



21st Century Sociology

Sociological Theory in the 21st Century

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Theoretical sociology has differentiated into ever more schools of thought over the last 40 years, a trend that is facilitated by the lack of “grand theories” that seek to integrate more specialized theoretical programs. Differentiation is furthered by a lack of consensus over the very nature of theorizing in sociology, with the major fault lines of debate revolving around whether or not sociology can be a natural science. Without a commitment to a common epistemology or a core canon of early theoretical works, an increasing number of theoretical perspectives has emerged from a small early base of theories and philosophies—functionalism, conflict theory, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and phenomenology. And as theories continue to proliferate, the hope of ever reaching a consensus over the key properties of the social universe and the best epistemology for studying these properties has begun to fade. Moreover, there are now many highly specialized theories emerging out of research traditions that are only loosely affiliated with theories built from the ideas of the founding generation.

It is not a simple task, therefore, to survey theoretical sociology at the beginning of the current century. The best that can be done is to focus on the more general theoretical schemes that built on the early legacy provided by the founding generations of sociologists. These are the theories that dominate theoretical sociology.

The Rise and Fall of Functional Theory

Sociology's first theoretical approach was decidedly functional, examining social structures and processes for how they meet postulated needs and requisites necessary for societal survival. Both Auguste Comte (1896 [1830–1842]) and Herbert Spencer (1898 [1874–1896]) drew an organismic analogy calling attention to the systemic qualities of the social universe and to the functions of parts for maintenance of social systems. For Spencer, there were four basic problems that all systems, including organismic and societal, had to resolve: production, reproduction, regulation, and distribution. Later, Émile Durkheim ([1893] 1947) postulated only one master functional requisite: the need for sociocultural integration.

Functional theorizing might have died with Durkheim and the abandonment of Spencer's evolutionism were it not for anthropologists, particularly A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Bronislaw Malinowski ([1944] 1964), who carried functionalism to the midpoint of the twentieth century. Since preliterate societies had no written history that could be used to explain the origins of cultural features of these societies, assessing the function of a particular cultural pattern for the survival of the society became another way to “explain” why a particular cultural pattern existed (Turner and Maryanski 1979). Radcliffe-Brown (1952) followed Durkheim's lead and analyzed cultural patterns, such as kinship, for how they resolve integrative problems in preliterate societies, whereas Malinowski adopted Spencer's more analytical strategy, emphasizing that social reality exists at different system levels (biological organism, social structure, and culture) and that each level of reality has certain functional requisites that must be met if that system level is to be viable in its environment.

It is this latter form of analytical functionalism that came to dominate sociological theory in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, primarily through the work of Talcott Parsons (1951) and colleagues (Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953; Parsons and Smelser 1956). For Parsons, social reality consists of four action systems (behavioral organism, personality, social, and cultural), and each system must meet four fundamental requisites: (1) adaptation (taking in resources, converting them into usable commodities, and distributing them); (2) goal attainment (establishing goals and mobilizing resources to meet these goals); (3) integration (coordination and control among system parts); and (4) latency (reproducing system units and resolving tensions within them). Each action system was analyzed by Parsons in terms of how it meets these requisites; later, Parsons began to explore the input-output relations among the action systems. Near the end of analytical functionalism's brief dominance of sociological theorizing, particularly in the United States, Parsons (1966) posited a cybernetic hierarchy of control among the action systems, with those high in information (culture) providing guidance for those action systems lower in the hierarchy. Energy was seen as rising up the

hierarchy from the behavioral organism through personality and social system to culture, while information from culture guided the organization of status roles in social systems, the motivated actions of the personality system, and the mobilization of energy in the organismic system. At the very end of Parsons's (1978) reign as the leading theorist in the world—indeed, not long before his death—he posited a view of the entire universe as four systems meeting the four functional requisites (a strategy that harkened back to Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy, where physics, biology, psychology, sociology, and ethics could be analyzed in terms of the same elementary principles of evolution).

Functionalism came under increasing attack from many quarters by the early 1960s. From philosophy, the idea that system parts should be analyzed in terms of their functions will produce illegitimate teleologies (outcomes cause the very events that lead to these outcomes) or tautologies (circular arguments in which parts meet needs and needs cause parts to emerge). On a more substantive level, the rise of conflict theories (or their resurrection) in the 1960s led critics to argue that functionalism produced a theory supporting the status quo because, in essence, it argued that existing structures must exist to meet needs for survival (Dahrendorf 1958)—a line of argument that biases inquiry against searches for alternative structures.

Functionalism did not completely die, however, because there are many scholars, especially in Europe (e.g., Münch 1987, 2001), who continue to use Parsonsian categories to perform functional analysis, while others retain the emphasis on systems without the same elaborate taxonomy revolving around multiple-system requisites (e.g., Luhmann 1982). In the United States, a brief neofunctionalist movement occurred in which theorists (e.g., Alexander 1985; Alexander and Colomy 1985) abandoned the notion of functional requisites and, instead, focused on the strong points of functionalism: the emphasis on structural differentiation and the integrative effects of culture. Neofunctionalism was not functional, for all its other merits, because what makes functionalism distinctive is the view that social structures and systems of cultural symbols exist because they meet fundamental needs or requisites for survival (Turner and Maryanski 1988).

Another effort to save what is important in functional theory revolves around viewing functional requisites as forces that generate selection pressures for social systems. For example, Jonathan Turner (1995) argues that human social systems are driven by forces—much like the forces such as gravity in physics and natural selection in biology—that push populations to organize in certain ways or suffer the disintegrative consequences. Many of these forces overlap with what hard-core functionalists have seen as survival requisites. Thus, for Turner, regulation, reproduction, distribution, production, and population drive the formation of macro-level institutional systems; differentiation and integrative forces drive meso-level formations of corporate units like organizations and categoric units such as social and ethnic classes (Turner and Boyns 2001); and another set of forces direct the flow of micro-level interpersonal behavior in encounters (Turner 2002). Such an approach is no longer functional because needs or requisites are not posited, but the approach still retains the appeal of functionalism: analysis of how the universal forces apply selection pressures on populations. Other theorists working from different theoretical traditions have also begun to pursue this selectionist line of theorizing (e.g., Runciman 1989; Sanderson 1995).

The Persistence of Ecological Theorizing

In the works of both Spencer and Durkheim can be found the essence of an ecological theory. Both argued that as populations grow, competition for resources increases, setting into motion selection pressures. Spencer's famous phrase "survival of the fittest" (uttered some nine years before Darwin's theory was presented) captures some of this view; those individuals and social structures revealing properties that allow them to secure resources in their environment will survive, while those that do not will be selected out. Durkheim took a more benign view of selection, arguing that if individuals and collective actors cannot secure resources in one resource niche, they will seek resources elsewhere, thus increasing the level of specialization (or social speciation) or differentiation in a society. Thus, from the very beginnings of sociological theorizing, social differentiation has been seen as an outcome of niche density and competition for resources.

