

VARIETIES OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIZING

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Summary

This chapter outlines the state of sociological theory at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century. Sociology has become a highly differentiated field, with relatively little intellectual integration. This trend is reflected in sociological theorizing, as a number of distinct traditions pursue work in relative isolation from each other. This problem of differentiation is compounded by the split between those who advocate a scientific approach to theory and those who do not believe that sociology can, or should, be a science. The chapter explores theorizing in several distinct traditions and variants within these traditions, including:

- Functional theorizing,
- Ecological theorizing,
- Stage-model evolutionary theorizing,
- Biosocial theorizing,
- Conflict theorizing,
- Structural theorizing,
- Micro-level interpersonal theorizing,
- Cultural theorizing, and
- Critical theorizing.

1. Introduction

Much like the discipline as a whole, sociological theorizing has differentiated into a number of general theoretical perspectives as well as highly specialized theoretical research traditions. Accompanying this almost hyper-differentiation has been a corresponding decline in what has been pejoratively called “grand theorizing” in which the theorists seek to explain large portions of social reality with one theoretical approach. The result has been for theorizing in sociology to fracture into so many diverse camps that theoretical synthesis and integration now appear virtually impossible, or at least unlikely, in the near future.

This situation has been aggravated by the continued debate within sociology over the prospects for scientific theorizing. This debate is as old as the discipline but over the last twenty years, it has taken on a new intensity, with those proclaiming that sociology can be like any other natural science increasingly separated from those who argue that sociology cannot be a science. The latter group, however, is far more diverse in their advocacy than those committed to the epistemology of science, and so even the anti-science advocates are differentiated into often antagonistic camps. Still another set of fault lines in theorizing revolve around the disconnect between theory and research within the discipline. Most research in sociology is atheoretical, although there are often efforts to offer theoretical window dressing to basically descriptive empirical endeavors. The effect of this disjuncture is for much theorizing in sociology to move into the philosophical clouds, undisciplined by research findings and indeed often unconcerned with stating ideas so that they can be tested, while empirical research continues to ignore a good part of sociology’s theoretical canon because it is untestable. There is, however, a number of general theoretical approaches that have active research traditions, but these tend to be the most specialized of the theories produced in sociology, with the result that they rarely work to bridge the gaps among diverse theories and, in fact, contribute to the partitioning of theoretical effort in the discipline.

One of the great ironies of this situation of hyper-differentiation is that over the last forty years, sociology has made enormous strides in what it knows about the social world and in its explanations of the dynamics driving this world. Compared to the state of sociological theory at, say, 1960, theoretical sociology is more robust and is capable of explaining a great deal more of the social universe than at any time in the discipline’s history. Still, because of the overspecialization, most scholars in the discipline do not recognize the great strides that theorizing has taken. So, at a time when sociology knows more than ever and can explain more dimensions of the social universe than ever before, the many lines of differentiation and antagonism within sociology, and especially within its theoretical wing, blind scholars to the incredible advances that have been made in the explanatory power of theories.

We will return to these sad ironies at the end of this chapter, but for the bulk of this essay, a review of the most prominent approaches in sociological theorizing will occupy our interest. Within these more general approaches are many variants, the most important of which will be highlighted. These approaches include: Functional and functionally-inspired theory, ecological theory, biosocial theory, stage model evolutionary theory, conflict theory, structuralist theory, micro theorizing on

interpersonal processes, and cultural theory. Although scholars working within these traditions have made progress, in developing mature theories, most theoretical perspectives remain isolated from each other, with their adherents rarely looking over the fence to see what other theorists are doing. This situation is made worse by the fact that some of these traditions are oriented to a natural science epistemology where others, to varying degrees, are not. The end result is that these epistemological differences assure that many theorists do not talk with each other, except to criticize the deficiencies in the epistemological assumptions of competing theories.

