Social Theory as a Vocation

Social Theory as a Vocation: Engaging with Future Challenges
by Donald Levine

To face a future with intelligence means first to define the present. The present condition of social theory in the U.S. is marked internally by pluralistic confusion and externally by diminishing support. As a working definition of its situation I suggest, without belaboring the description, a national culture which (in Sorokin’s terms) is sensate to the max, colored by an anti-intellectualism that is driven by populist prejudices and hegemonic commercial interests and, from both sides, a huge market for instant digestibles— to the extent that an "Education President" confuses internets with libraries (Hecht 1997).* It exhibits an escalating disbelief in the integrity of ideas that has been described as bordering on cynicism (Goldfarb 1991). National and disciplinary worlds alike have experienced a reconfiguration into fragments and globalities, attended by an accelerating dissolution of credible disciplinary boundaries (Levine 1995, 1996) and by growing skepticism toward the discipline of sociology in particular (Halliday 1992). To certain of these conditions, some social scientists evince fundamentalist reactions of various sorts—hugging old paradigms, partisan ideologies, identity scholarship, methodological chauvinism, and the like. “Theory” arguably forms part of the problem insofar as it manifests retrenchment into an isolative position (Wacquant 1996). For this and other reasons, one hears cries against the very existence of a separate line of work called theory—and a fortiori against the spectacle of self-styled theorists huddling into a separate professional section—from those who “view the perpetuation of a separate specialty of Theory in Sociology to be a bad idea and one that has not been useful for the field” (Gusfield 1996).

For those who feel called to profess social theory such cries elicit two questions: what is it we presume to profess, and then: what rationales warrant pursuing such a profession? Suppose we conduct a sustained public discussion of these questions. The answers to them affect how we lead our lives as scholars, how we allocate resources for publication, how we devise teaching programs, how we award prizes, how we organize ourselves as professionals. Such a discussion is needed, I believe, both because academics have lost an ability to makes ourselves accountable to publics that support us—partly due to uncritical acceptance of the kind of free-market ideology that lets you be beholden only to what the market will let you get away with—and because vital communities require recurrent if not continuous discourse about their constitutive beliefs and sacred values.

A point of departure for discussing the vocation of our field (and its Section) might be to consider its role as heir to the classic tradition of Western social theory (and, increasingly, global social thought) and as presumptive host to a set of ongoing discourses—about the aims of social science and how those aims relate to the contemporary world as well as to theoretical issues in substantive sociology. The discourses presume a kind of fiduciary responsibility toward the tradition; the ground rules include a principle of taking turns that has been dubbed “reciprocal priority” (Watson 1993).

I shall broach such discourses here by considering a short list of the things we mean when we talk about social theory and then by listing some objections to the profession of theory so conceived; then I shall offer a few remarks designed to counter those objections. Proceeding, I shall identify a number of exemplary accomplishments of social theorists, with an eye to compiling a paradigm (in the pre-Kuhnian sense) of special functions that comprise the business of what may be called "theory work." I conclude with remarks about ways to use and to prioritize the items in that list for the coming
What do we profess when we profess Social Theory?

The most common associations to the term theory reflect four distinct meanings of the term. The term can be construed in the sense of theory, abstract or rational, as contrasted with empirical; theory, general, as contrasted with particular; and theory, contemplative, as contrasted with practical. There is also a function (theory, ) that might be termed exegetical, as contrasted with heuristic. We might take a big step toward clarification simply by insisting that these meanings be kept distinct, thereby avoiding the frequent confusions that occur when, for example, "grand theory" equates abstraction, which can be about microsocial phenomena, with generality, which alludes to the macrosocial domain; or when students, as they so often do, confound "practical" with "empirical," because of their shared contrast to "theory."

For each of the above meanings, theory can be pursued either in conjunction with its contrast term or separately from it. For now, let us assume that no one objects to the pursuit of theory when it is pursued conjunctively (though, time and play permitting, one could imagine such objections). So we can say that sociologists are thought to theorize legitimately in at least one of the following modes: theory, relates abstract conceptualization to sets of facts, as Homans did in The Human Group (by examining sets of case studies to derive abstract propositions about interaction systems); theory, links notions of a general order to particular elements or sectors, as Eisenstadt does in Japanese Civilization (by referring certain political or religious developments in Japan to overarching characteristics of its civilizational pattern); theory, links theoretical analyses to policy recommendations, like Wilson in The Truly Disadvantaged (by arguing that changed socioeconomic conditions of inner-city black populations requires policies geared to job-creation and training rather than cultural reform or anti-discrimination laws); while theory, links the exegetical recovery of texts with ongoing investigation, like Coser in The Functions of Social Conflict (by consulting an old Simmel text as a source for state-of-the-art propositions about the consequences of inter- and intragroup conflict). One could then make the case that the whole point of a Theory Section should be to bring together sociologists with a theorizing bent whose work nevertheless manifests a lively linkage with the non-theoretical, in one or more of the above senses. I shall not make that case. Instead, I wish to take the more radical course of engaging with objections to modes of theorizing that are disjoined from their contrast modes. Regarding theory in the first sense, many social scientists have voiced opposition to abstractions that are not "grounded," that are not directly linked with reality and supported by data. Regarding theory, many have objected to conceptions of general orders that do not visibly link up with particular historical phenomena, as in C. Wright Mills's insistence on relating general conceptions of societal states to orders of experience at the personal level. Regarding theory, many have objected to a purely theoretical approach to social understanding, from Marx's Thesis Eleven or the philosophy of John Dewey to sociologists like Robert Lynd who voice what I call a pathos of practice—the notion that sociological work has value only insofar as it relates directly to the alleviation of suffering or the satisfaction of basic human needs. As for theory, there remains a charged current of opinion in the field that one would do best to forget the classics and deposit them forthwith in historical museums (Levine 1995, 62). Against these objections, I suggest that even in these disjunctive modes of theorizing, there is good and important work to be done. Although the value of such work hinges on the type of theory involved, let us leave those distinctions in abeyance for the moment and consider that any kind of theory work in sociology possesses at least three kinds of value. 1) Possession of a body of theoretical notions gives one a kind of intellectual power, a level of mastery over social reality, that one simply cannot get by looking at case studies or percentage differences in rates. 2) The discipline that inheres in the rigorous investigation and mastery of theoretical materials sophisticates the pursuit of any substantive empirical or practical project. 3) Much of the teaching that introduces students to sociology is carried by the distinctive perspectives and conceptual tools that sociology provides. Even so crusty an empiricist as Ernest Burgess used to introduce graduate students to sociology by lecturing on a lengthy series of sociological "concepts" (which is not to say that lecturing of that sort cannot be dreary).
Rather than continue to defend a general claim about the value of theory work, I shall now point to exemplars of valuable theory work, of both the pure and the mixed kinds, and sketch a way of sorting them that might constitute a virtual agenda for those inclined to profess social theory as a vocation.

