theory is the part that people remember.

My personal interest in sociological theory stems from my own early readings in the classical canon. As an undergraduate at the University of California at Irvine, Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical*

Manuscripts, and especially George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* particularly fascinated me. While many of my fellow students were disinclined towards theory because it was too abstract, too dry, too irrelevant, and sometime just too "old," I felt animated by theory. I did not approach theory merely as a set of ideas useful for developing an intellectual understanding the social world "outside," but also as a means for understanding myself and "my world." I saw that theory had a practical relevance for helping me come to terms with my everyday experiences, and I saw how it could do the same for others. As is often the case for many young sociologists, I became enamored with conflict and critical approaches to sociological theory, especially those of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. My reading of Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* as well as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* solidified my interest in contemporary theoretical debates and eventually attracted me to the postmodern literature. I was drawn to postmodernism because I felt that, as Erving Goffman might say, it was "where the action was." I felt that if there was a "crisis" in sociology, as

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Lewis A. Coser (1913-2003)

Stephen Kalberg, Boston University

“Leninist, but brilliant.”

-Coser comment on a student paper

Lewis A. Coser’s younger years provided excellent training for a sociologist. As a Jew and Leftist in Berlin, he early on acquired the outsider’s “bird’s eye view” and experienced as a teen-ager the ascent of a tumultuous social movement, National Socialism. Until age 20 he had known privilege as the son of a well-to-do stockbroker and had read widely in his father’s excellent library – and then “seen the rise of fascism in Europe, the ravages of the second World War, the Stalinist terror and murderous violence in the USSR.”¹ He lived as a foreigner on the edge of – or in – abject poverty for eight years in Paris and became a *citoyen* – only to be arrested by a *gendarme* and placed in an internment camp. He escaped and made his way over Portugal to New York, where he scrimped by for seven years on the wages from (mainly) low-skill and temporary jobs (e.g., hat checker, package wrapper, traveling salesman, freight dispatcher). By his mid-thirties Lew had mastered three languages and lived in, and knew well, three countries.

Tri-cultural and massively well-read before commencing graduate study at age 36 at Columbia, his education and experience in his

native Germany nonetheless dominated his thinking. Although he frequently chose reading at home over the formal structure of the classroom, his *Gymnasium* took him through three cycles of Western history, literature, and philosophy from the Greeks to the dawning of the twentieth century, leaving him with little respect for “disciplinary boundaries” and few hopes that social conflict could ever be tamed. An array of German historians, writers, and philosophers of the nineteenth century accustomed Lew to Goethe’s notion that the individual, unique and creative, always stood in a relationship of tension with his society. These same authors, however, also taught that the events of today could never be grasped without an understanding of the past and that traditions intrude comprehensively upon and grip the present, constraining the individual, as do class and convention. All echoes from across the sea – the unbounded hero who could pull himself out of the mud and make his own way, guided only by a set of noble values – met with firm resistance in the German classroom. Finally, his *Gymnasium* teachers instilled the idea that the thinker, whether philosopher or writer, was always duty-bound to serve as a strong critic of society.

Many of Lew’s central themes flow directly out of this heritage. That

conflict is ubiquitous in all groupings and remains inevitable stands in the middle of his sociology, as does the conviction that a “foreshortening of historical vision” will lead only to a “parochialism of the contemporary.”² The idea that, for their comprehension by the sociologist, ideas, interests, and values must be located in their rightful historical contexts cuts diagonally throughout his writings, as does the notion that social circumstances significantly influence thinking.³ And the social obligation of intellectuals – to remain detached, yet also continuously engaged as critics of the status quo and to oppose the rule of technocrats and experts – constitutes a pivotal theme. Finally, in hopes of establishing cultural sociology as a major sub-field, he undertook almost single-handedly a cross-disciplinary effort to unite sociology and literature.⁴

The obvious lineage of these themes tempts us to view his many works as simply transplantations of “German thought” onto American shores. Such an interpretation simplifies matters too much. His sociology must be comprehended as mixing together American and German streams in a unique way.

How is the American influence apparent?⁵ Lew’s Trotskyism, upheld in Paris and into the mid-forties in New York, had been jettisoned by the late forties. Moreover, amidst “the enthusiasm, vigor, and excitement animating [his] teachers at Columbia,” all of whom “felt that they were working at the frontiers of sociological thought”⁶ at this time, and the optimistic American embrace of

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What this analysis suggests is that a large number of individuals who are now teaching theory do not define themselves first and foremost as theorists.

- At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Chas Camic has been teaching graduate theory on a regular basis for a number of years. He defines himself primarily as a sociologist of knowledge. Other faculty teaching theory at this university are Nina Eliasoph (listing as her research areas political sociology, theory, and culture), Mustafa Emirbayer (who lists theory, comparative and historical sociology, and culture), Chad Golberg and Phil Gorski (who both list theory, culture, comparative historical, and social movements, but in no particular order). Of course, Gorski, who is now at Yale, also writes in the field of religion.

- At the University of Michigan, theory courses have been offered by Julia Adams, Peggy Somers, and George Steinmetz, all three comparative historical sociologists with strong interests in the fields of political sociology, culture, and theory. Adams is also interested in gender.

- At the University of California at Berkeley, new faculty members who teach or will teach theory are Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas and John Lie. Marion is an economic and a cultural sociologist working in the sociology of knowledge, while

John Lie is a historical sociologist working in the field of Asian and Asian-American studies. Other faculty who teach or have taught theory in recent years include primarily Michael Burawoy, but also Ann Swidler, Neil Fligstein, Gil Eyal, Nancy Chodorow, and Loic Wacquant, all of whom qualify as economic or cultural sociologists, or as comparative historical sociologists (but for Chodorow, who works primarily on gender).

