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Critical Notes on some Worrying Trends  
in the Recent Theorizing of Richard Münch*

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As national, regional, and cultural-political identities reemerge in the new Europe, so one can expect *a challenge to dispassionate universalism* in the name of a more engaged and less constrained scientific questioning. (Scaff 1944: 219)

World sociology would lose in the comprehensiveness of its perspective and the variety of its approaches to social reality if the American standardization of a professionalized discipline continued its ascendancy. European sociology needs to resist this trend just as Europe inevitably has to resist the McDonaldization of its culture as a whole in order to preserve diversity for itself and for the world. (Munch 1991: 329)

It is only in the transatlantic context of comparisons and relationships that the idea of a "European" identity can gain credence at all. (Scaff 1994: 219, 217)

Within every universalizing cultural endeavor there are national trends. "Universalistic and particularistic orientations in science are in continuous tension" Nedelmann and Sztompka (1994: 9) point out in their introduction to *Sociology in Europe: In Search of Identity*, the edited volume distributed free of charge to every registered participant in last summer's World Congress of Sociology in Bielefeld, Germany. They go on to describe this tension between universal and particular, quite rightly in my view, as "stimulating [to] scientific development". Yet, while empirically inevitable and theoretically stimulating, as Hegel himself well knew the particularistic side of this productive tension need not, and should not, be applauded regardless of its form. Indeed, my point in the following essay is to argue that in some of his recent writings Richard Munch introduces the particularistic moment in a one-sided, distorted, often chauvinistic way. *By* challenging the universalist aspirations of social theory in this manner, Munch has opened the

door to more virulent exercises in particularism that he himself would certainly abhor.

In marked contrast to the volume's other contributions, "The Contribution of German Social Theory to European Sociology" (Munch 1994) dwells at length on the superiority of European ideas and dismisses American sociology in a disdainful way. In making these arguments, moreover, Munch does not engage in theoretical argument as such, but relies instead on a broadly reductionist sociology of knowledge, one that gives an exaggerated and dangerous primacy to the "nation".<sup>1</sup> In this 1994 piece Munch draws extensively from an essay he published earlier in an American journal<sup>2</sup>.

Because his comparisons between Europe and America are more detailed and systematic in this earlier effort (Munch 1991), in the theoretical analysis that follows I refer to it as well<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> To prevent misunderstanding of what follows, I want to state clearly that I am not objecting to the sociology of knowledge per se. Rather, I am questioning (1) the particular way in which Munch investigates the social dimension of science and (2) the reductionism of his approach, that is the asymmetry between social causes and theoretical logic in his analysis of European and American work. In other words, I am in no way suggesting that social theory can ever assume what the philosopher Thomas Nagel calls "the view from nowhere," as anyone familiar with my work on theoretical presuppositions or the arbitrary in culture knows.

<sup>2</sup> The major differences between the two pieces – which are identical in virtually every other respect – is the proportionate space allotted to American (much more in 1991) and German sociology (much more in 1994). This shift in attention is not directly relevant to my concerns here. It indicates nothing more than Munch's response to the division of labour in the Nedelmann/Sztompka text.

<sup>3</sup> Instead of criticising the theoretical and cultural structures of his argument, one could also ask, why has Richard Munch himself produced it? For those who have been active in the international community of sociological theory, this question is, of course, not without some interest. For a decade Munch was a major contributor to the supra-national theoretical movement in sociology. Along with his German colleagues Bernhardt Giesen and Hans Joas, he was a driving force in establishing the series of semi-annual German-American conferences of the 1980s that were so stimulating for the participants and which produced some remarkable and influential results (e.g., Alexander, Munch, Smelser, and Giesen 1987). Munch himself was a highly enthusiastic participant observer in American theoretical debates, taught for extended periods in the U.S., and even at one point in time sought a full time American academic post. His intellectual identification with Talcott Parsons, the most influential American in post-war theory, is well-known.

I myself have been a participant in these international discussions. In introductory remarks to a forthcoming book, I acknowledge "my participation

Lurking just beneath the surface of Munch's arguments in these essays one finds the suggestion that social theory is national, the contention that, while theorists may aspire to universalise, most of their (our) ideas actually reflect the social structures and ideologies within which they (we) live<sup>4</sup>. Munch's position argues, in effect, that most sociological theories function as supporting *ideologies* for the struggles of their regions and nation states. Not only are theories instruments in the struggle and competition of national powers, but their varying intellectual influence, Munch clearly suggests, depends upon the relative economic and political power of their respective nations. Such arguments, to be sure, are not novel in the history of social theory. Nonetheless, they are something new in the history of postwar theoretical sociology, and they seem particularly threatening when against the background of the political and cultural conflicts that have emerged in the post-Cold War world in which we live and think today<sup>5</sup>.

