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Message from the Chair

Theory Growth in Sociology: Current Status and New Directions

By Morris Zelditch, Jr.

The year 2000 is a good time to assess how far contemporary sociological theory has grown, where it is, and where it is going. The theme of the miniconference on theory at the Washington meetings will therefore be "Theory Growth in Sociology: Current Status and New Directions."

Sociological theory has in fact undergone an astonishing amount of growth in the last quarter century. This has been to some extent obscured by the recent focus of so much attention on meta-theory. It is true that there has been some recent growth in meta-theory, e.g. the ongoing reconceptualization of structure and action. But meta-theory, especially meta-theory at the level of fundamental presuppositions like ontology, epistemology, the nature of the actor, of action, and of society, is a level at which theory usually grows only slowly, if at all. To a

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Notes from the Trenches

Graduate Students Respond to the Top Ten Debate

By Joshua Guetzkow and Alexandra Kalev

As freshly enlisted graduate students, we arrived on the front lines of the debate being waged in the pages of *Perspectives* over lists of essential texts and the means of correct training in theory. We became familiar with it in the context of our required seminar in "Contemporary Sociological Theory," taught by Professor Michèle Lamont at Princeton University. As part of the course, we read the articles that have appeared in *Perspectives* since Alan Sica launched the first volley in July of last year, and there

was also an optional question on this debate in the final exam. After the semester, at the invitation of the newsletter editor, Joe Hopper, Michèle offered that we contribute, and we agreed to dig in and write down a few notes from the trenches. We used our colleagues' final exams to inform our reflection and as "data" to broaden the scope of our discussion.

Our first observation is provided by a first year graduate student with a background in engineering who led us to reflect about the meaning of producing a list of "most important books"

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Confronting Our Tower of Babel

By Bernard Phillips

Commenting on the recent miniconference on communicating with non-theorists, I believe that the hierarchical or bureaucratic division of the discipline is itself the issue that we must address: It is our own view of sociology as divided, for example, into theory, methodology, and a variety of substantive areas. If we truly want to see theory used extensively throughout the discipline then we must go back to square one in addressing the nature of theory, the scientific method, and the nature of sociology itself. Many of us view such questions as interminable and fruitless and want to move on to more specific questions, yet we need not choose between general and concrete questions: both are important. One achievement of postmodernist orientations, granting what I see as their enormous limitations, is to address once again these general questions. What indeed is the nature of the scientific method, and how might it be applied to our discipline? Why have we social scientists by and large failed in the rapid cumulative development of our understanding of society? Why have we generally failed to attain the credibility achieved, for example, by biology? Why has it been so difficult for us sociologists to link theory, methods and substantive knowledge? Why haven't we integrated our knowledge into a platform on which efforts to

solve basic problems in society can be constructed? Why is so much of sociological theory, much like psychological theory, lacking in any commitment to the importance of history? Why do we have so much difficulty in linking micro theory with macro theory? Why is there so little agreement among theorists as to what is wrong and right with current theory?

Given the divergence of suggestions by leading theorists as to the most important works of theory, and given the sharp controversies among sociological theorists, it might be useful to inquire as to just what is the nature of a theoretical orientation in sociology? Does it mean an ahistorical approach to understanding the nature of human behavior as is taken by most psychologists, or does it allow for understanding different patterns of behavior in different historical eras? Does it require the theorist to probe into what Marx, Weber, Durkheim or Simmel really meant in their work, or does it point us in the direction of using their work so that it can mesh with whatever we have learned within the discipline since their time? Must it involve subspecialization within some area of theory or some particular theorist, or should it involve efforts to employ the diverse fields of subspecialization and diverse theorists in addressing any substantive area? Does it require commitment to a given

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Perspectives is the newsletter of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association. It is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October. The deadline for all submissions is the fifth day of the month before publication. We welcome news and commentary as well as announcements about conferences, journal information, calls for papers, position openings, and any other information of interest to section members.