What do social theorists do?

Consider the appropriation of Weber's work in the past half century. Gerth and Mills introduced a dazzling selection of his writings, Parsons an eye-opening introduction to the *Religionssozioologie* chapter, Bendix an intellectual biography that revealed new vistas, Roth and Wittich a state-of-the-art critical edition of some English translations. Or consider, in reverse transatlantic direction, the stunning recovery of G. H. Mead's macrosociological thought by Hans Joas and of his theory of communicative action by Jürgen Habermas, or Uta Gerhardt's profoundly tonic recovery of Talcott Parsons's writings on Nazism. Without such work, the intellectual horizons of social scientists would be markedly narrower. And such broadening does not happen once and for all--who now remembers Parsons's fruitful recovery of Pareto's critique of economicism thinking, more germane to contemporary social science than ever? In order to possess our heritage, each generation must earn it anew, as Coser emphasized by posting Goethe's dictum as epigraph to his *Masters of Sociological Thought*.

What are sometimes depreciated as "mere exegeses" perform crucial services. For one thing, didactic abridgments or summaries sometimes communicate an author's thought more clearly than the original--Harriet Martineau for Comte, Leon Mayhew for Parsons. And interpretive exegeses can simply transform one's thinking. Consider how Lisa McIntyre prods you to overcome your sociological prejudices about law in *Law in the Sociological Enterprise*, how Andrew Abbott's interpretation forces you to rethink whether early "Chicago sociology" was so mindlessly empiricist after all, or how, in their reader on *Culture and Society*, Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman compel you to broaden your horizon and engage with core conceptual and diagnostic issues whether you want to or not. Beyond the foundational work of critical editions, translations, and exegeses, there is the no less important work of correcting extant recoveries and reinterpreting those texts. The value of correcting earlier appropriations is manifest when one considers, for example, Richard Münch's recovery of "inter-penetration" in Parsonsian theory. Charles Camic's critique of Parsons on the utilitarians, Moishe Postone's rereading of Marx and the Marxists, or Birgitta Niedelmann's restoration of Simmel's key text on modernity. Indeed, this task seemed so important that it was made the Section miniconference theme in 1995 (Camic, forthcoming).

Another task that theorists have assumed is to secure substantive continuity in the sociological enterprise, which Robert Merton once thematized as one special mission of the theory vocation. Calls to codify theory and attend to continuities formed covering notes to his own seminal paradigms (functional analysis, sociology of knowledge) and conjectures of research traditions (reference group behavior). Kindred efforts of value jump to mind in many areas: Gelles and Straus's codification of theoretical perspectives on family violence; Ben Nelson's codification of work on what he called structures of consciousness; Mike Featherstone's recent synthesis of takes on late modern culture. Under this heading one may also locate the activity of reviewing divergent findings and conclusions on a common problem, a process often glossed as meta-analysis.

The work of codification leads directly to one of the most essential steps in inquiry of all kinds: defining problems. Merton's evocative terms for this crucial process neatly circumscribe the work in question: specification of ignorance and problem-finding. To illustrate the former, regarding which he observes "it requires a newly informed theoretical eye to detect long-obscured pockets of ignorance as a prelude to newly focused inquiry," Merton analyzed a sequence of successful specifications of ignorance in the development of the sociology of deviant behavior (1996, 53 ff.)--an analysis that itself exemplifies the work of codifying continuities as well.

Regarding the latter--well, at this point a panoply of essential theory work explodes in our faces. It appears in the activities of 1) articulating and refining concepts, 2) defining typologies, 3) constructing models, 4) formalizing theory, 5) differentiating theory, 6) replacing theory, 7) redirecting inquiry, and 8) theorizing new areas. Some scholars spend years productively on elucidating one or two concepts. In philosophy, tomes have been produced on such notions as freedom, justice, law, and
love. I have previously urged all sociologists concerned with freedom, for example, to familiarize themselves with Mortimer Adler’s The Idea of Freedom and Felix Oppenheim’s Dimensions of Freedom.

In sociology, valuable work of this sort has taken many forms. At a minimum, it focuses on disambiguation, as per Walter Wallace’s eloquent proposals to work toward a standard, univocal definitions of key sociological concepts. Even if, as I have argued, such work often encounters problems owing to the “essentially contested” (Gallie 1964) character of our core concepts, Wallace persuades me that such efforts can be productive—as, indeed, in the badly needed disambiguation of Weber’s conceptions of rationality by scholars like Bendix, Kalberg, and Levine. Beyond that, codification of the plurality of standard meanings can itself be a boon, as in Kluckhohn and Kroeber’s examination of some 150 definitions of “culture.”

Critical exploration of the meanings of key terms and their implications offer a not only a commendable route toward intellectual sophistication and clear thinking; it enriches understanding by exploring the context of concepts and by unpacking their properties and historical vicissitudes. Keywords by Raymond Williams offers a shorthand entree into such wisdom. For more extensive illumination, consider what we have learned from Edward Shils’s disquisitions on “tradition” and “secrecy,” Orlando Patterson’s on “freedom,” or Guillermina Jasso’s on “justice.”

Finally, there comes a time when a theorist is needed to reframe the accepted or conventional meaning of a term. One follows with undiminished interest and profit the route Durkheim traverses in reconceptualizing “crime” and “religion,” or Merton in the reconceptualization that issued in the concept of “opportunity structure.” Even if one does not agree with where Dahrendorf ended up his tortuous reconceptualization of “class,” shifting its core denotation from a socioeconomic stratum to that of a party in combat, and I for one do not, one cannot but learn a good deal from the course of his thinking about it.

Concepts never exist in isolation. (Perhaps one should theorize the notion of concept-sets as symbolical structures comparable to role-sets.) Certainly, the development of conceptual typologies has been a conspicuous contribution of theory work in sociology over the past century. Consider Weber’s deeply consequential typology of action orientations; Thomas’s social personality types (philistine, bohemian, creative); Parsons’s systemic functions, and his forms of social pressure (inducing, coercing, persuading, guilting); Janowitz’s typology of political-military elites (aristocratic, democratic, totalitarian, garrison state). Such schemas offer tools that enhance our capacity to sort out issues and generate questions. Even for purposes of straightforward empirical descriptions, categorial frameworks comprise indispensable boxes for sticking statistics in. Models represent another level of theoretical empowerment. Models incorporate motion and formalize frameworks. Consider how empowered we are by models like those of Bales, on the stages of interaction process; of Bellah, on stages of religious evolution; of Coleman, on the stages of community conflict; of Smelser, on stages of collective behavior; or Blau, on the generation of power formations generated through imbalances in exchange. An even more rigorous kind of systematizing work appears in efforts at formalization, in which clearly formulated premises are used to generate logically derived corollaries, as in Collins’s enumeration of dozens of postulates and hundreds of propositions regarding the dynamics of complex organizations, ritual, and societal stratification.

