Self, Social Structure, and Beliefs

Explorations in Sociology

EDITED BY

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Chapter 1

Mastering Ambivalence

Neil Smelser as a Sociologist of Synthesis

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Gary T. Marx, and Christine L. Williams

Future historians will write about Neil Smelser as an iconic figure in twentieth-century sociology's second half. Smelser has had an extraordinarily active career not only as a scholar but also as a teacher and organizational leader. Every participant in this volume has proudly been a "Smelser student" in one form or another. The distinction of these contributions speaks directly to Smelser's power as a teacher. His immensely impressive and varied performances as organizational leader are perhaps less well known, but they speak equally clearly of scholarly power exercised in a more political manner. His roles have included being advisor to a string of University of California chancellors and presidents; referee of the nation's most significant scientific training and funding programs, from the National Science Foundation to the departments of leading universities; organizer of the *Handbook of Sociology* and the new *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences;* and, most recently, director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

In many respects, both Neil Smelser and the social sciences matured together in the second half of the last century. Smelser expanded his areas of research to include sociology, psychology, economics, and history at the same time that newly synthetic cross-disciplinary programs, area studies, and applied programs appeared. Through his work with commissions and foundations and as a spokesperson for the social sciences, he sought a greater public role for sociology and helped to foster the gradual infiltration of their findings and methods into other disciplines, practical settings, and popular culture. Smelser's early interest in comparative international studies anticipated their expansion, an increase in international collaboration, and greater awareness of globalization issues. His move from optimism about positivist approaches and functionalism in the 1950s to a more guarded opti-

Chapter 13

Shaping Sociological Imagination

The Importance of Theory

Piotr Sztompka

I had my first taste of sociological theory in Neil J. Smelser's graduate class at Berkeley in 1972–1973. Following on the themes already developed in his *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (1968), he discussed the works of the great classical scholars: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Alexis de Tocqueville. It struck me immediately that he was not just contemplating, commenting on, or analytically dissecting them. Instead he was using them, trying to unravel the structure and logic of their theoretical explanation of concrete issues: social inequality in the case of Marx, power in the case of Weber, cultural cohesiveness in the case of Durkheim, and the functioning of democracy in the case of Tocqueville. It was the ability to explain such crucial social issues that made them great sociologists, because theory, in their view, and clearly in the view of Smelser, was empirically and historically rooted general explanation. It was, as Smelser was defining it, "an enterprise of accounting for regularities, variations, and interdependencies among the phenomena identified within the sociological frameworks" (1968: 55).

I looked up Smelser's own major theoretical contribution, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1963), and found the same focus on explanation, but not just any explanation. He put forward a dynamic explanatory model incorporating a temporal dimension in the "value-added sequence." According to his model, the necessary preconditions for episodes of collective behavior or social movements cumulatively emerge in stages: from structural conduciveness; to structural strain, initiating events, spread of generalized beliefs, and attempts at social control; to the emergence of the explained social phenomenon. This account, "logical patterning of social determinants, each contributing its 'value' to the explanation of the episode" (1968: 99), was obviously the realization of Smelser's creed that "sociological explanation consists in bringing constructions such as hypotheses, models and

theories to bear on factual statements" (58). This theory was causal, empirical, genetic, and operational and demonstrated forcefully that social facts do not exist statically but are in a state of continual emergence, "social becoming," as I later called it (Sztompka 1991). To this day Smelser's model is an exemplar of what sociological explanation (that is, sociological theory) should look like.

Soon after my Berkeley class, I had the opportunity to study under two other American theorists who, in spite of basic differences in the orientation and substance of their theories, seemed to share with Smelser the focus on explanation. One was Robert K. Merton, who put forward his influential program of middle-range theory to resolve the dilemma between abstract "grand theory," seen in Talcott Parsons's style, and the narrow-empirical data gathering, which dominated some subdisciplines of sociology. The other theorist was George Homans, with his critique of Parsonian functionalism in the name of the covering-law model of explanation, borrowed from Carl Hempel's classic logical work. Both Merton and Homans were trying to show what sociological explanation—that is, sociological theory—should look like.

