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SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

EDITOR

Craig Calhoun

PERSPECTIVES

EDITOR

Joseph Hopper

Submit news and commentary to:

Joseph Hopper
University of Chicago
Cobb Box 164
5845 S. Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Phone: (773) 702-3318

Fax: (773) 834-0493

E-mail: jhopper@midway.uchicago.edu

Theory in the Curriculum

Where's the Theory?

By Keith Doubt

I am concerned that there does not seem to be a "theory center" in any of the graduate sociology programs in the United States or Canada. To my knowledge, there is no program where sociological theory is a central and strong component, no department where theory is a compelling and unique specialty. While there are, of course, exceptional theorists with a commitment to teaching in many departments, my impression is that their status is more or less that of the "token theorist" within the department. This token theorist typically serves the needs of the department where the needs of the department (that is, the

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New Edition of ASA Theory Guide Available

ASA's *Resource Book for Teaching Social Theory* (3rd Edition) is now available from the ASA Teaching Resources Center. The center provides collections of resource materials for a variety of different courses, with each set of teaching materials being revised every few years.

The 1997 theory collection, edited by Richard Moodey, builds upon the 1984 edition edited by James Latimore and Louise Levesque-Lopman, and upon Moodey's own 1989 revision of their work. Teachers submitted new materials in response to a notice in *Footnotes*,

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Theory as a Vocation: More Dialogue

This column serves as a forum to continue the dialogue begun at the 1997 miniconference. Please submit questions, proposals, responses, and ideas to the editor.

On Weber's Legacy

Sven Eliaeson to Frederic Vandenberghe: I do not agree with your criticism of Weber's "subjective" choice of ultimate value points of departure and how the link to the more radical decisionism later developed by Carl Schmitt would cast a shadow over Weber's views on science and values. I see this as "political reduc-

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Engaging with Exemplars

By Charles Crothers

The point raised by Patricia Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley in the last issue of *Perspectives* (January 1998) of who is to count in the sociological pantheon is an important one. It is now becoming a popular issue to raise. Several of the examples put forward by Lengermann

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Theory Center Needed

Where is a serious student to go?

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empirical research needs of the department) are not intrinsically or necessarily connected to theory, theory development, or theory education.

What triggers this concern is an experience that keeps repeating itself. This year I have an exceptional undergraduate sociology major who clearly has the “theory bug.” In his essays, he has keenly juxtaposed the writing of Marvin Harris and Talcott Parsons on dialectical materialism, he has astutely applied the sociology and moral understanding of Emile Durkheim to the conflict in Bosnia, he has critically assessed the competing arguments of W. E. B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon on race relations in the United States, and he has deconstructed the dependency of Sandra Bartky’s phenomenological theorizing on Frantz Fanon’s writing. I had another student much like this one a few years ago and he now is at Penn State University with Alan Sica in the Social and Political Thought Program, a program, however, which recently lost its funding. I know that David Smith and Robert Antonio teach theory together at the University of Kansas. I am also aware that theory is an important part of the curriculum at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with Gerald Platt. Where, though, is there a good graduate program for students like the one I describe above (and I’m sure that there are many out there) to pursue advanced studies in sociological theory?

I wonder whether my observations and impressions are shared by others. The issue, I think, is timely and something that the ASA Theory Council needs to address. It is relevant to the long term interest of the ASA Theory Section and the long term significance of theory within the discipline of sociology.

Report on Theory Conference in Florida Social Theory “After” Postmodernism: The Next Step?

To explore the future of social theory and sociology “after” postmodernism, the Department of Sociology at Florida State University organized its third annual theory workshop February 20-22 at the Wakulla Springs State Park and Lodge south of Tallahassee. The conference, organized by Harry F. Dahms, Allen Imershein, Lawrence Hazelrigg and Daniel Harrison, and co-sponsored by F.S.U.’s College of Social Sciences and the Congress of Graduate Students, was structured around five sessions. All presenters and participants attended all sessions, which facilitated ongoing, in-depth discussions

of issues relating to the workshop’s theme.

