The Future of Social Theory


Social theory, both the term and the subject, preceded the discipline of sociology. Non-academic writers, such as Herbert Spencer (1969 [1851]; 1897 [1876]), and Benjamin Kidd (1894), academics from other fields, such as the economist Simon Patten (1896), as well as socialist thinkers, wrote extensively on the subject. Some of this “social theory” never became part of sociology. But during the first decade of the twentieth century, in the course of the division of the social sciences into disciplines in the United States, social theory had a disciplinary home. Disciplinarization produced a demand for theory writing of a particular kind: for a history with canonical texts, and for systematization, at least for the purposes of teaching a settled subject, and required theorists to pay attention to one another. This led, in the United States, to many surveys both of the history (Barnes 1948; Barnes and Becker 1961 [1938]; Becker 1971; Ellwood 1971) and present (House 2004) of social theory, and to such things as a catalog of sociological concepts logically arranged, by University of Chicago graduate Earle Edward Eubank (1932), to a series of dissertations on founding figures, and to classifications of theory. Eubank, like many Americans, was an admirer of the neo-Kantian influenced system-building of German social theorists and celebrated these “masters of sociology.” But the most powerful and influential adaptor of this style was Talcott Parsons (1937).

The division of academic subjects in other national university traditions came much later -- indeed, in France sociology was not separated from philosophy until the 1950s, and the different trajectory of European social theory reflected these institutional facts. In Europe, social theory remained more open, more philosophical, and less “scientific.” In the United States, the politics of disciplinary competition and the role of the Rockefeller philanthropies led to an emphasis on the idea of sociology as a science (Camic 1995). Parsons, influenced by Harvard writers on science, such as his patron L. J. Henderson (1970 [1941--2]), combined the impulse toward conceptual system construction and systematic surveys of past theory with the aspiration of making sociology a science. Parsons took from Henderson the belief that every science possessed and required a single, unified, conceptual scheme, and he set about providing one through an analysis of what he took to be the most important canonical figures in sociology including Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim, and especially Max Weber, as well as the economist Alfred Marshall. Parsons’s huge undertaking, similar to the many analogous systems provided by his German counterparts in the 1930s that were influenced by the neo-Kantian idea that an organized and hierarchical scheme of concepts was the key to being a science, had little to distinguish it other than his insistence that this was “science” in the sense of natural science. But Parsons had historical luck on his side. His shrewd and relentless politicking at Harvard made him a key figure when Harvard emerged from World War II as the most powerful university in the world.

Sociology in Britain had only a tenuous academic hold at this time and sociology in the rest of Europe, with the exception of France, had been subject to a radical discontinuity as a result of the rise of fascism and Nazism. American university models were widely copied in the re-establishment of the sometimes politically tainted universities of Europe, and a generous system of provision for visiting scholars and students to the United States was established. Sociology was the great beneficiary of this...
change and of American foundation funding in the social sciences, which was motivated in part by the desire to establish an alternative to communism. As a result, Parsons’s ideas became more influential outside the United States than they had ever been within it (where they were often dismissed for their association with Ivy League snobbery, an association well warranted by Parsons’s penchant for cultivating and then aggressively backing protégés from the Harvard undergraduate population), and provided a common lingua franca within which the idea of what was now called “sociological theory,” or even “theoretical sociology” in Robert Merton’s terminology (1967), could be taught and discussed. Influential as Parsons was, there was plenty of other “theory” around: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, exchange theory, and various forms of Marxism. And to some extent the power of Parsons even served to legitimize these rivals in the eyes of empirical sociology.

In the 1960s sociology grew rapidly in public esteem and student interest. Parsons, and “positivism” or the aspiration to science, was attacked both by critics both within and outside sociology but most virulently by student radicals, and various forms of left sociology, such as critical theory, increased in influence. In the early 1970s the influence of Parsons collapsed. But the debate lingered in Germany, where Niklas Luhmann (1970) produced dozens and dozens of impressive texts in language that relied on Parsons-like systemic ideas and a kind of debate between Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, the grand figure of the second Frankfurt school. Habermas, in The Theory of Communicative Action (1984), produced a systematic alternative to Parsons’s similarly sweeping and canon-oriented Structure of Social Action (1937). With the revised canon of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and G. H. Mead, theory was flourishing and becoming more diverse, as movements such as realism in Britain and ethnomethodology staked their claims.

