



MODERN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Malcolm Waters

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MALCOLM WATERS



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Preface

This book seeks to aid the good teaching of sociological theory. It does so by trying to establish that there is a theoretical tradition in sociology to which students can be exposed. It rejects the notion that theory can be understood as a series of discrete schools or compartmentalized individual theorists. Theory is a developing set of arguments and debates which focuses on common questions. And while there may be disparate, and perhaps irreconcilable, approaches to answering these questions, the disagreements and debates all take place within a common universe of discourse. The book argues that the contours of that universe are given in four concepts which theory must always address: agency, rationality, structure, and system. It tries to show, first, that these are the foci of theoretical debate, and second, that these baseline concepts are always mobilized in seeking to theorize such substantive phenomena as power or gender.

I believe that the book is also challenging. It aims neither to reduce theory to oversimplified and programmatic formulae nor to provide an entertaining read, although it might do either of these by accident. Rather it seeks to stick to the facts of theory and to present it at the level its authors would wish to have it presented. Because the book seeks to condense and precis, rather than to simplify, some the material is inevitably difficult. It is probably therefore much more suitable for graduate and senior undergraduate students than for those at the very beginning of their academic experience.

Most of my debts are diffuse rather than particular. My colleagues in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tasmania are a continuing source of support and intellectual stimulation. I should mention my persistent arguments with Stephen Crook and Jan Pakulski as a more precise source for ideas. Perhaps more importantly, my students in our third-year core-theory course, Modern Sociological Analysis, have been the victims of my numerous attempts to rehearse the contents of the book over a period of some twelve years. They have been more than forbearing, although they have certainly been that, and have made proactive, positive, and sometimes provocative contributions. My 'Scottish' mates, John Holmwood and Sandy Stewart, remain influential, and I must thank Stephen Mennell for insisting that I should discover the theory of Norbert Elias. Lest I come to be regarded as the enemy of all bureaucrats, Stefan Rucinski kept the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences running while

its Dean was busy writing. Rowena Stewart and Christina Parnell have provided unstinting administrative assistance.

I actually began the writing while I was a Bye Fellow at Robinson College, Cambridge in 1991. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Master and Fellows of the College for their generous hospitality and for the stimulating environment which they provided. Particular thanks must go to my sponsor, Peter Kornicki, and to the then Junior Bursar, Cdr George Coope, who went far beyond the call of duty in helping to provide facilities. I must also thank the librarians at Robinson, at the Faculty of Social and Political Studies, and at the Institute of Criminology, who all went out of their way to assist.

The editorial staff at Sage, that leading publisher of social science, have been as helpful and positive as can be. Karen Phillips commissioned the work and assisted in the early stages, while Louise Murray saw it through to the end. Stephen Barr kept a dispassionate watching brief throughout. Sage's anonymous referees in Britain and the USA have made a major contribution to the final product. I trust that they will notice the effects of their advice even if they cannot be acknowledged on an individual basis.

The book incorporates some material that I have published elsewhere in earlier versions. Parts of chapter 8 are modified elements of 'Patriarchy and Viriarchy', *Sociology* 23 (2): 193–211 (1989a); the second half of chapter 9 is abstracted and modified from *Class and Stratification*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire (1990) and from 'Collapse and Convergence in Class Theory', *Theory and Society* 20: 141–72 (1991); and a further small part of the chapter is modified from *Postmodernization*, London: Sage (1992) (written with Stephen Crook and Jan Pakulski).

Writing so long a book as this provides such a burden and disruption to domestic life that, at one stage during its production, I felt obliged to promise my wife, Judith Homeshaw, that I would in future stick to journal articles. It is a measure of the extent to which she shares my academic commitment that she has already let me off that particular hook. Without the pleasures of the family life we share with Penny and Tom, writing this book would have been quite impossible.

Acknowledgements

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1 General theory in sociology

Sociology can fairly make a claim to the status of an established academic discipline for two reasons: first, it has a widely acknowledged theoretical tradition; and, second, it makes a serious attempt at methodological rigour in the conduct of research. However, it is theory which defines the discipline because theory sums up what sociology can say to its audience about the social world. Methodology, by contrast, is merely a set of rules for deciding what one can say and the status of what one has said, a means to an end. Theory must always be the central and irreducible goal if sociology is to take a significant place within the development of human self-knowledge and the guidance of human society. If sociology sacrifices theory to interpretation it drifts towards the opinionism of journalism or history; if it chooses empiricism it drifts towards the tautologism and dehumanization of behaviourist psychology or economics; and if it retreats into philology or epistemology it drifts towards the scholasticism of philosophy or theology.