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Miniconference Plans

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lesser extent, it has also been obscured by the focus of positive theorists, hostile to meta-theory, on single empirical theories. There has been a good deal of growth at the level of single theories, but even this obscures how much growth has been occurring because the focus has been only on growth in confirmation status. A focus on the single theory obscures other kinds of growth—in precision, scope, rigor, and especially the number of explanatory domains—that depend on the relation of a theory to other theories.

Where growth has been astonishing is at the level of theoretical activity between meta-theory and the single theory, at the level of theoretical research programs. A theoretical research program is a family of related theories—each abstract, general, and empirical—oriented to the sustained accumulation of theory and research. The last 25 years has seen the emergence of many programs of this kind and many of them have undergone extensive theoretical and empirical development from the time of their inception. They span the gamut of levels of analysis, from micro-processes, like Berger's expectation states theory, Heise's affect control theory, and Cook's, Molm's, and Willer's different exchange theories; to meso-processes, like Burt's structural holes, Marwell and Oliver's critical mass theory of collective action, and Oberschall's, Tilly's, and Zald and McCarthy's different resource mobilization theories of social movements; to macro-processes, like Blau's theory of heterogeneity and inequality, Goldstone's and Skocpol's different theories of revolution, and Wallerstein's world systems theory; as well, of course, as theory programs like Meyer's institutionalism and Hannan's population ecology that span two or more levels. The emergence and sustained

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1999 Section Prize Winners Announced Noah Mark Wins Theory Prize

By Douglas Heckathorn

The 1999 Theory Prize Committee consisted of Ira Cohen (chair), Douglas Heckathorn, Linda Molm, Murray Milner, and Cecilia Ridgeway. Eighteen articles were nominated for the prize. Among them, the clear and decisive winner was Noah Mark, assistant professor of sociology at Stanford University, for his article, "Beyond Individual Differences: Social Differentiation from First Principles" (*ASR*, June 1998).

The article draws on arguments from Rousseau, Spencer, Durkheim, and symbolic interactionism to propose a formal dynamic model for the emergence of social differentiation, which is defined as the degree to which interaction occurs within distinct sets of individuals among whom there is little interaction. Social differentiation is seen as arising through a positive feedback process. Initial selection of interaction partners reflects homophily, a tendency to associate with others who share similar information. Subsequent interaction further increases similarity of knowledge through sharing and generation of information during interaction, and forgetting of information that is not shared during interaction. The effect of this dynamic is to increase the similarity of those who interact frequently, and reduce the similarity of those who interact infrequently or not at all. An important conclusion is that the emergence of differentiation does not depend on individual differences. Rather, differentiation arises through a stochastic process in which patterns of association generate differences among individuals. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the model for the sociology of culture and for studies of social inequality. •

Assessing the Current State of Theory

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growth of so many theory programs oriented to cumulative growth represents one of the most important theoretical developments of the last quarter century. It is on growth at this level that the miniconference on theory will focus in Washington in 2000.

The program as a whole will be made up of three invited and two open sessions. The two open sessions, one for papers and one round-tables, are open not only in the sense that they are open to anyone but also in the sense that they have no theme. (The call for papers, with addresses of session organizers, will appear in the January issue of *Perspectives*.) The three invited sessions, on the other hand, all have the same theme: "Theory Growth in Sociology: Current Status and New Directions."

The program committee has invited papers by leading proponents of 12 major, ongoing theory programs. Each will describe the theoretical and empirical background of the program, its course of development, its current status, and new directions of growth. Because there has been so much growth at this level, the committee's most difficult problem was selection; a considerable number of important programs are going to be neglected. Selection was guided, first, by the desire to represent growth at all levels of sociological analysis; and, second, by the desire to represent the diversity of growth itself. The growth of some programs is linear: They progressively elaborate a single theory. But many have a nonlinear pattern of growth. The 12 invited

