

Culture, History, and the Problem of Specificity in Social Theory

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Two different approaches have been involved in the project of developing “general” theory in sociology. The first of these seeks breadth, richness, or far-reaching application. The theories of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, for example, are said to be general because they can be applied to so many areas or dimensions of social life. They are thus contrasted both with theories of the middle range (*pace* Merton 1968) and with the very local theories which are proposed and tested in most sociological research (e.g. the “theory” of the demographic transition, or even more the basic building blocks in Stinchcombe’s 1968 conception of sociological theory). In the second approach theory is held to be general on more positivist grounds, because of its relative success in producing universally applicable, preferably lawlike statements.

The first of these understandings points to a virtue of the classical tradition of sociological theory, the attempt to build theories adequate to the understanding of social life in its full richness. It accepts rather too easily, however, the claims of the classical theorists – or at least most of them, most of the time – to be able to grasp with a single theory the sum total of instances of “society” or “social life.” Even more, this understanding follows Parsons in exaggerating the extent to which the classical theorists were developing theory which was independent of specific historical and cultural contexts, and which was about a similarly abstracted notion of social life. In fact, Marx especially

and in many ways Weber were quite attentive to the historical (if not always the cultural) specificity of social theory. This is one reason why their conceptual frameworks, although very broad in reach, were always developed in close relationship to specific empirical historical accounts; their abstractions were not free-floating but historically specific and determinate.

The second understanding of general theory derives from a widespread modern notion of science as discovery of universal truths. Durkheim was its main expositor among classical social theorists.¹ This second understanding of generality does not have to do with reach so much as with universal validity, certainty, positivity. It shapes not only debates over general theory but sociologists' folk imaginings of what physical scientists do: (1) theorizing about universal phenomena, (2) making universally valid statements about restricted scopes of phenomena, (3) attempting to make specific empirical or abstract propositions add up to maximally general ones, and (4) attempting to deduce specific subsidiary theories as special cases of more general ones.

This project has been challenged in a variety of ways. It has been shown, for example, that putatively universal laws were either false or applicable only within a very narrow empirical scope (e.g. innumerable claims about "human nature" have been shown to apply only or primarily to the American college students of the 1950s or 1960s who formed the population from which research subjects were drawn). This challenge, of course, strikes only at particular theories; though it complicates the inductive dimension of positivist theory-building, it does not in itself invalidate it. Similarly, the argument that sociology shows few, if any, cases of either the deduction of successful local theories from more general ones, or of the combination of tested propositions and/or local theories into more general ones does not demonstrate that the discipline cannot in principle do better in the future. In some ways, epistemological critiques are more damaging. The hermeneutic argument against the easy assumption of the pure facticity of observations (let alone survey or interview responses) suggests the fundamental impossibility of a theory pure in its empirical as well as its logical positivism. This challenge is often presented in such a radical way, however, as to make all research seem pointless because no secure grounds

can be given for comparative evaluation of results. Paradoxically, perhaps, this tends to lead researchers to feel justified in ignoring the critique. In any case, theory of the sort challenged thrives, even where the challenges would seem on philosophical grounds to have been fatal. At least the beginning of an explanation for why lies in the very separation of “abstracted empiricism” from “grand [read, in part, general] theory” which Mills (1959) critiqued two generations ago.

I want to turn my attention in this chapter not towards further epistemological critique, but to the question of what sort of work should be offered as an alternative to both abstracted empiricism and positivist grand theory. One of the problems of many epistemological critiques is that they have seemed to endorse or entail a relativism so thoroughgoing as to make empirical research – and most scholarly discourse – meaningless. I want to argue not only for the importance of empirical work, but for the essential mutual implication of theoretical and empirical work. Specifically, my claim is that most good sociological theories – especially those which attempt to grasp social life in something of its fullness – need to be culturally sensitive and historically specific. My argument is not just for the virtues of history and ethnography, but for the virtues of a theory which can take both of them seriously. Yet, let me stress in advance, this is an argument for theory – including both empirical and normative theory, and theory of very broad reach – and against extreme relativism. It offers two cheers for particularism, but suggests that though theoretical groundings are always by nature incomplete, they are nonetheless achievable in some proportion and worth pursuing. The kind of theory I advocate would be continuous with cross-cultural and historical description, but not identical to them because the explanations the theory proposes would purport to anticipate or account for cases beyond those for which they were developed (*pace* Lakatos 1970 and, in passing, Stephen Turner’s essay in chapter 4 of this volume).

Four sections follow. In the first, I shall elaborate on what I mean in my statement of theoretical desiderata by “culturally sensitive.” In the second I shall similarly explore the notion of historical specificity. The third section will take as given my claim that social theory should be culturally sensitive and historically

specific, and ask just what such theories should look like. The final section will discuss briefly the relationship of the project suggested here to some aspects of so-called postmodernism.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

By advocating cultural sensitivity, I mean that we should be attentive to problems of difference in a way social theorists seldom have been. Social theorists are too fully the heirs of the Enlightenment when they accept an ideology of science based on decontextualized truth claims, and when in both empirical and normative ways they join forces too uncritically with Enlightenment universalism. Though the latter in particular has certain normative virtues, grounding aspects of liberalism which have not outlived their usefulness, it also poses serious problems.

The very scientific attempt to sever empirical theory from normative theory has contributed to normative theory's problematic over-commitment to a culturally insensitive Enlightenment universalism. Normative theory has continued to adopt an eighteenth-century view of human beings as essentially interchangeable individuals. Both the individualism and its usual corollary that individuals are or should be essentially similar are problematic and ethnocentric. This is somewhat ironic, since critiques of Western ethnocentrism are often couched in the language of liberal individualism; they are in essence arguments that the underlying similarities of individuals are more important than the apparent cultural (and other) differences among them. There are even cases where extreme relativism and strong universalism actually meet in a shared individualism. On the one hand, assertions that there are no generally defensible grounds for normative judgment make this individualism into a declaration of the inevitability of arbitrary subjectivity; on the other hand assertions that certain moral injunctions (like the Kantian categorical imperative) must apply everywhere make an alternative individualism the basis for claiming to discover implicitly universal grounds for morality. In this sense, both that branch of modernity which has lately traveled under the name of postmodernism and the explicit Enlightenment modernism

proclaimed for example by Habermas suffer from weaknesses of cross-cultural sensibility. The former strain of thought is apt to make cultural difference into an insuperable barrier to both general discourse and normative critique. The latter is apt to reduce cultural difference to mere positions in a developmental scheme or grant it no theoretical significance whatsoever.²

Enlightenment universalism with its impoverishment of cross-cultural outlook informs not only the normative theories directly in its lineage but the bulk of universalizing empirical theoretical discourse. The idea that we can make significant general statements true of all human action, or human beings, or society at large is its heir. Such a notion is not false, I might add, for I believe there are some such statements to be made. Rather, problems arise when theorists try to make such statements beyond a very narrow range of minimal and generally highly formal and highly qualified propositions. There is a long-standing critique of this sort of ethnocentric positivism, which is not worth reproducing here.

