

Perspectives

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SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIZING: DIAGNOSIS AND TENTATIVE PRESCRIPTION

Alvin Boskoff
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I am alternately gratified and disquieted by the recent deluge of works, discussions, and programs that use "theory" in their titles and analyses. "Theory" has again achieved "status"--belatedly, I think. But most of these works do not deal with theory in any distinctive fashion. Instead, they tend to focus on either conceptualization, classification schemes, models or frameworks, or on bootleg methodological concerns (e. g. macro-micro distinctions, proper source of data or experience, policy implications). Even "theory texts" devote more space to biographical, social, and intellectual backgrounds and questionably accurate pigeonholes for given theorists, than to reasonably clear theoretical statements. Of course, it is also true that we sociologists differ considerably in our conceptions of the theoretical enterprise and thus in identifying its products.

In my opinion, our main difficulty lies in problem formulation, since I hold that theories must be devised and evaluated as answers to well-defined but reasonably generalized intellectual questions about social organization and social behavior. Thus, there can be no "theory" about society or human nature or power or social change until these concepts are converted into reasonably definable questions about the emergence, maintenance, or alteration of some sub-process, component, or phase of the aforementioned "sensitizing" terms. Problem formulation is the soft underbelly of sociology; it is rarely taught to either undergraduate or graduate students, in part because it is taken for granted or ignored, or assumed to be the province of courses in research methodology or statistics. Admittedly, it is an art, but art too has its structures and rationales.

The current sources of theoretical problems in sociology include social experience (of both sociologists and those they study), past theoretical statements and relevant conceptual schemes, models, frameworks.

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All three sources can be helpful, but they can also be intellectual diversions (in both senses) or implicitly a priori justifications for personal/ideological stances.

There is no guaranteed means of protection against these variably evaluated seductions. But I am convinced that there are responsible ways of identifying intelligible and widely useful sets of basic theoretical concerns--for sociologists who are interested in theories as necessary but fallible explanatory devices. Fundamentally, we begin by intellectually enmeshing ourselves in actual social phenomena (current or past), within some defined setting (group, community, nation) for some span of time (chronological and sociocultural). This is necessary because social phenomena reflect (a) interchanges of direct and indirect influence on perceptions, conceptions, and actions and (b) the direct and indirect influences of relevant environments (physical and sociocultural). Immersion is, of course, accompanied by some notion of patterning and regularity. However if our immersion is reasonably comprehensive, we can locate (a) recurring effects or products and (b) variably repeated (and probably predictable) uncertainties, problems, critical points, strains, etc. Thus, we have an empirically derived but conceptually simplified reservoir of questions or problems--one that does not obey the dictates of any social/philosophical position, esoteric metatheory, or moral/political ideology. The only "value" required for this immersion is the fundamental concern for understanding and explaining the varied consequences of interaction and social influence on the lives of persons and categories in some referential social context (stratum, complex organization, community, etc.)

How do we responsibly "reduce" this reservoir to "discover" generic issues? A precise methodology for this has long been wanting, and I strongly suspect that any "solution" will be peppered with critical objections. Nevertheless, I shall go out on a short but sturdy limb. In mulling over the empirical reservoir, we must obviously pay attention to the needs, perceptions, difficulties and opportunities, and peculiarities of individuals in different social locations (age, gender, marital status, stratum, etc.). However, this sociologically valuable source has distinct limitations--not because of its subjective aspect, but because it is typically parochial and partial, and tends to focus on personally meaningful but sociologically restricted time periods. A snail's eye view of social phenomena is better for snails than for sociologists.

With the supplementary use of perspective/distance, we can encompass (and construct) a larger and more complex picture of patterns in social phenomena. Specifically, we can distil issues that stem from (a) unintended and multiple consequences of actions and policies; (b) identifying a multiplicity of factors and alternatives that may be ignored or devalued by persons; (c) our ability to recognize indirect or subtle linkages between social categories and the implicit but potent impact of past arrangements and values on the experience and options of focal persons; and (d) the opportunity to compare experiences in one setting with those in similar or contrasting situations, organizations or social levels (of complexity or rank).