in the Research Committee on Sociological Theory of the ISA, which I organised with my close Polish colleague, Piotr Sztompka, in the late 1980s", adding that the "meetings of this intimate, stimulating, and contentious group of *supra-national* intellectuals provided the initial occasions for developing the first and second chapters of this book" (Alexander, 1995 forthcoming, italics added). The adjective "supra-national" is a vitally important one for me. It is homologous, in my view, with "international" and postmodern skepticism notwithstanding with "theory" itself. These three terms suggest cosmopolitanism, the aspiration to rise above national interests and ideologies in the name of a grater universalism that can provide access to a broader truth. What follows, then, can be read, not only as a theoretical criticism, but as a query made by an old friend to a former comrade-in-arms, one who had seemed to be as reflexive about his "German" theoretical identity as the author has himself tried to be about his "American" one. In this sense, I am asking "Richard", as compared to "Munch", the following questions: Am I merely a provincial American, confined by my isolated country's naivete and blinded by its own chauvinism, or has your work, in fact, taken a decidedly nationalist turn? If so, what has happened to change your mind about social theory, about the bases of its construction, about its American forms? What kind of influence do you want your new work to have?

<sup>4</sup> Although some of Munch's remarks do seem to suggest that German sociological theory may be at least partially exempted from such social constraint. See n. 9, below.

<sup>5</sup> To be sure, this new world of increasingly dangerous and sometimes violent ethnic and national conflict – manifest in the plethora of newly restrictive immigration policies, in populist and intellectual resistance to European unity, and in the emergence of neo-fascism parties and movements – was not visible when Munch began to think about the first of his articles. These were still the heady, post-Cold War days of "Euromania", when so many held such high ex-

From the beginning of his contribution to *Sociology in Europe*, Munch approaches theoretical issues in national terms. Referring to the role of voluntarism and consensus in functionalist theorizing, for example, he describes Merton and Parsons as having "assimilated European social theory to genuine American thought" (p. 45, this and all subsequent italics added, unless noted otherwise). In itself this observation certainly is not objectionable. It begins to be, however, when it is linked to Munch's objection that this assimilation "narrowed down the variety of European social theory" (46). The pejorative implications become evident, however, when Munch approaches the anti-functionalist micro and macro challenges of the late 1950s and 1960s, not in terms of their theoretical innovations, but in terms of the national origins of their theories. These primarily American theorists were able to mount this challenge, Munch argues, only because they could "draw upon the greater sharpness and distinctness of European social theories" (46). Rather than speaking about the theoretical and empirical references of these challenges to functionalism in scientific terms, Munch represents them geopolitically, describing as contributions that strengthened, not American, but European thought. He writes, for example, that "Coser, Dahrendorf, and later on Collins revitalized European conflict theory from Marx to Pareto, Weber and Simmel"!

Yet, according to Munch, these macro and micro challenges ultimately failed to overcome the theoretical limitations of functionalism. Why? Because they had not made a sharp enough break from American society and thought. Because "they all [still] related [their] variety of theories to American thought and reality," their theories actually continued the simplifying "Americanisation of European social theory" that Merton and Parsons had begun. Other observers (e.g., Sztompka 1994, Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994) have viewed this new wave of micro and macrohistorical work as marking a theoretical golden age. Munch disagrees. These theorists incorporated the forms of European thinking but not the real content. "In terms of content", he insists, these American theorists actually distorted European social theory. The point of Munch's argument, it seems, is to argue that such distortion

pectations for "1992", certain that it would be a major step on the way to a new United States of Europe. This atmosphere had certainly shifted dramatically, however, in 1992 and 1993, the years which formed the background for Munch's contribution in 1994.

was inevitable; according to emphasis on the nation, "American social theory" can only be "a reflection of American thought and its relationship to American reality". Neither America's thought nor its social reality "correspond to the whole variety of thought and reality in the different European countries".