The arguments of Spencer and Durkheim were downsized between the 1920s and 1940s by the Chicago School in the United States (e.g., Hoyt 1939; Park 1936). While the members of the department of sociology at Chicago pursued many diverse lines of research, one persistent theme was to view urban areas as a kind of

ecosystem, with competition among diverse actors (individuals with varying incomes and ethnic backgrounds as well as varying business and governmental actors) for urban space. Their competition is institutionalized by real estate markets; fueled by these markets, the patterns of control of urban space, the movement of individuals and corporate actors in and out of urban space, and the overall distribution of actors across urban areas can be analyzed with ecological principles. Today, this tradition still operates under the label of urban or human ecology (e.g., Frisbie and Kasarda 1988); it has consistently proven a useful theoretical orientation in understanding processes of urbanization and differentiation within urban areas.

In the 1970s, a new type of ecological analysis, one that focused on the ecology of organizations (Hannan and Freeman 1977), emerged. All organizations can be viewed as existing in a niche, where they seek resources (customers, clients, students, memberships, or any other resource needed to sustain an organization). Once an organization sustains itself in a resource niche, other organizations enter this niche and, in so doing, increase the density of organizations. Thus, the number of organizations in a niche will initially increase, but eventually, niche density becomes so great that selection pressures lead to the “death” of those organizations unable to secure resources or, alternatively, to their migration to a new niche where they can sustain themselves. More than urban ecology, organizational ecology borrowed self-consciously from bioecology, transferring many concepts from ecological analysis in biology to sociology. And perhaps more than urban ecology, organizational ecology remains one of the dominant approaches to understanding the structure and distribution of organizational systems in societies (Carroll 1988).

As urban and organizational ecology flourished, one of the carriers of this tradition from the Chicago School, Amos Hawley (1986), began to move the ecological analysis from the meso level (urban areas and organizations) back to macro-level societal dynamics. In essence, Hawley completed a conceptual odyssey to Spencer's and Durkheim's macro-level ecological theorizing, adding new refinements. For Hawley, technology as it affects productivity, modes of transportation, communication systems, and markets will lower mobility costs (for moving people, information, and resources) across space; and as mobility costs decrease, differentiation among corporate units (organizations revealing a division of labor) increases. Differentiation is also influenced by the capacity of the state to control territories, manage capital investments in the economy, regulate markets, and encourage technological development. When centers of power can effectively accomplish these goals, mobility costs are lowered and sociocultural differentiation increases. With increased differentiation, new integrative problems inevitably arise, often posing threats to centers of power that, in turn, lower the capacity of the state to control territories and otherwise act in ways that make markets more dynamic, that increase productivity, that expand transportation, and that extend communication. Thus, the ebb and flow of differentiation in a society is mediated by the operation of centers of power as these centers raise or lower mobility costs. Thus, the legacy of Spencer and Durkheim is very much alive in modern macro-level ecological theorizing. Others (e.g., Turner 1994, 1995) have also followed Hawley's lead in carrying forward Spencer's and Durkheim's macro-level ecological theory.

The Challenge of Biosocial Theorizing

The persistence of Darwinian ideas in ecological theorizing has been supplemented in recent decades by another type of Darwinian theory: sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Both of these approaches emphasize that humans are animals whose phenotypes (physiology as well as behavioral capacities and propensities) are influenced by their genotypes (genetic makeup) as this genotype has been honed by the forces of biological evolution (natural selection, gene flow, genetic drift, and mutation). This approach has been highly threatening to many sociologists because it is often interpreted as a new form of biological determinism that reduces understanding of culture and social structures to genetically driven behavioral propensities. Some of this skepticism was appropriate because early sociobiologists often made rather extreme statements (e.g., Wilson 1975). The basic argument of sociobiology is that behavioral propensities, culture, and social structure are, in essence, “survivor machines” that keep genes responsible for these propensities in the gene pool (Dawkins 1976). If particular behavioral proclivities and the sociocultural arrangements arising from these proclivities enable individuals to reproduce, they operate to maintain the genes of these individuals in the gene pool. Thus, behavioral strategies, social structures, and culture are survival machines, driven by “blind” natural selection to preserve those genes that enhance reproductive fitness (Williams 1966).

Evolutionary psychology (Cosmides 1989; Cosmides and Tooby 1989) adds to this line of argument the notion that there are “modules” in the brain that direct behaviors. These modules have been created by the forces of evolution as they have worked on the neurology of phenotypes (and the underlying genotype) to install behavioral propensities that enhance fitness. For evolutionary psychology, then, universal behaviors are driven by brain modules, as these have been honed by the forces of evolution (Savage and Kanazawa 2004).

These biosocial approaches represent a new way to address a topic that was often part of classical sociological theory: human instincts. Most early theorists had some vision of human instincts, but these views were often vague and disconnected to evolutionary biology. Bio-sociology offers a more sophisticated way to examine what is “natural” to humans as evolved apes, although the number of scholars pursuing this line of theorizing is comparatively small (but growing slowly). What this type of theorizing offers is a chance to reconnect sociology and biology in ways somewhat reminiscent of Comte's and Spencer's advocacy. (For sociological efforts to develop bio-sociology, see Horne 2004; Lopreato 2001; Lopreato and Crippen 1999; Machalek and Martin 2004; van den Berghe 1981.)

The Revival of Stage Models of Evolution

Comte, Spencer, Marx, and, to a lesser extent, Durkheim all presented stage models that saw the history of human society as passing through discrete stages of development. These models were, in a sense, descriptive because they reviewed the features of societal types, from simple hunting and gathering through horticulture and variants of horticulture like herding and fishing to agriculture and on to industrialism (post-industrialism was added later as a stage by contemporary sociologists, as was a postmodern stage by other sociologists). Yet these descriptions of societal evolution were always seen as driven by some fundamental forces, converting descriptions of stages into theories about the forces driving movement from one stage to another. For Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim, the driving force was population growth as it unleashed the ecological dynamics summarized above. Moreover, Spencer in particular saw war as an evolutionary force because those societies that won wars were generally better organized (economically, politically, and culturally) than those that were conquered, with the result that winners of wars constantly ratcheted up the complexity of human societies through the evolutionary stages that Spencer described in great detail. For Marx, the driving force of history revolved around changes in technologies and modes of production as these worked to generate “contradictions” that led to class conflict. For two thirds of the twentieth century, stage model evolutionary theory remained recessive. But in the 1960s, it was revived not only by Parsons (1966) in his later works but more significantly by Gerhard Lenski (1966) in his analysis of stratification systems. And later, neo-Marxian approaches like world-systems theorizing (see below) often imply a stage of societal evolution (Sanderson 1999; Wallerstein 1974).

