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CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: Current Projects and Conditions of Possibility

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ABSTRACT

This paper characterizes the field of sociological theory since the mid-1980s as the site of eight active and diverse intellectual projects. These projects are (I) to construct general analytical tools for use in empirical social research, (II) to synthesize multiple theoretical approaches; (III) to refine existing theoretical research programs; (IV) to stimulate dialogue among different theoretical perspectives; (V) to enlarge and reconstruct current theoretical approaches conceptually, methodologically, socially, and politically; (VI) to analyze a range of past theoretical ideas; (VII) to offer a diagnosis of contemporary social conditions; and (VIII) to dissolve the enterprise of sociological theory. We discuss the contours of these projects and identify some of the major ideas and theorists associated with each. We conclude with a brief discussion of the organizational structure of the contemporary theory field, observing that most current theoretical projects are formulated with insufficient attention to their conditions of possibility.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological theory has a long history of taking stock of itself. It lies among those distinctive academic specialties where a general review of the existing literature is not an occasional undertaking but part of the routine activity of many members of the area, a feature of every required survey course on theory,

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and a necessary component of every work purporting to be an original contribution to the field.

Under these circumstances there exists no shortage of recent articles, monographs, textbooks, and edited collections analyzing contemporary developments in the theory field, a subject also addressed in previous volumes of the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Among these various contributions, Giddens & J Turner (1987), Ritzer (1988c, 1990b), B Turner (1996b), J Turner (1991), and R Wallace & Wolf (1995) all discuss trends in the theory area; the theorists, texts, and intellectual currents making up these trends; and the substantive arguments and conceptual frameworks associated with these developments.

This chapter does not substitute for these detailed reviews. Its primary aim is not to resume the conceptual schemes and substantive arguments found in contemporary theories but to identify and briefly overview some of the major intellectual projects currently under way in the theory area. In research on earlier historical periods, we have shown that attention to a theorist's intellectual objectives and purposes increases understanding of the conceptual tools and empirical claims he or she articulated (e.g. Camic 1989, Gross 1997). In speaking in this chapter of "projects," we make a preliminary effort to extend this approach to the contemporary period by focusing on some principal tasks that those in the theory area are now seeking to accomplish, on the organizing programs or agenda that contributors to the field are developing their concepts and arguments in order to advance, and on the descriptive and evaluative assessments of the present state of the theory area that frequently accompany these programs.

We begin by identifying eight such projects and conclude with a discussion of their organizational conditions of possibility. All eight projects are contemporary, found in the theory literature in the period on which we concentrate, the mid-1980s to the present. Analysis of other periods would necessarily produce a different set of programs, whose degree of overlap with the following listing would be an empirical question. Throughout, we deal primarily with American developments, generally incorporating works by European theorists only insofar as these have appeared in English since the mid-1980s and have since then figured consequentially into American discussions. Even taking into account these restrictions, this survey of the literature is selective, and the eight projects do not provide an exhaustive charting of lines of current theoretical activity.

Furthermore, it should be recognized that these eight projects are not, as a rule, mutually exclusive of one another. There are theorists who have pursued more than one, both simultaneously and in different career stages, as we occasionally note, though it is not possible here to devote sufficient attention to particular individuals fully to characterize their projects over time or even in single works. We also emphasize that our eight project categories are internally

heterogeneous and that they bring together theorists who differ in other respects while separating those often grouped as similar in other scholarly classifications. But this simply testifies to the value of multiple classification schemes: to the fact that thinkers with a common agenda for sociological theory may differ in the concepts and arguments they use to advance this agenda, just as theorists who converge in argument and concept may use these means to advance very different projects within the theory area.

In discussing contemporary sociological theory, we consider an area with notoriously fuzzy boundaries. In identifying what works fall within these boundaries, we borrow Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances." Wittgenstein (1953:31–33) analyzes groups of elements that "have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all" elements; just as there are "various resemblances between members of a family, build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc.," so there are "family resemblances" among the elements of these other groups, i.e. "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail." It is such family resemblances that constitute the contemporary theory field: criss-crossing similarities in terms of analytical issues and problems, intellectual ancestory and points of departure, vocabulary and style of argument, self-identification (calling one's own work "theory"), institutional membership (belonging to theory sections of sociological associations), group adoption (having one's contribution embraced by theorists), and more. No fixed cluster of these traits defines a family member nor makes it possible to track down all the stepchildren, distant cousins, and black sheep. Nonetheless, after one has spent some time among family members, it is not difficult to recognize the different branches of the family tree.

EIGHT PROJECTS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Project I: Construction of General Tools for Use in Empirical Analysis

For one group of contemporary theorists, the principal task of sociological theory is to build analytical tools—concepts, explanatory propositions, interpretive guidelines, etc—directly applicable in the study of empirical problems. This project, according to many of its recent proponents, is increasingly threatened by abstract, self-referential theorizing that distances itself from the substantive issues that arise in areas of empirical social research.