One must begin to pay careful attention here to the way in which Munch homologizes two binary relationships. In the pointed contrasts he makes between America and Europe, he evokes, time and time again, the contrast between homogeneity and variety. In doing so, he is suggesting the following analogy: America is to homogeneity as Europe is to variety (America : homogeneity = Europe : variety). Constructing this kind of complex analogy represents cultural, not just social-scientific work. Rather than merely empirical observations, these contrasts and homologies are strongly evaluative. They establish frameworks of sacred and profane, purity and danger, categories that legitimate pollution and exclusion (Alexander 1993). This conflation of cognitive and evaluative strategies is clear when Munch argues that a series of well-established empirical facts – the "professionalization of sociology" in America, its "wellequipped leading departments and journals", the "establishment of a unified national discourse" in America, its competitive and individualistic social structure – have combined to produce a constraining "standardisation" (47) in American empirical research and theorizations. Mixing condescension, disappointment, surprise, and criticism, Munch describes postwar American sociology, not simply as homogeneous and standardized, but as bland and impoverished. The discipline's character is exemplified by what he calls "the uniform standard article" typically published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*. For Munch, American sociology becomes the paradigm case for the de-magicalization that Weber described as the bane of modernity. In American sociology, he rues, "there is little space for the extraordinary, whether in the negative or in the positive sense". His analogical series has now been further stretched. It reads, America : Europe = American sociology : European sociology = homogeneity : standardisation : creativity = uniformity : extraordinary.

What a misfortune that the intellectual challenges to functionalism originated, not in Europe, but in America, the standardized, homogenized, and de-magicalized country of the common, ordinary man! But what good fortune that the world's geopolitical situation, the regional and national dis-

tribution of power, is now undergoing such significant change. The antidote Munch offers to the deplorable condition of American sociology rests, in other words, on geo-politics rather than social theory. "With Europe's rise to the level of one of three superpowers" – Munch notes East Asia in passing – European sociology has regained the material power "to challenge the American hegemony in world sociology". "Only Europe can purify the pollution of social theory that its debilitating sojourn in America has caused: because of its greater diversity" Munch explains, "European sociology can be more creative than American sociology".

However, one last bastion of "Anglo-American cultural imperialism" still blocks Europe's resumption of its rightful place<sup>6</sup>. To "safeguard the characteristic national traditions of thought against the levelling pressures of standardisation", Munch asserts, European thought must preserve the integrity and power of its "different languages". This marks yet another polluting force that has emanated from the United States. The "establishment of the English language as the international medium of interchanging ideas", in Munch's view, is "a danger": (61). Because of this, the growing greatness of European sociology could actually produce a sadly ironic turn of events. Intensified intellectual communication within Europe, and more symmetrical two-way communication between Europe and the U.S., might only lead to "the further sedimentation of Anglo-American cultural hegemony". It seems fitting that in the very last sentence of his 1994 article Munch expresses his regret for this situation in a decidedly ethnocentric way. "German dialectics in English", he laments, "is only halfway dialectics, unfortunately" (62). With this remark he seems to suggest that the particularistic, national and tradition bound character of language makes it impossible for those outside a national culture to gain clear access to its theoretical ideas.

I will refrain from asking whether dialectical thinking is, in

<sup>6</sup> This hyphenated "Anglo-American" formulation raises the interesting question of whether Munch considers England to be part of Europe, a question, indeed, that more official spokesmen for German and French national interests have raised since the 1950s. Where England fits precisely into constructions of "America" and "Europe" remains ambiguous throughout Munch's discussions. In his own contribution to *Sociology in Europe*, by contrast, the English sociologist Martin Albrow is insistent that England's intellectual place is in Europe and the non-Western world – anywhere except in the United States. Perhaps Munch's hesitation and Albrow's insistence are two sides of the same coin.

fact, so inherently and exclusively German as Munch presumes<sup>7</sup>. I do want to suggest, however, that, according to this reasoning, dialectics in French, Italian and Spanish would do no better than in English. Reducing thought to a reflection of national culture and social structure throws doubt on the very possibility of a supra-national idea. Indeed, according to the perspective Munch himself has outlined, the very phrase "European sociology" must be viewed as a contradiction in terms. I leave to European colleagues the discussion of these issues, a discussion that would, I suspect, also wish to evaluate whether Munch's intra-European comparison of French, English, and German sociologies is as distorted as his comparison of Europe with America<sup>8</sup>. I concentrate here on the un-

<sup>7</sup> Munch maintains that it is. E.g., "The permanent production and resolution of contradictions is the characteristic view of modern society and its development put forward by German social theory. [In German social theory] society proceeds according to a dialectical logic which is rooted in its culture and which is expressed in various forms in its social institutions" (p. 49).

<sup>8</sup> According to Munch, English sociological theory is imbedded in class hierarchies and its spokespersons are representatives of working class movements. French sociology focusses on hierarchy and collective struggles for power and its great theorists are ideological intellectuals writing for politicized publics. German theorists, on the other hand, are free-floating intellectuals, academics who are protected from worldly economic, political, or national kinds of cultural pressures.

