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THE NEW BLACKWELL COMPANION TO

Social Theory

EDITED BY

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Introduction

A New Agenda for Social Theory?

BRYAN S. TURNER

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Social theory provides the necessary analytical and philosophical framework within which the social sciences can develop. Social theory both sustains the achievements of the past, notes the needs and limitations of the present, and points the way to future research issues and questions.

Any attempt to offer a generic definition of social theory is confronted immediately by the important differences between various sociological traditions. In considering social theory within a broad international framework, we need to recognize that sociology is inevitably colored by different local, national, or civilizational circumstances. Polish sociology is obviously very different from American sociology. The growth of nationalism and the nation-state had a profound effect on the early development of social theory in Europe in the nineteenth century, and World War I brought to a tragic conclusion the enormous developments in sociology in both Germany and France. In the late twentieth century, social theory has also been responding to the specific national or regional manifestations of information technology and cultural consumption in new theories of globalization. In developing this *New Companion*, I have therefore been conscious of the fact that there has been an important cultural and intellectual gap between American and European social theory. While Europeans tend to look towards Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber to define the foundational contents of classical sociology, American sociologists are more likely to consider John Dewey and G. H. Mead as crucial figures (see CHAPTER 10). This hiatus between American and European traditions, for example by reference to pragmatism, can often be exaggerated, but the division is nevertheless real (Baert and Turner 2007).

While there are important local and national contexts for the growth of social theory, the *New Companion* attempts to recognize a range of generic issues that inform its analytical content and substantive direction. There are a number of basic presuppositions to any sociological theory that we need to take into account

(Alexander 1987). Let us take four illustrations. First, there are basic questions about the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of social theory that have a general relevance. These include fundamental questions about the relationship between social action, social practice, and social structure. Secondly, there are generic issues about the rationality of action, the difference between behavior and action, and the question about intentionality and unintended consequences of social action (see CHAPTER 9). Thirdly there are also general features of social systems that remain relevant to theoretical inquiry, regardless of specific or local concerns. There are also important debates about the relationship between ethical issues, political power, and the social functions of social theory. These debates shape the responsibility of intellectuals towards public life. Finally, there are systematic questions and problems relating to the intellectual relationships, for instance between anthropology, political science, and economics as components of social theory. These questions relate to the structure and boundaries of the social sciences as methods of understanding social phenomena.

WHAT IS SOCIAL THEORY?

Why should we take social theory seriously? Before we can answer this question, we need to grasp what is meant by “social theory.” As a preliminary distinction, let us say simply that “sociological theory” is a sub-set of this more general characterization of “social theory.” Answering this question about what constitutes social theory is complicated, but the task may be rendered easier by looking at some historical examples. Defining social theory apparently used to be an easy matter. Let us take two early accounts of social theory before looking at some contemporary approaches. Writing in the revised edition in 1970 to *A Reader’s Guide to the Social Sciences*, Peter Blau and Joan Moore felt it sufficient simply to distinguish between grand theories of large-scale change and middle-range theories that were more closely tied to empirical data. Encompassing theories of social institutions in general were still undertaken by sociologists like Pitrim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons, but they noticed that “[i]ncreasing numbers of empirical studies are theoretically oriented, addressing themselves to problems posed by social theory and seeking to refine theoretical principles on the basis of empirical findings” (Blau and Moore 1970: 20). As leading examples, they cited the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Michael Trow, and James Coleman (1956) on union democracy and George Homans (1950) on *The Human Group*.

In making this distinction, they were of course reflecting on the notion of “middle-range theory” that had been developed by Robert K. Merton in his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1963) as a response to criticisms of general theories that were deemed to be too abstract and general. Merton, probably the most influential American social theorist of his generation, noted that various types of academic work were frequently lumped together under the notion of sociological theory – methodology; general sociological orientations; analysis of sociological concepts; *post factum* sociological interpretations; empirical generalizations, and finally sociological theory itself. Lamenting the all too frequent disjunction between empirical research and systematic theorizing, Merton developed the idea of theories of the

middle range as illustrated in his own development of reference group theory. The problem of connecting social theory to empirical work and vice versa has, however, remained an endemic problem in sociology.