- The University of Chicago is somewhat exceptional in that Don Levine, Hans Joas, and Martin Riesebrodt, who are all primarily known as theorists, have been covering the theory courses on a rotating basis. Chicago is the only department where theory specialists are exclusively in charge of theory courses. Andreas Glaeser (who lists theory and culture as fields) will soon join the rotation.

- At the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Andy Perrin, a cultural sociologist, and Charlie Kurzman, a political sociologist working on the Middle East, teach the theory courses.

- At Harvard, Mary Brinton (a comparative sociologist) and I (culture, knowledge, inequality, comparative) are teaching theory courses this year, but in the past Libby Shweber (a sociologist of science now at the University of Reading) and Orlando Patterson (a historical and political sociologist), had prime responsibility for these courses.

- I also taught graduate theory at Princeton for most of the past fifteen years. Theory courses have also been taught there by cultural and organizational sociologist Paul DiMaggio, economic sociologist Alex Portes, and more recently Mario Small, a student of inequality, culture, and the sociology of knowledge.

- At Northwestern University, Wendy Espeland, a cultural and organizational sociologist, has been teaching graduate and undergraduate theory for most of the last ten years, with, until recently, the occasional participation of Orville Lee (historical sociology, culture, and theory).

- At Stanford, theory has been taught by Buzz Zelditch, Bob Freeland (now at Wisconsin), Susan Olzak and Andy Walder. The latter are macro sociologists who list as their fields (among others) organizations, social movements, and economic or political sociology. Buzz Zelditch lists his interests as theory and social psychology.

- At UCLA, theory courses are taught by a large group composed primarily of comparative historical sociologists and political sociologists, which includes Rogers Brubaker, Rebecca Emigh, Adrian Favell, Michael Mann, Jeffrey Prager, Maurice Zeitlin, and until recently, Jeff Alexander.

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of theory in the discipline of sociology.

Although the award is administered and awarded by the Theory Section, the selection committee should represent the breadth of Coser's commitment and experience. To that end, the five-person committee will include: the President of the ASA or her/his representative, the Chair of the Theory Section or her/his representative, and the President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (Lew Coser being a former president of this association). The President of the ASA and the Chair of the Theory Section will each appoint one additional committee member, and the Chair of the Theory Section will chair the Committee.

The Lewis A. Coser Award comes with a financial reward and a ritual celebration. In consultation with the ASA, the committee will set the size of the financial reward each year, preserving the award endowment for future awardees, but spending most or all of the endowment's income on the award and award-related expenses. The recipient of the Lewis A. Coser Award will be announced at the ASA meetings in the year of her/his selection. The financial award will be paid to the winner of the award at that meeting. The following year, the recipient will give the Lewis A. Coser Award Lecture at the ASA meetings. Following the Lecture, the Theory Section will host a "salon" at or near the ASA meeting, at which section members, friends of the awardee, and invited others will meet for food, drink, and intellectual exchange. This event will be funded by the award endowment's income, and it is meant to commemorate the Cosers' legendary Stony Brook salons, where good food and good conversation mingled.

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researcher. In this sense the model of inductive theory-building must be deductive as well. While implicit "hypotheses" are shaped as a function of field experience, they can not be eliminated.

My point is to claim that the inductive and deductive models of research can never be disentangled. As "natural persons" we are continually learning from our situational exposure and from what we have been assured by others. *We are inductive theorists.* But we then use this learning to assume and to create expectations about how the world operates. *We are deductive theorists.* The distinction that has been propounded both by qualitative and quantitative researchers is fundamentally at odds with the way that people experience and generalize from their worlds.

As ethnographers we are never interested in the description of social scenes to the exclusion of other concerns. We are interested in how we might pragmatically utilize what we learn. Theoretical analysis is not something that occurs only before entering the field or after one has been in the field, but is a continuing and recursive process. Induction leads to deduction, which leads to induction, and on and on and on. Researchers should always be engaged in theory building - before, during, and after the gathering of ethnographic data. Qualitative research has the mission of being deeply and richly theoretical, but so does every other domain of social life.

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and utopian hopes should not only be seen as belonging to the politics of a generation-at-large. They also characterized a new version of a very old project for social theory: to articulate a unique language for social science. There was a glimpse, in theory, of the possibility that the study of societies could render itself free of its illusory dependence on the idioms of natural science, and yet avoid folding itself completely into humanistic forms of political and moral debate. There was, furthermore, a sense that this new form of interpretive knowledge could possess a circumscribed validity that nonetheless went beyond its immediate social milieu or its particular political valence. Hence Geertz's references to "good science," Sahlins' quip that "cultural relativism is first and last an interpretive anthropological – that is to say, methodological – procedure" (Sahlins 1999 [1993]: 43), and Kuhn's hesitations about the more radical-skeptical interpretations of his work.

But the more radical and skeptical interpretations of the cultural turn won out, via a paradoxical and ironic twist of fate. For the revolutionary social theorists of the 1960s not only felt uncertainty, they substantively discovered it. The instability of interpretation in social research, and the difficulties this posed for constituting the study of social life as another kind of science, sanctioned the flight from ambiguity via a flight from science altogether,

to other idioms of knowledge that promised a different kind of certainty or legitimacy: the modernist literary exploration of subjectivity and self (post-modern anthropology), moral objectivity (Rawls) and normative rightness (Habermas' post-Marxist critical theory), or, in the case of the new anti-anti-positivists, a return to general theory building, driven by the notion that with the discovery of the micro, sociology could finally become a cumulative science (Collins, Turner). Thus the old science vs. humanism dilemma emerged in new, more significant and sophisticated terms.