I have become more and more convinced that explanatory theory is the most important, illuminating, and useful aspect of that vast and multifaceted enterprise that runs today under the label of theory. In my sociological education, and later my own academic work, it was explanatory theory that turned out to be crucial. In this chapter, I argue why explanatory theory should remain in the forefront of sociological teaching and not be put aside by some other, trendy modes of theorizing.

THE EDUCATIONAL FOCUS: SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The education of sociologists has four aims: (1) to teach the language of the discipline, a set of concepts with which social reality is understood, (2) to develop a particular vision, a perspective from which social reality is approached, (3) to train in the methods, procedures, and techniques of empirical inquiry, and (4) to provide information about main facts and data concerning contemporary social life. Let us put the points 1 and 2—language and perspective—under one label, "sociological imagination," borrowed from the classic book *Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills. He explains the notion as follows: "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society" (1959: 3). Let us elaborate the full meaning of this statement and extend the concept beyond Mills's insight.

I consider sociological imagination to be a complex skill or ability made up of five components, including the abilities to (1) see all social phenomena as produced by some social agents, individual or collective, and to

identify those agents, (2) understand deep, hidden, structural, and cultural resources and constraints that influence social life, including the chances for agential efforts (as Mirra Komarovsky puts it, "It takes patient training of the sociological sight to enable the students to perceive the invisible social structure" [1951]), (3) recognize the cumulative burden of tradition, the persisting legacies of the past, and their continuing influence on the present, (4) perceive social life in its incessant, dynamic, fluid process of "social becoming" (Sztompka 1991), and (5) recognize the tremendous variety and diversity of the forms in which social life may appear. Everett Hughes defines one of the main goals of sociological education: "The emancipation through expansion of one's world by penetration into and comparison with the world of other people and other cultures is not the only aspect of sociological imagination. . . . But it is one great part of it, as it is of human life itself" (1970: 16).

To put it another way: Sociological imagination is the ability to relate anything that happens in a society to a structural, cultural, and historical context and to the individual and collective actions of societal members, recognizing the resulting variety and diversity of social arrangements. Mills gives us an example:

> One result of reading sociology ought to be to learn how to read a newspaper. To make a sense of a newspaper—which is a very complicated thing—one must learn how to connect reported events, how to understand them by relating them to more general conceptions of the societies of which they are tokens, and the trends of which they are a part. . . . My point is sociology is a way of going beyond what we read in the newspaper. It provides a set of conceptions and questions that help us to do this. If it does not, then it has failed as part of liberal education. (1960: 16–17)

Teaching sociology cannot be limited to sociology in books. It must go beyond that toward sociology in life, allowing deeper interpretation, better understanding of everything that surrounds us. As another classical author Robert Park, emphasizes, "When there is no attempt to integrate the things learned in the schoolroom with the experience and problems of actual life learning tends to become mere pedantry—pedantry which exhibits itself in a lack of sound judgement and in a lack of that kind of practical understanding we call common sense" (1937: 25). Mirra Komarovsky makes the same point: "There is no greater educational danger than this: that the students learn the sociological concepts on a purely formal verbal level without the richness and fullness of meaning; that this body of words remains a sterile segment of mentality, relatively unrelated to the confused stream of life which it sought to interpret" (1945).

I consider the training of the sociological imagination, and the skill to apply it to concrete problems of social life, to be absolutely crucial for the education of sociologists, both those who think about academic careers and those who go on to practice-oriented professions.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND THEORETICAL RESOURCES

To a great extent, training the sociological imagination is synonymous with training in sociological theory. However, this is not in the sense of memorizing names, schools, definitions, and arguments, but rather in the sense of using theory—that is, referring to concrete experience, looking at the current problems in the surrounding society, its dilemmas and opportunities. It also applies to our personal biographies and life chances. Sociological imagination should provide a map to ensure a better orientation in the chaos of events, change, and transformation. It should give us a deeper understanding, more thorough enlightenment, and, in this way, provide more opportunities for informed, rational life and sound practice. In this chapter I review the resources for such indispensable theoretical training that we possess in the sociological tradition, as well as in recent social theory.

