

Beyond the Epistemological Dilemma: General Theory in a Postpositivist Mode

Jeffrey C. Alexander¹

Socially grounded and personally rooted knowledge can be based, not in particularistic and local frames, but in the most generalized and critically reviewed experiences of the most inclusive social institutions and groups. From the continuous debate that accompanies the search for such knowledge, standards of evidence and reasoning develop that press toward rational, impersonal criteria of validity. In the course of this search it has proved crucial and practical for knowing actors to decenter themselves from the objects of their regard, thus separating the knower from the known. The objective world thus studied depends for its perception upon the construction of a worldview. Human beings create the view, but not the world that is viewed. Our theories do not simply and directly reflect the world "out there," but they do allow for the relatively consensual comprehension of powerful regularities in society. Standards of validity are thus immanent in the very practice of social science; hence this postpositivist case is of critical importance for general theory, which aims for provisional acceptance on the basis of universal argument.

KEY WORDS: postpositivism; theory; relativism; rationality; validity.

INTRODUCTION

In the postwar period, general sociological theory has been associated with the search for nomothetic knowledge. Such theory has been viewed, by its proponents and critics alike, as the crowning glory of the positive science of society. As the positivist conviction has weakened, the attractiveness of pursuing general theories in social

¹Department of Sociology, University of California, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles California 90024-1551.

science has waned; indeed, the very viability of the project has come to be seriously questioned. If subjective frameworks inevitably mediate scientific observations, then efforts at generalization from these observations must themselves have a particularist component. Once the pristine universal status of theory has been undermined in this way, it has seemed only logical to many that social science should not just acknowledge the personal but embrace it.

On such intellectual grounds, and for historical and political reasons as well, nonempirical discourse in the social sciences has become more relativist than ever before. Some intellectuals have embraced relativism enthusiastically; others have adopted it in a spirit of resignation, believing no other alternative to positivism can be defended. My point in this essay is that this simplistic choice between scientific theory and antitheoretical relativism represents not only a false dichotomy but a dangerous one.

I will call the presentation of these alternatives the "epistemological dilemma," for it presents the fate of general theory as dependent upon an epistemological choice alone. Either knowledge of the world is unrelated to the social position and intellectual interests of the knower, in which case general theory and universal knowledge are viable; or knowledge is affected by its relation to the knower, in which case relativistic and particularistic knowledge can be the only result. This is a true dilemma because it presents a choice between two equally unpalatable alternatives. Here I will argue that neither pole of this dilemma should be accepted. The alternative to positivist theory is not resigned relativism; the alternative to relativism is not positivist theory. Theoretical knowledge can never be anything other than the socially rooted efforts of historical agents. But this social character does not negate the possibility for developing either generalized categories or increasingly disciplined, impersonal, and critical modes of evaluation.

To acknowledge relativism is not necessarily to imply that actors impose on knowledge their personal and idiosyncratic imprints (cf. Nagel, 1986). Actors can be bound—socially bound—to standards that are rooted within, and after a manner, are reflections of broader and more inclusive social institutions and groups. They may also be bound by traditions that have a distinctively rational, impersonal bent. It is possible, in other words, to defend the search for universal truth, and the possibility of gaining valuable approximations to it, in a manner that does not reflect positivist credulity.

THE DIALECTIC OF UNIVERSAL AND CONCRETE IN CULTURAL HISTORY

Social science theory is one important manifestation of that search for universalism, for fair and principled standards of evaluation, that has been one of the principal ambitions of civilizational development. The contemporary debate between general theory and its critics can be seen, therefore, as one version of the conflict between the universal and the concrete that has marked cultural history itself.

To advocate the necessity for general theory is to uphold the possibility of universal thought. Universalism rests upon the capacity of actors to decenter themselves (Piaget, 1950), to understand that the world does not revolve around them, that they can study "it" in a relatively impersonal way. Yet, paradoxically, this decentered world is at the same time a worldview, and the human view of it a human creation. When this agency is forgotten, universalism becomes an objectification that seems not just to decenter human beings but to deny them. Objectivity is then viewed not as world mastery but as alienation. The consequence is the return to the concrete.