Kleinenberg Wins Graduate Student Prize

By Jeffrey K. Olick

The 1999 Shils-Coleman Prize committee—consisting of Joan Alway, Gary Dworkin, Nina Eliasoph, Bob Wuthnow, and Jeffrey Olick as chair—awarded this year's prize to Eric Kleinenberg, a Ph.D. candidate at Berkeley, for "Denaturalizing Disaster: A Social Autopsy of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave." The paper proposes a theoretical model for analyzing extreme events, weaving together the legacies of Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, the early Chicago school and the new urban sociology, and the political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. The article, which was published in *Theory and Society* (April 1999), is based on Kleinenberg's dissertation, "Dying Alone: A Social Autopsy of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave." Congratulations to the winner, and thanks to the others who submitted an impressive crop of papers. •

papers were chosen to illustrate the diversity of both the levels of analysis and patterns of growth of contemporary sociological theories.

2000 is a benchmark year. It is an appropriate time to ask where we are and where we are going. The Washington miniconference on theory addresses these questions by asking a dozen prominent contemporary theorists: What is the current status of a representative selection of contemporary theoretical research programs? What new directions will theory and research in these programs take in the future? This should be a fruitful way to assess the state of the art in the year 2000 and new directions in which sociological theory is likely to grow. •

A Kingdom Divided

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level of abstraction—whether upper-range or middle-range—or should it involve the ability to shuttle far up and down language's ladder of abstraction? Does it involve seeing substantive work as illustrating a lower order of sophistication, or should we see such work as posing a challenge for all of us to uncover key theoretical concepts that can help us to illuminate those findings? Should theorists orient their efforts so as to remain above the fray of concrete problems, such as the escalation of possibilities for nuclear, chemical and

Should theorists orient their efforts so as to remain above the fray of concrete problems . . . or should we see fundamental social problems much as the classical sociologists did?

biological terrorism in the modern world, or should we see fundamental social problems much as the classical sociologists did: as providing opportunities to develop the kind of sociological theory which can yield insight into such urgent problems and to legitimate the importance of sociological theory within society as a whole?

As for methods, should we see this area as largely oriented to trivial and atheoretical studies, or should we see it as challenging us to learn just how we might apply the scientific method to sociology? Are methods only what we use when functioning within professional contexts, or should we be following Gouldner's lead and attempting—with theory no less than methods—to move in a reflexive direction? Should we keep methods and theory largely apart in the interests of achieving depth in each area, or should all sociologists become responsible for keeping up with both areas on the

Election Results

New Section Officers Begin Terms, Outline Goals for Theory

Douglas Heckathorn was elected during the spring 1999 elections as chair-elect. He will begin a three-year term with successive one-year terms as chair-elect, chair, and past chair. Murray Webster was elected to a three-year term as secretary-treasurer. Robin Wagner-Pacifi and Jorge Ardit were elected to three-year terms as members of the council.

Heckathorn is currently professor of sociology at Cornell University. His research interests fall into several inter-related areas. First, he has been developing formal theories of collective action and norm emergence. Second, he has been involved in field experiments that aim to create norms among out-of-treatment injection drug users, and thereby reduce the transmission of the HIV virus. A third line of research focuses on the problem of how to draw representative samples of hidden populations. In January, Heckathorn will become editor of the journal *Rationality and Society*. During his tenure as an officer of the section, Heckathorn says he would like to increase communication across theoretic paradigms. "I have learned much, as a formal theorist, from a long-standing collaboration with a symbolic interactionist," says Heckathorn. "My experience is by no means unique. Just as disciplinary

assumption that depth requires methods no less than theory? Should we follow postmodernist critiques and give up on the utility of "the scientific method," or should we remain committed to the importance of that method while abandoning the view that it inevitably yields closer approximations to truth? Should we avoid examining achievements within the physical and biological sci-

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boundaries are becoming more permeable, so too are opportunities increasing for fruitful communication across disparate theoretic traditions."

Webster is professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, currently on leave while he serves as program director for sociology at the National Science Foundation. His recent theoretical work has been to extend theories of status construction, to develop a theory of second order expectations, and to test implications of comparison theory. Webster says that he fervently hopes to see the day when more sociologists are developing contemporary theory than are "worrying about what the dead guys really meant," and when logic and empirical tests are universally recognized as appropriate tools for assessing theory. For this reason, he says that he is particularly delighted with the selection of Jonathan Turner to edit the ASA journal, *Sociological Theory*.