These more recent models of societal evolution avoid the problems of early models, such as seeing each stage of evolution as inevitable and as marching toward an end state personified by Western European countries. Instead, more generic forces such as environment, demographic features (population size, characteristics, and rate of growth), technologies (economic and military), dynamism of markets, levels of production of material goods and services, properties and dynamics of stratification systems, and nature of institutional systems are all seen as interacting in complex ways to drive the structure and culture of societies. Few theories would posit one master force as driving evolution; instead, sets of forces are highlighted in various theories.

Lenski (1966), often in collaboration with others (e.g., Nolan and Lenski 2004), emphasizes the effects of technology (knowledge as it is used to increase production), but these effects are influenced by other forces, particularly the biosocial environment, nature of cultural symbols (values and ideologies), population size and rate of growth, institutional systems (kinship, religion, education, and polity), and patterns of war. Larger populations in stable and resource-rich environments, revealing liberal ideologies encouraging technological innovation, and institutional systems that do not discourage innovations or divert resources away from the economy and that limit warfare will become more complex and able to adapt to their environments. Stephen K. Sanderson (1995) blends ideas from bio-sociology and Marxian analysis, stressing that natural selection still works on individuals (rather than on society as a whole), but like Lenski, he stresses that societies are driven by demographic, ecological, technological, economic, and political forces. And like all Marxists,

Sanderson emphasizes the material conditions of life—production and distribution—as the base that drives the development of cultural ideologies, political systems, interactions with the ecosystem, and relations with other societies.

While all present-day evolutionary theories stress that it is possible for de-evolution to occur (as Spencer had also argued), they tend to see a direction to evolution toward greater complexity, higher rates of innovation, and increased interdependence among societies connected by global markets. And most theorists would argue implicitly that if human evolution were to be restarted, it would pass through the same evolutionary stages from hunting and gathering to post-industrialism. The virtue of theorizing on stages of evolution is the time perspective gained, with contemporary social formations seen as the outcome of a long evolutionary history driven by a few fundamental forces.

The Revival of Conflict Theorizing

Both Karl Marx (Marx and Engels [1847] 1970) and Max Weber [1922] (1968) posited a conflict view of the social world. Each argued that inequalities generate tensions that, under specifiable conditions, increase the probability (for Marx, a certainty) that subordinates in the system of inequality will become mobilized to engage in conflict with superordinates in an effort to redistribute resources. Marx and Weber presented a similar list of conditions: High levels of inequality, large discontinuities between classes, and low rates of social mobility across classes all set the stage for the emergence of leaders who would articulate a revolutionary ideology. Each added refinements to this general model, but they both saw inequality as potentially unleashing forces that lead subordinates to pursue conflict.

Conflict theorizing remained prominent for most of the twentieth century in Europe, but in the United States, it was recessive until the 1960s. Partly emboldened by the European critique of functionalism and by the demise of McCarthyism in the United States as well as by protests against the Vietnam War, conflict theory supplanted functionalism as the dominant theoretical orientation by the 1970s, although today the conflict approach is so integrated into mainstream sociological theorizing that it no longer stands out as a distinctive approach. The essence of conflict theories is the recognition that social reality is organized around inequalities in the distribution of valued resources such as material wealth, power, and prestige and that these inequalities systematically generate tensions, which under specifiable conditions generate various forms of conflict between those who have and those who do not have these valued resources. At first, the conflict theory revival was used as a foil against the perceived conservative bias of functionalism, but over the decades as conflict theory prospered, it developed a number of distinctive variants.

Abstracted Marxism

The first variant of conflict theory sought to make the theory more abstract, drawing from Marx's analysis of class conflict and extending it to all social systems where inequalities of authority exist (Dahrendorf 1959). This approach took what was useful from Marx, modified the Marxian model with ideas from Weber and Georg Simmel, and generated an abstract theory of conflict in all social systems. In the several versions of this abstracted Marxism (Dahrendorf 1959; Turner 1975), the conditions generating awareness among subordinates of their interests in changing the system inequality are delineated, and these follow from Marx but add the important proviso that the more organized are subordinates, the less likely they are to engage in violent conflict (instead, they will negotiate and compromise). Indeed, in contrast to Marx, these approaches argue that incipient organization, emerging ideologies, and early leadership will lead to open and often violent conflict, whereas high levels of political organization, clearly articulated ideologies, and established leaders lead to negotiation and compromise, a line of theoretical argument that goes against Marx but takes into account Weber's [1922] (1968) and Simmel's [1907] (1990) critiques of Marx.

Analytical Marxism

Another variant of Marxism is what Erik Olin Wright (1997) has termed analytical Marxism, an approach that incorporates many of the key ideas of Marxian theory on the dynamics of capitalism while trying to explain with

an expanded set of concepts the problems in Marx's approach, particularly (1) the failure of industrial societies to polarize, (2) the lack of revolutionary conflict in industrial societies, (3) the rise of the state as a source of employment (thus making problematic whether government workers are proletarians or state managers), (4) the expansion of the middle classes in industrial and postindustrial societies, (5) the contradictory class locations of individuals in industrial and post-industrial societies (as both workers and managers), (6) the multiple-class locations of many families (where one person is a manager or owner, while another is a wage worker), and (7) the blurring of class distinctions as some skilled blue-collar workers become high wage earners or even owners of highly profitable small businesses, while many white-collar workers become lower-wage proletarians in service industries.

These and other events that have gone against Marx's predictions have troubled present-day Marxists (for a review, see Burawoy and Wright 2001), and so they have set about revitalizing Marxian theory to explain contemporary conditions. In Wright's (1997) version of analytical Marxism, for example, a distinction between economic power (control of others and the ability to extract their economic surplus) and economic welfare (ratio of toil in work to leisure time), coupled with people's "lived experiences" and contradictory class location, dramatically changes the nature of exploitation and, hence, individuals' awareness of their interests and willingness to engage in collective organization. Moreover, the notion of "ownership" and "control" is broadened to include four basic types of assets: labor-power assets, capital assets (to invest in economic activity and extract surplus value), organizational assets (to manage and control others and thereby extract surplus), and skill or credential assets (to extract resources beyond the labor necessary to acquire skills and credentials). Depending on the nature and level of any of these assets for individuals and families, the rate of exploitation will vary, being highest among those who have only labor assets and lowest among those who have the other types of assets. Additionally, Wright has sought to account for the fact that the state employs a significant proportion of the workforce yet cannot be seen as part of the bourgeoisie. Here, Wright emphasizes a "state mode of production" made possible by the resources that come from taxes, tariffs, and fees; and from this mode of production comes conflicts between managers, who ally themselves with capitalists and political decision makers, on the one side, and government workers, who provide the actual services, on the other. These two classes of workers in government reveal conflicting class interests and, hence, increased potential for class conflict. In the end, Wright and other analytical Marxists work hard to retain the basic concern with emancipation of subordinates in Marx's thinking while adjusting Marxian concepts to fit the reality of postindustrial societies.

