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# The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope

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Sociological theory has gone astray. It has lost most of its social and intellectual importance; it is disengaged from the conflicts and public debates that have nourished it in the past; it has turned inward and is largely self-referential. Sociological theory today is produced and consumed almost exclusively by sociological theorists.<sup>1</sup> Its social and intellectual insularity accounts for the almost permanent sense of crisis and malaise that surrounds contemporary sociological theory. This distressing condition originates, in part, from its central project: the quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory of society.<sup>2</sup>

To revitalize sociological theory requires that we renounce scientism—that is, the increasingly absurd claim to speak the Truth, to be an epistemically privileged discourse. We must relinquish our quest for foundations or the search for the one correct or grounded set of premises, conceptual strategy, and explanation. Sociological theory will be revitalized if and when it becomes “social theory.” My critique of sociological theory and advocacy of social theory as a social narrative with a moral intent will be advanced from the standpoint of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup>

Anticipating the end of sociological theory entails renouncing the millennial social hopes that have been at the center of modernist sociological theory.<sup>4</sup> Postmodernism carries no promise of liberation—of a society free of domination. Postmodernism gives up the modernist idol of human emancipation in favor of deconstructing false closure, prying open present and future social possibilities, detecting fluidity and porousness in forms of life where hegemonic discourses posit closure and a frozen order. The hope of a great transformation is replaced by the more modest aspiration of a relentless defense of immediate, local pleasures and struggles for justice. Postmodernism offers the possibility of a social analysis that takes seriously the history of cruelty and constraint in Western modernity without surrendering to the retreat from criticalness that characterizes much current conservative and liberal social thought.

## SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY/SOCIAL THEORY: A DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

I'd like to posit a distinction between social theory and sociological theory. Social theories typically take the form of broad social narratives. They relate stories of origin and development, tales of crisis, decline, or progress. Social theories are typically closely connected to contemporary social conflicts and public debates. These narra-

<sup>1</sup> Discontent about the state of sociological theory is becoming more and more evident. See, for example, Geertz (1983), Sica (1989), Skocpol (1986), and Turner and Wardell (1986).

<sup>2</sup> For an argument exploring the institutional sources of intellectual distress among the disciplines, see Jacoby (1987).

<sup>3</sup> For useful discussions of postmodernism, especially as it pertains to social theory, see Bauman (1988), Brown (1990), Kellner (1988), Kroker and Cook (1986), Lash (1985, 1988), Lemert (1991), Nicholson (1990), and Seidman and Wagner (1991).

<sup>4</sup> This antimillennial theme is prominent in Baudrillard (1975, 1981), Foucault (1978, 1980), and Lyotard (1984).

tives aim not only to clarify an event or a social configuration but also to shape its outcome—perhaps by legitimating one outcome or imbuing certain actors, actions, and institutions with historical importance while attributing to other social forces malicious, demonic qualities. Social theory relates moral tales that have practical significance; they embody the will to shape history. Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* and the successive drafts of his critique of political economy in response to current social conflicts, as a practical intervention for the purpose of effecting change—to wit, contributing to the transformation of wage labor into the proletariat (i.e., into self-identified members of the working class antagonistic to capitalism). Weber wrote the *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in part to stimulate the building of a politicized German middle class willing to seize power. Durkheim wrote *The Division of Labor in Society* in order to legitimate and shape the Third Republic against attacks from the right and the left. Social theories might be written to represent the truth of social matters, but they arise out of ongoing contemporary conflicts and aim to affect them. Their moral intent is never far from the surface. They are typically evaluated in terms of their moral, social, and political significance.

Sociological theory, by contrast, intends to uncover a logic of society; it aims to discover the one true vocabulary that mirrors the social universe. Sociological theorists typically claim that their ideas arise out of humanity's self-reflection as social beings. They position theory in relation to a legacy of social discourse, as if theorizing were simply humanity's continuous dialogue on "the social." Sociological theorists aim to abstract from current social conflicts to reflect on the conditions of society everywhere, to articulate the language of social action, conflict, and change in general. They seek to find a universal language, a conceptual casuistry that can assess the truth of all social languages. Sociological theory aims to denude itself of its contextual embeddedness; to articulate humanity's universal condition. Insofar as sociological theory speaks the language of particularity, it is said to have failed. It must elevate itself to the universal, to the level of theoretical logics or central problems or to the study of social laws or the structure of social action. The intent of sociological theorists is to add to the stock of human knowledge in the hope that this will bring enlightenment and social progress.

