AGAINST HISTORICISM/ FOR THEORY: A REPLY TO LEVINE

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While Levine's reply to my essay demonstrates the broad grounding in historical considerations that we have come to expect both from him and his students, it also betrays a reluctance to grapple with the distinctively theoretical issues which were that essay's *raison d'etre*.

To demonstrate this failure, and to make the original theoretical points more pointed still, I will discuss briefly the two central issues that Levine raises.

(1) He argues first against my contention "that *Structure* established the 'base line vocabulary for modern sociology'." To refute this suggestion, Levine asks how many basic terms in modern sociology derive from *Structure*, referring to such "nonParsonian concepts" as mobility, network, modernization, inequality, stratification, age, and elite.

My problem here is, first, that Levine exaggerates my claim and, second, that he misses its point. I wrote in my essay (Alexander 1988:97) that *Structure* played "a key role, perhaps the key role in establishing a base line vocabulary for modern sociology." I did not say, in other words, that *Structure* "established" the vocabulary all by itself. Second, and much more important, by "base line" vocabulary I am obviously not referring here to empirically-directed concepts like stratification, modernization, age, or elite. To the contrary, I describe the base line issues I am concerned with as oriented to a higher level of generality, namely to "three central questions—order, action, and values." These are the issues I have called presuppositional in my work.

Recognizing the generality of these issues is critical for evaluating my claim about *Structure's* influence, for I rest that claim in the manner in which Parsons' formulations structured the distinctively theoretical debates in the postwar period. I suggest that these debates were structured around two conceptual issues that were distinctively formulated by *Structure*,

"conflict versus order" and "action versus order." I devote two of the six pages of my essay to demonstrating how two generations of theorists have been preoccupied with debating theoretical issues in these terms, and this is also one of the central preoccupations of my earlier book, *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War Two* (Columbia, 1987). Because Levine does not address these arguments, he refutes a claim I did not make.

(2) But there is another piece of my argument for the vast influence of *Structure*, a piece which leads us into the second and most significant problem in Levine's reply. I suggested (Alexander 1988:97) that *Structure* had "constructed—through selection and interpretation—the classical heritage from which subsequent theoretical and empirical sociology would draw [italics added]." In objecting to this argument, Levine, in his words, focuses on "*Structure's* vulnerability as a piece of scholarship." By italicizing three words in the former passage, I am drawing attention to the inadequacy of this historical focus.

The principal point in my essay was precisely that in evaluating *Structure's* influence, we cannot do so by taking it as an exercise in causal explanation in either empirical social science or historical scholarship. This was the approach taken in what I called the second stage of *Structure's* reception, for it represented an activity that still fell under the spell of Parsons' original empiricist claims. My premise was that now, however, fifty years after the publication of *Structure*, we are in a position to deconstruct these claims. We should view *Structure*, then, not as a signified, as a reflection of reality, but as a signifier, as a creator of reality. Deconstruction, in an epistemological rather than a nihilistic sense, is at the core of the postpositivist approach I employed:

Armed with the postempiricist philosophy, history, and sociology of science, we under-

stand theorizing differently than we once did. We are less inclined to see theory as a pragmatic test shot at empirical targets, the reality of which are taken for granted. To the contrary, we now understand that theory has an important role in *creating* the objects as well as their explanation. (Alexander 1988: 97; original italics)

It will not do, then, to challenge *Structure's* intrinsic theoretical interest or extrinsic intellectual influence by pointing to the fact that Parsons' whiggish reading of the history of social theory was highly distorted. It was certainly not my intention in this essay to argue that anything else was the case (see the "if often quite mistakenly" in Alexander 1988:98). Indeed, I have never had anything positive to say for what I have always viewed as Parsons' pseudo-historiography (e.g. Alexander 1984:215 ff). My point, rather, has been that to provide such an historical accounting for sociological theory was not the important thing that Parsons was doing in *Structure*. Not just history but the classics themselves were foils for his analytical arguments about the nature of social reality. It was not good historical scholarship but brilliant (if also deeply flawed) theory building that has allowed *Structure* to stand so tall. We can see this from the fact that it was with these theoretical claims, not with the historical suggestions, that 50 years of theoretical debate has felt compelled to come to grip.

It is, therefore, not only a serious misunderstanding of *Structure* but of the peculiar genre, sociological theory, to suggest, as Levine does, that the "principal claims" of *Structure* are historical ones and that a more accurate historical discussion somehow "refutes it." What is the "it"? Surely not *Structure's* theoretical account! In fact, the upshot of Levine's own discussion is merely to redirect the historical locus of Parsons' central theoretical categories like voluntarism, value and normative, concepts which in themselves Levine does not challenge. In a perverse sense, then, Levine's historical discussion actually supports my argument for *Structure's* centrality, for I have made this argument by pointing to the continuing employment of

the theoretical framework, whether by sympathizers or challengers to Parsonian theory.

The empiricism with which Levine approaches *Structure* is underscored in his suggestion that "one must question the success with which *Structure* pursued the aim . . . of 'taking stock of the theoretical resources at our disposal'." Why? Because "the effect of *Structure* was to exclude a number of authors who had been significant in theoretical discussions before he wrote." Again, this is not a critical response to my essay but a point that is actually central to my argument. In contrast to Levine, however, when I make this point, I do not view it as damaging to *Structure's* theoretical claims. In concluding this response, let me briefly suggest why.

Following postpositivist deconstruction, I suggested in my essay that if we are to understand the extraordinary impact of *Structure* we must set aside Parsons' own limited understanding of his own project, for it was largely rooted in a natural scientific point of view. From our present perspective, it is clear that Parsons certainly intended to exclude Simmel and Marx, among others, from his historical construction. Only in this way could he provide compelling "evidence" for his theoretical claims. But he cannot be hung on this petard. If he had not excluded these authors, he would have excluded others. All texts, whether poetic or scientific, are a combination of presences and absences; none faithfully mirror "reality" in an objective way. We investigate these absences not to disprove a text, but to find out what the text, and the author, might really mean.

This investigation is called interpretation. When we are making interpretations, moreover, we are ourselves constructing a text that is informed by our own theoretical interests. Interpretations are merely theories in a different key. That is why historicism can never replace systematic theory, even when the peculiar genre of sociological theory makes history and theory often shabbily intertwined. *Structure* is a work of theory, not history. Its influence, its weaknesses, its strengths cannot be demonstrated or refuted by

historiography. They must be confronted by theoretical reasoning itself.[1]

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[1] For an extended discussion of the relation between text interpretation and theory-building in a postpositivist perspective, and a long overview of the "Parsons Debate" in these terms, see Alexander, 1989. While I challenge Levine's historicism in this essay as well, these criticisms do not imply, of course, that Levine has not made important theoretical contributions that in fact avoid the historicist danger.

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