This is the position of Chafetz: "[S]ociological theory is integrally related to research" (1988:2) and "ghettoizes" itself when it retreats into "abstract epistemological and ontological [discussion of issues such as] agency/micro

and structure/macro" (1993:60–62). Opposing this retreat, Chafetz sets for theory the task of developing a "diverse set of practical tools"—general explanatory statements and the concepts they contain—"from which one can select those most helpful in solving any given [empirical] problem." She carries this agenda forward by articulating a multivariable, "eclectic structural theory" of the causes of gender stratification (1988:1, 51–54).

Along similar lines, Rule (1997) objects that the theory field is now a "cacophony" of discordant approaches (rational choice, network analysis, etc), each of limited range, and has lost sight of the discipline's "perennial issues"—its substantive questions about deviance, economic growth, civil violence, etc. For Rule, "the development of analytical tools" that address such questions is the principal task for contemporary theory, a task he himself takes up by formulating general propositions about the sources of civil violence (1997:1, 5, 19, 261–17; see also Rule 1988, Skocpol 1986). Calhoun, too, calls for "more studies that seek to advance theory in the cause of contemporary sociological research and understanding, as distinct from those which aim mainly at clarifying what [theorists] have already said" (1997:2). His preference, however, is for theory to supply not a set of general propositions and concepts but culturally sensitive "guidelines" or "frameworks for interpretation" of changing social practices (Calhoun 1996b:86, 92; see also Calhoun 1995, 1996a).

Pierre Bourdieu's writings (1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) offer perhaps the most elaborate case for this project. Rejecting "empty theoreticism"—general "programmatic discourse that is its own end," focused on other abstract theories and unwilling "to sully [its] hands in empirical research"—Bourdieu's agenda is to develop a "set of conceptual tools and procedures for constructing objects and for transferring knowledge [from] one area of inquiry into another" (Bourdieu 1988:774, 777, Bourdieu 1993b:45, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:5). Unlike other advocates of this program, however, Bourdieu does not envision these tools as a broad, eclectic assemblage suited to piecemeal appropriation. He concentrates instead on a limited set of concepts: most famously, "habitus," the "ensemble of dispositions" toward action and perception that operates from within social agents; and "field," the configuration of relations between social positions, or the structured space where social struggles unfold (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 16–19). Insisting on the "two-way relationship between habitus and field," Bourdieu seeks to transcend the hoary intellectual antinomy between objectivism and subjectivism by "integrating into a single model the analysis of the experience of social agents and the analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible" (1988:782–84) and by then deploying this model in empirical studies of spheres ranging from art and science to the economy and law. But he does not propose this model as a general "systematization" or a

universal "discourse on the social world"; it is a temporary "machine for research" that "accomplishes and abolishes itself in the scientific work it has helped produce" (1993b:29; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:159–61; for discussion, see Calhoun et al 1993, Swartz 1997).

In contrast, W Wallace believes it is at last time for the theorist to codify a general "metalanguage," "a single conceptual matrix"—consisting of eight basic descriptive and twelve explanatory variables—for use throughout sociology, the basis for a "discipline-wide consensus" (1988:60). With this program, he veers toward Project II, though Wallace makes no claims for a theoretical synthesis. He regards his matrix as furnishing only a general "nomenclature" for empirically oriented work, i.e. for the creation of "many kinds of descriptions and explanations" (1988:60, 1983:9).

Project II: Synthesis of Multiple Theoretical Approaches

The analysis of existing social theories that is often criticized by proponents of Project I actually animates a second contemporary project. This project rests on the conviction that it is now possible to achieve a comprehensive synthesis of previously divergent theoretical perspectives. According to some theorists, such a synthesis is well under way; for others, it is a vital opportunity now to be seized.

A decade ago, Ritzer (1988a, 1990a) forecast a coming era of theoretical synthesis, and today efforts toward synthesis can be found in various quarters: in Scheff 's program to "assimilate [contending] theoretical proposals in the human sciences...within a much larger matrix" by use of a "micro-linguistic analysis of discourse" situated in "the context of larger wholes" (1997:7–10, see also 1990); in Runciman's macro-historical "theory of social relations, social structure, and social evolution," offered as a "general synthesis" aiming to "do for the study of societies what Darwin [did] for the study of species" (1989b:60, 449; 1989a:13; see also 1983); and in Emirbayer's recent "manifesto for a relational sociology" that tries to rework "micro" and "macro" and to forge a "unitary frame of reference" upon which diverse social thinkers are said to be "fast converging" (1997:311–12; Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994).

The project of theoretical synthesis has also been embraced by some of the most widely discussed figures in contemporary theory. Included here are those broadly sympathetic with the research focus of Project I. J Turner, for example, has urged that steps be taken to break down the barriers that divide theorists and to advance toward a "theoretical synthesis" at the macro, meso, and micro levels—especially the last, where he has developed a synthetic theory of social interaction (1987, 1988, 1991). Recognizing that a theory unifying all levels may be far off, Turner believes that, at each level, "existing theories have captured many of the operative dynamics of the social universe," bringing sociology near to empirically testable general theory of the type found in

