

FRONTIERS

*of social*

THEORY

THE NEW SYNTHESSES

EDITED BY GEORGE RITZER

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# FRONTIERS OF SOCIAL THEORY

## The New Syntheses



George Ritzer, Editor

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# PREFACE

This book grew out of a conference titled "Sociological Theory: Current Status, Near-Term Prospects" that was held at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland on March 11, 1988. The conference was sponsored by the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, the Graduate School, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Maryland. It was also supported by a Problems of the Discipline grant from the American Sociological Association. Among those who I would like to thank for their help in gaining the needed support are Murray Polakoff, Stuart Edelstein, Jacob Goldhaber, Bill Falk, and Bill D'Antonio.

The conference centered around ten presentations, nine of which have been transformed into papers included in this volume. The nine original presenters were Jeffrey Alexander, Robert Antonio, Karen Cook, Gary Fine, Charles Lemert, Patricia Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, George Ritzer, Jonathan Turner, and Norbert Wiley. In two cases (Alexander and Cook) co-authors have been added for the writing of the papers that appear here. In order to give a fuller representation to important developments in contemporary theory, several other people were invited to contribute papers to this volume. The additions include works by Deirdre Boden, Randall Collins, Debra Friedman and Michael Hechter, Michelle Lamont and Robert Wuthnow, Douglas Kellner, as well as my own substantive essay.

The idea behind the conference was to bring together the younger generation of leaders of social and sociological theory to assess theory's current status and short-term prospects. While the essays in this volume certainly do that, a central, but unanticipated, theme has emerged from them. Most of them in one way or another deal with a range of

new synthesizing developments within social theory. There is clearly a move away from adherence to a given theory and a focus on a single level of social reality and toward synthesizing theories and analyzing the interrelations among various levels of analysis. To me, this is the dominant theme of the book and, I believe, the dominant theme of sociological theory as it moves into the 1990s.

I should say something about the use of "social" and "sociological" theory throughout this volume. While at one time there was a clear difference between more general (social) theory and theory (sociological) specific to the field, the line between the two types of theory has grown increasingly blurred in recent years. While this book focuses on sociological theory, many of the essays deal with or reflect the influence of an array of social theories (e.g., feminist theories, post-structuralism, post-modernism, cultural theory, etc.). Thus, social theory and sociological theory are used interchangeably throughout this book.

In addition to those mentioned above, I would like to thank Cass O'Toole, Debbi Griffith, Pam Gindoff, and especially Terri LeMoyné for their help in arranging the conference and, in the latter case, in editing this book as well. I would also like to thank Louise Waller at Columbia University Press for believing in this project and helping to bring it to fruition. Most of all I would like to thank my wife, Sue, for being who she is.

George Ritzer  
January 1990

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# 1

## The Current Status of Sociological Theory: The New Syntheses



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*University of Maryland*

There is a powerful love-hate relationship between sociologists and their theories and theorists. On the one hand, national and international conferences such as the one on which this volume is based, as well as theory sessions at national and regional sociology meetings, are always extremely popular and well-attended. On the other hand, sociologists, especially sociological theorists, love to attack sociological theories. For example, in a recent essay in *Theory and Society* (no less!), Hirsch, Michaels, and Friedman (1987, 332) argue that "grand theorist" is a derisive term and the best works of grand theorists "provide fodder for graduate courses and other grand theorists, but in practice are ignored by most sociologists."

Along the same lines, I found particularly interesting Arthur Stinchcombe's (1986) attack on sociological theory in a talk given at the 1983 Thomas and Znaniecki Memorial Conference on Social Theory at the University of Chicago. Stinchcombe excoriated sociological theory for being divorced from the real world. In his usual clever way Stinchcombe (1986, 45-46) attacked theory by arguing that the "higher the prestige of a piece of sociological work, the fewer people in it are sweaty, laughing, ugly or pretty, dull at parties, or have warts on their noses . . . it is the theories that are most divorced from blood, sweat, and tears that have the highest prestige."