The purpose of the presentations was two-fold: to assess the state of affairs in diverse areas of social theory, and to consider likely, necessary or desirable “next steps.” Robert Alford opened the conference with a critical overview of the papers to be presented, which was followed by Robert Antonio’s theses on “Social Theory in the Next Century.” In the next session, Orville Lee asked, “Is Cultural Theory the Future of Social Theory?”, a question that Stephen Turner

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though some materials are included from the earlier editions as well. The collection is organized around some of the key decisions that go into planning and teaching a theory course, including the decision as to where we stand in relation to the many kinds of social theory. Indeed, Moodey argues, the teacher’s stance towards the field of social theory makes a difference in her decisions about objectives, content and pedagogy.

In successive chapters Moodey reflects upon some of the following questions: How do earlier decisions about a course constrain later ones, and how does one revise earlier decisions in the light of the later ones? What is the ideal length of a social theory syllabus? How might we think about course objectives, given that decisions about objectives control other decisions and given that different theoretical standpoints control decisions about course objectives? Do we think of ourselves as detached observers of the social theory scene, emphasizing the “history” rather than the “systematics” of theory, or do we make a skillful deconstruction of theoretical texts an objective? How are pedagogy and content related to course objectives?

The volume presents both skeletal outlines and fully fleshed out syllabi with reading assignments and timetables. It also focuses a chapter on “contractual” aspects of theory courses, such as policies and requirements. The volume provides guides for papers, projects, discussions, and exams.

Contributors of syllabi and teaching materials include: Everett Wilson, Ruth Wallace, Samuel F. Sampson, Irving Zeitlin, Peter Blau, Alisia M. Potter, Laurel Richardson, Steve Derne, Craig Calhoun, Louise Lopman, Jim Spickard, Nancy Davis, Jarl Ahlqvist, Richard Moodey, Diana Crane, R. George Kirkpatrick, Shoon Lio, and Ben Brown.

Materials can be ordered through the ASA Teaching Resources Center or purchased at the annual meeting.

Publishing Options in Social Theory

Here begins a new feature in *Perspectives* that will continue over several issues. Each issue will profile one or two journals that are important and relevant for social theorists seeking an outlet for their work. Standard theory journals and volumes will be included, as will some that may seem more surprising. *Perspectives* will ask editors of selected journals to provide information for potential authors about primary content areas, the review process including time for review and acceptance rates, historical information, and what they, as current editors, are trying to accomplish particularly with regard to theory. Depending on how successful the effort is, book publishing outlets may be profiled next. If there is a particular journal you think ought to be included, please notify the editor of *Perspectives*.

About *Social Psychology Quarterly*

By Linda D. Molm and Lynn Smith-Lovin

The editors of *Social Psychology Quarterly* welcome and encourage the submission of more theory papers to the journal. These might include the formulation of testable theories, conceptual analyses with empirical implications or applications, or metatheoretical analyses of relevance to social psychology. One of the distinctive features of sociological social psychology is its emphasis on well-formulated theory, regardless of the particular theoretical tradition. It is our aim to encourage and continue this valued tradition; we hope you will help us by considering *SPQ* as an outlet for your work.

Below, we offer more information about the journal's scope and editorial process. For information on submission guidelines, please see current issues of the journal or visit our web site at <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~spq>.

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Sociological Theory

New Editor Sought

A new editor will be needed in 1999 for *Sociological Theory*, the American Sociological Association's official theory journal. Craig Calhoun's term is scheduled to end in December 1999, which means that a transition to the new editorship will begin a few months before that. The ASA publications committee will solicit proposals from potential editors in August 1998, and a final decision is scheduled for December 1998.

The editor should be someone broadly knowledgeable and open to a wide range of styles and perspectives in sociological theory. Fairness in treatment of many different kinds of work is crucial. So is

commitment to maintaining a high standard of quality and interest in the work published.

The number of manuscripts submitted has risen substantially (about 150 a year) so support from an editor's home institution as well as from the ASA is important.

This can be a very interesting position, and affords insight into the theory field as a whole. It is also an important service to the field, within which *Sociological Theory* is the leading general publication.