The recent struggles between self-proclaimed postmodernists, poststructuralists, and similar thinkers, on the one hand, and adherents of the Enlightenment project of modernity as rationalization on the other, however, suggest that the normative dimension requires more comment. One of the virtues of the work of Foucault, Derrida, and a number of other fellow travelers has been to thematize the importance of difference. Here I will only point schematically to two lessons to be learned.³

The first I would call the importance of fundamental differences of value. Universalist thought tends towards the position that there can only be one set of fundamental values; others can be justified to the extent that they are derivative from these. These are not generally concrete norms, as they might be in Aristotelian thought, but categorical or procedural injunctions. For Habermas (1984), famously, these are held to be implicit in the validity claims of all speech (to intelligibility, truthfulness, rightness or appropriateness, and sincerity). Since any responsible participation in communicative action must be open to redemption of these implicit validity claims, Habermas can claim an empirical basis for his normative theory, and indeed for expecting its developmental advancement. The relevant catch,

for present purposes, comes with his decontextualized treatment of the giving of reasons. He combines a neo-Kantian philosophical groundwork with speech act theory and Kohlberg's account of moral reasoning as a hierarchical sequence of stages in which justice is conceptualized in progressively more abstract and general ways. As the now famous Kohlberg–Gilligan debate makes clear, however, this understanding of moral reasoning privileges one mode over others.⁴ It grants greater validity and rationality to “post-conventional” moral reasoning (that which is maximally universalistic and in which the giving of reasons for moral judgments is oriented to a decontextualized discussion of formal, general “rights” or other principles of decision). So, generally, do the courts and most philosophers and other arbiters of moral judgment in the West. But do Kohlberg or Habermas offer an adequate basis for denying that a partially particularistic, situated moral reasoning based on ideas of care rather than abstract justice should not be considered comparably “advanced”? I think not. Though Habermas does stress the importance of conceiving human beings intersubjectively rather than individualistically, he does not advance this approach to a fully social understanding of morality. Rather, he returns moral judgment to a Kantian realm of decontextualized individuals. He does not consider whether the best moral judgment might not begin with relationships rather than individual persons, for example. Indeed, if (as seems true) the very notion of individual is culturally and historically specific, this affects normative statements incorporating it. And human individuals may be non-equivalent in varying ways internal to cultural formations or historical epochs. The non-equivalence, non-interchangeability of men and women in our own and nearly every other culture is of major import for moral theory (see Young 1987, on the problems built into the assumption that justice must rest on impartiality). More to the point of the present discussion, Habermas never questions that moral theory requires that all moral questions be rationally decidable, at least in principle, and that there be a clear and singular hierarchy of procedures and reasons for moral judgments. In other words, within the scope of Habermas's theory (and not just where he bases his work on Kohlberg) there is no room for recognition of a plurality of orientations to reason or action as equally meritorious.

Secondly, we should appreciate not only differences of value but the positive value of difference. In other words, contrary again to Habermas's vision, cultural difference among human societies and differences among people within societies or communicative communities is in itself desirable. Like the inherent desirability of a multiplicity of species in the biological world, there is an intrinsic advantage to the production of cultural variation. This is, of course, not an unlimited advantage; like most others it can reach points of diminishing return and must be hemmed in by other fundamental values. Nonetheless, difference is good. Freedom entails difference, it seems to me, and creativity may well depend on diversity. Moreover, social integration and reproduction both depend on at least some sorts of difference. Habermas does grant solidarity a place alongside justice in his account of basic social goods, and recognizes Durkheim's arguments for the possibility of solidarity based directly on reciprocal need (and hence difference). Yet social integration based on communication would seem to depend at least on a full respect for difference, if not an actual value on it, since it depends on a mutually empowering discourse across lines of difference (Calhoun 1988). Empirical social theory which does not fully address cultural and interpersonal difference at the most fundamental levels reinforces the tendency of normative theory to devalue difference. Here we confront the complicity of theory in the normalizing process to which Foucault (e.g. 1965, 1977a) has drawn our attention.

Related to these two points is the need for social theory to recognize the cultural construction (rather than autonomy) of putatively general categories. Race and gender, for example, need to be seen as sociocultural organizations of roles and identities, not simple derivations from the alleged facts of biology. This much has been a staple of sociological wisdom for generations. The step which many sociologists do not take is to recognize the fundamental significance of such categories. Even many self-declared feminist sociologists, for example, address issues of gender only by adding the variable of sex to established research paradigms like status attainment. They do not consider how the cultural construction of a categorical opposition between male and female shapes the very way in which we conceptualize society. Nor do they reflexively evaluate the place

of gender in scientific practice as more than a problem of material opportunities for female graduate students and scientists (cf. Harding 1986). A genuinely culturally sensitive social theory has to analyze and ask about the implications of the fact that we live in a deeply gendered world. Similarly, such a theory must go beyond the opposition between seeing race as a biologically given category and, by deconstructing its biological foundation, acceding to a claim that it exists only in the eyes of the biased observer. The latter sort of liberal critique of racism returns to the Enlightenment notion of essentially similar individuals. Just as a really serious feminism is about rethinking the categories of gender, not just getting women to wear business suits, so a really serious approach to race must begin with the cultural production and reproduction of race as a socially salient category and involve basic categorial rethinking, not merely reduction in objective consequences of racial sorting. We must recognize the assimilationist bias built into the liberal critique of racism.

One of the implications of trying to take difference seriously is that theory must be contentful, not purely and exclusively formal. There is certainly room for purely formal theory, but it must be recognized that it cannot and does not stand alone as an enterprise.⁵ Social theory can only be constructed on the basis of some explicitly or implicitly induced knowledge of the world. The categories used in declaredly purely formal theory – categories like gender, race, class, individual – are always at some level culturally specific inductions. This is not simply a flaw which is to be avoided or minimized by maximally abstract and artificial definitions of the phenomena under study, but rather the occasion for making clear the immanent relationship of any theory to its own empirical context and history. Making this relationship clear is not simply a prolegomenon to theory construction, but the primary means of establishing connection between the most fundamental categories of a theory and the empirical world on which they purport to have purchase.⁶ The place of empirical content in theory, and especially the assertion that basic categories are always linked to such content, raises the problem of theoretical generality in a particularly provocative way. We can approach this by looking at the problem of translation and evaluation across cultural boundaries.

Peter Winch's *Idea of a Social Science* (1958) set off a controversy about cross-cultural imputations of rationality which poses fundamental questions for the notion of general social theory. Winch argued that it was irrevocably the case that different cultures had different standards of judgment, and that it was therefore necessary to admit of a plurality of standards of rationality. This much I think has to be granted. Winch also argued, however, that it was impossible to translate among and compare these standards of rationality in a way that did justice to the internal meaning of each, or justified treating any one of them as superior to the others. Our preference for our own must be seen as purely arbitrary and accidental. It is primarily around these latter points that debate has raged (see the collections edited by Wilson, 1970, and Hollis and Lukes, 1982), foreshadowing in some ways aspects of "postmodernism." Most claims that there is a single universal standard of rationality are really claims for the absolute superiority of one standard, and are compatible with recognition that other people may act on other standards, though arguers may wish to deny the label of rationality to those standards.⁷ The fundamental questions are: can we translate among very different cultures (or, at the extreme, among any differing discourses), and on what grounds can we claim superiority for one standard of judgment? These are very hard questions and I do not propose to attempt an answer here. Rather, I want simply to raise certain implications of the debate for the practice of social theory.

The problem of translation arises at two levels. The first is the difficulty of rendering observations, interpretations, or propositions in language which is neutral and equivalent across cultural contexts. In other words, to take a simple example, sociologists are apt to use a single term like "family" or "monastery" to refer to a range of concrete instances which are designated by varying and not entirely synonymous terms in different languages. This may be inevitable and even necessary, but we need continually to remind ourselves of its problematic nature. There is no self-evident warrant for treating a Buddhist "monastery" as a token of the same type as a Catholic monastery. Rather, our use of a single term to refer to both is an assertion about their commonality. The type is our construct; it does not inhere in some external reality, and like any construct it is language- as

well as referent-dependent. We modern Western (and especially English-language) sociologists are remarkably prone to treat extensions of terms defined within our linguistic and institutional universes as though they were transparent, neutral and able to fit precisely in culturally variant contexts. But the problems which arise from the fact that "monastery" may not mean precisely the same thing as the terms from other languages which we gloss with it, or indeed that "class" and its putative synonyms may not refer to the same categorical constructs in all Western (let alone non-Western) settings are ultimately the easier of the two sorts of problems of translation. The problems of translation in this sense begin with the potential looseness of fit in any linguistic exchange, even in conversation between competent speakers of the same language. Each speaker may refer to slightly different things by the same term, fix the term slightly differently in the web of intra-linguistic associations, and intend or experience slightly different emotional feelings or perlocutionary effects. Ordinary conversation allows a good deal of redundancy, as well as opportunities for checking and exploring understandings, as ways of dealing with this. The problem is similar, though much more complex, when cross-linguistic understanding is sought.