The story I wish to tell is not that of a movement from social theory to sociological theory. Social theory and sociological theory, at least since the eighteenth century, have lived side by side and frequently have been intertwined. Marx wrote social theory but also sociological theory; Weber may have penned the *Protestant Ethic*, but he also wrote methodological essays that attempted to offer ultimate grounds for his conceptual strategies. Durkheim wrote the *Division of Labor in Society* but also the *Rules of Sociological Method*, which set out a logic of sociology; Parsons wrote the *Structure of Social Action* but also *The American University*. Although sociological and social theory intermingle in the history of social thought, I want to suggest that within the discipline of sociology, especially since the post-World War II period, the emphasis has been on sociological theory. Indeed, social theory is often devalued; it is described as ideological. Sociological theorists are encouraged to do sociological theory, not social theory. In the discipline of sociology, sociological theorists stake their claim to prestige and privilege on their ability to produce new analytic approaches to supposedly universal problems. I want to claim further that the hegemony of sociological theory within sociology has contributed to rendering sociological theorists insular and making their products—theories—socially and intellectually obscure and irrelevant to virtually everyone except other theorists. As

sociological theorists have moved away from social theory, they have contributed to the enfeeblement of public moral and political debate.

#### A CRITIQUE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AS A FOUNDATIONALIST DISCOURSE

Many sociological theorists have accepted a concept of theory as a foundational discourse (Seidman 1989, 1990, 1991a, 1991b). We have come to define our principal task as providing foundations for sociology. This entails giving ultimate reasons why sociology should adopt a specific conceptual strategy. We have assigned ourselves the task of defining and defending the basic premises, concepts, and explanatory models of sociology. We have assumed the role of resolving disciplinary disputes and conceptual conflicts by presuming to be able to discover a universal epistemic rationale that provides objective, value-neutral standards of conflict resolution. Sociological theorists have stepped forward as the virtual police of the sociological mind. In the guise of maintaining rationality and safeguarding intellectual and social progress, we have proposed to legislate codes of disciplinary order by providing a kind of epistemological casuistry that can serve as a general guide to conceptual decision making.

The quest for foundations has rendered sociological theory a metatheoretical discourse. Its disputes are increasingly self-referential and epistemological. Theory discussions have little bearing on major social conflicts and political struggles or on important public debates over current social affairs. Sociological theory has diminished impact on crucial public texts of social commentary, criticism, and analysis. And if I'm not mistaken, sociological theory functions as little more than a legitimating rhetoric for ongoing research programs and empirical analyses. Theory texts and conferences are preoccupied with foundational disputes regarding the logic of the social sciences, the respective merits of a conflict versus an order paradigm, the nature of social action and order, the conceptual link between agency and structure or a micro and macro level of analysis, the problem of integrating structural with cultural analysis, and so on. These discussions are rehearsed endlessly and use a short list of rhetorical tropes, such as the appeal to classic texts or to the higher values of humanism or scientism, to legitimate a favored vocabulary or conceptual strategy.

Has this discursive proliferation produced a centered, evolving vital theoretical tradition? No. Instead of a concentrated, productive discourse focused on a limited set of problems that exhibits sustained elaboration, we find a dispersed, discursive clamoring that covers a wide assortment of ever-changing issues in a dazzling diversity of languages. These vocabularies of social discourse typically imply divergent (if not incommensurable) philosophical, moral, and ideological standpoints. In this discursive clamor there is virtually no standardization of language, no agreement on what are central problems or standards of evaluation. There is a virtual babble of different vocabularies addressing a heterogeneous cluster of changing disputes. Indeed, a good deal of this discourse involves struggles to authorize a particular dispute or a particular conceptual vocabulary or a specific justificatory rationale (e.g., empirical adequacy or explanatory comprehensiveness). Typically, a text backed by a social network briefly captures the attention of some of the principal players in the field. A discussion ensues; local skirmishes break out in journals, books, and conferences; a particular vocabulary may acquire salience among sociological theorists. Such coherence, however, is typically short-lived because the field is always

divided, and rival theorists with their own agendas and networks clamor for recognition and reward. This metatheoretical proliferation has yielded little, if any, conceptual order or progress.

Foundational disputes to date have admitted of little, if any, consensus. Why? Because the criteria that guide conceptual decisions seem, in the end, local, heterogeneous, and perhaps ultimately incommensurable. How do “we” judge or prioritize epistemic standards that include empirical adequacy, explanatory comprehensiveness, quantitative precision, empirical predictability, logical coherence, conceptual economy, aesthetic appeal, practical efficacy, and moral acceptability? And how do “we” agree on what theoretical foundations might look like? What would need to be included (or excluded, for that matter)? What would closure or totalization or comprehensiveness look like (Turner 1991)? And what, after all, should serve here as a standard of validity? Finally, who is to make these decisions? Who, in other words, is the “we” that legislates justificatory strategies?

If one conclusion to date seems painstakingly clear, even if resisted equally painstakingly, it is that metatheoretical disputes do not appear to be resolvable by appeals to abstract or formal reason. Rival ontological and epistemological claims seem meaningful only insofar as they are tied to practical interests or specific forms of life. Yet if this is true—and I am claiming only that from my historical and social vantage point this point seems compelling—then foundational discourses can hardly escape being local and ethnocentric. This point suggests that the search for ultimate or universal grounds for our conceptual strategies should be abandoned in favor of local, pragmatic justifications.