The spirit of '68 – "sous les pavés, la plage" – is perhaps long gone. And with it, perhaps, goes the foundationalist dream of a singular, unified, theory of society, knowledge, and politics. But it is worth inquiring how much the "end of an era" narrative is an internal, performative, self-constituting narrative of theory that ties itself too closely to the specific political fortunes of various new lefts. For this sentiment infuses not only Habermas' post-Marxist return to philosophy and a generation of American sociological theorists, but also the self-understanding of Foucaultian cultural studies.

When Foucault's American emissaries Dryfus and Rabinow (1983 [1982]) announced the failure of archaeology and narrated, with characteristic ethnographic authority, the shift to genealogy, they also affirmed the turn to a new theory of institutional power and its determining effects on knowledge. Theoretically, the significance of this shift lies in the premature closure of the project outlined in *The Archaeology*

of Knowledge – to open up a new conceptual logic for social research, based fundamentally on new languages of interpretation. Foucault's early work is filled with empirical details pulled from the archives to support his interpretations, which thereby claim the status of accurate reconstructions of interpretive structures within which power operated. But in *Discipline and Punish*, this interpretive, archaeological, meaning-reconstructing dimension of Foucault's work took a backseat to the overtly meaning-creating project of critical theory, whereby the theorist tells us what these mechanisms mean for contemporary political inquiry. In other words, as *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge* have come to anchor the interpretation of Foucault, political valence and relevance has come to anchor the interpretation of society and history. This is not in itself a problem, unless they are the *only* anchor.

For, outside of some kind of moral objectivity, this kind of normatively valid knowledge requires a complementary empirical certainty. In many Foucault-inspired studies, the new institutional power structures play the same role as objectively known socio-economic structures played in Marxist ideology critique: they provide the core certainty that allows the critique of "systematically distorted communication." But the waning Marxist meta-narrative leaves Foucaultians (and all of us) in the

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uncomfortable position of lacking a telos with which to fend off the uncertainties of interpretation, and thus creates the oscillation between (over)confident political critique and relativism or nihilism. This explains why work done under the sign of Foucault overlaps with postmodern anthropology and tends to explicitly reject Habermas' reformulation of critical theory. For Habermas' solution to the end of the Marxism was not the implicit substitution of a new empirical certainty (the *dispositif*) for an old (the exploitation of labor), but the reanimation of the idea of moral objectivity in the form of the universal pragmatics of human communication.

This is the "flight from strong interpretive claims" that characterizes theory after the 1960s. Meanwhile, as Seidman has noted, myriad fields of empirical social study have arisen that articulate, in their own space, the normative, epistemological, and analytic-empirical questions that first began to be asked in the 1960s. And these fields represent the cutting edge in social research: collective memory and cultural trauma, crime and punishment, women's and gender studies, queer studies, post-colonial and globalization studies, citizenship studies, the sociology of popular culture, etc. But how does this emergence connect to what happened in theory? Certainly such work is done in the spirit of the cultural

turn. But in confronting the issues of "empirical" interpretation, the researchers in various substantive fields are forced to confront the problems that social theory avoided. Geertz's hermeneutic injunction, that the concepts of social science cannot bear any direct relationship to social objects of study, but rather are mediated and complicated by the meaning-systems that are always already in place, has remained just that: an injunction, as opposed to a reflexive, theoretical account of the development of knowledge in social science.

The desire to remedy this situation, where epistemology is everywhere and nowhere at once, and where the demand for creative politics threatens to stamp out the requirement for rigorous research in cultural studies, provides the impetus for an extensive "new" project for social theory: the articulation of an adequate self-consciousness for interpretive work in social science. I believe that the kernel of this project existed on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s, but was passed up for both internal and external reasons.

Such work for theory will involve at least three (interrelated) dimensions:

(1) A reformulation of the "values" question via an extensive semiotic account of the normative inputs to social science. Value-free social science is over, but this is due as much to the inadequacy of the value-approach in understanding

culture and knowledge as it is to the end of objectivity. Given the manifest production of knowledge that is *relatively* autonomous from *a priori* political positions, it is worth asking how reflexive we can be about normativity in empirical research, and if and how this normativity can be circumscribed.

(2) An investigation of the processes of establishing the empirical validity of interpretations in social science, given that uncertainty and conflict of interpretations is not limited, in social science, to the presuppositional level. It may indeed be "turtles all the way down" when it comes to the interpretation of cultures, but simultaneously there are rules, within the social science community, for establishing the existence of culture structures and their institutional manifestations. These rules are surely not transcendental or infallible, but neither are they irrational, and they are not reducible to the pragmatic concerns of each particular research situation.

(3) A careful account of interpretive theory and methodology that makes clear that the interpretive approach is not only about "ideas." In other words, an elaboration of the new conceptions of social force and power that, while not parasitic on natural scientific notions of efficient causality, capture the regulatory force of social institutionalization and the dynamic force of historical mechanisms. All sociology is hermeneutic sociology, but this brings culture in as a *perspective*,

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unable to solve the problem.

Kepler, Brahe's assistant, took on the problem after Brahe died. For years he continued to find the problem unsolvable. In his exasperation, Kepler developed a bizarre model in which orbits were determined by transparent solid polyhedrons. The model itself was useless, but in his flight of fancy he had accidentally placed the sun, rather than the earth, at the center. Although Kepler's observational and mathematical skills were inferior to Brahe's, he quickly solved the problem in light of the new conceptualization (Koestler 1967).

In my own field, social and behavioral studies of emotions, current research is based, with little discussion, on vernacular emotion words. But these words are all tropes, loaded with cultural assumptions. For example, in the English language the word love is extremely broad. As Aldous Huxley put it: "we use the word love for the most amazing variety of relationships, ranging from what we feel for our mothers to what we feel for someone we beat up in a bordello, or its many equivalents."