the natural sciences: i.e. to timeless principles that cut across substantive areas (1989:17, 1991:591). He fears, however, that this goal may be defeated by the "anti-positivism" of other theorists and by various organizational divisions within sociology (1990, 1992; S Turner & J Turner 1990). Somewhat more optimistic, R Collins envisions a "comprehensive theory [for] every arena of society"—theory in the form of "generalized explanatory models" of basic social processes—though this will not take shape immediately (1986a:1351, 1989: 124, 1981b, 1992). Given the discipline's current fragmentation, the theorist's present task is to promote "mutual confrontation" of available theoretical traditions and to bridge productive areas of substantive research in order "to compare, to synthesize, and to cumulate"—as Collins has done in identifying power and status as central dimensions of all interaction and in proposing "interaction ritual chains" as part of the micro-foundation of macrostructure (1994:295, 1986a:1355, 1981a; Kemper & R Collins 1990). (See also the program for a unified "comprehensive theory" proposed by Fararo 1989a, 1989b; Fararo & Skvoretz 1986; Skvoretz & Fararo 1996.)

Important variants of the synthesis project have also appeared among those for whom theory has greater autonomy from empirical research. Equating theory with general "presuppositions" about human action and social order, Alexander has argued for the imminent convergence at this level of all major—and hitherto one-sided—theories, classical and contemporary, announcing that "synthetic rather than polemical theorizing is now the order of the day" (1988d:77). As to the content of this "new movement," Alexander has variously predicted and promoted the following: a "multidimensional" synthesis of "normative and instrumental" views of action, "material and ideal" views of order (1982–1983); a Parsons-inspired "neofunctionalism" that "relink[s] theorizing about action and order, conflict and stability, structure and culture" (Alexander & Colomy 1990:57; Alexander 1985); a post-Parsonsian "micro-macro synthesis" integrating "action and structure, subjectivity and objectivity" (Alexander & Giesen 1987:4; Alexander 1987:376–77, 1988b,d); and a "new form of synthetic social theory" that moves beyond neofunctionalism and carries the micro-macro synthesis in the direction of "culturalist theories opened up to the model of culture-as-language" (Alexander 1998:288, 1988c, 1995). Along parallel lines, Münch's earlier call ([1982]1987, [1982]1988) for a "synthesis" based on Parsonsian action theory has become an agenda for a "new synthesis" connecting "Parsonian theory and competing theoretical approaches" that treat the economics, politics, and symbolics of action (1987:149, 1994).

Giddens (1984, 1987, 1995, 1996) has pursued a similar cause, forecasting a revolutionary "new synthesis"—open to work outside sociology and geared to the world society of the next century—to replace the competing theories of the past. Key to this change, in his view, is theoretical advance, seen not as cumulation of natural science–like generalizations but as "conceptual innova-

tion." To this end, he faults structuralism and functionalism for overlooking that actors are "vastly skilled in the practical accomplishments of social activities," while also criticizing phenomenology and ethnomethodology for neglecting the "structural constraint" that affects such activities (1987:43, 1984: xxvii, 26). He proposes "structuration theory" as the alternative that both recognizes the "duality of structure"—the fact that "the structural properties of social systems [i.e. their rules and resources] are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize"—and problematizes, for "specific historical circumstances, the relation between knowledgeable activity . . . and social reproduction brought about in an unintended fashion" (1984:25, 1996:72; for discussion, see Cohen 1989). More ambitiously still, Luhmann (1985, 1987, 1995), alarmed over sociology's "theory crisis," draws on work in biology and cybernetics to fashion what he sees as a unified theory of self-referential, or autopoietic, social systems. Conceiving such systems (societies, interactions) to be composed not of agents or actions but of communication, and analyzing how these systems evolve or adapt with respect to their environments through meaningful communication, Luhmann views this approach as providing the needed basis for a "comprehensive theory of the social," a theory of "*everything* social" (1995:xxxvii, xlvii).

The paradox of these diverse synthetic projects has not escaped notice. Unified though they are on a program of synthesis, they generally diverge on the substance of this program, each thereby undercutting the other's case for the reality of the particular synthesis in question. To be sure, there are terminological overlaps (agency/structure, micro/macro), and overcoming these divisions is a concern shared by several (though not all) projects, much the way calls to reconcile order/change or consensus/conflict were commonplace a generation ago. But even strong advocates of synthesis have conceded that current theories use terms like micro and macro very differently and may not "offer adequate bases for dealing with micro-macro integration" (Ritzer 1988b:705–6). Surveying the plurality of options, S Turner & J Turner (1990:170) flatly state that "recent synthetic theories...have not been successful" at theoretical unification, while Holmwood & Stewart (1994)—in a kind of reversion to Project I—take failed syntheses as an occasion to broach new explanatory problems.

Project III: Refinement of Theoretical Research Programs

For observers like B Turner (1989, 1996a), the heterogeneity of synthetic theories makes "fragmentation and division rather than successful accumulation [the] dominant trend in sociological theory," though there are exceptions to this pattern. They are found in pockets of the discipline once called "schools"—i.e. in areas committed to the ongoing elaboration of a single theoretical orientation closely tied to an empirical research tradition (B Turner 1996a:9–10). The continuing development of several of these "theoretical re-

search programs" (to borrow a term from D Wagner and Berger 1985) constitutes a third major project in the field of contemporary theory.