One huge pool of theoretical ideas is found in the history of the discipline, from the early nineteenth century onward. Teaching the history of sociology is not an antiquarian pastime. The tradition of our discipline is still extremely vital. Most of the concepts, models, issues, and queries that we study today have been inherited from the nineteenth-century masters. They put solid foundations under the sociological enterprise, and their work is still very much alive. They should be studied, not in a historical or biographical way, but in the context of our time, as their seminal ideas throw light on our present realities. Of course they must be studied critically and selectively, because not all have left an equally relevant heritage. My personal selection includes, of course, the "big three": Weber, Durkheim, and Marx—the true undisputed giants of sociology—as well as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Toennies, Vilfredo Pareto, Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Cooley, William Sumner, and George H. Mead. Reading and rereading them are crucially important to discovering new insights and questions and formulating sociological problems by entering into a sort of dialogue with them to assess our own ideas. Perhaps most important, they can show us the best models for intellectual work. As Robert Merton puts it, "Exposure to such penetrating sociological minds as those of Durkheim and Weber helps us to form standards of taste and judgement in identifying a good sociological problem—one that has significant implications for theory—and to learn what constitutes an apt theoretical solution to the problem. The classics are what Salvemini liked to call 'libri fecondatori'—books that sharpen the faculties of exacting readers who give them their undivided attention" (in Sztompka 1996a: 31–32). There is one additional benefit: the student learns that the social world is multidimensional and extremely complex, and

that it therefore requires many approaches to understand it. Studying the history of sociological theories is a great lesson in theoretical pluralism, tolerance for variety, and diversity of perspectives, and the best medicine against narrow-minded dogmatism and orthodoxy.

But let us leave sociological tradition, as my main focus here is current sociological theory and its relevance for teaching. I argue that we have four types of theory and theorizing in contemporary sociology, and that they are of unequal importance for educational purposes in training the sociological imagination. In order of diminishing importance, I discuss explanatory theory, heuristic theory, analytic theory, and exegetic theory. This classification partly overlaps with the triple distinction of "theories of," presuppositional studies, and hermeneutical theory as proposed by Jeffrey Alexander (1998b). But his preferential order is different from mine, and he does not recognize my third category: analytic theory.

THEORETICAL BOOM

In general, the last decade of the twentieth century was a good time for sociological theory. Only half a century ago, in the middle of the twentieth century, there was a lot of talk about the crisis of sociological theory (e.g., Gouldner 1971). Even quite recently, a rather pessimistic appraisal was given by Alexander, who perceived diminishing influence of sociological theory in the recent period, both within the discipline and without, accompanied by the growing importance of theoretical work in economics, philosophy, and literary studies (1988a). But now the situation seems to have changed. I share the opinion of a British sociologist, Gerard Delanty: "Social theory is in a position of great strength at the moment" (1998: 1).

To support this claim, I offer some institutional or organizational facts. The Research Committee on Theory (RC 16), which I founded together with Jeffrey Alexander in 1986, has grown to become one of the biggest of more than fifty committees of the International Sociological Association. In the American Sociological Association (ASA), the theory section is one of the largest groups. During the last decades of the century, the circulation of theoretical journals dramatically increased, and many new titles appeared: *Theory, Culture, and Society; European Journal of Social Theory; Sociological Theory* (published by the ASA); and *Theory and Society*. A new publication, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, has been launched by Sage under the editorship of Bryan Turner. A number of major compendia of theoretical knowledge have come out: *Polity Reader in Social Theory* (1994), *Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (1996), *Major Social Theorists* (2000), and *Handbook of Social Theory* (2000). New monographs are taking stock of current theory: for example, Patrick Baert's *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century* (1998) and John Scott's *Sociological Theory: Contemporary Debates* (1995). Major publishers, including Polity Press, Cambridge University Press, and Sage, put out rich lists of theoretical work, both classical and recent, including important book series: for example, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (edited by Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman). All around the world, there are theoretical conferences focusing on theoretical issues, including for example, "Reappraising Theories of Social Change" at Montreal (2000) and "New Sources of Critical Theory" at Cambridge (2000).

