

Sociological Theory and the Claim to Reason: Why the End Is Not in Sight*

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Sociological theory is being pushed from two sides to become something other than itself. Empiricists, like Wallace (1991), observe its increasingly discursive character, are alarmed by its relativism, and try to push theory back into the natural scientific mode. Poststructuralists, like Seidman (1991), observe its continuing generality and abstraction, insist that its discursive character does not go far enough, and try to push theory into a thoroughly antiscientific mode. Both of these demands must be resisted. In order to do so, we must understand more clearly the real nature of sociological theory.

My own work has emphasized the contextual aspects of science and the a priori presuppositions upon which theory rests. I have also emphasized the symbolic, interpretive, and particularist dimensions of social life. I have defended these commitments in a recent response to Wallace. In the present context, however, I feel compelled to defend the notion that neither argument implies the abandonment of other kinds of claims. Between the particular and the universal, the interpretive and the rational, there must always be a fundamental link.

Sociological theory can be a legitimate and socially important enterprise only if it can make a claim to reason. Whether this enterprise is insulated or integrated with empirical practice in sociology, with theory in other disciplines, with general intellectual debate, with public policy, or with political struggle are separate questions, which can be answered only in terms of the specific historical and social climate within which sociological theory exists.

To make a claim to reason is not to make an exclusive claim to reasonableness, or to suggest that such an exclusive claim can or even should be made. It is not, in other words, to embrace foundationalism in the naive, epistemological sense that Richard Rorty (1979) lampoons. To make a claim to reason, rather, is to suggest that sociological theory can achieve a perspective on society which is more extensive and more general than the theorist's particular lifeworld and the particular perspective of his or her social group. If this is not possible, there is no such thing as theory, whether social or sociological. If there is no possibility for theory, then the other, more historically specific issues simply do not matter. If theory does not have a claim to reason, in what can its contributions to empirical research, to other disciplines, or to society at large possibly consist?

This claim to reason can be defended strongly (Alexander 1990a, forthcoming). If theory does not actually achieve "the view from nowhere" that Thomas Nagel (1986) has described so eloquently as the intellectual and moral basis of modern life, it does achieve a view from "somewhere else," a place that is neither the theorist's own personal world nor the world entirely outside. In the life of the university, this place is

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sustained by the intellectual disciplines, which exert stringent demands for the impersonal expression of personal commitments that Weber called value-rationality. These disciplines have been created historically by what can be called broadly the tradition of reason, which has developed very gradually and unevenly and in many different civilizations over thousands of years. In microsociological terms, this tradition is sustained by the decentering of moral and cognitive understanding that underlies socialization, as Piaget and Parsons have shown. In macrosociological terms, the tradition of reason is institutionalized when civil society guarantees universal rights to particular groups according to the rule of an impersonal law (Alexander 1990b; Cohen 1982; Habermas 1989).

It is difficult to understand this claim to reason if reason is understood in a positivist or rationalist way, either as the mere reflection of external reality or as the exercise of an innate transcendental capacity. It was in reaction against such distortions that the Romantic rejection of "abstract intellectualism" developed. In the philosophy of the social sciences this rejection became formulated in the hermeneutics first of Dilthey, then of Gadamer. It is not true that hermeneutics rejected impersonal reason or, indeed, the reason-centered mission of the human sciences, as Rorty and many others have claimed. What Dilthey and Gadamer did, rather, was expand our understanding of the personal and subjective roots of reason itself, demonstrating that there can be only "present reason" and never "absent reason" (cf. Alexander forthcoming). In fact, it is the very process of mutual understanding that produces decentered traditions, what Dilthey called "objective *Geistes*," which can be understood as normative or interpretive spaces separated from the particular understandings of temporally and spatially situated human beings.¹ The presence of such extrapersonal traditions, paradoxically the result of the deepest interpersonal experience, allows modern existence to be relatively decentered and permits an interpretive social science to make claims to objectivity in a nonpositivistic way.

To make this claim to reason is not to suggest that it has been obtained consistently or progressively, either in social theory or in the social world itself.² It is to insist, however, that the claim can be made not only in principle but also in practice and that it is rooted in the expansion of subjectivity itself. This insistence is important because arguments against the claim to reason have been made under just such a banner. Counterclaims on behalf of a repressed, subversive subjectivity have fueled a "discourse of suspicion." This discourse has refused to recognize that there is a claim to reason which grows out of personal experience itself.

