You Say You Want a Revolution

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The term “social theory” has a strange history, which long precedes the institutionalization of sociology as a discipline, and for a long period prior to the introduction of the polemical replacement terms “sociological theory” and “theoretical sociology” by Parsons and Merton, was treated as one of the essential constituent members of the discipline of sociology, occupying as political theory did, a kind of separate condominium status within the discipline. The term was often used more or less interchangeably with social philosophy, which in its original form, for example in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, was understood as an interdisciplinary activity of theorizing shared between philosophy and the disciplines of the social sciences.

After 1945, and the imposition of the language of “sociological theory” by the then-young Turks of structural-functionalism, social theory usually meant Marxist social theory, and was best represented by such Frankfort School figures as Horkheimer and Adorno, who were comfortable both with representing sociology for example in Horkheimer’s radio addresses of 1952 and philosophy, observing so to speak within their own thought some methodological and stylistic distinction between philosophical and sociological types of argument, a practice that continues on with Habermas and in some sense with Michel Foucault.

When Nicholas Gane talks about the future of social theory in this book of interviews, he has a mind for the most part post-Marxist thinkers, who represent six of the eight interviewees. But this turns out to be an extraordinarily diverse bunch. And further diversity is added by Bruno Latour, who stands out in several respects.

In one sense social theory is a kind of eternal activity, the theoretical apprehension and reflection on social life. In another sense, of course, it is a problematic closely, perhaps irrevocably, bound up with what the Germans called the “social question” or “social problem” of the 19th century, meaning the group of conflict generating problems that arose as a consequence of the emergence in Europe of a working class that was urban, politically organized, and free from any sort of personal bonds with their employers, as had been the case for their ancestors in the countryside a generation before and for the workers in small, often company towns, in the small industries that covered Europe at the time.

The change was stunning in its extent and mysterious in its significance. It swept away the last element of a social order that had existed in Europe since the ebbing of Roman slavery 1,200 years before, and challenged the understanding of human nature and the nature of human relations that had grown up during this period, as well as challenging the intellectual constructions of the enlightenment, which had for the most part failed to anticipate the consequences or even the phenomena of the industrial working class.
Now the industrial working class is, for most intents and purposes, gone. The expectations of social theorists who originally attempted to make sense of the phenomena of the industrial working class were consistently confounded, though the phenomena of Leninism and actual existing socialism kept them alive long after it should have been obvious that there was to be no totalitarian revolution, no leap into freedom, and no "communism."

The Frankfurt School, among the earliest post Marxists, preceded by Sorel and others, had a simple solution to the intellectual problem posed by these predictive failures: false consciousness. This, together with the depression and the vogue for "planning" it produced, kept Marxism alive for sixty years after it ceased to explain or predict. But false consciousness was a story that eventually wore thin even for its most devoted adherents.

The end of the Communist regimes provoked a new round of questioning, under the heading "what is Left?" which raised the question of what it meant to be a progressive or a vanguard intellectual if no one knew any longer where history was going. One answer to this problem was to seize upon one or another of the more promising chards of the vanished Marxist consensus and reconstruct an approach based on the prioritizing or centralizing of this particular piece and discarding or reinterpreting the rest as the source of the errors that led to the misapprehension of the proletariat as the agent of progress. Another approach was to regard the original story as essentially correct but mistaken with respect to the identity of the heroes and villains. Yet another approach is to simply treat the notions of class and the like as having earned their retirement on, as Bruno Latour once put it, the rocking chairs on the porch of the old folks home, and search for some new set of categories more appropriate to the task; which raises the question of what the "task" is. And there is always the temptation to add just one more epicycle to the traditional Marxist story to make the predictions still plausible.

Gane does not explicitly articulate the principle governing the selection of the figures who represent "the future of social theory" but he drops a substantial number of hints about what sort of break has occurred which justifies asking the question of whether social theory has a future which go a long way to explaining their selection.

New Theory, New Theorists

Gane believes that old style social theory, represented for him oddly by Weber (who had no "theory" and denied the possibility of most kinds of social theory), prioritized face to face human relationships, and that this focus is no longer relevant as a results of the revolution in which such relationships are now digitally or otherwise mediated. In the book he and his interviewees also focus on the diminished significance or reality of "the social" which is identified with face to face interaction and more generally with classical Marxism, which is treated as a "social" and thus reductive approach to culture, politics, and the economy. Thus we get a story line in which the social diminishes or is replaced by the mediated and hence, as Scott Lash suggests, by the media, which calls into question the subject matter of social theory as distinct from literary theory and other kinds of theory, which calls into question the future of social theory.

The interviewees in this collection present various mixtures of the strategies identified above. Zygmunt Bauman reprises his substitution of the modernity
problematic for the capitalism problematic, a step that has the effect, so to speak, of
mentaling the problem of the nature of modern society, but differently than the
entalization that occurs in the Frankfurt School notion of pervasive false consciousness,
making the modern mentality the constitutive feature of modern society, and then
accounting for the all too apparent breakup of the certainties of modernism, and the loss
of direction of even progressive thought, by characterizing the present as a period of
“liquid modernity” in which the constitutive features of the modern mentality are
themselves in flux.