It is notable that theory has returned to its cradle, to Europe, after a long detour to North America (Nedelman and Sztompka 1993). Of course, apart from the continuing influence and presence of the "old guard"—Robert K. Merton, Neil Smelser, Seymour M. Lipset, Lewis Coser, Peter Blau, and others—a number of influential theorists from the younger generation work and publish in the United States, including Jeffrey Alexander, Randall Collins, Craig Calhoun, and Jonathan Turner, to mention just a few. But Britain, France, and Germany currently provide the most fertile grounds for original theoretical work. As Neil Smelser admits, "In fact, in the past 50 years, the center of gravity of general theoretical thinking has shifted from the United States to Europe, and this shift is represented in the works of scholars like Alain Tourine, Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, and Anthony Giddens. Much of current theoretical thinking in the US stems from the influence of these figures on faculty and graduate students" (1990: 47–48). From the European side, this is echoed by Bryan Turner, who predicts, "European social theory may once more emerge to evolve to a new form of domination in the world development of social theory" (1996b: 16).

EXPLANATORY THEORY

How can the above-mentioned facts and tendencies be interpreted? Sticking to the old, traditional opposition of "theory versus research" or "theoretical versus empirical sociology" (as exemplified by the Parsons-Merton debate in 1947 at the annual ASA convention; see Merton 1948) could lead one to conclude that the ascent of theory indicates a shift from research to scholasticism and the realm of pure ideas. In other words, empirical research is abandoned and real social problems and concrete social facts are ignored. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. The impressive reputation of theory is due to the fact that it won its way into all domains of empirical sociology, found a place in all specialist areas of sociology, and has finally become accepted as a valid and necessary component of sociological research. The separation of theory and research is no longer feasible. Instead we witness a proliferation of theories dealing with various substantive social problems and issues.

Theorists and researchers now meet halfway. Most theorists no longer pursue purely abstract ideas, but are looking at real problems: globalization,

identity, risk, trust, civil society, democracy, new forms of labor, social exclusion, cultural traumas, and so on. At the same time, empirical researchers no longer confine themselves to fact-finding and data-gathering but propose models, generalizations of their domains informed by accumulated research: theories of deviance, collective behavior, social movements, ethnicity, mass media, social capital, postmaterialist values, and so on. For example, the *Handbook of Sociology*, by Stella Quah and Arnaud Sales (2000), which sums up the state of the art in various sociological subdisciplines, in fact includes a considerable amount of theory in each chapter. The book illustrates that theory is coming closer to addressing real social problems, as opposed to esoteric sociological problems—that is, the problems experienced by common people as opposed to the professional concerns of sociologists. Theory can provide explanations of pressing social issues by generating more or less directly testable hypotheses and can thus influence more people in society by providing them with guidelines for thinking and mental maps of specific domains of their social life-world.

This first theoretical approach can be labeled "explanatory theory." It represents what Bryan Turner calls a "strong program" for theory (1996b: 6). First, we must ask three questions about a theory: It is a theory of what, for what, and for whom? A theory of what? Of real social problems: why more crime, why new social movements, why poverty, why ethnic revival? According Merton, Smelser, Bourdieu, and Bryan Turner, theory should grow out of research and be directed toward research. "For theoretical contributions to be worthwhile, they need to be question-driven" (Baert 1998: 202). "Social theory thrives and survives best when it is engaged with empirical research and public issues" (Turner 1996b: 12). A theory for what? For providing explanations, or at least models allowing better organization of dispersed facts and phenomena, and interpretation of multiple and varied events and phenomena. A theory for whom? Not only for fellow theorists but also for common people, to provide them with an orientation, enlightenment, and understanding of their condition. An important role of theories is to "inform democratic public discourse" (Calhoun 1996: 429). This role will become even more pronounced as more societies become democratic, and even more in a "knowledge society" of the future, composed of informed, educated citizens who care about public issues, and where democracy takes a form of "discursive democracy" (Dryzek 1990).