Yet here the story becomes confused. Several important changes occurred more or less simultaneously over the next two decades, which led to theory being displaced from its former role in relation to sociology. The institutional setting is important to understanding this. After a rapid rise in popularity during the 1960s and a turn in the public spotlight along with the student movement of the late 1960s, both sociology and social theory suffered a near-death experience in the 1970s as student interests became more vocational and sociology came to be blamed for the excesses and failures of the welfare state to deliver on its promises to solve problems such as poverty. The ending of the student movement was a world-wide phenomenon, and it had the effect of damping student interest everywhere. In the United States student enrollment in sociology courses dropped dramatically and the number of bachelors degrees granted fell to less than a third of the peak it had reached in the early 1970s.

One immediate effect was that the issues of theory and methodology, such as the debate over positivism, became less central: the audience for these debates had been graduate students finding their intellectual identity rather than mature scholars and research practitioners. But the ongoing estrangement between social theory and sociology had intellectual causes as well. One of the important developments of the 1970s and 1980s was the return to the classics, a process whose general character, well captured by the title “DeParsonizing,” had important implications for the character of writing in social theory. The classics that were being rediscovered in their full historical complexity were not “sociologists” in any narrow sense of this word, and not in the narrow sense, for example, of a widely read summary Reinhard Bendix, an influential commentator on Weber, who had written an “intellectual portrait” of Weber which omitted both his “philosophical” methodological writings and his political writings, making Weber into the narrower kind of “sociologist” that Bendix himself was (1960). When Weber’s methodological and political writings were “rediscovered” they became central to a new Weber and a raft of new Weber scholarship. Durkheim was of course trained as a philosopher and unintelligible without reference to the philosophical tradition in which he was trained and in which he originally taught. His image as a precursor to the survey research tradition was also revised. The “new” classics were thus interdisciplinary or nondisciplinary and both were more closely akin in their thinking to philosophy and political theory.
than the older view had depicted them. As the classics were restored to their historical context, however, they became less relevant to sociology as it was then practiced.

The process of revising the image of the classics was bitter and divisive. Adherents of the old scientistic view of theory, such as Randall Collins, and the Parsonians, routinely complained about articles about “what Weber meant” and were hostile to the whole style of scholarship and specialist intellectual habitus that it was associated with. This hostility reflected the subversive nature of the new history of the classics. In the era of Merton/Parsons domination, the systematic, scientific, and classically oriented elements had often been combined in the work of a single scholar. They established the acceptable way of approaching the classics, of treating them as precursors to the Merton/Parsons model of theoretical sociology. Alvin Gouldner (Chriiss 1999), a student of Merton, was perhaps a paradigm example of this, but other figures, such as Lewis Coser (1975) and Reinhard Bendix (1960), also fit this pattern. During the 1970s and 1980s many of these figures were engaged in a bitter rearguard action, in which they used their power as editorial advisors to suppress the newer scholarship. This struggle, inevitably, went to the young. Recapturing classics as real historical figures rather than precursors to structural functionalism and survey sociology was a necessary struggle. But the victory was pyrrhic: the price was the removal of the classic figures from the core of conventional sociological discussion and the marginalization of their study.

The second major change involved the idea of culture and cultural sociology. Many former theorists, especially students of the students of Parsons, came to identify themselves as cultural sociologists. This transformation was led by Clifford Geertz, a Parsonian anthropologist, who published an influential collection of essays called *The Interpretation of Culture* (1973) which transformed his previous commitment to the Parsonian doctrine into a postmodern notion of “the mind filled with presuppositions” which diminished the role of idea of consensus but expanded the insistence on the omnipresent significance of culture. This built on Parsons’s own cultural turn in *The Social System* (1951), in which the social system or society was the subject but culture and especially the modern value commitment were the primary explainer. It is thus not surprising that Parsonians, such as Robert Bellah, hitherto a typical product of the Parsonian career-making machine, reappeared as cultural sociologists in the 1980s and 1990s. It allowed them to get ride of the baggage of Parsons’s complex models of “the system,” his commitment to “systematic theory,” and his aspiration to science, thus eliminating the controversial elements of his theory.