The second level for the problem of translation arises when we seek to understand linguistic meanings which are not simply different from our own, but involve incommensurable practices. It is one thing, for example, to learn that dozens of shades and hues of blue have different names, and that recognition of the phenomenal differences may depend in part on learning the categories by which they are labeled. The misunderstanding which might have come from translating terms for azure, faience and turquoise all simply as blue can be remedied fairly straightforwardly. Indeed English has a great many color terms which are familiar to artists and not common in ordinary discourse; these may allow for progressively better translation. The situation is made simple by the fact that the English speaker and the speaker of the other language are engaged in similar practices when using names for colors. It becomes a great deal more complicated when translation is attempted among practices which are fundamentally different, and especially so when those different practices are incommensurable with our own. Practices

are incommensurable, Charles Taylor (1982) suggests, when they are incompatible in principle, when they cannot be carried on simultaneously. Rugby football and soccer are thus incommensurable, because each is organized according to a different set of rules, and the rules conflict in fundamental ways (e.g. with regard to whether carrying the ball is a legitimate tactic or a foul). As this example suggests, we may know about and have the capacity to participate in a multitude of incommensurable activities within our own daily lives and cultural contexts. This does not mean, however, that we can easily translate among them. How would we make rugby understandable in terms of soccer (literally, in terms of, not simply in relation to or to a player of soccer)? The challenge becomes more complex and more theoretically salient when we take up the issue of translating between incommensurable practices in very different cultures – say, comparing traditional Chinese and modern Western medicine.⁸

In this case, the two sorts of practices are different in form and content, in mode of reasoning and material prescription, but they make competing claims to something of the same practical efficacy. When they are brought into relationship with each other, they are naturally apt to become competitors. It is, moreover, nearly unavoidable that some judgments of their relative efficacy will be made (at the very least by consumers, if not by “disinterested observers”). This is so precisely because they are incommensurable and not simply different. Chinese traditional medicine is also at least as much different from Western architectural practices as from Western medicine, but it is not incommensurable with the former in the same sense, and indeed Chinese traditional medicine is happily practiced in Western-style buildings.

The point of all this is to suggest that overcoming ethnocentrism in social theory involves not just appreciating differences but coming to terms with incommensurable practices. The implications of this are somewhat surprising. It is commonly assumed that the appropriate approach to cross-cultural understanding, the antidote to ethnocentrism, is simply to suspend critical judgment. This is sometimes made into a ground for thoroughgoing relativism. The importance of understanding incommensurable practices, however, challenges this relativism.

To be sure, a first principle for understanding the practices of people very different from oneself is to suspend the sort of critical judgment one might apply to apparently similar practices in one's own culture. One should first attempt to understand just what the practice is, not categorize it immediately on the basis of its surface similarity to practices with which one is familiar. Unfortunately, too many sociologists do not take seriously the difficulty of this first step. As Taylor says (1982: 93): "The very nature of human action requires that we understand it, at least initially, in its own terms; that means that we understand the descriptions that it bears for the agents. It is only because we have failed to do that that we can fall into the fatal error of assimilating foreign practices to our own familiar ones." But generally, at least as researchers and social theorists, we do not wish to stop with this effort to understand an action in its own terms. Indeed, where investigators claim that such an understanding is the sole object of their investigation, they are generally disingenuous. They are engaged in an investigation which is itself outside of the practice they are investigating; they try to render practical knowledge discursive; they write articles and books aimed at audiences not composed of participants in the practice (or else urging participants to take a somewhat distanced stance towards their own practice). More generally, researchers usually are quite explicit in their intention to achieve, minimally, a translation of the practice into a form understandable in some discourse outside of that practice – usually that of the researcher's scholarly associates. Anthropologists do not go to New Guinea simply to become Papuans, or Ilongat, or what-have-you, they go in order to return and reveal something of what it means to be Papuan, or Ilongat, or what-have-you. Translation is thus a vital part of achieving social knowledge.

But is translation *per se* a good description of how the anthropologist or other investigator first achieves understanding? Largely, especially for the best fieldwork, I think not. In the first place, the knowledge of a practice is in many cases itself a largely practical, intuitive, even embodied *sense* (cf. Bourdieu 1976, 1977) not objectified in discourse. Even for purely discursive knowledge, however, the process of achieving understanding across lines of cultural difference does not seem to be one of

translation as such but of a richer, more complex discourse. Interlocuters – anthropologist and informant, say – engage each other in a process of gradually improving understanding, which must be conceived in dynamic terms. Both the anthropologist and the informant are changed by it. They achieve the understanding precisely because they change into people who can understand each other, not because one translates the static fully formed knowledge of the other into a form which he or she can appropriate without becoming a significantly different person. Since knowing is an action constitutive of the person, not a mechanical storing up of data, gaining in knowledge always means changing somewhat. But specifically where there are basic incompatibilities in practices (and accordingly in practical knowledge and sensibilities), achieving understanding involves becoming a person who in principle can play two different games which cannot be played simultaneously and which cannot be translated directly into the terms of each other. The anthropologist may thus construct an ethnography of the Nuer, revealing a good deal of what it means to be Nuer, but doing so is not simply translating Nuer life into Western anthropological (or ordinary) language.⁹ Moreover, the anthropologist is doing something which stands not only outside of but in a hierarchical relationship to what Nuer generally do (since, for example, Nuer do not send anthropologists to Britain).¹⁰ The transformations which are entailed by mutual understanding need not be symmetrical.

Earlier I chose the example of Chinese traditional medicine confronting Western “scientific” medicine precisely because this is not as starkly hierarchical a contrast as the one commonly used in the literature on cross-cultural translation and evaluation of rationality: that of witchcraft vs. modern science.¹¹ While we do not imagine the participants in Zande discourse on witchcraft attempt to comprehend Western science in Zande terms (though something of this might in principle be imaginable), there clearly is some such effort on the part of traditional Chinese medical practitioners. These not only attempt to understand Western medicine, they have appropriated aspects of it – both specific treatments and especially a quasi-experimental mode of research into and discussion of traditional medicine.¹² Nonetheless, the existence of incommensurable practices forces on us the necessity

of evaluation. Where two activities are simply different, we may (disregarding opportunity and resource costs) say, “let a hundred flowers bloom,” and enjoy the diversity without pretending to evaluation. Indeed, where difference is complete, comparative evaluation may be either impossible or a purely subjective, rationally arbitrary matter. But incommensurable activities are precisely linked by certain similarities; though they may be radically different, they pose related claims on the attention of observers – and, in the case of medicine, of potential clients. Possibly neither Chinese nor Western medicine is “better” in some overall way, but within certain domains where both claim efficacy, they are bound to be the subject of comparative evaluations. Moreover, it is not the case that such evaluations are merely arbitrary exercises of subjectivity or the will to power (as post-Foucaultian discourse might lead one to believe). Western medicine reveals sufficient technical effectiveness that it demands some combination of acceptance, explanation, or suppression (as, indeed, did Western science when it first began to achieve notable technical success in the West). Practitioners of Chinese medicine are, in fact, forced onto the defensive whenever they are put into direct competition with Western-style medicine on one of the latter’s strong points. But of course Western-style medicine has weak points as well, and there is at least room for Chinese specialists to advance compelling practical claims of their own in these areas. Thus acupuncture and certain herbal remedies travel to the West, where an attempt is made to appropriate them – an attempt which will continue to make Western specialists uneasy until their efficacy is fully explained on grounds internal to the Western scientific medical discourse.