The biggest payoff of theory work is often tied to the generation of theoretical propositions, though much of this work, appropriately, is conjoined with substantive empirical work: the causes, or commonly-associated factors, behind, e.g., revolutions, as in the creative theorizing of Edwards, Moore, Skocpol, Arjomand, or Goldstone; professionalization, as in the theory work of Hughes, Wilensky, Freidson, and Abbott; or crime, as in that of Sutherland, Cloward and Ohlin, Lemert and Becker, Turk and Quinney.

With regard to existing frameworks, models, and theories, theory work becomes innovative in numerous ways. It can differentiate concepts or relations that previously had been lumped, as when Margaret Wood differentiated the social type of the stranger into the newly arrived outsider and the sojourner, Michael Johnson separated forms of violence against women into “patriarchal terrorism” and “common couple violence,” or J. W. Friedman distinguished three kinds
of interdependence: structural, behavioral, and evolutionary. Theory work can add *intervening variables*, as Coser did to a number of Simmel's propositions, e.g., making the effect of external conflict on groups dependent on the structural properties of ingroups. It can proceed by *integrating* two different theories into a single framework, as Smelser did regarding Spencer's and Durkheim's theories of social differentiation. It can replace a vulnerable theory with an ostensibly sounder one, in the manner of *supersession* exhibited by Dahrendorf on class conflict; Murray Davis, in his theory of humor; Mark Granovetter, in his theory of weak ties; or Max Scheler, in his theory of *ressentiment* that so effectively superseded Nietzsche's.

Theory work also functions by *redirecting existing inquiries along new lines*. Consider what Simmel himself accomplished by attending to the associative consequences of conflict, or Tom Scheff on the role of unacknowledged shame in social violence, or Niklas Luhmann's addition of linguistic codes to the essential properties of specialized institutions. At times redirection occurs through *bringing older works to bear on current problems*, as when Norbert Wiley refocused theorizing on the self by incorporating ideas of Peirce. Merton has stressed the potentially important impact that theory work can have on practical research, reconceptualizing it by inserting concepts that pertain to overlooked variables.

Other kinds of innovative work *open up new areas for theorizing*. This happens in a number of ways: by recovering forgotten bodies of work—Camic on habit, Coser on conflict—or by analyzing emergent historical phenomena—James Rule's on public surveillance, Roland Robertson on globalization, Jean Baudrillard on simulacra. Most often, it occurs through inventing a new conceptual angle from which to examine long familiar phenomena: Karl Mannheim on generations, Erving Goffman on face work, Barry Schwartz on queuing, Carol Heimer on risk, Matilda White Riley on age structure, Carol Gilligan and Arlie Hochschild on gender issues, Bryan Turner and Arthur Frank on the body in society.

Up to this point my focus has been on types of theory work that arguably perform important, indeed essential, functions *within* the sociological enterprise itself. But other functions associated with theory work link sociology to other disciplines and broader concerns. Comte and Simmel were perhaps the two figures who articulated these functions most clearly. For Comte, the arrival of positive social science meant one could dispense once and for all with abstract philosophy, but there remained the important function of linking the conceptions of sociology with those of other disciplines, especially biology. This remains an important task for the theorist, especially now that academic knowledge has split into so many specialties. Consider the light thrown on the dynamics of social interaction by Tom Smith's pioneering linkage of social interaction theory with well-studied psychological and biochemical processes, or Alan Wolfe's Section Award-winning comparison of the assumptions of sociological theory with those of the burgeoning field of Artificial Intelligence. In the hands of scholars who roam handily across the literatures of half a dozen disciplines—like Talcott Parsons, Samuel Eisenstadt, or Alan Fiske, for example—that kind of theory work becomes electrifying.

Furthermore, pace Comte, we now understand that beyond synthesizing knowledge from different positive domains, other philosophical functions still demand attention. As Simmel put it, every positive discipline is surrounded by two boundaries at which reflection necessarily takes on a philosophical character. One boundary marks the domain of the cognitive preconditions of the discipline, its epistemic foundations. The other marks the domain where the necessarily fragmentary contents of positive knowledge become augmented into a world picture and related to the totality of life, in response to questions "that we have so far been unable either to answer or to dismiss"—either through personally colored depictions of the world akin to the representations of an artist or through the admixture of valuations of a sort that can never be empirically grounded (Simmel 1978, 53).

Foundational ideas are of two sorts. One concerns presuppositions about social reality. This is the area that figures like Parsons and Don Martin delve into creatively and that Jeffrey Alexander and James Coleman ploughed again so boldly in the 1980s. The other concerns the ideas about methods to be followed. Work in this vein by Simmel and Weber on ideal types and *Verstehen*, Lazarsfeld on typological procedures and the relating of variables, Dubin on theory building, or Stinchcombe on modes of conceptualization can be studied with profit by scholars of many orientations.
The domain of trans-empirical work that augments securely attestable knowledge includes a good part of the tradition of Western social theory. Virtually every major figure in that tradition has sketched some interpretation of the nature of modernity (Levine 1995, 306 ff.). Over the past half century, major new contributions of this sort have been crafted by undisputed luminaries of the field—Daniel Bell, Norbert Elias, David Riesman, Jürgen Habermas, Alan Touraine. Recent years have seen a good deal of fresh thought in this genre, including Ulrich Beck’s theorization of modernity as essentially risk-laden, Rosalind Williams’s portrayal of subterranean images of modernity in Notes from the Underground, or Peter Beilharz’s genial amalgam of modernist takes on romanticism, urbanism, and dual economies in Postmodern Socialism.

The other direction Simmel mentioned that transcends the exact determinations of positive sociology concerns the relevance of moral valuations to social facts. In considering this broad and complex area, one should be careful to distinguish a number of intellectual questions that tend often to get confounded: the ways in which sociologists should study and analyze social norms (Durkheim, Bellah), a question that belongs in the domain of ordinary sociological work and demands no special treatment; the norms of the sociologists themselves, as related to their conduct as scholars and investigators (Merton on the norms of science), the ethical relevance of their problems (Weber’s Wertbeziehung), and the impact of their other moral commitments on the prosecution of scholarly work (Merton’s “Insiders and Outsiders”); and the ways in which the work of sociologists can contribute to the clarification and direction of moral judgments for persons, groups, and societies (Weber’s guidelines for value clarification, Durkheim’s rules for normality and pathology, Myrdal’s methodological notes on valuation).