Bauman is the paradigm elder apostate from Communism who leaves
Communism by way of the problematic of modernity and surpasses the problematic of
modernity by arguing that modernity has been itself surpassed by liquid modernity which
is the social analogue to post modernity, so to speak real as opposed to the meta
phenomena. Ulrich Beck arrived via critical theory, from which notions like reflexivity
are taken, applied to the notion of modernization, yielding reflexive modernity, which is a
condition which relegates classical social theory and its concepts to the dustbin of history.
Judith Butler is part of the story as a radicalizer of what I have called the mentalization of
social theory who pretreats the mental dirivator of the linguistics or the rhetorical but who
nevertheless insists on some sort of residual role for the social and opposes the reduction
of the social to the linguistics. Scott Lash, in books like Organized Capitalism and his
writings on detraditionalization represents a parallel path in which the revisions of
Marxism are further revised and which point particularly explicitly to the idea that the
mediation of social life implies the replacement of the social by the media and of social
theory by media theory.

Bruno Latour is in some sense the odd man out in this book but in another sense
its most radical and consistent thinker. Latour lacks the lingering attachment to Marxism
that pervades the reasoning of many of the other theorists in the book, but he is as
relentless as Beck in attempting to retire the concepts of classical social theory and
especially the notion of the social. Indeed what makes Latour particularly relevant here,
given the emphasis on technologies of mediation, is his strategy of treating physical
objects (doorstops for servants, in his classic example) as surrogates for social relations
or even to human beings in social relations and his granting of a particular kind of agency
to these physical objects.

Nicholas Rose is a more traditional case. He starts out as a scientist attracted to
Marxism and evolved into a theorist of technology who thinks that Marx got the
technology story wrong. Saskia Sassen also began, though this is not a subject of the
interview, as a “political economy” Marxist who evolved into a theorist of cities,
especially global cities, which replaced the traditional physical conception of the city
which was intertwined with a social conception of urban processes with a virtualized
conception of the city in which the reach and impact of this city consisted in such things
as the electronic transactions process on the computers of a financial system or the visual
images generated for the world movie market. François Vierges is another theorist of
oppression who argues that a liberalism or French Republicanism was bound up with the
exclusion and subsification of the other colonialism, was inseparable from colonialism,
which persists after decolonialization at the political level in its mental form as an
oppressive way of thinking deeply engrained in the French and presumably the “White”
world generally.
John Urry is the thinker in this group who best exemplifies Gane’s basic picture. He argues that the idea of the social world as a separate topic which is theorizable apart from the physical world is a piece of nineteenth century hubris, and that the dissolution of the distinction between social and physical is needed to understand “complex hybrid systems—such as the Internet, automobility, information, global flows of waste products, international terrorism” 120. In a word—“mobility” needs to replace “society” as “the basic subject matter of sociology,” and the means of understanding should be complexity theory.

What Does Social Theory Do?

Beck speaks for the contributors as a whole when he says that the “cosmopolitan turn,” his jargon for the new reality,

means that the fundamental concepts of modern society and their relationships need to be re-examined and reinvented. Household, family, class, social inequality, democracy, power, state, commerce, public, community, justice, law, history and politics all must be released from the fetters of methodological nationalism [i.e. the idea of society as more or less corresponding to nation-states] and reconceptualized and empirically established within the framework of a cosmopolitan social and political science, which remains to be developed 165-6.

Part of this statement is trivially true: the business of social and political theory is the examination of concepts with a concern for their applicability, including their applicability to the present. And it is also true that although this business is occasionally slow and occasionally more brisk, all these topics are in a more or less constant state of change, and the changes require them and their relations to other concepts to be re-examined and and reinvented. And much of this re-examination forces us to reflect on the ways we think, on a second-order level, of the concepts themselves—meaning that we must “inquire into the presuppositions” of the enterprise.

But is any of this true in a non-trivial sense? The skeptic would naturally question whether everything has changed so much that the older forms of these concepts are radically inapplicable. Without an international public and international political parties, even in Europe, and when “national” identities (as in the “we want to remain Dutch” of the recent EU vote) remain potent political forces, it seems doubtful that a program of replacing “national” concepts with cosmopolitan ones, as opposed to the usual extending of familiar concepts, such as “democracy” or “publicity,” to the international sphere, makes much sense. The old regime persists, and not just in the fetters we place on our own theorizing.

Behind the skepticism there is a point of principle. There is nothing that social and political theory can do but take concepts that are already intelligible and apply them, revise them, extend them, and re-examine them in the light of new situations. The “social question” of the nineteenth century is a paradigm case of revision. What does “the public” mean when it is composed of workers? This was the question raised by Dicey’s *Public Opinion and Law*. And much of “classical” social theory was devoted to the problem of conceptualizing, describing, and understanding the transformation, and the
answers worked in the same way: the theorist took some feature of the already known social world, such as “social relations of an impersonal character,” and projected a future in which these expand. The novel theoretical views mentioned in this book are constructed in the same way. Certain novel relations, those mediated through the internet or media, are projected onto a future in which they loom larger.

The unlearned lesson of the failure of Marxism is that the project of doing more than this—of turning social theory into a *Weltanschauung* that can be a source of political and moral guidance with an authority above the mundane business of revising our concepts—is precisely, to borrow a phrase from the book, a form of hubris, doomed as other hubristic projects are doomed. Perhaps the piece of the Marxist project that still remains for many of the contributors to this book is an urge to replace this project. And this explains the often inflated “revolutionary” language with which several contributors articulate the need for the wholesale revision of our concepts.