Robert Solomon, a philosopher of emotions, considers the same issue in greater detail (1981, pp. 3-4):

"Consider the wealth of meticulous and fine distinctions we make in describing our feelings of hostility: hatred, loathing, scorn, anger, revulsion, resentment, envy, abhorrence, malice, aversion, vexation, irritation, annoyance, disgust, spite and contempt, or worse, 'beneath' contempt. And yet we sort out our positive affections for the most part between the two limp categories, 'liking' and 'loving.' We distinguish our friends from mere acquaintances and make a ready distinction between lovers and friends whom we love 'but not that way.' Still, one and the same word serves to describe our enthusiasm for apple strudel, respect for a distant father, the anguish of an uncertain romantic affair and nostalgic affection for an old pair of slippers."

In contrast to usage of the word love, English defines shame extremely narrowly, as a crisis emotion of disgrace. All other languages, however, define it more broadly, since they all include an everyday emotion, such as "pudeur" in France (translated roughly as modesty), and in many languages, the emotion of embarrassment. For this reason it is not surprising that several experiments have shown that English-speaking subjects consider embarrassment and shame to be separate emotions. The mistake is that these researchers concluded that they *are* separate emotions, because they had not done the same study with speakers of

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- At the University of Arizona, theory courses have been taught by Kieran Healy (economic and cultural sociology, political sociology), and earlier by Elizabeth Clemens (political and comparative historical sociology) and Cal Morrill (law and organizations).
- At Columbia, theory courses have been offered by Gil Eyal (sociology of intellectuals and political sociology), Allan Silver (theory and historical sociology), Jeff Olick (political sociology and culture), Nicole Marwell (poverty and organization), and Francesca Polletta (social movement and historical sociology).

Hence, the survey reveals that the prime subfield-identity of the theory teachers tends to be that of cultural sociologist, comparative historical sociologist, political sociologist, and gender sociologist. It is quite striking that those listing theory as their primary area tend to be among the most senior scholars in this list (Levine, Silver, Zelditch, etc.). These two observations could suggest perhaps a de-professionalization of the field of theory, its declining autonomy in relation to substantive areas of research, or its strengthening precisely through its integration into empirical research (or all of the above, simultaneously) – although it may also be that "theorists" have always been involved in multiple areas.¹ A systematic longitudinal analysis would be required to establish whether such changes are indeed happening, but the information I have collected is worth reflecting upon, if we want to understand ongoing changes in our field.

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Spanish, Arabic or Maori.

Ross and Nesbitt (1991) did somewhat better with their treatise on what they call The Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). They cite many, many studies of English-speaking subjects that show a preference subjects have for explaining motives in terms of characteristics of the person, rather than the situation. However, they manage to cite one study of Hindu subjects. These subjects didn't privilege personal explanations over situational ones. Perhaps the FAE is not so fundamental after all, but only a characteristic that differentiates between modern and traditional cultures. Modern cultures are ruthlessly individualistic, and traditional ones just as ruthlessly social.

No matter how rigorous and systematic the theory, method, and data collection, the claim that the results are universal must be interpreted within a larger cultural context. Investing virtually all research resources in method and/or data might be called the Brahe error. The modern disciplines of history and linguistics present one version of this error, to the extent that they focus entirely on descriptive data. Modern psychology presents another version, to the extent that it focuses entirely on experimental method. Economics and the theory wing of sociology, on the other hand, make what might be called the Kepler error, to the extent that they focus on fanciful theories of economic

or social systems, as if Kepler had stayed with his polyhedrons.

It seems to me that most studies in social and behavioral science commit either the Brahe error or the Kepler error. Refined methods like surveys, experiments, and scales, or abstract theories like evolution or exchange cannot substitute for cultural interpretation. This could be one of the functions of cultural studies, helping to clear a space in the jungle of routines that we take for granted.

The need for cultural interpretation is one aspect of a larger issue. What may be needed in social and behavioral science is a still larger framework, perhaps like the one that I have called part/whole analysis (Scheff 1997). The philosopher Spinoza was one of the first to note the extraordinary complexity of human conduct. He proposed that in order to understand even routine behavior, we need to relate "the least parts to the greatest wholes." I have interpreted this to mean that we need integration in the human sciences between micro and macro levels just as a first step. Understanding research results in relation to cultural wholes is one aspect of this larger framework.

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This overlap in interest is confirmed by statistics on joint membership across sections that have been made available to me by the ASA. As of September 2003, the sections with which the Theory Section has the greatest overlap in number of joint members are (in decreasing order) Culture (206), Comparative Historical (124), Political Sociology (85), Sex and Gender (75), History of Sociology (73), and Social Psychology (70). These figures reflect differences in the size of the respective sections, but they are informative of the state of affairs within our section. The overlap with the Culture section is particularly remarkable: in the ASA statistics, there are only four cases of overlap comparable to that found between the Culture and Theory sections (e.g., between the sections of Medical Sociology and Mental Health, or between the sections on Sex and Gender and Race, Gender, and Class). It would be interesting to compare how these patterns have changed over the past thirty years.

