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What can be expected from Social Theory in the Era of Post-metaphysics?

Abstract. *There are many complaints nowadays about social theory. On the one hand, theory is considered to be too abstract. The thrust of this approach, accordingly, is to develop a grand scheme that details how society or some component operates. Others argue, on the other hand, that theory is not abstract enough. These critics contend that theory is too particularistic and deals with simply how persons respond to themselves and others. Hence the focus is on interaction within very restricted confines. Each viewpoint merely begins from a different source. By invoking an actual debate that occurred in sociology, the thrust of this paper is to illustrate why the question of abstraction haunts theory. Additionally, an important issue that must be clarified is whether theory has any role without the ability to make generalized or increasingly abstract claims about social life.*

Keywords: *social theory, the question of abstraction, Post–metaphysical Era.*

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *socialinė teorija, abstrakcijos klausimas, postmetafizinė era.*

Introduction

There are many complaints nowadays about social theory. On the one hand, theory is considered to be too abstract. In this sense, theory is ethereal or disconnected from social life. The thrust of this approach, accordingly, is to develop a grand scheme that details how society or some component operates. The results of this drama are broad explanations of behavior or heroic attempts to reinforce the prevailing order.

Others argue, on the other hand, that theory is not abstract enough. These critics contend that theory is too particularistic and deals with simply how persons respond to themselves and others. Hence the focus is on interaction within very restricted confines. This type of theory dwells on narrow patterns of interaction and thus does not explain much about social life. The hope, however, is that gradual expansion will occur.

In both cases, however, the discussions are full of arcane and "insider" debates. Those who are not initiated into this esoteric world have little hope of understanding the twists and turns of this discourse. In the end, neither perspective has much utility but rests mostly on an examination of rarefied themes.

Both approaches, nonetheless, harbor dreams of offering broad insights into how

society functions. Each viewpoint merely begins from a different source. Nonetheless, a particular theoretical maneuver, considered to be sorely out of date by the measure of more contemporary theories, provides sustenance to these desires and the accompanying abstractions. But because these newer theories violate this cherished principle, they are often treated as epitomizing self-indulgence and beyond the pale. Bauman (2005), for example, refers to their efforts as liquid and unproductive.

By invoking an actual debate that occurred in sociology, the thrust of this paper is to illustrate why this question of abstraction haunts theory. Additionally, an important issue that must be clarified is whether theory has any role without the ability to make generalized or increasingly abstract claims about social life. In this sense, a lot is at stake with respect to the future of social theory.

In fact, Habermas declares that social theory must change dramatically in the current or Post-metaphysical Era. At this time, while grounded in the *Lebenswelt*, or life-world, so-called "Grand Theory" is problematic (Holmwood 1996). On the other hand, however, "particularistic theory" is not the only option. Indeed, such a turn would stifle any discussion of institutions, group life, and related issues. The range of theory, instead, can expand but only as far as social discourse permits; in other words, the boundaries of a community delimit the rage of theory. This expansion, in other words, is not simply a structural or methodological issue but an existential question.

Grand Conceptual Design

The central task of traditional theory has been providing an overall picture of how society operates. Talcott Parsons (1951) initiated his contribution to this trend in the 1950s, with the publication of his book *The Social System*, while following the lead of both Auguste Comte and Durkheim. What Parsons shared with his predecessors is the desire to provide a solution to the Hobbesian problem of order. In short, these writers believed their respective societies were on the verge of collapse, and thus a remedy for this unsavory condition was urgently needed.

In order to preserve society, a normative base had to be provided. In this way, the proliferation of norms, or *anomie*, could be halted. Achieving such an objective, however, required the installation and general acceptance of a non-contingent framework. A uniform set of norms would be thoroughly internalized, in other words, only if these standards were considered to be universal. For this reason, Durkheim (1983) declared that society constitutes a "reality *sui generis,*" while Parsons proceeded to describe social life to be an all-encompassing system. Both of these images, in effect, represent updated versions of Hobbes' Leviathan.