There are many problems in sociological theory, but there also is, as I think this volume will show, abundant vitality and promise for the future in sociological theory. I like the comments of Robert Merton (1986, 61), also at the Thomas and Znaniecki conference, since Merton, unlike some others, has achieved the status and maturity that allow

I would like to thank Ken Kammeyer and, especially, Bob Antonio for helpful comments on this chapter.



him to take a more generous, and in my opinion more accurate, view of sociological theory: "Pessimism results from the growing pains of a rapidly differentiating discipline in which the differentiation has multiplied so fast that we haven't the human resources to develop each sphere of inquiry in sufficient degree. The sociological enterprise requires a sense of tolerance rather than of battle, consolidating a mutual awareness of various theoretical orientations with a reasonable confidence that their mutual theoretical connections will be progressively defined." I think that Merton's confidence in the fact that we will see more theoretical synthesis is borne out in this volume.

In fact, the essays in this volume will demonstrate that the most widespread and important development in sociological theory as we enter the 1990s is the move away from theoretical dogmatism and in the direction of theoretical synthesis.<sup>1</sup> The old, reified labels that have dominated sociological theory for many decades ("structural functionalism," "symbolic interactionism") seem increasingly less meaningful and important. As a younger generation of sociological theorists takes center stage, older theoretical and conceptual (e.g., micro-macro) boundaries and divisions are breaking down and some younger theorists are even taking an active role in trying to shatter those borders. Contemporary supporters are much less interested in defending traditional interpretations of theories and far more interested in reaching out to other theoretical traditions in an effort to develop new, more synthetic theories. In addition, more recent theories are less likely to focus on a single level of social analysis and more apt to be interested in the interrelationship of multiple levels. While there is great interest in synthesis, there seems to be a recognition that earlier efforts to create a single, overarching synthetic theory were misguided. Several papers in this volume (Antonio, Kellner, Lemert) discuss intellectual developments (e.g., neo-Marxian theory, postmodernism, post-structuralism) that involve an attack on the idea of such a grand synthesis (grand or master narrative).<sup>2</sup> Rather, contemporary efforts at synthesis are more limited and circumscribed. Thus, we can think of the "new syntheses" rather than a "new synthesis." *This move toward theoretical syntheses is, in my view, the overriding theme of this essay, of the papers in this volume, and of contemporary sociological theory.*

As welcome as the growth of theoretical syntheses is,<sup>3</sup> it is far from the only reason to believe that this is a particularly auspicious era in the history of sociological theory:

The (relatively) new journal *Sociological Theory* sponsored by the American Sociological Association is well-established and joins *Theory and Society* and other more general journals (e.g., *Ameri-*

*can Journal Of Sociology*) as outlets for a substantial quantity and significant diversity of sociological theory.

There is a steady infusion of new (or revived) theories from Europe including Giddens' (1984) "structuration" theory, Bourdieu's (1977) work focusing on "habitus," Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" and "genealogy of power" (see the Foucault memorial issue in *Human Studies* 1987), Elias' "figurational" sociology (*Theory, Culture and Society* published a special issue in 1987 entitled "Norbert Elias and Figurational Sociology"), and the work of a number of postmodern theorists like Baudrillard and Lyotard (Kellner 1988, this volume; Denzin 1986).

The works of the classical theorists continue to be mined and those efforts persist in paying dividends. Significant recent examples included Collins' (1989) analysis of Mead, Camic's (1987) reexamination of the methods of the early Parsons, Marske's (1987) look at Durkheim's "cult of the individual," Hilbert's (1987) subjectivistic interpretation of Weber's views on bureaucracy, and Elster's (1985) micro-interpretation of Marx.

Most traditional theoretical perspectives (e.g., structural functionalism and conflict theory) continue to be viable with some even experiencing at least mini-booms in interest.

There is no overwhelmingly dominant theory like structural functionalism in the 1940s and 1950s to retard or prevent the development of newer theoretical perspectives.

There is less dogmatic refusal to listen to other theoretical approaches with the result that there appears to be at least a small audience for a wide range of theories.

The older generation of theorists is passing into retirement (e.g., Merton, Coserl), and while their work continues to be influential, members of a younger generation are taking over the leadership positions within sociological theory.

