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Perspectives

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Theoretical Growth and Conceptual Foreplay¹ *Michèle Lamont, Harvard University*

As we head toward celebrating the ASA Centennial in Philadelphia in August 2005, we will be taking stock, once more, of the fate and “progress” of our discipline. As a section, we will have spent time reflecting collectively on our discipline’s various theoretical cultures, on what research they facilitate and deflect, at the 2004 meetings in San Francisco. Against this background, it may be appropriate to return to the question of what constitutes theoretical growth and vitality in our field.

In his reply to my fall 2003 “Message from the Chair: The Theory Section and Theory Satellites,” Jonathan Turner reads my conclusion as celebrating the theoretical balkanization of our discipline.²

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Foregrounding Feminisms

Nancy A. Naples, University of Connecticut

[Note: For this edition of *Perspectives* I solicited essays on what is happening at the forefront of feminist theory, how this work intersects with the intellectual activities of the ASA Theory Section, or the role that theory has played in the work of scholars substantively concerned with gender. – Ed.]

The short answer to the question “what is happening at the forefront of feminist theory today?” is that it depends on your angle of vision and on the disciplinary site you inhabit. I have taught feminist theory since the early 1980s in four different academic settings and in two different disciplinary/interdisciplinary locations (sociology and women’s studies).

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Feminist Theory: Two Decades after the Missing Revolution

Raka Ray, University of California-Berkeley

I write this from the vantage point of being in a department with Barrie Thorne, who co-authored with Judith Stacey the “Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology” in 1985 and ten years later the less optimistic “Is Sociology Still Missing its Feminist Revolution” in the pages of this very newsletter (*Perspectives*, Summer 1996), and Michael Burawoy who responded (*Perspectives*, Summer 1996) by celebrating feminism’s ability to retain its revolutionary edge (more so than Marxism) within sociology. Now, eight years after that exchange, I find myself thinking about the profound epistemological and political ramifications of thirty years of feminist theory and its relationship to the discipline of sociology.

Feminist theory had clearly been around for a while though missing from sociology when Thorne and Stacey wrote their essay in 1985. It was still missing five years later when I was halfway through my graduate school career at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This was a time when feminist sociologists and theorists were being taken seriously, yet the study of gender and feminist theory had not been institutionalized in sociology – at least not at the University of Wisconsin.

Indeed, I remember being part of a group of advanced students who taught ourselves feminist theory and who helped craft questions for the first qualifying exams in the new field of Sociology of Gender. While we were interested in various elements of gender, it was feminist theory that motivated us and feminist theory that we wanted incorporated into the corpus that was handed to us as sociological theory. We came to realize that the problem did not lie in the institutionalization of the field of gender in terms of the empirical study of men and women in society as such, but rather in the inclusion of feminist theory as valid sociological theory.

Between 1990 and today, however, there has come to be formed something that can be called a feminist canon within sociology, if by canon is meant the presence of an agreed upon body of work that a community of scholars can study, share, learn from and critique. Perhaps because feminist theory came to sociology late, the field has shifted rapidly in past decade and a half. The first theorists represented in feminist theory syllabi in sociology in the early nineties were actually theorists who wrote in the seventies and eighties – Adrienne Rich, Gayle Rubin, Nancy Chodorow, and

Patricia Hill Collins. In terms of discipline, anthropologists, sociologists, and legal scholars seemed to be disproportionately represented here, along with writers of fiction and poetry. If a feminist theory syllabus could not do without the above theorists in 1993, today we increasingly see syllabi with Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Joan Scott and often Gayatri Spivak (this is truer of the younger generation of scholars). This is, of course, in tune with the larger turn toward the humanities which troubles so many sociologists. I will not dwell on this here except to say that this interdisciplinarity has always been the strength of feminist theory, and the best young sociologists that I have had the privilege of teaching and learning from deeply engage with these theorists, sociologizing them even as they expand sociology.

It has become customary to deplore the institutionalization (such as it is) of feminist theory and to mourn its depoliticization with the Foucauldian turn. Unlike many feminist scholars, I do not see evidence of this depoliticization. Indeed, I see feminist theory as a field in which clear theoretical advances have been made without sacrificing a critical political agenda.

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Thoughts about the State and Location of Feminist Scholarship in Sociology

Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Indiana University

In 1995, Joan Alway published a piece documenting the less than positive reception of feminist theory within the theory section and theory journals. In 2000 the theory section was the most disproportionately male of all large sections of the ASA (72% male), with few student members compared to other large sections. While not all theoretically-oriented women sociologists are feminist theorists and not all feminist theorists are women, it is not a stretch to suggest a connection between the reception of feminist theory and the composition of the section. The lack of appeal of the theory section to women – particularly women entering the profession – has implications for the health of the section. In this essay I suggest that theoretically-oriented work about processes of gender inequality and classification has been more warmly received in the culture section, leading some likely recruits to the theory section to find their homes in the culture section.

Alway (1995) identified several related reasons for the less than positive reception of feminist theory within the theory section: genres and styles of writing deemed less than academic, contamination due to political commitment, the low status of women in the field, and the lack

of the engagement of feminist theory with the classical canon. Most interestingly, though, Alway argues that “feminist theory displaces sociology’s central problematic” (p. 129). She argues that there is a basic conflict between the fundamental problematic of sociological theory – understanding modernity – and that of feminist theory – understanding gender.