World-Systems Theory

This approach retains many ideas from Marx on the dynamics of capitalism but shifts the unit of analysis from nation-state to systems of societies and globalization (Chase-Dunn 2001). Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) codified this mode of analysis, building on earlier work by dependency theorists (e.g., Frank 1969), into a conceptualization of world systems. One type of global system is a world empire revolving around conquest and extraction of resources from the conquered, which are then spent on elite privilege, control, and further conquest. Such systems eventually face fiscal crises, leading to showdown wars with other expanding empires. Of more interest to world-systems theorists like Wallerstein is a world economy driven not only by war but also by the flow of capital and technology through world markets. Such world economies are composed of (1) "core states," which have power, capital, and technology; (b) "peripheral states," which have inexpensive labor, natural resources, and insufficient power to stop their conquest, colonization, and exploitation; and (c) "semiperipheral states," having some economic development and military power, which, over time, can allow them to become part of the core. Thus, for world-systems theorists, the core is seen to exploit the periphery, frequently aided by the semiperiphery, with analysis emphasizing the economic cycles of varying duration (Juglar, Kuznet, and Kondratief cycles) and the flow of resources from periphery to core. From such exploitation, conflict within and between societies can emerge. There are many variants of world-systems theory, which adopt the broad strokes of Wallerstein's approach but emphasize somewhat different dynamics. For example, Christopher Chase-Dunn (1998) introduces new variables, such as population growth, intensification of production and environmental degradation, and immigration and emigration processes, to world-system dynamics leading to conflict within and between nations (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997). Thus, Marxian ideas have been given new life by the shift to globalization.

Abstracted Weberianism

Just as Marx's ideas have been abstracted and extended, so Weber's analysis of conflict has been converted to more general and abstract theories of conflict. Randall Collins (1975, 1986), for example, has blended Weber's analysis of domination with ideas from other theoretical traditions. Collins (1981) argues that macro-level social structures like organizations and stratification systems are built from micro-level interaction rituals that sustain class cultures, authority systems in organizations, and inequalities in resources. People carry varying levels of cultural capital, emotional energy, material wealth, prestige, and power; and they use these resources in face-to-face interaction, with those high in these resources generally able to dominate others and augment their shares of resources. True to his Weberian roots, Collins then analyzes the varying cultures of social classes, the power of the state, the ideologies used to legitimate state power, the economy, and even the geopolitics between nations in terms of the relative resources of actors. Those who receive deference because of their resources will have different cultures and orientations than those who must give deference; the nature of control in organizational systems will vary depending on the relative reliance on coercion, material resources, or symbolic resources; the scale of the state depends on a surplus of economic resources, the degree of consensus over symbols, and the ability to use resources to expand the administrative and coercive bases of power; and geopolitics will reflect the technological, productive, geographical, and military advantages of states. Thus, like Marx, Weber's ideas stand at the core of new forms of conflict theorizing.

Historical-Comparative Analysis

The ideas of Marx and Weber are often combined in historical-comparative analysis of conflict processes. These analyses tend to focus on several classes of historical events, particularly the rise of democracies, revolutionary conflict, and empire formation and collapse. All of these theories focus on the state and the mobilization of masses (and often factions of elites) for conflict against the state. There are two lines of argument in these theories. One lists the conditions that lead masses and elites to mobilize for conflict against the state, while the other specifies the forces weakening the state's power and its capacity to repress dissent and conflict (Li and Turner 1998). The first line of argument owes more inspiration to Marx, and to a lesser extent to Weber, while the second is more indebted to Weber than to Marx. Some adopt Marx's ideas and extend them to nonindustrial societies, as is the case with Jeffrey Paige's (1975) analysis of agrarian revolutions in which cultivators (agricultural workers) and noncultivators (owners of land and their allies in government) evidence a clear conflict of interest, with revolution most likely when cultivators can communicate, develop ideologies, and mobilize for collective action and when non-cultivators do not enjoy large resource advantages over cultivators. Barrington Moore's (1966) analysis of the rise of democracy employs an argument very similar to that developed by abstracted Marxian theories, emphasizing that subordinates can effectively engage in conflict when they live in propinquity, communicate, avoid competition with each other, and perceive that they are being exploited by elites who no longer honor traditional forms of relations with subordinates (primarily because of the effects of markets in breaking down traditional patterns of social relations). Charles Tilly (1978, 1993) similarly develops a model of resource mobilization that draws from Marx and Weber, emphasizing that when subordinates have been kept out of the political arena, when segments of elites have similarly been disenfranchised, and when the state has been weakened (due to fiscal crises, inefficient tax collection, and poor administration), mobilization for conflict is likely. Theda Skocpol's (1979) analysis of revolution draws from Weber the effects of losing prestige in the world system, which comes with defeat in war, coupled with fiscal crises, which give subordinates opportunities to mobilize for conflict. Jack Goldstone (1991) introduces a demographic variable into these theories of revolutionary conflict, arguing that population growth will over the course of a century cause price inflation, displacement of peasants from the land, urban migrations, disaffection of some elites, and fiscal crises for the state. In turn, these lagged outcomes of population growth weaken the power of the state to repress mobilizations by peasants, migrations of restive peasants to urban areas, and disaffection of some elites. Finally, Randall Collins (1986) develops a Weber-inspired model of empire formation, arguing that expansion of empires increases when a society has a marchland advantage (natural barriers protecting its backside and flanks) and when, compared with its neighbors, it has a larger population, greater wealth, higher levels of productivity, more advanced technologies, and better-organized armies. But, as the empire expands, it will eventually lose its marchland and military advantages (as enemies copy its technology) while increasing its logistical

loads to sustain the empire. Eventually, an empire will have a showdown war with another empire, causing it to collapse and implode back to its original home base. As is evident, then, Marx and Weber's theoretical legacy lives on in yet another theoretical venue, historical-comparative analysis of state and empire formation, revolutionary conflict, and war.

Critical Theorizing

From sociology's very beginnings, thinkers have often argued that sociology could be used to reconstruct society. Comte, for example, viewed positivism as a means for creating a better society, but his approach as well as that of his followers, such as Spencer and Durkheim, was not sufficiently critical of the condition of early industrial societies. Instead, it was Marx's critique of the evils of capitalism that pushed for a critical edge to theorizing, but as critical theorists in the early twentieth century sought to retain the emancipatory thrust of Marx's ideas, they had to take into account Weber's prediction that the state would increasingly dominate social relations through rational legal authority.