And there is an array of startling new developments in sociological theory such as the explosion of interest in cultural sociology, postmodernism, feminist sociological theory, and the micro-macro and agency-structure linkages.

Relatedly, sociological theorists have grown increasingly introspective and are more likely to examine metatheoretically (Ritzer 1988a, 1990) where the field stands and where it seems to be heading.

I should note at this point that while I see much merit in contemporary theory, others, such as Jonathan Turner in his essay in this volume, take a very different position. From Turner's point of view, theory is

bankrupt because it has lost sight of its positivistic roots. While this may be true from the point of view of a positivist, it is not a perspective shared by most theorists who, as Turner recognizes, do not adopt a positivistic orientation.

Part I of this book looks at the current state and near-term prospects of some theoretical perspectives that have been with us for some time and continue, even as they are undergoing significant change, to attract the attention of sociological theorists. In this category are Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy's look at structural functionalism, or as they now call it, neofunctionalism, Randall Collins' essay on conflict theory, Robert Antonio's piece on neo-Marxian theory, Gary Fine's examination of symbolic interactionism, and Karen Cook, Jodi O'Brien, and Peter Kollock's analysis of exchange theory. Part II deals with theories of more recent vintage, at least in sociology, including works on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis by Deirdre Boden, rational choice theory by Debra Freidman and Michael Hechter, structuralism and post-structuralism by Charles Lemert, postmodern social theory by Douglas Kellner, cultural sociological theory by Michelle Lamont and Robert Wuthnow, and feminist theory by Patricia Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley. Part III includes a set of more general essays including my own on micro-macro synthesis in sociological theory, an overview of the state of sociological theory by Jonathan Turner and Norbert Wiley's comments on all of the essays in this volume.

Before turning to a general overview of contemporary sociological theory, and of the movement toward theoretical syntheses more specifically (and thereby much of what is covered in this volume), it would be useful to examine what is omitted. Clearly, no volume of this type can hope to cover everything taking place in sociological theory. For one thing, this book focuses primarily on what is occurring in American sociological theory and to a slightly lesser degree developments in Europe, especially France. Furthermore, it does not cover theoretical developments in other parts of the world. Another limitation is that it is unlikely that all of the major developments in American and European sociological theory will be treated in this volume. This is true of some aspects of each of the theories that are discussed, but of greater importance are the theories that are not singled out for separate treatment. Great effort has been made to concentrate on theories that demonstrate a high level of current interest and are likely to continue to attract attention in the foreseeable future.<sup>4</sup> However, some notable theories have been excluded because a judgment was made that they are not now as lively and not likely to grow substantially in the near future. For example, action theory, in spite of its classic roots in the work of Weber and Parsons, as well as a recent revival in the works of

Coleman (1986a) and others, is not deemed worthy of full-scale, chapter-length treatment.

In the next section as well as the one that follows I discuss the most important theories in contemporary sociology. In doing so, I will use conventional labels (e.g., structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism). However, as I will be pointing out, the movement toward syntheses makes these labels progressively less meaningful.

## NEW LIFE IN SOME TRADITIONAL THEORIES

It was only a little more than a decade ago that Wilbert Moore (1978) saw structural functionalism as a near "embarrassment" and Turner and Maryanski (1979) argued that structural functionalism was dead as an explanatory theory and urged its abandonment. This seemed to be linked to intellectual and social changes (e.g., the loss by America of its position of world hegemony) during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Huaco 1986). But today there seems to be more than a flicker of life in what is now called neofunctionalism (Alexander 1985a, 1985b). Colomy (1986, 139) has recently responded to the critics: "Functionalism is not dead. To the contrary, there are signs that the functionalist tradition is being revitalized." The resuscitation of functionalism is closely linked to the so-called "Parsons revival" (Sciulli and Gerstein 1985), being spearheaded by Alexander in the United States, but certainly not restricted to him (Sciulli, Camic) nor to the United States (Munch, Luhmann). Furthermore, the Parsons revival is not limited to the predictable scholars as is shown by the attention to Parsonsian theory by the contemporary neo-Marxist, Jürgen Habermas (1987). Structural functionalism appears to have a whole new generation of adherents and that group is being added to the holdovers from the heyday of functionalism in the 1950s. In fact, many non-theorists were unaware of structural functionalism's near-demise in the 1970s so they will not be surprised by its current strength, nor will they need to be lured back to a fold they never left.