In the initial postwar period, the claim of social science to reason was threatened not by the discourse of suspicion, but by positivist and rationalistic variants, from the chimeric quest for a general theory, on the one hand, to obsessive verificationism and quantophilia on the other. Since the 1960s, however, the discourse of suspicion has been perhaps the greater threat. Beginning benignly with the healthy correctives of Kuhn and Geertz, the discourse of subjectivity, relativity, and deconstruction has overcorrected, turning in upon itself. In Foucault, Nietzsche's daring reduction of abstract truth to existential power received its systematic, one-dimensional historical elaboration; in Derrida it received its most elaborate epistemology. With the work of

¹ For an important recent discussion of the interplay between rational and subjective elements within the hermeneutic tradition, see Entrikin (1990). Entrikin, who is a geographer, relates the ideal-type method developed by Rickert and Weber to recent developments in narrative theory, and employs this approach to argue that social theory can focus on the particularities of place and region without giving up access to universalistic claims.

² In my own writings, for example, I have elaborated a series of "dialectics," or fundamental tensions, between individuation and domination (Alexander 1989), between present and absent reason (forthcoming), between progress and apocalypse (1990).

Richard Rorty, who attacked the search for reason as foundationalism and called for a new pragmatic hermeneutics, the discourse of suspicion became Americanized.

This reductive line of argument is provocative but profoundly mistaken. Although reflection theory certainly should be abandoned, it is merely simplistic to suggest that there is only "constructed" knowledge. If transcendental reason is abandoned, as it must be, it is naive to conclude that there is only subjectivity. The logic is solipsistic and the social implications, although superficially liberating, are in fact profoundly conservative. Power and desire are the sole basis for knowledge only if the subjective and objective dimensions of knowing are sundered one from the other. If impersonal understanding is cut off from personal knowledge, neither can be connected to the traditions or institutions that sustain universalism. The effect is to undermine the theoretical project to humanize the world upon which the Enlightenment and much of the Romantic movement (Seidman 1983) were based.

Until recently, the American discourse of suspicion has been expressed primarily in literary and philosophical studies. John Searle (1990) remarked recently that this location may account for its casual dismissal of the empirical world, but this is to underestimate not only the philosophical basis for its relativism but also the extent to which it has already permeated social science in its European form. In America, the discourse of suspicion is being introduced into social science via "postmodernism." Postmodernism is a difficult thing to get hold of. An aesthetic of recent architecture and art, it is surely also the expression of a fin-de-siècle antimodernist mood. Whether it is a new phase of history is altogether less certain. The sociological support for postmodernism in this form is complex and uneven.

It certainly cannot be said, however, that the discourse of suspicion originated in, or because of, this postmodern phase. This discourse has been an endemic part of Western social thought throughout the twentieth century (Alexander 1990c). The proposal that the twin projects of progressive emancipation and rational thought are at an end is nothing new, either in its relativistic claims or in its apocalyptic mood. The proposal betrays all the familiar weaknesses of this overcorrecting and inturnd line of thought.

Indeed, as the discourse of suspicion is embraced, the awful consequences of this century's earlier antirationalist efforts raise their ugly heads. It is in order to avoid this darker side of the discourse that Steven Seidman suggests he is rejecting not social but only "technical" or "sociological" theory. This strategy cannot succeed. The legitimacy of truth claims is the same for both modes of theoretical thought. If either cannot make a claim to reason, then neither can. If sociological theory is politically irrelevant truthlessness, social theory is merely relevant, "politically correct" truthlessness. Is this really a better place to be?

Seidman defines social theories as "narratives with a moral intent," and equates narratives with fictional stories and tales. The weakness of this position can be revealed in two ways. First, although science is certainly a narrative, it is not only that. It is also a code, one which, in Bernstein's (1971) terms, is elaborated and open rather than simple and closed. Second, and vitally important, one must distinguish between different kinds of narratives—between stories that are literary and political, on the one hand, and scientific on the other. Science differs from other narratives because it commits the success of its story to the criterion of truth. For every scientific narrative we are compelled to ask, "Do we know whether it is true?" One of the primary concerns of recent sociological theory, and of social theory since its inception, has been how we know, or ever can know, the answer to this question.