In this new form, its political significance was inverted. It could be remade as a left doctrine, assimilated to Michel Foucault (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]), and the powerful but mechanically Marxist writings of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1997; Hall, Morley, and Chen 1996). The Parsonian account explained the remarkable stability, as well as the good things about modern capitalist society in terms of culture, especially the “modern” values. The left account used the same explanation to explain the pervasive false consciousness that produced the stability, and the bad things, of modern capitalist society. The issue of meritocracy is a simple example of this: for Parsons, and in a more subtle way for sociologists like Michael Young (1958), meritocracy was central to modernity, and of course the universalism which Parsons took to be a major value of modern society was also an Enlightenment value. The left, which absorbed Carl Schmitt’s dictum that “Words, such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term” (1976 [1932]: 30--1), looked at these Enlightenment notions accordingly. Merit was unquestionably a concept that “affected, combated, refuted, or negated.” For feminists, it excluded women; for Bourdieu, writing about “distinction” (1977 [1972]), it was enacted in practice in the French educational system as a means of excluding the working class from positions of authority in the system and the state. The processes of internalization of values which were central to Parsons were replaced in
Bourdieu by processes of reproduction that assured the continuity of dominance by the dominant (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

The cultural turn was also aided by the rise of social constructionism. Berger and Luhmann’s book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) was the most cited sociology book of its time. The term was soon applied, contrary to the authors’ specific disclaimers, not only to scientific concepts, producing the widely influential “Strong Programmes” in the sociology of knowledge and other related ideas. It quickly spreading to gender studies, leading to Judith Butler’s famous formulation about the social construction of gender differences -- that everyone is in drag -- as well to such areas as disability studies in which the disabled were regarded not so much as disabled but as mislabeled. Finally, it became a commonplace that what died in the last part of the twentieth century was “the social” and that social relations had become mediatized. Media, it was argued should henceforth be the new vehicle and subject of social theory (cf. Gane 2004).

The cultural turn had paradoxical implications for social theory. On the one hand, it expanded the audience for social theory, which now became a staple of literature departments and the humanities as well as central to new fields such as media studies and to changing fields such as communications. On the other hand, the traditional concerns of social theory were replaced and its explanatory structure simplified into a relatively crude and easily parodied model, in which culture was made into an instrumentality of unconscious domination in which the dominated were complicit in their own domination by virtue of accepting or enjoying the ideas and activities that led them to be dominated. This simultaneous expansion of the audience of social theory, its sideward movement into the topics of culture, the carrying through of themes such as social construction into applied disciplines, the widespread employment of ideas derived from critical theory across the social sciences and then philosophy, the contemporary rise of “theory” in literary studies, and the use of ideas like practice and hidden mechanisms of oppression by social movements created a new and quite different space for social theory. This space was often very far removed from disciplinary sociology, and especially from empirical research in sociology, which, especially in the United States, had come to focus on the secondary data analysis and the construction of causal models -- something that required minimal “theory.”

But sociology itself changed significantly during these two decades in another profound way. A new issue dominated sociology: gender. Schemes for the increased employment of women were imposed on universities in the United States; other countries followed. “Affirmative action” was enthusiastically taken up in sociology, partly by groups which believed themselves (often correctly) to have been excluded from positions of influence, partly by the old guard which saw it as a means of excluding their younger adversaries. The regime was applied most rigidly to social sciences, where there were more women available. In short order, gender issues became essential to sociology, and gender inequality became its central subject. In bookstores the category of sociology in many places was merged with that of women’s studies. The women’s studies movement and the “Black Studies” movement provided a model of solidaristic relations between academic subjects and social movements that proved to be replicable in relation to other causes. In the United States, the sociology of relations became assimilated to the reality of black studies programs and evolved into an African American-oriented field from which whites were essentially excluded. The pattern was repeated world-wide for other excluded groups, and other social movements, such as gay and lesbian movements, would be given similar treatment. These relations attracted a new group of students to sociology, and created new audiences for sociological writing.