The adoption of the label "neofunctionalism" is clearly designed to show continuity with structural functionalism,<sup>5</sup> but also to indicate that the new perspective seeks to overcome some of the problems associated with structural functionalism as well as to extend that perspective. Alexander (1985a, 10) has enumerated the problems associated with structural functionalism that neofunctionalism will need to surmount, including "anti-individualism," "antagonism to change," "conservatism," "idealism," and an "anti-empirical bias." Efforts are being made to overcome these problems programmatically (Alexander

1985a) and at more specific theoretical levels, for example Colomy's (1986) attempt to refine differentiation theory, but even Alexander (1985a, 16) has had to admit that "neofunctionalism is a tendency rather than a developed theory."

In their paper in this volume, Alexander and Colomy stake out a very ambitious claim for neofunctionalism. They do not see it as, in their terms, a more modest "elaboration," or "revision," of structural functionalism, but rather a "reconstruction" of it in which differences with the founder (Parsons) are clearly acknowledged and explicit openings are made to other theories (e.g., conflict, interactionism).<sup>6</sup> In other words, and consistent with the basic theme of this essay, Alexander and Colomy are endeavoring to synthesize structural functionalism with a number of other theoretical traditions. Such reconstruction can both revive structural functionalism and provide the base for the development of a new theoretical tradition. Alexander and Colomy clearly have such ambitious objectives for neofunctionalism. We will have to wait and see whether neofunctionalism achieves such goals, or even whether it attains the more modest goal of merely reviving structural functionalism. While a wide range of thinkers are rediscovering the strengths of Parsonian theory (which, by the way, Alexander and Colomy seem, erroneously in my view, to equate with structural functionalism), many theorists remain dubious about any form of structural functionalism, whether it be elaborated, revised, or reconstructed.

It has been difficult to see much life in conflict theory. Conflict theory enjoyed a small boom in the 1960s as the macro-level alternative to structural functionalism. However, except for Collins' (1975) *Conflict Sociology*, and that book was much more micro-oriented than the conflict theory of Dahrendorf and others, there have been few notable contributions to this theoretical perspective.

That situation has been rectified, at least in part, by Collins' contribution to this volume. After devoting more than a decade to other concerns, especially interaction ritual chains, Collins has returned to his interest in conflict theory. In Collins' view, conflict theory has not been moribund for the last decade, but has been developing quietly under a variety of different guises in a number of areas within sociology. For one thing, Collins believes that conflict theory has become the dominant perspective in a number of sub-areas within sociology. Although he does not go into it in detail, one example of what he has in mind is the emergence of the "power approach" as the dominant orientation in the sociological study of the professions (Ritzer and Walczak 1986). Collins' main concern is to show how conflict theory lies at the heart of much of historical/comparative research, especially the work of Michael Mann (1986). Collins sees Mann doing a kind of network

theory and Collins seeks to synthesize Mann's approach with mainstream work in network theory. Whether or not conflict theory moves in this particular direction, it seems clear that Collins' effort will help to revive interest in conflict theory and contribute to the movement toward theoretical integration.

A related effort worth undertaking, but not underscored by Collins, would be a review of the array of specific conflict theories that have developed within various sub-areas in sociology, with the objective of putting this disparate body of work together into a broader conflict theory of society in general. The fact is that conflict theory is a well-established label that is woefully lacking in substance. If conflict theory is to become a renewed force in sociological theory, it is going to need to flesh out what has been heretofore little more than a theoretical skeleton.