The notion that foundational discourses cannot avoid being local and ethnocentric is pivotal to what has come to be called postmodernism (Rorty 1979, 1982, 1991). Postmodernists have evoked the suspicion that the products of the human studies—concepts, explanations, theories—bear the imprint of the particular prejudices and interests of their creators. This suspicion may be posed as follows: How can a knowing subject, who has particular interests and prejudices by virtue of living in a specific society at a particular historical juncture and occupying a specific social position defined by his or her class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnic and religious status, produce concepts, explanations, and standards of validity that are universally valid? How can we both assert that humans are constituted by their particular socio-historical circumstances and also claim that they can escape their embeddedness by creating nonlocal, universally valid concepts and standards? How can we escape the suspicion that every move by culturally bound agents to generalize their conceptual strategy is not simply an effort to impose particular, local prejudices on others?

Postmodernism elicits the suspicion that science is tied to the project of Western modernity and to a multiplicity of more local, more specific struggles around class, status, gender, sexuality, race, and so on. Thus feminists have not only documented the androcentric bias of sociology but have analyzed critically the politics of science in its normative constructions of femininity and womanhood (e.g., Andersen 1983; Harding 1986; Harding and Hintikka 1983; Jagger and Bordo 1989; Keller 1985; Millman and Kanter 1975; Smith 1979, 1989; WestCott 1979). Because this relentless epistemological suspicion is turned against disciplinary discourses by, say, feminists, and because the same trope is rehearsed among African-Americans, gay men and lesbians, Latinos, Asians, the differently abled and so on, no social discourse can escape the doubt that its claims to truth are tied to and yet mask an ongoing social interest to shape the course of history. Once the veil of epistemic privilege is torn away by postmodernists, science appears as a social force enmeshed in particular cultural



and power struggles. The claim to truth, as Foucault has proposed, is inextricably an act of power—a will to form humanity.

This epistemic suspicion is at the core of postmodernism. Postmodernists challenge the charge of theory as a foundational discourse. The postmodern critique does not deny the possibility of success in the quest for foundations. I urge only that from the standpoint of the history of such foundational efforts, and from the vantage point of modern consciousness, which itself has generated this relentless epistemic doubt, this project does not seem compelling or credible.

Aside from this epistemic doubt, there are practical and moral reasons to consider in assessing the value of the foundational project. Postmodernists view such discourses as exhibiting a bad faith: concealed in the will to truth is a will to power. To claim that there are universal and objective reasons to warrant a social discourse, to claim that a discourse speaks the language of truth, is to privilege that discourse, its carriers, and its social agenda. Insofar as we believe that social discourses are social practices which, like other social forces, shape social life and history, privileging a discourse as true authorizes its social values and agenda (Brown 1990).

Social discourses, especially the broad social narratives of development produced by sociological theorists, but also the specialized discourses produced by demographers, criminologists, organizational sociologists, and so on, shape the social world by creating normative frameworks of racial, gender, sexual, national, and other types of identity, social order, and institutional functioning that carry the intellectual and social authority of science. A discourse that bears the stamp of scientific knowledge gives its normative concepts of identity and order an authority while discrediting the social agendas produced by other (scientific and nonscientific) discourses. To claim to have discovered the true language of society delegitimizes rival paradigms—now described as merely ideological or, at best, as precursors—and their social agendas and carriers. It entails a demand to marginalize or withdraw privilege and its rewards from these rivals. Indeed, to claim epistemic privilege for a social discourse is to demand social authority not only for its social agenda but also for its producers and carriers. To assert that a social discourse speaks a universally valid language of truth confers legitimacy on its social values and its carriers. In a word, the politics of epistemology is bound up with social struggles to shape history.

When one appeals solely to the truth of a discourse to authorize it intellectually and socially, one represses reflection on its practical-moral meaning and its social consequences. A discourse that justifies itself solely by epistemic appeals will not be compelled to defend its conceptual decisions on moral and political grounds. The practical and moral significance of the discourse will go unattended or else will be considered only in the most cursory way. On the other hand, if theorists—as postmodernists—believe that all appeals to universal standards or justificatory strategies are not ultimately compelling, they will be forced to offer “local” moral, social, and political reasons for their conceptual decisions. Disputes between rival theories or conceptual strategies would not concern epistemic first principles—e.g., individualism versus holism, materialism versus idealism, micro-versus macro-level analysis, instrumental versus normative concepts of action and order. Instead theorists would argue about the intellectual, social, moral, and political consequences of choosing one conceptual strategy or another.

A pragmatic turn has distinct advantages. It expands the number of parties who may participate more or less as equals in a debate about society. Where a discourse is redeemed ultimately by metatheoretical appeals, experts step forward as the authorities. This situation contributes to the enfeeblement of a vital public realm of

moral and political debate because social questions are deemed the domain of experts. By contrast, when a discourse is judged by its practical consequences or its moral implications, more citizens are qualified to assess it by considering its social and moral implications. A pragmatic move, in principle, implies an active, politically engaged citizenry participating in a democratic public realm.