The kind of theory that was attractive to these audiences was the kind that validated the social movements that they were allied to and in particular validated their claims to oppression. In most of the cases these claims were that the ordinary nominally egalitarian procedures of the liberal state were the source of hidden forms of oppression which resulted from such things as the masculinist assumptions
inscribed into the law (MacKinnon 1989) or that the nominally egalitarian and race- and gender-blind procedures of the liberal state represented the denial of ethnic values and the imposition of whiteness. Values, such as the value of mothering, which facilitated the relegation of women to the mommy track or to self-exclusion from the job market, were understood in these terms. “Hidden injuries” thinkers such as Sennett (1977), and theorists whose primary focus was oppressive practices such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Dorothy Smith (1990), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000 [1990]), “theorized” these hidden forms of oppression and explained why the oppressed unconsciously conspired in their own oppression. This particular kind of utility, a utility for social movements in their aim of transforming consciousness and recognizing and combating “victimization,” established a new relationship between social theory and the now significantly transformed audience of sociology students for whom these victimization narratives were central parts of their personal identity (Glassner and Hertz 2006).

These new usages had obvious continuities with Marxism. As Michael Burawoy put it in his important American Sociology Association presidential address about public sociology (Burawoy 2005), this new kind of relationship with social movements could be understood in terms of Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual who represented and led, but who was also bound to, the proletariat (1996). But there was also a rupture. The new social movements typically abandoned not only the grand theoretical narrative of Marxism, with its commitment to the idea of the historical mission of the proletariat, but grand theoretical narrative itself, restricting themselves, as Foucault did, to a model of protest and resistance. The effect of this new user relation was to exclude as useless much of what theory had traditionally talked about, while at the same time uncritically taking for granted theoretical notions, such as practice, and various de-Marxified and renamed versions of the notion of false consciousness.

What did this have to do with theory? Although “theorists” in the younger generation took up these authors, commented on them, explicated them, and both endorsed and criticized them, “theory talk” about, and criticism of, these theoretical notions were not of any interest to these users, and not welcomed. A new and quite different kind of theoretical discourse emerged that was, in practice, entirely segregated from “theory talk.” Feminist social theorists engaged in extensive and sometimes acrimonious, not to say vituperative, discussions with one another focused on the question of who truly represented the viewpoint of women or how to represent the standpoint of particular oppressed groups of women. Although they creatively extended the ideas of male and white domination, this was not “theory talk,” and theories were used uncritically -- uncritically except for the central issue of their utility for the cause. For example, the concept of practices, which was the subject of extensive debate and discussion in the 1990s (Schatzki 1996; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), was used by feminists without their participation in, or even acknowledgment of, this debate.

This division between men’s and women’s spheres of discussion was paralleled by quite different attitudes toward and enactments of theoretical debate. Women complained about being excluded and ignored by theorists, and this was partly true (Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto 2007). But movement women did not want into the “boys’ club” of theory so much as want deference from it for their views. The extensive efforts of theory organizations to include women were frequently rebuffed by women, and were always subject to the difficulty that while women wished to have their theoretical contribution recognized they had no wish to play the game of traditional theory -- of allowing themselves to be subjected to searching critique from all directions. This difference in style was enacted in a number of dialogs-of-the-deaf encounters between theorists and feminists in which feminists said they were deeply offended by what was no more, and usually less, than standard kinds of questions and criticisms. The paradoxical character of these demands is on display in the article on gender studies in Craig Calhoun’s centennial volume on American sociology. Myra Marx Ferree and her collaborators speak of themselves as feminists being “incensed” and “offended” (Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto 2007: 474) But what produced this reaction was merely innocuous criticism by standard empirical sociologists. Being exposed to the rougher
kinds of critical exchanges typical of theory and to what they regarded as a lack of suitable respect and deference by the “boys’ club” of theory was simply not acceptable to them, and they did not submit to it. But the deference issue had another side: males were routinely told that they did not have the authority to speak to women’s issues. And it was a standard gimmick of feminist presentations for many years to forbid men to speak, or prevent them from speaking until all the women who wished to speak had had their say. Women, in any case, did not have any compelling reason to pay the price of admission to theory discussion. They had an audience apart from the theory audience, an organic relation to a movement, and a strong sense of the legitimacy of their cause. And they also had something that traditional theory after the demise of the student movement lacked: an avidly interested and personally motivated student audience.