The conjunction of broad interpretive work with moral-evaluative work yields the genre of social diagnosis and social criticism. This, too, offers a legitimate domain for the social theorist, one that is often shied away from or else deprecated as mere opinion. Yet there is a world of difference between the streetcorner pundit and the conscientious, informed, and disciplined observer-critic. If the role of the latter shades into that of the public intellectual, so much the better for democracy, and so much the better for legitimating the work of social theory. It is time for social theorists to dust off that role again, clarify its mission, and exemplify how social theorists as public intellectuals can function in a credible and constructive way.

What should social theorists do?

Sifting what intuitively seems to constitute valuable work in our field may generate an ordered agenda. The kinds of work just glimpsed divide into what may be called custodial functions and heuristic functions, the latter in turn dividing into efforts internal to sociology and those external to the discipline. Enumerating these functions in the form of a paradigm enables one to consider more clearly what areas might need special support at a given time. The paradigm I offer is not complete, and surely not exhaustive. It could serve as a stepping-stone toward a more authoritative inventory of functions. Meanwhile, it not only does the job that Merton assigned to paradigm constructing—of bringing out into the open the array of otherwise tacit assumptions, concepts, and propositions in an area—but can stimulate fresh thought about ways to invent curricula and focused experiences that imbue training in the theory area with more professional dignity.

An Agenda of Theory Work in Sociology

1. Custodial work
   1.1. recovering the heritage: critical editions, translations, exegeses
   1.2. correcting and reinterpreting accepted recoveries
   1.3. forming inventories and codifying ideas
   1.4. constituting and sustaining dialogues

2. Heuristic work: internal
   2.1. conceptual articulation, disambiguation, and reformulation
   2.2. construction of conceptual frameworks and typologies
   2.3. model-building and formalization
   2.4. problem-finding and problem-justifying
   2.5. redirecting current scholarship
   2.6. theorizing new areas, through
      2.6.1. extrapolation from earlier work
      2.6.2. attending to emergent phenomena
      2.6.3. constructing new analytic angles

3. Heuristic work: external
3.1. foundational
   3.1.1. ontological
   3.1.2. epistemo-logical
3.2. representational syntheses
   3.2.1. syntheses with other disciplines and perspectives
   3.2.2. grand descriptive syntheses
3.3. ethical syntheses
   3.3.1. ethics of scholarship
   3.3.2. theory-practice relations
3.4. social diaganosis and criticism

How should those tasks be prioritized?

My first task will be to engage Theory colleagues in dialogue about this paradigm, with an eye to refining it. I trust that this will occur before, during, and after the miniconference, and that a revised version will have the benefit of those deliberations. Conversation about this paradigm may, I hope, set the tone for a number of other conversations, in which Section members and others, of varying orientations, will work to carry out the type of work noted above as 1.A.—constituting and sustaining dialogues. I see an immediate need for dialogues of four sorts. One would strengthen the case for social theory as a vocation by identifying pieces of good theory work that signally improved the course of sociological investigation or practical applications, and instances of flawed or misdirected work that could have been signally improved by the adduction of some well-crafted theory work. A related conversation would reflect on some of the exemplary achievements of theory work with an eye to formulating criteria of excellence and calling attention to those exemplars. There is a pressing need, within the social sciences generally, to combat the subjectivist epidemic that equates all considered statements as mere expressions of opinion.

Another would use something like the above paradigm or its successor as a basis for engaging in collegial deliberations about the character of theory curricula and training programs. In communications with a number of Section members, I have encountered a good deal of confusion and groping exploration in this area.

A fourth would engage in a discussion of cutting-edge problems, both those raised by current complications in the literature and those that ought to be addressed but that, for one reason or another, have been ignored or neglected. Since readers of this statement may legitimately be impatient to learn where its author stands on this last question, let me conclude by identifying a few areas I consider of the highest priority for theory work of the next decade.

2.4. What is known and what is not known about the sources of violence and of nonviolent solutions in contemporary society? And, using this (or any other practical problem as an exemplar), what is the range of defensible positions on the relation between theory and practice, and how might those differences be mediated?

2.5. The expansion of radical economic thinking—utilitarianism in the narrow sense in which Parsons defined it (albeit in a historically flawed manner)—has long seemed to me to constitute an intellectual retrogression and a moral danger. Although this matter has been addressed by some, critics of rational choice theory need to mount a more vigorous offensive to engage its defenders in an exploration of the limits of that conceptual framework, insisting on a full accounting for the customary, habitual, emotional, unconscious, biologically altruistic, interactional, cultural, and serendipitous dimensions of human action, and some acknowledgment of the experimental evidence that those wedded to that outlook—economics majors, for example—demonstrably behave in a more self-centered manner than do control groups (Frank et al 1993).

3.3.1. Analyze the extent to which uncritically accepted criteria of equality of entitlement underlie sociological research of all kinds.

This would include some consideration of how the mentality of a consumerist culture may permeate most moral assumptions and a consideration of other ethics that sociologists might be invited to explore as groundwork for their choice of research problems. More generally, examine the character and distribution of values that underlie most commonly held value-relevant points of departure for investigation.

3.2.1. Granted that other traditions have not evolved a formal sociology historically: all societies have ways of representing and interpreting human behavior. What is to be gained by beginning to consider their knowledge in a more systematic and rigorous way? One might begin with classics like Confucius or Ibn Khaldun, or with non-Western interpretive traditions, as I have attempted to demonstrate (Levine 1994).

I conclude with a word of warning. In making the case that there is indeed a role for specialized
theory work in sociology, I do not mean to suggest that theory by itself can produce a reliable understanding of social phenomena. To warn against the fallacy of misplaced abstraction, the door to every theorist’s office should present the dictum: concepts without percepts are empty. The case for social theory as a vocation must be that theory work can rightly claim to represent one specialty among many. That does not mean that it must be pursued as a full time, lifelong specialty. I would probably distrust my own efforts at theorizing more than I do had they not been supplemented with extensive field work, historical scholarship, and other kinds of empirical investigations. And while I love philosophy, I probably find most exciting the scholarly works that actually conjoin massive empirical work with sophisticated theorizing—as in the best productions of a Reinhard Bendix, a James Coleman, a Shmuel Eisenstadt, a Robert Wuthnow—and I regret the distance between theorizing and empirical work that has increased over the past generation. But there lingers no doubt in my mind that people without disciplined training in theory work can not be fully effective as social scientists or even as social critics or practical change agents.

* Due to space limits, references are provided only for those items that involve direct quotations or figure as part of the expository argument, not for those used for purposes of illustration.