In contrast, work focused on processes of gender inequality and classification from a feminist political perspective has been more warmly received in cultural sociology. In addition, highly visible women have been involved in the culture section since its inception (e.g., Lamont, Swidler, and Griswold). References to the classical canon are not mandatory. And, mostly importantly, the central problematics of feminist and cultural sociology are compatible. The fundamental problematic of the sociology of culture is the problem of how meaning matters in social life – what culture is and what it does. Key sub-problems include the relationship between meaning systems and social inequality, and between meaning systems and materiality (including human physical embodiment). Sociologists of culture ask questions like: How is meaning-making implicated in

human life chances (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000), structures and structural change (Sewell 1992), and in the fate of our natural and built environments (Gieryn 2000)? In what ways do meanings guide and shape human practical activity (Swidler 1986; Swidler 2001)?

The problematic of gender can be seen as an important case of the more general problematic outlined above. Examining the variety and complexity of ways we attribute gendered meanings to our world – not only our bodies, but the rest of our social and natural worlds – is of deep interest to both feminist and cultural sociologists. The apparently universal existence of some system of gender meanings – although highly varied among societies/groups – raises puzzling questions about the extent to which the materiality of our bodies constrains gender/sexual meanings. Thus, cultural sociology offers tools for the analysis of the construction and reproduction of gender categories and gender inequality. Similarly, when feminists develop better understandings of gender they frequently advance the theoretical development of the sociology of culture.

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Whither Theory?

Denise Ferreira da Silva, University of California, San Diego

When I was invited to write this piece, which I understood to be about why “I do” sociological theory, I embraced the challenge to sign off on an answer to the question and stick to it, for the time being. After a dozen “good to go” versions, I finally came up with one I can sign off as an autobiographical statement.

Anyone who has read anything I have written will wonder why I claim what “I do” is sociological theory. Without qualifying my disciplinary positioning to the point of defensiveness, I will just say blame it on Peter Berger. At 15, I accepted his “invitation to sociology.” That example of a child who tries to locate his house on the map caught my imagination. There is a seemingly simple, properly “sociological,” and typically biographical explanation for this. I grew up in a housing-project in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Before I was one year old, my parents and their neighbors were relocated from a *favela* (slum), situated on a hill in a traditional neighborhood, in one of the many attempts by the state officials to “clean-up” the noble areas of the city from the economically subjugated black population. Therein, however, hides a more complicated answer to Berger’s invitation: the *place* I sought to locate is not to be found on Berger’s sociological map.

What “I do” thus reflects the desire to displace Berger’s child, the model of the social subject. Why? Because I am convinced that the (classical and contemporary) sociological theorizing that institutes it does not provide adequate tools to delineate the subaltern *place*—how race, class, and gender/sexuality together institutes in modern social configurations. For this reason, I find it comfortable naming myself a theorist because in my engagement with the discipline’s project I seek to displace its investment in the project of European modernity.

My critical engagement with the discipline has also been informed by other biographical details which, when I consider them now, are surprisingly sociological. My simultaneous exposure to three religions – Afro-Brazilian, Catholicism, and Judaism – produced a symbolic landscape not explicable and containable by the concept of culture guiding the sociological theoretical apparatus, the one informing notions such as community, identity, and so on. Having an Afro-Brazilian priestess as a grandmother, I grew up knowing that Yoruba gods played a crucial role in the daily things of life, attending and participating in rituals, and

following religious prescriptions and codes of conduct. Having a father who worked at a synagogue, whose German-Jew members allowed him to borrow books from the library for his bookworm daughter, the first bible I ever read had only the First Testament. Throughout the year, I waited anxiously for the Jewish holidays to enjoy all the sweets and food I could bear to eat. My early ease transiting between symbolic spaces that rarely meet continued even when, as a teen-ager, I became active in the progressive neighborhood’s Catholic church. At church, I was trained to become a soldier of a Christ who was a champion of the people. From sermons that turned biblical passages into guides for overcoming social injustice, and from readings of liberation theology documents and books, I acquired an activist sensitivity, which prepared me to join the secular neighborhood association, progressive political parties, and the black movement.

Early in my academic training, I became interested in concepts of power and culture. At the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, my trajectory as an undergraduate student in the department of social sciences already reflected this interest.

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On the Grand Theory Debate

Ronald Glassman, William Patterson University

In a recent issue of *Perspectives*, a debate between Michele Lamont and Jonathan Turner focusing on “grand theory” was featured. It caught my attention, because this debate goes back almost fifty years!

I was young – just beginning graduate school – but I can remember Merton and Mills vitriolically disagreeing: the former asserting that sociologists should give up grand theorizing and concentrate on empirical studies and “theories of the middle range”; the latter warning that this would lead to “abstract empiricism” with no theoretical grounding at all.

Is this not what Lamont and Turner were arguing? But there was more: Merton had a hidden agenda, or rather, two hidden agendas.

First, he wanted sociologists to abandon Parsons’s grand theory. For, Parsons’s theory, though purporting to be the basis for American “structural-functionalism,” had in fact turned out to be far too abstract, and too distant from institutional and cultural realities. Parsons’s grand theory was actually a variation on “systems theory,” which he had learned while studying in Germany, and it never did become the theoretical basis for

American functionalism. Merton understood this, but did not want to insult his old Harvard mentor and colleague. So, he simply told a whole generation of students to abandon *all* grand theorizing entirely.

Merton’s second hidden agenda was not so hidden back then. It was the late fifties, and the “red scare” was overwhelming American politics. The universities watched anxiously as hundreds of intellectuals were accused of having Marxist sympathies. In this atmosphere, Merton certainly did not want his students theorizing grandly in a Marxist manner. He said little about Marx or his theory. And, when questioned, he would say that he really didn’t know Marx’s work very well.... But the message was clear: do not use Marxian theory as your grand theory; do not expand upon Marxian theory; do not link your empirical analysis to a Marxian framework.