If conflict theory has seemed weak, neo-Marxian theory has grown dramatically, albeit unevenly, since its emergence in American sociology in the late 1960s. Bottomore (1984) asserts correctly that "Marxism has now established itself as one of the major paradigms in sociology."<sup>7</sup> Much of the strength of neo-Marxian theory has been in critical theory, but Bottomore (1984) has claimed that "the Frankfurt School, in its original form, and as a school of Marxism or sociology, is dead." That assertion seems far too strong, especially in light of the widespread interest in the work of the contemporary inheritor of the critical school tradition—Jürgen Habermas—and a revival of interest in the work of original members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno and Benjamin. While it is hard to agree with Bottomore on the death of critical theory, it is far easier to accept Benton's (1984) view that structural Marxism, as in the work of Althusser and Poulantzas, is in decline.

While some varieties of neo-Marxian theories may be weakening, others are rising to take their place. Many of those who at one time were attracted to critical theory and structural Marxism have now moved in the direction of a variety of perspectives soon to be discussed: post-structuralism, postmodernism, and newer varieties of neo-Marxism. Then there is much interest in game-theoretic, or rational-choice, Marxism in the work of Roemer (1982, 1986) and Elster (1985). Game-theoretic Marxism continues the effort, found in critical theory and its turn toward Freud, to give Marxian theory a micro base, this time in assumptions about a rational actor derived from economics. But game-theoretic Marxism goes further and poses a largely micro-level theory that stands in stark contrast to the macro-level orientation of virtually all other Marxian theories. Activity within this domain, as well as the attacks it is likely to elicit from macro-oriented Marxists,<sup>8</sup> are likely to breathe considerable life into Marxian theory. Other lively areas of

interest in neo-Marxian theory are world-system theory (Wallerstein 1980, 1988; Boswell and Bergesen 1987); neo-Marxian economic sociology (*Theory and Society* 1986); "post-Marxist" (building on the Marxian tradition, but rejecting the "primacy of class and economic dynamics" [Wright 1987, 749]) theory (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1986), as well as empirically oriented research done from a Marxian perspective (Wright and Martin 1987).

Antonio seeks to review much of the history of neo-Marxian theory from the point of view of its relationship to one of Marx's totalistic perspectives, his materialist emancipatory modernism. In Antonio's view, Marx from this perspective offered a grand view of society moving toward its teleological end (communism) impelled by the collective subject, the proletariat. For a time, this view shaped (and distorted) Marxian theory, but later an array of neo-Marxian theorists sought in a variety of ways to distance themselves from this grand narrative. In some cases, however, they merely replaced Marx's materialist emancipatory modernism with other equally problematic grand narratives. More recently, an array of decentered neo-Marxian theories have emerged. While they have served to overcome the excesses of Marx's materialist emancipatory modernism, they threaten to offer an excessively pluralistic image of society. Antonio suggests that neo-Marxians build on Marx's "historical holism" rather than his emancipatory modernism.<sup>9</sup> Historical holism is a global theory of capitalism without the excesses (e.g., teleology) of materialist emancipatory modernism. Whether or not neo-Marxian theory moves in that direction, Antonio has succeeded in using the idea of totality to both give an overview of the history of and to point to a future direction for neo-Marxian theory.

Symbolic interactionism is another traditional sociological theory that seems to have defied the doomsayers by enjoying something of a renaissance. In the 1970s it appeared as if symbolic interactionism was about to lose its traditional turf to a number of much more exotic theories of consciousness, action and interaction, especially phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, existential sociology, hermeneutical sociology and the like (Ritzer 1985). While the latter theories have, in the main, grown in importance, that growth has not been at the expense of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism has its association (Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction), its journal (*Symbolic Interaction*), significant re-analyses of the classic works of Mead (Collins 1989) and Blumer (*Symbolic Interaction* 1988), major new program statements (Perinbanayagam 1985), and a number of new theorists (e.g., Fine 1986; Shalin, 1986, 1988) who are continuing to work with the perspective while refining it in a variety of ways. Also aiding symbolic interactionism is the growing recognition that Erving

Goffman was a first-rank theorist (Collins 1986) and that his ideas will continue to be of utility in dealing with a variety of theoretical and empirical issues (Rawls 1987). Although there is considerable disagreement over whether Goffman should be considered a symbolic interactionist (Gonos 1977, 1980), many do view his work in that way and the likelihood of a continued mining of his ideas is apt to contribute to substantial interest in symbolic interactionism. In recent years a number of works employing a significant aspect of Goffman's symbolic interactionism, his dramaturgical approach, have appeared (Haas and Shaffir 1982; Snow, Zurcher, and Peters, 1984; Zurcher 1985; Kitahara 1986).