REFERENCES


Reply to "Social Theory as a Vocation" by Donald Levine
by Karen S. Cook

In "Social Theory as a Vocation," Donald Levine has laid out some of the current and future challenges facing social theory in the United States and he has articulated his vision of how these challenges might be addressed. Levine makes many statements with which I am in agreement. For example, I agree in general with the three "kinds of value" he imbeds theory work with: (1) it grants intellectual power, (2) it enhances the pursuit of empirical work, application and practice, and (3) it gives students of the discipline a unique sociological perspective. It is hard to argue with these aims. Levine identifies many of the well-known fruits of the various types of theory work—the formalization of knowledge, the differentiation of concepts, the integration of theories, the generation of propositions, the redirection of lines of inquiry, the linkage of the sociological perspective with work in other disciplines and engagement with broad social issues and the moral imperatives of the day. In many ways, arguing against theory is like deciding that motherhood is somehow reprehensible. However, while I am in complete sympathy with Levine’s defense of theory as a vocation and its significance for social inquiry, I want to take issue with some of the claims that are sprinkled throughout his text.

I will focus more on the prescriptive section of Levine’s piece labeled, “What should social theorists do?” Here Levine provides an “agenda” of theory work in sociology. First, anything labeled “custodial work” is highly unlikely to be given high priority in sociology, even by those who are sympathetic to this type of theoretical work and its importance for the discipline. Much of what goes under this label in Levine’s paradigm is significant (i.e. moving beyond the history of social thought or of philosophy) only if it serves a larger scientific purpose. In this category of theory
work he includes: recovering the heritage (critical editions, translations, exegeses), correcting and reinterpreting accepted recoveries, forming inventories and codifying ideas, and constituting and sustaining dialogues. Even if we exonerate this type of activity from the label, "custodial," we still must defend this work on more fundamental grounds than has Levine.

If the recent exchange between Alexander and Sciorino with Camic over Camic's effort to reinterpreta an aspect of Parson's work in The Structure of Social Action is an example of what Levine means by "constituting and sustaining dialogues" or of "correcting and reinterpreting accepted recoveries," then I find such activity distinctly less informative than does Levine. From the comments of both sets of authors, it appears that neither has fully understood the other. Thus we read of one misunderstanding, misquotation, and misinformed interpretation of text after another in the major theory journal in sociology. What does this type of theory work illuminate? No student of theory in sociology will learn much from this debate or "dialogue". If the theorists can't get it right or understand each other's basic arguments, then how do we expect those we are trying to train to do so? If we are to argue that theorists should engage in such activity as Levine suggests we do, then we have to come up with a new set of ground rules or criteria for evaluating such work. Diatribes like this one, even if more benignly labeled "dialogues," are precisely the kind of published work that lead sociologists in a wide range of subfields to dismiss the work of theorists. It is only mildly ironic that on the cover of the issue of Sociological Theory (July, 1996) in which this debate is included is a picture of an advertisement from "Bull's Head Book Shop" for "Cheap Theory - 20% Off." The "destruction of the classics," to use Alexander's terminology, is more likely to occur from within the theory camp than from those outside of it.

It will not be surprising to many that I would elevate theory work of category 2 "Heuristic work: internal"—in Levine's agenda to first place on the, or at least I would give it first priority were I asked to prioritize activities as Levine has done in his conclusion. I view this category as including tasks that are central to the advancement of the discipline and to graduate training. Here we have conceptual work (disambiguation—I like this phrase—and reformulation), the construction of typologies, model-building and formalization, problem finding, redirecting current scholarship and theorizing new areas through extrapolation of earlier work, attending to emergent phenomena, and constructing new analytic angles. This is the core of theory work in my view. It is in many ways what Weber, Parsons, Sinimel, Marx and Durkheim were attempting in their day—- theorizing new areas through attending to emergent phenomena in society and constructing new analytic angles on the social world around them. It is what we should be doing in our own day (informed by the work of our predecessors, or, to use Merton's terminology, "standing on the shoulders of giants"). The final form of the theory product is less important and here I part company with those who would constrict theoretical activity to more formal (or formalized) presentations. Good ideas are hard enough to come by in any field thus we should be catholic about the ways in which such wisdom is received in the discipline. Formalization is most useful in well-developed areas of theory work in which it contributes to the clarification of concepts, definitions, scope or range of applicability of the ideas, and in the development of propositions that can be examined empirically.

The third category in Levine's agenda for theory work is what he labels, "Heuristic work: external." It includes a wide range of activities roughly grouped into four sub-categories: foundational (e.g. epistemological) work, synthetic work (e.g. grand syntheses across disciplines), ethical work (syntheses related to the ethics of scholarship and practice), and finally, social criticism. This category needs further development. The internal-external classification system for heuristics is not sufficiently clear. Of the four classes of activity he includes in the external category, I would like to separate the first two more theoretical enterprises from the latter two which focus more on matters of ethics and practice.

Foundational work is significant in any discipline. Addressing both ontological and epistemological issues advances not only theory of all varieties, but also relates in important ways to the methodologies of a discipline and its empirical roots. The danger with too much emphasis on this type of theory work, however, is that it may take the place of theory development (of the sort included in category 2). Some criticize meta-theoretical work on these grounds (e.g. Turner). Foundational debates will not ever disappear in any
discipline as diverse as sociology. Efforts to revisit epistemological issues are important as sociologists explore during each decade what it is that they want to know about the social world we inhabit and how it is that we will come to know it. How will we apprehend social reality, with what tools, and how will we interpret the evidence we obtain? What are the limitations of our methods of inquiry and our modes of interpretation? While I do think such matters remain foundational in a fundamental sense in any discipline and that discussions of these issues are essential, especially when taken-for-granted ways of doing sociology are reexamined with each new generation of scholars, I also see a downside. The downside is that a kind of meta-theoretical paralysis can set in leading to less theoretical activity that is focused directly on understanding the social world and how it works (category 2).

Synthetic activity I rank in second place behind the kinds of theory work listed in category 2. This type of theory work is, however, directly related to various types of theoretical activity Levine includes in his second category. It often represents one of the ways in which current scholarship is redirected (2.5) or new analytic angles are constructed (2.6.3). It also enables theory growth through the use of concepts and principles "borrowed" from related disciplines. Categories 3.3 and 3.4 on ethics and social criticism raise numerous issues that simply cannot be dealt with in a brief reply. I will make only a few observations about the inclusion of these issues in an agenda for theory work. First, no one can quibble with the inclusion of discussions of the ethics of scholarship in any agenda for sociology, let alone a theory agenda. But it is not clear how this type of activity is specifically theory work. The ethics of scholarship and of the nature of our relations with the subject and objects of study is relevant to all who call themselves sociologists. If Levine means to include in this category clarification, codification and instruction in the ethical standards of inquiry in our discipline then, like motherhood, its inclusion is beyond reproach. If it refers to something else then Levine needs to clarify what he includes under this heading and specifically how it relates to theory work (beyond the obvious inference that theorists should be bound by the same standards as others scholars).

