overtly political. These studies often identify an interest at work. It is important to realize that interests can be generated internally, within the workings of the social system of science itself. The sociology of knowledge carries no prior commitment to what is sometimes called 'externalism', rather than 'internalism', in its methods. The richness of this empirical material precludes summary here, but it spans early Royal Society work on the air pump, the attractions of the corpuscular philosophy, nineteenth-century anatomy and evolutionary theory, cellular biology, geological controversies, non-Euclidean geometry, astronomical discoveries, statistical techniques, genetic theory, and modern particle physics.

Sadly, many of the critical discussions of the sociology of knowledge are blighted by ill-informed and hostile stereotypes. These sustain a number of oft-repeated arguments that are widely taken to discredit the enterprise. For example, the sociology of knowledge is said to be 'self-refuting'. The charge begs the question, because it simply takes for granted the premises of the weak programme: that causal determination equals error or distortion. Again, a distinction is often drawn between the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification'. Is not the sociologist concerned with the origin of beliefs, and is that not irrelevant to their epistemological status? In fact, sociologists have little to offer on the origin of ideas, but much to say about their evaluation and subsequent elaboration; so the criticism gets things the wrong way round. Nor, as is often alleged, need the sociology of knowledge derive from, or issue in, a negative stance towards the beliefs under study, as if the only purpose were to 'unmask'. To exhibit, the social construction of science is no more to criticize it than studying the physiology of the eye is to criticize vision.

See also: FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY; FOUCAULT, M.; NATURALISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

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DAVID BLOOR

SOCIOLOGY, THEORIES OF

Throughout the history of sociology, three types of theorizing have co-existed, sometimes uneasily. 'The-

ories of' provide abstract models of empirical processes; they function both as guides for sociological research and as sources for covering laws whose falsification or validation is intended to provide the basis for a cumulative science. 'Presuppositional studies' abstract away from particular empirical processes, seeking instead to articulate the fundamental properties of social action and order; meta-methodological warrants for the scientific investigation of societies; and normative foundations for moral evaluations of contemporary social life. 'Hermeneutical theory' addresses these basic sociological questions more indirectly, by interpreting the meanings and intentions of classical texts.

The relation between these three forms of theorizing varies historically. In the post-war period, under the institutional and intellectual influence of US sociologists like Parsons and Merton, presuppositional and hermeneutical issues seemed to be settled; 'theories of' proliferated and prospects seemed bright for a cumulative, theoretically-organized science of society. Subsequent social and intellectual developments undermined this brief period of relative consensus. In the midst of the crises of the 1960s and 1970s, presuppositional and hermeneutical studies gained much greater importance, and became increasingly disarticulated from empirical 'theories of'. Confronting the prospect of growing fragmentation, in the late 1970s and early 1980s there appeared a series of ambitious, synthetical works that sought to reground the discipline by providing coherent examples of how the different forms of sociological theory could once again be intertwined. While widely read inside and outside the discipline, these efforts failed in their foundational ambitions.

As a result of this failure, over the last decade sociological theory has had diminishing influence both inside the discipline and without. Inside social science, economic and anthropological theories have been much more influential. In the broader intellectual arena, the most important presuppositional and hermeneutical debates have occurred in philosophy and literary studies. Sociological theorists are now participating in these extra-disciplinary debates even as they have returned to the task of developing 'theories of' particular institutional domains. The future of specifically sociological theory depends on reviving coherent relationships between these different theoretical domains.

1 **The forms of sociological theory**
2 **Sociological theory in the post-war world**
3 **Sociological theory today**
4 **Prospects**

1 The forms of sociological theory

Theories of. Following what is taken to be the natural science approach, theorists have produced sets of highly general causal or descriptive propositions aimed at modelling empirical processes (Stinchcombe 1968). These models have had a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are guides to more specific empirical studies of particular social processes. On the other hand, they are designed to produce putative covering laws which such particular empirical studies will falsify or validate.

Max Weber's famous essay on bureaucracy can be viewed as providing a classic example of theorizing along these lines. Weber presented a series of propositions about the structure and processes of bureaucratic authority that has provided the central reference for empirical studies, complementary elaborations, and competing general models in the sociological study of organizations over the last fifty years. In an effort to test the model's insistence on rationality, formal rules and hierarchical command, for example studies emerged that emphasized informal organization and decentralized, problem-oriented decision making; the limited, primarily short-term rationality of bureaucratic action; and even the ceremonial, merely ritualistic qualities of bureaucratic processes. Yet, because Weber's original essay has been accepted as an empirically grounded 'theory of', the field of organizational studies has organized and conceptualized itself as being guided by an accumulative, increasingly elaborated, essentially progressive theoretical model.