Visible among these approaches has been rational-choice theory. The rubric encompasses different positions, some suggestive of the synthetic goals of Project II (see Abell 1996a, Coleman 1989, 1993, Lindenberg 1986). Typically, however, the approach offloads many topics onto other theories to concentrate on constructing formal models of the processes by which interdependent, utility-maximizing actors "combine to produce social outcomes"; it then seeks to elaborate these models and extend their empirical range (Coleman & Fararo 1992a:xi–xii; Coleman 1990; Hechter 1983; Abell 1996b). With this in view, rational-choice theorists are now working to incorporate "social structure into models of individual choice" (Macy & Flache 1995) and to use these models in areas where they would seem inapplicable, e.g. in studies of family, religion, and gender, and in research on social solidarity (Hechter 1983, 1987; Hechter & Kanazawa 1997; for criticism, see Barnes 1995, Coleman & Fararo 1992b, England & Kilbourne 1990, Smelser 1998). A similar theoretical project is also being cultivated within Analytical Marxism. Here formal rational-choice models are again embraced and elaborated, but now as part of a program to bring Marxism out of the nineteenth century, to clarify its core concepts, to place its "macro-structural" theses on "micro-foundations" that specify their causal mechanisms, and to apply this perspective in research on class structure, exploitation, etc (Wright 1989:47–49; Elster 1985; Mayer 1994; Roemer 1986; for critique, see Burawoy 1986, 1989).

Another current focus for the project of theoretical refinement is expectations-states theory, which has continued its effort to formulate concepts and general propositions to describe and explain the status structure of small groups, to extend these ideas to further aspects of group interaction processes, and to test these formulations empirically (Berger et al 1989, Berger & Zelditch 1993, Fisek et al 1995, D Wagner & Berger 1985). This program has spawned several major subprograms, plus active attempts to integrate these, each new step hailed as calling for "more explicit formalization of the theory" and "research to test its more subtle implications" (D Wagner & Berger 1993:48). In these ways, the expectations-states program mirrors developments in other formal approaches to the analysis of interaction, such as exchange theory, network analysis, and projects combining the two (see Burt 1992, Cook 1987, Cook & Whitmeyer 1992, White 1992; cf Blau 1994).

Other elaborative projects are under way in connection with less formal theoretical approaches. Rebounding from its relative quiescence during the 1960s and 1970s, symbolic interactionism, for example, is now in a state of "revitalization" and "ferment," retaining some of its traditional concern with the concrete interactional basis of meaning, identity, and self, but moving in new directions: on the one hand by diversifying and "turn[ing] increasingly to-

ward power, history, and distinctive versions of social structure" as subjects for interactionist research and theorizing (Plummer 1996:236–38); and on the other hand by bridging outward (as more tightly knit approaches such as rational choice have yet to do) to connect with other contemporary perspectives, notably cultural studies and postmodernism (Denzin 1992, Fine 1993, Goffman 1983, Joas 1987, Becker & McCall 1990, Stryker 1987). In ethnomethodology, a diversifying but continually developing theoretical research program is also clearly in evidence (Maynard & Clayman 1991).

Project IV: Dialogue Among Multiple Theoretical Approaches

If the multitude of positions found within the theory area has led numbers of theorists to decry fragmentation and, as an alternative, either to seek shelter in empirical research or to envision an all-encompassing synthesis or to cleave to a particular theoretical approach, a different reaction animates a fourth project. In this case, the presence of multiple approaches is welcomed as a potential opportunity for fruitful theoretical dialogue.

This program has affinities with the pluralist agenda articulated a generation ago by theorists like Merton who held that "it is not so much the plurality of paradigms as the collective acceptance by practicing sociologists of a single paradigm proposed as a panacea that would constitute a deep crisis with ensuing stasis" (Merton 1975:29; cf Eisenstadt & Curelaru 1976, Rorty 1979). But current dialogic projects seek not only to emphasize the functions of theoretical diversity but also to recognize and promote combinations and interactions of different theoretical perspectives—an objective that may be understood in different ways.

In some contemporary projects, for example, theoretical dialogue is viewed as a means to other kinds of programmatic ends, including tool construction (Rule 1997), broad (or partial) theoretical synthesis (R Collins 1994, Münch 1994), and theoretical reconstruction (Calhoun 1995; see also Bauman 1992).

Beyond such instrumental uses of discourse, however, dialogue has also been recently elaborated into a project in and of itself by Mouzelis (1995), Wiley (1990), and most fully, Levine (1986, 1995). Believing that communication—calmly "grasping truly alternative points of view"—is "the healing response" to cries of fragmentation, Levine sets for theorists the task of cultivating the "spirit of dialogue," especially by "tak[ing] stock of our manifold forms of social knowledge" and thus building a "common vocabulary that social scientists can use to engage in constructive conversations about their differences" while "opening [themselves] to a wider range of options" (1995:2, 297, 305, 324, 329). This project underlies Levine's (1985, 1991) own efforts to examine the dialectic interplay between the ideas of Simmel and Parsons, and it can be seen as well in the work of scholars carrying forth the Marx-Weber dialogue (Antonio & Glassman 1985, Wiley 1987).