Such a return is not necessary, for depersonalization can augment the exercise of reason. It can do so because, once again, it has been humanly created. Depersonalization brings individuation, not simply domination (Alexander, 1989a). Thus, even while the world is increasingly experienced as objective and impersonal—as rational and rationalized—actors can experience an intimate connection to the forces from which they have become estranged. Insofar as this experience can be sustained, there exists what I will call "present reason."

The experience of present reason is difficult to maintain. In the course of its progress, impersonal reason is continually negated by the demand for the concrete. As soon as the existence of the universal is posited, it is denied. This negation is generated because of the experience that depersonalization causes reason to be absent. Actors experience the fear of obliteration from the forces that they have themselves created, from the isolated and demanding self, from the impersonally organized society, from the rationally reorganized forces of nature.

UNIVERSAL AND CONCRETE IN SOCIAL THOUGHT

In the realm of thought this dialectic has been conceptualized as the relation of the knower to the known (cf. Holmes, 1986). The scientific

revolution of the early modern period decentered man, the knower, in a particularly dramatic way. Social thought followed in its wake, as thinkers from Hobbes to the French philosophers strove to find the social physics corresponding to Newton's heavenly ones. These decentering movements of thought were experienced as liberating but also as forms of alienation. Romanticism created a countermovement that continues to inform such countermovements today. Fichte, Hegel, and the early Marx were not the only thinkers who believed that self and world division were only necessary steps along the way toward a higher experience of unity. (For this argument, see Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and Marx's *Early Philosophical Manuscripts*. For a broad and important discussion, see Charles Taylor, 1975.) As M. H. Abrams (1971) has shown in his discussions of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake, Romantic literary and theoretical protests against objectification were also firmly rooted in English thought.

Still, it was English thinkers who produced political economy and Utilitarian social science, and Germans who created Hermeneutics, the great intellectual countermovement whose call for the recentering of the knower within the known has become increasingly influential in recent times.

It is not my intention to deny the intellectual significance, much less the moral importance, of this Romantic and idealistic movement in modern thought and culture. The pathology of universalism is, indeed, that reason is often experienced as absent. To "treat" this pathology, rational actors must be reminded that they are the creators of the worldview that allows them to comprehend nature, self, and society in a universalistic and impersonal way. Romanticism in its various forms has been the teacher of this lesson, for every generation fortunate enough to experience its tutelage.

I do wish to maintain, however, that in important respects the world outside of the self can, in fact, be comprehended. Human beings create the world view that allows them to conceive of this world, but they do not create this world as such. Nor do they invent the society whose regularities—which if not lawful in the same sense as physical laws are nonetheless powerfully and consistently patterned—this decentering allows them to see. The countermovement against impersonal rationality allows us not to forget that it is we who are seeing this society and world; it is not seeing itself through us. Yet, we can decenter ourselves from this personal process of objective knowing in turn; this is the achievement of Romantic social thought in its modern guise. Insofar as we do so, we can understand and explain what this process of constructing rational perception involves. This understanding does not threaten the universality of perception. To the contrary, it can become another, equally universalistic theory—a theory of knowledge and perception—in its own right.

SOCIAL THEORY IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD

The universalism of general theory cannot be justified if this universalism is understood and experienced as a decentering that demands the alienation of reason. General theory is not something that simply reflects the objective out there. Positivism and empiricism reduce theory in this way, viewing it merely as the studied reflection of the natural world. For this reason, their justifications for theory have been particularly vulnerable in the contemporary period, for in this recent period the agentic contribution to our perception of the objective world has become increasingly well understood.