Social diagnosis and criticism may or may not be central as an agenda item for theory work depending on what we mean by these terms. I view this category as related to what Levine calls problem-finding and problem-justifying, under heading 2.4. One of the many ways in which sociologists identify problems of interest to them for theory and research is by way of social critique of the society in which they live. Examples include work on school tracking, school desegregation, urban decay, violence and other forms of social unrest. Wilson's work on the truly disadvantaged or the urban underclass is exemplary. In this sense, efforts to understand the world around us lead us to offer theories that can explain (or interpret) events of such social significance. In this way social diagnosis and criticism forms the bedrock of our theoretical efforts. But we must be disciplined in this regard. Social criticism should be informed by theory and research in sociology. Levine refers to this matter when he argues that "the rigorous investigation and mastery of theoretical (and I would add, substantive empirical) materials sophisticates the pursuit of a practical project." This is how I would conceptualize the nature of theory-practice relations which Levine locates in a different category. (His inclusion of theory-practice relations under the label, "ethical syntheses," implies that he is more concerned with the ethics of such relations, but he needs to spell out the nature of these concerns. It may include matters not of the relation between theoretical work and social criticism or practice, but matters of the ethics of the relations between investigators and the subjects of their inquiry. What is our obligation to those we study and how do we protect their rights and anonymity if that is crucial, etc.?)

In the final section of my commentary I will make a few remarks about Levine's personal agenda for theory work, under the heading "How should those tasks be prioritized?". Collegial deliberations about the character and quality of theory curricula and training programs in sociology are long overdue in many departments. I welcome such an opportunity. Similarly, discussion of "cutting-edge problems" in theory work, identifying current complications in the literature and important topics that have been ignored or neglected is always of potential use in any discipline. I find somewhat more problematic Levine's suggestion that we should identify good theory work that "significantly improved the course of sociological investigation or practical applications" and "instances of flawed or misdirected work that could have been improved by the adduction of some
well-crafted theory work." In a related fashion he calls for identification of exemplary achievements in theory work in order to formulate "criteria of excellence." On the surface this sounds like a great idea. But by whose standards will we judge this work?

When Levine states that "the expansion of radical economistic thinking ... constitutes an intellectual retrogression and a moral danger," I get concerned about the nature of the criteria being employed and the power of those who would be mind-guards in the field. He selected out this particular trend for the most negative evaluation made in his discussion of theory work. The looseness of this charge and the ease with which it slips into his top four list of priorities makes me believe that exercises of the sort he proposes will lead only to acrimony. What happens to those theorists (or the ideas of those) not among "the chosen" and who selects those who choose? Perhaps we can come to some agreement about exemplars simply by noting the breadth of their reach and the depth of the scholarship they have inspired in the field. I would have my own list of exemplars in this regard to offer up. Perhaps we can even agree, at least in subgroups, on what criteria could be employed to separate clear, concise, and informative theoretical statements from those that are confusing, ambiguous, and unlikely to lead to much enlightenment if even "the theorists" can not interpret their meaning. But between these poles most of the rest of theory work falls and how are we to judge its contributions to the field?

Levine also calls us to challenge the "uncritically accepted criteria of equality of entitlement (which) underlie sociological research of all kinds." He does so in an effort to challenge the basis upon which sociologists select research problems. Are they driven by too glib an acceptance of consumerism in our culture? What are the moral underpinnings for the choice of research problems? Can we more carefully examine the values that form the "points of departure" for many sociological investigations? Again, while in the abstract, this sounds like activity that is long overdue (witness the communitarian critique of utilitarianism run rampant in social theory akin to Levine's sharp charge), the question that haunts is who will decide which problems are worthy of pursuit? Whose morals will be the gold standard? I am more comfortable with a democratic orientation to values and the freedom of investigators to select problems for investigation, even if this may at times seem to those in "ivory towers" as an uncritical acceptance of equality of entitlement underlying and implicitly legitimating sociological research of "all kinds". As in many fields it is not at all clear which investigations in the beginning will bear fruit in the end. From this standpoint letting a thousand flowers bloom is a reasonable strategy, one not too distant from the current state of affairs in theory work in sociology.

The case for theory as a vocation is best made in my view by those Levine identifies in his concluding comment who "conjoin massive empirical work with sophisticated theorizing." In this category he places, Bendix, Coleman, Eisenstadt and Wuthnow. This is not a bad place to end in any commentary on theory as vocation. What makes these individuals unique is that they are unlikely to have identified theory as their primary vocation. Yet, each was sophisticated in his efforts to examine aspects of society theoretically and empirically. It is the interplay between such efforts (theoretical and empirical) that push theory forward and make it both relevant to the social world and informative to those who want to know how the world works.

References:

Which Vocation?
by Arthur Frank

Don Levine skillfully walks us around the elephant of theory. When each of us returns to clutching the leg, trunk, or tail of our own research and teaching, we have better sense of the whole. Because Levine speaks for the profession of theory in general, he wisely leaves the concept of vocation implicit. Speaking only for myself, I need to specify a vocation that can perpetually reorient my teaching, the sole concern of this comment.

When I wrote my first theory syllabus in 1975, the world and the discipline were simpler. Today at least four new demand inform a theory course. One is the multiculturalism demand. My "classics" now include W.E.B. DuBois—whose name I had to learn
to pronounce properly because it was never spoken in my graduate training—and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Not only do they raise substantive issues of race and gender in a new way, they also question the parameters of theory as practice and literary form.

The second new demand is multidisciplinary. Neither Foucault nor Habermas, disputably the most influential theorists of the last 20 years, is an academic sociologist (though Jean Baudrillard did begin his teaching in a sociology department). Feminist theory is notably multidisciplinary, as is cultural studies. Sociology is decentered within social theory.

The third demand follows from the demise of general theory (Levine’s 2.2 and 2.3) in favor of what I’m content to call local theory (cf. Levine’s 2.6). As far as I can tell, specific courses on theory entered the curriculum to teach the Parsonian synthesis and others’ objections to it. Today that project no longer commands curricular centrality. Excitement for the discipline brings an increasing blurring between what is taught in “theory” courses and in other substantive “sociologies of” courses.

The fourth new demand is that theory has to make sense of a media-saturated, consumer cross-marketed, virtual hyperreality that is lived increasingly outside the assumptions of classical and mid-century concepts (e.g., community, labor, organization). Yesterday’s news told of the army testing holograms for battlefield use and Islamic clerics trying to determine which sex a transsexual was, and when, for inheritance purposes. The conflicting discourses of AIDS render Parson’s sick-role theory nostalgic: ill people are distinctly blamed, the management of long-term illness requires increased responsibilities, and medical treatment must be strategically negotiated for. Society maintains patterns—people go to war, inherit property, and get sick—but when latency is not what it used to be, neither can theory be. Where’s the vocation? My own greatest satisfaction is helping students to question the person whom the social world has convinced them they are supposed to be. As soon as this task is undertaken, theory rushes back in, from Goffman’s face work through Dorothy Smith’s textually mediated reality. The point may be to change the world, but first we need descriptions that are increasingly hard to come by—today’s commodity form is even more mystical than Marx imagined—and we need a sense of how these descriptions implicate us, because today’s sense of self is also more mystical. The vocation of teaching theory sounds so simple: to convince students of their enormous personal stake in describing a world that is so brutally hard to take seriously.