At the University of Frankfurt, early critical theorists like Max Horkheimer ([1947] 1972, [1947] 1974) and Theodor Adorno [1966] (1973) emphasized that critical theory must describe the social forces that work against human freedom and expose the ideological justifications of these forces. Theorists must confront each other, debating ideas, and from these debates "truth" will emerge, but this truth is not that of science but a practical knowledge that comes from human struggles against the forces of oppression. Others in the Frankfurt School, as it became known, took a more idealist turn. György Lukács [1922] (1968), for example, borrowed from Marx the idea of the "fetishism of commodities" and converted it into a notion of "reification" in which all objects, including people, become commodities to be marketed, whose worth is determined by their "exchange value," another concept taken from Marx and Adam Smith ([1776] 1976). Lukács saw this process of reification to be an evolutionary trend, coming to a similar conclusion as Weber's "steel cage" argument, but he proposed a way out: There are limits to how far human consciousness will tolerate reification, and so it is necessary to unlock this innate source of resistance to reification—a theoretical position that pushes critical theory into subjectivism.

Outside the Frankfurt School proper, critical theory also took a cultural turn. For example, in Italy, Antonio Gramsci [1928] (1971) returned to the early Marx, where the importance of ideology was emphasized in the critique of the Young Hegelians. For Gramsci, the power of the state is used to manipulate workers and others through the propagation of ideologies about civic culture that are seemingly inoffensive but that nonetheless become the dominant views of even those who are oppressed. Thus, workers come to believe in the appropriateness of markets, the commodification of objects and symbols, the buying and selling of labor as a commodity, the rule of law to enforce contracts unfavorable to workers, the encouragement of private charities (rather than structural reform) to eliminate suffering, the curriculum in schools, the state's definition of a "good citizen," and many other taken-for-granted beliefs of the oppressed population. Thus, the state controls a population not so much by a "steel cage" of repression and rational-legal domination as by a "soft" world of symbols that the oppressed accept as "natural and appropriate"—a more sophisticated version of Marx's arguments about "false consciousness." In France, Louis Althusser (1965) adopted a structuralist metaphor, seeing the individual as trapped in a "deeper" structural order dominated by the state, capitalist economic relations, and capitalist ideologies; and because people see this order as the way things must be, they do not perceive that they can escape from this structure. By failing to see the state and ideology as crude tools of power and by seeing self as subordinate to deep structures directing all social life, individuals come to believe that resistance to these oppressive structures is futile.

The tradition of the Frankfurt School has been carried forth by a number of scholars, the most notable being Jurgen Habermas (1981/1984), who begins by seeing science as one form of domination as the state propagates an ideology revolving around "technocratic consciousness." Habermas develops a broad evolutionary view of human history, incorporating theoretical elements from many contemporary theoretical traditions, but the basic argument is that the "lifeworld" (an idea borrowed from phenomenology) is being "colonized" by the state and economy; as this process proceeds, people's capacity for "communicative action" is reduced. For Habermas, communicative action is the process whereby meanings are formed, creating the lifeworld that is the principal means of integration for societies. As the lifeworld is colonized, the reproduction of the lifeworld is interrupted; and societal integration is maintained only by "delinguistified media" such as

money and power. Habermas develops a larger philosophical scheme, but his arguments carry forth the legacy of the Frankfurt School.

Within the United States, the issues raised by the old and new Frankfurt School, and those outside Germany working with its legacy, have been less influential than the rise of a wide variety of more specific critical approaches. These critical approaches often borrow from Marx and philosophy, but they owe more inspiration to prominent social movements, particularly the civil rights and women's movements. These theories are generally philosophical, often anti-science, and critical of the social relations and ideologies that oppress specific subpopulations, such as members of ethnic minorities, women, and workers. Over the last two decades, this line of theorizing, if it can be called theory proper, has gained a strong foothold not only in sociology but also in many other disciplines such as English. Just how successful these ideologically loaded "theories" will be in the next decades is an open question, although they are now well established throughout academia and thus have a resource base that can sustain them. The result is that the debate of earlier generations of sociologists over the prospects for scientific theorizing has taken on a new polemical intensity, exceeding by far the comparatively muted debates among the founding generation of sociologists over the prospects for scientific sociology.

Postmodern Theorizing

One of the most prominent new lines of theorizing in sociology is postmodernism, which, like critical theories, tends to be hostile to science (Lyotard 1979; Rorty 1979) and often takes a cultural turn from its Marxist origins. Economic postmodernism draws ideas not only from Marx but also from early theorists who were concerned about the "pathologies" of modernization, whereas cultural postmodernism emphasizes the increasing dominance of culture at the same time that symbols have become fragmented, commodified, and at times trivialized in ways that make individuals overly reflexive and unable to sustain a stable identity. Both economic and cultural postmodernists emphasize the dramatic transformations that come with global markets driven by capitalism; indeed, these transformations are so fundamental as to mark a new stage of human evolution: the postmodern.

Economic postmodernists stress particular dimensions of the transformation that come with globalization (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984; Lash and Urry 1987). One point of emphasis is the effect of high volume, velocity, and global markets fueled by advertising. The result has been the commodification of objects, people, and, most important, cultural symbols that are ripped from their indigenous locations, commodified, and marketed across the globe. Marxist-oriented postmodernists, who often overlap with world-systems theorists, emphasize the rapid movement of capital over the world and its deconcentration from historical centers of capital. Advances in transportation and communication technology have also compressed time and space in ways that facilitate the flow not only of capital but also of goods, people, and symbols around the globe. Finally, economic postmodernists tend to emphasize the growing dominance of imaging technologies of reproduction over those for production.

Cultural postmodernists focus on the consequences of the transformations described by economic postmodernists (Baudrillard 1981/1994; Gergen 1991; Kellner 1995). The first significant consequence is the increasing dominance of culture and symbols over material structures. People increasingly live in a world of fragmented symbols, which has more impact on their identities and behaviors than material conditions. The increase in the power of culture is made possible by media technologies and markets that detach culture from local groups, local time, and local space and that send commodified cultural elements via media technologies or via markets around the global system. Indeed, humans live in a simulated world of symbolizations of symbols, viewed through the eyeglass of the media (Baudrillard 1981/1994). As a result of its detachment from its material base and free-floating signifiers, culture loses its capacity to provide stable meanings for individuals. As an outcome of this inability of culture to provide meanings and anchorage of individuals in local groups, self becomes more salient than group, leading to increased reflexivity about self in an endless loop of searching for meanings and for a true sense of self. Thus, at the very time that self is ascendant, it reveals less stability, coherence, and viability.