In the course of the 1960s there emerged in reaction against the absent reason of scientism and theoreticism an extraordinary neoromantic critique. Optimism about the objectively progressive course of the postwar world had begun to fade; renewed racial, ethnic, and class conflicts and the emergence of newly strengthened primordial attachments made the unthinking commitment to universal social and intellectual structures more difficult to make. When they protested against "meaningless abstraction" in their newly expanded multiversities, college students were experiencing the absence of reason in the very heart of intellectual life; they viewed the university not as the expression of human creativity and imagination but as an objectified machine. They indicted science for this reification in weapons of war.

By the end of the 1960s, an antitheoretical orientation had begun to emerge throughout Western intellectual life. I will call this broad movement "contextualism." Thus, in what became an extraordinarily influential quarrel with functionalist theory, Clifford Geertz (1964/1973) attacked the notion that cognitive truth was relevant to the study of ideology, arguing against Parsons for an interpretive and relativist approach that emphasized the close link between political action and the rhetorical creation of meaning. Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) rebelled against absent reason in natural science in an equally constructivist and contextualist way. While not denying the possibility of doing natural science, he identified the decentered scientist as a "normal science" idiot, while describing creative and revolutionary science in a subjectivist and recentered way. Peter Winch (1958) went further, questioning the very possibility of a social science.

THE DEEPENING SKEPTICISM ABOUT THEORY AND "TRUTH"

With the partial exception of Winch, the early contextualist reactions did not reject the possibility of universalism or the value of general theory.

They did not, in other words, become fully confined by the epistemological dilemma. Those who followed them did, and were.

Over the last two decades the neoromantic reaction has deepened. What are taken to be the epistemological implications of contextualism—conventionalism and skepticism—have been explicitly formulated; theory has given way to the investigation of the concrete. Arguing from the mere existence of context, social scientists and philosophers have concluded that universalistic modes of argument are impossible. The facile and ultimately false dichotomy between positivism and relativism has thus inserted itself as a principal rubric in contemporary debate. The possibility that the context within which we operate is itself the very tradition of objective reason has been ignored.

Equally revealing of the increasingly radical implications of contextualism is the poststructural movement beyond semiotics and structuralism. Since Saussure set forth semiotic philosophy in his general theory of linguistics, its key stipulation has been the arbitrary relation of sign and referent: there can be found no “rational reason,” no force or correspondence in the outside world, for the particular sign that the actor has chosen to represent his or her world.

In accord with the logic of the epistemological dilemma, poststructuralists moved to extend the arbitrary relativism of the semiotic field to semioticians themselves. Because the reference of “reality” is arbitrary, the very concept of an objectively differentiated reality exercising an independent influence on the knower must be rejected out of hand. Experience replaces reason; relativism and the embrace of hypercontextualism displace the search for universalistic truth. Emancipation then is a logical impossibility, domination a condition that cannot logically be overcome. The perceptual structures of social actors are mere particularistic reflections, primitive symbolic codes, from which there is no escape (Bourdieu, 1984). With Derrida (1981) the knower becomes nothing other than a literate *bricoleur*. Reality, in turn, can be nothing other than a text, a symbolic construction that is itself related to other texts—not to history or social structure—in arbitrary ways. Indeed, texts cannot themselves be accepted as representations, even of arbitrarily signified referents. Composed not just of presences but also of absences, texts do not exist as complete wholes. When Foucault adds a history and sociology, focused on technical rationalization (absent reason) and the identity of discursive knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977, 1980), even the possibility of decentered experience is denied; there is no appeal to universalizing standards against worldly power.

At the end of the road, once the problem of the relation of thought to reality is abandoned, there is nothing much left for philosophers in the traditional sense or for theorists in general to do. Thus, having given up

on the traditional conception of truth telling, Rorty (1979:317) suggests that the philosopher should become an "informed dilettante," the "polypragmatic" who can spread a little understanding by providing what are destined to be personal translations between discourses whose relative truth can never be compared. In this way, philosophy can become an "edifying" profession, even a "poetic" one (1979:360), which promises the hope that "our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt" (1979:315). Compromise is possible because no principled positions are at stake. In such an aestheticized and antitheoretical vision, there is no way to distinguish between telling stories and telling the truth, and one can no longer defend objectivity in even a conditional form.

