

The Theory of Theory

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ABSTRACT

Theory is supposed to consist of a proposition that can be tested. Sociology is supposed to be the study of behavior of social groups. Hence Sociological theory is a set of propositions about social behavior. Hundreds of articles exist in the Sociological Abstract database about "sociological theory." A perusal of these articles shows points of view rather than testable hypotheses.

Theory is supposed to consist of a proposition that can be tested, whether it is theory of the physical world, as in Physics, or theory of the social world, as in Sociology. In Physics right now, there is a debate between two groups of physicists, some of whom are looking for the underlying, unifying essence of all reality which they now approach with pure mathematics. Others say, "Shut up and calculate," meaning to restrict thinking to that which can be measured and to forget about pure mathematics. These contending forces are aptly described in an hour long video by Physics professor Al-Khalili (2006). What is the parallel situation with theory in Sociology?

It was easy in the Sociological Abstracts database to find 100s of articles published in scholarly journals in the past 9 years dealing with Sociological Theory and to select a couple dozen choice ones through their titles and abstracts. This is what was revealed to me: there still is not anything close to a sociological theory; there are only points of view. Furthermore, these points of view are often about individual dispositions or individual points of view rather than about social behavior.

Also, where Sociological theory is concerned, much of it tends to remain obscure. For example, King (2009) says:

a number of commentators have employed Wittgenstein's 'sceptical paradox' to demonstrate that the dualistic account of social reality provided by major figures in contemporary social theory such as Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar and Habermas is unsustainable; it is individualist. This paper acknowledges the importance of Wittgenstein but maintains that a critique of contemporary social theory consonant with the 'sceptical paradox' was already present in the sociological canon: in the form of Parsons' utilitarian dilemma in *The Structure of Social Action*.

Do you know what that means? I think he means that Parsons had Wittgenstein's 'sceptical paradox' embedded in his theory of social action. But Parsons' social action is not a theory at all. It just says that there *is* social action, that it is from the individuals' point of view, and that it is a component of behavior. That provides nothing to measure, and it provides nothing of social behavior for social action is viewed from the individual point of view. Barbalet (2009) reaches back to 1805 to resurrect Hazlett's theory of human action, and it, too, is social life as seen through the eyes of an individual's "interest" – and there

is no way to measure what is in an individual's interest. Still another article speaks of exchange benefits—something only measurable from the inside of an individual's head (Dooan, et al, 2009). An article by Kim (2009) claims to have a way to test Bourdieu's field theory of science. Bourdieu's field theory is what the actor sees in his field, so it, too, is subjective.

Other articles went on in obscure ways to try to lay out what is considered Sociological theory, but most remained obscure, trivial, or psychological from my perspective. It seems to me that in order to have a theory, we have to have a question, and we do not yet agree upon the question in Sociology. In physics, the question is what is the elemental particle, the building block of physical reality. For a while, it was thought to be the atom. Then the atom broke down. When physics came up with two answers to that question, their question became how to reconcile the two points of view. Now their question is whether they are supposed to have concepts that yield something to measure or whether they are to pursue pure mathematics on the belief that nature must rest on something essential which would be captured by pure math.

What is the question of Sociology? What is the building block of society? So far, it appears that we have come up with two or possibly three answers: the building block is social agreement, for without it there is no group. Or the building block is power with its implied conflict or potential for conflict, for without power of one over the other, there would be no movement. A third way to look at the building block of society is to look at where it is built, and it is built almost by definition between two actors, in social interaction, the impetus for which and result of which might be either consensus or conflict, power of the group or power of one actor over another in a group.

References

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