

THEORETICAL SOCIOLOGY

A Concise Introduction to
Twelve Sociological Theories



JONATHAN H. TURNER

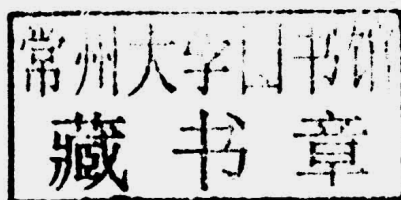


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Twelve Sociological Theories

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Theoretical Sociology

To the memory of my dear friend, Clara Dean, who in 1969 began typing all my manuscripts and who, at age 85, retired in 2010 from typing, only to die in 2012. I will forever be grateful to her friendship and incredible competence for over forty years in getting my manuscripts ready for publication.



About the Author

Jonathan H. Turner (PhD, Cornell University) is Distinguished Professor of sociology at the University of California, Riverside and University Professor for the University of California. The leading authority on sociological theory, Dr. Turner is the author of 38 influential books, which have been published in twelve different languages, as well as the author of many research articles in numerous journals and books.

Preface

There is surprisingly little consensus among sociologists about what theory is and what it is supposed to do for sociological analysis. For some, theory represents the way that science explains the empirical world. For others, it is simply an orienting perspective that can be used to describe events. For still others, theory is to be normative, advocating social arrangements that reduce oppression and inequality. All of these views of theory have been present since sociology's beginnings, and the arguments and debates among those holding one or the other of these views can become, to say the least, quite contentious. So, in writing a short introduction to sociological theory, it is difficult to know where to begin and end, given the controversy. I have sidestepped the controversy by outlining diverse approaches within twelve broad theoretical traditions. In some, scientific explanation is the dominant view; in others, a more descriptive view prevails; in still others, a critical view of the role of theorizing dominates; and in a few, two or all three visions of what theory should be can be found. My biases are toward scientific theorizing, where abstract laws and models that explain how the social universe operates are preferred. Yet, I have given fair coverage to the alternative approaches because, like it or not, they are part of what is called sociological theory today.

I have written many long books on theory, but I have tried something new here. I have—at least for me—written a short book that is still comprehensive but that highlights the key elements of a particular theoretical perspective and some of the important theorists working within a perspective. The goal has been to create a handbook that packs a lot of information into a small space, especially compared to the other large books on theory that I have written in the past. I originally thought of titling the book *Lectures on Theoretical Traditions* because the chapters have drawn upon my lecture notes, but I have also pulled important elements from my larger and longer books. The result, I hope, is a book that is useful in many different ways, such as a concise introduction to the range of theorizing in sociology, a convenient review of theory for those brushing upon sociological theorizing, a source of lectures for instructors, and a quick guide to those who do not know much about sociological theory and are just curious about what it is.

It was fun to write this book, and moreover, it was good for me—champion of theoretical tomes—to summarize in an abbreviated but a still robust manner.

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Theoretical Sociology Today

Controversy Over What Theoretical Sociology Can or Should Be

Sociology emerged as an explicit discipline in the early 1800s, although people have always thought about the universe around them, including the social universe of their own creation. Auguste Comte,¹ the titular founder of sociology, preferred the name social physics for the new discipline because, during his time, the notion of “physics” had not been usurped by the current discipline using this name. Physics back then meant “to study the nature of”; therefore, *social physics* was to be a scientific discipline devoted to studying the nature of the social universe created by people’s behaviors, interactions, and patterns of social organization. For Comte, explanations in science are developed through theory, and thus, sociological theory was to be the vehicle by which explanations of the social universe were to be achieved—just as is the case in physics and biology.

Since the label, *social physics*, had already been used by a Belgian statistician, Comte had to adopt the Latin-Greek hybrid label of *sociology*—a name that he did not like but had to accept. From the very beginning, the view of sociology as an explanatory science, like any natural science, was questioned by many. Today, many still do not believe that sociology can be a natural science, and hence, theoretical sociology cannot offer explanations like those in the “hard” sciences. For these critics, humans have the capacity to change the very nature of their universe, with the result that there can be no universal laws about social dynamics like those in physics or even biology. Moreover, so much of what happens in history is by chance events converging to produce unpredictable outcomes. And so, at best, sociological theory can describe for a time the social universe, but as this universe changes its fundamental character, old theories must give way to new theories, which will also eventually become obsolete as humans remake their universe.

For others, whether or not sociology can be a science, it must first of all be critical of social conditions where oppression and inequality prevail. Sociology should emphasize unjust social conditions and propose liberating alternatives; and for many who make this argument, the scientific pretension of some in the discipline is part of the problem—a theme that has existed in sociology from its first moments as a new discipline.

¹Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, three volumes. Condensed and translated by H. Martineau (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896, originally published in serial form in French between 1830 and 1842).

For still others, theoretical sociology should be seen as conceptual schemes that allow sociologists to describe important social processes, at least for a time until these processes change fundamentally. Sociology provides, in essence, a set of eyeglasses for seeing reality and, equally significant, for understanding this reality at a given time and place.