Listen, But Don’t Touch
by Charles Lemert

For many years I enjoyed the services of a psychoanalyst who, in her youth, had been the research assistant of C. Wright Mills. Just how her experience in the service of a sociological master might have influenced her clinical practice is far from clear, but I did trust her to run the therapy group to which I once belonged. At her instruction the group had simple, but firm, rules:

#1, Come to every session. #2, Pay the fee. #3, Talk at least once every session. #4, Listen to others. #5, Don’t touch another member for any reason.

These are not bad rules for social theorists to adopt in consideration of their collective enterprise. The first two rules -- #1, attend; #2, pay up -- are the ones that bring a social group into being. Without them, there would be no secure occasion in which to obey #3, talk, or otherwise engage the active expressions by which belonging assumes social value. In the case of sociological social theory, it is our talk that everyone comments upon, without recognizing that none of what is said, by voice or text, would come into public being were we not to attend to the world of events and texts by which they are known -- which attendance extracts a regular fee in the coin of the domain: hard work.

But, most especially I would recommend the last two rules to my fellow social theorists: #4, listen; and #5, don’t touch. In the therapy group of my analogy, it was listening, and listening above all else, that allowed this little society to do its healing work. The talking cure is impossible if no one listens. The expression of ideas, no less than of feelings, cannot bind people to each other if there is no listening. Rule #5, however, is nearly as important because it is the one meant to control the impulses. The impulse to touch another may incline toward erotic or aggressive purposes which, while good in many ways, can also destroy the integrity of the more delicate social arrangements. Social theory, when practiced in the wider society of professional sociology, is just such a delicate
community. Its practitioners are beset on every side by complaints, many of which are directed at the very idea of theoretical work. To some or another party of our little community, abstract, general, contemplative, exegetical may, as Levine suggests, inspire a clarifying sense of vocation. But, each of these is a camp fire around which a smaller camp of theorists huddles, seeking heat, if not always light, against the gathering horde of despisers who share Joe Gusfield's low opinion of our work -- "bad idea" and "not useful."

As much as I admire the pastoral intentions and sensible contents of Professor Levine's "Social Theory As a Vocation," I am disappointed that it is still too much like things I and others have said or tried to do. Levine's essay is good theoretical talk insufficiently grounded in listening; that is, in letting whatever others say be what it is without trying to talk the talkers out of their point of view. Some hate us; some like us. Some who like us okay as a group, hate us as individuals. That's the way life is. Listening is accepting this fact of life.

But also, Levine's essay touches too much; that is, it enters the aggressive fray by acting on the impulse to defend the activity, or otherwise to show the correct way. "Vocation," we sometimes forget, is a calling that must be discerned. How will we hear it amid the aggressive chatter? I am not myself sure that social theory has, or ought to have, a calling in this high sense. But, even if the vocation of social theory is of a more mundane kind, it will never come into its own if we do nothing but talk our traditional talk.

We are the characterological talkers of the discipline. While colleagues spend hot summers in dirty archives, or lonely nights observing this or that social scene, or sleepy afternoons pondering print-outs before they even think of writing, we are ready to hold forth at a moment's notice -- delayed at most by some variant translation or obscure reference. The very ease with which a theorist can give voice to facts hard-won by others is, surely, one of the reasons so many of them hate us. We are despised because, when we do our theory, we are indeed borrowers and brokers. It is modest labor, too often puffed up.

But someone has to do it. The question I ask is, How might we do it in ways that give those from whom we borrow the feeling that we hear and respect their talk? Here, in support of rule #4, I invoke rule #5: Control the impulse to touch; that is, to reach out too graspingly to the evidences others offer. The line between the erotic wish to possess another's charms and the aggressive need to destroy them is fine indeed. And, social theory, as it is often practiced in professional sociology, too frequently intrudes in order to appropriate, hence to destroy, the facts we tuck so furtively behind our abstractions, generalizations, contemplations, and exegeses. It is not that sociological theory is ignorant of the facts but that it is so voracious a consumer, and so seldom a producer, of them.

But the aggression of which I speak is not simply toward our more empirically serious despisers. At several points in his essay Don Levine speaks of our work as a "theorizing of new areas" -- an activity that is too close for comfort to colonizing new territories. Professor Levine uses the expression innocently I am sure. Yet, the aggressions it implies reappear, ever so subtly, in his "Agenda for Theory Work in sociology.

I love his notion of custodial work. We are indeed the janitors of the field, sweeping up the scraps and crumbs left by others. But the remaining two-thirds of Levine's agenda falls under the grand ideal of heuristic work. Strictly, heuristics is the logic of discovery. Here the custodian is undressed, for it is here that he speaks in the proud tongue of a world-builder, if not a colonizer; conceptual articulation, construction of frameworks, model-building, redirecting scholarship, theorizing new areas, ethical synthesis, social diagnosis, and the like. The language of world-building, while seemingly benign, betrays too much a naked ambition Levine seeks to cover in his concluding coda -- that we are merely one among many specialties of the field. If we are to be one among many, then we must not aim to be the conceptual movers and shakers of the whole.

Hence, again, rule #4. If there is a vocational ought for theory it is that we ought to be custodians through and through. We clean up after hours, looking for and listening to the secrets left behind by those too busy with other work. Though humble, this is ennobling work. It allows social theorists to give a fine gift to professional sociology as a whole which too often fails to listen to the secret talk of those who inconvenience its scientific search for central tendencies. If there is a distinctive vocation for the theorist in our field it is surely not to organize the world, or each other, into conceptual frameworks that cannot help but overlook the
unheard whose deviations are anything but acceptably standard. This is what we should do first and foremost. Yet, if it were not for the likes of Dorothy Smith, Steven Seidman, Patricia Hill Collins, William Julius Wilson, Craig Calhoun, Chrys Ingrahm, Norman Denzin, and a growing number of others willing to let themselves be known as theorists, there would be less of this kind of listening work than there is.

Not long ago (perhaps still) there was factual evidence that the Theory Section was measurably the most male of all the sections in the field (more than 90%, the last time I saw the count), just as it seems to be among the more unblinkingly white and quietly heterosexual. Though being white and straightly male does not require us to be colonizers of new areas, this apparent fact of our collective nature is surely not indifferent to the audible form of our theoretical talk.