These themes in contemporary postmodern theory can all be found in the founding generations of sociologists. For example, Durkheim's concern over anomie and egoism; Marx's views on alienation;

Simmel's analysis of the marginal and fractured self; Smith's, Comte's, Spencer's, and Durkheim's concerns about the differentiation and fragmentation of society; Weber's portrayal of rationalization and emphasis on efficiency over other types of action; Marx's and the later critical theorists' view of the power of ideology; and many other "pathologies" of modern societies that early theorists emphasized have all been recast in postmodern theory. In a very real sense, then, postmodern theorizing represents an extension of the concerns of early theorists about the effects of modernization on society and humans. Yet much postmodern theory consists of conjectures that have not been seriously tested, although many postmodernists, particularly the cultural postmodernists, would consider empirical tests in the mode of science to impose a "failed epistemology" on their modes of inquiry. Moreover, a great deal of postmodern theory overlaps with critical theorizing because few consider the "postmodern condition" to be a good thing; thus, postmodernism is heavily ideological in critiquing the contemporary world, often assuming implicitly that human nature has somehow been violated.

Like critical theorizing, postmodern theory is part of a much larger intellectual and cultural movement that extends across disciplines as diverse as architecture, social sciences, and the humanities. Within sociology, it has enjoyed a strong following for the last two decades, although there are signs that cultural postmodernists are losing ground, with the economic postmodernists moving more squarely into Marxian-inspired world-systems analysis.

Interactionist Theorizing

Contemporary interactionist theorizing reveals a number of variants, each of which draws from a different theoretical tradition. Symbolic interactionism carries forth the pragmatist tradition synthesized by George Herbert Mead (1934); dramaturgical theory draws primarily from Durkheim's ([1912] 1947) analysis of rituals; interaction ritual theory also draws from Durkheim and dramaturgy while introducing elements from other modern theories; ethnomethodology represents the modern application of phenomenology (Husserl [1913] 1969; Schütz [1932] 1967), coupled with elements from other traditions; and there are several efforts to develop syntheses among all these strands of theorizing about face-to-face interaction.

Symbolic Interactionism

The ideas of Mead have been applied to a wide variety of topics, from roles (Turner 1968) and identity processes (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980, 2001) through the sociology of emotions (Burke 1991; Heise 1979; Scheff 1988) to theories of collective behavior (Snow and Benford 1988; Turner and Killian 1987). The basic argument is that social reality is ultimately constructed from face-to-face interactions among individuals who communicate symbolically, develop definitions of situations, draw on cultural resources, play roles, and seek to verify self and identity (Blumer 1969). Identity theories are perhaps the most prominent theoretical wing of interactionist theory today (for recent statements by various theorists, see Burke 2006; Burke et al. 2003). Here, theorists view more global self-conceptions and situational role identities as a cybernetic control system, with individuals presenting gestures so as to get others to verify their self and identity. These theories also overlap with theories of emotions, since verification of self arouses positive emotions, whereas failure to verify self generates negative emotional arousal and leads to adjustments in behaviors or identities that bring identity, behavior, and responses of others into line. Some versions of symbolic interactionism extend these Gestalt dynamics not only to person but also to others, the identity of others, and the situation, with individuals seen as motivated to keep sentiments about these aspects of interaction consistent with each other (Heise 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988). As noted earlier, another set of symbolic interactionist theories incorporates Freudian dynamics to explain the activation of defense mechanisms when self and identity are not confirmed or when individuals fail to realize expectations or experience negative sanctions (Scheff 1988; J. Turner 2002). Role theory has also been influenced by symbolic interactionism, with each individual reading the gestures of others to determine the latter's role and with individuals also seeking to have others verify their roles and the self and identity presented in these roles (R. Turner 2001). Theories of collective behavior and social movements also adopt symbolic interactionists ideas, emphasizing the collective contagion and emotional arousal of crowd behaviors and the processes by which members of social movements frame situations in ways that direct collective actions (Snow and Benford 1988).

Dramaturgical Theories

Erving Goffman (1959, 1967) was the first to downsize Durkheim's ([1912] 1947) analysis of rituals and emotions as the basis of social solidarity in the most elemental social unit, the encounter, or episode of interaction. While Goffman was often seen as a symbolic interactionist, he was a Durkheimian who emphasized the importance of the cultural script, the dramatic presentations of self to an audience, and the strategic behaviors that individuals employ in presenting self on a stage in which props, sets, space and ecology, and interpersonal demography are employed to make a dramatic presentation and to realize strategic goals. In contrast to most symbolic interactionists, dramaturgy views self as purely situational and as something that individuals "put on" in presenting a "line" or in strategic acts of "impression management." Thus, in addition to the use of the front stage to manage a line, forms of talk, use of rituals, presentations of roles, and keying of frames (of what is to be included and excluded from the interaction) are all synchronized to present self in a particular light and to achieve strategic ends.

Interaction Ritual Theorizing

Randall Collins (2004) has extended Durkheim's and Goffman's analysis to a more general theory of ritual. For Collins, the elements of what Goffman termed the "encounter" constitute a more inclusive ritual where individuals reveal a focus of attention, common mood, rhythmic synchronization of bodies and talk, symbolization of the positive emotional energy from rhythmic synchronization, and enhanced solidarity. When these elements of the ritual do not unfold, however, negative emotional energy is aroused, and solidarity becomes more problematic. Unlike most interactionists, Collins does not see self as a critical motivational force in these rituals. Moreover, he tries to develop a more general theory of meso and macro structures using interaction rituals as the "micro foundation" of all social structures (Collins 1981). More recent theories (Summer-Effler 2002, 2004a, 2004b) in this tradition have blended more symbolic interactionist elements into interaction ritual theory by expanding the analysis of emotions and introducing self and identity as key forces.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology emphasizes the methods or interpersonal techniques, especially in talk and conversation, that individuals employ to construct, maintain, or change their presumptions about what they share. This basic idea is adopted from phenomenology, a philosophical tradition (e.g., Husserl [1913] 1969) given a sociological character by Alfred Schütz ([1932] 1967). For Schütz, much interaction involves signaling to others not to question the presumption that parties to an interaction share a common view of reality. For ethnomethodologists, the gestures and signals that individuals exchange are "indexical" in that they have meaning only in particular contexts; and these signs are used to construct a sense of common meaning among individuals. Most ethnomethodological research examines finely coded transcripts of conversations to determine the ethno or folk methods that individuals employ to create or sustain a sense of reality. For example, turn-taking in conversations, gestures searching for a normal conversational form, ignoring gestures that may disconfirm reciprocity of perspectives, patterns of overlaps in conversations, allowing ambiguities in meanings to pass, or repairing in subsequent turns minor misunderstandings are all techniques that individuals employ to create and sustain the sense that they share a common intersubjective world (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1992; Schegloff 2001). The data presented by ethnomethodologists have been adopted by other theories, but unfortunately, the theoretical arguments of ethnomethodology appear to have taken a backseat to empirical analyses of conversations, often moving ethnomethodology into some version of linguistics.