A full understanding of each discourse from within the other, however, is impossible. If the respective groups of practitioners were to achieve a full understanding of each other, it could only be by creating some new form of medical practice which incorporated elements of each tradition but was not reducible to either. Then, of course, the groups would have changed. The same, I would contend, is true of all the sorts of cross-cultural discourses in which we engage and on which our theories’ claims to generality rest. The doing of theory is itself a form of discourse which grows as it is transformed in changing

historical circumstances and cultural contexts. It cannot achieve true generality simply by subsuming or being tested against data from a wide range of cultural settings and historical periods. Nor can it be translated transparently across cultures in a way which does not in some combination change the original, impose the original as an alien, dominating form, or simply fail to communicate. As a result, it will always be incumbent on social theorists – the more so as they increasingly attempt to grasp fundamental social categories – both to situate themselves in their cultural context, and to open themselves to reformation by confrontation with other cultural contexts.

I have already introduced the issue of historical specificity by talking about processes of theoretical change; I could also say about historical context everything said about cultural context in the previous sentence. Indeed, many of the issues posed by historical change are similar to those posed by cross-cultural variation – with the added difficulty of the impossibility of engaging in a proper dialogue to achieve mutual understanding. Cultural and historical specificity are thus inextricably linked, but there are some specific points to be made about the latter.

HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY

In advocating “historically specific” theory, I mean not merely “taking history into account,” and still less claiming to explain all of history. Rather, I mean recognizing that (1) the production of theories is a historical phenomenon, (2) the categories used in theoretical discourse are adequate only to specific historical epochs (partly because they are inevitably contentful as suggested above), and (3) theories exist in discursive fields, in relation to other theories, and are not self-sufficient statements of their meaning.

That the production of theories is itself a historical problem is now widely, though hardly universally, recognized. At least within the discourse of critical theory, the need to ground a theoretical statement with an account of its own production (or the potential for such an account without performative contradiction) is generally accepted. This idea of grounding is more or less distinctive to critical theory, however; it does not figure

significantly at all in “mainstream” social theory.¹³ Most self-proclaimed positivist theory is constructed without any attempt to make the act of theory construction itself intelligible within the theory.

The historical specificity of theoretical categories themselves is much less widely accepted. This is somewhat surprising inasmuch as both Weber and Marx worked in large part through historically specific conceptualisation. Even devout followers of each, however, have often tended to ignore their (admittedly sometimes ambiguous) historical specifications and treat their concepts and theories as transhistorical, timeless truths. Consider the use of the term “labor” in Marxist theory.¹⁴ Most readings of Marx take labor to be a transhistorical category applying to all epochs and cultures. Others argue – correctly, in my view – that as a category in Marx’s fully developed theory, “labor” should be treated as specific to capitalism. To be sure, work – in some general sense – may be understood to occur more broadly, but this is precisely because it is an untheorized term. The notion of labor is central to the mature Marx because labor as a form of abstract value is theoretically constitutive of capitalism, and it is a concept adequate and specific to a society in which capitalism as a set of cultural categories as well as material relationships can be said to exist.¹⁵

The historical specificity and contentfulness of all complex theoretical categories cannot be eliminated by analytic reformulation. It constitutes a reason why theoretical work cannot be strictly cumulative, in the positivist sense, and why deductive formulations are always limited and parasitic on inductive accounts. The hope for a theoretical millennium of deductive/cumulative theory is misleading at best (see also Stephen Turner’s essay in chapter 4 of this volume). Among the effects of pursuing this chimera, I would contend, is a necessary impoverishment of theoretical categories and consequently theories. No effort to specify the “scope statements” (cf. Walker and Cohen 1985) for a theory solves (or even really addresses) this problem, for it presumes the adequacy of the accounts of the basic categories across the lines of contexts in which the theory’s propositions are found to hold or not to hold.

The need for historical specificity is not simply the difficulty an omniscient author has of indicating which of his or her

equally true statements apply at what moment in a narrative of dramatic changes. Rather, it is the need to recognize (1) the limited vantage points provided by the historical perspective of each and every theorist, and (2) the immanence of theoretical categories in the world of practice. With regard to the latter, I mean first off and quite simply that it is not imaginable that Marx would have developed his theory of capitalism had he lived in the ninth and not the nineteenth century. More specifically, even theoretical concerns which run through the whole history of social thought – the attempt to understand and specify what a person is, for example – are always only thinkable in ways which are inextricably tied to the nature of society (and hence of persons) within the realm of experience and learning of a given thinker. Learning, scholarship, in this context, may help to overcome the limits imposed by the reach of one's own experience; it may make one less ethnocentric and less historically naive. Nonetheless, personal experience must be assigned a central role in accounting for the understandability (and particular reference) of theoretical categories and concepts, and of the theories into which they are woven.

The issue of historical specificity arises at all levels of analysis. It also concerns all time periods. Thus, there are historical changes which distinguish the context of theory production from one generation to the next. But the most important application of this point comes in the demarcation of epochs in human history, and the construction of conceptual frameworks adequate to epochal changes. Thus historical specificity comes to be of special significance for debates about whether modernity is giving way to postmodernity, whether theories based on the economic strategies of individual capitalists explain much about contemporary capitalism, or whether normalization of power is a social process of distinctive significance to modern societies or more general application. To reiterate, the issue is not simply one of scope statements. It is more fundamentally a matter of how the conceptual construction of these basic historical demarcations determines what sorts of categories will be appropriate to the analysis of phenomena internal to them. This is particularly important for a theory which proposes to take a critical stance towards existing social arrangements. It is essential that such a theory be able to show that it stands in an

immanent relationship to such social arrangements in order for its critique to avoid being merely an arbitrary subjective expression on the one hand, or an only slightly less arbitrary imposition of universalistic values.

The importance of the fact that theories exist in historically and culturally limited discursive fields has partly to do with the impossibility of separating the evaluation of any theory from the range of possible alternatives to it. Choices are made with regard to epistemic gain, not absolute truth; political advantage, not political certainty; and so forth.¹⁶ Such choices are always part of a process of projection and examination of possible future paths, thus, and inevitably of communication concerning the range of options. Such theoretical communication presents itself as being able to rise above the ordinary problems of communication, to offer not only greater clarity and precision, but in Habermas's terms to offer readier redemption of validity claims. There is, I think, some truth to this self-presentation of theory. Among discourses about society, theoretical ones have particular advantages in enabling communication across lines of cultural difference. They have these advantages, generally, because even where theory does not thematize reflexivity it nonetheless involves it. But the advantages are greatest where the theory can be clear about its historical grounding and application.

Under the best of circumstances, however, communication is never perfect. Because theory sets up a higher standard for its own internal discourse, it makes an easy target for critique. In particular, it is easy to show that theory presenting itself as politically and otherwise neutral, is strongly biased, and that theory claiming objective clarity and certainty can do so only by presupposing a foundation in the habitus of its practitioners and the tacit assumptions of their culture – “that which can be left unsaid.” The answer to this, I am suggesting, lies in increasing the grounding of theories in the self-reflexivity of theorists, in cultural sensitivity and historical specificity, not in suggesting that because theoretical discourse cannot live up to its own ideals we must forfeit those ideals as regulative constructs. We must make choices among available theoretical options or abandon a great deal of contemporary scholarly, political, and ethical discourse. The path of avoiding such choices, of letting

the inadequacy of all available theories be a license for dismissing them all, is far more radical and problematic than many of its seeming advocates suppose. In this connection, I think that so-called postmodernists are misleading to claim that the presence of ambiguity and ethnocentrism in all previous means proposed for overcoming breakdowns in communications constitutes grounds for their dismissal or radical relativization.¹⁷ One of the key problems with the postmodernist position is that its critique is not accompanied by an alternative social theory offering epistemic gain. Of course, this is not to say that such a theory could not be elaborated drawing on insights from so-called postmodernist thinkers, but generally speaking this has not occurred; indeed Foucault (1980) spoke prominently against the impulse to theorize. The effort to develop a postmodernist social theory (and in fact much of the postmodernist empirical literature) is prone to performative contradictions: asserting claims to rhetorical persuasiveness as more true or more adequate while denying the meaningfulness, legitimacy, utility, or interpersonal adjudicability of the notions of truth or adequacy.