These thinkers are caught within the horns of the epistemological dilemma. They cannot differentiate the levels and complexity of present reason in an appropriate way. Acknowledging representational subjectivity does not mean abandoning the possibility of differentiating our representations from objects in the outside world. The possibility for so comparing "objective" and "subjective" is produced by the development of human culture itself, which can be seen as progressive insofar as it has allowed an increasingly decentered construction of nature and social life (cf. Larmore, 1989). This reason, moreover, can be exercised in a present way.

A REFORMULATION

In this final section, I wish to suggest in a positive rather than in a critical form how the search for universal grounds can proceed and how the possibility of proximate universality can be understood. A first clue comes from recent developments within hermeneutical social theory itself (cf. Ingram, 1985). The possibility that hermeneutical understanding may not, after all, be the antithesis of reason recently has been recognized by even some of the most severe critics of "mainstream" social science. Shifts in Richard Bernstein's perspective exemplify this recognition in a most vivid way. The central ambition of Bernstein's earlier work, which culminated in *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1978), was to question the very possibility of a social science (see Alexander, 1981). Attacking confidence in explanatory theorizing as profoundly misplaced, he issued a call for practical theory and contextual interpretation. In his most recent book, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983), Bernstein's ambition is very different. He wants to demonstrate that hermeneutics is not antithetical to social science or to the search for universals as such. He now introduces the idea of "reasons embedded in . . . social practices." Rather than free

floating, reason is a practice embedded in science; when scientists argue about truth, they refer not to some suprasocial reality but to this embedded reason—to “the best possible scientific reasons that can be given.” To suggest that it is institutionalized, however, does not suggest that science is irrational. To the contrary, “a scientist is always under the obligation to give a rational account of what is right and wrong in the theory that is being displaced and to explain how his or her theory can account for what is ‘true’ in the preceding theory.” It should be clear that Bernstein’s target is no longer positivism but skepticism. Indeed, he ends up by defending the possibility of social science theory against hermeneutics itself.

As this example suggests, present reason offers a way out of the epistemological dilemma. To restate my argument: even while rationality is acknowledged to be an agentic accomplishment, objectivity can also be seen as an eminently worthy goal. To achieve grounded rationality, social actors promote a decentered understanding of the social and natural world, establish norms and frameworks that negatively sanction personalization and that reward not only the ability to see the world as “out there” but the willingness to “subordinate” one’s personal opinions to that world’s exploration. It is time now to establish some general criteria for just how this hermeneutically rooted development of universality can proceed.

While present reason establishes the frameworks for understanding this world, it does not create this world itself (Will, 1985:131). For this reason, “correspondence” between “framework” and “reality” must ultimately be conceived of as the criterion governing every validity claim. Obviously, I am not myself proposing here a realist program. Since the world, in the brute pre-Kantian sense, cannot be seen as such, correspondence can be nothing other than the relationship between “reason-created” conceptual structures and reasonable “observational statements” about the world. Whether this differentiation can be confidently made is, then, the first criterion of whether universality, and some conditional conception of objectivity, can be achieved.

Has this criterion been met in contemporary natural and social science? The answer must certainly be yes. It has been one of the clearest achievements of Western and more recently modern intellectual life to create a world of observational statements that most practitioners at any given point in the development of their disciplines recognize as having an impersonal status. This recognition is signaled in the nearly unanimous prohibitions against “contaminating” empirical data and by the omnipresent acceptance of the need for observational tests of preconceptions.

Whether impersonal worlds are *acknowledged to exist* is the first criterion for universality. Whether *practitioners feel themselves bound to these frameworks* is the second. Insofar as scientists do not agree about the nature

of their worlds—either about observations or the differentiated rules that interpret, document, model, and explain them—they will be unable to consider one another's claims as reasonable. Not only will they appear, instead, as particularistic and personal arguments, but they will in part be so. The more individuals share conceptions of their impersonal worlds, the more individual practice can be subject to extrapersonal control; the more practice is subjected to impersonal control, the more it submits itself to universal criteria of evaluation. The more shared ground, the more neutral this ground not only seems but is in fact—not neutral in the sense of absent reason, but in the sense of a historical practice that neither party feels it can either own or control.

