

# Perspectives

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## SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: LOOKING FORWARD

Neil J. Smelser  
University of California, Berkeley

Prefacing his request with a mention of widespread reports he has heard that sociological theory is now in a state of some kind of stagnation, the editor of *Perspectives* has asked me to pen a kind of op-ed on the subject. And while realizing that my own observations might themselves be different from others', I decided to try my hand.

My starting point is to note a certain cyclical effect in the history of theorizing in sociology. The past century seems to have been characterized by the following kind of sequence: a period of relative (I underscore that word) dominance of, consolidation of, and consensus about a certain theoretical-methodological perspective; followed by a period of critical attack on that perspective and a flaking away of consensus; followed by a period of theoretical searching, which involves the revitalization of past perspectives and the invention of new ones; followed, finally, by a period of new synthesis and relative (again underscored) domination. I would illustrate this cyclical process by pointing to the periods of relative dominance of the classical evolutionary perspectives in the late nineteenth century, the positivistic and quantitative stress in the first third of the twentieth century, and the structural-functional stress of the 1940s and 1950s, each of which suffered its own slings and arrows of criticism, and each of which gave way to a period of theoretical criticism and ferment, if not disarray.

I would venture to say that we are now in the late stages of searching, and possibly on the eve of some new kind of theoretical synthesis. The period of relative dominance of the structural-functional perspective gave way in the 1960s and 1970s to a flurry of criticism and theoretical ferment. Among the main challenges to that perspective were a resurgence of neo-Marxist formulations, a renaissance of neo-Weberianism, a new vitalization of critical theory, and what might be called the 'microscopic revolution,' facets of which were to be seen in the reappearance of several variants of

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symbolic interaction, labeling theory, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology generally. All these developments, and more, gave the impression of disarray, prompted commentators to proclaim that the field of sociology was truly a pluralist, multi-paradigmatic one, to be contrasted (falsely, I believe) with fields like economics and psychology which were believed to be more nearly unified theoretically, and led textbook writers to organize their representations around the notion of 'competing perspectives.'

It seems to me that this phase now appears to be running its course, and that new signs of synthesis are appearing or are on the horizon. Every one of the revitalizations of the 1960s and 1970s has experienced its days of polemic heat and pioneering enthusiasm, and representative advocates of each have written of the internal crises in their own approaches to sociology, and of their growing dissatisfactions with them. Among those who have tried their hands at new syntheses, I would note that the most visible efforts have been made by European scholars. Among these are the works of Alain Touraine in France, whose labors have involved a continued preoccupation with Marxist principles but with a new process perspective on social change; Anthony Giddens in England, who struggles to unite some kind of structural sociology with a sociology of purposeful agency; and Jürgen Habermas in Germany, whose work admirers hail as a creative synthesis of Marxian, structural-functional, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, and critical strands, and whose detractors describe as the efforts of a theorist in a dark woolen suit attracting all the lint that is around. The theoretical efforts at synthesis on this side of the Atlantic (notably by Randall Collins and Jeffrey Alexander) should also be registered.

Above and beyond these signs of synthesis to be found in the writings of individual theorists, I would like to cite a number of collective efforts as well, manifested mainly in a series of recent and continuing conferences sponsored jointly by the Theory Sections of the American Sociological Association and the German Sociological Association. These conferences each have drawn mainly leading sociological theorists from the two sponsoring countries, as well as a handful of scholars, largely from other European countries. Their themes have been the following:

1. The theoretical and empirical relations between the microscopic and the macroscopic modes of analysis in sociology. Papers submitted to this conference held in the summer of 1984 in Giessen, West Germany--concerned the promises and failings of models of rational choice, the modes of supplementing relations among institutional relations by invoking process models, as well as past and present efforts to establish relations between the two analytic levels. The tone throughout the conference was consistently non-polemic and constructive.
2. Theories of modernization and social change. This conference (Berkeley, 1986), too, was marked by a number of integrative themes: neo evolutionary efforts to fathom the dynamics not only of the Western past but also in post-modern phases; neo-functional emphases (especially the emphasis on functional differentiation and adaptation); revisions of Marxist interpretations (especially in the literature on new social movements); and efforts to strike some sort of theoretical balance between endogenous and exogenous factors in the genesis of social change.
3. Theory of culture. This conference is to be held in Bremen, WEST GERMANY, in the summer of 1988. It is already apparent that the contributors will be struggling to accommodate, assimilate, and strive for synthesis among inherited anthropological and sociological perspectives on the one hand and the innovative theoretical trends sparked by the formulations stimulated by Clifford Geertz, George Lukacs, Pierre Bourdieu, and the contemporary theorists of mass and popular culture on the other.