German sociologists ... are not part of an intellectual elite with a public outside the academic world like the French, nor are they spokespeople for a class like the British, nor are they teamworkers and employees of a huge, professional system appropriate for the mass production of standardized articles [i.e., the Americans]. They are, above all, academics in the strict sense, living in a separate world of ideas, concepts and theories that has its own history independent of what is going on outside ... This is the milieu which is favourable to great achievements in conceptual sharpness, theoretical consistency, and logical conclusiveness. (1991: 326)

According to Munch, it is the extraordinarily unattached social position of German social theorists that has allowed them to understand more clearly than any others the contradictions of modernity and, thus, to theorize in dialectical terms.

From my perspective, Munch's thumb-nail descriptions of French and English thought are not merely simplistic in themselves but seriously out of date. One may note, for example, Albrow's own presentation of England in the same volume. Albrow contrasts the class-oriented discipline of the 1950s and early 1960s, in which sociology was to "put to good use in creating a just society" (Albrow 1994: 83) in the service of "democratic socialist planning" (86), with "the [later] 1960s and 1970s", in which "British sociology became a battle field



derlying logic of Munch's reasoning, and on its pejorative, and simplistic, understanding of American life and thought. For if the "nation" is seen as the basic shaper of ideas, stereotypes and simplifications of national life and thought will follow in due course, and international intellectual conflicts will quickly be reduced to hegemonic struggles for national domination.

These reductive and distorting implications of Munch's approach are even more plainly to be seen in the 1991 essay from which his more recent effort is directly drawn. In the first six pages of this earlier effort to explain the fates of European and American sociology, Munch employs the word "domination" seventeen times, describing the relationship between the two traditions in a harsh and sometimes even brutal way. For example, rather than speaking about Parsons' and Merton's "assimilation" of European ideas in the late 1930s, as he does in the 1994 version, Munch writes here that "sociology was taken over by the Americans after World War II" (314). This language suggests a hijacking, even an act of force. Indeed, it is war, not ideas, to which Munch points has the major cause. "The United States dominant [sociological] position", he writes, "was settled after World War II"<sup>9</sup>. True, Munch acknowledges

for differing theoretical perspectives", from French structuralism to Foucault, ethnomethodology and deconstruction. As for British sociology in the 1980s, an acute French observer (Herpin 1993) has recently noted that, far from endorsing a traditional, hierarchical, class-oriented sense of the world, its most distinctive contribution has been the construction of a sociological post-modernism.

Munch's observations about French social theory appear to be similarly anachronistic. Despite the fact that Bourdieu remains that nation's dominant sociologue, the movement in French sociology over the last decade has been away from hierarchy and power formations to a focus on actors (Boudon and Touraine), pragmatic action (Latour) and speech acts (Boltanski and Thevenot), strategic and innovative organizational actions (Friedberg), and collective action (Chazel 1994a). For an extremely interesting interpretation of these tendencies, an interpretation that is itself marked by the rational action approach, see Chazel 1994b.

<sup>9</sup> Even in its own nation-centric terms, this statement is not historically accurate. It was actually migration, not war, that helped facilitate the enormous expansion of knowledge that American academic establishments generated in the postwar era, and by far the largest part of this outflow occurred in the 1930s. This intellectual migration, in other words, was not something that waited upon the war's outcome in 1945. One might even say, in fact, that this enormous shift was not provoked primarily by the war. It was not America's postwar domination of Europe but the domination and violence exercised by many pre-war European governments against their own citizens that facilitated

that, in the immediate sense, America's "better organized academic system" was responsible for this reversal of fortunes. But even this passing acknowledgment of institutional factors is immediately qualified, for Munch gratuitously recalls that, after all, such an organized approach to the academic "system embodied Humboldt's idea of integrating research and teaching". He goes on to subordinate institutional causes to national in a much more direct way. America's more efficient academic system only "began to dominate the world", he insists, "during the period that coincided with the political domination of the new [American] superpower in the Western world, its economic expansion in the world economy, and its leadership in forging major international associations". America's intellectual influence, in short, was created by "American hegemony". It was because of this exercise in power, because of American national domination, that European sociology submitted to American sociology's intellectual force.

Words are not neutral. Domination is not a pretty term and an argument that repeatedly employs it tells us something about its evaluative aim. "Domination" is connotative, not merely denotative, and it is the operative trope Munch employs to define the America/Europe relationship. In semantic terms, this trope is highly important, for it creates a metonymic relationship – a relationship of proximity – between America's coercive power and Europe's vulnerability, on the one hand, and the negatively charged dichotomies that Munch has employed to compare American and European social structure and culture, on the other. I demonstrated above how Munch constituted "America" and "Europe" by making use of the well worn but still useful rhetorical package of "negative modernity" – homogeneity, standardization, the end of the extraordinary. In the 1991 article he directly links this symbolic package with the exercise of America's dominating force. This allows Munch to pull out all the metonymic and metaphorical stops.

what H. Stuart Hughes called "the sea change" in the intellectual and scientific relationship of America and Europe.