Confronted by C. Wright Mills on the “grand theory” derived from Weber, Merton won debater’s points when he offered that Weber’s theory of the “the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism” was a perfect example of a “middle range theory.” But anyone who knew Merton’s graduate students at the time

knows that a student who suggested a dissertation which proposed to compare Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism on their ethic of work, money-making, and asceticism, and then proposed to compare these to the religious ethics of China, India, and Ancient Israel, would have been laughed out of the room. The humbled student would have been told to focus on a small micro-study; to gather data using the questionnaire technique; to analyze the data gathered with statistical formulas to see if there were any “statistically significant” findings.

For, not only had Merton taught his students to avoid “grand theory,” but he also taught them to emulate the “scientific method” – as he understood it at that time. To Merton, science was purely an empirical enterprise: scientists observed the world, gathered data systematically, and then wrote-up their findings in scientific journals, using a specific format for their presentation of the data. If the sociologists imitated the natural scientist, they too could produce momentous results.

And further, by following this purely empirical process, the sociologist could avoid the politically dangerous, value-

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I had concluded this piece by opening a Pandora's box, that is, by stating rather flatly (and telegraphically) that grand theory is best conceived as a complement to middle range theory and empirical research. This conclusion was "inconclusive," in the sense that I intentionally did not spell out the theoretical position that led me to it, and this, with the hope that colleagues would take the bait, as indeed Turner and others have done. Hence the need to elaborate, if only briefly, specific aspects of my position by asking what constitutes theoretical progress or vitality in our field.³

Walking in Homans's footsteps, Turner is still hoping for a unified discipline of sociology that provides general propositions or laws that hold across all contexts. He equates theoretical cumulation and sociological explanation with the production of such propositions. This is illustrated by the list of successful research programs that he mentions, which include the usual suspects

(expectation state theory, exchange network analysis, resource mobilization theory, etc.). He regards contributions that do not aim to "explain as much reality as is possible with as few concepts, models, and principles as is possible" as "conceptual foreplay around time-bound data" and "conceptually-massaged empirical observations." He calls for us to move up the ladder of abstraction and sees this as the key to the production of lasting contributions from hot fields such as cultural sociology. The alternative is disciplinary demise.

It is difficult not to share Turner's commitment to theoretical cumulation. Most of us agree on the need to build on the work of others by positioning our research in relation to what has been established by the literature. One of the points around which opinions diverge is the question of the linear or multidimensional character of progress.⁴

Should the latter be conceived as an additive process, or are other metaphors more apt? How about zigzagging? Hopping? Skipping? My recent work on definitions of originality in the social sciences and the humanities suggests that moving research in new directions and making new connections is the type of originality most salient to panelists who serve on funding panels across a range of disciplines—more than advancing new theories or new findings within already established research programs. Changing the terms of the debate, providing new lenses, re-conceptualizing ways of approaching a familiar phenomenon: such contributions do not necessarily translate into linear disciplinary progress. Nor do they lead to the production of generalized propositions. Yet if we believe my panelists, our accounting of progress should take such contributions into consideration, and I agree.

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¹ I thank Neil Gross and Robin Stryker for reacting to this piece.

² Jonathan Turner. 2004. "Is Grand Theory Dead and Should Sociology Care? A Reply to Lamont." *Perspectives* 27 (2), pp. 3, 11, and 12.

³ This being an occasional piece, I do not have space to discuss the work of the many colleagues who have written wisely on the topic of theoretical growth. My heartfelt apologies. I hope to have the occasion to do so in a paper to be delivered at the ASA in 2005.

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Adopting a multifarious conception of growth allows for a considerable broadening of the list of theoretical nobles beyond that offered by Turner. Indeed, if the criteria of significance go beyond “generalizability” and “predictability” to include “providing new lenses,” the tent is wide enough to include Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, Arlie Hochschild, Emmanuel Wallerstein, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, and William Julius Wilson, along with Joseph Berger and many others who do more than conceptual foreplay. This broadening is essential if theory is to continue to thrive and to play a central role in our field. I suggest that it is precisely the excessive narrowing of theory to the production of general parsimonious propositions that is leading to the balkanization of theory within sociology, to the section’s weakened influence, and to theorists becoming more active in sections that I have described as theory satellites.

This is not to deny the many contributions of our colleagues who share Jon Turner’s stance on how knowledge grows, nor of Jon’s own. But again, we have to keep in mind that his stance describes only one of the ways by which knowledge grows. This perspective is not widely shared in sociology and in the social sciences at large, if we believe the panelists I have interviewed. The anti-reductionist comprehensive standpoint that Weber developed in the context of the *Methodenstreit*, in which theory is used to illuminate empirical cases in their complexity and singularity rather than for the sake of constructing general laws, is by far the epistemological position most popular among these panelists. It is used in more than three quarters of the 66 interviews with panel members and chairs that I conducted.⁶ Also, these panelists learn to translate their positions into the logic most valued by their peers and to avoid attacking the very principles on

which alternative epistemological positions (constructivist, positivist, utilitarian) are based in order to steer clear of decisional dead-ends and collective failure. The same needs to happen in our community of theorists, and acknowledging the various paths to knowledge building is an essential step to achieving this goal. The alternative may be disciplinary demise.⁷ Fortunately, many colleagues share this pluralistic perspective.

Because of my recent work on peer review, I have been asked to serve on a committee of the National Academy of Sciences that is charged with evaluating which areas of the research on aging show the most vitality. Much is at stake, since our report will influence funding decisions. At the center of our mandate is defining what vitality means and how to capture it. This is the substantive drive that has led me to agree to join the team despite my obvious ignorance about the

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⁴ I leave the question of reductivism and the relation place of grand theory in sociology for my ASA 2005 paper.