While few theoretical models have exercised comparable hegemony, in many empirical sub-fields of sociology one can find 'theories of' that have played similar roles for more limited periods of time.

Presuppositional studies. Rather than developing empirical generalizations to guide studies or provide covering laws, another kind of theoretical effort generalizes away from particular empirical realms to consider fundamental issues that are held to undergird them (Alexander 1982).

Some of these theoretical efforts discuss issues like action and order: is social action practical and goal-oriented or is it normatively guided and oriented by aesthetic, emotional, or moral concerns? Does the patterned nature of social activity derive from controls exercised over individuals by institutions, whether coercive or moral, or does it emerge from pragmatic negotiations between actors as they spontaneously confront the unpredictable contingencies of everyday life?

Some presuppositional studies address more meta-methodological issues: should sociology be modelled

after the nomological sciences that aim at producing covering laws and abstract away from the particular and idiographic, or should it be more hermeneutical and aim at producing rich ethnographic interpretations of particular institutions and events?

Other presuppositional studies take the form of critical ideological and moral inquiry: is capitalism an oppressive social system? Is modernity healthy? What are the social obligations of scientists when they are faced with injustice or abuse?

If we consider the relationship of presuppositional studies to the earlier example of bureaucracy, we find an illuminating point of contrast with the 'theories of' approach. Rather than arguing on the basis of empirical studies that informal ties exist alongside formal rules, presuppositional theorists have argued that, because emotion is central to action and cooperation basic to order, bureaucratic institutions simply cannot be conceived or explained in the way Weber proposed. Arguing that Weber was, in fact, generalizing from only distinctively Prussian authority structures rather than from bureaucratic organizations as such, other presuppositional theorists have pushed for a case-study approach to organizations in different countries and different historical milieu. Others, focusing on the moral dimension, have condemned both the idea and the practice of bureaucratic organization for ignoring the possibility of democratic self-regulation.

Hermeneutical. 'Theories of' and presuppositional studies are highly abstract enterprises, each broaching the question 'what is society?' in a direct way. By contrast, the third form of sociological theorizing is not abstracting but idiographic and concrete. Hermeneutical theory seeks to explain human society by explicating, through interpretive argument, the meaning of sociological texts whose consequentiality has given them a classical status (Levine 1995).

These textual efforts are neither historical nor literary. Rather than being primarily directed to questions of intellectual and social context or to questions of genre and aesthetic form, they engage the hermeneutical method to investigate the traditional questions of sociology, albeit in an indirect and idiographic rather than direct and abstracting manner. By reinterpreting canonical texts, hermeneutical readings challenge extant theories and empirical studies that derive their authority from the covering laws or the presuppositions espoused by these classics. By producing new and authoritative versions of canonical texts, the hermeneutical ambition is to reorient theoretical and empirical practice.

Once again, Weber's organizational studies provide an illustration. Arguing that Parsons' translation of Weber's term, *Herrschaft*, as 'imperative coordination' implied that Weber intended a consensual rather than coercive model of authority, hermeneutical theorists have suggested that 'domination' is closer to the meaning Weber intended (Roth 1968). This translation challenge has, in fact, been part of the broader theoretical debate between functionalist and conflict-oriented 'theories of' various institutional realms (see FUNCTIONALISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCE). Within the specific field of organizational studies, hermeneutical students of Weber's corpus have argued that he envisaged his essay on bureaucracy primarily as a historical and comparative explanation of the development of Western authority structures over time rather than as an effort to model the processes involved in contemporary organizations as such. Making connections to the emphases on charisma and morality in Weber's other historical studies, these hermeneutical theorists have, indirectly, tried to reframe his original bureaucracy model as one that can incorporate without contradiction the informal, emotional, and normative elements of organizational life.

Very similar kinds of hermeneutical arguments have been made in regard to the classical writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Parsons. Through translations and explications of his earlier writings, Marx has been reinterpreted as being more concerned with the qualitative, cultural, and psychological problems of capitalism than with the quantitative and economic. By exposing the increasing influence of religion in Durkheim's later and posthumously published work, Durkheim has been reinterpreted as aiming to produce a symbolic rather than morphological sociology. By emphasizing the disjuncture between the early and the later Parsons, hermeneutical theorists have indirectly argued against systems theory and in support of more pragmatic presuppositions about action and order (see SYSTEMS THEORY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE §§1–2).