In his emphasis on the second World War as providing the basis for American domination, Munch almost seems to imply that America was waging war against "Europe". One must be more precise, however. This war was fought by America with two important European allies, Britain and the Soviet Union, and it was waged, not against Europe but against German, Italian, and Japanese fascism.

Not content with speaking of the theoretical homogeneity of functionalism as reflecting American individualism and its consensus-forming ways, in the 1991 piece Munch adventitiously tacks on the equally spurious issues of religion, ethnicity, and race. Referring to "the homogeneity of the American, middle-class, WASP self-image" (316), he argues that American theory sterilized the heterogeneity of European thought because of the ethnic, racial, and religious domination that the white race of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and its ideological spokesmen, imposed upon American life. Via this expansion of profane associations, Munch's analogic argument against American social theory becomes still more elaborate and flexible. For example, he can add a new twist to his antagonistic reconstruction of Parsons' work. Parsons' thinking deteriorated after 1937, he here asserts, not only because Parsons' effort to build a systematic social theory separated him from the classical European sources (the reasons he mentioned in 1994, which I discussed above), but also because, as Parsons grew older, he increasingly accepted the WASP ideology that portrayed America as a homogeneous society<sup>10</sup>. The metonymic relationship between domination and homogeneity, then, allows Munch to pollute Parsonian functionalism in a deeper going, more politically correct way. He can argue that Parsons' increasingly naive, nationalistic, and self-serving credulity – after all, Munch asks, wasn't Parsons himself a WASP? – pushed him ever further from the heterogeneity and variety of genuine European thought. Here is yet another example of how Munch substitutes nation-based explanations not only for other kinds of institutional accounts but for an examination of internally generated intellectual ideas. If this new, nationally oriented approach is correct, there is no need to ask whether changes in Parsons' work reflected shifting ideas about action

<sup>10</sup> In empirical terms, this description has no validity. Although Parsons was perhaps more politically "progressive" in the 1930's and 1940s, his writings of this period that concern America demonstrate little if any systematic attention to what today would be called problems of difference, i.e., the relationship between majority and minority ethnicity, race, religion, or gender. Only in the 1960s, in fact, did Parsons turn his theoretical attention to such issues in their American context, a new focus that had such far reaching theoretical results, e.g., his ethnic-racial-religious transformation of Marshall's model of citizenship in the 1965 essay, "Full Citizenship for the Negro American". In this essay, furthermore, Parsons explicitly rejected homogeneity and assimilation as goals for integration, introducing instead his concept of inclusion.

and order, e.g., whether his incorporation of Freud rather than Mead into his 1940s social-psychology produced a less voluntaristic theory<sup>11</sup>. Munch is producing here, not just a new explanation for the demise of functionalism and the poverty of American social theory, but a broadly “revisionist narrative” that rewrites the actual history of American/European confrontations over religion, ethnicity, and race<sup>12</sup>. To condemn America for domination in the name of primordial purity reverses some of the key facts of twentieth century history, and before. Was it not the continental European and particularly the German failure to contain ethnic, racial, and religious heterogeneity – a social failure deeply etched in German social thought (Joas) – that actually triggered the second World War and, with it, crimes that the word “domination” scarcely begins to describe? This is not to deny America’s own history of heinous racial exploitation and continuing prejudice. Yet, how can American social thought be singled out and identified with ethnic homogeneity and racial domination when it was post-war American sociology that virtually created the self-critical empirical and theoretical fields of ethnic and race sociology, and postmodern American social theory that has been a principal creator of the post-integrationist argument for multicultural societies? It does not seem plausible to me that a German sociologist as liberal and as tolerant as Richard Munch would attack American racial, religious, and ethnic homogeneity on the grounds that it destroyed the commitment to heterogeneity that flourished in European social thought before World War II!<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> To focus on the effects of this particular shift, moreover, would have the added disadvantage of casting doubt on Munch’s thesis that, as Parsons’ theory matured, his thought moved “away from Europe”. One can say, I think, that Freud, a European, was the single most important theoretical influence on Parsons in the fifteen years following *Structure*.

<sup>12</sup> Donald N. Levine brought this term to my attention. See his recently writings on this topic.