Potential candidates interested in more information may contact craig.calhoun@nyu.edu.

Are You Writing for *Sociological Theory*?

By Craig Calhoun

Sociological Theory is an official journal of the ASA and the premier general theory publication in sociology. It publishes work from all perspectives in sociological theory and in a variety of styles. It also publishes substantive analytic articles, including those presenting theoretical data, so long as they offer significant original contributions to sociological theory.

If you are thinking of submitting—and if you have an interesting theoretical project underway you should—here are a few tips to consider:

(1) Finish your article first. It is surprising how many authors submit rough drafts or incomplete versions of their work. This is a mistake, because reviewers have high standards and expect to see work as close to ready for publication as authors can make it. Unfinished work is likely to be rejected, cutting off the possibility of it eventually appearing in the journal.

(2) Present the work well. Failure to use good English prose, to proofread a manuscript carefully, to make sure the references are in good order, and so forth, is an excellent way to bias reviewers against the theoretical work presented. Make sure you offer as clean and readable a copy as possible, and that your writing and edit-

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Writing for Journals A Few Tips

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ing help your theoretical work come across clearly.

(3) Take the abstract seriously. Readers—including the reviewers for the journal—use abstracts to figure out whether they want to read an article and to orient themselves. Make clear why someone should be interested and what they should expect to find.

(4) Get to the point fairly quickly. Background can be helpful, but it is a good idea to make the major thrust of an article clear within the first three pages (if not sooner). Don't leave your readers wondering where you are going. Unless you are an especially good writer (and relatively few of the theorists who have submitted in the last three years fall into this category), suspense is a technique better left to mystery writers.

(5) Pay attention to the existing literature in the field. I see a number of articles every year that have an interesting theoretical insight, but lack reasonable situation of that insight in relation to other work. Some take one preferred theoretical hero, and consider that individual's work but not the relevant publications of lesser lights. Some fail to look at directly relevant work from contrasting perspectives. Too many, sadly, simply reinvent the wheel.

(6) Make sure it is clear what original contribution your paper makes. The primary purpose of Sociological Theory is to advance current theoretical knowledge and discourse. A re-examination of classical texts may do this, but it is important to make clear to readers how it corrects prevailing misunderstandings, how it helps to address current concerns in sociological analysis, and in general why it matters. It is not enough simply to be accu-

Candidates Nominated for Section Offices Integrated ASA Elections Scheduled for May

The Nominations Committee has completed its work and forwarded to the ASA its slate of candidates for Theory Section offices. The two candidates for chair are Roland Robertson at the University of Pittsburgh and Morris Zelditch, Jr., at Stanford University.

The four candidates for two slots on the council are Joan Alway at the University of Miami, Harry Dahms at Florida State University, Mustafa Emirbayer at the New School

for Social Research, and Margaret Somers at the University of Michigan.

All candidates have agreed to serve, and have forwarded biographical information to the ASA offices in Washington. Section members will receive a single ballot sometime in May for all ASA and section elections. Candidate profiles will arrive with the ballot.

Candidates for chair:

Roland Robertson
Morris Zelditch, Jr.

Candidates for the council:

Joan Alway
Harry Dahms
Mustafa Emirbayer
Margaret Somers

The Nominations Committee members are Ira J. Cohen (Chair), Robert Antonio, Joseph Berger, Donald N. Levine, and Anne Rawls.

rate in discussing Durkheim or Weber, say, it is important to advance our ability to understand social life. More generally, for any paper, make clear to your readers how you think your ideas are useful, what they help us understand, why they are better than other possible tools.

(7) Don't try to do everything in one paper. Papers are more likely to succeed when they have one strong line of argument, or at most two, and other points are clearly subordinate. Papers with five or seven "major" points usually cannot do justice to each. Relatedly, it is important to keep in mind that it is usually not the conclusions of a paper that make it succeed or fail, but the quality of the argument in support of its conclusions.