2. Functional Theorizing

Functional theorizing was sociology's first theoretical perspective. All functional theories assume that societies and their subunits constitute a system of interconnected parts, with specific parts meeting basic survival needs or requisites necessary for adaptation to the environment. Explanation consists of determining the need or requisite that a system component meets. While functional analysis has a long history in biology and philosophy, it was August Comte who brought this mode of analysis to sociology; and it was Herbert Spencer who developed the first robust form of functional analysis. For Spencer, all societies differentiate along three axes, each of which represents a "selection pressure" on actors. The first axis is operation by which he means the two problems of production (securing, producing, and distributing resources) and reproduction (biological support and socialization); the second axis is regulation devoted to coordination and control of system units (through power and structural interdependencies); and the third axis is distribution or the development of infrastructures and exchange systems (like markets) for moving people, information, and resources about a population. Each of these axes poses a problem for a growing population which, as it differentiates, must develop structures that meet these needs for operation, regulation, and distribution.

Émile Durkheim followed Spencer in developing a functional approach, but in contrast to Spencer, he posited one master need: the need for integration among members and society. Integration, however, occurs along a number of dimensions, and so in actual fact, Durkheim posited several functional needs: the need for individuals to be attached to groups, the need for persons to share common ideas—values, beliefs, and norms (what he termed "the collective conscience"), the need for exchange and interdependencies, and the need for representative regulation by centers of power.

Functionalism was carried into the 20th Century by anthropologists who were seeking a way to explain elements of preliterate societies. Functionalism was initially appealing because it allowed ethnographers to explain an element of a society by its functions in meeting the needs that the society faced. The most elaborate of the functional schemes was developed by Bronislaw Malinowski who conceptualized culture as operating at distinct levels—biological, social structural, and cultural (symbolic)—with each level evidencing distinctive requisites to survive in their respective environments. When examining social structures, for example, Malinowski's scheme is similar to Spencer's in that he emphasized four basic need states of all social structures: production, distribution, regulation and control through authority, education and socialization. Structural features of a pre-literate society could, therefore, be analyzed by how they

operated to meet these requisites. The other early anthropological functionalist—A. R. Radcliffe-Brown—adopted a more Durkheimian approach, emphasizing that social structures could be analyzed in terms of how they met the need of all societies for integration.

By the 1950s, functionalism was re-incorporated into sociology with the work of Talcott Parsons who, like Spencer, developed a scheme that emphasized four basic functional needs for all social systems: adaptation (gathering, producing, and distributing resources), goal attainment (setting the mobilizing resources to achieve ends), integration (coordination among system parts), and latency (reproduction and resolving tensions within social units).

For a very brief time in the 1950s, it could be said that functionalism was the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology, but by the end of the 1960s, it had declined under constant criticism from conflict theorists who argued that the view of the social world presented in functionalism is like a utopia in which system parts function smoothly to meet system needs. Such an approach, it was argued, does not have an adequate theory of power, inequality, and conflict that typify all societies.

Still, variants of functionalism have persisted to the present time. Niklas Luhmann was perhaps the most important functional theorist after Parsons, arguing that all collectivities seek to resolve one master functional need: the reduction of complexity. Social systems and their parts are, in essence, systems designed to reduce complexity. Others such as Richard Munch continued with the Parsons' program. Still others argued for a neofunctionalism that, in essence, emphasizes sociocultural differentiation without reference to functional needs or requisites, thus making neofunctionalism non-functional. Finally, most recently Jonathan Turner has sought to make more explicit the basic line of reasoning in all functional analyses: the notion that populations and the social units in which they are organized confront selection pressures from the environment—pressures such as how to gather sufficient resources, how to control and regulate actions, how to reproduce new members, how to distribute resources, and many other problems. These are not so much functional needs as forces, much like gravity, that push actors to respond or suffer the disintegrative consequences. In this way, Turner has argued, the key element of functional theories that have made them so interesting—what is essential for a society to survive in its environment—is retained and re-integrated into more general evolutionary models in biology and the social sciences.

3. Ecological Theorizing

In both Spencer's and Durkheim's functional theories was a theory of human ecology. Spencer coined the famous phrase, "survival of the fittest," almost a decade before Charles Darwin published his great work on natural selection, whereas Durkheim borrowed explicitly from Darwin. Still, both were perhaps more influenced by Thomas Malthus in his analysis of population dynamics. Whatever the exact lineage, both Spencer and Durkheim argued that as populations grow, there is more competition for resources; and from this competition comes social speciation or differentiation as actors seek resource niches. Spencer also had a geopolitical theory, arguing that the history of

societies during their evolution from simple to more complex forms was a history of war, with the more organized society generally winning a war and with the consequence that the overall complexity of society was ratcheted up as better-organized societies consistently won in conflict.

