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Jonathan H. Turner Responds:

Some Problematic Trends In Sociological Theorizing

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INTRODUCTION

An assessment of trends in sociological theorizing should perhaps begin with the question: Why is there so little theory in sociology? Professor Gisela Hinkle's stimulating paper summarizes rather well some emerging types of intellectual activity, such as Marxist analysis, critical theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and other emerging alternatives to more dominant modes of analysis. Indeed, proponents of alternative viewpoints all have reason to be dismayed over the current state of sociological theorizing, but each is unlikely to resolve sociology's theoretical problems. While symbolic interactionism, structural-functionalism, and other "establishment" theoretical orientations are sadly deficient as theory, the newer alternatives are even more deficient. They make for good philosophy, social criticism, or epistemological stargazing, but in their present state, they do not represent sound approaches for building theory. And thus, to the extent that these alternatives represent future trends, sociology will remain an immature science.

In commenting on Professor Hinkle's paper, therefore, my remarks will focus on why sociology has so little theory and why some of the current trends will take us further from Auguste Comte's dream of a "science of society." I will begin by taking issue with several of Hinkle's assertions, and then, move into a more detailed critique of trends in sociological theory.

QUESTIONS ABOUT HINKLE'S ASSESSMENT

While Hinkle's overview of current trends in sociology is basically sound, she makes several assertions which, I feel, are incorrect. First, she notes that "American sociological theory has been construed predominantly within a positivistic-empiricist and deductive-rational frame, molded after the natural sciences." I can only wish that this were true, but unfortunately one finds very little deductive theory in sociology and even less concern with discovering the universal laws of human organization. In the physical sciences, for example, concern is with discovering the universal laws of the physical universe, but in sociology such concerns, sadly enough, are often viewed as premature (Merton, 1968) or as not possible (Blumer, 1969). Instead, we have a disproportionate emphasis on empirical inquiry in which every concept must be operationalized in ways that facilitate its correlation, through the wonders of multiple regression and the computer, with other operationalized concepts. Thus, what we have in sociology is a pile of statistically significant findings that have very little, if any, theoretical significance.

Secondly, I think that she has confused new areas of intellectual activity, such as structural-linguistics, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, critical theory, and the like, with trends. I would view a trend as a new activity that is gathering a growing following and that has changed, or is changing, the direction of sociology. I doubt that many of the "trends" that she describes fit this definition. I do not see waves of students or professionals abandoning their Duncan SES Indexes or computers to read Hussrel, Schutz, Lévi-Strauss, Kierkegaard, Sartre, or Garfinkel. There has always been a sociological fringe which has debated the issues of "meaning," "reality," "epistemology" and other heady philosophical topics, but recently they have "come out of their closets" and posed some important and penetrating questions. But few have listened. And to be truthful, I am not sure that sociologists should until their challenge moves beyond philosophical mysticism and begins to demonstrate how their approach can lead to abstract principles about the social universe.

Despite these critical remarks on Hinkle's paper, let me emphasize

that she has done sociology a service. We should be concerned with trends in our discipline, or if not trends, new issues. For in describing what is new, we are in a better position to see if it holds any promise as an alternative to present modes of sociological theorizing. Moreover, Professor Hinkle has done me a personal favor in providing an occasion to think about what is occurring in theory and by extending to me and to others "an invitation . . . to further intellectual dialogue." I gratefully accept this invitation and will continue the dialogue with my own observations on trends in sociological theory.

THE TREND AWAY FROM SCIENCE

Not only will critical theory, Marxist sociology, phenomenology, and other alternatives take us further away from science, but so will what now passes for science in sociology: "positivism." Although positivists and their critics seem like strange bedfellows, I think that they have one tendency in common: the tendency to be atheoretical. They take us away, albeit in different directions, from the goals of all science: to discover the universal laws of what Radcliffe-Brown (1957) once termed "natural systems of the universe." Each arrests our imagination and prevents us from seeing that it is possible to discover invariant laws of human organization. Anti-positivists do this by asserting that social structure is not real, that human action is only understandable with entry into the human mind, or that laws of human organization are always time-bound. Positivists do this by becoming so obsessed with correlations among specific variables tied to particular times and places that the art and act of abstraction eludes them.