Postmodernism contests a representational concept of science whose legitimacy hinges on an increasingly cynical belief in science's enlightening and empowering role. This Enlightenment legitimation obscures the social entanglement of the disciplines and permits them to abandon moral responsibility for their own social efficacy. Postmodernism underscores the practical and moral character of science. It sees the disciplines as implicated in heterogeneous struggles around gender, race, sexuality, the body, and the mind, to shape humanity.

### THE POSTMODERN HOPE: SOCIAL NARRATIVE WITH A MORAL INTENT

Foundational theorizing is by no means a product of the social scientific disciplines. The attempt to resolve conceptual disputes or to authorize a particular conceptual strategy by appealing to some presumably universal or objective justification has accompanied modern social thought. Yet the institutionalization of social science and the phenomenal growth of the disciplines in the twentieth century has contributed greatly to the rise of theory specialists whose expertise revolves around metatheoretical or foundational concerns. Although foundational discourses may play a beneficial role at certain sociohistorical junctures (e.g., during periods of epochal transition, such as the 18th century), my view is that today they contribute to the social and intellectual insularity and irrelevance of much sociological theory. Moreover, I have voiced an epistemological doubt about the likely success of the foundational project. This suspicion has been a systematic feature of modern Western social consciousness at least since Marx's time. Postmodernism evokes this suspicion as current.

From a postmodern perspective, justifications of conceptual strategies appear to be unable to avoid a local, ethnocentric character. This is not an argument denying the possibility of foundations; I offer no proof of the impossibility of achieving a grounded social discourse. My epistemic doubt is local, if you will. It stems from my reflection on the historical failure of foundational efforts; it reflects a sympathy for the relentless epistemic doubt generated by modernist social science itself. If a genius comes along tomorrow and proves to the satisfaction of the social scientific community that he or she has succeeded in providing foundations, I will relinquish my standpoint. Until then, however, I propose that we renounce the quest for foundations in favor of local rationales for our conceptual strategies. Instead of appealing to absolutist justifications, instead of constructing theoretical logics and epistemic casuistries to justify a conceptual strategy, to lift them out of contextual embeddedness and elevate them to the realm of universal truths, I propose that we be satisfied with local, pragmatic rationales for our conceptual approaches. Instead of asking what is the nature of reality or knowledge in the face of conflicting conceptual strategies—and therefore going metatheoretical—I suggest we evaluate conflicting perspectives by asking what are their intellectual, social, moral, and political consequences. Does a conceptual strategy promote precision or conceptual economy? Does it enhance empirical predictability? What social values or forms of life does it

promote? Does it lead to relevant policy-related information? Postmodern justifications shift the debate from that of Truth and abstract rationality to that of social and intellectual consequences.

The quest for foundations has been connected intimately to the project of creating a general theory (Seidman and Wagner 1991). Many modern social theorists have sought to elaborate an overarching totalizing conceptual framework that would be true for all times and all places. The search for the one right vocabulary or language that would mirror the social world, that would uncover the essential structures and dynamics or laws of society, has been integral to sociological theory. In the *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels believed that they had uncovered a universally valid language of history and society. In their view, the categories of labor, mode of production, class, and class conflict crystallized what they considered to be a general theory that captured the essential structure and dynamics of history. Durkheim proposed in *The Division of Labor in Society* and *In The Rules of the Sociological Method* the dual categories of collective representations and social morphology as the conceptual basis for a universal theory of society; Parsons wrote *The Structure of Social Action* and *The Social System* to reveal a universal set of premises and concepts that would unify and guide all social inquiry. This quest to discover the one true language of the social world, to uncover its laws, general structure, and universal logic, has been an abiding aim of sociological theory.

The quest for a totalizing general theory, in my view, is misguided. My reasoning parallels my reservations about foundationalism. General theories have not succeeded; their basic premises, concepts, and explanatory models, along with their metatheoretical rationales, consistently have been shown to be local, ethnocentric projections (Turner and Wardell 1986). The project of general theory has pushed theorists into the realm of metatheory as theorists attempt to specify an epistemic rationale to resolve conceptual or paradigm disputes; it has isolated theorists from vital ongoing research programs and empirical analyses; the quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory has marginalized theorists in regard to the major social events and public debates of the times. Moreover, when concepts are stretched to cover all times and places or to be socially inclusive, they become so contentless as to lose whatever explanatory value they have. These flat, contentless general categories seem inevitably to ignore or repress social differences (Nicholson 1991). For example, the categories of labor, mode of production, or class conflict may be useful in explaining nineteenth-century England, but are much less so, I think, in explaining nineteenth-century France or Germany or the United States and are virtually irrelevant for societies that are more kinship-centered or politically centered (e.g., Balbus 1982; Baudrillard 1975; Habermas 1977, 1984, 1987; Nicholson 1986; Rubin 1975).