While these three forms of theoretical activity in sociology represent distinct and long-standing traditions, each of them has been the object of polemical challenges from champions of the other types. In practice, however, the three types have often interpenetrated one another. Thus, rather than taking as data only empirical studies, 'theories of' particular institutions have often justified their abstract models by making textual interpretations, challenging or elaborating classical works that earlier sought to explain the same institution. Presuppositional studies, for their part, are often deeply implicated in evaluative statements about the moral worth of different approaches to action and order. Similarly, ideological debates are replete with explanatory

claims about the empirical causes and effects of particular institutions.

The classical example of such a blurred genre is Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), perhaps the single most influential theoretical work of post-war sociology. Parsons presented the work primarily as a hermeneutical one, describing it as an investigation of the writings of a group of important European social thinkers, Pareto, Marshall, Durkheim, and Weber. In the lengthy first section of his work, however, Parsons developed a series of highly abstract presuppositional arguments; while ostensibly provided to facilitate his subsequent textual interpretation, this discussion became a fundamental, *sui generis* theoretical argument in itself. Throughout his subsequent exegetical discussions, Parsons also produced pointedly polemical 'theories of', using his textual interpretations to challenge existing empirical models of various institutions.

2 Sociological theory in the post-war world

While the three forms of sociological theorizing have, indeed, always interpenetrated in significant ways, over time there have been remarkable shifts in the relative importance of each genre in the theoretical field. These changes are caused not only by intellectual developments within sociology but also by developments outside of it, by shifts in the intellectual life of society and in the institutions of society itself. These shifts have had significant effects on the relation of sociological theory to theory in other social scientific disciplines and to theoretical efforts in philosophy and aesthetics.

Despite the fundamental and continuing role of theories produced by classical sociological theorists – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Mead – the story line of 'modern' sociological theory begins in 1937 with the publication of Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*. Despite its intrinsic intellectual power, this blurred genre made virtually no impact at the time. Under the impact of the Great Depression and massive social movements on the Left and Right, US and European sociology was highly fragmented. No single institutional or intellectual centre dominated, and within each sociological community radically divergent theories struggled for recognition. In the wake of the world-historical realignment that followed the Second World War, the social and intellectual situation was fundamentally changed. While European theorizing retained its distinctive forms and practices, the social stability, institutional power, and ideological hegemony of the USA allowed it to emerge as the arbiter of sociology in its professionalized, disciplinary form.

In this new context, Parsons emerged as the dominant theorist of his time. A new generation of sociologists came to consider his (1937) work as having established the canonical foundations of a distinctively modern sociological theory. While this theory was termed 'structural-functionalism', it might more accurately be considered a version of Kantianism (Munch 1981). Rather than using biological models to establish an organicist model of society, Parsons actually devoted his efforts to describing the institutional, psychological, and cultural foundations of differentiated and pluralistic societies that could process economic, political, religious, and ethnic conflicts in democratic, fundamentally cooperative ways (Turner and Holton 1986). Within this Parsonian framework, during the 1950s and early 1960s 'theories of' dominated other types of theoretical practice, and sociology increasingly was viewed as a maturing and cumulative science of society. This optimistic scientism was encouraged by the impression that the post-war explosion of large scale quantitative empirical studies were conducted within the rubric of functionalist thought, an illusion encouraged by the institutionally-oriented, 'middle level' functionalist models of Parsons' discipline (Merton 1967).

Because of its high degree of internal consensus, its cumulative character, and its high degree of intellectual creativity, in the post-war period US sociological theory achieved a high level of influence, both inside the discipline of sociology and outside. Historians, political scientists, and anthropologists, for example, drew heavily upon the premises of modernization theory, which was the historical foundation of Kantian functionalism. Literary critics drew upon sociological theory to investigate the origins of modern genres. While philosophy remained largely in the analytical mode, more historical and socially-oriented philosophical efforts also drew upon these sociological ideas.