Such high degree of overlap may indicate that the Culture Section and the Comparative Historical Sociology Section in particular have become de facto “satellite” theory sections, i.e. that a large number of sociologists interested in theory have become involved in these sections, both as theoretical producers and consumers.² I believe this to be the case, based on my own involvement in these sections (as past-Chair of the Culture Section and former Council Member of the Comparative Historical Section). In particular, a number of young sociologists

interested in theory may have come to define themselves primarily as cultural sociologists, perhaps because this field allowed them to pursue theoretical interests within a context more favorable to empirical research, and without having to deal with old theoretical dichotomies that have come to appear increasingly obsolete (e.g., between micro/macro, symbols/structure, objective/subjective, etc.). It has also allowed them to escape the age-old polarization between doing theory for theory’s sake versus doing theoretically informed empirical research (a polarization that was much more salient to the older generations of theorists than it is to the younger generation, which tends to combine theoretical and empirical training – often quantitative and qualitative). This hypothesis may be supported by the fact that graduate students represent only 26 percent of the Theory Section membership, but 33 percent of the members of the Comparative Historical Sociology Section, and 39 percent of the Culture Section.

Broad intellectual trends that could account for the growing centrality of cultural sociology could include the rise of cultural studies, in which Marxist, feminist, race, post-structural, and post-modern theories have played a central role, the rapid diffusion of post-structuralism in the United States in previous decades,³ the growth of gender and race studies as areas of specialization, and the broader transition from social history to cultural history, and from the structural turn to the linguistic turn

from the seventies to the nineties.⁴ But explaining these changes should be the topic of a separate essay.

In any case, any diagnosis of what is going on in sociological theory today should take into consideration developments in the fields (and sections) of Cultural Sociology and Comparative Historical Sociology, as well as developments in the gender literature and Sex and Gender Section, where feminist scholarship, which has unfortunately not encountered a favorable climate in our section, is being conducted. Possible migrations to “theory satellites” outside the Theory Section may have made room available for formal theory and other forms and topics of theorizing within the Theory Section. It is my belief that if the Theory Section is to remain central to the theoretical agenda of our discipline, it needs to remain open to a wide range of theoretical cultures and sustain close relations with its kindred satellites. This is particularly important at a time when “grand theory” entirely disembodied from empirical research seems increasingly to be a thing of the past, at least as far as the culture of a significant segment of theory teachers are concerned. Thus, grand theory certainly remains a crucial part of a good sociological education, and of intellectual literacy more generally, but is, in practice, probably increasingly conceived as a complement to middle range theory and empirical research. And from where I stand, this is as it should be.

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The award endowment will be managed by the American Sociological Association. A major source of funding will be royalties paid by publishers for Coser's many publications, which Coser's children have agreed to contribute to the award fund. In addition to royalty income, individuals and institutions are encouraged to make contributions to the endowment in memory of Lewis Coser.

The Theory Section expresses heartfelt gratitude to the Coser family for its generosity. We are particularly pleased to celebrate the intellectual traditions represented by the scholarship of Lew Coser, as well as his distinct intellectual legacy.

For more detail about eligibility, criteria of selection, and related matters, please see the Theory Section website, www.asatheory.org.

To donate to the Lewis A. Coser Award Fund, send your check to the American Sociological Association, 1307 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005. Make sure your donation is clearly marked for the Lewis Coser Award Fund. Contact the ASA at (202) 383-9005 if you would like to contribute by credit card.

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Endnotes

¹Barry Markovsky, 2002. "Theoretical Method, Part 1: Orientations of the Discipline." Presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, August; Steven Brint and James La Valle. 2000. "DuBois Ascendant! And Other Results from the Brint-LaValle Theory Section Survey." *Perspectives*, 22 (1): 1-7.

²Several of these informants reacted to my analysis, for which I thank them: Julia Adams, Charles Camic, Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas, and Andy Perrin. I also thank Neil Gross and Steven Brint for good exchanges.

³A third observation is the relatively small member of women teaching theory. This topic will be taken on in a future newsletter. It is unclear whether the patterns mentioned above hold beyond the top departments, several of which are relatively small and located in private universities (Harvard, Princeton, Northwestern, Columbia, Chicago, Stanford). These departments have relatively small undergraduate enrollments and may have smaller demand for theory courses, which could explain that faculty would not define themselves primarily as theorists. Big state universities may be better able to sustain those specialized in theory than smaller private institutions. I thank Chas Camic for making me aware of this paradox.

⁴... which raises the possibility that in fact the Theory Section may be becoming a satellite of the Culture Section...

⁵On this topic, see Michele Lamont and Marsha Witten. 1988. "Surveying the Continental Drift; The Diffusion of French Social and Literary Theory in the United States." *French Politics and Society*. 6 (3): 17-23.

⁶On this topic, see William Sewell, Jr. Forthcoming. *Logics of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chapter 2.

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not as an assertion of a substantive “thing” in society that is more important than others.

This new epistemology will develop in dialogue with already existing structures of interpretation: the extensive empirical knowledge of cultural history, interpretive sociology, and various interdisciplinary fields of research. In this sense, it is true that “foundational” social theory is over: 40 years after “Ideology as a Cultural System,” accounts of the social developed to stand on their own, rather than via the tacking back and forth between culture-near and culture-far concepts, are indeed outdated. But creating rigorous and extensive knowledge of historical and cultural particulars will require a reflexivity about knowledge that can only be obtained through embracing abstract thought.

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shout gleefully, with the certain knowledge that there’s something interesting happening. We rarely suggest that “it’s all theory,” but I’ve tried to point out that a certain brand of phenomenological ethnography might itself constitute a kind of theory as well as description. If by “theory,” we mean abstract formulations pulled apart from their empirical context, then my kind of ethnography isn’t much connected to theory. But if we mean something more like a good and useful story, a way of making sense, by bringing social coordination into view, then we should think of this kind of ethnography as both descriptive and theoretical.