(8) Consider what possible objections there may be to your argument and try to answer them or head them off. A paper is inevitably an argument. You help the argument succeed by making clear that you have considered potential lines of disagreement with it, as well as by present-

ing it clearly and showing its payoff. Do not be defensive, but try to look at your argument from the vantage point of someone not already engaged by it.

(9) Do not be discouraged by the response "revise and resubmit." This means that your paper has been judged to have considerable potential value and a good chance (50 percent or better) of being published. It just needs further work. But by the same token, do the work requested or have a good reason why you do not. Take the reviews seriously (reviewers put a lot of time into them and most are remarkably generous and helpful with their suggestions). You do not have to follow advice slavishly on every point, but you should think about it. When you resubmit, it is a good idea to include a cover letter that explains how you responded to the criticisms and suggestions offered (including why you chose not to make some possible changes if that is the case).

(10) Do not ask the editor to read your
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Social Theory at the ISA in Montreal Presenters Announced

July 26 - August 1, 1998. *XIV World Congress of Sociology, International Sociological Association*, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

The Research Committee on Social Theory and the Research Committee on the History of Sociology each plan several sessions related to sociological theory at the Montreal meetings this summer.

The social theory committee is organizing eight sessions around the question, "Where Does the Canon Stand Now?" proposing an intellectual audit of sociological theory. Eight sessions include: Modes of Reading and Writing Theory; National Modes of Theorizing; Cross-Disciplinary Theorizing; Theorizing at the Societal Level; Theorizing Institutions; Cultural Theorizing; Theorizing Subjects and Agents; and Critical and Contested Knowledges. Information about particular titles and presenters will be available soon. E-mail Ronald.Eyerman@soc.lu.se for information.

The Research Committee on the History of Sociology plans several sessions related to social theory as well. Contact Jennifer Platt at J.Platt@sussex.ac.uk for full program information. Selected titles and presenters include:

Life is in Permanent Flux: New Perspectives on Science and Art in Georg Simmel's Lifetime. *Felicitas M. Dörr-Backes*, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Germany

The Centrality of "Life Orders" in Max Weber's Works: A Challenge from Werner Sombart? *Stephen Kalberg* Boston University, USA

The Will to Act: An Analysis of Max Weber's Sociology in the Light of

Goethe's Fiction. *Isher-Paul Sahni*, McGill University, Canada

Max Weber's Concept of Honour and His Search for Professional Ethics. *Martin Schmeiser*, Universität Bern, Switzerland

Elective Affinities: Georg Simmel and Marianne Weber on Differentiation and Individuation. *Theresa Wobbe*, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Re-reading Max Weber's Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion. *Masanaga Katsumata*, Nagoya City University, Japan

A Rational Analytics of Power: Nietzschean Themes in Max Weber's Concept of Domination. *Thomas Kemple*, University of British Columbia, Canada

The Sociological Critique of Ethics: The Science of Morality and the Search for the Good Society. *Robert T. Hall*, West Virginia State College, USA

Harriet Martineau, Patriarchal Gatekeeping and Sociological Theory: Multiple Assaults on the Historical Canon. *Mary Jo Deegan*, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

Classics, Canons, Postmodernity and Phenomenology. *Stephen Schecter*, UQAM, Québec, Canada

Is There a Cumulative Theory in Urban Sociology? *Mark Gottdiener*, SUNY-Buffalo, USA

Luhmann, Habermas, and the Theory of Communication. *Loet Leydesdorff*, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Durkheim on Montesquieu and Rousseau: Consequences for Contemporary Systems Theory. *Philippe Couton*, McGill University, Canada

The Preference of the Text in the Shift to Scientific Narration in Durkheim's Suicide: Toward a Sociology of Knowledge. *Ken Morrison*, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

The Power of the Sociological Tradition: The Case of Social Differentiation and Gender Differentiation. *Theresa Wobbe*, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

The Hegelian Critique of "Habits." *Keith Doubt*, Truman State University, USA

Ideology: Some Trends in the Development of a Sociological Concept. *Bote de Jong* Groningen, The Netherlands

Robert Michels: A Sociology Formed by Deception. *Erhard Stöltzing* Universität Potsdam, Germany