IMPLICATIONS

If theory is truly historically grounded and sensitive to cultural variation, then the project of developing maximally general social theory cannot take some of the forms which have been proposed for it, or in which it has been proposed. To begin with, theory must be a polyphonic discourse, not a monological statement (Taylor 1985a: ch. 10). That is, for the most part theory will not be a matter just of right answers. It will not be cumulative in any simple sense and it will not be possible for it to be "completed." More specifically, the achievements of theory will appear in the form of a discourse in which many voices shed light on a problem from different vantage points.¹⁸ Indeed, internal to the best theories, there will be some play of different voices, a dialectic which does not attempt to reduce the world to a set of surface descriptions.¹⁹ In this sense, the notion of polyphony shares much with the structuralist insight that aggregation of empirical instances of a phenomenon may be

misleading as to the underlying structures generating a range of objective possibilities, and with the dialectical understanding that what exists at any one point in time is not necessarily the most fundamentally real and certainly not the limit of the real. A good theory of the more “general” sort must not pretend to closure, but open itself internally to the play of contending tendencies and possibilities.²⁰ Even more, it must be recognized that individual theories derive their meaning largely from the field of theoretical discourse in which they are developed and presented; they are not self-sufficient.

Relatedly, we need to recognize that the strong versions of claims for deductive theorizing and aggregation of tested hypotheses into theories are unreachable (claims 3 and 4 of the list of claims about theoretical generality presented in the introduction to this chapter). Local theories do not add up to middle-range ones; these do not add up to general theory. Each level of theory may encompass lower levels, or receive guidance from more general ones. It is not, however, possible to produce or understand a middle-range theory, say, simply by enumerating a series of local theories – still less a series of successfully tested propositions – in its domain. There is separate theoretical work which must be done, not least of all in establishing the historical grounding of the theory and in clarifying the cultural context of its concepts, as well as in relating different, more local theories to each other. Local theories in any case cannot altogether escape implication in cultural outlooks and historical processes which cannot be grasped internally to them. Such cultural and historical dimensions can, of course, be left naively unspecified. This may mask an implicit reliance on a more general theory – as much local theory in sociology today relies on a loose mixture of functionalism and positivism without serious intellectual attention to either. And non-specification of cultural and historical situation removes the grounding for a critical relationship between a theory and the social context of its production.

Local theory thus cannot escape dependence on more general theory. Either it will be directly dependent on a specific line of more general theory or it will be dependent on an untheorized set of cultural factors which could only be theorized at a more general level. Conversely, however, complete deduction of local and middle-range theories from more general ones is no more

plausible an ideal.²¹ It is certainly possible to construct a deductive theory, and such efforts have some value in restricted areas, but they do not indicate a plausible path for theoretical development overall. An entirely (or even mainly) deductive theory cannot be very culturally sensitive or very well historically grounded. It must be overwhelmingly formal and minimally contentful.²²

Such deductive theories (e.g. rational choice theory, Blau's macrosocial structuralism) are often taken as models for general theory. In the sense of my argument here, however, this "generality" is highly restricted. Universal (or nearly universal) application is bought at the expense of cultural sensitivity and historical specificity such that the theory cannot ground itself in any rich way in concrete social life. Putatively universal propositions or structures of propositions about relatively narrow ranges of phenomena, or highly abstract aspects of phenomena are in this sense not "general theory" but variants of local theory. Rational choice theory, for example, consists of a highly general set of procedures or guidelines for constructing highly local theories; it does not offer much of a general theory *per se*.²³ Whether we call it "general" or something else, the best social theory (in the sense of most adequate to accounting for social life in all its multidimensionality and cultural and historical variation) is empirically rich. It combines comparative and historical substantive (empirical) discourse with reflection on and development of categories.²⁴ Marx, Weber, and to a large extent Durkheim thus remain exemplars in ways which Parsons and Habermas do not quite achieve.

The best of the "general" theories in the sense of universalizing, especially deductive theories are not strictly speaking theories of social life. Rather, they theorize certain of the conditions of social life. This is true of a good part of Simmel's work, and in this it has a modern heir in Peter Blau's macrostructural theory of inequality and heterogeneity (Blau 1977; Blau and Schwartz 1982). Theories of social life must always be historical because social life is always a historical process, and contentful because social life is always culturally particular. While a formal theory like Blau's can be very wide in its application, perhaps even universal (and in that sense general), it cannot be concretized or become in any way

empirical without becoming to some extent particular, in both historical and cultural terms (see Calhoun and Scott 1989). This is something Simmel recognized rather more, or at least more explicitly, than Blau. Even the simplest or most “obvious” concrete categories with which Blau illustrates his formal theory – e.g. those of race and class – must be at least implicit and *ad hoc* introductions of the historically and culturally particular into the theory.²⁵

The importance of cultural and historical particularity within good theories, however, does not preclude cross-cultural and cross-time generalization or comparison. I suggested some reasons for this in the first section above. It is worth mentioning again, however, as we turn to considering – very briefly and from an arbitrary range of sources – how the postmodern project might preclude both such generalization and meaningful comparison (perhaps despite the intentions of some of its proponents).

“POSTMODERNISM”

Self-styled postmodernists are often happy relativists – perfectly prepared to acknowledge that there are no certain truths and perhaps even no ways to be sure of meaningful communication across intellectual traditions or cultures, untroubled by the lack of grounding this leaves them for normative judgments and scholarly disputes. A good many eschew the gloom which the prospect of radical relativism suggests to Enlightenment thinkers and adopt instead a Rabelaisian carnival attitude, playful before the intellectual abyss.²⁶ Some try to avoid the ungrounded judgments, others proffer them anyway, as simple assertions or some of the infinity of possible disseminations of life’s text. While most postmodernists, thus, remain unconcerned by the central charge that “modernists” (e.g. Habermas 1988a) levy at them, a few have argued that abandoning the Enlightenment project of general theory and adopting a postmodern stance entail neither relativism nor the impossibility of a strong politics (see e.g. Linda Nicholson’s chapter 3 in this volume). I am sympathetic, but have my doubts.

Nicholson shares the widespread contemporary rejection of

foundationalism. One of the central claims of postmodernist thought is that the search for ultimate philosophical foundations for knowledge is (1) an impossible quest, and (2) part of an intellectual imperialism which does violence to the necessary multivocality of intellectual and political discourse. In such arguments, as Stephen Turner has suggested (in chapter 4 of this volume), the proponents of critical "postpositivist" programs rely on notions of fundamental proof which have all too much similarity to those found in positivism. This tends rhetorically to eliminate the possibility of a middle position between foundationalism and extreme relativism (happy or not). Nicholson claims, somewhat more surprisingly, that the postmodern abandonment of foundationalism does not entail the impossibility of general theories (or values, or categories), though she does not specify the basis (if any) on which they will rest their persuasiveness. As she sees it, relativism is not so much a theoretical position (or failing) as a "life possibility . . . the situation which results when communication breaks down" (p. 86). Conversely, she does not go so far in condemnation of general truth claims as many postmodernists (who regard all such claims as arbitrary exercises of the will to power).²⁷ Such truth claims have only to be seen as internal to historical traditions to be acceptable:

the postmodernist need not abandon the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate claims to power as she or he need not abandon the more encompassing idea of criteria of truth. The difference between the postmodernist and the modernist on these issues is rather that the former and not the latter denies the possibility of such criteria external to any specific historical tradition. (p. 87 above)²⁸

By implication, since communicative conflicts are to be solved by finding a common belief or value, the more "historical tradition" people share the better, and the less the worse. If this is so, then any grounding of theory only in cultural traditions (*pace* Rorty) confronts serious problems. Such an account recognizes difference, but does not grant it a positive place (which is, in particular, a serious problem for feminism).²⁹ In most postmodernist accounts, the coming together of people from different traditions, or those abiding by different rules from within the same tradition, seems primarily an occasion for

communication to break down, not for the kind of mutual learning and growth discussed above. Obviously modernist thought has shared historically in the imperialist drive of modern politics, economics, and culture generally. But the postmodernists make a stronger claim than historical connection, joint culpability, or tendency. They see no basis other than power for relations among people of very different traditions.