Let us take another early attempt to define theory, namely Leon Bramson's essay on "Social Theory" in *A Guide to the Social Sciences* (1966). Bramson usefully distinguished between three fundamental meanings of social theory. In the first it simply means any attempt to understand the nature and workings of society. In sociology "social theory has meant the effort to try to explain social phenomena in the same way in which the facts of the physical world were explained by the burgeoning natural sciences" (Bramson 1966: 185). In short, social theory comprises the attempt of the social sciences such as economics, sociology, and demography to explain social phenomena or "the social." But Bramson noted a second meaning, namely the development of normative theories of what would or should constitute a "good society." In this sense a social theory is not simply descriptive and explanatory but normative and prescriptive, possibly establishing strategies to create a better world. This second meaning has been highly contested since it is held that any *scientific* theory of society should be value-free and value-neutral. This defense of a scientific view of social investigation which is sometimes referred to as a positivistic orientation has been characteristically legitimized by reference to Max Weber's famous essays on objectivity in the social sciences edited by Shils and Finch (1949). Finally, Bramson noted that social theories were often part and parcel of political ideologies such as fascism and communism in the sense that, for example, Lenin's theory of the party is a "social theory" of how politics works and how to organize revolutionary activity. Bramson usefully thereby brought to attention that social theory, however overtly value-free, is necessarily bound up with actual social movements and social classes. One example would be the fact that Weber's own theories of leadership became a fundamental aspect of German politics partly through the influence of the jurist Carl Schmitt.

What might one say about contemporary attempts to define social theory? Most textbooks of modern sociology have an introductory section on either sociological theory or social theory. One influential account of sociological theory was offered by Walter Wallace, who argued persuasively that theory was simply part of the general process of sociological inquiry involving methods, observations, empirical generalizations, hypotheses, and theories. In particular he noted that theory has two crucial roles. It specifies the factors that the researcher should be able to measure *before* an inquiry and, secondly, "theory serves, *after* the research is done, as a common language (i.e. the empirical generalizations) may be translated for purposes of comparison and logical integration with the results of other researchers" (Wallace 1969: x). One good example is Richard Jenkins's *Foundations of Sociology* in which under the subheading "The Necessity of Theory" he apologetically notes that the question "what is the *point* of theory?" is among the "most common questions asked by non-sociologists and students" (Jenkins 2002: 31). He goes on nevertheless to assert that broadly defined "sociological theorizing involves the creation of abstract models of those observable realities in order to aid our better understanding of what goes on in the world of humans," and furthermore theory is at "the core of sociology's distinctive perspective" on the world of humans.

From this brief and incomplete survey, we might note that the major issues in social theory are related to: (1) the relationship between theory and empirical research, or, more naively, between concepts and facts; (2) the relationship between theory and values or between scientific inquiry and (moral) judgment; and (3) the relationship between academic work (within universities and research institutes) and the wider society, or between theory and politics. These issues have to some extent always been prominent in modern social theory – consider Karl Marx’s attempt to overthrow the alleged idealism of Hegel and to proclaim that the real point of philosophy was to change the world and not merely to understand it.

TWO METAPHORS FOR THEORIZING

We can shift the emphasis of this introduction by thinking less about what social theory is and thinking more about how social theory gets done by reference to two metaphors. First, we might think metaphorically of social theory as a scaffold that helps us explore data and move around social reality rather like workmen moving about the outside surface of an office block. Theoretical scaffolding permits us to examine social data from many angles, and in particular as a normative exercise to detect major faults in the social fabric – such as a condition of anomie – that might require repair. The relationship between scaffolding and buildings is interactive and mutually supportive. We cannot get around the face of the building without the support of the building itself. This metaphor may help us to encapsulate the view that theory without empirical work is empty, but empirical data without theory are blind. Theory helps us to build an edifice of concepts and explanations to understand social reality.

Of course, metaphors are always limited. The idea of scaffolding might suggest a relatively neutral and universal system of concepts, by implying a passive relationship between data and theory. To move to a second metaphor, possibly the best short definition of social theory has been proposed by Barry Markovsky (2005: 834) in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia of Social Theory* as an “argument” in which the “author of the theory offers the argument in an attempt to convince readers that one or more *conclusions* must follow from a series of assumptions or *premises*.” I will modify Markovsky’s definition to say that a theory is like a legal argument where a lawyer (researcher) attempts to convince a jury (an academic audience) that something is the case by reference to evidence (often incomplete and contested), narratives about agents (that attribute motives, reasons, and causes) as to why and how something took place (a person was murdered for example). A theory is an argument in which the social theorist strives to convince others about the nature of social reality by the use of evidence, narratives, hunches, concepts, and even material objects as “exhibits.” The legal decision is then open to further inspection by legal philosophers as well as by convicted criminals.