The “boys’ club” had troubles of its own. The relations between theory and traditional empirical sociology, which had been good during the era of Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, also degenerated. One of the reasons for this was purely technical. Merton and Lazarsfeld had supported a notion of theory construction in which middle-range theories were the source of hypotheses which could be tested though statistical methods involving 2 by 2 tables, and which required background knowledge (which they understood as theoretical) to assess the “causal” relationships using the elaboration method, namely of partialing the tables, understood as a total relationship by variables that might render the relationship spurious or otherwise change the values through the introduction of “test” variables. Causal modeling, which replaced this method, relied on an absolute minimum of background knowledge, which was understood as knowledge so trivial or uncontested that little or no “theory” was needed, and this minimum was steadily reduced by the creation of new statistical methods to eliminate spurious relationships and detect latent variables (Pearl 2000). This change meant that, during the period in which “theorists” were shifting their attention to the classics, to Foucault, and to culture, the relevance of “theory” of any kind to the practical enterprise of empirical sociology was diminishing.

The role of theory in teaching declined accordingly. The present situation of theory teaching in the United States, though it is more extreme than elsewhere, is one in which little theory is on offer. The chairman of the theory section of the American Sociological Association posed the question of how theory was taught at the leading American sociology departments, and by whom, and published the results of some of this inquiry on the section website, prompting a blog discussion on the section homepage (<http://www.asatheory.org/>). In this discussion it became evident that theory was for the most part no longer taught in leading American sociology departments to the extent that it once had been, that the people teaching theory were in many cases people who did not write or publish in the area of theory. There was a widely held perception that it was better for empirical sociologists rather than “theorists” to teach theory because empirical sociologists were better able to show how theory could be used or could be made useful than theorists.

Theory done by theorists -- consisting of things like papers on the subject of what Weber meant -- was seen as largely irrelevant to the role theory had in the curriculum: to provide graduate students the means of giving some theoretical content to their empirical studies. The attitudes toward theory of non-theorists who teach these courses is exemplified in one especially explicit syllabus, which collects a variety of quotations illustrating the uselessness of theory for empirical sociology and unintelligibility. The syllabus writer comments that “‘theory’ can be defined in practice as what people called ‘theorists’ do, but is as well or better defined as the guiding ideas used by practicing sociologists to understand the world” (Shrum 2003: 8). The syllabus writer quoted here, Wesley Shrum, adds that “Sociological theorists remain committed to studying each other, rather than the subject of which they signed up: the social world” (Shrum 2003: 9).

Not surprisingly, the opportunities to learn “theorists’ theory” diminished quickly. Judith Butler observed in a recent interview that when she was a student at Yale it was possible to get a solid grounding
there in classical social theory (2004). She points out that this is no longer the case, though in fact there are more opportunities at Yale than at many other American departments. Thus the estrangement of theorists’ theory and sociology has had consequences. The most important of these consequences has been that reproduction, the training of theorists in theorists’ theory, has essentially ceased in American sociology. Sociology students still learn some theory in some departments, but the kind of thorough training in a common core of texts that was the normal entry ticket for students interested in theorists’ theory in the 1960s and early 1970s now no longer exists. At best, there are highly idiosyncratic treatments of theory in a few sociology departments and a small theory community among the students in those departments. But the training is limited and the sense of a larger community with core confidences and points of reference and common concerns is no longer there within sociology. Nor are theoretical interests thought to be a ticket to a career in sociology. The dearth of production in the area of theory and the retirement of many teachers of theory has meant that there is a certain amount of demand, but the demand is being filled by sociologists whose interest in theory is distinctly secondary. The picture outside the United States is often better, but the pressures and the competition are the same.

So what do these institutional facts mean for the future of social theory? They indicate that the older relation to sociology of a semi-autonomous field of social theory doing theory-talk, and through this providing ideas which can be studied empirically, is no longer viable. This was a relationship that in large part survived because of the centrality of the idea of a scientific sociology based on the model of physics, that is to say a relationship with theorists and empirical researchers engaged in a fruitful dialog in pursuit of the common goal of an overarching empirical science. This goal no longer motivates anyone but an eccentric faction of American sociologists. Inquiry that has theoretical context and is primarily driven by disciplinary concerns does continue -- economic sociology is an example. But the primary intellectual impetus to sociological research now comes from the organic relations between sociologists and social movements, which use theoretical ideas, but are driven primarily by particular notions of oppression and injury that are rooted in personal experience and related to policies and programs.