This conceptually manipulated empirical immersion reflects the alternately hesitant and bold application of a qualitative "factor analysis," in which the factors are basic or generic theoretical problems, and the numerous but finite practical patterns of influence (direct and indirect) represent the factor loadings (without the precision of coefficients). Here is where art, judgment, scholarship, and audacity play inevitable parts. Thus, from the dual standpoint of persons and social organizations, I offer the following set of recurring problems for sociological explanation:

1. "New" socially structured experience for limited populations.
 - (a) Processes of recruitment of "new" members (or replacements) to existing social systems (firms, schools, agencies, clubs, etc.).
 - (b) Formation of "new" and/or "reproduced" groups or organizations (family units, experimental schools, social movements, religious or therapeutic cults, commercial ventures).
2. Origins and conditions of the character (degree and substantive content) of differentiation and specialization of skills and activities among the members of organizations.

3. Socialization.

- (a) Processes by which persons learn the skills, values, and level of commitment relevant to membership in given organizations.
- (b) Processes by which persons replace or supplement previous socialization with alternative skills, values, and commitments.
- (c) Factors that obstruct or delay the phenomena in (a) and (b).

4. Stratification.

- (a) Production, maintenance, adaptation to, and change in patterns of social inequalities.
- (b) Opportunities, limitations, and derivative effects of vertical mobility (for persons and social categories).

5. Coordination/Regulation.

- (a) Perception and resolution of relevant interpersonal and intraorganizational conflicts.
- (b) Coordination of diverse but potentially reinforcing skills, information sources, etc.
- (c) Allocation and re-allocation of scarce (or newly altered) resources to members.
- (d) Treatment and management of legitimately defined deviant actions and deviant persons.
- (e) Maintenance or change in the process and criteria by which succession to leadership is determined.
- (f) Processes of organizational adaptation to actual or perceived external pressures, through decisions about continuity or innovation (borrowed or sponsored).

6. Sociocultural Deviation.

- (a) Motivation and production of variant perceptions, skills, values and behavior in given social systems.
- (b) Processes by which shared distinctions are made between approved, tolerated, and disapproved variations, and by which given variations are differentially evaluated over time.

7. Social Change. For higher levels of organization, processes by which there develop major alterations in social complexity, forms of social inequalities, and the structure and dynamics of coordinative patterns.

This basic theoretical agenda can certainly be more detailed (with additional sub-categories) and perhaps other basic theoretical areas merit inclusion. But this approach provides wide but nevertheless crucial "base areas" for diverse sociological analyses and explanations. It also offers an intellectual basis for evaluating the inevitable explorations (current and future) in problem-formulation by suggesting valid (and perhaps cumulative) connections between novelties and established formulations. Clearly, many of the researches and discussions in our journals and monographs are interesting, worthwhile, and exemplify various kinds of competence--which are appreciated by distinct "minorities" in the profession. In addition, I believe we must apply another criterion to these productions; in what ways do they either (a) clarify or add to the evolving stock of theoretical issues or (b) suggest critical interactions or linkages among sociological issues?

For example, we are in the midst of a revival of an old theoretical and methodological theme: the proper relation between complex, indirect levels of social influence and the more circumscribed, direct processes of interaction--the so-called macro-micro link. Empirically, we have the challenge of tracing direct and indirect patterns of impact among personal, inter-personal, and organizational "levels," with concern for both upward and downward directions of influence. Methodologically, we have to decide on appropriate simplifications of numerous patterns, which probably requires determination of clear organizational levels (from autonomous social relationships to functional community levels and national or international structures) and linkages among those levels.

Theoretically, these linkages may be pursued by determining (a) the categories or positions in each organizational level that are focal "senders" or "receptors" of influence and (b) the conditions (internal and external) that account for these (and not alternative) flows of influence. Similarly, we should try to uncover the factors that impede or divert theoretically sensible linkages, and thus create (or sustain) semi-isolated "gaps" in the ensemble of analytically distinguished levels. All this, in my opinion, rests on the prior identification of the dynamics of social levels (or sub-systems), and thus of the key theoretical questions about their respective functioning over time.