<sup>13</sup> This paragraph raises the unavoidable question of whether Munch’s unabashedly positive reading of the present and past of European social theory, and of German social theory in particular, can hope to come to terms with the dark events of the twentieth century, events which centered in Europe. It seems worthy of remark that, in the 23 pages of his 1991 article, Munch devotes only one paragraph to this dark side, which he describes as “the tragedy of German idealism” (1991: 327). In the 21 pages of his 1994 article, one can find only two such sentences. In these discussions, Munch acknowledges that there is, or at least was, a dark side of German thought. He argues, however, that this dark side, which he relates to the German need to find a way of

In this more systematic and elaborate discussion of American social theory, Munch analyzes the micro and macro rebellion waged by American theorists against functionalism without acknowledging, as he did in his 1994 piece, that they drew, not only upon European thought, but also "upon genuine American sources" (1994: 46). While even the later admission by no means acknowledges the possibility of universalism, it does allow the post-Parsonian generation of American social theorists to maintain some intellectual self-respect, suggesting that in their work one can find at least some internally generated, original, and nonderivative thought. In the longer, 1991 version of his argument, by contrast, Munch makes no reference to specifically American thought in anything other than a pejorative sense. Rather than describing Homans as having "revitalized the economic theory of neo-classical thought" (*ibid.*), Homans here is said to have "reestablished ties with European economic theory" (1991: 317). Rather than suggesting that Blumer "revitalized American pragmatism by developing symbolic interactionism from Mead's work" (1994:46), Munch here writes that "Blumer reestablished links to German hermeneutics via his interpretation of Head" (1991:317), adding that "Garfinkel did the same" by turning to "Schutz's German-based phenomenology" (*ibid.*). Even Munch's tendentious argument that the American-led micro and macro revival failed because it could not embrace heterogeneity becomes much more crude in tone. These theorists failed, he suggests here, because they "committed the common American error of taking the United States to be the world" (*ibid.*).

Such "ethnocentrism" (*ibid.*) not only has ruined American

synthesizing society's contradictions, was an inevitable offshoot of the positive side, which so brilliantly emphasized contradictions and the need for dialectical thought: "It is the tragedy of German social theory that its insights into the contradictory nature of modernity had to produce such unrelenting searches for synthesis which helped to establish the most extreme forms of totalitarianism in human history" (1994: 50, *italics added*). The European and world tragedies triggered by the thought and action of some of Germany's leading figures, in other words, did not evolve from any fundamentally negative tendencies in German intellectual life but rather emerged as unintended consequences of its admirable traits. In Munch's account, such errors can only appear trivial in comparison with the endemic faults he identifies in American social theory, i.e., its ingrained ignorance, its intellectual shallowness, and the ethnocentric distortion created by the country's practices of racial, religious, and ethnic domination.

sociology but evidently has also had terrible effects on the world. Munch here wheels into place a new metaphorical weapon: the long-standing tropes representing America as Mammon, the grisly embodiment of capitalist degradation and greed. As compared with the “rather more artistic works written by European sociologists”, American sociology is anti-aesthetical and materialistic. Munch reiterates his familiar complaint that in America “levelling” allows “no place for the exceptional”, that in America anything which “does not comply with established standards has no chance of surviving, and that applies not only to works that fall below the standards, but also to those that rise above them” (318). The banality of American society, however, is here attributed less to general American cultural and social traits than to the effects of its capitalist life. Munch constructs an elaborate and highly polluting analogy between America’s sociology and its technological economy. He begins with the claim that “the American Journal of Sociology and the American Sociological Review feed sociologists all over the world with completely standardized and quality-approved products” (ibid.). On this basis, he argues that America has become the McDonald’s of world sociology: its “effect on world sociology is the same as that of McDonald’s worldwide supply of the same quality-approved hamburger for the world economy” (ibid.). Indeed, “we can speak of the McDonaldization of world sociology”, Munch suggests, as “originating from the highly professionalized and standardized work produced by American sociology departments”.

The average American sociologist works like an employee of McDonald’s: a team-worker who is dedicated to producing one hamburger-like article, article after another, according to the same quality standards.

American sociology is not merely being analogized with economic relations, it is actually being equated with them. Munch suggests that it is simply another form of highly efficient, imperialistic capitalist production, one that produces articles instead of hamburgers. This rhetorical deflation reaches its nadir when Munch speaks about what he regards as the newest trend in America theory, namely the “ascendancy” of “the economic paradigm of rational choice theory” to “an increasingly dominant position.”