In his essay in this volume, Gary Fine argues that symbolic interactionism has entered a new, "post-Blumerian" age (*see also* the special issue of *Symbolic Interaction* [1988] devoted to Herbert Blumer). This new symbolic interactionism "has cobbled a new theory from the shards of other theoretical approaches." Symbolic interactionism now combines indigenous insights with those from other micro theories like exchange theory, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology. More surprising is the integration of ideas from macro theories (e.g., structural functionalism) as well as the ideas of macro theorists like Parsons, Simmel, Weber, and Marx. Post-Blumerian symbolic interactionism is a much more synthetic perspective than it was in Blumer's heyday.

Even action theory, long a weak component of the contemporary theoretical scene, is showing some faint signs of life. Coleman (1986a, 1987) has sought to revive action theory by returning to its roots in Parsons' (1937) *The Structure of Social Action*. He is trying to undo Parsons' mistake of abandoning action theory in favor of structural functionalism. Thus Coleman is seeking to move action theory away from the system level and back toward the actor who for Coleman, as for Parsons, can be "either persons or corporate actors" (1986a, 1312). In other words, Coleman is seeking the development of a broader action theory which synthesizes interests in actors and systems. Another work of this genre is Sciulli's (1986) effort to clarify the meaning of voluntaristic action and to link it to work in legal theory.

Exchange theory, while as strong or even stronger than ever, is clearly a theory in transition. Its modern founder, George Homans (1974), seems more of a historical forerunner than an active participant in ongoing work in exchange theory. Peter Blau (1964), who helped pioneer exchange theory and extend it to the macro levels, has made it abundantly clear that he has abandoned exchange theory for structural theory (Blau, 1987a). Furthermore, he has moved from the traditional micro-level concerns of exchange theory, and the more integrative micro-macro foci of his own exchange theory, to a focus on the macro-



structural level. It is Richard Emerson and his disciples, especially Karen Cook (1987a, 1987b), who seem to have moved to the center of ongoing work in exchange theory. While starting with the traditional micro-level concerns of exchange theory, this group is seeking to build toward the macro level and develop a more synthetic exchange theory.

Indeed, in their essay in this volume, Cook, O'Brien, and Kollock define exchange theory in inherently integrative terms as being concerned with exchanges at various levels of analysis, including among individuals, corporations, and nation states. They identify two strands of work in the history of exchange: one at the micro level focusing on social behavior as exchange, and the other at the more macro level of social structure as exchange. Cook et al. identify three contemporary trends, all of which point toward a more integrative exchange theory. The first is the increasing use of field research focusing on more macroscopic issues, which can complement the traditional use of the laboratory experiment to study microscopic issues. Second, they note a shift in substantive work away from a focus on dyads and toward larger networks of exchange. Third, and most important, is the ongoing effort to synthesize exchange theory and structural sociologies, especially network theory. Along the way, Cook et al. discuss the gains to be made from integrating insights from rational choice and decision theory as well as symbolic interactionism. Most generally, they see their synthetic version of exchange theory as being well-equipped to deal with the centrally important issue of the micro-macro relationship.

## THE LIVELINESS OF SOME MORE RECENT THEORIES

While the theories discussed in the preceding section can be traced back in sociology for many decades, the theories to be discussed in this section are generally of more recent vintage, or at least have come to be accepted by large numbers of theorists only in recent years.

Ethnomethodology (and the related conversation analysis), while it has certainly not swept across the sociological domain, has succeeded in moving beyond its southern California enclave and has created a number of beachheads throughout the United States as well as some notable centers on the British Isles (Sharrock and Anderson 1986). Intellectually, ethnomethodology has retained its core interests in everyday interaction and conversation analysis (see the special 1986 issue of *Human Studies* devoted to "Interaction and Language Use"; Heritage and Atkinson 1984), but it also now seems to be expanding