The social and intellectual upheavals that rocked Western societies between the mid 1960s and the 1970s had the effect of displacing not only Kantian functionalism but the approach that emphasized 'theories of'. Pragmatic, phenomenological, and behaviouristic traditions re-emerged as 'micro-sociological theories', powerfully challenging Parsonian theory in various domains (Homans 1961; Garfinkel 1967). Conflict theories and Marxism became increasingly influential, constituting 'macro' challenges to functionalism's optimistic and relatively consensual social models (Collins 1975). As both the models and the canon established by Parsons were put to the test,

sociological theorists became increasingly involved in presuppositional and hermeneutical studies (see PRAGMATISM; BEHAVIOURISM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES).

By the end of the 1970s, Parsons' challengers had triumphed. Sociology was proclaimed a 'multi-paradigmatic' field which, once again, was devoid of either an institutional or theoretical centre. Paradoxically, even as this dramatic sea change reached its climax, the historical context facilitating it dramatically changed. The waves of anti-Establishment protests subsided, backlash movements against them asserted increasing strength, and Western societies began to experience conservative retrenchments. During the same period, state-communist societies began to crumble under their own weight.

These shifts placed sociological theory in a precarious position, even when its prestige was at its greatest height. Responding to the de-centred situation of sociology and to the broader sense of imminent transition in the intellectual and social world at large, the most influential theoretical works that emerged at this time were marked by their refusal to endorse the notion of pluralistic and relativistic social science. To the contrary, these highly ambitious theoretical efforts stepped outside their respective traditions and created grand syntheses (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Habermas 1984; Alexander 1982; Collins 1975). Despite marked differences, they had a common aim: to found a new era of intellectual cooperation and social progress in a post-positivistic frame. Indeed, with their combination of hermeneutical, presuppositional, and explanatory ambitions, these efforts closely resembled Parsons' earlier effort to overcome intellectual and social fragmentation in 1937.

But the post-war world that had allowed Parsons' earlier effort to succeed had been dramatically and fundamentally changed. Despite the fact that these ambitiously synthetical works were widely read and admired both inside and outside the discipline of sociology, they turned out to have brought the curtain down on an era rather than ushering in a new one. In a *fin-de-siècle* world torn between deeply pessimistic moods of fragmentation and decline and wildly optimistic hopes of utopian rebirth, none of these synthetic efforts to recreate a new version of Neo-Kantian sociological theory succeeded in gaining hegemony or even in creating traditions that could convincingly establish coherent new lines of theoretical and empirical work.

3 Sociological theory today

The failure of these synthetic efforts, and the continuing impact of the social and intellectual conditions that gave rise to them, has given rise to developments that have had significant repercussions for sociological theory.

Self-identified 'sociological theorists' have been increasingly less able to exert influence over the explanatory models and canonical texts inside the discipline of sociology. Instead, sociological theory is now increasingly viewed merely as one sub-field among many, one devoted to hermeneutical reconstructions of the origins of classical texts, on the one hand, and to 'meta-theoretical' commentaries and arguments about presuppositions, on the other (Ritzer 1992). With the exception of the work of BOURDIEU, whose influence, while substantial, remains relatively limited, there exists at present no over-arching general theory that combines hermeneutical and presuppositional arguments with sociological 'theories of' various institutional spheres. While empirical sub-fields continue to be organized theoretically, and the three different types of sociological theorizing flourish within each, these discussions are hermetically cut off from the more generalized theoretical debates in the discipline at large.

Distinctively sociological theories have lost their influence *vis-à-vis* theorizing in other social scientific disciplines. This is demonstrated by two contradictory developments. The model of society as based upon exchanges between rational actors, derived from economics, has become an international cross-disciplinary tradition that already exercises a deep influence in political science and, increasingly, in sociology (Coleman 1990). At the same time, cultural models of symbolic action and ritual order, which emerged in anthropology (Geertz 1973), have had far-reaching theoretical and empirical effects in history and sociology.

The most influential presuppositional and hermeneutical studies, and even some of the most important theoretical discussions about the nature of contemporary societies (that is, 'theories of'), now occur outside the social sciences in philosophy and literary studies. Under the influence of Michel FOUCAULT and Jacques DERRIDA, deconstructionism and postmodernism have established an anti-universalist position that has had widespread repercussions throughout Western intellectual life, including the social sciences (Bauman 1995; Seidman 1991). In opposition to this position, Neo-Kantian theorizing about the possibilities for universalism and democracy has been rejuvenated under the influence of John RAWLS and Jürgen HABERMAS (§1) (Cohen and Arato 1992). Between these two poles there have emerged arguments for new forms of pluralistic, identity-based

democratic associations, arguments derived from Aristotle, Hegel, and US pragmatism and associated most significantly with the writings of Charles TAYLOR (§5), Richard RORTY, and Michael Walzer (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991; Warnke 1992).