While I have had no space for scholarly citations, I hope this analysis is not excessively arbitrary. More important, I hope it will encourage some desirable re-thinking about the core functions of theory in a rather variegated sociological discipline.

In Memory

Louis A. Zurcher (May 13, 1936-December 10, 1987)

Louis Zurcher (University of Texas) died soon after being diagnosed for stomach cancer. Professor Zurcher is well known for his contributions to role theory, and was highly regarded by many section members for his personal as well as scholastic qualities. He will be missed. A scholarship fund has been established in Dr. Zurcher's name, care of the University of Texas School of Social Work.

WHEN IS ENOUGH FAILURE "ENOUGH"? A REPLY TO FREESE (See Volume 10, Number 4, December 1987)

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Lee Freese states seven theses for the purpose of starting, or reviving, an argument. To the extent that they cohere, undoing one should undo the whole, so I shall limit myself to the last, which holds that "significant problem solving is a matter of developing knowledge in consecutive states" and applies this to the situation of sociology. Without pretending to fully understand what this formulation means, I would like to make the banal point that the implied claim that the problems presently taken to be significant to sociology are problems of the sort that can be solved in this fashion is baseless. Perhaps the "problems" of sociology are what Herbert Simon, in his discussions of computer problem-solving, calls "ill-structured," that is, problems where the criteria of adequacy for solutions, the problem-space, and so on, are not well-defined in advance. Typically such problems make for a multiplicity of solutions, none of which seems fully adequate or definitive (which is a fair description of the situation in the research areas Freese regards as most theoretically successful). Simon's contrast is to well-structured computational problems, of the kind "find a prime number between 70 and 80." Such problems are easily tackled using a "serial" method of specifying successive search procedures. But it should be evident that to the extent that the steps are not well-structured problems, are genuinely independent, the number of potential "solutions" increases exponentially. Freese gives the example of a seven step serial solution. If each step had only three plausible solutions, the set of plausible different seven step solutions would consist of mere 37 or 2187 possibilities. (The same point, unfortunately, applies to metatheoretical claims. There are at

least two other plausible accounts of each of Freese's seven claims, and each of them is probably consistent with most of his other claims as well as the alternatives to them, making for an equally large set of metatheoretical possibilities!

Freese seems to think that it is enough to make baseless assumptions and invite their refutation. The hour is late for this kind of "argument." After two hundred years of failure, one might reasonably hold that the burden is on Freese to show that the problems he regards as "significant" are in fact sufficiently well-structured for the serial method to succeed. Moreover, as I have shown, they must be very well-structured indeed for this method to produce meaningful results. Without this, Freese's theses are just another set of articles of an increasingly forlorn faith. The "positivists" in philosophy departments have since departed Professor Freese's church, apparently unwilling to make this particular sacrificio dell' intelletto and have suggested that the ideal of physics is not appropriate for sociology (e.g. Clark Glymour, "Social Science and Physics," Behavioral Science, 28:126-34, 1983), as many sociological methodologists have also decided. Why should sociological theorists continue to attend this church? When is enough failure "enough"?

International News

SOCIAL THEORY IN SWITZERLAND

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It is not possible to talk about a single Swiss tradition of sociology, or to talk about Swiss social theory. As is well known, Switzerland is divided into two main intellectual communities: one French speaking the other German speaking. (The Italian part of Switzerland (Tessin) does not have a university, and Italian speaking Swiss scholars join either one of the two communities.) For several historical and cultural reasons, the intellectual contacts between the French and the German parts of Switzerland are less extensive than the relations between each part and its respective cultural neighbor. The French speaking Swiss are closer, both culturally and intellectually, to Paris and the French speaking world while the German speaking Swiss have more contact with German universities. When discussing the "Swiss" tradition of social theory, one must therefore consider at least two objects: French and German, i.e. Western and Oriental Switzerland.

The communications between each part of Switzerland and either France or Germany are of course not systematic. But institutionally, the links are quite obvious. In the French speaking Swiss universities of Lausanne, Neuchâtel and Geneva, several professors of sociology are French (Raymond Boudon and Patrick de Labriol are in Geneva) and in German Switzerland, several German sociologists have found top positions.

