
Theory

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The Fallacy of the Scientific Choice between Structures and Meanings: A reply to Therborn

Göran Therborn's witty and challenging contribution, *What about taking Ourselves Seriously?*, in the Spring issue of *Theory* is most welcome. It provides an opportunity to address some critical issues in contemporary thought.

While I am not entirely clear from Therborn's note what taking ourselves seriously as sociological theorists involves, he seems to imply that we must move closer to what he calls "scientific sociological theorizing". For, while acknowledging the existence of a different mode, "humanistic sociological theorizing", Therborn believes the latter to be in sorry shape and suggests it must become more like the former, supposedly scientific, theorizing if it is to survive.

My first response is to insist that this division between scientific and humanistic sociological theory is an impossible one. First, it is not stable empirically, nobody can ever agree on where the division is except selfidentified partisans in the debate. Second, and more importantly, this division is untenable intellectually. Any theory that attempts to sever explanation from interpretation cannot explain, and any interpretation that seeks to avoid explanation cannot interpret. Any intelligent effort at meaning interpretation must posit a series of causal linkages and predictions. Every ambitious social structural explanation, implicitly depends upon cultural knowledge, in the sense that it takes as parameters (rather than as variables) fields of meaning the interpretation of which it can only assume.

Therborn argues that scientific theory has made great "advances", in the sense, presumably, of providing verified, widely accepted covering laws and concepts. He seems to believe that it has done so by focusing on social structure, on "external resources and constraints". By contrast, he suggests that because humanistic theory is concerned with "the cultural field of identities, cognitions, and values/norms", it is in a dismal condition, "remarkably under-theorized". Sociological theorists know, Therborn suggests, "remarkably little"

about such things; we have, indeed, "surprisingly few ideas about them".

These assertions may seem plausible to many contemporary theorists. To me, however, they seem quite wrong headed. Consider, for example, organizational theory, taken by Therborn as a field of scientific theory in which exemplary advances have been made. It seems to me, to the contrary, that organizational theory is riven with fundamental disagreements, manifests little theoretical coherence, and has scarcely escaped from the challenges and they are very real ones - of cultural sociology.

Let me very briefly illustrate this point. By acknowledging the significance of identity, legitimacy, and values, Myer's branch of neo-institutionalism seeks to avoid the mechanism of Hannan's neo-Darwinian model. However, the former effectively reduce the "cultural scripts" of organizations to a black box of pseudo-symbols that function merely as a new kind of instrumental means. The result is that neo-institutionalists actually achieve little more explanatory success than their competitors. As Friedland and Alford have argued, neo-institutionalists are afraid of allowing the actual experience of meaning too much importance; they lack, in other

words, an independent, internalist cultural theory.¹

This is precisely the direction, of course, that Therborn does not wish "humanistic sociological theory" to go. He argues against taking lay actors' meanings as the "empirical referents" of cultural sociology, dismissing them with heavy sarcasm as "the catchy phrase of the talkshow personality or the captured conversational driftwood of the professional socialite". As more appropriate sources of data, he points to "historiography and the sociology of knowledge". The latter, of course, recalls neo-Marxism and the structural reduction of Mannheim. Therborn would have cultural sociology turn back to the "external resources and constraints" that define theory of a scientific, social structural kind!

He is not alone. This inclination has, in fact, characterized much contemporary theorizing and research in cultural studies, from Wuthnow and Archer to Bourdieu and the British Birmingham school. In none of these approaches is culture treated as much more than a scintillating dependent variable that real,

serious sociology must precede to explain.²

The reductio ad absurdum of this position can be found in the approach to norms that Coleman takes in his most recent, naively scientific paen to the theory of rational choice. It is hardly a coincidence, in other words, that this is very work Therborn lauds as "a major step forward" in cultural studies. While acknowledging norms (and self identities) as regulators of cost calculations, Coleman can only "explain" their existence by their marginal utility.³ He is unable to take lay meanings or self identity seriously, as independent variables which are non-rational, or nonmaterial, not only ontologically but epistemologically. This derives from Coleman's insistence on dividing "scientific" from hermeneutic theory, which shuts him off from the powerful and growing conceptual armory that exists in the inter-disciplinary cultural field.