Such are a number of synthetic themes, selected by contemporary theoretical leaders in Western Europe and the United States. I mention two more strands of thinking that point in the same integrative direction. The first is an effort to assess and place in systematic relation with one another the various methods of empirical inquiry in sociology and the other social sciences--experimental, statistical, survey, historical-comparative, and ethnographic--with an eye to identifying the kinds of substantive problems to which each is best tailored and to stressing the necessity of employing a combination of such methods in social-scientific research. I dare say that the fourth German-American conference, if it is held, might well be on this topic.

The second direction is the increasing emphasis in the social sciences on research that is topical or problem-related in character, and reaches across disciplinary boundaries. The kinds of topics I have in mind are the dynamics of individual decision-making under conditions of risk; processes of collective decision-making;

biological, psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural factors in the study of health and illness; institutional change; demographic behavior, and a host of others. The recently-released report of the Committee on Basic Research in the Behavioral and Social Sciences (National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences) was organized almost entirely along topical lines of an inter- or multi-disciplinary sort. Such topics, while not all cast as involving a stress on theoretical synthesis, nonetheless point in that direction because they involve the invocation of a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives.

By now it is clear to my readers that I, while recognizing that our field is subject to great vicissitudes in its theoretical development, do not place myself in the ranks of the "stagnation" school of thought in interpreting its present state. I believe the trend toward internal specialization of the field may never again permit the kind of grand theoretical overviews that have been possible in the past century, but that we may expect a season of stress on synthetic theoretical thinking in the coming decade or two.

#### Special Award Announcement

The Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior is pleased to announce that the winner of its 1987 Theory Prize is Michael L. Schwalbe for his article "Head among the Cognitivists." The prize is awarded annually to the paper which best reflects the theoretical objectives of the Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, submitted by a person who has received his or her doctorate within the last five years. The prize carries with it an honorarium of 250 pounds sterling. Because of the number of high quality papers submitted, the committee elected to make two honorable mention awards for 1987 to John Barresi for "Prospects for the Cyberiad" and Richard Montgomery for "Psychologists, Folk Psychology and One's Own Case." Each comes with an honorarium of 50 pounds sterling.

#### Theory Section News

##### Election Results Gisela J. Hinkle (Ohio State)

We congratulate the winners: George Ritzer as Chair-Elect; and David Sciulli and Alan Sica as the new Council Members. Likewise, we thank all the other candidates and everyone who participated in the election. The closeness of the votes reflects the quality of the candidates and the respect every one of them has in the eyes of the membership. We look forward to seeing you in Atlanta in August.

Chair-Elect:	110 George Ritzer	Council Members:	88 Eugene Rochberg-Halton
	105 Stephen Turner		95 David Sciulli
			130 Alan Sica
			85 David Wagner

##### Section Bylaws to be Changed

The business meeting of the Theory Section will be held at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 27. This will be a particularly important meeting, because changes in the bylaws will be voted on. All section members are urged to attend. Anyone wanting to examine the text of proposed changes prior to the ASA convention can contact Chair-Elect Charles Lemert, Department of Sociology, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut 06457.

##### Membership Committee

Ruth Wallace, Theory Section Chair, is looking for energetic people to serve on the Committee on Membership and Circulation. This committee is charged with increasing Theory Section membership as well as journal subscriptions to Sociological Theory. WE NEED VOLUNTEERS! Please contact Ruth Wallace (Department of Sociology, George Washington University, Washington D.C. 20052) now, before the ASA meetings. Ruth wants to have a full committee in place when we meet in Atlanta!