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The duality of the social as a mode of being is (fittingly) one of the great collective discoveries of the last century. The investigation of its modes of operation, of our concrete forms of sociality (e.g. reflexivity, desire, competition/cooperation, the marking and unmarking of understanding, memory etc.), their interplay with various forms of projective articulation and thus their very historicity is, despite promising inroads, still a vast terra incognita. This is where ethnography might want to apply itself theoretically.

Endnotes

¹ The source for such an ethnographic imagination can of course also be perceptive reflection on social life in our immediate environment. It is not an accident, I would surmise, that much excellent social theorizing has been produced within the horizon of theorist’s own existential problems. What the systematic involvement with ethnography can do, however, that reflexive participation in social life can not accomplish, is the extension of our social imagination to a much wider range of possibilities of what it means to be human. At least in this sense a sociological education is quite incomplete without ethnography.

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Alvin Gouldner anticipated and Charles Lemert eulogized, I wanted to be in the midst of it. I read the works of Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard, David Harvey, Michel Foucault, Arthur Kroker, and Fredric Jameson. While these writers gave me a newfound critical insight into social life, I was drawn to them more than anything simply because they were provocative and controversial. They gave me a new kind of consciousness about the social world in which I lived, one increasingly filled with mass mediated hallucinations and the dreams and fantasies of consumerism.

I took these interests to the University of California at Riverside where I pursued doctoral studies in sociology. I came to UC Riverside specifically to study sociological theory under Jonathan Turner and Randall Collins, both of whom have left an indelible impression upon my work in theory. While studying with Turner and Collins I quickly realized a couple of things. First, that my understanding of sociological theory was exquisitely limited and naive. I discovered that theory in sociology is broad in scope, not only with respect to the diversity of its traditions, but also in terms of epistemological orientations. Second, that theory in sociology can be significantly more than just about consciousness raising. I remember at the end of a heated discussion in one seminar about the merits and foibles of positivistic approaches to sociology Jon Turner turned soberly to the class and remarked

that at a certain point in their career every sociologist has to make the decision as to whether their work is to be primarily motivated by science or by ideology. Though I'm still not completely convinced that the "gulf" between science and ideology cannot be bridged, Turner's statement crystallized something for me. From that point forward theory became not just a series of insights and ideas *about* the social world, but more significantly it became a navigational system for investigations *into* the social world. Both Turner and Collins provided me with an appreciation of the positivistic tradition in sociological theory, a tradition that I had initially approached with skepticism and reservation. Turner likes to describe his positivistic approach to sociology with the controversial label of "social engineering," but this is not the social engineering that might be associated with social eugenics, or that found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Instead, for Turner social engineering involves the application of sociological theory to practical, concrete problems. In this way, theory can be used to conceptualize and study the everyday world, not only in a conformist and conventional manner, but also for critical, even radical purposes.

It is the bridging of this putative "tension" between positivistic approaches and critical approaches to sociological theory that is the motivating springboard for my own work in theory, and especially

for my teaching. California State University at Northridge, the university where I continue my work, is part of a state sponsored university system that holds effective teaching in very high regard. This focus helps me keep the teaching and the transmission of theory at the forefront of my interests. I am confronted with the struggle to engage students in theoretical ideas, to help them explore the richness of sociological theory, and make theory relevant for their lives. When confronted with the word "theory" almost immediately students tend to tighten-up, to resist it like an impending injection, largely because it has the connotations of being "intangible," exceedingly "conceptual," "painful" and just plain "hard." They tend to experience theory much like the alienating "hegemonic knowledge" that Dorothy Smith describes. But I tell my students that I believe an effective study of sociological theory can be a life-altering experience; it can change the way they understand and experience the world. I find that many students are hungry for the kind of knowledge that sociological theory can provide, but they do not know how to access it. The majority of my students are probably not very genuinely interested in studying theory. They find that they cannot metabolize the knowledge that they desire merely by reading texts and listening to lectures; instead, they need to find a way experience it, to make theory a concrete part of the manner in which they approach

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the future, any residual German “cultural pessimism” could scarcely survive.⁷ Hence, even while Marxism’s critical mission – to expose underlying causes – endured in Lew’s writings, support for the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, with its focus on capitalism, a culture industry, and one-dimensional men,⁸ never materialized. A pathway now opened to address ubiquitous conflict in a non-Marxian fashion, namely, following Simmel, in terms of its pluralistic sources, multiple directions, and capacity to serve in various ways as an integrative force.⁹ And the abandonment of the broad and overarching themes of German sociology – capitalism, bureaucratization, and the fate of the individual in the modern world – further pointed toward the middle range theorizing of Robert Merton. Although rooted in Simmel, Lew’s *The Functions of Social Conflict*, one of sociology’s bestselling classics, appears inconceivable without the influence of Merton.¹⁰

Yet Lew participated, as he never tired of noting, in the structural-functionalism church “as a heretic.” Too many vigorous impulses from his German schooling and the German tradition, via Marx, Weber, and Simmel, prevented a full embrace by this “stranger within the gate.”¹¹ His own “middle range” studies were far more embedded deeply in history and comparative-historical cases (see *Men of Ideas*, *Greedy Organizations*) – as well as the theoretical work of Weber and

Simmel – than were those of the other Mertonians or Merton himself. Moreover, in accord with both his longstanding view of the role of the intellectual and his earlier Marxism, Lew’s insistence that sociology should have a “critical bite” is evident throughout his sociological writings; repeatedly, his studies explore the *origins* of the problem under investigation by reference to deep contextual and developmental-historical political and economic forces. Time and again he “locates” the present and its uniqueness, following Marx, Mannheim, and Weber, by reference to longer term, background – even ideological¹² – factors rather than to ahistorical function and structure.¹³