This question is as relevant to social criticism as it is to social and sociological theory. How do we know that a piece of social criticism is good or true, that it is

accurate, trenchant, and moral in its claims? As Seidman articulates the discourse of suspicion, there are no criteria for this choice other than the “consequences” of its “moral, social, and political” aims. But what are the criteria by which we can evaluate these consequences? Seidman suggests that these criteria can be nothing other than the interests of some particular social group. They must be “ethnocentric” criteria, linked to “the values of the community of which the critic is a part.”³

This reductionist pragmatism is not only anti-intellectual but downright dangerous. To endorse particularistic interest as the primary criterion for evaluation is to invite misunderstanding, prejudice, and anticivil conflict. Are we to apply Jewish criteria for evaluating social criticism written by, for, or about Jews? Afro-American, gay, lesbian, and feminist criteria for social criticism written by, for, and about Afro-Americans, gays, lesbians, and feminists?

Although it is a cliché to point out that this practical reductionism can explain neither the origins nor the effects of its own theorizing, still it is a point that must be made over and over again. Seidman, for example, would hardly extend such a generous validity criterion to those whose thought he detests. Would he agree that conservative, liberal, and WASP social theory should be evaluated only according to criteria generated by the interests of these groups? He could not, because he spends the greater part of his essay criticizing these theories on the basis of criteria that clearly have been generated in external, extra-particular ways. Conceptually he invokes highbrow philosophical criteria such as antifoundationalism and hermeneutics as well as lowbrow criteria such as inaccuracy, inhumanity, and out-of-dateness. These criteria have a distinctly general and universal ring. Politically he attacks liberal and conservative theories on the grounds that they ignore the needs and distort the sensibilities of underprivileged or excluded groups. How can these criticisms be understood as invoking criteria other than those which are relatively universal and distinctly supralocal in scope?

Reductionist arguments are inherently self-contradictory for the institutional and historical reasons I suggested above. In the decentered milieu of Western intellectual life—which now has permeated the intellectual life of the world at large—it is impossible not to evoke relatively generalized and extra-particular standards. If only for pragmatic reasons this must be the case, for if such standards are not evoked, one’s argument cannot be made available to (much less legitimate for) the audience of fellow readers and intellectuals who stand outside one’s own particular social group.

It is clear that substantive moral arguments themselves involve abstract, universal issues. One must ask whether a particular kind of political, social, or critical argument actually expresses a moral good. Ringing justifications that point to the “simple justice” of particular moral claims are effective in political struggles but cannot suffice in theoretical ones. Hence the history of moral philosophy, which is a great debate over whether moral consequences must be evaluated in contractual, utilitarian, or natural rights terms. Even philosophical efforts to justify pragmatic and internalist moral criteria, such as Walzer (1983) and Rorty have advanced, involve subtle and complex exercises in general theory, whose immediate relevance to any particular social group is very difficult to see. If we are to take seriously the moral dimension of social theories, we cannot avoid the strenuous abstractions of our intellectual past.

Social theory, of course, does not make only moral claims. It also rests upon factual descriptions, empirical explanations, and cognitive assumptions about the real nature

³ The American intellectual historian David Hollinger (forthcoming) recently has explored the highly restrictive political and moral consequences of the discourse of suspicion in precisely these terms.

of the social world. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx made a series of sweeping empirical claims, which he devoted the rest of his intellectual life to trying to sustain. Because many of these claims were not correct, some of Marx's most significant moral criticisms were misleading and his political proposals impractical in the extreme. The interpenetration of empirical, moral, and critical claims is inherent in sociological theory (see, for example Alexander 1979). Attacks on the political impoverishment of contemporary society and calls for the restoration of community—such as those contained in “The End of Sociological Theory”—rest upon theoretical assertions about the diminution of the public sphere (Habermas 1989). Are these assumptions justified? Some sociological and political theorists (Alexander 1990b; Cohen 1982) have developed arguments that the public sphere in capitalist democracies remains in relatively good health. If such claims cannot be evaluated in a relatively impersonal and rational way, then social criticism cannot be based on influence but only upon the rule of force.

What about the moral arguments against capitalism and the demands for socialist planning that have informed so much of the progressivist tradition in social science (Alexander 1988)? Is their attribution of alienation and radical inequality to the economic market an accurate one? In this case, too, sociological theory recently has had something important to say (Holton and Turner 1986, 1989; Szelenyi 1983; Zelizer 1988). Again, how can one evaluate such claims and counterclaims if reality is not acknowledged to exist outside discourse and if the possibility of decentered access to this reality is not acknowledged?