These solutions to the problem of maintaining order depend on what Levinas (1998) calls old-time metaphysics. Specifically, a locale is assumed to exist where absolute principles can reside divorced from perspective and other human inventions. These norms, accordingly, have the stature required to overshadow all other options

and rebuff successfully any challenges. In a manner consistent with the Western philosophical tradition, Parsons and his fellow travelers rely on this escape from contingency to secure a reliable foundation for truth and order. In this way, according to Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (2007), "first philosophy" has shaped mainstream cultural studies and social theory.

As a consequence of this maneuver, the resulting portrayals of social life are incredibly abstract. The adopted theoretical designs, accordingly, tend to obscure how persons construct their lives and relationships. Daily existence, for example, is described to consist of a mélange of structures, networks, and roles. And while such descriptions may inspire confidence that order is secure, society is barely recognizable. Everyone is simply part of an ominous mechanism that forestalls the dissolution of order. Persons and their relationships are thus obscured by the imperatives of the social system. For this reason, Ralph Dahrendorf declares that Parsons' rendition of this system is formalistic and, thus, provides a truly fictitious description of social life (Savage, 1981).

(Re)introduction of Humans

As a reaction to this trend, George Homans and his supporters announced that any adequate depiction of social life must be more attuned to individuals and their interpersonal exchanges. Theory, in short, must be less abstract. In this regard, Homans (1964) declared his intentions in a famous article written in 1964, entitle "Bringing Men Back In", where he declared that

humans must be given a prominent place in any acceptable social theory. The idea behind this title is that Parsons, with his abstract system building, focused on roles rather than persons. The rendition of persons Homans has in mind, however, is very problematic.

At first, this redirection seems to be needed and perfectly sound, particularly in view of the speculations of Parsons and his fellow realists. But Homans makes an alliance with B.F. Skinner that, in the opinion of many theorists, calls into question his entire program. The fundamental objection they raise is: Are persons merely "black boxes" whose behavior can be explained as the sum of stimuli and responses?

Many critics, in this regard, began to dismiss Homans' truncated version of humans as inappropriate for disciplines such as sociology. The term dehumanizing, for example, began to be applied at this juncture, due to the emphasis placed on an ingrained "reflex arc" that records and directs all the actions that slowly become equated with psychological propensities. Such reductionism simply misconstrues persons and their social relationships and thus is unacceptable. Simply put, such psychology overlooks the symbolic intricacies of the social world.

Nonetheless, assuming that humans operate in the manner described by Skinner enabled Homans to imagine that sociology could eventually disclose universal laws of behavior. After all, stimuli and responses can be conceptualized clearly and measured precisely, without any interference from perceptual anomalies, selection bias, or

other so-called subjective elements. Only a lack of methodological rigor would stifle the discovery of basic principles of interaction. Indeed, Homans (1967) imagined that sociology could eventually propose a set of laws similar to those extolled by physics that would explain how persons interact.

In the end, Homans' project culminated in exchange theory and the identification of several axioms that specify the conditions that are necessary for persons to initiate interaction and continue any relationship. And consistent with the position of Skinner, this theory is predicated on the belief that interactions can be quantified, weighted, and easily contrasted, so that exact rules of exchange can be specified. If certain human propensities can be transformed into algorithms, Homans illustrates that entire systems of exchange can be documented and formulated into a coherent interactional scheme. This framework, in fact, resembles the dynamics that are presumed to be at the core of economic exchanges at the marketplace.

Finding a Middle Ground

Into this context, Robert Merton (1968) introduced the idea that sociologists should strive to develop "middle range" theory. What he wanted to avoid were the extremes represented in this debate thus far. He believed that sociology would not progress as a discipline so long as the focus is either the abstractions of Parsons or the reduction of interaction to uniform psychological propensities pursued by Homans. Neither strategy, he believed, would result in meaningful

social insights or sound policies. Something more "intermediate", as he says, is needed (Crothers 1987).