Later, in the first half of the 20th Century, the ecological model to be found in Spencer's and Durkheim's analysis of societal evolution was downsized to urban communities. The major contribution of the famous "Chicago School" was to view the urban landscape as a kind of ecological field in which diverse sets of actors competed for space, with the real estate market institutionalizing the competition. The result of this competition was a series of urban areas, or niches, in which different actors, such as those seeking industrial space, housing, business storefronts, and the like, were able to successfully secure resources. Patterns of neighborhood succession and settlement patterns among residents, government, and businesses could be viewed as an outcome of ecological struggle among actors with different levels and kinds of resources seeking urban space. This form of urban ecology is still active today, but in more recent years another type of ecological analysis has emerged: organizational ecology.

The key figure was Amos Hawley, who overlapped with the members of the Chicago School, and who was the mentor to John Freeman and Michael Hannan. The latter founded the field of organizational ecology. In their analysis, populations of organization can be viewed as competition with each other in distinctive niches where they seek resources, whether these be students (educational organizations), customers (business organizations), clients (professional organizations), or any set of actors who have resources that can sustain an organization. In Hannan and Freeman's scheme, niches are defined as the specific type of resources that a set or population of organizations seeks—from students seeking education through newspaper customers and car buyers to those needing accounting services. As one organization becomes successful in a niche, it will attract competition from other organizations that enter the niche (again, often institutionalized by market dynamics); and as the number of organizations in the niche increases, rates of failure rise as some organizations cannot sustain themselves or are forced to migrate to a less competitive niche.

More recently, Amos Hawley took ecological analysis to a more macro level in the spirit of Spencer and Durkheim. For Hawley, mobility costs for moving people, information, and resources across space are the critical variable (as they were for Spencer in his analysis of distribution). As technology allows for the lowering of mobility costs, differentiation among corporate units revealing a division of labor increases. Differentiation is also influenced by capital investments in the economy, the dynamism of markets, and political actors who can discourage or encourage technological development. With increased differentiation comes, *à la* Durkheim, integrative problems that push actors to construct new bases of power, new forms of markets, new laws, and other new systems for resolving problems of integration. This mode of analysis dovetails into Turner's view that selection pressures from fundamental forces such as distribution and differentiation push actors to respond, and as they do so, they construct new social formations.

Thus, ecological analysis has gone full circle, beginning with the functional analysis of

evolution by Spencer and Durkheim who often saw the movement of human societies to new stages of increased differentiation as the outcome of competition for resources, with individuals moving into resource niches (and hence, differentiating) where they could sustain themselves. While urban and organizational ecology are now well-established “middle range” theories, more recent work by Hawley and others has taken ecological analysis back up to the macro level. In so doing, yet another offshoot of early functionalism has enjoyed a dramatic revival in the 21st Century: stage model evolutionary theory.

4. Stage Model Evolutionary Theorizing

The early functionalists—Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim—all developed stage models of societal evolution as they evolved from simple to more complex forms. These models were essentially descriptive, although Spencer and Durkheim posited an ecological dynamic as driving societal evolution. Spencer also added the view that warfare between societies had driven much evolution as the more productive, politically organized, and technologically advanced society would, typically, win out, conquer its neighbors, and then assimilate them. Other, non-functional theorists such as Marx also had evolutionary theories, with Marx arguing that the history of human society had involved movement from simple hunting and gathering (primitive communism) through slavery and feudalism to capitalism and eventually to communism as a result of the structural contradictions leading to class conflict and social change. These kinds of evolutionary stage models fell out of favor for much of the 20th Century, rightly being seen as somewhat ethnocentric (all societies march toward the western capitalist ideal) or utopian (communism is inevitable).

There were, however, signs of revival in the 1960s and early 1970s as Talcott Parsons and Gerhard Lenski both developed models outlining the movement of societies from simple hunting and gathering to post-industrial capitalism. Not much later, neo-Marxian approaches such as world-systems theorizing (see below) also began to posit evolutionary dynamics flowing from the hegemonic cycles of conflict and competition among societies.