Report on Florida Conference

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answered with a resounding "no." Turner reported on recent developments in cognitive science that throw into question the very idea of cultural theory, which set the stage for further discussion of the relationship between social theory and cultural theory. The workshop continued with Joan Alway on "No Body There: Habermas and Feminism," and David Brain on "Postmodern Materialism: Material Culture and the Art of Building Communities." The final formal session featured Douglas Litowitz's "Postmodern Theory and the Law: An Overview and Assessment" and Hans-Herbert Kögler's "Critical Hermeneutics of Subjectivity: Cultural Studies as Critical Theory." Comments by Janet S. Chafetz and Harry F. Dahms on the contributions and discussions of the preceding days set the stage for the discussion concluding the workshop. The organizers plan to have the proceedings (presentations and discussions) published within a year.

Miniconference Debate Weber, Values, and Democracy

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tionism” that does not do justice to Weber or Schmitt. The early German relativists and subjectivists were, measured by the standards of their time, democratic and liberal scholars trying to accommodate to a semi-authoritarian regime, and they were trying to protect the uncompromising search for knowledge in an ideologically overheated milieu. Instead of eroding science, it seems to me that the polytheist creed in Weber’s so-called scientific value-relativism builds a firm base for its pursuit, despite differences in world-views among the practitioners. My concern is that in measuring Weber against our standards of democracy without due consideration of his own context, there is an obvious risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. I wonder if a proper understanding of what is dead and alive in Weber’s political sociology doesn’t require a more serious recontextualization.

Frederic Vandenberghe. What is really at issue is the possibility of a secular ethics and of a democratic polity in which the last word belongs to the people. Convinced that in a post-Christian disenchanted world ultimate values can no longer pretend to objective validity, Max Weber defends the postulate of the axiological neutrality of the sciences. Science is only concerned with factual, logical and technical issues and has, in principle, nothing to say about practical issues, which are not amenable to truth. Values are subjective; they belong to the demonic realm of pure choice. Values are like colors and tastes: one can no more

Perspectives is the official newsletter of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association. It is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October.

argue that blue is nicer than red than one can argue that civilization is better than cannibalism. On this point, one just has to decide, and Carl Schmitt reminds us that decision is the opposite of discus-

I am convinced that normative claims to validity can still be rationally justified.

sion. But if this is the case, and I think it is not, then an artful division of labor between the scientific analysis of the means and the political decision imposes itself in the political realm. The technocrats can pronounce themselves on the economy and the efficacy of the necessary means, but when it comes to the determination of the ends which are to be reached, they have to leave it all over to the politicians so that the politicians can decide, as a function of their beliefs, interests or personal tastes, which ends should be pursued. Thus, here where value-free objectivism and existential decisionism touch each other, we see that an increase in formal rationality on one side goes together with material irrationality on the other.

Against Weber, however, I am convinced that, notwithstanding the pluralism of values which characterizes the modern age, normative claims to validity can still be rationally justified. We can argue about our ultimate values and we can rationally ground our moral principles. Values are not irrational. Counterfactually, we have to assume that they are amenable to truth. But if this is the case, then politicians no longer have to decide what is good for us. We are mature—*mündig* as Kant used to say—and as citizens we can discuss in the public sphere which values we want to realize, which ends we want to pursue, and having been informed by the experts

on the objective possibilities, which means we can use to realize our ends. This dialectic of technical power and democratic formation of the will, whereby the technical determination of what is objectively possible and the public articulation of what is practically desirable enter into a mutual relation, is what makes politics democratic.

Democracy is the modern principle of legitimization which states that ultimately the power belongs to the people. It always struck me that in his theory of legitimization Weber does not introduce the democratic principle as a fourth type of legitimization but reduces it to a mere subtype of charismatic legitimization. For Weber, democracy does not represent a normative principle. It is just a pragmatic mechanism for the selection of a strong, charismatic leader. Notwithstanding his inclination towards caesarism, we should, however, be extremely wary of committing the paralogism of the *reductio ad Hitlerum*. Weber was after all a liberal, and one of the staunchest defenders of the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*). But he was not a democrat at heart. Therefore, I think it is fair to conclude that he threw the democratic baby out with the liberal bath water.