I would like to elaborate upon these charges by focusing on several topics: (1) What should sociological theory be? (2) What should sociological theory be about? (3) How should sociological theory be built? (4) Can positivism save us? Answers to these questions can, I feel, help us to see the depressing trends in sociological theory, and maybe they can also let us see the way out of our current intellectual morass.

(1) What Should Sociological Theory Be?

In sociology, we rarely practice what we preach in books and courses on theory construction. For a long time, the Weber-Parsons vision of theory held the stage and emphasized the construction of category systems, but contrary to Hinkle's assertion, this is not deductive theory. Rather, it represents a biological vision of explanation as classification: If an empirical event can be subsumed under a category that is linked to another category, then "explanation" has occurred.

One reaction to Parsons' grand conceptual scheme has been to construct causal models, using correlational techniques of the British agronomist, Karl Pearson (Willer and Willer, 1973). These models do more than classify, but unfortunately, they cannot become abstract, since they correlate empirical events. Another reaction has been to assert that, since human action is spontaneously constructed and reconstructed, the "definitive concepts" necessary for deductive theory cannot be developed (Blumer, 1969). Rather, only "sensitizing concepts" are possible — a position that relegates sociologists to perceptive observers and ex post facto commentators. Yet another reaction is from critical theorists who are so busy criticizing "the system," legitimating their own value premises, and thereby bending reality to fit their biases, that they probably see as "irrelevant" the task of building theory. Marxists suffer from similar problems and from the additional conviction that any "laws" are historically bound to particular epochs. Phenomenologists are often somewhat more philosophically inclined interactionists, or if not this, they are pre-occupied with intellectual probes into the nature of consciousness — thus abandoning the task of theory building. Ethnomethodologists have increasingly sought to demonstrate the theoretical utility of their assumptions with conversational analysis — a task which has yet to demonstrate the soundness of their position and which certainly has not yet led to any general laws of human organization.

Our theoretical approaches, then, do not offer us a very good model of what theory should be: the development of universal laws, for all times and places, about why and how humans organize themselves the way they do. To phrase the issue this way seems to be (take your pick): "premature," "platitudinous," "naive," or "just plain stupid." But this should be the goal of a science of society. Theory is abstract and not tied to observables; and it should be simplifying. It does not try to operationalize every concept; it does not try to account for the weights of, or control for, every empirical variation. Rather, it seeks to state the nature of basic relationships of the universe, as is done in physics with the formulas $f=ma$ or $E=mc^2$. If a thinker came up with the sociological equivalent of such powerful theoretical statements, I can visualize the reaction: "Where are the operational definitions?" "That's just too abstract." "What about the level of meaning?" "That's just bourgeoisie formalism." And so on. But $E=mc^2$ provides no operational definitions; it is not tied to observables; and it does not seek to measure the impact of specific empirical forces. It states the nature of a fundamental relationship of its universe.

True, sociology is a long way from such statements, but not because we are a young science, not because our universe is more complex, and not because we confront unique and difficult methodological problems.

Rather, such statements are not likely to be developed in sociology because past and present trends have led sociologists to believe that they cannot do this, or if they can, we first need to collect an impressive mound of empirical observations. This fear of abstraction is, in my view, the most destructive trend in sociology: We have lost Comte's vision of "social physics," of a true science of society. We are intellectually inhibited and fearful of statements that are not tied to observables. This is the real tragedy in sociology and it is the reason that we feel somewhat embarrassed around "real scientists" and it is perhaps the reason why in some academic circles sociology is yet to be recognized as a "real science."

(2) What Should Sociological Theory Be About?

Durkheim (1893) stated the matter well and Radcliffe-Brown (1957) stated it even better: Sociology studies that "natural system in the universe" involving relations among people. It studies what goes on between people, leaving it to psychology to study what occurs inside of them. Many "trends" in sociology reject this assertion, arguing that it is not possible to develop laws of social structure without penetrating human consciousness. The reality of psychological variables can never be questioned, nor can the potential of an interstitial like "social psychology." But we have lost the vision of what sociology's main charge is: to discover the laws of social structure.