There are many variants on these views of what theoretical sociology can, and should, be. Given this lack of consensus—and indeed, outright hostility among some epistemological camps—it becomes difficult to know what to include in a book on theory, and particularly in a short book like this one. My biases, as are well known, lean toward a view of theory as scientific, but I would be foolish to assume that others all feel the same way. As a result, I have written this book to emphasize that theoretical sociology has a set of theoretical perspectives—some scientific, others less so; some descriptive, others explanatory; some critical, others value-neutral—that have been developed over the last two centuries of sociological theorizing. I have done my best to summarize these perspectives fairly and in as much detail as a short book will allow.²

For each perspective, I first seek to examine its origins in classical sociology. Then, I review its basic structure and line of argumentation. And finally, I offer examples of variations in how theorists have used a particular theoretical perspective and orientation. Thus, I try to pack a great deal of material into relatively short number of pages, but not to the point of making the book too dense. I offer a concise but not, I trust, a dense introduction to theoretical sociology.

Violating the Law of Small Numbers

There are eleven chapters after this one, and thus, it might seem that this book reviews this many distinctive theoretical approaches—which might be true except for the fact that there are variants of these perspectives that are often quite different. The result is that the number of perspectives examined is much greater than the twelve that are advertised in the subtitle of this book, which always imposes the problem of “small numbers.” Any intellectual field can probably have fewer than seven major perspectives that everyone can grasp,³ and so once we go beyond seven, the intellectual landscape becomes cognitively more complex. So, from the start, we are at twelve perspectives, but once we see the sometimes dramatic variations within a perspective, we have easily doubled the total number of distinctive approaches in the field of theoretical sociology.

Despite the cognitive overload of having many variants of what I see as the twelve basic approaches outlined in the next chapters, this complexity must be accepted because it is the state of sociological theory today. Depending upon one’s preferences, some of the theoretical orientations examined in these chapters are not essential, whereas for others, they are. Clearly, some approaches are more widespread than others, and yet some of the less practiced approaches are among sociology’s oldest perspectives or, alternatively, some of the newest perspectives promise to become increasingly prominent over the next decades. I have, therefore, had to make some judgments about what I think is most prominent today; others might make up a somewhat different

²I have also written very detailed reviews of theoretical sociology. See, for example, Jonathan H. Turner, *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012) and *Theoretical Sociology: 1830 to the Present* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012).

³Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

list but, in the end, I do not think that our lists would be so different because, despite the complexity of theoretical sociology, there is a core set of approaches that continue to dominate the field.

When I entered the field of sociology almost fifty years ago, textbooks on theory listed many perspectives, which I found confusing because, as I looked at the field in the 1960s, only a few approaches really dominated. Still, texts had lots of historical detail, and the result was many more perspectives than I can review here on these pages. When I wrote my first text on sociological theory,⁴ I reduced the number of contemporary perspectives down to four basic approaches: functional, conflict, exchange, and interactionist theory. One can still find this list organizing introductory textbook descriptions of theoretical sociology today. While I knew that I had chosen the most dominant approaches in the field, I also suspected that this small number of recognizable perspectives would not last, and I was correct. They began to differentiate and elaborate, and once we add some of those that I had not included, the actual number of approaches was much greater than was evident almost forty years ago in that first book, titled *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. What changed theoretical sociology was further breakdown over the consensus of what theory is, can be, or should be, coupled with the comeback of approaches that had been left for dead.

Without consensus over epistemology, the criterion of science could no longer be used to sort out dominant perspectives. Furthermore, with the resurrection of older approaches, such as evolutionary theory, the number of theoretical approaches began to grow and, as variants within perspectives were successfully added, sociology finds itself almost back to where I started in the 1960s—with perhaps too many approaches. But this is the reality of the day, and I have tried to do my best to capture this variety without overwhelming the reader with too many fine-grained distinctions. For the goal of this book is to be concise and to offer a broad overview of theoretical sociology as it is currently practiced in the discipline.

Issues That All Theorists Must Resolve for Themselves

Over that last five decades, I have often been dismayed by the controversies in theoretical sociology. Debate can be intense among protagonists, and unfortunately, because the debate is over epistemologies and often moralities as well, it never ends. I would encourage all who read this book not to get bogged down in these issues that cannot be resolved, except by personal preferences of theorists. Certain questions need to be answered by each theorist, and depending on the answers given, different scholars will pursue different theoretical approaches. What are the basic questions? There are surprisingly few.

Can Sociology Be a Science?

This is probably the most fundamental question. Depending upon the answer, the kind of theorists that a scholar becomes will vary. My views were not always as strong as they are today. I recall in graduate school that there were great debates among students on whether or

⁴Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1974). There were seven editions of this book, mostly published by Wadsworth Publishing when the book then went out of print in 2012.

not sociology could be a science. I had no strong views at the time, but over the years, I have decidedly come down on the side of trying to make sociology a hard science. Others have gone the exact opposite route. Several of my (still) good friends from graduate school were once as rabid as I am now about the prospects for a natural science of society; today, we are in opposite camps but, thankfully, we can live with each other's differences in epistemological faith. But, anyone who becomes a theorist must make a decision on this fundamental question. Even in reading the pages of this book as, perhaps, a beginner in theory, you may find yourself starting to think about this question; and the more you pursue sociology, and theoretical sociology in particular, the more salient this question becomes.