Wagner-Pacifi teaches sociology in the joint Sociology and Anthropology department at Swarthmore College. She describes her work as determinedly interdisciplinary, generally incorporating literary and anthropological frameworks in her studies of rupturing and disjunctive events; currently she is analyzing a number of such events to theoretically analyze the contingent interactions (particularly those of language and violence) in standoffs. Her next project will develop a social history of "surrender." Wagner-Pacifi would like to see sociological theory engage more fully with the theoretical developments in contiguous disciplines, particularly those of anthropology and political theory. As well, she would like to see more event-driven theoretical analyses. •

Research Opportunities for Social Theorists

Fellowships for Studies on Human Values

The University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, invites applications for its Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Fellowships to be awarded for the academic year 2000-2001 to outstanding teachers and scholars who are interested in devoting a year in residence at Princeton to writing about ethics and human values. Fellowships extend from September through May. Applicants are expected to have a doctorate or a professional postgraduate degree and cannot be in the process of writing a dissertation. Deadline for application materials is December 15, 1999. Recipients will be notified by March 15, 2000. Contact Valerie Kanka, University Center for Human Values, Louis Marx Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544. Telephone (609) 258-4798; e-mail vjkanka@wvs.princeton.edu.

ISA Research Committee Will Sponsor Conference on Critical Theory

July 13-16, 2000. *New Sources of Critical Theory*. Cambridge, United Kingdom.

The International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Sociological Theory invites submissions for its mid-term conference. Critical theory is broadly defined here, and may include empirical applications as well as purely theoretical discussions. Topics range from philosophical discussion of the Frankfurt School and contemporary critical theory to efforts to develop theories in an applied direction on gender and ethnicity. The committee plans to publish selected conference proceedings. Titles and abstract

(between 100 and 200 words) of proposed papers should be sent by October 30, 1999 to Patrick Baert, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK. Telephone 44-1223-3599339; e-mail pjnb100@hermes.cam.ac.uk.

New Journal on Critical Theory

Critical Horizons is a new interdisciplinary journal of social and critical theory. It aims to provide a forum for the critical analysis of contemporary issues and debates within social theory regarding a range of concerns such as forms of modernity and postmodernity, changing social relations, politics, identities, feminisms, aesthetics and visual culture. It also aims to engage with the variety of traditions in critical and social theory through which these concerns are often voiced, but it also aims to position papers in ways that actively promote debate across established boundaries and beyond established traditions. As a new journal it intends to bring a renewed sense of urgency and contention to critical analysis.

Critical Horizons welcomes unsolicited manuscripts; it also will be developing themes of specific interest, and will feature a forum where social theorists reflect on new critical thought and established social-theoretical traditions. Forthcoming issues feature themes on theories of the imagination, new perspectives on nature, war and democratic states, the crisis of the university, experiments in democracy in post-communist states, love in the post-romantic age, post-metaphysical perspectives on evil, and culture and identity.

Contributors are asked to submit articles in triplicate hard copy and pro-

vide the editors with an e-mail address for correspondence. Please address correspondence to: The Editors, *Critical Horizons*, The Ashworth Centre for Social Theory, HPS Department, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3052, Australia. Telephone 61 3 9344 7287; fax 61 3 9344 7959; e-mail: critcal@hps.unimelb.edu.au. The address for subscription inquiries is: Brill Academic Publishers, 112 Water St., Suite 400, Boston, MA 02109.

Call For Papers 21st Volume of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*

Current Perspectives in Social Theory invites submissions for Volume 21, 2001. *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* is an annual publication dedicated to publishing articles across the spectrum of perspectives within social theory, conceived of in a broad and interdisciplinary sense. To submit a manuscript, send five copies and a one-page abstract to: Jennifer M. Lehmann, Editor, *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, Department of Sociology, 741 Oldfather Hall, The University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68588-0324. Submission deadline is January 31, 2000.