Project V: Enlargement/Reconstruction of Current Theoretical Approaches

For many contemporary theorists the range of options before them is, or until recently has been, severely limited in some fundamental respect. Their project is to identify and fill one or more conceptual, methodological, social, moral, or political lacunae in the theoretical perspectives available to them and then to work out the reconstructive implications of the resulting enlargement of sociological theory—implications that vary in scope and depth from theorist to theorist.

Proposals for conceptual augmentation have been numerous and diverse, spanning the distance from B Turner's program to encompass human corporeality and overcome sociological theory's neglect of "the most obvious fact of human existence, namely that human beings have... bodies" (1984:41), on the one side, to steps by Alexander (1988a), Archer (1988), Connor (1996), J Hall (1990b), Somers (1995), Swidler (1986), and Wuthnow (1987) to awaken contemporary theory to the structural, symbolic, and institutional dimensions of culture and to recent work in anthropology and cultural studies, on the other side. Elsewhere, S Turner (1994) and Camic (1986, 1989) have urged renewed attention to habitual action—Turner to combat the concept of social practices, Camic to defend a sociology of action forms or practices. Others have called for the theoretical incorporation of revised conceptions of the self (Seidler 1994, Wiley 1994, Wolfe 1991) and of emotion and the irrational (Campbell 1996, Scheff 1997, Sica 1988). (See also Urry 1996 on the "singular absence" of the topic of time and space in sociological theory prior to the early 1980s.)

The pioneering effort along these lines, published slightly earlier but widely discussed in the period under review, is Habermas's concept of communicative action. Brought forth to accommodate circumstances where "the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through ... calculations of success"—as assumed in theories that define action in instrumental, goal-directed, and related terms—"but through acts of reaching understanding [viewed as] a cooperative process of interpretation," communicative action provides Habermas with a "comprehensive counter-concept": a means of reconceptualizing rationality (as communicative rationality), the organization of the social world (as the relationship between the communicatively based "lifeworld" and instrumental "system" processes), and also the evolution and present condition of society (Habermas [1981]1984:101, 285–86, Joas 1991:99; see also Habermas [1981]1989, [1983]1990, [1985]1987, [1988]1992, [1992]1996, Calhoun 1992a, Honneth & Joas 1991a). More recently, Joas, who has criticized Habermas's formulations, has outlined an ambitious alternative to dominant action-theoretical approaches, one that seeks to focalize "the creativity of action"— the potentially creative dimension of all human activity (Honneth & Joas 1991b:4; Joas 1993, 1996). Faulting the tendency of modern theorists to squeeze social action into a di-

chotomy of rational versus normative action, Joas draws from the early American pragmatists to show that all action takes the form of an alternation between "unreflected habitual action" and the creation of "a new mode of acting, which can gradually take root and thus become itself an unreflected routine" (1996:129). He uses this reorientation as a foundation for reconstructing theories of contemporary culture, collective action, and social change.

Proposals to fill voids of a more methodological sort have also assumed various shapes. Often launched as critiques of "positivist" views of knowledge still felt to dominate the theory area, these programs—reviewed in detail elsewhere—have included efforts to predicate sociological theory on recent developments in realist and hermeneutic philosophies of science (Outhwaite 1987, 1996, Sayer 1992, Shapiro & Sica 1984) as well as on some of the diverse epistemological lessons of critical theory, feminist theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and the sociology of science (Agger 1991, DeVault 1996, Fuller 1988, J Hall 1990a). More prosaically, work in the theory area, as it was passed on by the previous generation of theorists, has been charged with a neglect of history, with applying "universal theoretical terms [to] all aspects of social life, regardless of times and places" (Skocpol 1984:2–3). In the last two decades, this critique has inspired numerous theoretical contributions sensitive to the specifics of time and location (for review, see Mandalios 1996), among them Mann's (1986, 1993) theory of social power and Sewell's (1992, 1996) efforts to reformulate Giddens's concept of social structure and to make "events" a viable "theoretical category" (see also Abbott 1995).

Perhaps the most distinctive current focus, however, has been on an omission brought to light by various contemporary social movements. This is the "reality of differences" (Lemert 1995): what Calhoun defines as the "basic and urgent project [of] developing ways to take seriously such fundamental categorical differences" as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, language, class, region, and nation (1995:xix–xxii). Among these differences, it is the neglect of gender that has received the widest treatment, as feminist scholars have attacked sociological theory for its restrictive assumptions about which aspects of social reality merit analysis, for its marginalization of feminist contributions, for its masculinist reliance on "logical dichotomies" and tendency to suppress the agency of subjects and "re-attribut[e it] to social phenomena" (Sprague 1997: 93; Smith 1989:49; see also Alway 1995, Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 1990, Stacey & Thorne 1985, 1996, Wallace 1989). On such grounds, feminist theorists have proposed varying degrees of theoretical reconstruction: in some cases, the inclusion of gender into established theoretical approaches (Chafetz 1988, Walby 1988); in others, radical alterations of the aims and procedures of all existing approaches (e.g. Haraway 1985, Smith 1990, 1993; for review, see Chafetz 1997, Clough 1994, Lovell 1996). Related lines of argument have emerged elsewhere as well: in the demand for theories of oppression, struggle, motherhood,

and community constructed from the neglected and "unique standpoint [of] Black womanhood, unavailable to other groups" (P Collins 1990: 33); in the critique of sociological theory for omitting the concerns and contributions of peoples of color in both the Western and post-colonial worlds (Connell 1997, S Hall 1996, Gilroy 1993); and in the claim that theory has also avoided questions of sexual identity, exhibiting both disinterest in gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals and an unwillingness to rethink its basic terms from the perspective of sexual difference (Butler 1993, Clough 1994, Seidman 1996).