Sociological theory is neither a unified nor a completed project. It is differentiated into specialized foci of interest which are only partially linked together. In physics there is now very real hope for the unification of particle theory with theories of the cosmos which hitherto have provided the ultimate divide between a micro- and a macro-universe. In sociology no such hope is yet available for a resolution of its special dualities: action and structure, materialism and idealism, individualism and holism, rational instrumentalism and communicationism, and value-neutrality and value-relevance. Indeed it would be possible to construct a book which focused precisely on these oppositions as prevailing debates. Such a book might argue that these debates need to be resolved if sociological theory is not to be counted as a failure. But theorizing is a process rather than an accomplishment and, so long as these oppositions are mobilized in addressing substantive concerns, sociological theory can progress in the way that physics manifestly has.

It is precisely on substantive concerns that this book focuses. It addresses the things which sociological theory can say, its substantive topics and the claims it makes about them, rather than the explanatory dualisms which might frustrate such an endeavour. Somewhat surprisingly these topics are relatively few in number and this fact alone speaks positively to a measure of theoretical integration in a discipline so young. Theoretical sociologists, one can argue, communicate with one another within a field of common discourse, even if not a field of common agreement – they use a shared

system of concepts to focus on topics of common interest. In identifying these topics of common theoretical interest this book specifically rejects arguments that sociological theory should be understood as a multiplicity of competing, or even conflicting, schools of thought or paradigms, each of which has a finished argument. Argumentative competition is precisely the social process by which theorizing is achieved.

One of the reasons why theory in sociology has a common but broad agenda is that it has a relatively unified theoretical heritage, although not an absolutely unified one. It stands between, say, psychology or economics on one hand, which can point to the single figure of a Freud or a Marshall as the originating point for their theoretical development, and history or political science on the other, for which it would be difficult to identify any small group of defining and founding theorists. The topics and approaches of sociology are broadly traceable to the work of three major, late-nineteenth-century figures, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, only the last two of which regarded themselves as sociologists, and only Durkheim exclusively so. Although it is high time that sociology went beyond a simple reading of the classics, we need nevertheless to emulate their originality and their broad compass. So we shall remind ourselves continuously throughout this book that the topics that we currently consider came from these sources.

This introduction is divided into three sections. The first focuses on what theory is and how it is practised. The second sidesteps into a textual, although not a pedagogical, irrelevancy, an identification of the main approaches to sociological theory, which shows the links between more recent theorizing and the classics. This is provided as a scheme against which the somewhat unusual organization of the book can be referenced, allowing the reader to 'check back' when a particular theorist or theoretical tradition (an 'ism') is encountered and to locate it in relation to other developments. The third section identifies the main thrust of the book, the central concepts of sociological theory which are covered in each of the chapters.

The practice of sociological theory

In sociology, the word 'theory' is used much as it is used in everyday life. We can take the definition given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as an indicator of its everyday meaning: 'Supposition explaining something, esp. one based on principles independent of the phenomena etc. to be explained' (1964: s.v. Theory). The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, which as it happens is rather longer, has the space to offer several definitions, including one which might suit more precisely an academic discipline such as sociology:¹ 'A scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena; . . . a statement of what are held to be the general laws, principles, or causes of something

known or observed' (1973: s.v. Theory). In sociology the phenomena to be observed, quite obviously, are social phenomena, that is, its theory focuses on the relationships and interaction (other-related practices) between human beings.

We can now move on to use these definitions to isolate the special characteristics of theory as opposed to other sociological practices. Theory in sociology includes any intentionally constructed set of statements which can meet the following criteria:

- They must be abstract, that is, they must be separated from the social practices which they address. Theory usually achieves abstraction by the development of technical and arcane concepts which are used only within the sociological community.
- They must be thematized. A specific thematic argument must run through the set of statements giving them coherence and force.
- They must be logically consistent. The statements must not contradict one another and, if possible, should be deducible from one another.
- They must be explanatory. Theory must constitute a thesis or argument about social phenomena which can account for their form, or substance, or existence.
- They must be general. They must, in principle, apply to, and be able to account for any and all instances of the phenomena which they seek to explain.
- They must be independent. They must not be reducible to the explanations participants themselves offer for their own behaviour.
- They must be substantively valid. They must be consistent with what is known about the social world both by its participants and by sociologists and other social scientists. At a minimum there must be 'rules of translation' which can connect the theory with other bodies of knowledge.

For any practising theorist, theory is a developing set of ideas which seeks maximally to meet these criteria but which may only be a partial contribution to a more communal theoretical enterprise.