One can formulate a hypothesis in the framework of the "sociology of knowledge": the driving force behind the developments in explanatory theory are found in rapid, radical, and overwhelming social change. We are experiencing the next "great transition" (to paraphrase Karl Polanyi). Theories are especially in demand in times of change. There is pressure on sociologists from both the common people and politicians to provide explanations of the chaos. Everyone wants to know where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. Facts and data alone cannot answer such questions. Only generalized explanatory models can provide an overall view. "Nothing presses this theoretical venture on us more firmly than the experience of historical change and cross-cultural diversity" (Calhoun 1996: 431).

Teaching explanatory theories is, in my opinion, the most important goal of sociological education, and particularly so in periods of overwhelming social change. This kind of theory provides the strongest stimulus in developing the sociological imagination, as it links theorizing with concrete experience.

HEURISTIC THEORY

Let us move on to a second kind of theoretical approach: theoretical orientation, or what I call a heuristic theory (not directly testable but useful in generating relevant concepts, images, and models). It is closest to social philosophy, and particularly the ontology or metaphysics of the social world, as it attempts to answer three perennial ontological questions about the constitution of social reality: What are the bases of social order? What is the nature of human action? And what is the mechanism and course of social change? Such questions have been addressed by all classical founders of sociology. Good examples of the classical orientations dominating in the middle of the last century, which attempted to deal with such issues, were structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, and Marxism. Since then, several new trends have emerged, which I discuss later.

What are the characteristics of this kind of theory? Again, let us ask our three questions. Theory of what? Of the foundations of social reality. It poses questions not of "why" but of "how": How is social order possible (how do social wholes exist; how do people live together, cooperate, cohabit)? How is social action carried out? How does social change proceed? Theory for what? For the conceptual framework for more concrete explanatory theoretical work, for sensitizing us to specific types of variables, for suggesting strong categories to help us grasp the varied and dispersed facts. Theory for whom? Mostly for researchers building explanatory models of specific domains of reality and answering concrete problems.

The formidable growth of such heuristic theories by the end of the century cannot be explained by reference to social facts, but rather by intellectual developments. Heuristic theory should be seen in terms of the history of ideas rather than the sociology of knowledge. It seems to be related to new, contingent intellectual developments—that is to say, new trends and attractive, innovative, original perspectives. There is the excitement of a "paradigmatic shift" (Kuhn 1970); in fact we have witnessed three parallel paradigmatic shifts in recent theory. The first shift, from "first" to "second"