In short, theories are rhetorical devices, and this preliminary conclusion suggests that this way of viewing theory is consistent with pragmatism (Baert 2005). Theories survive or fail depending on their rhetorical force in convincing other social scientists that their accounts of social reality are plausible, if not definitive. The plausibility of a social theory will depend on its scope, its precision, and its capacity to guide

us through empirical findings. A good social theory, like a good legal argument, tends to be persuasive, plausible, and parsimonious. Finally we might extend the metaphor to say that, in English common law, legal cases are won or lost in part by reference to case law, that is, to a legal tradition. Good social theories can be cumulative rather than simply discontinuous and fashionable. The problem with modern social theory is that there is more disruption than continuity, and the rhetorical force of sociological argument has lost much of its public plausibility. This *New Companion* attempts to restore some the argumentative force of sociology as an aspect of public culture.

THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

Contemporary social theory can therefore be said to be in a crisis. The context and character of social theory since the 1980s (to select a decade somewhat arbitrarily) have become increasingly uncertain and difficult. As Stephen Turner points out in the final chapter of this volume (CHAPTER 28, these problems are in part related to significant changes in modern philosophy which have in large measure influenced the ways in which sociologists now think about social theory. We can connect this crisis in social theory with the rise of postmodernism, the collapse of world communism, the globalization of neoliberal economics, and the attendant transformations of social life. The postmodern era – which is explored fully by Jan Pakulski in CHAPTER 13 – can be said to have been announced with the publication in French of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, which was translated into English in 1984.

The basic assumption of this *New Companion* is that social theory is in an intellectual crisis, and furthermore this intellectual crisis has important consequences for sociology as an academic discipline as a whole. To care about the future of sociology as an academic practice means that we need to attend to the difficulties of contemporary social theory. This crisis of sociology is in fact part of a larger issue within the social sciences and the humanities. One aspect of this crisis has been a revolution in the philosophy of the social sciences and epistemology whereby the certainties of positivism, empiricism, and objectivism have waned before the insistence that there are no theory-neutral observations of reality, that all theory is context-dependent, and that the pretension of scientific neutrality is just that – a pretension. The problems facing theory were recognized for example in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner’s *Social Theory Today*, where they observed that theory-neutral assumptions about research had been repudiated, and more “importantly science is presumed to be an interpretative endeavor, such that problems of meaning, communication and translation are immediately relevant to scientific theories” (Giddens and Turner 1987: 2). The consequence was an “increasing disillusionment” with the assumptions of mainstream social science.

What is the nature of this crisis? In fact we can speak of a double crisis, namely a crisis of the social and a crisis of its theory. The crisis in social theory can be summarized easily. It involves (1) the fragmentation of social theory into cultural theory, film theory, critical theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and so forth; (2) the widespread abandonment of or skepticism towards classical theory; (3) an

increasing dependency on (continental) philosophy, literature, and humanities for inspiration; (4) a deepening divorce between theory and research; (5) an inability to provide much insight into major modern issues such as environmental pollution, low-intensity warfare and civil unrest, terrorism, famine, and global slavery; and finally (6) a tendency for social theory to become narcissistic, thereby leading to theory about theory or theory about theorists. In this final issue, we can register a distinction between first-order and second-order social theory. In first-order theorizing, there is a concentration on creating an original conceptual framework that is addressed to something. We can take almost any example. The church-sect typology attempts to explain why over time evangelical sectarian movements tend to become denominations with a bureaucracy and professional ministry (Wilson 1961). By contrast a textbook about the sociology of religion such as Richard Fenn's *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (2001) is a book about sociological theories and obviously not as such a theory of religious organizations. There is clearly a place for exegesis and interpretation, but these activities do not, however brilliant, amount to theories of social phenomena.