Should Sociology Be Critical, Moral?

Critical sociologies and scientific sociology are often viewed as opposites, but such need not be the case. Most people who become sociologists often begin by being drawn to a discipline because it studies problems in societies and, it would appear, seeks to do something about these problems. I was certainly drawn to sociology for this reason, and I was not alone in the 1960s, which was a watershed period of protest and realignment of Western societies around the world. Critical theorists are normative, and moral; they search out oppressive conditions; they analyze their root causes and effects; and they demand that these conditions be eliminated. One can be a scientist and pursue this agenda, as I have done for many years—less in my actual sociology and more in my personal life. But critical theorizing demands the value neutrality of scientists, where the goal is to understand as much as to condemn social conditions. Critical theorists often argue that, by not taking a critical and moral stance, the scientists end up implicitly supporting the oppressive status quo. I do not accept this judgment, but many do; and so, at some point, scholars have to make decisions about where their inner critical theorists will reside, and whether or not these inner critical theorists will be subordinate to a more dominant value-neutral scientist. Early in my career, I gave much more free rein to my inner critical theorist; today, I keep it bottled up when I do science, letting it out when I am done doing scientific analysis. Others do just the opposite, and still others let the two battle it out.

Whatever the decision, it has to be made, perhaps not so much as a conscious decision, as was my case, but as an emerging preference where one just prefers one side or the other. I decided in the mid-1970s that my sociology would be a better sociology and, moreover, a more useful sociology if I began by holding in check my moral biases and, instead, devoted my time to figuring out how the social world operates, without passing moral judgments. With such knowledge, I would be in a better position to propose viable solutions to real world problems. Again, others do not accept this, seeing it as a “cop-out,” but the important point is that you have to make a decision or let these two inner demons fight it out for control of how you do sociology.

What Is the Most Important Approach to Sociological Analysis?

This question is less disturbing because it does not have to be answered early in a career, and indeed, it can be answered in different ways at varying points in a sociological career.

I started out as a committed symbolic interactionist (see Chapter 5), and then switched to other perspectives, primarily functionalism (Chapter 2) and conflict theory (Chapter 3). But over the years, I have found just about every theoretical perspective useful, and so, now I am so eclectic that I could not categorize myself by any of the perspectives examined in the chapters to follow. My goal is to figure out how the social universe operates, and I am willing to beg, borrow, or steal an idea from any perspective that allows me to achieve this goal. Indeed, I spend much of my time integrating theories.

Still, when we first start out, some approaches are typically more appealing than others. And often, people stay with this initial decision for their entire careers. One has to start somewhere, and picking an approach that is appealing is one way to begin. But, I found myself intrigued by almost every new approach that I learned over the decades, even ones that I initially did not like (but later saw merit in); for others, maybe just a couple of perspectives will do it for a career. Reading the theories outlined in this volume will probably lead readers to prefer one or two over the others, and this is a good place to begin developing one's sociological imagination.

What Level of Analysis Is Most Important?

The answer to this question is much like the one above: you may start out at the micro level of interpersonal processes, but then move to more meso- or macro-level phenomena. Some scholars never leave where they start out. For example, many symbolic interactionists stay at the more micro level; conflicts theorists and functionalists might stay at the macro level. Yet, others begin to see that we need to understand all the levels, and so, they begin to theorize about all levels of social reality.

Social reality unfolds at three levels: (1) the face-to-face interpersonal level; (2) the macro level of societies, inter-societal systems, institutions (e.g., economy, polity, law, kinships, religion, science, etc.), and stratification; and (3) the meso level of corporate units (groups, organizations, communities) and categoric units (membership in social categories like class, ethnicity, gender). Some argue that one or the other of these levels is more "primary" than the others in the sense that one level yields more understanding than the other two. I have called those who make this argument micro and macro chauvinists because they assume that social reality can only be understood by focusing on the micro or macro levels of reality. There also could be meso-level chauvinists. Being a chauvinist in this sense is not necessarily bad because, by studying one level and seeking how far one can take explanations, it often yields important insights, although I would argue that at some point, further understanding cannot be gained without shifting levels of analysis.

Early sociology was decidedly macro in its interests in trying to understand the big transformations to societies that came with modernity. More recently, theorizing in sociology often has a more micro bias. Again, as a starting point, one needs to jump into reality at one of these levels—just to get started being a sociologist. I found the micro level fascinating as an undergraduate, but when I got to graduate school and was exposed to macro sociology, I found this level of reality just as fascinating. I spent half my career being primarily a macro-level theorist, but the second half has involved a great deal of micro-level theorizing on emotions and interpersonal processes. And most important, to me at least, is that I have tried to