⁵ Joshua Guetzkow, Michèle Lamont, and Grégoire Mallard. 2004. “What is Originality in the Social Sciences and the Humanities?” *American Sociological Review* 69: 190-212.

⁶ Grégoire Mallard, Michèle Lamont, and Joshua Guetzkow. 2004. “Do Epistemological Differences Affect Evaluation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities? Evidence from Peer Review Panels.” Unpublished paper, Department of Sociology, Harvard University. Of course, more work is needed before we can draw conclusions about specific trends within disciplines, and before we can extrapolate from trends in funding panels to disciplinary trends.

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field of aging – the diverse group includes colleagues such as Stephen Cole and Rob Kohler. In discussions with colleagues here in Cambridge,⁸ I have begun compiling a list of all the dimensions through which we can capture the vitality of a field. Among the criteria we have identified, I will mention only a few, in no particular order:

- 1) Generativity: the extent to which specific contributions lead to new theories and “discoveries”
- 2) Growth (intellectual and institutional): the extent to which a field attracts energy and produces activity, via the creation of researchers, publication outlets, sources of funding, and other resources
- 3) Diversity: the range of problems being tackled by those active in a field
- 4) Interdisciplinarity: the extent to which a field engages questions raised by other fields
- 5) Attraction: the extent to which researchers outside a field follow it and engage it

6) Diffusion: the extent to which knowledge from a field diffuses outside of it

7) Applicability: the extent to which knowledge generated by a field has practical applications in policy, business, law, education, and elsewhere.

These criteria point toward a multiplicity of types of excellence. Similarly, if we are to capture what defines the vitality or strength of sociology, more than one criterion should be taken into consideration. Our discipline produces different types of knowledge (e.g., generalizable propositions, but also theories that stress temporal heterogeneity for instance),⁹ and this diversity should be acknowledged in our definition of theoretical growth or vitality. To order sociological contributions within a single hierarchy or paradigm, as economists do, and as Turner seems to be advocating for our field, would be to weaken it by underestimating the contributions

of its various strands, with only a few of us doing “the real thing” – mostly well-established senior (and by the way, male) researchers such as our very esteemed colleagues Charles Tilly and Robert Wuthnow (singled out by Turner as going beyond “conceptual foreplay”). It also would place our discipline very low on the totem pole of fields, which to my view would grossly misrepresent the many contributions of our multi-paradigmatic discipline. Just as sociologists of science have long abandoned a naïve representation of the natural sciences as disciplines moved by linear cumulation, we should move away from a view of sociology as having to fall in line with a unitary scientific order that has never been. Along with Karin Knorr Cetina, it is high time that we acknowledge the disunity of science,¹⁰ and within sociology, the fact that we do many things. And from where I stand, this is as it should be.

⁷ For instance, this argument is very much in line with that of Donald Levine, Charles Camic, and Hans Joas. See in particular Charles Camic and Hans Joas. 2004. “The Dialogical Turn.” Pp. 1-19 in *The Dialogical Turn, New Roles for Sociology in the Post-Disciplinary Age*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, p. 5.

⁸ Thanks in particular to Susan Silbey, Ilana Lowy, and Peter Galison.

⁹ William Sewell, Jr. Forthcoming. *Logics of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Karin Knorr Cetina. 1999. *Epistemic Cultures. How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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As a result, I am acutely aware of the diverse investments that shape what counts as theory in different academic sites. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, this observation is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which scholars in one disciplinary location are unaware of the theoretical perspectives that are viewed as most significant by academic practitioners in another discipline.

Because many interdisciplinary faculty members are trained within a particular discipline, our disciplinary lenses continue to shape our evaluation of which theoretical frameworks we consider to be the most important. Differences among feminist scholars in the social sciences and in the humanities are especially pronounced in some academic settings and feminist literature. That said, from my angle of vision I briefly highlight some of the theoretical perspectives that I see “at the forefront of feminist theory” in the discipline of sociology and offer an overview of theoretical frameworks and themes that transcend disciplinary borders.

From the point of view of feminist sociological theory, it is important to foreground the on-going significance of social

psychological feminist theory, especially the ground breaking work of Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989). Other influential approaches include feminist symbolic interactionism (see Fenstermaker and West 2002); the gender and power approach developed by R. W. Connell (1987, 1995); and feminist social constructionism (see, e.g., Lorber 1995). If we shift our lens to interdisciplinary work that does not have as much influence in our discipline but remains in the forefront of feminist theory in other academic sites, we would need to include feminist psychoanalytic theory that has been informed by Lacan’s work and poststructural linguistic approaches that draw on Saussure’s theory of language (see, e.g., Clough 2000; Fraser and Bartkey 1992).

While disciplines remain a foundational structure of power/knowledge that infuses different feminist projects and influences who are considered the most important producers of feminist theory, there are a number of theoretical perspectives and debates that do transcend disciplinary boundaries. For example, debates over modernism and postmodernism continue to provoke heated discussion among feminist theorists, although the intensity of

these debates has waned over the past few years (see, e.g., Harding 2003). Postmodern and poststructuralist feminisms have been shaped by engagement with Foucault’s theories of power/knowledge and discourse, among other European theorists (see, e.g., Ramazanoglu 1993). Feminists have appropriated Foucault’s theory of discourse but caution that Foucault’s turn from the subject undermines the political agency of women and others who are interested in contesting dominant power relations. Foucault’s approach also masks the important feminist insight that discursive regimes construct as well as target gendered and racialized subjects. Feminist theories of discourse are able to bring the dynamics of gender, race, and class into the theoretical frame more effectively than is possible with a non-feminist Foucauldian approach.