For, contrary to Therborn's claims, there have indeed been significant advances in sociological cultural studies. These

¹Roger Friedland and Robert Alford, *Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices and Institutional Contradictions*, pp. 232-236 in Paul DiMaggio and Woody Powell, eds., *The New Institutionalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991

²For a telling critique of these tendencies, see Eric Rambo and Elaine Chan, *Text, Structure, and Action in Cultural Sociology: A Commentary on "Positive Objectivity"* in Wuthnow and Archer, *Theory and Society*, 1990 (19): 635-48

³Alexander, *Shaky Foundations: The Presuppositions and Internal Contradictions of James Coleman's Foundations of Social Theory*, *Theory and Society*, 1992 (21): 203-17

theoretical⁴ and empirical⁵ investigations of meaning have been informed by the humanities - semiotics, symbolic anthropology, post-structuralism - but have not eschewed the scientific ideals of conceptual elaboration, controlled experiment, causal attribution, or explanation. They provide a powerful refutation of rational choice theory and a decisive rejoinder to the argument that the seriousness of the sociological enterprise can be measured only by how closely it mimics natural science.

The gap between science and humanities is an illusion created by scientism. Only by showing how social structure and meaning interpenetrate, mutually influencing one another, can sociological theory achieve the kind of seriousness that Therborn and I both are trying to help it to attain.

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⁴E.g., Anne Kane, *The Analytic and Concrete Autonomy of Culture*, *Sociological Theory*, 1991 (9) 1: 53-69. More generally, see Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁵E.g., Phil Smith, *Codes and Conflict: Toward a Theory of War as Ritual*, in *Theory and Society*, 1991, (20): 103-138; Jeffrey Alexander and Phil Smith, *The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for cultural Studies, Theory and Society*, forthcoming; Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, London: Polity, 1990

Mid-term Theory Conference

Looking back, it was probably foolish of me to offer to write a report of our conference on 'Lessons from the Post-Communiste Transition for Sociological Theory: Convergence Theory Reconsidered', held at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences (SCASS) in June, 1992. After all, even the title was enough to incite controversy, and divergence appeared more likely to prevail than convergence.

As it turned out, although there was plenty of divergence of views and differences of approach, most participants seemed to feel there had been a real meeting of minds by the end of the two days. Thanks for that should go to the organizers, Jeff Alexander and Piotr Sztompka, and members of SCASS, who not only offered warm hospitality but also played a full part in the discussions. Even so, any report is bound to be very selective and based on personal impressions. I can only refer to a few of the papers, but they seem to me represent the main threads of the discussions and so I hope they are sufficiently representative.

Most papers made clear that there was no question of going back to 'convergence theory' as it had previously existed. However, the general idea of 'convergence' did

provide a useful starting-point for debate about the theoretical significance of the 'post-communist transition'. Alexander pointed out that the phrase 'transition from communism to capitalism' sounded oxymoronic because it suggested the straight line of history appeared to be running in reverse, according to previous ideas of transition. But each historical period needs a narrative that defines its past in terms of the present, and suggests a future that is fundamentally different, or at least 'even better' than contemporary time. He delineated four distinctive theoretical-cum-ideological periods: modernization theory and romantic liberalism, antimodernization theory and heroic radicalism, postmodern theory and comic detachment, and the emerging phase of neo-modernization or reconvergence theory, which seems to combine the narrative forms of each of its predecessors on the post-war scene.

Sztompka stressed that the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe were different in that they were 'a-theoretical' in character. They were not undertaken in the name of another utopia or under the banner of ideology, but rather expressed disenchantment with any ideology. They were carried out by a wide alliance of diverse social groups, united only by what they were against. Whereas convergence theory had envisaged a gradual movement of

different systems towards each other, we had witnessed a sudden disintegration of one system, leaving the field to be dominated by a rival victorious system.

Nevertheless, what was happening in Eastern Europe could not be accounted for by transition from one system to another, as there were many different kinds of social movements and tendencies appearing, including supposedly pre-modern forms such as ethnic, regional and religious differences and attachments. Theorizing these developments required a focus on aspects of human agency, cultures, traditions, charismatic leaders, social movements and movements of opinion.