This does not mean that theory looks the same everywhere in sociology. There are, in general, three types of theory: formal, substantive and positivistic. *Formal* theory is the most inclusive. It seeks to produce a scheme of concepts and statements within which society, or human interaction in its entirety, can be explained. Often such theory is *paradigmatic* in character, that is it seeks to set the entire agenda for future theoretical practice against the claims of opposing paradigms.² Such theory is also often 'foundational' in character, that is, it seeks to identify a single set of principles which are the ultimate foundation for social life and by which everything can be explained.³ Chapters 2–5 of this book concentrate on formal and foundationalist theory.

Substantive theory, by contrast, is much less inclusive. It seeks not to

explain all things but either specific, but very generally ramifying, events or specified types of social process. The former includes theories of the emergence of industrial society, or of the maintenance of capitalism, while the latter might include theories of worker alienation, political domination, class subordination, religious commitment, or 'deviant' behaviour. Chapters 6–9 describe the most general examples of substantive theory in sociology.

Positivist theory⁴ seeks to explain empirical relationships between variables by showing that they can be deduced from more abstract theoretical statements. It explains very specific statements indeed. Because positivist theory is so focused on specific empirical relationships its findings have not proved to be influential. Consequently they are not canvassed widely in this book, although some examples are discussed in chapter 3.

We now know, in formal terms at least, what theory is and what its varieties are. We can therefore move on to ask how it is done or practised or what its methodology is. A simple answer is to say that theory is done by reading, thinking, writing, publishing and arguing, but not necessarily in this order. More helpfully, theorizing might generally be regarded as a process of scholarship, as opposed to research, which is advanced by one or more of the following strategies:

- Proposing or advancing a political or practical agenda. Here the sociologist often seeks to reveal the true or genuine nature of society to open up possibilities for changing it. Major examples are feminist sociological theory (chapter 8) and critical theory (chapter 5) which seek to emancipate sections of humanity from dominating structures.
- Standing opposed to prevailing theoretical arguments. Here the theorist engages in a critique of extant theory and offers an alternative. The classical example is Durkheim's critique of Spencer (see chapter 9). More recently, Giddens' structuration theory (see chapter 7) was developed because Giddens believed that structural-functionalism and Marxist structuralism (see chapter 4) took insufficient account of human motives and their consequences.
- Synthesizing received theoretical wisdom. This involves a reading and interpretation of major theoretical contributions in order to discover commonalities and convergences between them. A relatively early example is Parsons' synthesis of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber into a 'voluntaristic theory of action' (see chapter 2). In the contemporary period, Alexander seeks to synthesize the contributions of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons, and Habermas goes even wider to include also Mead, Schütz, Lukács, and several linguistic philosophers (see chapter 5).
- Accommodating research findings. Although accomplishing an interchange between theory and research is one of the 'parenthood' statements of sociology, the actual practice is all too rare. Two more or

less isolated examples are: the use of findings from small groups research to construct a scheme of 'functional imperatives' for society by Parsons and Bales (see chapter 4); and Goldthorpe's argument that there are seven classes, which is based on findings from social mobility research (see chapter 9).

- **Hunting basic formalities.** This is a reductionist strategy in which the theorist seeks to discover a simple, very formal set of axiomatic (self-evident) principles by means of which all social life can be explained. Early exponents of the strategy were Weber and Simmel, while more recent ones include Homans and Elster (see chapter 3).
- **Making sense of great events.** Arguably the main impetus for the origins of theory was the emergence of capitalist industrial society. The transition was so enormous that intellectuals were virtually obliged to theorize in order to make sense of the changes.

This wide range of alternative strategies suggests that sociological theory might be characterized by substantive diversity. This is indeed the case and the next section identifies the main approaches.

Approaches to sociological theory

We have said that sociological theory is only a relatively unified body of knowledge. There are in fact a number of interweaving strands or themes in its development. This section is a 'road map' which seeks to simplify the maze. It relies explicitly on a scheme developed by Alexander (see pp. 152–5 and the diagram in figure 5.6) which asks what the main pre-suppositions or assumptions of theory are. A simplified version of the scheme, redrawn for present purposes, is given in figure 1.1. The scheme makes two distinctions and intersects them to produce four types of theorizing. The first distinction relates to what the theorist believes are the elements which make up the social world, the elements of which it is constituted. The theorist can take the view either that the social world consists of the creations, interpretations, meanings, and ideas of thinking and acting subjects (subjective); or the view can be that the human condition is characterized by an immutable and common set of constraints in which there is no opportunity for choice or intention (objective). The second distinction relates to the type of explanation offered by the theorist. In the first type of explanation, the social world is 'reduced to' the characteristics of each of its individual participants, to their isolated meanings or interests (individualistic). The second type of explanation makes reference to wholes, either to collective systems of ideas or to shared material conditions (holistic). The four types of theorizing which the scheme yields are:

- *constructionism* (subjective/individualistic), which seeks to understand individual and intersubjective meanings and motives – here human