In more detail, the crisis can be illustrated by reference to the influence of post-modernism, poststructuralism (see CHAPTER 6) and the skeptical pragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty. His reputation was originally built on his philosophy of science, namely *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), in which he argued that philosophers should give up the fantasy that philosophical truths could be simply a mirror of (or to) nature. If there are any philosophical truths, they are not simply mirrors of an objective reality. Because Rorty holds that all observations of nature are theory-dependent and that a correspondence theory of truth is untenable, he rejects realism as a plausible scientific position. Rorty has argued that professional philosophy has ignored the relevance of history to an understanding of philosophical concepts, mainly because philosophers have rejected the view that concepts are context-dependent. For Rorty, the task of philosophers is essentially modest, namely to help their readers abandon outdated ideas and to find more rewarding ways of thinking about society and their lives. As such, philosophy is a product of specific times and places rather than a grand narrative.

This approach to truth claims owes a great deal to John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein, for whom the ability to assert truth claims is a function of language, and language is best seen as a set of social practices. The result of Dewey's pragmatism is to demolish the Cartesian tradition that Truth can be grasped by a Mind Apart, thereby introducing the social into the heart of any debate about truth and reality. Finally, truth does not occur at the level of facts but only at the level of propositions, and objectivity simply means an inter-subjective consensus.

While Rorty's notion of consensus looks rather like the idea that social theory is an argument, there is an important issue that a sociological argument or first-order theory must appeal to some notion of the independence of evidence. In the scaffold metaphor, Rorty might be forced to argue that there is no building beyond the scaffolding; there is only scaffolding. One consequence of Rorty-type arguments is that too much of what passes for "social theory" is simply a reflection on social theory rather than the issues that lie behind it; in other words, it assumes a second-order status. Put simply, I want to claim that theory has to be an argument about *something* and not just an argument about an argument.

What are the elements of the solution to what I perceive as a crisis in modern social theory? These can be enumerated simply as: a defense of classical sociology and the idea of a vital sociological tradition; the attempt to connect and in some cases reconnect sociology with its sister disciplines such as demography (see CHAPTER 22) and economics (see CHAPTER 18); the need to have a strong grasp of historical sociology (see CHAPTER 20); the development of a sociology of human rights and justice (see CHAPTER 25; the importance of attending to major social and political issues; and the avoidance of any artificial choice between sociological arguments and ethical judgments.

DEFENDING A CLASSICAL TRADITION

When sociologists question the value of social theory, they are often skeptical about “classical sociology” in particular, and hence there is an encompassing question that we must confront: why read the sociological classics at all? In this *New Companion*, CHAPTER 1, and CHAPTER 2, are concerned to explore and defend the “classical foundations” of sociology and its legacy. Another major criticism of classical sociology is that it was dominated by the patriarchal assumptions of the period in which it was inaugurated. Feminism and feminist theory have subsequently had major consequences for the ways in which we conceptualize the social and hence for the ways in which we may wish to think about the legacy of sociology (see CHAPTER 12).

There are several preliminary justifications that one might offer for reading the texts of classical sociology. Any pedagogy demands a discipline, and hence the training of sociology students requires the practice of confronting major texts. One cannot properly come to terms with social theory without paying regard to its context, history, and major works. If social theory is an argument, then the actual “textuality” of classical sociological theory needs to be addressed by any serious student of the subject. Furthermore, the sociological imagination has been shaped and continues to be shaped by themes and issues that were established by and within these classical texts – for example imperialism, capitalism, modernity, alienation, and social class. The classics continue to inspire research. One modern example of such an application would be George Ritzer’s use of Weber’s rationalization theory to explain the McDonaldization process (Ritzer 2000).

To reject the legacy of classical sociology often means that students will inevitably have an eclectic, partial, and ad hoc relationship to sociological theory, and as a result they are denied the opportunity to experience the accumulation of both theoretical and empirical research. The result is unfortunately that postmodern readings of sociological texts tend to suggest that anything can pass as “sociology.” Critical responses to the very idea of a canon of sociology leave us with a weak and passive version of disciplinarity. While interdisciplinarity has become a fashionable orientation towards the undergraduate curriculum, there can be no interdisciplinarity without disciplines. If there is an argument in favor of interdisciplinarity, it should be made primarily at the research level and not by reference to undergraduate teaching. Once more it is the classical texts such as Weber’s *Economy and Society* (1968)

that provide the model of interdisciplinarity with its capacity to integrate sociology, economics, jurisprudence, and politics.