According to Robertson there have been two major changes in the character of social theory since the earlier debate about convergence as an aspect of modernization theory. On the one hand there have been attempts to theorize the world as a whole; on the other, there has been an antitotalizing thrust, particularly in postmodern theories. Recently there have been attempts to consider the relationship between the homogenizing and heterogeneizing tendencies, and the interplay of universality and particularity. Robertson emphasised that the promotion of particularity is increasingly organized on a global basis. The debate about globalization is

a form of upgrading the old problem of convergence. But, whereas the old debate was concerned with whether societies were becoming similar, the debate about globalization places interactions and comparisons at the heart of discussion and does not find a polarity in the universal-particular relationship.

Two controversial papers were presented by Elisa Reis and Helena Kozakiewicz. Reis began by apologizing for introducing a controversial issue: the predicament of the Third World and whether it makes sense to speak of a Third World while the First and Second seem to be converging. She made a powerful case for an affirmative answer by comparing the different histories and trajectories of East European and Latin American societies and insisting that we need theories that account for divergences rather than focusing on convergence. Reis's paper title, 'Convergence: the Winning Theory or Failing Prophecy?', gave only the minimum warning of what was to come. In her view, the conference title's reference to convergence theory signalled a return to ideology, although she speculated that the conference organizers' 'theoretical intuition' had probably warned them off using the title most commonly adopted in Central and Eastern Europe - 'Transition from totalitarianism to democracy'. In the meantime, she said,

the ideological euphoria in that part of Europe was giving way to cynicism on the part of the governors and bitterness and depression among the governed. Ideological terms as 'political democracy', 'market economy' and 'free culture', should be confronted by the realities of struggles for power among narrow elites, economic recession and corruption, and Christianization that resembled the medieval crusades.

With papers like these, and others that were equally challenging, the conference could not fail to excite lively debate. The real testimony to the effectiveness of this ISA Research Committee on Social Theory is the fact that lively debate was carried on in a constructive and positive spirit.

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We are able at this early date to present list of topics and session organizers for the Theory Research Committee at the next ISA World Congress to be held in Bielefeld, July 18-23 1994. We have been given 18 Sessions, so that each section should include two sessions and more room than usual for papers. This should allow for a broad interpretation of topics and for the inclusion of a wide range of papers.

Sessions for 1994 World Congress

1. General Session: "Theorizing the 20th Century"

Moderator: Margaret Archer (U.K.)
Presenters: Niklas Luhman (Germany)
Alain Touraine (France)

****Organizational meeting of RC after Session #1****

2-3. Symbols, Discourse, and Ideology (2 sessions)

Co-organizers: Kenneth Thompson (U.K.), Marcel Fournier (Canada)

4. Identity and Solidarity

Organizer: Franco Crespi (Italy)

5. Tradition, National Character, and Charisma: Forces of Stability or Change?

Organizer: Piotr Sztompka (Poland)

6. Theorizing Civil Society

Organizer: Jeffrey Alexander (U.S.)

7. Globalization and Nationalisms

Organizer: Roland Robertson (U.S.)

8. "Rationality" and "Irrationality" in Social Action

Organizer: Nikolai Genov (Bulgaria)

9. Violence, Trust, and the Problem of Order (tentative)

Organizer: Ron Eyerman (Sweden)

Call for Papers:

**Allienation, Reification, and the
Advent of Postmodernity**
XIIIth World Congress of Sociology,
Bielefeld, Germany, 18-24 July 1994

Organizer: David Schweitzer,
Department of Anthropology and
Sociology, University of British
Columbia, 6303 N.W. Marine Drive,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 2B2
(tel: *604 731 4049, Fax: *604 822
6161)

This session will focus on the analysis of new and changing forms of alienation and reification associated with the emergence of postmodernity. Papers on a variety of related topics are invited, including those dealing with the reifying impact of the new technologies and mass communication forms, the theoretical refinement and conceptual clarification of ideas about alienation and reification in the postmodern era, revised and updated Marxist or Durkheimian analyses which take into account the changing conditions of postmodernity, and the debate between modernists and postmodernists over issues of general theory, agency, and social practice.

IMPORTANT NOTE!

Dues which are necessary to the continuence of this Newsletter, are \$ 25 for four years. The best way to send them is in Swedish currency directly to our account Nordbanken, Box 55 221 00 Lund, Sweden. Account # 3029 45 48785 - ISA Theory Research Committee.