In order to avoid these extremes, and the resulting abstraction, sociologists should study phenomena that are both social and measurable. For example, instead of trying to describe the role of farmers in an abstract social system, or in terms of an all-encompassing interactional algorithm, research might be conducted on farmers in the South. In this sway, verifiable information—"delimited aspects of social phenomena"—can be accumulated about this group that might gradually be expanded into a comprehensive thesis about farming (Crothers 1987). As opposed to the proposals advanced by Parsons or Homans, this knowledge will reflect how farmers perform their tasks and try to fulfill their social obligations. In other words, their actual behavior will be the focus of attention.

Although Merton wants to avoid abstraction, he presumes that generalizations might be possible in the long run. Broad theories, in other words, might be formulated under the proper conditions. The key problem, however, is that the social sciences are currently immature. But with time, and the necessary technical advancements, methodologies can be developed that permit the sophisticated analysis of vast amounts of data. Such improvements, accordingly, will foster the growth of increasingly expansive theory. Merton's maneuver, in the end, is simply tactical.

Most important at this point is that there is nothing unique about the human condi-

tion, according to Merton, that places limits on the generation of theory. Any problems are simply logistical and will surely be solved by improved methodology. Hence Merton is simply saying that middle range theory is acceptable for only the time being. But with more advanced methodological techniques, and the proper training, more expansive theory is inevitable. The traditional goal of offering broad explanations of behavior can thus finally be achieved. The gambit made by Merton, accordingly, is merely a tactical maneuver that does not violate the goals of Parsons or Homans. At this time, writes Merton (1968), the prospect of achieving grand theory is simply premature.

Legitimacy of Abstraction

The problem with theory development thus far is that all roads seem to lead to abstraction. Each position is consistent, in this regard, with the traditional first philosophy—the pursuit of ultimate foundations—that encourages this outcome. Within this context, abstraction is not only legitimate but expected, since finite knowledge is basically flawed and must be transcended. After all, valuable knowledge is unaffected by quotidian concerns, or *doxa,* and universal.

Presupposed by this scenario is that escape from the everyday world is not only possible but necessary to obtain pristine knowledge. Theory, in the classical sense of this term, represents the ability to reach a higher level of thought or insight that is untrammeled by mundane concerns and the associated limitations. In the parlance of social science, the operative principle is to strive for increasing generalizability. And as explanatory power expands, the quality of the resulting theory is enhanced.

But how is this transcendence executed? Throughout the history of Western philosophy, this transition has been made with the assistance of strategies such as reflection, meditation, or prayer. With social science, this maneuver is supported by a more practical means that Jacques Ellul (1964) calls "technē." Specifically, methodology serves as a neutral conduit that, if operationalized properly, can remove biases from the acquisition of knowledge and allow researchers to confront social reality. A purely observational language is thus available. The result is the opportunity to grasp real knowledge and build more expansive theory. Particularly noteworthy is that the "natural language problem" and the accompanying issue of interpretation that Joseph Weizenbaum (1972) claims plague system building are allegedly overcome.

But the thesis that justifies this finding and the resulting theory has been discredited in various philosophical circles, in addition to several disciplines. Using a typical differentiation, the ontological or fundamental distinction between the particular and universal is no longer valid. Both have identical properties, and thus the designation of universal is simply a practical determination. Striving for increased abstraction, accordingly, does not necessarily lead to more profound insights and has lost legitimacy. Universals, in other words, say more about the researcher, and the process of operationalization, than the nature of social reality.

In view of this change in outlook, what is the role of theory? What can theory accomplish, in other words, with access blocked to the establishment of grand conceptual designs and all-encompassing algorithms?

No Escape from Contingency

Habermas (1992) has declared that philosophy has now entered a "post-metaphysical" era. Despite his equivocation on this change, others have made their views quite clear. With Husserl's claim that all knowledge is "intentional", along with Wittgenstein's treatment of language as a "game," the metaphysics linked to first philosophy and the "representational thesis" is defunct (Rorty 1984). Furthermore, a myriad of more recent writers, such as Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, and Rorty, has expanded these initial analyses to discussions of truth, methodology, and ethics.