The defense of classical texts as a basis for discipline is not therefore simply a conservative or narrow exercise, but merely recognition of the cumulative steps that are necessary in any defensible pedagogy. However, my final defense of the classics rests on the substantive argument that they help us to understand the social world and they establish the foundations for critical and effective interventions into modern politics. If the classics fail in this regard, then they are merely museum pieces.

What we might recognize as the strong program of classical sociology was an attempt to defend the notion of “the social” as an autonomous field of social forces. In practice this defense of “the social” amounted to the study of social institutions or patterns of social action and interaction involving social norms, social constraints, and power. John Heritage (CHAPTER 15) gives a good account of how we can regard conversational practice as a system of institutions such as queues in conversations. Broadly speaking these social institutions are the social forces that bind and unbind communities. “The social” is thus characterized by a dynamic between solidarity (processes that bind us together into communities) and scarcity (processes that divide and break communities). In practical terms, classical sociology involves, on the one hand, the study of the values, cultural patterns, trust, and normative arrangements that underpin institutions and, on the other, the systems of social stratification that express scarcity.

By contrast, in my view the weak program of sociology is the study of the meanings of social actions for individuals in their social relations. The strong program insists that, in the majority of cases, the social forces that determine social life are not recognized or understood by social actors themselves. Indeed there is a sense in which social actors in their everyday lives are not interested in such questions; their orientation to everyday life is pragmatic and practical rather than reflective and theoretical. There is therefore an important difference between the motives and reasons for action in the everyday world and the models of explanation of social science.

Classical sociology as the quest to define “the social” was very closely connected with Durkheim’s attempt to understand “the social” in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1958), in which sociology avoids reference to psychological variables in its explanations of social phenomena or social facts. In more precise terms, the *locus classicus* of this tradition was initially presented in *Primitive Classification* (1963), where Durkheim and Mauss understood the general schema of logical classification as manifestations of social structure. Classical sociological explanations are sociological in the strong sense, because they do not refer to individual intentions as causes of action; sociological explanations are simply indifferent to human psychology. The obvious problem with this definition is that it may appear to exclude Weber from the strong program precisely because he developed a notion of social action that was a response to economics, thereby treating notions of social structure as reified concepts. In response to this problem, it can be argued that Weber’s sociological explanations rested on the notion of “unintended consequences” rather than self-conscious actions of individuals. The idea of unintended consequences in Weber or of ambiguity in Merton’s sociology points to the ways in which the social structure works “behind the backs” of the social actors. More importantly, not all socio-

logical explanations adhere to Durkheim's *Rules*. Insofar as sociological explanations do not employ references to social structure or social facts in Durkheim's sense, they are not examples of the strong program of classical sociology, but they may nevertheless be explanations that one can regard as sociologically useful and persuasive.

It is also important to grasp the fact that classical sociology is a critical discipline, because it represents typically an attack on the taken-for-granted assumptions of bourgeois, utilitarian liberalism. This critical tradition is conventionally associated with Marxism, but here again Durkheim offers the definitive critique of utilitarian individualism. Both *Suicide* (1951) and *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1992) were political attacks on (English) economic individualism and the sociology of Herbert Spencer, and thus Durkheim's professional or academic sociology was constructed as an attack on a particular trend in society that was seen to be destructive of the social. Durkheim's attack on the corrosive consequences of the ideology of egoistic individualism is in this respect the precursor of recent French sociology (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006; Bourdieu 1998).

The double crisis of social theory involves the notion that the social in the modern world is being eroded. Because I have already discussed this issue in the second edition of the *Companion to Social Theory*, there is no need to repeat that argument here. Suffice it to say that the neoliberal revolution in economics has produced societies that depend increasingly on market mechanisms rather than social capital and trust, and give pronounced emphasis to individualism and choice over collective solutions to social issues. Many public institutions are in decline – state universities, public libraries, public broadcasting, public health systems, public transport, and so forth – leading to societies that depend more on voluntary agencies and charities rather than states. The social is being eroded along with social citizenship as the social glue of civil society (Turner 2001). In modern societies more and more social activities are deregulated, outsourced, or privatized, leaving little scope for accountability and little hope of universalism in provision. Even military activities, for example in Iraq, are outsourced to private agencies, with the result that citizens are at risk from military actions for which these private companies are not wholly accountable.