At this point it is necessary to stop talking about postmodernism in general and recognize the different and contending voices within that movement. Of course, I cannot pretend to review the range of positions here, and will only note the connections of a few, arbitrarily selected but important to the present argument.

It is Foucault, above all, who has taught the inevitable mutuality of knowledge and power. In his view, all ways of knowing are exercises of power: "Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" (1980: 73). This power is not reducible to interpersonal domination, but is constitutive of social life and culture generally.

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.

(Rabinow 1977: 61)

Power is, in this sense, "decentered," not the property of any subject. Power is normalized, rendered into discipline, practiced routinely by subjects upon themselves insofar as they re-enact the premises of their culture. This seems to grasp a dimension of the modern experience of power, but at the same time it obscures the specifically modern increase in occasions and resources for people to distinguish between what power is and ought to be. One of the central problematics of power disappears in this formulation: there are no criteria for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate power. Foucault's

theory, indeed, may actually make such criteria internally impossible.

A fundamental challenge for any postmodernist theory is to offer bases for making critical judgments. I have argued above that such bases need ideally to be grounded in strong recognition of their cultural and historical specificity, and preferably to stand in an immanent relationship to the context of their development. Nonetheless, to be meaningful – both politically and theoretically – such bases need to allow for critical judgments to be arguable, defensible, in discourse *across* lines of cultural and other difference. A position which cannot give reasons for why it should be persuasive to those who are not already a part of its “tradition” is a severely problematic political as well as scientific tool. Agreement must then be arbitrary, or imposed; if people are moved, there is no internal account of why. At the same time as discourse among people different from each other is vital to democracy and public life, so it is crucial that people within any one tradition (and for that matter individuals within their own lives) be able to give accounts simultaneously of how they have come to be who they are and how they want to become better in the future. That is, a critical historical consciousness implies an ability to express and defend not only one’s interests but the project of developing better interests, wanting to have better desires (cf. Taylor 1985a, chs. 1 and 2; 1985b, ch. 3). Foucault does offer social criticism, certainly through his tone and choices of descriptive content, but also sometimes explicitly. It is not clear, however, that he could ground such criticism without performative contradiction. The potential for doing so within his theory is weakened especially when it loses its historical specificity.

In his early and middle works, up through *Discipline and Punish* (1977a [1975]), Foucault emphasizes deep ruptures between historical epochs and focuses his attention on the birth of modern power in the reformation of institutions of carceral control in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But in his later work on sexuality, and in some interviews and essays, he implies that the mutuality of power and knowledge is universal, not distinctive to modernity, and that similar analyses can be developed for all cultures and historical periods. Foucault does enunciate something of the distinctiveness of the power/

knowledge implication in modernity, even as late as the 1970s: "It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (1980: 75). Foucault holds out the option of specific criticisms of the modern forms of hegemony, but he does not suggest any direction for criticism to move in. Like most other "postmodernists," he can advocate only resistance, not emancipation. At extremes, he seems to imply that anything would be better than what obtains now. But this sort of account is in an odd tension with the historical approach he developed earlier. There he argued for recognizing the centrality of epochal transformations which made sense of many small changes (but made historically specific sense, within the context of a specific epochal transformation, not the sense which comes from imposing a single transhistorical narrative or set of categories on historically specific events):

In order to analyse such events [e.g. the introduction of a new form of positivity or other epochal shifts in consciousness], it is not enough simply to indicate changes, and to relate them immediately to the theological, aesthetic model of creation . . . or to the psychological model of the act of consciousness . . . or to the biological model of evolution. We must define precisely what these changes consist of: that is, substitute for an undifferentiated reference to *change* – which is both a general container for all events and the abstract principle of their succession – the analysis of *transformations*.

(Foucault 1972: 172)

It is curious that the advice informing the history (though less so, perhaps, Foucault's earlier formulation, the archaeology) of forms of power/knowledge should not provide a different outlook, one with a normative direction, for the analysis of contemporary questions. Such a normative direction need not involve a "supernarrative" of history, a single moral to all stories. It could consist, rather, of suggestions for the direction in which we should move from where we are, recognizing that new considerations will inform decisions about the appropriate

directions to be followed thereafter. It seems to me that the nature of practical involvement in the world, especially political involvement, calls necessarily for confronting such questions of directionality. Moreover, seeking understanding across lines of important cultural differences necessarily involves confronting contrasting normative directions because these produce incommensurable practices of the sort (discussed above) which cannot coexist without posing competing claims for adherence.

At this point, where it cannot achieve historical specificity or confront the incommensurable practices of different cultures, Foucault's analytics of power loses any potential critical edge. Ironically enough, fashionable anthropologists have followed the lead of the later Foucault and begin to unravel ubiquitous subjectless power in all settings, while combining this with a self-declared critical orientation and affirmation of cultural difference.³⁰ It seems to me that the postmodernist claim to historical grounding – indeed, even to historicity – is in important aspects spurious. The history which is introduced is often remarkably unsystematic.³¹ Like postmodernist architecture, its historical side consists of incomplete and decontextualized borrowings. Even in the hands of an extraordinary historical scholar like Foucault, postmodernist historical writing is often a bit like an orientalism of the past – an appropriation of history for purposes of debating the contemporary condition directly, not an inquiry into the fullest possible understanding of another way of life which might indirectly or in later comparison shed light on our own. It is partly for this reason that Foucault, the great theorist of historical ruptures, in his later work began to find the same mechanisms of power/knowledge at work in ancient Greece, China, and modern France, and everywhere else he looked. Most importantly of all, the postmodernist position is not historically or culturally *specific*, either in grounding or in analytic purchase.

Foucault, of course, did emphasize the poststructuralist, postmodernist theme of difference: “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (1977b: 79). This theme, however, is especially associated with Derrida, for whom it has remained enduringly central. Derrida's *différance* is a “primordial nonself-presence” (Derrida 1973: 81). It

is transcendental, even prior to presence and the transcendental reduction (Dews 1987: 19); it is “not something which occurs to a transcendental subject. It is what produces it” (Derrida 1973: 86). The structuralist and poststructuralist displacement of the subject from modernity’s and philosophy’s center is thus basic to Derrida; it is not the self which we presuppose in all thought and action, but *différance*. In Dews’s words, “in the majority of his work, Derrida bases his analyses on the concept of absolute difference: of an essential *logical priority* of non-identity over identity” (1987: 27).³² It is this which orients the deconstructionist project to the discovery of internal incoherences within texts, rather than reading them more conventionally by “constructing” from them a meaningful whole (Derrida 1978).

Not only the unity of a text, but subjectivity itself, the originating unity of consciousness, is merely a thought, a fiction (Dews 1987: 31). This is the basis for viewing the world as a textual or discursive structure to be deconstructed, its incoherencies exposed. Derrida’s opposition is to the notion of speech as transparent, self-sufficient presentation of truth, and for the priority of textuality understood as always embodying tensions and hence making deconstruction possible (or perhaps even inevitable). This is what he means by challenging the “logocentrism” of Western thought. But left to itself this offers only a critical moment. It is a very problematic basis for social or political analysis. Even Derrida is unwilling to regard social institutions as merely textual or discursive structures (though some of his followers have not balked at this). Derrida insists on retaining the option of social and political criticism, but falls back on Heideggerian grounds for it. His own theory cannot ground a critical account of political antagonisms insofar as these cannot be reduced to logical antagonisms. Deconstruction can offer a certain sort of constant vigilance and attempt to escape mere positivity, but it cannot offer a political or ethical program, or a properly explanatory analysis.