The possibility of reaching consensus, then, is the second criterion of scientific objectivity. I want to suggest that social science succeeds in meeting this second criterion more often than its relativist critics realize. Ultimately, I will argue that it does so because of the existence of “theories,” multilayered impersonal worlds that create the conditions of agreement. Within theories, social scientists share broad traditions and research programs; moreover, in the context of contemporary social science, even competing theories crosscut one another in important ways.

The impersonal worlds that theories create are “lifeworlds.” For contextualist critics like Rorty, lifeworlds are the particularist projections of hermeneutic philosophy. I would argue, to the contrary, that hermeneutical philosophy itself rests on the idea that lifeworlds can—indeed must—assume a universal and consensual form. For example, the confidence that subjectivity and contextuality actually create shared and binding norms—commensurability in the science studies phrase—rather than detract from them is at the heart of Gadamer's (1965/1975) existential hermeneutics. Universal, depersonalized norms are possible—in life as well as in method—because on the level of social life there is openness and community between individuals, who relate to one another more in the mode of “I and thou” than “I and it.”

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the ‘Thou’ truly as a ‘Thou’, i.e., not to overlook this claim and listen to what he has to say to us. To this end, openness is necessary. Anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. (Gadamer, 1965/1975:325)

Because individuals are open to each other, they have a chance of mutual understanding. This act of understanding means acknowledging the decenteredness of human reality and accepting some at least of its impersonal claims; “Openness to the other, then, includes the acknowledgement

that I must accept some things that are against myself, even though there is no one else who asks this of me" (Gadamer, 1965/1975:325).

Habermas (1977) has demonstrated the continuity between efforts at mutual understanding and the rational reconstruction of linguistic rules that produces scientific theories of language. With this transition, we move from hermeneutics to social science. In fact, it is less a leap than a logical step. The movement toward universalism is inherent in contextual interpretation itself, for actors make efforts to understand their own understanding in increasingly general ways. The universalistic result of each interpretive effort might be conceived of as a deposit of rationality. These deposits are taken up by future efforts and become *rational traditions*; eventually, upon further reconstruction, they can become *abstract theories*.

Theories are couched at various levels of generality. For this reason, "theories" present themselves in a variety of types (Alexander, 1982), as arguments about presuppositional logic, as schematic interactive models, ideological prescriptions, methodological predictions, causal hypotheses. These theories do not reflect absent reason; they do not exist "out there" and impose themselves on credulous human beings. They do reflect thoughtful efforts, sometimes generations and centuries long, to understand and develop approximations of the society that surround human life. It is not only moral or aesthetic edification that prompts this effort, but the desire for objective understanding itself.

Indeed, it is a simple thing to demonstrate that moral and aesthetic arguments have themselves aimed at developing general theories and have been guided by earlier theorizing in turn. Neither aesthetic nor "practical" theory can or wish to avoid strenuous references to validity claims; nor can or wish they to avoid the effort to substantiate these claims by building arguments of the most generalized sort. In giving such reasons and making such arguments, they reflect their deep entrenchment within a depersonalized and decentered world. This universalistic mode is abandoned, indeed, only when there is a change in the genre. Here we have the famous "imitative fallacy," that form should resemble substance. When the analysis of morality becomes an exercise in moral jeremiad, or when the argument for erotic and aesthetic freedom becomes an exemplification of poetic playfulness, the moral or aesthetic argument may be edifying or satisfying, but it certainly will not have the same claim to be true. (Compare, in this regard, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* [1954] with Brown's *Love's Body* [1966].)