Despite the recent trend of proclaiming sociology to be "overly structural," (Buckley, 1967; Homans, 1974), such is not the case. Most of our "theories" are about processes, such as conflict, exchange, role bargains, impression management, socialization, symbolic interaction, and so on. But our structural units are extremely vague: We have Parsons' (1951) "social system," "collectivity," and "institutional system"; Dahrendorf's (1959) "imperatively coordinated association"; Blau's (1966) "organized collectivity"; Homans' (1974) "institutional piles"; Emerson's (1976) and other's "social networks"; and Merton's (1968) "socio-cultural item." Thus, we have a series of concepts about processes among vague structural units.

It would seem that the nature of processes might be affected by the nature of structural units. There may be "laws" applicable to all structural units, but it is also likely that we will require more specific principles pertaining to different levels of social organization or different types of units. But surprisingly, one sees very little effort to discover the abstract principles guiding generic levels or units of social organization.

Thus, past and present trends have kept us from recognizing that sociologists study social relations and the structural forms that these relations take. Until sociology returns to this basic issue and concentrates its theoretical energies on this task, we will remain theoretically immature.

(3) How Should Theory Be Built?

The reaction to Parsonian functionalism reached a feverish pitch in the 1950's (Turner, 1978). At the same time, some dismay was expressed over mindless empiricism or what Mills (1959) called "methodological inhibition." Merton (1968) supposedly "resolved" the grand theory vs. empiricism debate by advocating something called theories of the "middle range" — thus setting into motion another unfortunate trend. Merton's vision was not necessarily inadequate, but it was used by less thinking intellects to buttress and legitimate several harmful trends:

(1) The notion of "middle range theories" legitimated empirical work in any social context because it would, so it was believed, eventually have theoretical relevance as consolidation of empirical generalizations into theories occurred.

(2) The middle range ideology kept sociologists from questioning some of their professional-political divisions and sub-fields. It thus legitimated the partitioning of the discipline into sub-fields which probably do not correspond to endemic units of analysis or to areas requiring distinct theories (what, for example, is the theoretical justification for "sociology of education," for "Marxist sociology," for "medical sociology," for "marriage and family," and so on?).

(3) The middle range ideology corresponded with, and encouraged, an over-concern with methodological technique, with ways of analyzing data which often make adherence to current methodological protocols more important than theoretical conclusions.

(4) Through an over-concern with technique and empirical generalizations, a generation of sociologists have become atheoretical, more concerned with reaching statistical than theoretical significance in their work.

The result, then, of the over-reaction to the deficiencies in the grand conceptual schemes has been to turn sociology away from the search for general theoretical principles to the over-concern with statistically significant correlations about empirical events which are selected more for political-professional reasons than for their theoretical relevance or importance. This partitioning of sociology into atheoretical sub-fields serves well the interests of funding agencies, the editors of journals who crave scientific respectability, and the personal-professional needs of Ph.D. sociologists for "scholarly productivity." But it does not serve the interest of sociology as a science, concerned with discovering the laws of

human behavior and organization.

(4) Can Methodological Technique Save Us?

The current "cult of methodological and statistical technique" is not, in itself, a harmful development. Sociology needs ways to gather and analyze data about the world for both descriptive and theory-testing purposes. But increasingly these techniques are viewed as a substitute for theory. Whether guised as "network analysis" or "causal models," statistical and mathematical techniques for analyzing data must, by necessity, remain tied to the empirical world. They cannot become highly abstract, and hence, they describe rather than explain empirical events. Thus, methodological techniques cannot become theory, but unfortunately, the current trend is in the direction of viewing econometrics as "real science."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The ultimate goal of all science is to create theory — that is, abstract principles that explain why events should occur. Theory pulls away from the empirical world in an effort to become abstract, whereas methodological techniques move toward the empirical world in an effort to capture the specific nuances of particular situations. Thus, the belief that methodological technique is theory, or can build theory, is totally antithetical to the goals of science.

Theory building is a creative act that involves intuitive genius, a sense of logic, knowledge of the empirical world, and the ability to ask and answer basic questions. Theory is not created by correlations among, or mathematical models of, observable events. These procedures will be useful in testing theories created by those individuals willing and able to pull away from specific events, times, and places.