Amid these developments, sociological theory has also been widely indicted for its exclusion of moral issues, for having strayed from its origins to become a "detached enterprise of abstract problems [that lack] immediate implications for everyday schemes of moral and political action and belief" (Wardell & S Turner 1986:11; see also Levine 1995, B Turner 1989, 1996a). An interest in ending these exclusions forms a leitmotiv in many of the works already reviewed in this section, some of them explicitly advocating a renewal of "critical theory"—in Habermas's case from the standpoint of communicative rationality, in Calhoun's from the perspective of difference. But heightened concern with theory as a moral and political enterprise is evident in numerous other sources, including Selznick's (1992) sweeping program to build a "liberal communitarianism" on the foundations of pragmatist social theory (cf Bellah et al 1985, Etzioni 1996, Horowitz 1993, Wallerstein 1997, Wolfe 1989).

Project VI: Engagement with Past Theoretical Ideas

Proponents of the preceding projects differ markedly in their attitude toward a sixth line of theoretical activity. This is the analysis of various theoretically significant ideas found in the writings of social thinkers from the past—a program that brings together theorists working to advance some of these other contemporary projects and scholars who are relatively aloof from such efforts.

The range of work falling within this category is vast. Recent years have witnessed an outpouring of research on and reinterpretation of all the major classical theorists, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Mead (for a review, see the chapters in Camic 1997a), along with efforts to revitalize and critically extend their perspectives, as seen, for example, in various lines of "neo-Weberian" scholarship (R Collins 1986b, Eisenstadt 1987, 1992, 1996, Kalberg 1994, Lehman & Roth 1993, Scaff 1989, Schluchter 1989, Sica 1988, Whimster & Lash 1987). Increased interest has also been shown in the ideas of such latter-day figures as Parsons, Mannheim, Merton, and Garfinkel (Camic 1991, 1992, Crothers 1987, Heritage 1984, Hilbert 1992, Kettler et al 1984, Sztompka 1986) and in the work of earlier women thinkers (McDonald 1994), intellectuals of African descent (Lemert 1993, Seidman 1994a), and other "neglected theorists" (*Sociological Theory* 1994–1995), Norbert Elias perhaps chief among them (Fletcher 1997, Mennell 1989).

These studies cannot be separately reviewed here, but generally they locate themselves as projects integral to the theory area (rather than as contributions mainly to the history of sociology) on different grounds. These run the gamut from the utilitarian claim that works from the past contain concepts and generalizations "worth salvaging and using" in order to address contemporary research questions (R Collins 1986b:3) to the "noninstrumental" idea that "conversing with great minds," via "writings of unsurpassed scholarly texture," is a vital experience, "humbling and invigorating" (Poggi 1996:40–42; cf Alexander 1989). Between the extremes, scholars have also recently urged the careful application of hermeneutic methods to past theoretical works; instead of "cannibalizing classical statements in search of testable fragments," such methods strive for "a contextual or holistic understanding of [each] theorist's project" (Sica 1988:138). In this way, they expand the range of theoretical alternatives beyond the bounds of present possibilities and reveal the contingent historical processes by which some theoretical approaches were established at the expense of others (Camic 1997b; cf Calhoun 1995, S Turner 1996a).

Project VII: Diagnosis of Contemporary Social Conditions

Not past theoretical ideas but present social realities form the main focus of a seventh contemporary project. This sets for theory the task of providing for the late twentieth century what the classical theorists furnished for their era but now demands overhaul: an analysis of the nature and dynamics of modernity, of the social forces shaping human life in the current period.

This project is sometimes pursued in close conjunction with others we have identified. On the basis of his concept of communicative action, for example, Habermas ([1981]1989) examines the modern world (descriptively and normatively) in terms of the growing penetration, or "colonization," of the communicative processes of the "lifeworld," found in areas such as family and public discussion, by the instrumental processes of economic, political, and legal "systems." In turn, Luhmann draws on systems theory to argue that whereas "in modern society, functional systems...have the possibility of self-steering," there are inherent limits on the extent to which the political system can effectively regulate other social spheres (1997:45). In Luhmann's view, the contemporary world is unique in the intensity of its calls for such regulation; analysis of the limits of societal steering thus forms part of "the self-description of modern society" (1997:54). For his part Giddens mobilizes structuration theory to characterize the present age of "late modernity" as the "increasing interconnection" between two developments: the reflexive organization of "self-identity," as individuals confront distinctive forms of risk amid a "transformation of intimacy" and relationships of trust; and "globalization" in its economic, political, military, and cultural dimensions (Giddens 1991:1–6, see also 1987, 1994a,b, 1996).