sociology (Dawe 1978), moves from a view of fixed organic systems to fluid fields of social forces. Social order is seen to be a constantly emerging and constructed achievement of agents, produced and reproduced by human action. Examples of such perspectives are found in the work of Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Elias, Giddens, and Bourdieu. The second shift is from evolution or social development to social becoming. There is an emphasis on open-ended historical scenarios, determined by decisions and choices but also by contingent, random occurrences. Examples of this perspective are found in historical sociology—represented by authors like Tilly, Archer, Theda Skocpol, and myself (Sztompka 1991, 1996b). The third shift is from images of *homo economicus*, the calculating, rational, purposeful actor (still at the heart of rational choice theory, e.g., James Coleman and Jon Elster), and *homo sociologicus*, the normatively directed role player (still found in neofunctionalism, e.g., Alexander, Luhmann, and Richard Munch), to *homo cognitans*, the knowledgeable and meaningful actor informed and constrained by collective symbolic systems of knowledge and belief. This shift is also seen as an interpretative turn, cultural turn, or linguistic turn. "Contemporary social theory has done an about-face in analytical terms by giving prominence and priority to cultural phenomena and cultural relations," according to Bryan Turner (1998). It has many varieties. In one, which is sometimes called mentalism, there is a stress on the invariant components of the human mind. Examples include the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss or Ferdinand De Saussure and the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. The second kind, what some authors call textualism, is represented by poststructuralism or theory of discourses by Foucault, where social reality appears as a form of text with specific semantic meaning and its own rules of grammar. The third is sometimes also labeled intersubjectivism, to which Habermas made a great contribution in his theory of communicative action. Finally, there is the reaction against the "overintellectualized image of man." The emphasis shifts to practical knowledge (Giddens) and ethno-methods (Harold Garfinkel) but also to seeing the body as an instrument of action (Bryan Turner) and emotions as accompanying actions, things one uses, objects encountered, environment providing context for action. Individuals are seen as the carriers of routine but complex, characteristic sets of practices (Bourdieu).

Thus we presently have a rich and varied menu of heuristic orientations. Teaching should sensitize students to the necessity of using many of these orientations to look at society from various perspectives and different sides in order to attain a fuller understanding of social life.

ANALYTIC THEORY

The third theoretical approach can be called analytic theory. What it does is generalize and clarify concepts, providing typologies, classifications, explications, and definitions applicable in explanatory theory. It has an important but subsidiary role to play. However, there is a danger that it can become merely a method to sharpen conceptual tools without ever resulting in a specific orientation or producing a binding system of concepts. The attempts to construct closed conceptual systems and special languages to cover the whole domain of sociology seem to have ended with Niklas Luhmann's huge effort (earlier only Talcott Parsons had similar ambitions). But on a more limited level, this variety of theorizing is useful and necessary, coming close to what Merton labeled "middle range theory" (in Sztompka 1996a: 41–50). These are empirically informed conceptual schemes, applicable to concrete empirical problems (e.g., his theories of roles and role sets, reference groups, stratification, mobility, anomie, deviance, etc.).

What is the nature of such a theory? Again we must ask our three questions. Theory of what? Of rich concepts useful for grasping phenomena. Theory for what? For identifying, unraveling, explicating phenomena or important dimensions of phenomena. Theory for whom? For sociologists, providing them with a canonical vocabulary, the technical language to deal with their subject matter. Teaching analytic theory is crucial to developing students' ability to think and talk sociologically. It provides them with the basic tools of the trade. The focus in introductory courses of sociology should be on precisely this kind of theory.

EXEGETIC THEORY

Finally, there is the fourth kind of theory, which can be called exegetic theory. It comes down to analysis, exegesis, systematization, reconstruction, and critique of existing theories. It is, of course, a valid preparation for theoretical work. It should be seen as a stage of a scientific career, a period of apprenticeship. Most major theorists have gone through such a stage: Parsons with *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Giddens with *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971), Alexander with his four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982), and Smelser with *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (1968). I also include my *Sociological Dilemmas* (1979) in this category. However, we can lose sight of what is truly important if we let dissecting and analyzing the work of fashionable authors become the main concerns: what certain scholars said; how they could supposedly say it better; what they could have said but did not; are they consistent; what do they, or do they not, really mean? The more esoteric, incomprehensible, and muddled a theory, the greater opportunity it provides for exegetic debate. It inspires the frantic search "in a dark room, for a dark dog, which is not there." This is the secret of some current theories (e.g., the whole school of postmodernism and deconstructionism) and explains their popularity among interpreters. If a theory is

straightforward, problem-oriented, precise, and clear, there is not much to interpret and criticize.