1999 Volume of *CPST* Now Available

With articles by *Postone* on Neo-Marxism, *Dahms* on critical theory, *Luke* on bodies and subjectivity, *Alway* on Habermas and feminism, *Chafetz* on feminist theory, *Burns* on rhetoric, *Harms* on semiotics, *Kalberg* on Weber, and *Zafirovski* on rational choice theory. This is Volume 19 in the series, and is available from JAI Press.

Integrating Knowledge within a Fragmenting Discipline

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ences because those fields are so different from our own, or should look to them to discover whatever it is that all scientists have in common? Should we follow Merton's orientation to middle-range efforts because of our relatively backward status as social scientists, or should we come to see that approach as reinforcing that backward status? Is accurate prediction what methods should point toward, or should we be

moving pragmatically toward deeper understanding? Is original research what is most important, or should secondary analysis of research already completed be our key priority?

In my own view, what we need is a direction for how every sociologist can be effective in using theory and methods to come up with important substantive findings. And there is a literature which legitimates this very broad approach to sociological theory and to the scientific method. For example, philosophers of science Duhem, Quine, Ullian, and Kincaid argue that hypotheses should not be seen in isolation from one another but rather should be seen within a "web of belief". Psychologists have pointed up the importance of relating abstract concepts to one another as a central basis for achieving "construct validity" and credibility. Sociologists such as Mills, Willer, Webster, Phillips, Lauderdale, and Wallerstein have criticized work which avoids abstract theoretical concepts and centers on the kind of specialization which fails to link with a wide range of knowledge. What these sociologists suggest is an approach to theory and to the scientific method that enables us to integrate, directly and indirectly, much of our present sociological knowledge so as to achieve far more credibility than arguments based on the support of a limited number of key figures, of a limited field within the discipline, or of a limited number of empirical studies. Rather, a web of abstract theory derived from a great many studies throughout the discipline can succeed in carrying much of the weight of our knowledge and can yield substantial credibility.

I invite any reader interested in learning about a project aimed at *demonstrating* the feasibility of this approach, using a secondary theoretical analysis or empirical data of his/her own choos-

ing, to contact me at Bernieflps@aol.com or at 105 Commercial St., Provincetown, MA 02657. I plan to edit a two-volume work encompassing a very wide range of substantive areas, "Confronting Sociology's Tower of Babel," to be developed over the next eighteen months. I am taking responsibility for obtaining a publisher (whether in my own series with Aldine de Gruyter, "Sociological Imagination & Structural Change," or with another publisher). I am also planning a two-day conference of all participants to take place in Washington, DC at the same time as the annual ASA meetings. My aim is to provide exemplars for what any sociologist might learn to do: contribute to developing a theoretical and methodological approach which yields the integration of knowledge within our Tower of Babel. I also invite critiques of this approach in the newsletter along with alternative directions for how to confront sociology's Tower of Babel in the sociological literature. I believe that there is no issue deserving debate more than this one at this time in history. •

The Last of the Aphorisms

By Murray S. Davis

- § Sociologists can tell they have uncovered something important if their findings provoke moral outrage. Otherwise the social factors they discover are more likely superficial.
- § One person's platitude is another person's sociology (and vice versa).
- § Dramaturgical sociologists are those who shout "theater" during a calamitous fire.
- § Is it possible to fall in love with a sociologist (qua sociologist) so that one "can hardly wait" for his or her next book? Can a practitioner of that most unromantic of disciplines exhibit the combination of clarity and wonder, acuity and uncertainty, intellectual strength and vulnerability, that readers find irresistible? Can readers be so attracted to some of a sociologist's ideas that they are willing to overlook, explain away, or justify the imperfections of others?