Deconstructionism is also a seriously deficient approach to developing a culturally sensitive and historically specific social theory – despite the fact that it has helped to call attention to the importance of difference. In the first place, deconstruction must remain a wholly negative technique. Secondly, though Derrida attempts to avoid the radical relativism some of his followers

embrace, he does not succeed in explaining theoretically why he should do so. His very attempt to absolutize *différance* produces incoherencies in his theory. More specifically, the theory offers no openings to sociality or to material factors in history and social relations. It severs cultural from social and political-economic analysis. The deconstruction of a text plays infinitely on its internal capacities for dissemination; it neither needs nor addresses other sources of meaning. Unlike some other approaches influenced by phenomenology (e.g. hermeneutics), deconstruction offers no approach to historical or even cultural specificity. All texts have a life free from specific contexts; they cannot be grounded within them. There is, thus, no satisfactory basis for comparison. This, by the way, is part of the attraction of Derrida for those who regard all canons as *mere* exercises of power, rather the combinations of power with more satisfactorily grounded judgments.

What is for Derrida the absence of an approach to the social becomes for Baudrillard (1975, 1977, 1981) an explicit devaluation of the social. Modernity has been ruptured, he asserts, by the collapse of normalizing power, expanding material productivity, and the possibility of grasping social life as a relation among subjects. The modern sense of the social had been dominated by the centralization and deterritorialization of power (by implication the effect of the growth of the state), and the production of commodities which gained their value from abstract human labor and whose pattern of circulation could be criticized from the standpoint of concrete use value and concrete labor. In other words, modernity was the era of power and the production of commodities. Postmodernity is the era of the sign and the seduction of consumers. The structure of relations which now matters is among signs. People are "exteriorized" into a technoculture of "hyperreality" where significance replaces reification and we know only the simulacra of mass existence. Baudrillard's vision is basically a tragic account of the completion of the abstraction of power suggested by the Weberian notion of rationalization, and of production (reconstituted as seduction) by the Marxian commodity-based system of capitalism. But it takes him far from those masters theoretically. And it leaves him facing nihilism squarely and advocating an attitude simply of "ironic detachment." Baudrillard almost celebrates the fear of

mass culture which helped make Adorno and Horkheimer into such pessimists. As he asks: "Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, and in the fascination which results? Is it the media which induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses which divert the media into spectacles?" (1983: 105).

At one level, Baudrillard regains within his tragic vision some sense of historical specificity: we face the abyss; our ancestors did not. A key reason is because he ties his vision of postmodernist culture to a more general view of postmodern society; he does not make postmodernism something free-floating, purely within the realm of ideas. But his theses of the implosion of meaning and the out-of-control production of signification suggest the impossibility of any theoretical grounding, and of cross-cultural evaluation. And Baudrillard radicalizes Barthes's (1982) vision of the destruction of cultural difference by the media. His theory thus has an enormous amount in common with the views of mass society, mass culture, or the revolt of the masses which have been endemic to modernity. We might question, however, whether there is not a great deal of internal differentiation among "the masses" which might be addressed by an empirical theory more focused on cultural variation, and which might be valorized by a normative theory more respectful of differences.

The very distinction between modernism and postmodernism is also problematic. I would suggest that postmodernism is an internal product of modernity, not its true opponent. It is a counterpoint to the modernist project, but one generated from within modernity, a recurrent modern form of challenge to Enlightenment universalism and foundationalism (and thus not, as Habermas (1988a) implies, simply a sort of throwback to the pre-modern resistance to modernity). Lyotard is distinctive in recognizing that "postmodernity is undoubtedly a part of the modern" (1984a: 79). Postmodernists are quite modern, for example, in style, not least of all in constantly searching for the new, suspecting that which has been received. "A work [of art] can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (ibid.). In nearly all material

ways the modern tendencies continue: centralization of power, demand for economic productivity. Even the exploding and fragmenting of once more integrated cultural systems or communities is not “after” modern. It is, rather, something modernity has done throughout its existence.³³

Elsewhere, unfortunately, Lyotard (1984a) does tend to treat postmodernity as a historical period and postmodernism as a separable project. Such treatments, which are common in the postmodernist rhetoric, force us to ask the question: when did the postmodern era begin? There are a number of possible answers implied by various writings within the postmodern tradition (this very vagueness is testimony to the non-specificity of the theories):

- With “poststructuralism” in the late 1960s. Derrida might be taken as marking this break most strikingly with his publication of three books in 1967.³⁴
- With “postindustrial society,” computerization, and/or other socio-technical changes taken to undermine the privileging of labor as the source of value. This is an idea put forward by Lyotard especially.
- With the ascendancy of consumption/seduction over production/power, an argument launched by Baudrillard.
- With non-traditional critics of modernity from Nietzsche (emphasizing the will to power) to Simmel (the fragmentation of society) to Musil (who in *The Man without Qualities* put forward a notion of the self as insufficient to bear the weight of “modernist” subjectivity).

Underlying this concern is the problem of how to relate the intellectual current of “postmodernism” to change in social life. Identification of a new-age “postmodernity” is postmodernism’s main possibility for claiming a historical grounding.

Lyotard suggests that the core difference between modernist and postmodernist thought be seen in the tendency of the former to impose suprahistorical narratives on the concrete and ultimately directionless flux of history:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative,

such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth . . . Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives.

(1984: xxiii–xxiv)

Lyotard thus argues that neither of the “modern” views of society – functional, systemic unity and conflictual division held together by power – is acceptable, and the very division is representative of a form of thought out of step simultaneously with postmodern forms of knowledge and patterns of social change. These changes are fundamental: “the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale” (ibid.: 14). As a result, if Lyotard is right, sociological analysis focused on these institutions or “poles of attraction” can no longer grasp the social condition very well. Instead we must look at the flow of communication through a social grid in the form of endless language games. “[T]he observable social bond is composed of language ‘moves’” (ibid.: 11). Because these are competitive moves in language games, they cannot be grasped by a purely cybernetic theory, but must be seen in terms of their agonistic aspect. Society, then, has become “atomized” into flexible networks of language games (ibid.: 17); Lyotard claims that the prominence of bureaucratic and other institutional constraints or control mechanisms does not seriously challenge this view; these limits are merely the stakes and provisional results of language strategies.³⁵

At the same time, we have seen the displacement of narrative forms of customary knowledge: “Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative” (ibid.: 26). Science is the principal antagonist of narrative and thus of the sort of language game which combines to form the social bond. But note here that the postmodern condition seems to describe a “loss of meaning” which has been lamented for at least a century in very similar terms, and that science as the antagonist of

narrative must be seen to have played a role in nearly the whole history of *modern* culture. In other words, the “postmodern” critique grasps something of contemporary life because it grasps something of a modernity which continues, not because it calls attention to something new.

Historically, grand narratives pursued (and to some extent achieved) legitimation of the social order, either as the metanarrative of an ideal subject (spirit, knowledge actualizing itself) or of a practical subject (humanity liberating itself) (Lyotard 1984: 35). But in postmodern culture, such grand narratives have lost their credibility. Science seeks its own internal and external legitimation, sometimes in terms of old narratives of knowledge and emancipation. Other times it offers up simply its “performativity” – achieving the best input/output equation for its sponsors (*ibid.*: 40). But increasingly, science appears simply as playing its own language game, and therefore incapable of legitimating itself or other language games (*ibid.*). Faced with this, one may become pessimistic, become nostalgic for the old narratives, or – if one is a good postmodernist – simply accept that legitimation can only spring from people’s own linguistic practice and communicative interaction (*ibid.*: 41).