Yet social theory goes on, both within sociology, and, increasingly, outside of it. The same forces that led to the estrangement between social theory and empirical sociology have brought social theory closer to political theory, to such topics as citizenship and such figures as Arendt and Schmitt, for example, and to other bodies of thought, such as pragmatism and cultural studies in the humanities. Despite the displacement of theory from sociology, the subject has matter flourished, in different settings and forms. Durkheim, for example, once freed from Parsons, took his place as a theorist of religion and culture: a recent volume on “teaching Durkheim” was published by the American Academy for Religion, a religious studies association, and included chapters on the use of Durkheim in the classroom from scholars in various fields -- only one of whom was in a sociology department (Godlove 2005). Weber became part of the canon of political theory (Weber 1994). Indeed, the historical study and interpretation of the classics has flourished over the last few decades to a greater extent than it had when they were tied to the project of scientific sociology. Much of this thinking, for example Chantal Mouffe’s Schmittian approach to democratic theory (1985, 1999), is politically engaged. But it is also willing, in ways that “organic” sociology is not, to debate its premises and commitments and to measure itself against past theoretical traditions.

The persistence of social theory and its survival outside of sociology tells its own tale. It shows that the tradition of social theory is deeper and richer than the discipline of sociology on which it depended. Its future, however, is better understood by extrapolating from its pre-disciplinary past, which was also “engaged,” open to contestation, and unconcerned about boundaries.

[a]New Challenges and the Persistence of the Old Regime[/a]
If we ignore the relationship between social theory and sociology, and ask what the challenges to the
social theory tradition are today, four come immediately to mind. In each case they represent competitors
to social theory or problems with the relevance of social theory. The most obvious of these challenges
arises from the oldest organic relation of social theory, with the left. With the demise of the Soviet Union
and the emergence of capitalist-like states from state socialism in eastern Europe, Marxism and Marxist
thought has been compelled to rethink itself and to find some theoretical basis for the project of critique
(Žižek 2001). Post-Marxist thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman have proposed such notions as “liquid
modernity” to capture the nature of social transformations that made irrelevant the older more mechanistic
materialism and its view of the social (2000). As noted, many who think about this transition have turned
to the idea of media on the grounds that the space in the determination of human relations formally
occupied by the social, that is to say personal relations between people, is now occupied by the media,
which mediates relations between people.

The second challenge comes from evolutionary theorizing. The idea that the subject matter of the
social was more or less an autonomous subject in which such questions as what is the source of social
order and what binds people together could be understood and accounted for in terms of features of the
social world itself is subject to a powerful challenge from evolutionary psychologists. They regard the
social patterns established by evolution in the genetically reinscribed responses of other primates not only
as constraining the answers that can be given to these traditional social theory questions but in large part
answering them. Even the evolution of cultural forms, long disregarded as a serious topic in social theory
and in anthropology, is now subject to extensive mathematical treatment using evolutionary models
(Richerson and Boyd 2006). Social theorists lack the cultural status to set the terms of conventional
wisdom on these subjects. The terms are set instead by writers such as Steven Pinker, who has dismissed
as false most of the standard objections made by social scientists to the reductive explanation of human
culture by reference to consideration sexual selection. Pinker says, for example, that the idea that
“throughout history the bride and groom had no say in marriage” (1997: 431-32) and many other social
science commonplaces about kinship and social psychology are bunk, and makes universalizing claims
about the effects of such things as sexual selection -- ignoring the fact that the effects would be quite
different if marriages were arranged or greatly constrained by kinship rules, as they have been, Pinker
notwithstanding, in much of the world for most of human history.