If social theorists renounce the project of foundationalism and the quest for general theories, as I am recommending, what's left for us? Undoubtedly some theorists will want to argue that a more modest version of the project of general theory is still feasible, such as Merton's middle range theories or some variant, say, in the mold of Skocpol's *States and Social Revolution*. I won't dispute here the value of these alternatives, although I believe that they remain tied too closely to scientism and the modernist ideology of enlightenment and progress that have been suspect for decades. Instead I wish to propose that when theorists abandon the foundationalist project in the broad sense—elaborating general theories and principles of justification—what they have left is social theory as social narrative. When we strip away the foundationalist aspects of Marx's texts, what remain are stories of social development and crisis; when we purge Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society* of its foundationalist



claims, we have a tale of the development of Western modernity. The same applies to Parsons, Luhmann, Munch, or Habermas. I am not recommending that we simply return to the grand stories of social evolution from Condorcet to Habermas. If social theory is to return to its function as social narrative, I believe it must be a narrative of a different sort than those of the great modernists. In the remainder of this section, I will outline briefly one version of a postmodern social narrative.<sup>5</sup>

The postmodern social narrative I advocate is event-based and therefore careful about its temporal and spatial boundaries. By event-based, I mean that the primary reference points of postmodern narratives are major social conflicts or developments. As event-based narratives, postmodern social analyses also would be densely contextual. Social events always occur in a particular time and place, related to both contemporary and past developments in a specific social space.

The grand narratives of the great modernist social theorists responded to the major events of the day but typically disregarded their temporal and spatial settings. Instead of locating events in their specific sociohistorical setting, these grand narratives framed events as world historical and evolved stories of the course of Western, if not human, history. Instead of telling the story of capitalism or secularization in, say, England or Italy, they analyzed these events as part of a sketch of “Western” or human development. Thus, instead of analyzing the unique industrial development of England or Germany, which had “capitalistic” aspects, by being attentive to their dramatic differences and singular histories, Marx proposed a theory of capitalism that purported to uncover essential, uniform processes in all “capitalist” social formations. His “theory of capitalism” outlined a history of Western and ultimately human development that disregarded the specificity of particular “Western” and non-Western societies. To be sure, Marx counseled that the uniform operation of capitalism would vary in different societies even if the essential dynamics and direction of history were set by the “laws of capitalism.” Marx assumed that the fact that different societies have divergent national traditions, geopolitical positions, and political, cultural, familial-kinship, gender, racial, and ethnic structures would not seriously challenge the utility of his model of capitalism as setting out the essential dynamics and direction of human history.

In my view, this was a serious mistake. Even if one takes Marx’s model of capitalism to be of some utility for analyzing nineteenth-century dynamics of socioeconomic change, I believe that the immense sociohistorical differences among European and Anglo-American societies and between them and non-Western societies would affect seriously the form and functioning of industrializing dynamics. Individual societies evolve their own unique configurations and historical trajectories, which are best analyzed historically, not from the heights of general theory.

The Eurocentrism of these grand narratives has been exposed thoroughly (e.g., Baudrillard 1975). Human history in these modernist tales really meant Western history. Non-Western societies were relegated to a marginal position in past, present, and future history; their fate was presumed to be tied to that of Europe and the United States. The West, in these stories, was the principal agent of history; it showed the future to all of humanity. Behind this conceit was the arrogance of the western theorists, with their claim that the western breakthrough to “modernity” carried world historical significance. The great modernists claimed not only that Western modernity

<sup>5</sup> Although I focus on postmodern assumptions about agency, history, and freedom that I believe strongly should guide social narratives, my understanding of narrative has profited from the works of Gennette (1980), Mink (1978), Ricoeur (1984), and White (1973).

unleashed processes which would have world impact, but also that modernization contained universally valid forms of life (e.g., science, bureaucracy, socialism, organic solidarity, secularism). Not much effort is required to see that behind the aggrandizing intellectualism of the modernists were the expansionist politics of the age of colonialism.

These grand narratives seem to bear the mark of their own national origin. They contain an element of national chauvinism. Modernists projected their own nations' unique development and conflicts onto the globe as if their particular pattern were of world historical importance. These totalizing conceptual strategies that attempted to sketch a world historical story seem today extremely naive and misguided. The grand narratives of industrialization, modernization, secularization, democratization, these sweeping stories that presume to uncover a uniform social process in a multitude of different societies, these stories with their simplistic binary schemes (e.g., Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's mechanical to organic solidarity) which purport to relate a story of change over hundreds of years, should be abandoned. They repress important differences between societies; they perpetuate Western-world hegemonic aspirations and national chauvinistic wishes; they are, in short, little more than myths that aim to authorize certain social patterns.

Although I believe we should abandon the great modernist narratives, general stories are still needed. This is so because in all societies there occur certain events and developments that prompt highly charged social, moral, and political conflicts. The various parties to these conflicts frequently place them in broad conceptual or narrative frameworks. In order to imbue an event with national moral and political significance or to legitimate a specific social agenda, advocates elaborate social narratives that link the event to the larger history and fate of their society or humanity. This process is clear, for example, in the case of the AIDS epidemic: the spread of HIV in the United States occasioned social discourses that relate a fairly broad story of the failure of the "sexual revolution" or, indeed, the failure of a liberal, permissive society (Seidman 1988; Sontag 1988; Watney 1987). The construction of broad social narratives by theorists still has an important role.