The economic paradigm of rational choice theory expresses overtly what otherwise hovers in the background of the competing

paradigms of conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology in American sociology: the view that society is composed of the interactions of free individuals and that interaction is an economic transaction. (p. 319)

This assertion may be compelling in terms of cultural logic but it is empirically wrong. In the first place, rational choice is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a dominant perspective in American sociological theory. It has not become so, moreover, precisely because the competing micro approaches of symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology are anything but glosses on economic exchange. To the contrary, from the very beginning these microsociologies have been constructed in opposition to instrumental reason, placing the expressive and moral self at the center of their theoretical models. Indeed, if one examines American social theory from functionalism to micro-sociology and cultural studies, one can make a compelling argument that runs directly contrary to the one offered by Munch. From the community and organizational studies that began with Gans and Suttles and continues through the "new institutionalism" of Myers, to the new sociology of emotions exemplified in writers like Hochschild and Katz, to the analyses of conversation initiated by Sacks and Schegloff, one can see how actor centered studies of order have been placed in the service of perspectives on action that emphasize emotional capacities and moral judgment. This emphasis is also visible in developments outside the discipline of sociology narrowly conceived, from the Geertzian revolution in symbolic anthropology to the revival of American moral philosophy, which stretches from Rawl's neo-Kantian work to the communitarian thinking of Walzer and the pragmatism of Rorty. Taylor, very much the Anglo-American intellectual, stands today at the philosophical center of the neoAristotelian critique of Kantian proceduralism represented by Habermas, among others, a critique that has so powerfully argued for a new focus on the ideographic and cultural in contemporary theory<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> While the present essay is not the place to present an alternative reading, this paragraph begins to indicate how Munch fundamentally misreads not only the past but the present tendencies in American sociology, both empirical and theoretical. This is a fundamental problem for him, of course, because the success of his nation-based sociology of knowledge depends on the correspondence between "society" as he has depicted it and the ideational formations which he supposes are produced by it.

There are a number of other, more institutionally directed criticisms that

In my view, Munch misunderstands not only the thrust of contemporary American ideas but the relationship between American and European thought. If postwar American social scientists have often been guilty of a presentist chauvinism that neglects the importance of European theoretical and empirical work, Munch and some of the other contributors to this debate are guilty of an equally one-sided Eurochauvinism. There is no doubt, of course, that American developments have been highly stimulated by classical and contemporary European ideas. Yet neither is there any doubt that virtually every strand of contemporary European sociological theory builds in fundamental ways upon American postwar thought. Boudon would be unthinkable without the influence of Homans, Blau, Merton, and Coleman. Bourdieu formed his post-1972 praxis theory as much from his encounter with Goffman and Garfinkel as from anything else. Giddens' structuration theory is deeply dependent on the pragmatist and interactionist American traditions. As for Habermas and Luhmann, the representative cases for Munch's claims about the superiority of contemporary German thought, their ideas could be read as efforts to

could be raised in this regard. The two journals that Munch cites – the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) and *American Sociological Review* (ASR) as perfect representations of American sociology, though indeed highly prestigious, are regarded as marginal by most of the leading figures in both empirical and theoretical fields. Almost entirely devoted to highly quantitative work, those who practice ethnographic and interpretative sociology – certainly one of the premier empirical contributions that Americans have made to the discipline – publish elsewhere, in journals ranging from *Ethnography* to *Symbolic Interaction* to *Public Culture*. Specialists in macro sociology, whether theoretical, historical, or comparative, rarely have published in either the AJS or ASR, preferring outlets like (*Comparative Studies in History and Theory*), *Theory and Society*, *Sociological Theory*. In more specialized areas one also finds important journals, for example, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Sociology of Education*, and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. There is also a range of good to adequate regional journals, the best of which are *Sociological Quarterly* and *Sociological Forum*. The *Annual Review of Sociology* has also been an important outlet for some major theoretical pieces. It must be emphasized that most of the major statements in empirical and theoretical fields alike are made in book form and, indeed, it is primarily through the translation of these texts, and their distribution in English, that American sociology is known around the world today. In other words, despite the often narrowly restricted, pseudo-scientific quality of American sociology's two "leading journals," when considered as a discipline one finds little of standardization and uniformity that Munch has described. In empirical terms, indeed, what Munch has reproduced seems less an empirical description of American sociology than a series of interlayered stereotypes and cultural clichés.