The third challenge comes from a closely related source, namely cognitive neuroscience. To the
extent that aspects of social interaction can be shown to be exhibited in actual brain structures, social
theory is compelled to listen. When it is discovered, for example, as it recently was, that altruistic
behavior is centered in a certain portion of the brain, theorizing that ignores the phenomenon of altruism
or accounts for it entirely in non-altruistic terms, fails to match the “scientific” facts. An extensive body
of research in neuroeconomics has now begun which addresses such problems as the neurochemical
character of trust, the question of whether punishing free riders is on its own a source of pleasure for the
punisher, and so forth (Fehr and Fishbacher 2005; Fehr, Fischbacher, and Kosfeld 2005). This creates a
new universe of facts that social theorists need to take account of, facts which stand in a peculiar
relationship to the history of social theory.

One important example should make this clear. Early sociological social psychological theorizing
was greatly influenced by the idea of imitation, especially in the formulation of Gabriel Tarde (1903). The
recent discovery of mirror neurons in human and monkey brains provides an actual neurocognitive
mechanism for this social theoretical idea (Hurley and Chater 2005; see also the exchange between
Lizardo [2007] and Turner [2007]). And the very possibility of validating our social theoretical
distinctions by strapping a subject into an fMRI or some other neuroscientific method radically alters the
kind of relation to science social theory can have and the kind of science that social theory can be. On the
one hand, it frees social theory from the necessity to, as Noam Chomsky famously put it, “imitate the
surface features of the more established sciences” (1967), i.e. to be like physics, and enables social theory to ground its distinctions in an accepted and uncontroversial substrate of scientific facts. The technologies of neuroscience also offer some tantalizing possibilities. If some of these central concepts of social theory, such as authoritarianism or charisma, could be studied in terms of the particular neuro-structures that they involve, social theory would become “scientific” in a more powerful and dramatic way than the kind of imitation science that statistical sociology represents. And if so, it could become allied with and an extension of an acknowledged “real science.” On the other hand, it raises the question of whether many traditional social theoretical notions with cognitive implications, such as the idea of collective memory, do in fact correspond to anything in the brain, and forces us to ask whether we should take seriously mental concepts, such as Geertz’s “head full of presuppositions,” which may fail to correspond to anything discoverable by neuroscience.

A fourth challenge is a bit more familiar in that it is closely related to rational choice thinking of the kind that is highly familiar to those practicing social science. Much rational choice thinking in social science has been addressed to issues that are removed from the classical tradition and classical problems of social theory. This cannot be said of an increasingly important body of applications of rational choice and game theory ideas which is directly concerned with problems of social theory, particularly problems which arise from the social contract tradition and are concerned with the establishment of norms (Bicchieri 2006; Skyrms 2004). This type of thinking is especially associated with Hobbes and tends to use essentially eighteenth-century concepts together with elaborate mathematical arguments to produce conceptually fair formal analyses of problems of convention, norm, and collective order. As this style of techno-ethics has evolved, it has begun to take on additional problems in political philosophy, and curiously enough has begun to assimilate and even rely on empirical work in the social sciences, particularly social psychology (cf. Bicchieri 2006). Ironically, this conceptually very thin kind of social theory has managed to get more out of contemporary empirical social science than social theory itself, which almost never refers to this kind of research.

One reason for this surprising relationship is that some social psychologists have concerned themselves with ethical issues such as distributive justice and to inquire empirically into circumstances which encourage the idea of equity and in which some evidence could be found for a human disposition to equitable solutions to distributional problems. This kind of analysis represents a more subtle challenge to the traditional concerns of social theory, which have typically been more closely bound to the history of Europe and its actual class relations and conflicts. By pitching the problem on a very abstract and unhistorical level, these kinds of social philosophy present themselves as empirically based explanatory accounts relying on a minimum of plausible assumptions which explain actual empirical phenomena in the social world and answer fundamental questions traditionally associated with social theory. This style of thinking has a high level of prestige and American analytic philosophy is extensively studied in European philosophical circles influenced by analytic philosophy, and proceeds in close relation to certain branches of economics.

A fifth challenge is more global. Understanding the world -- the project the critics of social theory think has been abandoned by “theorist’s theory,” today means more than just making itself useful for empirical sociology. It means, at a minimum, contributing to an understanding of such topics as the peaceful collapse of Soviet communism, the environmental challenge, the Asian challenge to Western domination (especially the rise of China), and the US reaction to the security threats. It must be said that these topics are almost entirely absent from empirical sociology and cultural sociology: so much for their engagement with reality. The tradition of social theory, however, was concerned with such issues, and Weber, and notably even Durkheim, remain inspirations for the discussion of issues of war and peace today (cf. Wendt 1999).