Integrative Approaches

All of the above theoretical approaches involved some integration of both classic and contemporary theories. But some contemporary theorists have sought to develop more general and robust theories of interpersonal processes by integrating concepts and propositions from a variety of interactionist theories. Jonathan Turner (2002), for example, has blended elements from symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, interaction ritual theory, the sociology of emotions, role theory, expectation states theory, and ethnomethodology into a view of encounters as driven fundamental forces: emotions, transactional needs, symbols, status, roles, demography,

and ecology. Yet relatively few theories are as integrative as Turner's efforts; most microsociology tends to remain narrow in focus, producing a delimited set of generalizations and data sets designed to test these generalizations.

Exchange Theorizing

Exchange theory draws from both the behaviorist tradition of Edward Thorndike, Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson (1913), and B. F. Skinner (1938) and the utilitarian tradition of the Scottish moralists. The basic argument is that individuals seek to gain profits in exchanges of resources with others, with profit being a function of the resources received, less the costs and investments spent in seeking these resources. All exchanges are also mediated by norms of fair exchange and justice, with the most prevalent norm of justice emphasizing equity or the distribution of rewards in proportion to relative costs and investments among actors. However, all exchange theories introduce the notion of power, in which one actor has the capacity to receive more rewards than others. Power is typically defined as the dependence of other actors on a powerful actor for valued resources, and the greater is the dependence of actors, the greater is the power of resource-holders over them.

Over the last four decades, exchange analysis has ventured into other areas of theorizing. Initially, exchange theory and network analysis were combined to understand the dynamics of networks in terms of the exchange dynamics that arise from power dependence (Cook and Rice 2001). The general finding is that power-advantaged actors use their advantage to exploit dependent actors by demanding additional resources. Under these conditions, dependent actors will seek other exchange partners, leave the exchange, learn to do without resources, or introduce new resources into the exchange that are highly valued by the previously advantaged actor (thus creating mutual dependence). Other findings emphasize that actors will develop commitments to exchanges, or engage in suboptimal exchanges, in return for certainty of exchange payoffs.

Another area where exchange theory has more recently penetrated is the sociology of emotions, in which power-dependence processes and network structures are analyzed in terms of the emotions that are aroused during the process of exchange (Lawler 2001). From theory and research, several generalizations emerge (Turner and Stets 2005). When payoffs are profitable and meted out in accordance with the norms of justice, positive emotions are aroused, whereas when payoffs are unprofitable, below expectations, and violate the norms of justice, negative emotions are aroused. If individuals are over-rewarded or their over-reward leads to unfair under-reward for others, they will experience guilt. Positive rewards in negotiated and reciprocal exchanges reveal a proximal bias in attributions (leading to feelings of pride), while negative rewards or under-rewards in such exchanges evidence a distal bias (arousing anger toward others, the situation, or group). High-power individuals are more likely to make self-attributions for success in profitable exchanges and external attributions for under-rewards than are low-power actors. The more profits are received in dense networks engaged in coordinated actions, the more likely are positive exchange outcomes to cause actors to make external attributions to the group, and the more they will become attached to the group. These and other generalizations document that exchange theories are becoming integrative, crossing over into other areas of theory and research in sociology.

Structuralist Theory

All sociologists study social structures, but structuralist theorizing in sociology has special connotations. There are, in essence, two branches of structuralist theorizing, both of which derive considerable inspiration from Durkheimian sociology. One branch emphasizes material conditions as influencing the nature of social relations among individuals and collective actors. Marx, Georg Simmel, and especially the early Durkheim all agreed that structure is a set of connections among parts, with the goal of theorizing being to discover the cause of these connections and their dynamic properties. The other branch of structuralism seeks to discover the "deep structures" or "generative rules" guiding the formation of culture systems and social structural arrangements. What is observable empirically is seen as a surface manifestation of a deeper underlying system of generative rules and, in some theorists' minds (e.g., Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963, 1979), rules directed by the neurology of the human brain.

The materialist version of structural analysis can be found in any theory that tries to explain the properties of social relations. One of the more prominent approaches in this tradition is network analysis, which views structures as nodes connected by relationships involving the flow of resources. In network theory, the form of the relationship is critical because different forms will reveal varying dynamic properties (for a review, see Turner 2002). The structuralism that also comes from Durkheim, via structural linguistics (de Saussure [1915] 1966; Jakobson 1962–1971) and structural anthropology, has inspired a revival of cultural sociology, even though some theories oftentimes see structure as being generated by the biology of the brain. But structuralism inspired a new concern with cultural codes and the practices that carry these codes to situations and that change or reinforce them. The structuralism movement enjoyed a certain cache during the 1970s and 1980s, but by the turn into the twenty-first century, the interests of structuralists had been incorporated into the “cultural turn” of sociological theorizing. The more materialist versions of structural analysis continue, as they always have, in a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, although network analysis—the most formal of these materialist approaches—has become ever more concerned with computer algorithms for describing rather than explaining network structures.

The Cultural Turn in Sociological Theory

Over the last decades of the twentieth century, sociological theory has taken a cultural turn. There were, of course, classical antecedents to this turn, but all of them tended to see culture as a dependent variable, as something that is shaped by social structural arrangements. For Marx, culture is a “superstructure” driven by the material “substructure”; for Durkheim, the collective conscience is related to the nature, number, and relationships among system parts, although his work did inspire cultural structuralism; and for the modern functionalists, culture is conceptualized in highly analytical terms as a system composed of abstract elements such as value orientations. Only Weber ([1905] 1958) appeared to emphasize culture as a causal force, as illustrated by his analysis of the Protestant Ethic and the rise of capitalism (although his analysis in terms of ideal types tended to reduce the culture of Protestantism and capitalism to a few analytical elements). As we saw, the critical theories of the Frankfurt School and others in this tradition like Gramsci often migrated to the analysis of ideologies, but again, culture was always connected to material and political interests. And during the 1960s, as Marxism and conflict sociology reemerged in the United States, culture was once again seen as an ideology reflecting the material interests of contending groups.

Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2001) have termed most sociological analyses of culture a “weak program” because culture is not explored as an autonomous system but, instead, as a dependent variable or superstructure to material conditions. They even criticize work that focuses explicitly on culture, including the Birmingham School's analysis of symbols in terms of Marxian structural categories, the efforts of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) to understand “habitus” and its connection to material conditions, and the works of poststructuralists like Michel Foucault (1972), whose “archeology” of knowledge ultimately uncovers the effects of power on culture. Similar cultural programs, such as Wuthnow's (1987) analysis of the moral order, are seen to emphasize the connection between the moral order and the material resource bases generated by wealth, leadership communication networks, political authority, and other structural properties. Likewise, Michèle Lamont's (1999) analysis of culture as marking group boundaries is viewed as explaining culture by its attachment to stratification and economic systems.

In contrast to these “weak programs,” Alexander and Smith (2001) propose a “strong program” where culture is treated initially as an autonomous sphere with deep textual analysis of its symbols in their specific context. Both the weak and strong programs emphasize cultural codes, discursive practices by which these codes are used, rituals directed at the code, and the objects denoted by codes, discourse, and rituals, but the strong program avoids connecting cultural analysis to material conditions, at least until the full exploration of the cultural codes has been completed. For example, Alexander's (2004) strong program of “cultural pragmatics” emphasizes that there are deep background “representations” that generate “scripts” and “texts” that actors decode and interpret; and these need to be analyzed before they are connected to individuals' actions in front of audiences. Although power and productive relations influence how actors extend culture to audiences through ritual performances, the elements of culture need to be analytically separated from their structural contexts, and their scripts and texts need to be thickly described. Only then can they be reattached to ritual, social structure, and audience to explain ritual practices and audience reactions. And as actors extend culture to audiences, they experience cathexis, which, in turn, influences the nature of the texts, discourse, and

rituals.

Whatever the merits of these kinds of arguments, it is clear that cultural sociology has made an enormous comeback over the last decade of the twentieth century, and indeed, theorizing about culture is becoming as prominent in the first decade of this century as conceptualizations of material conditions were at the height of conflict theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, for all the emphasis on thick description of texts, most analyses eventually become highly analytical, abstracting from these texts particular sets of codes that, in turn, are attached to material conditions.

Problems and Prospects for Sociological Theory in the 21st Century

The Decline of Grand Theory When It Is Most Needed

At the very time when sociological theory has differentiated into a variety of approaches, general and integrative theorizing has declined. All of the early theorists, especially Spencer, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, were generalists who sought to explain a wide range of phenomena across long reaches of history. Functional theory in the modern era, particularly that practiced by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, was also grand, but with the demise of these versions of grand theory, such theorizing fell out of favor and has been replaced by narrower theories confined to one level of analysis and held in check by scope conditions. Relatively few theories today seek to explain all phenomena at the micro, meso, and macro levels. There are some exceptions, however. For example, Anthony Giddens's (1984) structuration theory is grand in the sense that it attempts to explain all levels of reality, although his scheme is more of a conceptual framework for describing a wide range of empirical cases. Jonathan Turner's (1995, 2002) efforts of theorizing approximate a grand approach because he consciously seeks to integrate existing theories at all levels of social reality. Randall Collins's (1975, 2004) interaction ritual theory is another approach that seeks to explain reality at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Still, most theorists shy away from this kind of integrative effort, at the very time that sociological theory is fragmenting into diverse and often hostile camps. In the future, it will be necessary for more integrative and, indeed, grand approaches to make a comeback if sociological theory is to reveal any coherence in the twenty-first century.

The Continuing Debate over Science

From the beginning, sociologists have debated the prospects for scientific sociology resembling that in the natural sciences. The founders were split, with Comte, Spencer, Simmel, and Durkheim pushing for scientific sociology, while Marx and Weber had doubts about the prospects for universal laws that could explain reality at all times and in all places. This split over the prospects for scientific sociology continued through the whole of the twentieth century and divides sociological theory (Turner and Turner 1990).

There are those who wish to perform rigorous analytical work but who view a sociology that apes the natural sciences as impossible; there are those who see the epistemology of the natural sciences as not only impossible but as a tool of repression; there are still others who see science as proposing grand narratives when the world does not reveal such an obdurate character; there are many who seek sociology as an art form or as a clinical field in which investigators use their intuiting to solve problems; and there are many who argue that sociology should be explicitly ideological, seeking to change the world. There is, then, a rather large collection of anti-scientists within sociology, especially sociological theory.

The end result is that scientific sociology is not accepted by many sociologists. Yet an enormous amount of theoretical growth and accumulation of knowledge has occurred over the last four decades, at the very time when many were having doubts about the appropriateness or possibility of a natural science of society. Thus, much of the new scientific understanding about the dynamics of the social world is ignored or viewed with hostility by those who have other agendas. Indeed, should sociology ever have its Einstein, only a few would take notice.

Chauvinism and Intolerance

Even among those who are committed to the epistemology of science, there is both chauvinism and intolerance. Some proclaim that certain processes occurring at a particular level of reality are the key properties and processes of the social universe, while being dismissive of those who think otherwise. And among those who do not believe that science is possible or even desirable, there is a smug condescension that is equally dismissive. For the former, theory becomes narrow and focused, building up barriers to other theoretical approaches, while for the latter group, theory becomes anything and everything—ideology, practice, philosophizing, textual analysis, moral crusading, critique, and virtually any activity. In being anything and everything, it becomes nothing in the sense of accumulating knowledge about the social world. Social theory, when not disciplined by the epistemology of science, becomes driven by intellectual fads and foibles, constantly changing with new social, cultural, and intellectual movements but never establishing a base of knowledge.

Conclusions

This summary cannot really do justice to the diversity of activity that occurs under the rubrics of “social” and, more narrowly, “sociological” theory. Humpty Dumpty has fallen off the wall, split into so many pieces that even grand theorists may never be able to put him back together again. In one sense, the proliferation of theories is a sign of vitality, especially among those narrow theories that seek to develop cumulative knowledge. But it is also an indicator of weakness because at some point, sociological theory will need to develop a more integrated set of principles and models about social reality. This effort is hindered by those who simply do not accept the epistemology of science. As a result, efforts to integrate theories will often be sidetracked by debate and acrimony as factions become intolerant of each other. As a consequence, at a time when enormous progress has been made in denoting the basic properties of the social universe, in developing abstract models and principles on the operative dynamics of these properties, and in assessing these theories with systematically collected data, it is not clear how many sociologists are listening. Fifty years ago, it seemed that sociology was ready to take its place at the table of science; today, this prospect seems more remote, despite the fact that sociology is far more sophisticated theoretically than five decades ago. Thus, as we move toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is not clear just what the prospects for sociological theory will be. Will the scientists prevail? Will the anti-science factions win out? Or will the fight continue for another 100 years? Realistically speaking, this last prognosis is the most likely scenario.

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- conflict theory
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- cultural turn
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