##### Reception

The Social Theory Section will have a reception at 6:30 p.m., Saturday, August 27. We will honor the winner of the Theory Prize. In addition, a number of foreign scholars have been extended special invitations and this will provide a good opportunity to further develop our international ties.

## Social Theory and the Individual

Theory Section activities will begin 8:30 a.m. with Stephen Turner's session on Social Theory and the Individual. Stephen Turner will be presiding. Victor Lidz will serve as discussant. The papers to be presented are: Eugene Rochberg-Halton, University of Notre Dame, "Life, Meaning, and Contemporary Social Theory"  
David Ashley, University of Wyoming, "Postmodernism and the End of the Individual: From Repressive Self-Mastery to Ecstatic Communication"  
Braulio Munoz, Swarthmore College, "Enlightenment and Suspicion"  
Keith Boubt, Eastern Oregon State College, "Autonomy and Responsibility in Social Theory"

### Mini-Conference

The mini-conference this year is on the timely subject of feminist theory. Papers will be presented in two panels, one at 10:30 a.m. and the other at 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 27.

10:30 Session, Organized and Presided by Ruth Wallace

Dorothy Smith, University of Toronto, "Sociological Theory as Methods of Writing Patriarchy into Feminist Text"  
Joan Acker, University of Oregon, "What Happened to Paradigm Change? Making Gender Visible"  
Edith Kurzweil, Rutgers University, "Implications for Sociological Theory of Psychoanalytic Feminism"  
Norbert Wiley and Christine Chambers, University of Illinois, "Self and Gender in Lacan"

4:30 Session, Organized by Ruth Wallace and Presided by Janet Chafetz

Rae Lesser Blumberg, University of California at San Diego, "From the African Food Crisis to the Israeli Kibbutz: Toward a Feminist Theory of Development"  
Miriam Johnson, University of Oregon, "Feminism and the Theories of Talcott Parsons"  
Thomas Meisenhelder, California State University at San Bernardino, "Habermas and Feminism: The Future of Critical Theory"  
Rose Coe, Boston College, "Feminist Theory or Theory of Feminism?"

### Roundtables

This year there will be fifteen refereed roundtables during the roundtable period organized by Miriam Johnson:

1. Getting Theory Papers Published: An exchange opinions about the "dos and don'ts of submitting theory papers as well as an overview from the editor's chair of trends in theory work. (John Wilson, Charles Smith, Charles Lemert, and Norbert Wiley)
2. The Division of Labor: Further Implications (David R. Meyer; Jean Stockard and Maralee Mayberry)
3. Feminist Reconceptualizations (Celene Krauss and Louise Levesque Lopman)
4. The New Utilitarianism (Frank J. Lechner and Eric Hans Rambo)
5. Network Analysis: Theoretical Reconstruction with Practical Intent (Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin)
6. Means, Goals and Anomie in Durkheim (Marco Orru and Stjepan G. Mestrovic)
7. Time, Space, and Scale (Jiri Kolaja and Alvin Boskoff)
8. The Micro-Macro Link (Kenneth D. Bailey and Ino Rossi)
9. The Evolutionary Theories of Marx and Engels (Stephen Sanderson)
10. Toward a Theory of Status and Sacral Relationships (Murray Milner)
11. A Critique of Wilson's "Morality in the Evolution of the Modern Social System" (Joseph B. Tanney)
12. The Weakening of Tensions: Parsons on the Individual and Society (Gerald Turkel)
13. Mediations Between Sociology and its Context in the Career of Robert Park: A Study in Bourdieu's Sociology of Science (Daniel Breslau)
14. Constructing a Theory of the Family: From Malinowski Through the Modern Nuclear Family to Production and Reproduction (L. L. Cornell),
15. Freud, Weber, and Nazism: Crisis of Masculinity and Modernity (Roslyn Wallach Bologh)

### Upcoming Events

#### Modernity: The City, The Street

Scott Lash is co-organizing an international conference with probable television coverage on "Modernity: The City, The Street." This will be in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, October 1-2, 1988. Speakers will include David Harvey, Richard Sennett, Stephen Marcus, Marshall Berman, Martin Jay, and Sharon Zukin. For information contact Scott Lash, Dept of Soc, Univ of Lancaster, Lancaster LA14YL, UNITED KINGDOM, or the Institute.