4 Prospects

In considering the future development of sociological theory, it is important to observe two apparently contradictory developments within the work of those who participated in the creation of synthetic general theories in the 1980s. Leading sociological theorists are now participating in the broader philosophical, political, and literary debates outside of the discipline itself (Calhoun 1992). At the same time, they have also turned towards empirically-focused topics and are developing 'theories of' particular institutional spheres. Only if and when these very different kinds of practices can be brought back together (Mouzelis 1995) will sociological theory regain the coherence, vitality, and intellectual power that allowed it to exercise such wide influence in an earlier day.

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JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

SOCRATES (469–399 BC)

*Socrates, an Athenian Greek of the second half of the fifth century BC, wrote no philosophical works but was uniquely influential in the later history of philosophy. His philosophical interests were restricted to ethics and the conduct of life, topics which thereafter became central to philosophy. He discussed these in public places in Athens, sometimes with other prominent intellectuals or political leaders, sometimes with young men, who gathered round him in large numbers, and other admirers. Among these young men was Plato. Socrates' philosophical ideas and – equally important for his philosophical influence – his personality and methods as a 'teacher' were handed on to posterity in the 'dialogues' that several of his friends wrote after his death, depicting such discussions. Only those of Xenophon (*Memorabilia, Apology, Symposium*) and the early dialogues of Plato survive (for example* Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*). Later Platonic dialogues such as* Phaedo, Symposium *and* Republic *do not present the historical Socrates' ideas; the 'Socrates' appearing in them is a spokesman for Plato's own ideas.*

Socrates' discussions took the form of face-to-face interrogations of another person. Most often they concerned the nature of some moral virtue, such as courage or justice. Socrates asked what the respondent thought these qualities of mind and character amounted to, what their value was, how they were acquired. He would then test their ideas for logical consistency with other highly plausible general views about morality and goodness that the respondent also agreed to accept, once Socrates presented them. He succeeded in showing, to his satisfaction and that of the respondent and any bystanders, that the respondent's ideas were not consistent. By this practice of 'elenchus' or refutation he was able to prove that politicians and others who claimed to have 'wisdom' about human affairs in fact lacked it, and to draw attention to at least apparent errors in their thinking. He wanted to encourage them and others to think harder and to improve their ideas about the virtues and about how to conduct a good human life. He never argued directly for ideas of his own, but always questioned those of others. None the less, one can infer, from the questions he asks and his attitudes to the answers he receives, something about his own views.

Socrates was convinced that our souls – where virtues and vices are found – are vastly more important for our lives than our bodies or external circumstances. The quality of our souls determines the character of our lives, for better or for worse, much more than whether we are healthy or sick, or rich or poor. If we are to live well and happily, as he assumed we all want to do more than we want anything else, we must place the highest priority on the care of our souls. That means we must above all want to acquire the virtues, since they perfect our souls and enable them to direct our lives for the better. If only we could know what each of the virtues is we could then make an effort to obtain them. As to the nature of the virtues, Socrates seems to have held quite strict and, from the popular point of view, paradoxical views. Each virtue consists entirely in knowledge, of how it is best to act in some area of life, and why: additional 'emotional' aspects, such as the disciplining of our feelings and desires, he dismissed as of no importance. Weakness of will is not psychologically possible: if you act wrongly or badly, that is due to your ignorance of how you ought to act and why. He thought each of the apparently separate virtues amounts to the same single body of knowledge: the comprehensive knowledge of what is and is not good for a human being. Thus his quest was to acquire this single wisdom: all the particular virtues would follow automatically.

At the age of 70 Socrates was charged before an Athenian popular court with 'impiety' – with not believing in the Olympian gods and corrupting young men through his constant questioning of everything. He was found guilty and condemned to death. Plato's Apology, *where Socrates gives a passionate defence of his life and philosophy, is one of the classics of Western literature. For different groups of later Greek philosophers he was the model both of a sceptical inquirer who never claims to know the truth, and of a 'sage' who knows the whole truth about human life and the human good. Among modern philosophers, the interpretations of his innermost meaning given by Montaigne, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche are especially notable.*