The tension between so-called modernist and postmodernist approaches is most evident in critiques of feminist standpoint theory. This important strand of theorizing can be traced to the earlier theoretical frameworks of Marxist feminism and socialist feminism and developed in the context of challenges to the so-called dual systems of patriarchy

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and capitalism approach that was associated with socialist feminist theory. While most feminist scholars no longer use the terms Marxist and socialist feminisms to describe their feminist perspectives, the tradition of historical materialism remains highly influential in contemporary feminist scholarship as evident by the popularity of the edited collection by Rosemary Hennessy and Chris Ingraham (1997) among other materialist feminist writing. Broadly defined, feminist standpoint theory includes Nancy Hartsock's (1983) "feminist historical materialist" perspective, Donna Haraway's (1988) analysis of "situated knowledges," Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) "black feminist thought," and Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990) "everyday world" epistemology. Feminist standpoint theorists Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, and Donna Haraway, in particular, have had tremendous influence in sociology and beyond. While some critics of feminist standpoint theory fail to see the significant differences between these scholars, I have found that each theorist offers a different understanding of "standpoint" as: (1) "embodied in experiences of both the researcher and the researched"; (2) "located and constructed in ongoing relationships in communities" or

(3) "a methodological strategy, namely, a site through which to begin inquiry" as in Dorothy Smith's approach (Naples 2003, 8). Some feminist theoretical approaches like standpoint theory are defined as "modernist," others like feminist discourse theory are categorized as "postmodernist." However, many scholars, myself included, resist the dichotomous distinction between modernist and postmodernist theories that has fueled much recent feminist debate (see, e.g., Ferguson 1991; Naples 2003; Weeks 1998). As I have argued elsewhere, "by defining Foucault's genealogical approach as postmodern and placing it in opposition to Marxism and other frameworks said to be modernist, parties to the debate reduce the complexity of both Foucault's thought and Marxist theories" (p. 6). Cultural studies scholar Wendy Hesford (1999) also challenges the divide between modernism and postmodernism that conflates "the deconstruction of the subject with the erasure of human agency" (p. 26). The blurring between modernist and postmodernist perspectives has contributed to the development of a new form of materialist feminism, one "that incorporates important insights of postmodern analyses of power, subjectivity, and language as a powerful framework for exploring the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, region, and

culture in different geographic and historical contexts" (Naples 2003, 7). Perhaps even more significant than the modernism/postmodernism debate are the challenges posed to feminist theorizing by critical race, third world and postcolonial theories. Although feminist scholars did engage with questions of race and class throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa in 1987 and *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins in 1990, along with other theoretical work by Black feminist and Chicana feminist scholars, led many feminist theorists across the disciplines to grapple with questions of power, racialization, and difference to a much greater extent than in earlier theoretical work (also see, e.g., Spellman 1988). Analytic work that explicitly attempts to theorize the relationship between gender, race, class, and other structures of difference and inequality is often defined as "intersectional theory." However, I find Dorothy Smith's analysis of "relations of ruling" and her theoretically driven approach, "institutional ethnography," to be the most powerful theoretical framework for analyzing the intersection of multiple systems of power as they

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are expressed in everyday life (see, e.g., Smith 1990, 1999). Most recently, theoretical frameworks that center on postcolonial analyses or gendered processes of global capitalism such as third world feminism, postcolonial and global feminisms have taken center stage in feminist scholarship (see, e.g., Basu 1995; Mohanty, 2003; Naples and Desai 2003; Narayan 1997). Not surprisingly, the overlapping themes of globalization, development, immigration, nationalism, terrorism, and human rights have become some of the most salient foci for feminist theoretical work in the new millennium (see, e.g., Barker and Feiner 2004; Bhavnani, Foran and Kurian, 2003; Molyneux and Razavi 2003; Momsen and Kinnaird 1993; and Saunders 2002). The strength of feminist interventions into these areas of investigation include, but are not limited to, theorizing the relationship between local and global processes with attention to the construction of gender, inequality, and resistance; demonstrating the importance of place and locale for understanding difference, agency, and power; destabilizing notions of the "state," among other constructs, by examining the gendered processes and gendered effects of governmentality; challenging the separation of culture and political economy in

theoretical analyses; and insisting on the complexity of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, nationalism, class, and other processes through which subjects are constituted.

Feminist cultural theory and feminist queer theory are two other aspects of feminist theoretical work that is in the forefront of feminist scholarship across the disciplines (see, e.g., Hennessy 2000; Esptein 2002; Walters 1995; Weed and Schor 1997). Theoretical analysis of sexuality has a long history in feminist thought. Recent work in this area focuses on decoupling gender and sexuality, theorizing genders and sexualities, and exploring the gendered production of sexual desire (see, e.g. Williams and Stein 2002). While analyses of gender, sexuality, and the body have formed a core theme in feminist theorizing since the early 1970s, in its most recent permutation, feminist scholars across the disciplines are now widening their lenses and exploring the themes of gender and embodiment, and gender and disability (see, e.g., Fausto-Sterling 2000, Martin 2001, Wendell 1996). One of the best collections of work in this area that I have come across is *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (1999).

Questions regarding gender and violence have also been of great concern to feminist theorists since the early 1970s. The most recent work in this area explores questions of gendered violence in war, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and imprisonment. Another theme that continues to garner a great deal of attention in feminist theoretical work across the disciplines is the relationship between gender, race, class and the state. For example, feminist political sociologists continue to examine the gendered contradictions of social policy cross-nationally and in the context of contemporary globalization (see, e.g., Mazur 2002; O'Connor, Orloff, Shafer 1999). A final area of theoretical work that deserves more than this brief mention is the diverse theoretical perspectives produced by feminist scholars in other social locations such as African feminism or Latin American feminism (see, e.g., Nnaemeka 1998). Although some feminist scholars would argue that each of these framework could be understand as a form of "standpoint epistemology," this definitional move would not do justice to the rich analyses that are found in this scholarship (see, e.g., Momsen and Kinnaird 1993).