These narratives offer alternative images of the past, present, and future; they can present critical alternatives to current dominant images; they can provide symbolic cultural resources on which groups can draw in order to redefine themselves, their social situation, and their possible future. I consider paradigmatic, for example, texts such as Linda Gordon's (1977) *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, which offered a novel feminist interpretation of the conflict over birth control; Jeffrey Weeks's (1977) *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Great Britain*, which proposed a new social and historical reading of homosexuality; Barbara Ehrenreich's and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good* (1979) or Robert Bellah's *The Broken Covenant* (1975). These texts offer redescriptions of the present that open up new ways of defining the present and the future (Seidman 1991b). Broad social narratives that cover large chunks of time and space are still important, provided that they remain deeply contextual and event and nation-based.

Postmodern social narratives will depart from those of the great modernists in an additional way: such narratives abandon the centrality of the ideas of progress or decadence that have served as the unifying themes of modernist social thought. From *philosophes* like Condorcet or Turgot to Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Parsons, these stories of social development are little more than variations on the motif of human advancement. They amount to millennial, salvationist tales. In reaction to the stories of the enlighteners, there appeared the great tales of lament or decadence by Rousseau, Bonald, Schiller, Weber, Simmel, Spengler, Adorno, and Horkheimer.

Both the great modernist narratives of progress and the counterenlightenment motif of decadence are decidedly Eurocentric. In all cases the site of the fateful struggles of humanity is the West. Indeed, national histories are important in these grand narratives only insofar as they exhibit a pattern of progress or decadence. These stories typically disregard the enormous social complexities and heterogeneous struggles and strains within a specific society at a specific time. They have one story to tell, which they rehearse relentlessly on a national and world historical scale. They utterly fail to grasp the multisided, heterogeneous, morally ambiguous social currents and strains that make up the life of any society. In the end they amount to little more than rhetorics of national and Eurocentric chauvinism or rhetorics of world rejection.

The great modernist stories of progress or decadence almost always operate with one-dimensional, virtually mythic notions of domination and liberation. Ignoring actual complex conflicts and power dynamics with their ambiguous calculus of gains and losses, benefits and costs, pleasure and pain, these grand narratives frame history and social conflicts in grossly simplifying millennial or apocalyptic images. For these modernists, the dynamics of domination are merely a matter of freedom lost or gained; whole strata, indeed whole epochs, are described as unfree, alienated, or repressed; large chunks of time are regarded as periods of darkness or light, freedom or tyranny. History is thought to play out a unidimensional human drama revolving around the human quest for liberation against the forces of domination.

These images of liberation and domination are often tied to essentialist concepts of the human subject.<sup>6</sup> The modernists presuppose a notion of humanity as having a fixed, unchanging identity and dynamic regardless of historical variation and social considerations such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation. This unified human subject is thought to be in a constant struggle for freedom. The forces of oppression, in this tale, aim to deny humanity's quest for liberation. Human freedom is identified with the realization of human nature. Most modernist social narratives are underpinned by these notions of progress, liberation, domination, the human subject who is oppressed and striving for emancipation. As an obvious example, in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx relates a story of the struggle of humanity to actualize its full nature by overcoming an alienated human condition. Although this tale of humanity's struggle for self-realization is later transfigured into the struggle of the working class to overcome capitalist oppression, there is no change in the focus on a grand world historical drama in which "humanity"—now in the guise of the working class—resists oppression to achieve a state of freedom. The same symbolic configuration reappears in the more contemporary social discourses of the black liberationist, women's, and gay movements. In all these movements, a world historical drama is depicted, involving humanity's struggle to overcome a state of domination to achieve liberation.

The problem with this discursive strategy relates not only to the shortcomings of the categories of progress, to the flattened-out concepts of domination and liberation, as I've stated already, but also to the concept of the human subject that is built into these discourses. Although Marxists, feminists, or gay liberationists may have abandoned the essentialist strategy of speaking of humanity as if "humanity" referred to a fixed, unchanging essence across all times and places, they continue to appeal to the agency of women, blacks, homosexuals, or the working class. Yet these categories are no

<sup>6</sup> The discussion of essentialism is especially vigorous among feminists and gay intellectuals. See, for example, Butler (1990), Epstein (1987), Foucault (1978), Katz (1983), Spelman (1989), Weeks (1985), Vance (1984), and Young (1991).

more fixed or uniform in their meaning than the concept of humanity. Without rehearsing an argument that is now being played out with a vengeance among people of color, feminists, and gay and lesbian intellectuals, I believe that the language of agency, whether that of womanhood or of the working class, is viewed by many parties to these debates as normative (e.g., Spelman 1988).