This emphasis on globalization is not unique to Giddens. Albrow's comment that contemporary sociologists "are falling over themselves in their haste to re-thematize old topics in the light of globalizing processes" (1993: 732) perhaps reflects the particular perspective of British sociology (see, e.g., Featherstone 1990, Robertson 1992). But Albrow's (1997) own recent work on globalization, Sklair's (1995) attempt to transcend state-centered views of the global system with a theory of "transnational practices," and Meyer et al's (1997) analysis of the diffusion of the nation-state model in the context of "world society" are lines of thinking that all evidence growing concern with the dynamics and consequences of new patterns of interconnection among the world's societies, institutions, and peoples.

Efforts to theorize contemporary conditions have taken several other directions as well. For Touraine, "social life is constructed through struggles and negotiations around the implementation of...cultural orientations"—struggles that, "in today's post-industrial society...center upon... the production and mass distribution of representations, data and languages" and thus turn the analytical spotlight to contemporary social movements (1995:358, 1988; see also Eder 1993, Offe 1985). For Beck, the modern world has witnessed a "renaissance of political subjectivity" due to the emergence of a "risk society" beset with environmental hazards; here "socially recognized risks...contain a peculiar political explosive" that ignites activity outside conventional politics (1992:24, 1994:18). In other work, theorists have looked to the public sphere (Calhoun 1992a), identity politics (Calhoun 1994), the collapse of the Communist bloc (Offe 1997), the apparent waning of the ideology of liberal reformism (Wallerstein 1995), doubts about the "intelligibility" and "shapeability" of the social world (P Wagner 1994:176), citizenship debates (B Turner 1993, Laclau 1990), and the nature of contemporary capitalism (Lash & Urry 1987) and culture (Bauman 1992; see also the new afterword in Bell [1976] 1996)—all to advance the agenda of coming to intellectual terms with the distinctive characteristics of the current historical epoch.

Project VIII: Dissolution of Sociological Theory

As theorists have reckoned with the features of the present age, a very different project—an anti-project—has emerged in proposals to bring the enterprise of sociological theory to an end. Accepting in various degrees the post-modernist assault on the activity of social-scientific "theory" and on the reality of the "social," these proposals generally call for the multidisciplinary development of critical, non–social-scientistic narratives.

The challenge to "theory" has been raised by Lemert, who employs post-modernist epistemological critiques to argue that "whatever social theory today is or is not, it has few choices beyond accepting, getting around, or resisting the stance of radical and continuing doubt about the final vocabulary avail-

able for use in speaking about the social world" (1992:20). Given this, Lemert (1992, 1993, 1994a,b, 1995) holds that sociological theorists must relinquish their aspirations to be purveyors of abstract scientific truths, instead becoming what Rorty (1989) calls "ironists"—intellectuals who recognize that there exists no theoretical metalanguage for objectively arbitrating between competing truth claims. Drawing on thinkers like Foucault (1972) and Lyotard (1984), Seidman launches a similar attack on sociological theory for its generalizing, universalist ambitions, observing that "once the veil of epistemic privilege is torn away by post-modernists, [social-scientific theory] appears as a social force enmeshed in particular cultural and power struggles" (1994c:124). This kind of sociological theory should therefore be replaced by a diversity of "social theories" in the form of "broad social narratives [that] relate stories of origin and development, tales of crisis, decline, or progress," but that do not pretend "to discover the one true vocabulary that mirrors the social universe" (1994c:120). Moreover, because sociologists hold no monopoly over such narratives, theorists need to "move sociology away from its historic role as a discipline" and open themselves up to insights about the social from feminist theory, post-colonial studies, queer theory, and so on (Lemert 1994a:268; see also Seidman 1994c, B Turner 1990).

For other contemporary scholars, however, even the "social" itself is deeply problematic. This is so, in Game's (1991) view, because the writings of Barthes, Derrida, and Irigaray have shown that "the social is written, that there is no extra-discursive real outside cultural systems" (1991:4). For this reason, all forms of sociological theory that assume that theoretical terms are ideational representations of reality must give way to a "deconstructive sociology" that imagines and analyzes the social only as text, alert to the power interests that lie behind representationalist thinking (see also Brown 1990, Clough 1993). For Baudrillard (1983), in contrast, it is the present historical period itself that marks the "end of the perspective space of the social." As a result of the contemporary diffusion of various technologies of simulation, the activity of representation has itself become increasingly impossible, and the social, as a representation of the real, collapses: "[T]he social only exists in a perspective space, it dies in the space of simulation..." (1983:83). Under these conditions, sociological theory as a discourse on the social necessarily loses all viability (see Kellner 1994, Bogard 1990, Denzin 1986, Gane 1991; for critical discussion, see Bauman 1992, Seidman & D Wagner 1992, Seidman 1994b).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

There are areas in sociology where the presence of this number of active and diverse projects would generally be seen as evidence of intellectual vitality.