All of these new forms of stage modeling avoided the problems of early models by positing generic forces as driving societal change, from population growth through the dynamism of markets and stratification systems to complex interactions among social structures and culture. Few theories posit a master force as driving evolution; instead, evolution is viewed as a complex interaction among forces. Lenski along with Patrick Nolan has emphasized the effects of technology (knowledge), but this view is tempered with a more nuanced analysis of biosocial environments, the nature of cultural symbols (values and ideologies), institutional systems (kinship, religion, education, polity), and patterns of economic trade and warfare between societies. Stephen Sanderson blends ideas from biosociology (see below) with Marxian analysis, stressing that natural selection still works on individuals (rather than society as a whole), but like Lenski, he stresses that demographic, ecological, technological, economic, and political forces set the stage where selection on the individual occurs. And, like all Marxists, Sanderson sees production and distribution—the material conditions of social life that also generate inequality and stratification—as the fuel behind diverse ideologies, politics,

ecosystem effects, and relations with other societies. Most recently, Lenski has further expanded his evolutionary theory; and so, it is now clear that evolutionary theorizing is back, even if it is not as dominant as it once was at the very beginnings of sociology.

5. Biosocial Theorizing

Darwinian ideas have not only returned with ecological and stage-model theorizing; they have inspired in the second half of the 20th Century an entirely new explanatory effort that goes variously under the names of biosociology, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and evolutionary sociology. Despite important differences in emphasis among these approaches, they all share a willingness to emphasize that human phenotypes, including human behavior and, by extension, human patterns of social organization are influenced by genotypes as these have been altered by natural selection working on phenotypes over the long-run of hominid (on the line to humans) evolution.

5.1. Sociobiology

Sociobiology emphasizes that human behavioral propensities, culture, and social structure are “survivor machines” that house genes and make it possible for them to remain in the gene pool. If properties of these survivor machines allow individuals to reproduce themselves, thereby passing on their genes, they are seen to promote fitness. Thus, those cultural symbols and social structural arrangements that promote fitness—that is, the ability to pass on genes—have been built from blind natural selection as it has worked on the hominid genome. This kind of theorizing has been highly threatening to sociologists who often see it (with some justification) as reductionist or as reducing the complexity culture and society to biology. Yet, a number of sociologists has gravitated toward this form of explanation, analyzing kinship, religion, power relations, marriage, mate selection, and many other social behaviors as manifestation of propensities installed by natural selection to increase fitness.

5.2. Evolutionary Psychology

This approach shares many of the same assumptions as sociobiology, but adds an intervening mechanism: the wiring of the human brain. Natural selection has worked on hominid and human neuroanatomy to generate “modules” in the brain that direct behaviors. Behaviors that appear to be universal—e.g., reciprocity, self-interest, altruism—are the outcome of natural selection as it installed modules in the brain that would increase fitness; and thus, evolutionary psychologists predict that as more is known about the brain, the modules directing universal behavioral propensities will be exposed; and it will be possible to understand how these modules became wired by examining how they enhance fitness among individuals and groups.

5.3. Evolutionary Sociology

A third approach, less threatening to sociologists, involves searching for human nature by examining humans’ closest relatives: the great apes. By comparing the behavior and organizational characteristics of the great apes with the first human societies—hunting and gathering—it may be possible to discern what is biologically hard-wired in humans

as “evolved apes” and what is more purely the result of sociocultural forces. Moreover, by seeing what humans have taken with them from their closest ape cousins, what has been added, and what appears wholly unique to humans, it becomes possible to discern the selection pressures that reworked the hominid and human anatomy and neuroanatomy. Unlike sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, evolutionary sociology does not seek to explain complex social structures by reference to human biology; rather, the goal is to see what kinds of subtle pressures human nature has put on social structures to evolve in ways more compatible with human nature.

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Biographical Sketch

Jonathan H. Turner is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at University of California, Riverside. He received his PhD from Cornell University in 1968, and since the 1969-1970 academic year, he has been at UCR. Within the discipline, he is known primarily as a general theorist, although he has a number of more substantive specialities, including: the sociology of emotions, ethnic relations, social institutions, social stratification, and bio-sociology. He has been Faculty Research Lecturer at UCR, and in the profession, he has been president of the Pacific Sociological Association and California Sociological Association. He is also a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has lectured widely all over the world, and he has been a visiting professor at Cambridge University, UK, Universitat Bremen, Germany, Universitat Bielefeld, German, Shandong University and Nan Kai University, Peoples Republic at China.