In each case, the key principle is that knowledge and order, for example, can no longer be viewed to exist *sui generis*. The reasoning behind this shift in orientation is very simple: with any neutral standpoint undermined, the flight from everyday existence that characterizes traditional theory is no longer feasible. As described by Enrique Dussel (1985), in his philosophy of liberation, every investigation must begin and end with the world that persons create, maintain, and sometimes try to destroy; every escape attempt is marred by worldly considerations.

Phenomenologists refer to this realm as the *Lebenswelt*, or "life-world" (Husserl 1970). Knowledge and order are thus thoroughly embodied in the issues that concern persons; knowledge, in other words, is always mediated thoroughly by the human presence, thereby transforming reality into an "accomplishment" (Garfinkel 1967). Rather than existing *sui generis,* any mode of social reality is sustained only by further collective action. Roland Barthes (1986) makes this point when he says that objectivity is merely a convention perpetrated by the accumulation of interpretations.

Various modes of sociology have taken seriously this challenge to abstraction. For example, phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists, and some symbolic interactionists have attempted to rethink many facets of social life without the aid of dualism and the accompanying inability to make grand proclamations about social laws and the operation of society. But they have suffered a dire fate because of this shortcoming. Particularly, they have been labeled "micro-theories", and thus are considered to have little to say about serious topics, such as power and other aspects of institutions. In this regard, such approaches to theory are not thought to contribute much to the advancement of sociology as a respected discipline.

But does theory disappear with the onset of post-metaphysics? The answer to this query is clearly no. Nonetheless, much of traditional sociology must be re-examined in view of the challenge to the abstractions that have been invoked regularly to substantiate knowledge and order. Stated simply, sociology and the associated theory become much more of a worldly affair! The reflection provoked by sociological theory leads

to neither to transcendence, a grand conceptual scheme, nor a final explanation. Theory, accordingly, is forced to deal with issues that haunt the quotidian realm. In the end, what is possible is theorizing from the "life-world."

What can Theory Deliver?

This anti-metaphysical turn has been made before. But this time the aim is neither ultimate clarity nor the final delimitation of reason. Such ends, in fact, are within the bailiwick of the old metaphysics and out of reach. Likewise, the usual descriptives—such as causes and structures—adopted by sociology are outmoded, since the move beyond contingency they are designed to foster is not possible.

What theory can provide legitimately, however, is an account of how knowledge and order are enacted without the standard abstractions and the social implications of such a maneuver. Phenomenologists and symbolic interactionists, for example, have certainly moved theory development in this direction, but with limited appeal. Theory, in this sense, is undertaken within ambiguous and contingent institutional arrangements and the attempts to give these associations legitimacy. Reflecting within these processes thus requires a serious reorientation of traditional sociology. Here are some possible issues that theory based in the life-world could address:

1. Construction of "worlds." In the absence of a transcendent signifier, the social world should not be portrayed, for example, as an abstract system or algorithm. Now any sensible depiction of society must be mediated thoroughly by the human presence or action. The result, as Foucault (1989) maintains, is that reality does not exist *sui generis* but is carved up in many, and often very diverse, ways through human intervention. Theory, accordingly, can provide an account of the constitution of these worlds and how they influence behavior (Nancy 2007). These worlds may inspire behavior, for example, but this influence should not be misconstrued as causing or determining outcomes.

2. The Constitution of knowledge. Traditionally truth claims and normative expectations are judged against a-historical or objective referents. And any advances are thought to be assessed in terms of successive approximations to these standards. But in the absence of any prospect for such correspondence or representation, the focus should be on how truth and facts, for example, are socially constituted and maintained (Lyotard 1984). A vital part of this analysis, furthermore, is how certain forms of knowledge become dominant and marginalize other possibilities. For example, how does certain knowledge come to be viewed as objective and factual? Critique of this process is thus an essential part of all discussions of knowledge claims and the accompanying theory.