The theoretical debates that have taken place in France and Germany have had direct effects in Switzerland. The results of these debates are more obvious in the area of social theory than in any other field. Let me present very briefly in the following few pages the two sides of Swiss sociology; the Swiss German--sociological research oriented side and the Swiss French social theory oriented side.

The Two Switzerland

The academic careers of two prominent Swiss German sociologists, the historian Herbert Luthy (1910-) and the sociologist Peter Heintz (1920-1983) are in many ways representative of the state of Swiss German sociology. Swiss German sociologists are often intellectually oriented toward Germany, when they are not simply German. For example, Peter Heintz met René König in Switzerland. He then became his assistant in Cologne. In Cologne, Heintz changed his sociological research style to a more strictly positivist, empirical, mathematical and applied type of sociology, culminating in a mathematical approach to macrosystems (See A Macrosociological Theory of Societal Systems with Special Reference to the International System, 1971-72). Meanwhile the "school of Cologne" under the leadership of König (and opposed to the Frankfurt School) placed its own in all the Swiss German universities and

in some French speaking ones too (including Peter Heintz and later Hans Joachim Hoffman-Monotny at Zurich and Paul Trappe at Basel). So that, up until the present, Swiss German social theory is similar to that developed by the school of Cologne; it is practically non-existent.

Many of the internationally well-known Swiss social theorists have been, and still are, associated with French speaking universities. First and foremost is, of course, the Lausanne School at the turn of the century, and the sociologist Wilfredo Pareto (1848-1923). (Pareto's complete works have been published, under the direction of Giovanni Busino, in 30 volumes by Droz in Geneva. On the Lausanne school, see Giovanni Busino and Pascal Bridel, L'Ecole de Lausanne de Leon Walras a Pasquale Boninsequi Lausanne; Lausanne University, 1987). In the twentieth century, one of the best known social theorists is Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who worked in Lausanne and Geneva. The legacy of these two towering figures is to be found in the French speaking universities. If we contemplate the present state of social theory in Swiss sociology, we see that French speaking universities are still in the lead. One could mention, for example, the work on Pareto by Giovanni Busino (e.g., La permanence du passe. Questions d'histoire de la sociologie et d'epistemologie sociologique) and his activities with the research group "Pratiques sociales et theories." At present the scholar who best fits the category of social theorist in Switzerland is Jean Blaise Grize (1922-), a former student of Piaget who is now leading the Center for Sociological Research at Neuchatel University (see Revue europeenne des sciences sociales, volume 25, Number 77, 1987).

These three eminent Swiss social theorists, Pareto, Piaget and now Grize, all share a common interest in the analysis of logical actions. In his Etudes sociologiques, Jean Piaget was interested in establishing sociology as a truly scientific discipline. He tried to do so by applying to societies the results of his studies on child cognitive development. Grize "followed" this idea by way of refuting it. According to Grize, the social world and the cognitive world are technically separate worlds: The social world is not rededucible through deductive logic, and therefore cannot be studied in the same empirico-deductive manner. For the study of societies, one needs to discover and understand the "natural logic of daily life" (logique du quotidien, logique naturelle). Through these two magistral attempts, an historian of sociological analysis, such as G. Busino, was able to see in a new light Pareto's attempts at understanding logical and non-logical actions.

As far as periodical publications are concerned, the split between social theory and sociological research is evidenced in the publications of the universities of Lausanne, Neuchatel and Geneva as against the German speaking universities. The only Swiss publication mainly dedicated to social theory is the Revue europeenne des sciences sociales published in Geneva under the editorship of Giovanni Busino.

Sociological Research vs. Social Theory

From this brief note on the state of "Swiss" social theory, we can see that most social theory oriented work is carried out in the French speaking universities whereas the stronghold of applied, empirical sociological research may be found in the German speaking universities, especially in Zurich. Yet, it is not quite exact to say that French Swiss are "mainly" social theory oriented. Despite this distinction, between those engaged in social theory and those involved in sociological research, the current state of social theory in Switzerland reflects more general Swiss conditions.