The vibrancy of feminist theoretical work is a consequence

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of a core commitment to reflective praxis as well as the diversity of voices and theoretical work that is considered part of the broader knowledge production enterprise. Preparing to teach a course in feminist theory involves considering what angle of vision to take and which of the many feminist perspectives will offer students the most broad-based entry into the field without marginalizing approaches that do not neatly fit into sociological theoretical traditions. In addition to addressing “what is happening at the forefront of feminist theory today” I have also been asked to respond to a second question, i.e., “is the theory section a hospitable place for such work?” I do not have a long angle of vision to bring to this answer. Although I have been teaching feminist theory courses for many years, I did not see the Theory Section as a logical section to join. I first attended a session sponsored by the section when Dorothy Smith was a featured speaker. I recall many senior feminist scholars in the audience commenting on how remarkable this was given that few, if any, feminist scholars had been featured by the section over its long history. I was also struck by the recent debate over the so-called decline of “theory” positions and the finding that a large number of graduate theory departments are taught by gender

scholars. While I acknowledge that not all gender scholars are feminist scholars, this finding comes as no surprise to me since feminist scholarship requires a broad theoretical training, one which mandates familiarity with theoretical debates in a number of disciplines as well as in the growing number of interdisciplinary arenas.

Sociological theory is enriched by engagements with feminist theoretical work inside and outside its borders. Feminist theorists have a great deal to offer the Theory Section: (1) as translators who are conversant across theoretical perspectives as well as across disciplines; (2) as critical analysts who have demonstrated the limits of major conventional sociological theories by critiquing these frameworks for their inability to adequately analyze and explain the dynamics of gender, sexuality, and power; (3) as intersectional theorists who, together with critical race scholars and queer theorists, have generated rich theoretical insights about knowledge, power, subjectivity, and resistance that go far beyond the “add and stir” approach that is often found in other sociological approaches; and (4) as innovators who adopt reflective theoretical strategies and are therefore quick to develop new theoretical questions and frameworks.

Feminist theoretical perspectives were developed in the context of diverse struggles against hegemonic modes of knowledge production that render women’s lives, and those of other marginal groups, invisible or dispensable. Institutionalized and elaborated within the academy, feminist theories simultaneously reflect and challenge certain intellectual and material investments held to be sacred by many academic practitioners. Within the social sciences, feminist theorists have raised questions about the separation of theory and method, the gendered biases inherent in positivism, and the hierarchies that limit who can be considered the most appropriate producers of theoretical knowledge. As a consequence, feminist theorists have been unwelcome, dismissed or ignored in some sociological circles. The fact that the Theory Section is, once again, grappling with the “missing feminist revolution” (Stacey and Thorne 1995) within its sacred circle and is willing to invite comment about it is a consequence of the section’s interest in revitalizing the field of “sociological theory” more generally. I believe that feminist theoretical work can help the section achieve this goal. I welcome the opportunity for further discussion and debate.

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Perhaps because it is so linked with the concept of political change, feminist theory has remained vigilant, and has been willing to shift its lens and even its understanding of its own foundational terms – women, gender, liberation – in order to maintain a critical edge that continues to inspire both scholarship and social movements of all kinds.

Let me briefly sketch three significant shifts that have taken place over the past thirty years of feminist theory. Some of these changes have been incorporated into sociology and others resisted. These are not the only ones but the ones that I find the most significant: 1) From universalizing to particularizing and contextualizing women's experiences; 2) From conceptualizing men and women as categories to exploring gendered practices; and 3) From a focus on the particular and local to understanding transnational connections.

Early feminists such as Gayle Rubin and Catherine Mackinnon tried to isolate gender from other social forces, to analyze its specificity – as different from class and race – while marking gender as THE core contradiction of society – indeed of all societies. Of the assumptions

made here, the first to be challenged was that there was something unique to women and shared by all women – the assumption of universality. This is, of course, a classically sociological challenge that arose, at least in the US and Europe, out of the recognition of working class women and women of color that the assumptions made about women's shared experiences were not in fact shared by all women. That which was being considered universal to women was in fact a US and England based white middle class specificity. Thus the first theoretical move was the rejection of white womanhood as the *normatively universal* category and an acceptance that it was a *particular* category. Thus gender came to be seen as something whose effects are best understood in intersection with other elements (race, sexuality etc). Within sociology, Patricia Hill Collins is perhaps best known for her articulation of the intersection of race and gender, and outside of it, legal scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Bell Hooks. Gender, then, is not as an independent social relation (no more than are class or race), but is embedded in a field of other relations such as class, age, sexuality, race and geo-politics. Those inspired by poststructuralists such as Joan Scott take this one step further

and emphasize not just the interactive effects of race, class and gender, but the discursive and material co-constitution of gender/race/sexuality/class within different contexts.

The second move, once the unified category has been debunked, and gender contextualized, is a shift in the object of study from *women* (a group or a category with shared traits) to the production and construction of gendered practices where masculinity (ies) and femininity (ies) exist in relation to one another. Thus women and men are interesting in as much as they usually (but not always—the slippages and alternative possibilities are important here) embody different sets of gendered practices. These clusters of practices, named masculinity and femininity, get their power from being constructed in opposition to each other. The theoretical task here is to think through the ways gender difference is constructed through everyday practice. This is also the shift that legitimizes the study of men through the study of practices of masculinity. While sociologists such as R.W. Connell and Barrie Thorne were at the forefront of this attention to practice, the study of multiple constructions of masculinities and

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femininities form a core element of both feminist theory and Cultural Studies today (see for example Judith Gardiner's edited volume *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*). The shift from studying categories of people to practices also enabled studies of sexuality and queer theory to flourish (see the work of Steven Seidman).