His 1975 ASA presidential address¹⁴ intermixed an orientation to the German classics and his understanding of the intellectual’s proper purpose with that which he found most appealing in Mertonian structural-functionalism: rigorous, clear, empirically-grounded theory. He lamented on the one hand the stratification literature’s propensity to acknowledge only distributional rather than relational elements – issues concerning power and class privileges – and on the other hand the “rigorous description” of ethnomethodologists, and expressed his deep fear that the discipline, if it now abandoned its hard-won theoretical and critical elements, would slide silently toward a raw empiricism and a methods-driven narrowness. A “preoccupation with method [and the] neglect of significance and substance” must

not reign, he argued in this address as well as later writings and lectures, for then sociology would lose its claim to be an intellectual endeavor – a critical enterprise – and become simply an activity pursued by technocrats.¹⁵ “Were mental technicians and experts...to pre-empt the field that intellectuals now occupy, modern culture would likely perish through ossification.”¹⁶

Lew Coser was a sociological theorist deeply respectful of and engaged in empirical research. Following both Merton and the early Simmel, his theorizing remained at a level fairly close to social problems and political and intellectual cultures. The powerful case studies in *Greedy Organizations*, in which he demonstrated the similar all-encompassing influence upon persons of sect-like groupings externally radically different, stands today as perhaps the most masterful application of Simmel’s formal sociology. *Men of Ideas* investigates, in a broad variety of empirical settings in the past and present, the relationship of intellectuals to the powers that be and then draws general conclusions. Last but not least, *Masters of Sociological Thought* (1971)¹⁷ broke with all heretofore existing theory textbooks by examining the ideas of the classics explicitly in reference to the intellectual and social contexts uniquely surrounding their birth.¹⁸ Following his other master, Max Weber, and diverging again from middle range theory, all of these works throw the particularity of the present into stark relief

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the social world. Because of this I try to bring a “direct experience” approach to teaching theory, one that attempts to synthesize the use of positivistic principles with critical, personal insight. I follow the epigraph from Goethe that Lewis Coser has etched into the beginning of his *Masters of Sociological Thought*, “What you have inherited from your fathers, you must earn in order to possess.” I try to compel my students to “inherit” their knowledge of theory, not only by “earning” it through reading and taking tests, but instead by actively exploring it in the context of the world around them. Sometimes this simply involves illustrating theoretical principles through student activities or through film. For example, I typically show students segments of the cityscape documentary “Koyaanisqatsi,” for there is no better exemplification of the functional premise that “society is like an organism”; the PBS Frontline documentary “The Making of Cool” is an exceptional study of the “culture industry” described by the Frankfurt School; and the bodybuilding documentary “Pumping Iron II: The Women” is terrific for confronting many of the issues of cultural and postmodernist approaches to feminist theory. I also borrow Inge Bell and Bernard McGrane’s ethnomethodologically inspired “desocialization” approach in teaching theory. I have students explore some of the basic principles of symbolic interactionism by having them spend a day without talking, or I ask them to sit and do nothing for half an hour and directly experience the “imaginative rehearsal” of the mind Mead talks about. In addition, I ask my students abstain from watching television for a week during the term and then interpret their experiences using insights from sociological theory. Here, they are able to directly confront conceptual ideas like Baudrillard’s simulations, Habermas’s “colonization of the lifeworld,” and Schutz’s phenomenological insights into “indirect experiences.” They explore these ideas firsthand, find their boundaries, and test their limitations

In general, I think that Collins is right: theory is the part of sociology that one tends to remember. However, we have to find a way to make it memorable. This is not only an issue that we confront in teaching our students, but also one that is central to the public response to the discipline. I still believe that our social world can benefit greatly from sociology, guided by the practical concerns of sociological theory.

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– and hence in the end call upon sociologists today to lengthen out their historical vision and to avoid “a parochialism of the contemporary.”¹⁹

However magisterial Lew’s unique synthesis of theory and research, it fails to dwarf, in my opinion, another noble achievement: his contribution to the American discipline, which became manifest primarily in four ways. First, more than any other of the distinguished refugees from Hitler’s Germany who broadened and deepened sociology in the United States, Lew sought systematically to introduce and cultivate the European tradition of theory and research. He served as a critical link and a giant in this regard, not least as series editor of “Perennial Works in Sociology” (35 volumes; Arno Press), “European Sociology” (65 volumes; Arno Press), and “Makers of Modern Social Science” (Prentice-Hall; 7 volumes). Second, the generosity of his civic duty to the Brandeis and Stony Brook departments was legendary, as was his teaching and work with innumerable graduate students. Third, his activism in the discipline spanned nearly five decades and included, as he once noted, “sitting on all major ASA committees at least once.” Who else has been elected to the presidencies of the ASA, ESS, and SSSP (as well as of the ISA’s RCHS)? Finally, his 200 masterful book reviews enlightened sociologists in nearly all of the discipline’s subfields. His “Letter to a Young Sociologist,” which stands as a worthy successor to Weber’s “Science as a Vocation,” serves as testimony to his expansive and sincere commitment to sociology, his deep concern for its future generations, and his dedication to the university as an institution where intellectuals can cultivate a posture of “detached concern” vis-à-vis their society.²⁰ Remarkably, amidst scholarship, teaching, and civic activism, Lew’s other career – engagement in the issues of the day as a public intellectual – remained intense for more than fifty years.²¹

Lew possessed charm, generosity of spirit, a deep sense of irony, and a well-developed, wry humor;

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he lacked any hint of arrogance or pomposity. A seriousness of purpose and deep integrity characterized alike his demeanor and writings. The ideals of universal justice and inclusion rang out in his journalistic essays; his commentaries upon the state of sociology call for a pluralistic scholarly community of collegiality, universality, and tolerance. He despised all forms of unfairness.