Despite, or perhaps because of its linguistic, cultural, and religious divisions, Switzerland is strongly integrated around a fundamental value of coexistence, or consensus. Discussions and decision processes are primarily informed by this consensual value. Simply and concretely, this means that all parties must be able to agree or concede to a proposed change before proceeding further. The concept of special interest groups is unknown in Switzerland. Because this fundamental value is sacredly respected by all, each of the numerous linguistic, cultural, and religious parts of Switzerland can continue to govern itself autonomously with all the administrative freedom that these distinctions imply.

This fundamental value is rarely discussed, even among social theorists. In fact, this implicit consensus allows all kinds of radical scholars (for example, Ulrich Jost) to work freely in the Swiss system. Critical discussion of this value, however, is perceived as an act of treason. Yet the task of social theorists is precisely to uncover what stands behind the words and discourse of a society. For this reason social theory has

always faced resistance in Switzerland. Empirically oriented social research on the other hand has been faced with less opposition; descriptions or measures that can help make decisions are readily accepted. This is why Swiss German sociologists, intellectually dominated by the Cologne school of sociological research, hold a much stronger institutional position in Switzerland than Swiss French sociologists.

These general socio-cultural conditions weigh on all Swiss sociologists, and prevent the growth of authentic social theorists except by accident: Pareto was a foreigner, and while Piaget was a major figure abroad, his success in Geneva was limited. In Switzerland these general conditions are made visible through linguistic and cultural signals, which makes Switzerland an interesting case to study. The general conditions surrounding social research in Switzerland may be found in other national communities as well. The particular linguistic and cultural divisions in Switzerland make these conditions clearly visible and make the development of Swiss social theory a particularly interesting case study.

(The author wishes to acknowledge his fruitful discussions of these issues with Professor Giovanni Busino, and reliance on the excellent editorial assistance of Tamara Hamlisch.)

Theory Section News

The preliminary schedule for the 1988 ASA meetings in Atlanta concentrates most theory section activities on Saturday, August 27, 1988. Come energized and prepared to exchange ideas and information.

Ruth Wallace, Theory Section Chair, has appointed William Kuvlesky (Texas A & M), Chuck Powers (Santa Clara University), and Norbert Wiley (University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana) to serve provisionally as a Committee on Membership and Circulation. Their charge is to work on increasing Theory Section membership and journal subscriptions to Sociological Theory. Anyone willing to take an active role assisting in these efforts should contact Chuck Powers (acting committee chair).

Some libraries have been told that Sociological Theory is no longer being published! (The confusion dates back to ST's move from an annual to a semi-annual, and the simultaneous change of publishing houses.) If you only assume that your library is receiving ST, you may be wrong. Please check this yourself. Do whatever is necessary to get ST into your library.

Conference News

SIMMEL SYMPOSIUM

(See Volume 10, Number 4, December 1987)

Michael Kaern

Georg Simmel Foundation and Boston University

On November 23 and 24, 1987 a two-day symposium on Georg Simmel's philosophy and sociology was held at Boston University. It was organized by Robert S. Cohen, Michael Kaern, and Bernard Phillips. Papers were presented by: Birgitta Medelmann, International University, Florence; Anna Wessely, Eotvos University, Budapest; David Frisby, University of Glasgow; Gary Dean Jaworski, Fairleigh Dickinson University; Michael Kaern, Boston University; Klaus Koehnke, Universitaet Bielefeld; Donald W. Levine, University of Chicago; O.K. Moore, University of Pittsburgh; and Bernard S. Phillips, Boston University. Kurt W. Wolff and George Peabody chaired the sessions. Among the invited guests were Arnold Simmel, Rudolf Weingartner, Suzanne Wronen.

Interest in Simmelian theory is increasing on both sides of the Atlantic. This is primarily true for Germany where a group at the University of Bielefeld is preparing a 24 volume edition of Simmel's collected works. David Frisby and Klaus Koehnke (who presented papers in Boston) are key figures in this edition of the collected works. (I wonder if it might be possible to find a publisher for the publication of the collected works in English ?)