Next Issue

- Dubois is hot, formal theory is not
- Using theory text books: Section members report on whether to use them and which ones to use
- Publishing options: *The European Journal of Social Theory*
- Call for miniconference papers
- Tips on teaching theory
- Call for nominations for section awards

Essential Readings from the Graduate Student Perspective

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for sociological theory. From her somewhat unusual vantage point, she notes the following: “While list compiling may be an ego-laden exercise for tenured professors, showing off who and what they know and have read, the fact [is] that students want clear and short lists of important works.” Although we do not believe that asking for “the list”—as did Christopher Schmitt, who launched this debate—is a trick, we do think that it’s a red herring and believe that the desire of students to have a list needs to be more closely scrutinized.

Our news from the trenches is that, in a paradoxical manner, the debate about theory lists not only fails to demonstrate the importance of theory, but further marginalizes theory in American sociology. This can be seen as an outcome of the two dominant ways in which theory is approached in American sociology—if the preceding debate is any measure. The first approach, which we will call theory for theory’s sake, is characterized by the treatment of theory and knowledge of theory as ends in themselves. The second approach is a utilitarian one and is characterized by treating theory in a narrowly instrumental manner. Though quite different, both approaches to theory—coined “encyclopedic versus instrumental” in another student’s exam—fail to provide a way for fruitful integration of theory into sociology, especially in the eyes of the newcomers to the discipline, graduate students.

A central problem with the theory for theory’s sake approach is that it takes the importance of theory for sociology as self-evident. An example can perhaps be found by looking at one of the lists collected in Alan Sica’s first article. Randall Collins offered the most Herculean list, warning his students that

one ought to read at least forty or fifty classical theory books, be aware of “what is going on in the major research areas” as well as read “the best recent contributions” in order to be not only “well-educated in social theory,” but also to be considered a “serious sociologist.” A brief look at others’ lists, as well as at theory course syllabi, renders the same overwhelming feeling of the unimaginable amount of reading needed in order to be (regarded as) a

Both approaches to theory—coined “encyclopedic versus instrumental” in another student’s exam—fail to provide a way for fruitful integration of theory into sociology, especially in the eyes of the newcomers to the discipline, graduate students.

serious sociologist. By conceiving, packaging and presenting theory in the form of (a huge mass of) “classic” or “essential” books of self-evident importance, such lists still leave students wondering what relevance it has for their own research interests and agendas. Subscribers to *Perspectives* may have forgotten that much sociological theory is vaguely intelligible to quite a few sociologists and simply boring to many others. Rather than inspiring students to consider seriously the relevance of theory, one unintended consequence of “Must Lists” is furthering the belief that theory is for theorists.

Buying into the “theory for theory’s sake” approach makes those entering the field often feel an urgency to hide their perceived inadequacy by learning the theory lingo and the important names. The student we quoted from above also had this to say: “Students, sensing the importance of such knowledge, want a *quick list* of things they ought to know, to signify they are a

sociologist” (emphasis added). “Must lists,” required reading volumes and compact middle range theories—all of which in fact exempt one from any further reading—are used as an efficient remedy for this problem. But is “efficiency” efficient in sociology? If everyone reads the same ten “musts,” will it enhance sociological knowledge? Help develop a diverse and wide-ranging discipline? Formulate new theoretical questions? Facilitate the exploration of new answers? It seems unlikely.

Those suspicious of the “theory-for-theory’s-sake” approach—or bored by it—counter it with a utilitarian approach, defined in opposition to the former. If theory is not presented as a list of great men who thought great things, then it is introduced as

a “tool of explanation”—an instrument that can be detached from its context, as suggested by Andrew Abbott’s discussion of using “theory proper in small doses and for particular reasons.” Or, others, such as Janet Chafetz, advocate teaching “closely tailored” theory in a way that will make it “useful” to applied researchers. We do not doubt the importance of perceiving theory and empirical research as inseparable. We do, however, doubt that it can be done by treating theory in an instrumental way, which may lead one to reify middle range theory and perceive it as the only form of theorizing relevant for empirically oriented science, rendering meta-theoretical questions irrelevant and useless. When this approach is taken to its extreme, it can lead people to believe that the theories which do exist hinder us from seeing society “as it is.” First study society, then theorize, they say. This view can lead one to use theories without being aware of it, as

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Lists and Lists in Search of Questions

TOP TEN DEBATE *from Page 7*

exemplified by rational choice's "common sense" understanding of social life in lieu of theory (See Margaret Somers, in the recent debate held in *AJS*, 1998:722-784). Not only is it intellectually disingenuous to suppose that even the most grounded and empirically focused sociologists aren't guided—wittingly or otherwise—by theoretical assumptions, but it is also unwise (or inefficient) to go through the trouble of reinventing key theoretical debates.