Our three questions are especially revealing in the case of the fourth kind of theory. Theory of what? Of other theories, certain books, texts, and phantoms of sociological imagination, resulting in self-referential exercises. Theory for what? For apologies or destructions of proposed theories—which easily implies factionalism, dogmatism, orthodoxy of schools, sects, and fans and which degenerates from the free market of ideas into a vicious battlefield of ideas. Theory for whom? For other theorists who play intellectual games within the sects of the initiated. Such theories are the least consequential and often futile and irrelevant. They often deteriorate into epigonism. This opinion is shared by several theorists: "Social theory is at once the most futile and the most vital of intellectual enterprises. It is futile when it turns inward, closes into itself, degenerates into a desiccated war of concepts or an invidious celebration of the cognitive exploits of this author, that school, my tradition, your orthodoxy" (Wacquant 1998: 132). "It is necessary to let fresh air into the often closed compounds of indoor theorizing. Social theory is not only conceptualizations and discourse on other theoretician's concepts" (Therborn 1998: 132). "Without these political and public commitments social theory is in danger of becoming an esoteric, elitist, and eccentric interest of marginal academics" (Turner 1996b: 13). "Quite a number of scholars seem to assume that theoretical progress depends solely on close scrutiny and recycling of preceding social theories. . . . This strategy is unlikely to provide innovative and penetrating social knowledge" (Baert 1998: 203).

Needless to say, I would not recommend exegetic theories for sociology students. If included at all, their place in the curriculum should be only marginal, perhaps limited to graduate or postgraduate levels as a kind of mental exercise in reading and debunking of esoteric texts.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the most important, fruitful, and promising types of theory, crucial for sociological imagination, are the explanatory and heuristic theories. Analytic theories have a subsidiary role in sharpening conceptual tools and providing the language for sociological thinking. Exegetic theories are useful only in preparing a background for theorizing and the development of critical skills, but they do not contribute to theory proper and they should not replace other forms of theorizing.

Explanatory and heuristic theories make up a pluralistic mosaic of theoretical explanations and theoretical orientations. How should we deal with this fragmentation of the theoretical field? The attitude of "disciplined eclecticism" is a good way to address explanatory, practical theory, which is useful for the people, not only for the theorists (the quote is from Merton

1976: 169). This should be imparted to sociology students. Being disciplined means having a critical approach, appraising theories on their internal merits, coherence, persuasiveness, and ability to generate hypotheses. Being eclectic means having an open, inclusive, tolerant attitude, free from one-sided dogmatism. The spirit of Neil Smelser's work is clearly congruent with this strategy. He explicitly suggests "an attitude of permissiveness for a variety of theoretical and empirical activities, combined with an obligation to relate these to the core of sociology" (1968: 61). More recently, some other authors have argued in the same, ecumenical direction: "It is generally not possible to ask all the interesting questions about any really significant phenomenon within the same theory or even within a set of commensurable, logically integratable, theories" (Calhoun 1996: 435). "It is possible to gain cumulative knowledge about the world from within different and competing points of view" (Alexander 1988a: 79).

Disciplined eclecticism allows us to cross not only intertheoretical borders but also interdisciplinary borders, to go back toward social theory as practiced by the classics rather than engage only narrowly defined sociological theory. Already in the 1960s, Neil Smelser opted for this kind of true theoretical integration, which is not to be confused with creating interdisciplinary institutes: "A major requirement of integration is that some common language be developed so that the elements of the different social sciences can be systematically compared and contrasted with one another" (1968: 43). Twenty years later, Immanuel Wallerstein argued that, by intellectual necessity, sociology should link with psychology, economics, anthropology, cognitive sciences, and political science, and that it is important to abandon some pernicious interdisciplinary divisions which emerged in the nineteenth century and have proved resilient (1988). The same message was forcefully articulated a decade later by Mattei Dogan: "The networks of cross-disciplinary influences are such that they are obliterating the old classification of the social sciences. The trend that we perceive today is from the old formal disciplines to new hybrid social sciences" (1997: 442). The persistent emphasis on the same need for integration over several decades proves in itself that the promise is not yet fulfilled. It remains as perhaps the biggest challenge facing sociological theory and sociological education today.

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