In fact, the fundamental push to abstraction and “technicality” in social theory derives from this very conflict between claim and counterclaim (Alexander and Colomy 1991). When empirical, problem-oriented propositions are advanced, they are challenged by factual descriptions that often seem equally plausible. How are these rival claims to be evaluated? Adherents to a tradition ask, “Why do my opponents’ claims appear true when they are not? Why does disagreement continue despite strenuous efforts at truth and genuine achievements of illumination?” (Alexander 1991; Wallace 1991).

Participants in social science thus feel compelled to thematize their claims to legitimacy (to employ Habermas’s apt term), and they cannot do so merely by reiterating the empirical status of their propositions. In an effort to demonstrate deeper and more compelling grounds, assumptions are unearthed that underlie empirical claims, assumptions about models and methodologies, about action and order, about the morality of society and its capacity for renovation. These theoretical discussions are sometimes highly abstract and often highly political. Rarely, however, are they so technical that they can be understood only by theorists themselves. Theory is assigned and read by every first-year graduate student in sociology. Significant theoretical works are discussed widely not only in disciplinary journals but often in extradisciplinary venues and general intellectual reviews. Theory is not a distinctive or exotic animal; it is the generalized form of a widely shared effort to understand human society. What distinguishes theory is its reflexivity: it is the effort to understand this understanding and to develop criteria for helping us recognize why and how we disagree.

The technical and the substantive, then, must be intertwined thoroughly, and there is scarcely a theorist who has not done significant amounts of both kinds of work. Collins problematizes the micro-macro link and counterposes abstract models of conflict to functionalist theory, while he conducts empirical investigations about the role of solidarity in war, the origins of capitalism, and the history of religious sectarianism. Giddens writes abstractly about action and structure in one work,

substantively about the nation-state and violence in another. Coleman rethinks collective action theory in order to suggest new social policies that would, he believes, decenter power and regain social control. Bourdieu engages in highly speculative discussions of culture and social structure as well as freedom and determinism; yet, upon these tensions he builds his empirical and moral critique of capitalist inequality. Habermas develops theories of communicative action and universal pragmatics while investigating the contemporary crisis of legitimacy and intervening in contemporary German debates about political affairs. My own efforts to penetrate theoretical logic have informed interventions that range from the political responsibility of universities (1986) to the Contragate crisis (1987a, 1987b).

Theories, it is true, are almost always exercises in dispute. Yet they do not necessarily lead to the kind of radical miscomprehension, or "babble," to which Seidman alludes. In the first place, theoretical argument and empirical research programs are encased in traditions. Within a particular tradition, abstract theory is understood rather easily even by the most empirical practitioners because it represents an articulation of an underlying code.⁴ In the second place, one of the most vital functions of theorizing is to offer compelling grounds for legitimation in the eyes of skeptics, including evidence that alternative views cannot possibly be correct. If a theory is good, it will be understood by many, who are moved nonetheless to disagree; if it is important, it will also have the effect of resolving certain disputes among many members of the disciplinary community, for significant periods of time.

Sociology recently emerged from a bruising yet very productive period of intense theoretical conflict. In the midst of this crisis, general theoretical arguments played pivotal intellectual and organizational roles. During the current period there has been a significant abatement of hostility and a fundamental shift toward synthesis, even while fundamental disagreements remain. The borrowing and intertwining of once rival traditions is readily apparent in recent empirical work. It is also the new agenda (e.g., the essays in Ritzer 1990) for a wide range of robust and ambitious efforts in sociological theory.

Certainly it would be misleading to suggest that these new theoretical syntheses are leading the way. They do, however, provide versions of this contemporary search for synthesis in widely accessible, self-reflexive forms. In this situation of intellectual vitality, it seems not only unwise but also absurd to announce the imminent death of this important product of the life of the mind.

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⁴ The recent work of Victor Nee provides an important example of how traditions allow this productive interplay of theory and research. In a series of methodologically rigorous empirical studies, Nee (1989; Sanders and Nee 1987) attacked antimarket explanations both of China's recent economic growth and of the socioeconomic niche occupied by American ethnic enclaves. This work, however, is informed not only by moral critiques of antimarket theory but also by the general theories that have introduced and reinterpreted markets, referred to above (Stark and Nee 1989). Nee's work, in turn, has clear moral and political implications—for example, in its insistence that access to the economic market should be viewed as a positive policy goal.

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