Finally, the debunking of claims of universality meant that scholars began to concentrate on women in particular countries (in the US, most feminist scholars think about and work on the US), but the actual connections between womens' lives in different countries were neither theoretically nor empirically explored, except by some Marxist feminists. Hidden until recently were the connections between gendered ideas and practices and asymmetrical power relations in the world. Today, transnational feminist theory, influenced by postcolonial theory, pays more attention to the flows of power, ideas and resources between rich and poor nations of the world. Transnational theorizing is fundamentally different from earlier attention to women in the third world, when radical feminists declared foot binding in China, the Salem witch trials and the wearing of high heels to be manifestations of the same universal principle of patriarchy.

It is also different from when feminist scholars of development paid attention to other parts of the world because women were particularly poor or oppressed there. Transnational feminist theory urges us to examine how global capital and geopolitics both depend on and asymmetrically affect gendered ideas and practices in rich and poor countries. Women's Studies scholars such Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have been crucial here.

The initial objective of feminist theory was to explain the seemingly universal asymmetries between men and women in the world. Thus feminist theory was not interested in explaining all social problems but rather the specific problematic of gender inequality. However, feminist theory has long evolved into a complex body of knowledge through which to comprehend many social facts about the world – even those that appear on the surface to be ungendered, such as war or famine. What then, of the relationship of sociological theory to feminist theory? Is the theory section of the ASA a hospitable place for feminist theory? I believe it can be. There has been increased attention to feminist theory and to queer theory in recent issues of *Sociological Theory*, for example. Yet feminist theory should by now

have been included as a major school of thought to be examined and learned and critiqued along with other theories about social order and conflict and culture. This has not happened, though many of the courses on sociological theory do include the requisite one week on feminist theory. On the other hand, feminist theories and epistemologies have slipped into sociology in the way we now critique the blind spots of particular theorists and in our refusal to see them as abstract minds, through our understanding of the multiple ways in which power operates, or through our skepticism of work that assumes the separation of the public and the private. We have a situation then where a vibrant body of thought is either taught in a separate class or as one week within a larger course on sociological theory when it openly calls itself feminist theory, or is quietly absorbed into sociological theory, without open use of the f-word. The revolution may have been quiet and it has a long way to go, but I would not hesitate to call it a revolution.

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Thus, research motivated by the feminist goals of challenging gender inequality and classification draws on and contributes to core conceptual frameworks in cultural sociology. For example, sociologists of gender and of culture have both played crucial roles in the development of social constructionist theory. Cerulo's (1997) review of the state of work on identity construction in sociology demonstrates how work on gender identity contributes to the study of identity more generally. The integration of tools relevant to feminist agendas into core conceptual frameworks suggests progress in the feminist revolution in sociology. Stacey and Thorne defined a feminist revolution in sociology as involving the transformation of basic conceptual frameworks not just the adding of new topics and subfields. Since Stacey and Thorne initially described the feminist revolution in sociology as missing, scholars have periodically reassessed the situation, with varying degrees of optimism

The general case I have been developing for the relative appeal of the culture section is also an explanation of my own personal location within sociology. I entered graduate school in the late 1980s intending to become a

feminist theorist. While I continue to be deeply interested in theory – i.e., I am engaged in an attempt at reconciling Sewell's usage of the terms "structure" (Sewell 1992) and "culture" (Sewell 1999) – I am not currently involved with the theory section. I adopted the culture section as my primary intellectual home after a culture section reception at the ASA meetings in Los Angeles in 1994. At this party, I was seduced by a powerful combination of theoretical affinity and network ties. There were many women in the room – both faculty and graduate students – leading me to believe that women were welcome in the section. I was in the midst of my dissertation at that time, and thrilled to discover a national network of scholars who "got" what I was up to and seemed to think it was interesting and relevant. Over the years I have continued to find cultural sociology to offer exciting theoretical tools, and to be open to the contributions of scholarship motivated by feminist concerns. I experienced no parallel recruitment into the theory section. I suspect my intellectual and professional biography is not unique, and that these factors may partially explain why the culture section is more gender balanced than the theory section, why it has more student members, and, why, as noted by Michele Lamont in a

recent web forum on the "The Role and Location of Theory in Sociology" (2004, Theory section webpage www.asatheory.org), the culture section has become the home of theoretical scholarship that in the past might have been located in the theory section.

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Because I took all available classes on Marxism, political science became my area of concentration by default. In the required sociology courses, however, Durkheim's, not Weber's or Parsons', version of the sociological project interested me the most precisely because in his formulation of the social the individual does not constitute the basic moral entity. Not until I began working on my M.A. thesis, "The Reverse of the Mirror: Race and Symbolic Exclusion in Brazilian Soap Operas," did I realize why Marx and Durkheim seem to hold the key for engaging in the mapping of the *place* Peter Berger had taught me could be outlined but his humanist sociology could not grasp. Because Marx and Durkheim directly challenge the two theoretical formulations – respectively Hegel's and Kant's – that constitute modernity's self-representation, as a rational juridical-moral order, they suggest that the discipline's project does not need to rely upon it. As I delved further into poststructuralist critiques of modern thought, I gathered formulations that indicated the limits of the notion of culture (morality) and ideology that organize the social scientific theoretical arsenal. More specifically, I learned that the sociological rendering of culture –

as in Weber's typology of meanings and Parsons's social system model – which presupposes and produces self-transparent (interior/temporal) social subjects, provided a map of the social in which those sharing my social (racial, class, gender) *place* could not be located. Two interrelated poststructuralist bugs have from then on "contaminated" my approach to the discipline's project: the critique of transparency and the centrality of the symbolic, of processes of signification/subjectification. If I was to remain on the path I had been for the previous ten years, an engagement with social theory seemed the obvious venue.