It would sadden me, if what I have here said is taken as a rebuke of Don Levine. He has said nothing I and others have not also said. He, in fact, has done us a fine service by opening up the subject to discussion, thus to invite the possibility that we might find a more attentive, if modest, custodial attitude.

Through the fallacy of misplaced concreteness an analytical model, which is appropriate in the context of science, turns out to become a dangerous ideology in the context of public debate. Here the broader understanding of social theory, which is still alive in sociology, is called for to establish a forceful movement against the domination of public discourse and policy programs by one-sided economic thinking.

An example is the wave of deregulation which is justified by harder competition resulting from globalization and by the economic gains expected from its advancement and which itself supports the globalization process. In doing so, societies are transformed to correspond much more to the ideas of economic liberalism than before. What is completely ignored in this perspective is the change of social integration and the change of the conditions for democracy which result from this transformation. Democracy moves much more away from a republican form and more toward a liberal form than ever before. Let me outline this argument shortly in order to give an example of what a broader understanding of social theory would tell us about the contemporary wave of deregulation.

The question is, in which direction social integration and democracy are changing as a result of the democratic welfare state’s sovereignty loss coming about with deregulation in the process of globalization. Is there a chance for democracy beyond the nation state on the level of supranational associations like the European Union and even on the level of a world society? We hope for that

Reminder—
The 92nd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association will be held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada from August 9-13, 1997. The theme of this year’s conference is “Bridges for Sociology: International and Interdisciplinary.”

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Linking the Classical Heritage to Contemporary Challenges in Social Theory: Comments on Donald N. Levine: Social Theory as a Vocation by Richard Münch

Donald Levine’s paper on “Social Theory as a Vocation” gives a really valuable account of the field of social theory in all its numerous differentiations. And it is the right time to remind us of the worth of theory work not only for the advancement of sociology, but also for a broader public in order to understand the situation in which we live. Unfortunately, the public definition of the situation is very much under the influence of economistic thinking, as Levine mentions in his final remarks (p. 10). This line of thought accounts only for a small aspect of what is covered by a broader understanding of social theory. This is the result of an intellectual development that put the positivistic sciences in a dominant position in determining public opinion and policy programs. Because economic theory has achieved much more than sociology to become a science in the positivistic sense, it has outranked sociology in its influence on the public definition of the situation.

However, because social life is much more complex than acknowledged by economic models, the tendency to take such models for the real world implies that public opinion and policy programs are governed by false assumptions.
without being sure about the feasibility of such a program. If we take a republican view of democracy we might be skeptical about this. According to this view democracy means the sovereignty of citizens to decide together on how to live on a common territory, thereby distinguishing the general will from the sum of particular interests. The consolidated nation states have succeeded in this respect, because of the establishment of the nation as a community of citizens who share a common territory on which they organize their common life. Being committed to a commonly shared space the citizens are bound together in an elementary solidarity which reaches beyond the boundaries of particular groups. In as much as the global division of labor proceeds, the nation states are losing their sovereignty of deciding on the organization of life on their territory.

The contemporary competition for investors with programs for lowering tax rates gives an example of how the nation states are losing sovereignty. And it is unlikely that the European Union will be able to re-establish that sovereignty. The result is a tremendous shift from the political to the economic organization of life. This means that the individual will gain space for individual self-determination. However, this will only be possible in terms of maximizing individual interests, which corresponds to the emergence of a global world of total consumption. In this way the individual gains freedom for following his/her self-interest. However, he/she is increasingly losing the political freedom of deciding on how he/she wants to live at all, which can only be done by common reflection and decision.

Solidarity bound to a commonly shared space will be replaced by the conflict between the global solidarity of the modernizing elites and the particularistic group solidarity of those who cannot keep up to the tougher competition on the global labor market. The consolidated nation states have succeeded in resolving this conflict through social integration. Because the necessary precondision of a commonly shared space is difficult to be established on both a European and a global level, we cannot see how this gap can be closed beyond the nation states in the foreseeable future.

If this analysis is correct, the regimes on both the European and global level will not be like the democratic nation state but much more like an empire of loosely connected and rapidly changing networks bound together by nothing but individual contracts under the formal rule which supervises the fair negotiation of contracts. The competitive character of such a system of contracts spreads also over to the political field which is nothing but a battleground for interests, put forward by a more and more sophisticated professional lobbying.

Politics proceeds in an endless process of little decisions determined by situationally changing constellations of power. In this process, politics loses any ability of distinguishing common interests in organizing a common life from the unlimited pursuit of particular interests.

In terms of liberalism this is living liberty within a political framework which does nothing but provide the battleground for a peaceful competition between interests. In terms of republicanism it is the end of democracy, because the sum of maximized interests is not identical with a good life according to common interests. In such a society the negative external effects of the maximization of individual interests maximize also, and they turn individual self-determination into the total loss of control on one's life, because it is affected by an uncountable number of decisions made by individuals without a chance of controlling their effects on each other. The future of democracy will depend on our ability to preserve at least elements of common decision making power in the face of the adversary effects exerted by the shift of power from the local and national levels to the European and global levels. The nation state will no longer be the center of decision-making, but it will be the representational mediator between global cooperation, supranational coordination and local determination of action. In such a system there will be more space for republican democracy on the local level, because of the diminishing power of the nation state.

However, the negative effects of competition will need control and compensation through national policies which have to be coordinated on the supranational level and put into cooperation on the global level.

As we can see, there is a lot of theory work in the broader sense demanded by the fundamental social transformations in our time, particularly in order to overcome the much too narrow perspective of the economistic thinking dominating public debates and policy programs. The revitalization of a broader understanding of social theory
would therefore be of greatest importance not only for sociology but also for the development of our societies. The vocation of social theory can particularly be to maintain the linkage between the richness of classical thought in social science and contemporary as well as future challenges to understand the social world. In Levine’s terms it is the linkage between the custodial and heuristic functions which is particularly important. And it is the peculiar task of sociology to work on this linkage, because this linkage has been broken by the economic thinking of our time.

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Our special thanks to all who contributed to this forum. Any responses can be directed to the editors.

New Section-in-Formation: Sociology of Sexualities

In response to a growing literature in the field of sexuality, a new section in formation has been formed. This new research addresses broad theoretical topics such as the formation and nature of identities, the intersection of bodies and social institutions, the relation between the private and public sphere, and the interconnection of sexuality with gender, class, and racial forms of social stratification. Please consider supporting this section in formation when you register for the ASA in 1997.

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The European Journal of Social Theory is a new sociology journal being launched in 1998 to provide a world-wide forum for contemporary social thought. The journal will bring together social theorists and theoretically-minded social scientists with the objective of making social theory relevant to the challenges facing the social sciences in the 21st century. If you are interested in submitting an article, contact:

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