SOME PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS

Recently, a few theorists have taken seriously the task of sociological theorizing: to develop abstract principles that explain the basic properties of social structures. In their own way, Richard Emerson (1976; Turner, 1978) and Peter Blau (1977) have attempted to construct axiomatic theories of social structure. Starting with certian axiomatic assumptions, each has sought to develop corollaries and theorems that can help understand the nature of various forms of social structure.

This kind of theorizing represents a healthy alternative to present-day theoretical efforts. And indeed, I find it curious that Hinkle fails to mention these efforts, particularly Blau's. Hopefully, these first efforts at true theory, as opposed to systems of conceptual categories, points of philosophical contemplation, and tables and diagrams of correlation coefficients, will mark the beginnings of a new theoretical movement. For unless these efforts initiate a new trend, we will continue to wait in vain for the Comtean vision of a "science of society."

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Alvin Boskoff Responds:

On Recent Theoretical Trends In Sociology: Remembrance of Things Passed

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Given the murky waters of sociological theory in recent decades, Gisela Hinkle has done a fine job in summarizing the varied entrants into the theoretical pool in which sociologists recurrently dip. She has identified (1) the recent diversity in orientations, (2) the alternative assumptions, and (3) the ways in which theorists borrow from such fields as philosophy and linguistics. Since her analysis is avowedly short, I would like to take this opportunity to go beyond identification to the importance but more difficult matter of interpreting and evaluating these "trends."

First, and very briefly, there are some recent theoretical strands that should be included in a survey of trends. Mention should be made of "general systems theory" (as tentatively applied by Buckley and others); "labeling theory" (e.g., Lemert, Schur, Scheff); neo-evolutionary theory (in the more recent work of Parsons, as well as Lenski, and Doby, Boskoff, and Pendleton); the application of rational-economic notions to varied social phenomena — an important extension of exchange theory in the work of Blau and others; and the development of ethology and sociobiology as attempts to explain simple and complex

forms of human social behavior and organization. Consequently, contact with other disciplines seems to include a renewed and wider borrowing from biology, physical anthropology, and modern economics.

Now, I would like to turn to the delicate question: what is the **significance** of these theoretical trends?

1. In most instances, the "new" contributions are more conceptual, methodological, or ideological, rather than strictly theoretical — particularly those that have a philosophical or linguistic derivation (e.g., ethnomethodology, structuralism, phenomenology, and existentialism). They deal with important questions of a **preliminary** nature — what are appropriate or ignored dimensions, what experiences are crucial, what new dimensions should be sought after, how should we identify patterning or diversity? But the overwhelming thrust of these "orientations" is not **theoretical** or **explanatory**; it is either descriptive-analytical or partisan-ideological, criticizing "uncongenial" (not factually limited) patterns of social phenomena or justifying some form of social action (e.g., violence, conflict, apathy, alienation).

2. Because theoretical questions are often vaguely stated or even absent, many of these new tendencies implicitly offer a view of sociology as amorphous, unstable, uncertain, and perhaps as a series of playful exercises in modern Scholastic speculation. I can find in most of these developments little that outlines the contours of sociology, of what sociology can distinctively contribute to the **understanding** of social behavior and social organization. Unlike the situation a generation ago, of course, sharp boundaries for disciplines are no longer viewed as necessary or desirable. But surely it is necessary and desirable to delineate some identifiable core for sociology before we can relate or compare "sociology" with other partial approaches to human social phenomena.

3. The "newer" orientations or trends in or around sociology are largely and significantly **not new**, but renewals of issues, controversies, and ideas of the '20's and '30's — issues that were not effectively resolved then, and in my opinion, no more crucially confronted in the past decade or so. For example, the Marxist-critical orientation was prominent but not popular, as espoused by radical sociologists like Bernhard Stern, Robert Lynd, V. F. Calverton, Theodore Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. Likewise, the **sociological** thrust of such developments as phenomenological, existential, and ethno-methodological orientations seems to be a conceptual-methodological echo of themes in Thomas and Znaniecki, Znaniecki himself, G. H. Mead, and others in the '20's and '30's. And that wonderful mixture of ideas called "structuralism" is mainly compounded of (1) a recurrent search for underlying patterns, traceable to Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Simmel, Small, Lévy-Bruhl, Freud, Weber, and a host of others, and (2)