With the passing in September of Kurt Wolff, American sociology has lost the last two representatives of that extreme erudition typically found among early generation participants in disciplines recently formed and lacking firm boundaries. At the end of his life, Lew felt alienated from the calling he revered, for sociology had developed in the expected manner: toward greater specialization and a narrowing of purpose. From Max Weber he knew – and we know – that this progress is inevitable. Yet we theorists above all should perhaps on this occasion ponder deeply sociology’s transformation and honor those who, such as Lewis A. Coser, helped to lay down its tracks broadly.

The awarding to Lew of an honorary Ph.D. by the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1994, where Simmel and Weber had once taught, was appropriate and just, as is the establishment now by the Sociology Department at Stony Brook and the Theory Section of the Lewis A. Coser Prize. It is fitting and noble that the “stranger within the gate,” who lost so much and gave back so magnanimously to future generations, has now been formally recognized in *both* of his homelands.

Endnotes

- ¹ “A Sociologist’s Atypical Life,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (1993, vol. 19), p. 6 (hereafter “Atypical”).
- ² *Men of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. xviii.
- ³ See, e.g., *A Handful of Thistles: Collected Papers in Moral Conviction* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), p. xix.
- ⁴ See *Thistles*, pp. xix-xx. See also *Sociology Through Literature* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963; enlarged second ed., 1972).
- ⁵ Lew arrived in New York in September, 1941.
- ⁶ *Thistles*, p. xvii. Lew enrolled in 1948 at Columbia.
- ⁷ When asked why his writings contained none of the cultural pessimism frequent among German-born thinkers, Lew hesitated and then replied: “I guess because I never attended a German university.” One must also note the upbeat, can-do, and energetic approach to life of Rose Laub Coser.
- ⁸ Despite Lew’s close friendship at Brandeis with Herbert Marcuse. Together they anchored the “History of Ideas” graduate and undergraduate programs.
- ⁹ Not surprisingly in light of social chaos in Weimar and post-1933 Germany, and of World War II, Simmel’s essay (Der Streit [Conflict]) had been completely neglected in Europe. Lew notes that in Paris he had been, owing to the Marxian heritage, “tone deaf to Simmel’s formal approach” (“Atypical,” p. 7).
- ¹⁰ See “Atypical,” pp. 6-7.
- ¹¹ This expression pervades his two autobiographical statements. See “Atypical” and *Thistles*, pp. xi-xx.
- ¹² He notes, for example, that “the American ideology of individual achievement” predisposes stratification researchers to become “[preoccupied] with the pathways to individual mobility” rather than to investigate “structures of power and exploitation.” Furthermore, a distinct limitation of our understanding occurs when this ideology is “combined with the use of statistical methods.” See “Two Methods in Search of a Substance” (reprinted in *Thistles*), pp. 9-10.
- ¹³ See his early review of *Essays in Sociological Theory* by Parsons (AJS, LV [March, 1950], pp. 502-04). (On his relationship to Parsons see “Atypical,” pp. 7-8.) See also, e.g., “Prospects for the New Nations,” in *Thistles*, pp. 207-24. Here modernization theory is rejected in favor of a mode of analysis attentive to historical distinctions.
- ¹⁴ “Two Methods” (see n. 10).
- ¹⁵ “Two Methods,” p. 14; see pp. 9-14.
- ¹⁶ *Men of Ideas*, p. x.
- ¹⁷ Now issued in paperback by Waveland Press.
- ¹⁸ Space will not permit mention of various articles that combine theory and empirical research.
- ¹⁹ See, e.g., “Letter to a Young Sociologist,” *Thistles*, p. 283.
- ²⁰ See *Thistles*, pp. 275-84. See also “Social Involvement or Scientific Detachment: The Sociologist’s Dilemma,” in *Thistles*, pp. 285-90.
- ²¹ A discussion of his life-long engagement, in the pages of *Partisan Review*, *Dissent* (which he co-founded and co-edited), *The Progressive*, and many other journals, with the major political and social issues of the latter half of the twentieth century at home and abroad must be omitted.

Call for Nominations - Section Awards

(Deadline for nominations: February 27, 2004)

The Theory Prize

This award recognizes outstanding work in theory. The 2004 prize will be awarded by the ASA Theory Section to a book published in the preceding four calendar years (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003). Nominations are solicited from members of the American Sociological Association. Send nominations by February 27, 2004 to the Committee Chair: Julia P. Adams, Theory Prize Committee Chair, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, 1225 S. University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2590. Email: jpadams@umich.edu. Five copies of the book must subsequently be sent to all five committee members by March 12, 2004.

Shils-Coleman Memorial Award

The Graduate Student Prize Committee invites submissions for the Shils-Coleman Memorial Award, which recognizes distinguished work in theory by a graduate student. This competition is open to all graduate students. Submitted work may take the form of either a paper published or accepted for publication, a paper presented at a professional meeting, or a paper suitable for publication or presentation at a professional meeting. The winner will receive a plaque and reimbursement for up to \$500 for travel to attend the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. The deadline for submission is February 27, 2004. To enter, please send five copies of the paper to Charles Camic, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706. E-mail: camic@ssc.wisc.edu. The winner will be announced at the Theory Section Business Meeting at the 2004 American Sociological Association meetings in San Francisco.

Note from Amitai Etzioni

For a discussion of Communitarian theory, please visit <http://www.amitai-notes.com/blog/>. Those who are interested in these issues may email comnet@gwu.edu or call 800-245-7460 to receive a free sample issue of the quarterly journal, *The Responsive Community*. Subscribers to *The Responsive Community* will also receive a free copy of *The New Golden Rule* by Amitai Etzioni.