Thus far, we have presented two forces leading to the marginalization of theory in American sociology. On the one hand, the "theory for theory's sake" approach presents theory in a hagiographic manner and forgets that it must convince new recruits of the importance and relevance of theory to sociological research beyond its usefulness in self-referential debates or for impressing professors at the annual departmental party. On the other hand, the utilitarian approach promotes an overly instrumental view of what counts as theory or discounts its usefulness altogether. We contend that both of these approaches lead graduate students to desire lists (and professors to desire to supply them). Both approaches end up fencing theory in a narrowly defined realm, providing a quick solution to students' problems: either they need a list of obligatory symbolic capital and canonized knowledge, or else they just can't see the point of it all and want to be told what to read (keep the list short, please) so they can get back to SPSS.

Our alternative lies elsewhere. We contend that the question is less "what theory" but "why theory." Students will find their own lists when they are enthusiastic about looking for them. But, how to create that enthusiasm? It isn't enough to open a theory text, point to it, say "isn't it beautiful?" and expect a

student to pick and choose or to become lost in "the dreamy realities of human affairs" (Abbott, October 1998). Of course, there will be students who are immediately interested in theory and need no further inspiration. But if that percentage remains the same, then the marginalized state of theory in American sociology is unlikely to improve.

The primary question for reflecting on the means of correct training in sociological theory should thus not be which

The question is less "what theory" but "why theory." Students will find their own lists when they are enthusiastic about looking for them.

books must be read, but rather which *ideas* and debates should be examined, as we experienced in Michèle Lamont's theory seminar for instance (covering theoretical debates by reading Hechter/Kiser vs. Margaret Somers, Pakulski and Waters vs. E.O. Wright, Goffman vs. Tilly, and so on). Moreover, we contend that what is at issue is not just which ideas are introduced (because then we could just start another list), but how those ideas are introduced to those of us who aspire to be serious, but not flagellant, sociologists. One way to start is to realize that a list of important texts, and the quasi-religious exegesis of the founding texts ("and then Weber spoke unto the people thusly, saying..."), presents students with ready-made answers and settled controversies, while at the same time unnecessarily circumscribing the set of questions that can be raised. Let's assume that we (as graduate students in sociology) have a genuine interest in the subject. Instead of provoking us into sociological debates, our list-builder-

teachers are providing us with ready-made answers, sometimes without mentioning the questions they address. If Adam Smith is on a list (Donald Levine's) why does Marx not appear on the same one? They both provide different answers to a similar sociological question. Is one answer better than the other? Should we thus add Marx to the list? And then what about Durkheim? He, too, had a take on questions of social order and social stability. And when all our (male and western) theoretical canons are listed, can we be assured that the full array of answers has been covered? It seems that the solution lies somewhere else. Not in providing answers, but in asking questions that are common to the sociological endeavor, to all those who consider themselves to be serious sociologists. Explicating and formulating the questions and problematics that drew us to the discipline in the first place may give us the chance to read theory as an array of answers—in search of our own. Of course we need to know who asked the questions, in which historical context they have been asked, what answers have been found both empirically and theoretically (again, in what context and by whom) as well as how and why the debates have changed over the years. By focusing on the debated questions and contested concepts of theory, by presenting theory as alive and unsettled as opposed to being in the state of dead letters—i.e. institutionalized texts and lists, detached from their own sociological context—we believe it will become less necessary to justify the utility of theory or to construct any list, since the approach we are advocating creates a mechanism for perpetuating the sociological interest/imagination. Any questions?

Note: The authors thank Michèle Lamont for her inspiration and assistance. •