Still, while the centrality of general theorizing can be demonstrated even in paradigmatically interpretive works, that this reference does not create a comforting sense of objectivity is as clear in these modes as anywhere else. "Theories" may create the impersonal worlds that are the necessary conditions for agreement, but within the social and humanistic

sciences, at least, fully satisfying agreement rarely occurs. The disciplines of the human sciences are organized theoretically around competing research programs. These traditions and programs originate in the charismatic reason of figures, some of whom are later eventually accorded classical status (Alexander, 1989b). In periods of particular fission, the existence of such cleavages often leads to skepticism and discouragement. This, indeed, has been one of the principal reasons for the deepening movement toward contextualism of the present day.

Two responses can be made. The first follows directly from the argument thus far. These traditions and programs are not just sources of disagreement but powerful means of intertwining impersonal theoretical controls with disciplinary practice. While there is dissensus between programs and traditions, there is relative agreement within them. It is for this reason that, within the parameters of a school, practitioners can sometimes reach remarkable levels of mutual theoretical understanding and conceptual and even empirical precision. The objectivity of such practices is conditional but not ephemeral. Dominant and mature research programs often create entirely new realms of observational statements; they also set standards of explanatory scope and internal coherence that competing programs must meet. In the competition between such programs and traditions is found whatever progress the human sciences can provide (Alexander and Colomy, forthcoming).

The second response to the prospect of continual disagreement is to suggest that these groups are neither as internally coherent nor as externally hermetic as the model of theoretical cleavage suggests. Kuhn exaggerated the incommensurability of paradigms because he viewed scientific orientations as expressive totalities. Yet the components of science, the different kinds and levels of theory, are relatively autonomous; even within a single theorist's own work, let alone a particular school, commitments at different levels of the scientific continuum do not tightly cohere. While this variability reduces the possibility of objective controls over practices within a school, it increases the likelihood that there will be universal and shared references between schools.

In the history of natural-scientific thought (Alexander, 1982: 25ff), scientists of similar metaphysical orientations have often diverged radically over issues on the more empirically oriented side of the scientific continuum, such as proper models or correct propositions. On the other hand, scientists have agreed about empirical observations while disagreeing fundamentally about general presuppositional issues. If such cross-cutting commitments or "weak ties" occur even within the relatively controlled settings of the physical sciences, they are that much more frequent in the social. In both the natural and social sciences, moreover,

powerful cross-cleavage agreements emanate from the methodological level, where common commitments to rationalist notions of evidence and logic can usually be found. These and other historically grounded yet deeply institutionalized agreements—from intellectual ambitions to topic selection procedures—form the shared disciplinary matrices (Toulmin, 1972) within which theoretical traditions and research programs must find their place (cf. Thompson, 1978:205–206).

These final considerations bring us back to the question of “foundations,” a concept that postpositivists have placed in increasingly ill-repute (e.g., Rorty, 1979). To engage in foundationalism is to put forward general theoretical arguments, to create criteria for truthfulness that are so universally compelling that they produce agreement about validity claims between practitioners in a field. While the search for foundations has been associated with nomothetic positivism, I want to suggest that it is precisely the perspectival, dissensual quality of social science that makes its own version of foundationalism, its more or less continuous strain of general theorizing, so necessary and often so compelling. It is natural science that does not exhibit foundationalism, for the very reason that its access to external truth has become increasingly secure. Commensurability and realism delegitimize foundationalism, not increase its plausibility. In natural science, attention can plausibly be focused on the empirical side of the continuum. In social science, by contrast, practitioners cannot so easily accept “the evidence of their senses.” Discourse becomes as important a disciplinary activity as explanation (Alexander, 1989b). Discourse is general and foundational. It aims at thematizing the standards of validity that are immanent in the very practice of social science. Responding to the lack of disciplinary confidence in empirical mirroring, theoretical discourse aims to gain provisional acceptance on the basis of universal argument. It is, therefore, the very difficulty of establishing permanent foundations that makes foundationalism in the social sciences so critical. This is the postpositivist case for general theory. It is also a case for present reason.

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