But there are obstacles to social theory making original contributions to such questions. One is
the political center of social theory. Social theory has anti-liberalism in its genes: Comte was a critic of liberalism, and his successors, such as Durkheim, were as well -- right down to Bourdieu and Foucault. German social theory in general was anti-liberal, with the ambiguous exception of Weber himself. The social movements with which sociologists have allied themselves in recent decades -- the resistance paradigm discussed earlier -- have typically been based on hostility to the market, to globalization, and even to free discussion and cultural production -- which cultural studies treats as a form of corporatized false consciousness. In consequence, for many sociologists, “society” has come to mean resistance by the local and the marginal, and a rejection of “seeing like a state,” which is associated with masculinist assumptions about power, patriarchy, and whiteness.

The realities of globalization, the problems of the environment, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and so forth, however, are bound up with the successes of liberalism. To get back to the “reality” that “theorists’ theory” has supposedly abandoned, it is these anti-liberal assumptions -- the now conventional assumptions of much standard sociology as well as of much social theory -- that must be interrogated. The idea that resistance and solidarity is a sign of political virtue and is also the special business of sociology is fundamental to the Burawoy model of public sociology. But resistance to globalization and liberalism is also almost always self-interested resistance to economic processes which dissolve privilege. And among the most extreme and, in global terms, inequitable forms of privilege that are threatened by these processes are the privileges of citizenship in European states, states which preserve the advantages of their citizens by excluding poor countries and their citizens from their markets and economies. Understanding any of this within the limits of the resistance paradigm is pointless, and the focus on resistance obscures the larger processes. Weber did better because he adopted a “standpoint” that the resistance paradigm devalues. Weber’s follower Raymond Aron explained the standpoint well when he said “I was always inclined to ask myself what I could do in the place of those in power” (1990: 30). In asking this question one acknowledges the discipline of reality in a way that the resistance paradigm rejects as ideological and unprogressive. But the resistance paradigm is no longer entitled to the notions of “ideology” and “progress.” Indeed, it is the product of the failure of the grand narrative of Marxism that enshrined these notions in social theory.

Is social theory up to the challenge of dealing with the liberalized world? The process has already begun, though it is not without difficulties. The rise of citizenship studies, though rooted in T. H. Marshall’s classic essay, is an example: citizenship is a normative and legal concept that is part of the liberal conception of the state, but it also has a critical edge (cf. B. Turner 1986). The study of the public sphere (Alexander 2006; Calhoun 1992), though it is rooted in Habermas’s Marxist critique of liberal public as sham (Habermas 1992), nevertheless acknowledges the centrality of the problem of the public sphere and public discussion to understanding modern politics, and avoids reducing the public realm to its extra-political determinants, such as class, as Marxist critiques formerly did.

[a]Conclusion: Hope and Skepticism[/a]

Ulrich Beck says that the core ideas of the tradition of social theory are “zombie concepts” (2004: 152), mindlessly persisting and of no relevance to the present, and he calls for a conceptual revolution: not so much new social theory extending the past as a complete replacement for it. If skeptics like Beck are right, there is no point to extrapolating from the pre-disciplinary past of social theory: social theory as hitherto known is simply dead. If the skeptics like Shrum are right, the end of its role in relation to sociology would be the end of its purpose. But the skeptics are wrong. It is telling that on the commentary pages of the Financial Times, a newspaper read most assiduously by the international elite, Weber is routinely invoked -- far more frequently than empirical sociology is, and more often than the kind of “public sociology” that aspires to influencing public opinion. The audience of the Financial Times is interested in understanding the world and subject to the discipline evoked by Aron. The fact that century-
old texts help them do it is evidence enough that the concepts of classical social theory, far from being Zombies, are often as useful as ever, and that the needs remain. Social theory is changing in the face of its challenges. But it needs to change much more.

[x]Note[x]
1 I am indebted to Jan Pakulski for suggesting this list.

[x]Bibliography[x]