Wanted: Good Theory Papers

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paper first and tell you whether it is “suitable” for *Sociological Theory*. This is what the review process is for. The editor is also busy reading the 150 papers that are actually submitted. His personal taste is in any case not especially relevant; *ST* publishes all sorts of work, so long as it theory and/or shows the utility of specific theoretical approaches and ideas in sociological analysis and understanding. All decisions are based on reviews by scholars in the field.

We always need more really good papers, so please submit!

Social Psychology Seeks Theory Papers

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SCOPE. The scope of *SPQ* is quite broad, encompassing both theoretical and empirical papers on the link between individuals and society. These include studies of the relations of individuals to one another and to larger social units (groups, collectivities, institutions), and studies of intra-individual processes to the extent that they influence, or are influenced by, social structure and society. Within this broad scope, we are interested in good papers representing all fields and traditions of social psychology, and all types of work.

THE EDITORIAL PROCESS. *SPQ* receives about 100 new submissions a year. Each new manuscript is assigned to one of the co-editors who, as decision editor, handles it from start to finish. We typically send new submissions to three reviewers. Generally, these reviewers are experts in the area or areas represented by the paper, but for fairly narrow or technical papers, we might also include one "generalist." The time from submission to decision is ten weeks, on average. About two-thirds of all new submissions are rejected; the vast majority of our remaining decisions are revise and resubmit. Very few papers are accepted, conditionally or otherwise, on the first round. Our decisions rely heavily on the recommendations of our reviewers; in this sense, we are not "activist" editors. We do offer substantial advice to authors of promising papers, however.

We typically invite revision and resubmission only when we believe a paper will eventually be accepted if the authors make the changes requested. Some R&Rs require more extensive revisions than others; our letters for these make clear our greater uncertainty about the outcome. We typically send revised papers back to two of the reviewers from the first round and, when revisions are

Two Review Articles on Theory Rational Choice Theory and Feminist Theory Featured in Annual Review

Two review articles on social theory are featured in the 1997 edition of the *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 23, edited by John Hagan and Karen S. Cook. The first is a review of feminist theory, written by Janet Saltzman Chafetz. The second is a review of rational choice theory, written by Michael Hechter and Satoshi Kanazawa. Abstracts are reproduced below.

Feminist Theory and Sociology: Underutilized Contributions for Mainstream Theory

By Janet Saltzman Chafetz

Feminist theories in sociology reflect the rich diversity of general theoretical orientations in our discipline; there is no one form of feminist theory. The development of these theories over the last twenty-five years has only recently begun to influence the mainstream theory canon, which has much to learn from their insights. This chapter demonstrates why feminist versions of the following theory types should be more fully integrated into mainstream sociological theory: neo-Marxist, macro-structural, exchange, rational choice, network, status expectations, symbolic interactionist, ethnomethodological, neo-Freudian, and social role. Feminist standpoint theory, an epistemological critique of mainstream sociology, is discussed at the beginning, and the chapter concludes with a brief account of the newly developing effort to theorize the intersection of race, class, and gender.

extensive, to a new reviewer as well. The likelihood that revised papers will eventually be accepted (possibly after a third revision) is much higher than the likelihood that new papers will be accepted: on the average, 75 to 80 percent are accepted.

Once a paper is accepted for publication, our managing editor, Jo Ann Beard, then takes over and works with the author and copy editor to turn a manuscript into

Sociological Rational Choice Theory

By Michael Hechter and Satoshi Kanazawa

Although rational choice theory has made considerable advances in other social sciences, its progress in sociology has been limited. Some sociologists' reservations about rational choice arise from a misunderstanding of the theory. The first part of the essay therefore introduces rational choice as a general theoretical perspective, or family of theories, which explains social outcomes by constructing models of individual action and social context. "Thin" models of individual action are mute about actors' motivations, while "thick" models specify them ex ante. Other sociologists' reservations, however, stem from doubts about the empirical adequacy of rational choice explanations. To this end, the bulk of the essay reviews a sample of recent studies that provide empirical support for particular rational choice explanations in a broad spectrum of substantive areas in sociology. Particular attention is paid to studies on the family, gender, and religion, for these subareas often are considered least amenable to understanding in terms of rational choice logic.

final form for publication. The average time from acceptance of a paper to publication is six to nine months.