3. Explanations of behavior. Without the aid of first philosophy, behavior cannot be explained in causal terms. Especially noteworthy is that causes can no longer be treated as autonomous agents. Due to the pervasiveness of human action, or "interests", as Habermas (1971) calls them, should be understood to mediate the constitution of social phenomena and prioritize all responses to these elements. Social indicators and all reactions to these factors, for example, are now symbolically laden, and can only be unraveled by the reflection provided by theory. The "biography" that inundates behavioral patterns, in other words, can be elucidated by theory, so that accounts of comportment are experientially informed (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

4. Order without integration. The standard discussions of order have also benefitted from traditional metaphysics. System imperatives and the accompanying imagery, such as structures, are thought to sustain order without any ambiguity. As a result, order is able to confront and control persons. But because this traditional autonomy is no longer acceptable, order must emerge from the life-world and, thus, represents the gradual creation of solidarity (Dussel 1988). Instead of providing an outline of grand systems and similar schemes, theory can chart, for example, how communities are formed and maintained. These intri-cate discourses, along with their implications for various organizations, are certainly worthy of attention and hold the key to creating successful policies and other interventions.

The point of these suggestions is to illustrate that in the absence of grand theorizing sociology is not condemned to collapse into obscurantism. Theory, in other words, does not have to represent simply an internal turn that culminates in interminable reflection on philosophical questions—which is the standard criticism of phenomenology and similar approaches. Theory, instead, can have a coherent program that deals with pressing issues that affect key institutions.

Conclusion

The result of this end of metaphysics is that theory is local; the point of post-metaphysics is to "summon humans back to their historicity" (Zabala 2005; 9). Therefore, as opposed to grand schemes, only "little pictures" (petite narratives) of how social worlds are constituted and influence behavior can be conveyed legitimately by theory (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985). But this limitation does not signal a serious fault with theory, contrary to the position taken by Merton.

In more contemporary terms, any limits that are placed on theory are existential rather than procedural. The human condition, simply put, is anathema to traditional first philosophy and defies maneuvers that lead to abstraction. The collective *praxis* that deploys the social world is always situational and, in this way, contingent, even

when the designation absolute is applied to some outcome of this process.

The picture that theory can offer, in fact, is restricted by the human presence. Therefore, the expansiveness of theory depends on how social reality is dissected by human action, rather than simply overcoming methodological flaws. And although what is possible may not qualify as "macro-theory," important social processes can be revealed, discussed, and critiqued. For example, how biography shapes choices about health care, or seeking treatment, is vital to successful social planning.

Anyway, so-called macro-theory has always been a fantasy! As the so-called "new culturalists" have discovered, how institutions emerge from social action, yet are still perceived to be autonomous, is one of the many significant themes that can be examined through theory (Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010). Offering such grounded observations, however, does not necessarily deprive sociology of status, particularly subsequent to the collapse of metaphysics announced by Habermas. Instead, the prospects for social theory simply become compatible with the inability to escape from the world of *praxis,* contingency, and how social life is constructed in the face of others and competing interests.

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SANTRAUKA

KO GALIMA TIKĖTIS IŠ SOCIALINĖS TEORIJOS POSTMETAFIZIKOS AMŽIUJE?

Šiandieną socialinė teorija laikoma problemiška sritimi. Kai kurių kritikų požiūriu, teorija yra labai abstrakti. Abstrakčios teorijos paskirtis – išplėtoti koncepcinę sistemą, kuria remiantis būtų galima sukonkretinti, kaip funkcionuoja visuomenė ir sudedamosios jos dalys. Kitų kritikų požiūriu, teorija – nepakankamai abstrakti, orientuota pernelyg partikuliaristiškai ir nagrinėja tik tai, kaip konkretūs asmenys atsako sau patiems bei kitiems. Šios teorijos akiratyje – sąveika labai apribotuose kontekstuose. Abu šie požiūriai remiasi skirtingomis prielaidomis. Šiame straipsnyje, orientuojantis į dabartines diskusijas sociologijoje, siekiama išnagrinėti, kodėl abstrakcijos klausimas socialinei teorijai yra svarbus. Taip pat analizuojama, ar ir kaip teorija išplėtoja gebėjimus formuluoti apibendrintus ir abstrakčius teiginius apie socialinę tikrovę.

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