A sociological understanding of the social is also being eroded by the fact that public opinion and public policy are increasingly influenced by genetic rather than social explanations of human behavior. The great revolution in modern biology has produced a number of major breakthroughs in genetics, leading to the quest for genetic explanations of social deviance, individual disorders, and behavior patterns. The notion that, to quote Durkheim, social facts are required to explain social facts is constantly challenged in the media (even when natural scientists themselves may be far more cautious about the scope of explanations of human behavior by reference to genes). Although there is much utopian aspiration associated with modern genetics and much fantasy about for example “living forever” (Appleyard 2007), the ideological power of modern medicine does represent a challenge to the sociologist as a public intellectual. Many of these important issues are discussed by Oonagh Corrigan in CHAPTER 17, and to some extent by Darin Weinberg in CHAPTER 14.

Although I have emphasized the importance of early versions of classical sociology (especially Durkheim and Weber) as the foundation of social theory, this defense

implies no conservative stance towards modern social theory. On the contrary, a robust sociological tradition must be open to new ideas and perspectives such as actor network theory (CHAPTER 7), the sociology of the body (CHAPTER 26) or theories of mobility (CHAPTER 24). There is in any case an intellectual depth to sociology that we must not neglect or underestimate. In this *New Companion* I have felt it important to include such traditions as ethnomethodology (see CHAPTER 8), and phenomenology (see CHAPTER 11), which offer creative ways of looking at social structures and appropriate methodologies for sociology.

THE SOCIAL AND THE POLITICAL

While the social and social theory have been deeply challenged by postmodernism, by the changing nature of the social, and by the rise of genetic theories of social behavior, there is some evidence to suggest that the fortunes of political theory have been more encouraging than those of sociology. In this introduction I want to consider what “social theory” might learn from the recent history of “political theory.”

In 1962 Isaiah Berlin published an article on the question “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” (Berlin 1962). This article alone did much to reverse the uncertain fortunes of political philosophy in British universities, to establish a program of what political theory was about, and distinguished political philosophy from political science. Berlin and his students did much to steer British political studies in the direction of political theory rather than political science. The article outlined his objections to historical determinism in the social sciences, which included both American political science and, more importantly, Marxist historical determinism. The intellectual background to this essay was the impact of linguistic philosophy on the idea of “political principles,” which had led Peter Laslett (1956: vii) to claim provocatively that “For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead.”

The political background to Berlin’s liberalism was communist authoritarianism and the Cold War, and the ensuing struggle to defend liberalism and individual rights against authoritarian governments. His overt aim was to defend the idea of philosophical inquiry into the causes and nature of politics, and hence the need for political philosophy in the first place. Berlin consequently regarded sociology with some degree of suspicion. For him, “sociology” sounded too much like “socialism,” appeared to embrace deterministic arguments, and claimed with too much presumption to be a science. A Jewish refugee from the Soviet system, Berlin came to intellectual maturity against the background of European fascism. His commitment to liberal political theory and his antagonism to sociology were hardly surprising. At least in Britain, sociology in the 1950s and 1960s had strong affiliations with Marxism and developed the analysis of social class as one its principal research objectives. Berlin’s suspicions about the intellectual association of sociology with socialism were not entirely unfounded.

In the 1950s there was a sense of malaise in political philosophy, at least as it was taught in British universities. As I have indicated, there is also a sense of contemporary malaise in social theory in which the impact of posthumanism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism have brought many to assume that, with the “cultural

turn,” there was little to distinguish literary theory from social theory (see CHAPTER 28). In European universities, social theory is increasingly subsumed under cultural studies or cultural theory (see, however, CHAPTER 19, by Jeffrey Alexander and Isaac Reed, who develop a robust defense of the program of cultural sociology).

I propose immodestly that to revive sociology today we need an argument that will answer the hypothetical question “Does sociological theory still exist?” with the same decisiveness that Berlin answered Laslett’s accusation that political theory was comatose. The current challenge to social theory remains closely connected with the traditional issues of social action theory (see CHAPTER 4). It is clear that the conundrum of institution and action is yet another way of describing the debate about agency and structure, or structuration in Anthony Giddens’s theory of the constitution of society (Giddens 1984). However, in retrospect it seems to me that the real point of the debate was lost in theories that became too abstract to be useful. If social structure is over-emphasized, one moves towards a highly deterministic theory of action. If individual agency is over-emphasized, then one has an individualistic, not a sociological, theory of the social. But what is the real point of this contrast between agency and social structure?