Among the majority in the theory area, however, this is not the prevailing sentiment. Pessimists, disillusioned over what they take to be the direction of the area, here greatly outnumber those who are now sanguine about the field or some particular contemporary project.

Expressions of this attitude are widespread, though efforts to get to its roots have been meager. Proponents of the theoretical projects described above often portray themselves in dismay, facing a hard battle on behalf of their cause. Rarely, however, do theorists provide a serious and constructive assessment of the forces arrayed against their particular agenda. To the contrary, most contemporary theory programs put themselves forth on exclusively intellectual grounds, giving minimal sociological attention to the organizational conditions that confront them—conditions these programs must reckon with realistically if they are to advance their aims. Four important conditions of possibility are discussed below.

OTHER PROJECTS With isolated exceptions, few contemporary projects evince awareness of the range of other projects with which they share the theory field. This situation precludes systematic consideration in the field of possible relationships among projects: of the different intellectual questions to which the various projects may be differentially applicable; of the points at which different programs might operate in collaborative, complementary, integrable, or cross-cutting modes, in contrast to points at which they are competitive or mutually irrelevant (on these options, see Levine 1986). Added to this problem is the tendency among several projects simply to lump the majority of alternative projects together in an undifferentiated mass. It is thus that advocates of tool-construction (Project I) are prone to regard all other theoretical efforts as little more than the exegesis of past ideas (Project VI?), overlooking in the process even a number of differently formulated variants of their own program—an oversight exhibited in other projects as well. By this kind of lumping, various projects misassess their relative position in the theory area: tool-constructors, for example, regularly, but wrongly, presenting their agenda as a beleaguered minority stance; synthesizers (Project II) erring in the opposite direction by absorbing all other lines of theoretical work into their own program, thereby fostering the widely accepted but inaccurate view that this one project is contemporary sociological theory as such.

SOCIOLOGY AT LARGE Quantitative data on the organization of sociology document that, during the very period when these contemporary theory projects have been under way, not only did "new theoretical approaches [fail to] provide a unified perspective for the discipline as a whole," but contributions from the theory area ceased "to be closely connected to the sociology literature" at large (Crane & Small 1992:229–30). Historical evidence suggests that this is no recent development: that the impact of sociological theory on socio-

logical research has long been tenuous, with theory an unwanted presence in many of the ever-changing speciality areas of the discipline (Sica 1989a,b). With occasional exceptions, however, theorists have been slow to think through the implications of this and to fashion suitable roles for themselves under these conditions. To the contrary, current theoretical projects often read like efforts to wish the conditions away, to deny that the strong "internal connectivity" between research areas that gives centrality to "theory" in a discipline like economics is simply not an institutional feature of sociology (Crane & Small 1992:208, 231).

EXTERNAL FORCES As a result of its own "fragile professional standing," the entire discipline of sociology has been buffeted during this same recent period by major changes in its social and institutional links to other academic disciplines, in its relations to its different patrons and publics, and in the size and composition of its student clienteles (Halliday 1992). Save for scattered commentary on the first of these points, however, theorists have rarely considered the bearing of these developments on the viability of their own projects. And even regarding the first point, their opinions are divided, with some theorists anticipating only minor adjustments in the disciplinary status quo and others expecting and calling for closer ties between sociological theory and everything from biology to all the social sciences as well as history and cultural studies. For those urging these ties, the common hope is that they will produce a "flourishing" back-and-forward exchange between these other fields and work in sociological theory (Calhoun 1992b); but theorists need also to recognize that reciprocated exchanges have been the exception—that theoretical projects inside sociology have drawn from without far more often than they have been elsewhere drawn upon (Crane & Small 1992:231–32).

HISTORICAL LEGACIES Almost invariably, contemporary theoretical projects rest on historical narratives, accounts of the theory field (and sometimes of sociology and forces external to it) at previous times—the 1940s and 1950s, the 1950s and 1960s, the 1960s and 1970s—different theorists choose different slices. But their historical narratives are ordinarily more than window dressing: for each narrative is the baseline for the particular project that the theorist seeks to put on the agenda for the future, an analysis of what the theory field thus far offers and does not offer, an inventory of its resources and lacunae, of its problems and possibilities. Take the historical narrative away and one removes much of the rationale for the project it accompanies. Yet, for all this, few theorists exhibit much historical care in constructing their narratives, in defining the intellectual and institutional legacies that the contemporary theory field actually confronts. Indeed, so lax are theorists in this respect that their historical claims tend not only to cancel one another out, but also to meet broad disconfirmation when subjected to direct historical investigation (see Platt 1996).

In the course of advancing their different projects, a few contemporary theorists have given serious attention to some of these organizational factors (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, Calhoun 1992b, R Collins 1986a, 1989, Levine 1995, Sica 1989b, S Turner & J Turner 1990). But systematic examination of the intellectual and institutional relations among the diverse projects that now constitute the theory field, of the field's complex historical legacies, and of its current position within sociology and in regard to various external forces has yet to crystallize into a program in its own right, a project that would problematize the form or forms appropriate to sociological theory under present conditions of possibility. If at least some current projects are to succeed, however, contemporary developments would seem to warrant also including this project square on the theorist's agenda.

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