For example, postmodern feminists have criticized the essentialist discourse of gender—both androcentric and gynocentric—that posits a bipolar gender order composed of a fixed, universal “man” and “woman.” According to these postmodernists, such agentic concepts are understood as social constructions in which the discourse of gender, including the feminist discourse, is itself a part of the will to shape a gendered human order. The discourse of gender is tied to ongoing struggles to assign gender identities and social roles to human bodies. Womanhood and manhood are seen as neither a natural fact—nor a settled social fact but as part of a ceaseless, contested struggle among various groups to establish a gender ordering of human affairs.<sup>7</sup> Therefore those who appeal to the agency of women or homosexuals or African-Americans intend to become part of the clamor of voices and interests struggling to shape a system of identity, normative order, and power. Discourses that use categories such as woman, man, gay, black American, and white American need to be seen as social forces embodying the will to shape a gender, racial, and sexual order; they seek to inscribe in our bodies specific desires, needs, expectations, and social identities.

My point is not that such categories of agency should not be used but that we need, first of all, to recognize their socially efficacious character. Although they are attached to a discourse of truth, they are inextricably entangled in the very constitution of identities, normative orders, and power relations. Second, we must be sharply aware that just as there is no “humanity” which acts as an agent (because humans exist always as particular national or tribal, gendered or aged, religious or ethnic beings), the same is true with respect to “women” or “blacks” or “homosexuals.” These categories do not have a uniform meaning and social import across different societies or even within any given society. For example, same-sex intimacies do not carry an essentially fixed and common meaning across different histories. As many historians have argued compellingly, the concept of homosexuality and the homosexual exhibit historically and culturally specific meanings that cannot be applied to all experiences of same-sex intimacies (e.g., Katz 1983; Seidman 1991b; Weeks 1977; Williams 1986). Moreover, even within a given society at a specific historical juncture, these categories of identity and agency (woman, man, homosexual, black American) not only acquire diverse meanings but do so, in part, because categories of identity are always multiple and intersect in highly idiosyncratic and diverse ways. Just as individuals are not simply instances of the abstraction “humanity,” we are not embodiments of the abstractions of woman or man. Even within the contemporary United States, “woman” does not have a uniform meaning. It varies by ethnic, racial, religious, or class status as well as by factors relating to sexual orientation, age, or geographical/regional characteristics. There is no reason to believe that a middle-class southern heterosexual Methodist woman will share a common experience or even common gender interests with a northern working-class Jewish lesbian. It is equally naive to assume that whatever gender commonalities they

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the claim that gender is a site of normative conflict among feminists, see Butler (1990) and the essays collected in Nicholson (1990). A constructionist notion of gender underlies a good deal of the new feminist social history. See, for example, Cott (1977), Ryan (1979), and Smith-Rosenberg (1985).

do share will override their divergent interests and values.

This argument suggests, of course, that the experience of oppression and liberation is not flat or unidimensional. Individuals are not simply oppressed or liberated. Just as an individual's identity mix is varied in innumerable ways, his or her experience of self as empowered or disempowered will be similarly varied and multidimensional. We need to shift from an essentialist language of self and agency to conceiving of the self as having multiple and contradictory identities, community affiliations, and social interests. Our social narratives should be attentive to this concept of multiple identities; our stories should replace the flat, unidimensional language of domination and liberation with the multivocal notion of multiple, local heterogeneous struggles and a many-sided experience of empowerment and disempowerment.

Insofar as postmodern social discourses are seen simply as narratives with all the rhetorical, aesthetic, moral, ideological, and philosophical aspects characteristic of all storytelling, their social role would have to be acknowledged explicitly. Postmodern social analyses amount to stories about society that carry moral, social, ideological, and perhaps directly political significance.

Postmodern social narratives would do more than acknowledge their moral and social character; they would take this moral dimension as a site for a more elaborated analysis. I believe that there are fruitful possibilities here for sociological theorists to shift their reflexive analytical focus from metatheoretical foundational concerns to practical-moral ones (cf. Bellah *et al.* 1985; Rosaldo 1989). In other words, I am urging that the effort which theorists have invested in foundational, general theorizing, an effort that has yielded so little and has cost us so dearly, be shifted in part to moral analysis.

Needless to say, I am not counseling a shift to foundational moral theory or to the search for universal values or standards of justification. I wish to endorse a pragmatic, socially informed moral analysis (e.g., Seidman forthcoming). From a postmodern pragmatic standpoint, it would not be sufficient simply to invoke general values (e.g., freedom, democracy, solidarity, order, material comfort, pleasure) or moral imperatives (e.g., that individuals should be treated with respect or dignity or should be treated as ends) either to justify or to criticize current social arrangements or to recommend changes. Social criticism must go beyond pointing to the deficiencies of current social realities from some general moral standpoint. It would be compelled to argue out its standpoint through an analysis that is socially informed and pragmatic. The social critic has a responsibility, it seems to me, not only to say what is wrong with current realities in some broad, abstract way but also to make his or her critique as specific as possible so as to make it socially relevant. Similarly, the critic should be compelled at least to outline in some detail the social changes desired and the consequences that would follow for the individual and society. Again, this process forces social criticism to be potentially socially useful to (say) policy makers, activists, and legislators. It also makes theorists more accountable for their criticisms.