If modern sociology wants to be relevant to modern society, especially in a period of globalization, it has to develop a sociology of rights, an understanding of how the rule of law functions, and an objective theory of justice (see CHAPTER 25). To do this, it needs to go beyond a general cultural relativism (Turner 2006). People can only have rights if they have moral autonomy – that is, if they are moral agents. This moral autonomy cannot work if we assert a mechanistic theory of causality. This is the classical liberal Berlin-type argument, and it is correct. However, if people have rights, in the strong sense, then they must also have duties. Where does a sense of duty come from? Moral duties are typically inscribed in what we as sociologists call “culture” – an umbrella term that includes morality, values, and religion. In a largely implicit way, sociology is the study of the duties (mores, morals, norms, and values) that are important in creating the social. The separation between sociology and law in the modern university has had severely negative consequences for sociology, because the sociological study of norms, institutions, and social action now takes place quite separately from jurisprudence. This institutional division between legal and sociological reasoning was not characteristic for example of the intellectual context of classical sociology. In a related field, the study of rights has become largely the concern of jurisprudence and political philosophy; the study of duties – or normative institutions – has been the task of sociology, but you cannot have rights without duties and vice versa, and you cannot have political philosophy without sociology.

JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Sociology has also been impoverished by its separation from political theory for at least one obvious reason. Political theory has been especially concerned with questions of rights and justice. But sociology rarely considers justice; its major concern has been inequality (that is, the sociology of stratification), not injustice as such. When sociology comes to study justice, it is often simply concerned with the indi-

vidual and the subjective apprehension of justice. The examples are few and far between: Barrington Moore on *Injustice* (1978), Morris Ginsberg *On Justice in Society* (1965) and Garry Runciman on *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (1963). Sociological relativism means that it is difficult to formulate critical theories about gross inequality. Relativism means that we cannot, as sociologists, criticize modern-day crises in capitalist societies, only describe and account for their ideologies.

For social theory to exist in some sense as a vibrant and important part of sociology as a discipline, it has to throw light on problems of major contemporary concern. A relevant social theory should not be a theory about theorizing, that is, it must be something more than a metatheory. In my estimation the major contemporary problems are the changing nature of warfare, the impact of biotechnology on human expectations (see CHAPTER 17 and CHAPTER 26), the growth of cosmopolitanism (see CHAPTER 27), the relationship between technology, science, and society (see CHAPTER 23), the degradation of the environment, globalization (see CHAPTER 16 and CHAPTER 24), and the growing incivility of the public sphere. In all of these situations, the assertion of and claims for rights are central issues.

An important distinction between sociology and politics is that political philosophy has been primarily concerned with the question of justice, and hence the analysis of rights arises necessarily from a concern with the justice and legitimacy of political regimes. By contrast, sociology often portrays itself as “value-neutral,” and hence it does not raise normative questions about justice or rights. Sociology approaches these normative issues indirectly, for example from the study of inequality. The paradoxical consequence of this concentration on empirical studies of income inequality is that sociology typically does not study equality directly. Equality is merely the absence of inequality, and not, as it were, an independent phenomenon. Normative debates about equality and justice are buried under empirical and descriptive analysis of inequality and injustice. For mainstream sociology, injustice is translated into a value-neutral study of social stratification as simply an empirically given hierarchy of different income levels. Because anthropologists and sociologists have typically been either positivists or relativists, they have not developed an analysis of justice and rights, and therefore they have failed to engage with the most significant institutional revolution of the twentieth century – the growth of universal human rights. Because sociology has withdrawn from the issues covered by international relations as a subject area, it does not have much to say about many macro political issues: regime change, international intervention, international wars, famine relief, and so forth.

AGENCY AND STRUCTURE AS A FRAMEWORK

An intellectually exciting sociology can never be merely the study of significant contemporary problems; it has to make a lasting contribution to sociological theory. What examples do we have from British sociology, given my focus on Isaiah Berlin and British liberalism, that might be instructive with respect to the analysis of political problems? One example might be taken from the research of John Rex, who