Send manuscripts to: Linda D. Molm and Lynn Smith-Lovin, Editors, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Department of Sociology, Univ. of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.

Potential Engagement with Possible Exemplars

EXEMPLARS *from Page 1*

and Niebrugge-Brantley as non-exemplars are in fact quite exemplary non-exemplars and a small “industry” (with commercial implications) has built up around propelling them more into the public eye. For example, our theoretical texts now need to be refreshed with a wider range of exemplars. But why stop with a handful of North American, circa nineteenth century “ignored” thinkers (preferably with “minority status”)? There are other continents, other centuries—a wealth of potential exemplars. I hardly need to begin a list. (What is worrisome, perhaps, is that the logic driving this enterprise pushes towards a total breakdown: the victor in the competition is she who can uncover the most obscure potential exemplars!)

The possibility of being overwhelmed by this plethora of potential precursors surely requires us to revisit Merton’s useful distinction between the history and the systematics of theory. While we by now have developed a rather more nuanced version of this doctrine, in which some of the inherent linkages between the two overlapping enterprises are clearer, nevertheless I think it is wise to separate out the two central thrusts. It is the historian of sociology’s task to dig out the major and minor figures (recognized and unrecognized) in our distant and recent past. It is the theorist’s task to develop theory in whatever ways are possible, including (as so many sociological theorists find very

helpful) building on the received legacy of sociological wisdom. Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley conflate the two tasks too readily. (Levine, in his useful notes on theory in an earlier newsletter, also over-emphasizes, in my view, historical work.) So, those of us with a stronger interest in theory than in history await being alerted to those theoretical arguments uniquely advanced by the various examples offered.

But even with this said, I think the lessons of the session were rather different. The question posed was a methodological (or meta-theoretical) one: How have we/should we engage with the work of previous generations of theorists? In his historical work on the development of sociologies, Levine has developed a dialogical model that might guide theoretical development in sociology: we need better skills in conducting conversations between generations and among traditions of sociological thought. This viewpoint undoubtedly shaped his planning of the sessions, and the case studies presented hopefully built towards a honing of our skills in being able to carry out such conversations. If this is the problem at hand, surely the exemplars examined should be chosen to best represent a range of different ways in which engagement might be enacted. Presumably we might want to build up a typology of different patterns of experiences and engagements. For this task, exemplars who have been engaged need to be considered. The examples offered by Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley might provide interesting negative case studies of non-engagement, but it seems that these are less likely to yield a rich harvest about engagement. Lengermann’s and Niebrugge-Brantley’s work (along with that of others) on their engagement with some non-exemplars is awaited with interest.

Transition Note

Because of the transition between newsletter editors, you may have received Volume 19, Number 3 after Volume 20, Number 1. We hope this caused no confusion.

Theory Section Committees 1997-1998

Theory Prize Committee

Murray Webster, Jr. (Chair)
Karen Cook
Stephen Turner
Henry Walker
TBA

Shils-Coleman Award Committee

David Sciulli (Chair)
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David Wagner
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Nominations Committee

Ira J. Cohen (Chair)
Robert Antonio
Joseph Berger
Donald N. Levine
Anne Rawls

In short, we must be careful not to conflate separable questions. The legitimate search for the past of sociology must add to, and not deflect from, the task of actually building theory and of enhancing our capacity to build theory. The methodological issue of how we relate to exemplars must not be conflated with the also legitimate question of who these exemplars might be. This brings us back to the point Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley claim of an increasing divergence of theoretical voices. It is precisely by reflecting on our experiences of engagement with past sociologies that we may be able to improve our ability to handle this very variety.