## Conference News

### Mayland Conference: Sociological Theory: Current Status and Near-Term Prospects George Ritzer (Maryland)

A conference on "Sociological Theory: Current Status and Near-Term Prospects" took place at the University of Maryland on March 11th, 1988. Maximum attendance at any given time during the day was about 400 people, but since many people came for only one or two presentations, it is estimated that well over 500 people attended at least part of the conference. The conference was funded largely by the Graduate School, the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, and the Sociology Department at the University of Maryland. In addition, support came from a Problems of the Discipline Grant from the American Sociological Association. Because of this generous support, no fee was charged to those attending the conference. Major participants included: Jeffrey Alexander, UCLA (Neofunctionalism); Robert Antonio, Kansas (Neo-Marxian Theory); Ronald Burt, Columbia (Network Theory); Norbert Wiley, Illinois (General Theory); Patricia Lengermann, George Washington University, and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, Northern Virginia Comm College (Feminist Theory); Gary A. Fine, Minnesota (Symbolic Interactionism); Charles Lemert, Wesleyan (Structuralism); Karen Cook, Washington at Seattle (Exchange Theory); Jonathan Turner, UC Riverside (General Theory); George Ritzer, Maryland (Contemporary Theory); Ruth Wallace, George Washington (Theory Textbooks); Jere Cohen, UMBC (Conflict Theory); Ron Glassman, William Paterson College (Weberian Theory); Jerry Hage, Maryland (Theory Construction); Joe Scimecca, George Mason (Humanist Theory); James Farganis, Vassar (Theory in Introductory Sociology); Dave Walczak, Union (Teaching Theory in a Small College); Farid Atlas, Johns Hopkins (Theory in the Third World)

A volume based on the major presentations at the conference is planned with George Ritzer serving as editor. In addition to the papers provided by the major presenters, a few other papers have been solicited including Deirdre Boden on ethnomethodology, Randall Collins on conflict theory, and Debra Friedman and Michael Hechter on rational choice theory. The volume, like the conference, will deal with the current status and the short-term prospects of sociological theory.

### Midwest Meetings

The 52nd annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society was held at the Marriott Hotel in Minneapolis, March 23-26, 1988. Gisela Hinkle reports that the meetings were very good, very well attended, and provided a good occasion for theory people to meet for lively and fruitful exchange. There were an unusually large number of theory sessions this year, particularly in the area of symbolic interactionism. Participants in the various theory sessions included: Joan Allen, Howard Becker, Colleen Bell, Deirdre Boden, Dean Bowman, Kathleen Brady, Allison Carter, Susan Chase, Patricia Clough, Ira Cohen, Kenneth Colburn, Gary Cook, Carl Couch, David Diekema, Charles Elkins, Clifford English, Rose English, Gary Alan Fine, Harold Finestone, Michael Flaherty, Yael Gluck, Gilbert Goffstein, Robert Habenstein, James Holstein, Elzbieta Kalas, Peter Hall, Gisela Hinkle, Roscoe Hinkle, Michael Katovich, Peter Kivisto, J. David Knottnerus, Doyle McCarthy, James McKee, Scott McCall, Dennis Maines, Valerie Malhotra, Gale Miller, Mary Moore, Gil Nusolf, Mary Jo Weitz, Thomas O'Connor, Harold Orbach, R. S. Perinbanayanan, Chris Prendergast, William Reese, Peter Remender, Eugene Rochberg-Halton, Stanley Saxton, James Schellenberg, Raymond Schmitt, Michael Schwalbe, Dmitri Shalin, Jerry Stark, Elizabeth Sughrue, John Thornmeyer, R. Stephen Warner, Diana Warshay, Leon Warshay, Andrew Weigart, and T. R. Young.