"Europeanize" Parsons if this nation-based nomenclature were acceptable, which I believe it is not. Despite the fact that Luhmann has made original and important theoretical innovations, his thought stands firmly upon Parsons' in the most elaborate and apparent ways. Habermas' later critical theory of communicative action builds upon Luhmann and in many ways "corrects" his systems technicism by drawing upon, and revising, the developmental cognitive and moral emphases of Parsons himself<sup>15</sup>. As for Munch, the very theoretical

It is perhaps some awareness of problems in this regard that led Munch, at the very end of his 1991 article, to introduce a *mea culpa* and a series of residual categories. That he does so in a reductionist, nation-based manner only reinforces the argument I have made here. He seeks to qualify his claim to realism, for example, by acknowledging, "what I have portrayed in this sketch is my personal, German view of what I see" (1991: 329). Implicitly acknowledging that there is, in fact, much greater variety in American sociology, and much more genuine interpenetration with the European field as well, he exclaims, "far be it from me to deny that there is any overlap between the outlined traditions of sociology [I have described], or to claim they completely cover what is going on in" (*ibid.*, 330). To explain what he has ignored, Munch suggests that modern processes of communication and exchange have actually created an "overlap" between national sociologies. For this reason, he acknowledges, "American sociology in purely geographic terms does not consist entirely of McDonaldised products". His point is not, however, to point to richer examples of the American sociological imagination but to claim that, in addition to its native, standardized fare, American sociology "also offers French, German, and Italian 'cuisine' to the specialists"! The writings of Moors, Skocpol, and Wallerstein are traced to German and British theories, for example. As for my own theoretical work, Munch acknowledges that "there are also American sociologists of the younger generation like Alexander who have again drawn upon the diverse sources of European social theory". Munch condescendingly refers to these glaring empirical anomalies as "European transplants," claiming that they are "not genuine elements of American sociology". He patronizes such work, finally, by predicting that "the highly professionalized American system of sociology will inevitably exert its standardizing effects on the European implants".

<sup>15</sup> Cf., the judgment by Tominaga, a leading Japanese theorist thoroughly at home in both contemporary American and German thought: "After his death in 1979, Parsons' theories were developed further by European sociologists such as Habermas and Luhmann"; (Tominaga 1994: 206). More generally, see the judgment of Scaff, who speaks (1994: 217) of the "reciprocal historical and social relations that have bound together the fate of Europe and American in a working partnership".

[Weber's] notion of "social action" was removed from its original 'social economy' context and elaborated by Talcott Parsons in the 1930s and 1940s as a general, unified 'theory' of social action. Based on a rereading and synthesis ... of several European classics ... Parsons offered an influential schema that developed a life of its own as a part of contemporary disciplinary history. For

framework he draws upon to analyze American and European sociology represents a variation, albeit an innovative one, on the interchange model that organizes Parsons' later work. This is not even to mention, of course, the high degree of interpenetration that exists among European and American sociologies across a large number of more specialized subfields, including social problems, social movements, mobility, historical and comparative sociology, religion, organizations, media, gender, and politics.

Albrow's (1994: 89) suggestion that between European and American sociologies there is "limited exchange and enduring tension" appears, then, to be quite as mistaken as Munch's claims for the utterly derivative quality of American work. Scaff's (1994: 215) observation that, since 1945, "the flow of ideas and personnel in both directions has created a disciplinary matrix" gets much closer to the truth. Whether one considers networks or ideas, empirical fields or general theories, one sees an extraordinary efflorescence of international communication between European and American sociology. One may ask, in fact, whether it is tenable any longer even to speak of such a bounded entity as "European" or "American" sociology<sup>16</sup>. I have argued here, indeed, that one confidently can do so only if one is willing to subsume ideation to social structure, to replace theoretical with geopolitical thinking, and to understand nations or regions themselves in an unrealistically isolated, culturally distinct, and internally homogeneous way.

the post-Second World War European generation then to produce in Niklas Luhmann a serious rereading of Parsons' ideas serves to reemphasize the reciprocal dynamics of the [Europe/America] exchange. Or even in the case of Jurgen Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, a work emerging from a quite different 'critical' philosophical tradition, the reintegration and critique of Weberian and Parsonian themes offers a timely reminder of the extent to which European and American thinkers from quite generations and orientations have relied on a common core of knowledge". (Scaff 1994: 214)

<sup>16</sup> See Scaff:

There is surely sociology in different guises practiced in Europe, as there is in America and elsewhere, just as there is sociology produced by Europeans, Americans and others. But a European sociology is another possibility altogether. What can we or should we mean by such a category? What can such a claim imply? What, indeed, does it mean to speak of "Europe" in relation to a scientific discipline? (1994: 218, original italics)

This is especially true, according to Scaff, because in the study of society "so little agreement on fundamentals laws prevails even in the most closely bound communities of science" (ibid.).

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