Finally, insofar as the social critic cannot appeal to transcendent or universal moral standards to justify his or her moral standpoint, the critique must be justified by an appeal to local values or traditions. Lacking a transcendental move, the postmodern critic must be satisfied with local justifications of those social forms of life which he or she advocates. The justification perhaps will take the form of endorsing a specific social arrangement because it promotes particular social values that are held by specific communities. This kind of pragmatic moral argumentation must be informed by a sociological understanding that allows one to analyze the impact of proposed changes on individuals and society. For example, a postmodern feminist critique of



gender arrangements should do more than document and criticize general inequalities and discrimination against women from a moral standpoint that values freedom and equality. It also should show what a gender order of equality in specific social domains would be like and what social impact such changes towards gender equality would have. In addition, feminist critique in a postmodern mode would appeal to local traditions, practices, and values to justify these changes.

Recognizing that all social narratives have a socially effective character, we would not try to purge them of this character but would try to acknowledge it and, indeed, to seize it as a fruitful source of an elaborated social reason. How so? Not, as I've said, by simply offering a general criticism or defense of social forms from the high ground of some abstract moral values or standpoint. And certainly not by trying to ground one's moral standpoint in an appeal to some objective universal element (e.g., nature, God, natural law). Rather, I have recommended a pragmatic, socially informed moral analysis in which the critic is compelled to defend social arrangements by analyzing their individual and social consequences in light of local traditions, values, and practices. The values of the community of which the critic is a part stands as the "ultimate" realm of moral appeal.

Theorists would become advocates. We would be advocates, however, of a slightly different sort from (say) public officials or social activists. Unlike the advocacy of these partisans, which typically might take the form of rhetorical, moral, or national appeals, the presentation of documents or data, or appeals to particular social interests, the advocacy of theorists would take the form of elaborated social and moral argumentation about consequences and social values. Like other partisans, we would be advocates for a way of life, but unlike them, we would be compelled to produce elaborated social and moral discourses. As theorists we would be in a role of encouraging moral public discussion; we would be catalysts for public moral and social debate. We would be advocates, but not narrow partisans or politicians. Our value would be both in providing socially informed analyses that would be useful to partisans and in promoting an uncoerced public moral discussion in the face of various partisans who repeatedly act to restrict such elaborated discourse. We would become defenders of an elaborated reason against the partisans of closure and orthodoxy, and of all those who try to circumvent open public moral debate by partisan or foundational appeals.

## CONCLUSION

Sociological theory, in my view, has become insular and irrelevant to all but theory specialists. At least in part, this insularity is connected to a foundationalist project that has been at the center of modernist social thought. Ironically, the institutional successes of sociology have been accompanied by the growing obtuseness of sociological theory. Today, sociological theorists are largely entangled in metatheoretical disputes revolving around the search for a general, universal grounded science of society.

I have suggested some reasons why there is little likelihood of escaping this morass. Moreover, although the foundationist project may have had beneficial practical significance from the eighteenth century through the latter part of the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, which was linked to legitimating "modernity" against its critics, it has lost most of its social benefits, at least in the contemporary United States and perhaps in many western European nations. The argument that

the foundational project is important for the defense of certain desirable social arrangements can hardly be entertained seriously in view of the social and intellectual insularity of disciplinary theory. I don't doubt that the foundational, totalizing theoretical project might still be valuable for promoting a reflexive, critical reason. Yet the same intellectual and social values can be cultivated just as easily in the postmodern project.

Under the banner of postmodernism, I have pressed for a major reorientation of sociological theory. To be revitalized, theory must be reconnected in integral ways to ongoing national public moral and political debates and social conflicts. This vital tie between theorizing and public life accounts for the continuing attractiveness of classical social theory, but that connection has been broken. To reestablish that tie I have urged that sociological theory reaffirm a core concept of itself as a broad, synthetic narrative. I have proposed, however, that a postmodern social narrative should depart in certain important ways from those of the great modernists. I recommend an event-based, nation/society-based narrative. Postmodernist narratives would be well advised to discard the configuration of core modernist concepts such as progress, domination, liberation, and humanity. The basic postmodern concepts will revolve around the notion of a self with multiple identities and group affiliations, which is entangled in heterogeneous struggles with multiple possibilities for empowerment.

Finally, postmodern narratives would acknowledge their practical-moral significance. Moral analysis would become a part of an elaborated social reason. Theorists would become advocates, abandoning the increasingly cynical, unbelievable guise of objective, value-neutral scientists. We would become advocates but not narrow partisans or activists. Our broader social significance would lie in encouraging unencumbered open public moral and social debate and in deepening the notion of public discourse. We would be a catalyst for the public to think seriously about moral and social concerns.

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