### Western Anthropology/Sociology Undergraduate Research Conference

Kathleen Dunleavy  
New School for Social Research

Sharon Sheehan  
Northwestern University

The XV Annual Western Anthropology/Sociology Undergraduate Research Conference was held at Santa Clara University on April 16, 1988. Fourteen different schools from California and Washington were represented. Students presented papers in the areas of social problems, applied anthropology, demography, ethnography, social movements, and social psychology. Although the presentations did examine a number of different sociological areas and were really quite interesting and informative, most lacked some of the essential components of scientific

sociological study. The students described their data collection strategies and presented their findings but tended to omit a discussion of the relevant literature and theory. In some cases data analysis was limited to examination of frequencies and crosstabulations.

The papers presented tended to be topically interesting but theoretically shallow. Weaknesses in the undergraduate presentations underscore the need for a more rigorous training in theory and methodology. If the necessity of a close relationship between research methods and the formulation of theory is difficult for students to grasp, it is incumbent upon professors teaching undergraduate sociology to develop appropriate strategies for integrating theory with research. Undergraduates need to develop a working knowledge of the scientific methods of sociology (including a full appreciation of the role of theory) in the classroom if they are to apply those methods in their own work.

Many sociology professors also attended the conference giving students the opportunity to discuss sociological issues in a professional setting. And students saw some of the methods of sociology at work in the keynote presentation by Dr. Rodney Stark. Stark, a guest speaker from the University of Washington, spoke on "Durkheim's Suicide: An Intercontinental Inquest". His presentation, using a computer system with exceptional graphics (available from Cognitive Development, Inc., of Seattle, Washington), offered the audience a catapulting vision into the future of the social sciences. The computer screen made the audience feel like active participants in the theory testing process. Stark interpreted the suicide rates from different countries in a test of Durkheim's theoretical framework, all with relative ease; showing the audience the possibilities that lie ahead with the full incorporation of computer graphics into sociological teaching and research. Stark's presentation was masterful. He captivated his entire audience.

#### North Central Meetings

Meetings of the North Central Sociological Association were held in Pittsburgh, April 14-17. John Leggett, Alfred McClug Lee, Elizabeth Bryant Lee, David Maines, Norman Denzin, and Gary Jo Deegan participated in a special session in appreciation of Herbert Blumer. Participants in other theory sessions included: Barbara Renchovsky Ashley, David Ashley, David Boyer, Barbara Bradfield, Thaddeus Coreno, Jeffrey Crane, Ann Davis, Kenneth Eslinger, Thomas Fararo, James Geschwender, Barry Johnston, Thomas Korllos, John Leggett, Jan Meyer, Ruth Miller, Arthur Neal, S. Lee Spray, Jerry Stark, John Thormeyer, Dianna Warshay, Leon Warshay, and Morton Wenger.

#### Call for Papers

Research in Community Sociology, a new serial publication, (JAI Press, Greenwich, CT) invites manuscripts dealing with theoretical and empirical studies on community structure/change, problems, policy-planning and related issues. Cross-cultural, comparative, interdisciplinary and critical studies are welcome. Deadline for submission of manuscripts for Volume I is November 30, 1988. Authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts on IBM Compatible disks using the ASCII system. Send three copies of papers (25-75 pages double spaced) in ASA Format to the series editor: Dan A. Chakki, Professor of Sociology, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg R3B 2E9, CANADA

#### Book Announcements (Notify Perspectives of new publications)

Faud Baali, Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought, SUNY Press.  
Karen Cook (Editor), Social Exchange Theory, Sage, 1987.  
Charles Crothers, Robert K. Merton, New York: Routledge, 1988.  
Michael Pusey, Jürgen Habermas, New York: Routledge, 1988.  
Scott Lash and John Urry, The End of Organized Capitalism, University of Wisconsin Press (Polity Press, Cambridge, in the U.K.), 1987.  
Jonathan Turner, A Theory of Social Interaction, Stanford University Press, 1988.  
Sam Whimster and Scott Lash (Editors), Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity, Allen Unwin, 1987.