The presented papers may be briefly characterized as follows: (1) Klaus Koehnke ("Simmel and Dilthey") followed two roots of Simmel's theorizing: Wilhelm Dilthey and Moritz Lazarus, the founder of Voelkerpsychologie and teacher of Simmel. (2) Birgitta Medelmann ("Georg Simmel as an Analyst of Autonomous Processes: The Merry-Go-Round of Fashion" and "On the Concept of Erlieben in Georg Simmel's Sociology") presented Simmel's use of autonomous processes and processes of autonomization using "fashion" as example. She analyzed Simmel's concept erleben (to experience), and argued that this concept may be useful for the analysis of everyday life as well as the analysis of macrophenomena, i.e., large scale cultural changes, social movements, or riots. (3) The epistemology of Simmel was analyzed by Anna Wessely and Michael Kaern. Anna Wessely ("Simmel's Metaphysics") reconstructed the basic metaphysical framework of what could be called Simmel's philosophical anthropology and its most important feature: the definition of the human condition as immanent transcendence (from a substantive point of view) and the search for third, mediating and comprehensive categories (from a methodological point of view). She discussed two such "third" categories: "objectification" and the concept "life." (4) Michael Kaern ("The World as Human Creation" and "The Structure of Simmelian Theory") presented Simmel's use of the Philosophy of As-If, arguing that Simmel's theorizing cannot be properly understood without understanding his usage of as-if counterfactuals (i.e. his methodological relativism). He pointed out that according to Simmel, counterfactuals are used first, by humans when they construct the social world, and second, by the sociologist when he analyzes this social world. He commented on Simmel's theory of "truth," a relational concept according to Simmel. (5) David Frisby ("Georg Simmel and the Study of Modernity" and "Georg Simmel's Concept of Society") traced Simmel as the sociologist of modernity and in the second paper analyzed four different interpretations of Simmel's concept "society": society as a totality, as sociation, as experience and everyday knowledge, and society as aesthetic object. (6) Gary Dean Jaworski ("Simmel's Contribution to Parsons' Action Theory and its Fate") assessed the place and fate of Simmel's sociology and Parsons' writings, up to and including the Structure of Social Action. His thesis is that Simmel contributed to Parsons's early action theory, that Parsons had acknowledged this contribution, and that Simmel's contribution is represented in the pages of Structure. Unfortunately, Parsons' chapter on Simmel was not included in Structure. (7) Donald M. Levine ("The Legacy of Georg Simmel: A Persisting Enigma") pointed out that Simmel is still an enigma. Simmelian theory is not really practiced anywhere, and although Simmel said that his legacy is going to be like cash, Simmelian theory has not become the medium of exchange in sociology. (8) O.K. Moore ("Simmel and Folk-Model Analysis" and "Simmel on the Ratio of Subjective Values to Objective Cultural Possibilities") told that Simmel is alive and well in his own applied work, and his design of learning environments which is based on his own Folk Model Theory, which in turn is based on Simmelian theory. He also argued that Simmel's concepts "objective culture" and "subjective culture" can be used to describe the growing monopolization in modern society of objective culture by the upper strata. (9) Bernie Phillips suggested that we reconstruct many of Simmel's fundamental ideas within a framework that emphasizes stratification, and interaction by adding Simmel's emphasis on culture and the individual to the focus on structure by Marx and Weber. This reconstruction can help us to understand societal change more completely. A focus on language is necessary for this kind of reconstruction.

Michael Kaern, Bernie Phillips and Robert S. Coon are preparing a volume of collected papers to be published by D. Reidel, Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

Book Announcements (Notify Perspectives of new publications)

Giovanni Basilio and Pascal Bridel, L'Ecole de Lausanne de Leon Vairas a Pinguale Bonlassogni, Lausanne: Lausanne University, 1987.

Randall Collins, Sociological Theory, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988.

Stjepan G. Mestrovic, Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology, Totowa NJ: Rowan & Littlefield, 1988.

Eugene Rochberg-Melton, Meaning and Modernity, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.