Already seriously infected by French poststructuralism, I took one pivotal course during my first year at the sociology graduate program at the University of Pittsburgh: a seminar on sociology of culture, in which I was first exposed to the theorizing on globalization, in particular global culture. Two things bothered me in the early 1990s theorizing of globalization: first, I could not understand why race (as a colonial and postcolonial political concept) was totally absent from the theorizing of global conditions; second, it seemed to me that the political significance culture had acquired

in the previous years – the so-called "cultural turn" – should trouble its use as an explanatory device. My conclusion was that the potential of the global as a critical theoretical tool was undermined by theorists' need to hold on to classical sociological theorizing. The only options seemed to be to conceive of a global subject that was just a planetarian version of the social subject, the product of a homogeneous global culture; or to conceive of the latter as a heterogeneous (fragmented or hybrid) moral whole, in which all different constitutive "local cultures" seemingly occupy the same position. Not much sociological training is necessary, I am convinced, for one to realize that the globe is an uneven (economically and juridically) political configuration; and yet historical-materialist accounts of globalization all too easily articulate, to dismiss, the pervasiveness of culture as another ideological strategy of the big old capital. However, ideology could not account for how in the early 1990s, for better or worse, appropriations of the postmodern critique of modern thought were already making headlines in declarations of "cultural wars," and defenses of multiculturalism and diversity as

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solutions to end these symbolic and the anthropological battles. What was inconceivable construction of its racial/cultural was that social theorists of all (moral) “others.” Though shades could ignore the fact that Berger’s invitation informs my race and culture supported claims teaching and writing, my project for “cultural difference,” the is to undo the humanistic map the demands for recognition of the sociological rendering of culture “locals,” which many said produces. My bio/graphical registered the emergence of threads animate a desire to global conditions. Because they comprehend how knowledge had become global “native” produces subaltern subjects categories, these traditional pieces proliferating in the contemporary of the sociological arsenal should global political configuration, not be ignored, be taken as mere how the very tools social “empirical” givens, be deployed scientific practitioners deploy as theoretical tools in the same to understand it configure this way they had been during the political space. More precisely, previous hundred years or so. my work addresses race and culture as political/symbolic

instruments that delimit the *place* reflects this impatience with certain individuals and global sociology’s investment in the regions occupy in contemporary project of European modernity, global configuration. Whether it expressed in this refusal to situate should be called sociological it and in its own inability to theory depends on whether acknowledge its own participation sociology can afford in the production of the social acknowledging its own conditions it investigates. Whither participation in the production of theory? Certainly, the social that which it seeks to explain, and theory “I do” is not sociological whether, when doing so, the theory as we know it. From the discipline will retain the desire to critical bugs I got from secure its own *place* as a social poststructuralism, I have devised scientific project.

a critical analytical arsenal, organized by a conception of the political/symbolic to capture how knowledge constitutes a productive moment of modern social configurations that seeks to displace the Marxist account of subjection, the sociological version of the modern subject,

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-loaded, grand theory of Marx and his followers, and avoid the overly abstract systems theory of Parsons. Merton joined forces with the mathematician, Lazarsfeld, and set society on a theory-less course, hoping that empiricism and statistical analysis – formatted in scientific-journal style – would be enough. Generations of American sociologists have followed this path.

But what of Merton himself? What kind of sociology did he do? Ironically, Merton grounded his work firmly in grand theory – the grand theory, first and foremost, of Emile Durkheim. In Merton's paper, "Social Structure and Anomie," he extends Durkheim's theory of social disorganization, producing a very useable typology of deviance. This extension of Durkheim's theory has become a classic in itself.

Merton went on to ground his theory of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" in the work of W. I. Thomas – whose work was part of another grand theory: Symbolic Interactionism.

Most of Merton's corpus of work is very deeply grounded in Durkheimian and Symbolic Interactionist theory.

Yet, at Columbia, when Durkheim was taught, the emphasis was on his statistical prowess – his remarkable use of census data – rather than on his grand, comparative, cultural and structural theory. Would anyone at Columbia – or any of the prestigious universities in America – have been encouraged to study "suicide" or "religion," as these phenomena appeared from France to Germany to the Amazon and to Australia?

And so, the debate goes on. And, because Merton won the debate – even though he became a great sociologist by not following the path he demanded his students follow – sociology is still being done in America disjointed from the exceptionally insightful "grand theory" base upon which our discipline could, and should, rest.

No, we do not have a unified theoretical base. Yes, Marxian and Weberian historical theory are epistemologically different from Durkheimian and Symbolic Interactionist ahistorical theory. This is old news, and there are more complications and contradictions in our theoretical underpinnings. But the "grand theories" which undergird sociological analysis – and which are taught in every theory course in every university – are *great*.

They are great in the same way that Newton's theories and Darwin's theories are great. That is, just as the universe and nature have become better understood through the lenses of Newton's and Darwin's work, so too, social life has become better understood through the lenses of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, G. H. Mead, and other "classical" sociological theorists.

With Communism dead and Parsons resurrected, it is time to forget Merton's hidden agendas and his overly simplistic view of science. It is time to re-ground sociology on its grand theoretical base. For, this is a base we can be proud of – a base Merton himself proved is fertile ground for new sociological insights to come. Let us "stand on the shoulders of giants" once again, for we can see much more clearly from there.

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