For Lyotard (*ibid.*: 81–2) the most important result of such acceptance is rejection of the “transcendental illusion” – the fantasy of putting all the heterogeneous language games of the world together in a single whole. Totalization of this sort breeds terror (especially, we might add, the historically specific sorts of terrors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like genocide). Such material terrors are the counterparts of intellectual and aesthetic violence done by attempts to impose a single vision of reality or set of standards on the diverse experimenters of art, thought, and life.

CONCLUSION

Here we come to a critique of Enlightenment universalism with substantial similarities to that developed in the first parts of this chapter. What then are the crucial distinctions to be drawn?

First, there is the matter of cultural and historical specificity.

Even for Foucault, with his historically rich scholarship – let alone for the deconstructionists – their very particularism produces a decontextualization which loses or even denies the importance of temporal and cultural situation to the interpretation of meaning.³⁶ The pursuit of cultural and historical specificity challenges universalism but can give only two cheers to particularism. The postmodernist decontextualization of referents is held to mirror various contemporary social and cultural processes: mediatization, internalization, mobility, etc. I think there is a great deal to this, but the question is how to respond. Seeing only a choice between totalizing power and free play of thought at the expense of relativism, postmodernists have generally opted for the latter. But I have tried to show in this chapter that other paths are open – particularly a culturally sensitive and historically specific sort of theory which must be highly contentful and aim at epistemic gain, not final truth.³⁷ One can respond to diversity by attempting to find relationships, not just by embracing or eradicating difference.

Second, there is the question of whether “postmodernism” points to, draws on, or provides for any termination or transcendence of modernity. I argue elsewhere (Calhoun, 1991) that in terms of the basic material trends in modern society – centralization of power, extension of geographical incorporation, and accumulation of capital – modernity must be seen as continuing. This is obscured by the rhetoric of postmodernism. I agree with Lyotard that so-called postmodernism is coeval with and even a part of modernity – so it is mislabeled. Beyond mislabeling, this points to the virtue of a theory which can be clear about its own historical groundings. Critical theorists within the Marxist tradition have developed substantial and sometimes brilliant arguments as to how capitalism contributed to – provided for – crucial developments of modern Western intellectual history (e.g. Lukács 1922).³⁸ Building on those, we can provide a better historical basis for Lyotard’s critique of the totalizing nature of modern thought. Totalizing thought embodies the experience of totalizing capitalism and centralizing state power; the question is how to grasp this totalization and at the same time recognize it as reification. Rejecting the transcendental illusion which Lukács embraces, we can use this historical grounding to situate and use

theories which are neither universalistic nor radically particularistic and relativistic.

Third, I have suggested that postmodernist thinkers generally are unable to provide grounds for their normative judgments which can serve as the basis for discourse with those who do not already share their orientations. This transmutes particularism into relativism. It limits the central stance of postmodernists to Foucault's sophisticated version of the slogan "resist authority," Derrida's eternal vigilance for incoherencies, Baudrillard's ironic detachment, and Lyotard's encouragement of experimentation. In varying degrees these may be worthy, but they are not sufficient normative bases for living an ordinary human life, let alone taking on a political project of any significance. I have argued that taking seriously other cultures and in general practices different from our own requires us to respond to their claims of technical efficacy and normative rightness – at least where these practices are incommensurable with our own. We cannot escape normative judgments and simply to refuse to provide discursively addressable grounds for them is to make them arbitrary.³⁹ If they are arbitrary, any attempt to commend them to others must be an explicit attempt at power through illocutionary means, or a performative contradiction.

Finally, there is the issue of comparison. The postmodernist approaches allow for, even encourage, the recognition of a multitude of voices in history.⁴⁰ They sharpen our awareness of difference, but they provide no basis for comparison and in some cases make it seem impossible from within the approach. The reasons are somewhat similar to those producing a strong normative relativism. Ironically, in this way postmodernists are often the mirror image of the Enlightenment universalists they challenge, making of difference – especially Derrida's *différance* – an absolute as rigid as unitary identity or universalism is to their enemies. And if positive, unitary identity is a form of violence against difference, so absolutized difference is a form of violence against intersubjectivity or, more specifically, the human will to bridge the gap between people, traditions, cultures.

What is called for must be a *processual* approach to understanding. It will require a form of communicative action (*pace* Habermas 1984, 1988b) which allows for discourse in

which intersubjectivity grows. It will expect that mutual understanding itself will be achieved not simply by translation but by a historical process of change on both sides. It will situate comparative scholarship within such a historical process, seeking epistemic gain through highly contentful theories which must be subject to a continual play of reinterpretation. It will attempt to make clear the historical and cultural frames of reference which make it possible, not losing sight of the finitude and limited generalizability of those frames.

In short, doing social and political theory and doing historical and cross-cultural comparison must be continuous, mutually involved enterprises.

NOTES

I am grateful for comments from Pamela DeLargy

- 1 Though not without some ambivalence, as Alexander (1982) has shown. Parsons (1937) attempted to overcome the division between this positivist notion of science and the approach of Weber and the other classical theorists whom he accepted into the sociological canon. Sica (1988) has shown how far Parsons's reading was from the hermeneutic dimension of Weber's theory.
- 2 "Orientalism" of the sort epitomized by Montesquieu and prominently critiqued by Said (1976) is a variant of this problematic treatment of cross-cultural variation. While difference is made theoretically salient by the orientalist, his or her project is not the understanding of the other but rather the use of accounts of the other to inform ethnocentric self-understanding. Such accounts may be positive ("see what we can learn even from the noble savage or the heathen Chinese") or negative ("we may lack full democracy but thank God we don't live under Kadi, pasha or some other form of oriental despot") in their view of the other. The other may be given a more schematic or more richly detailed description. Nonetheless, in such accounts, the other is understood only externally and as a marked rather than primary or independent category.
- 3 These are lessons which Habermas at least seems inclined to take seriously in his recent lectures on Foucault (Habermas 1988a), though they have not yet resulted in any major theoretical reformulation.

- 4 In addition to the original contributions of Kohlberg (1981, 1984) and Gilligan (1982) see Benhabib's (1985) insightful commentary and theorization of the controversy.
- 5 For a sympathetic methodological critique of Blau's formal theory of social structure following this same direction, see Calhoun and Scott (1990).
- 6 We shall see something more of what this means in considering the historical specificity of theoretical categories in the next section.
- 7 Theories of economizing or utilitarian rational choice may constitute exceptions to this. To the extent that they involve empirical claims rather than hypothetical constructs, they do seem to claim that actors do in fact always or almost always behave according to a single universal standard of rationality.
- 8 Culture is not, it should perhaps be stressed, the static collection of norms, values, and beliefs which introductory sociology textbooks present it as. It is a dynamic dimension of social practice. In the present context, simply being a member of a culture is being engaged in a variety of practices which are incommensurable with those of other cultures, from ways of eating to religion and family life. To be both an American (of any specific sort) and a Nuer, say, is to be engaged in many incommensurable practices; in a sense, to be American and to be Nuer *are* incommensurable practices. This is the source of the fundamental challenge in reporting anthropological fieldwork.
- 9 Indeed, as Steiner (1975) has famously argued and modern semiotics generally would suggest, all translation is in some part construction, not mere rendering of equivalences.
- 10 Of course, third world anthropologists have worked (albeit rarely) in Western settings, but this is not quite as reciprocal as it sounds. Such anthropologists are still participants in a discourse which had its origins not in their traditional culture, and not in the national cultural or international third world culture to which that traditional culture may have partially given way, but in the West. By becoming anthropologists these people, even if of Nuer or other traditional ancestry, and even if highly committed to an alternative third world view, nonetheless leave the realm of practices internal to traditional culture. This does not mean that such practices are not internal to their own current culture – anthropology is now an internal part of Sudanese culture, say, and much more so of Indian. But though internal, it is not altogether indigenous and is not the product primarily of traditional practices.
- 11 See Winch 1964, and the essays in Wilson 1970 and Hollis and Lukes 1982.

- 12 As I learned in observation of and discussions with traditional medical practitioners in Chengdu in 1984. I say “quasi-experimental” both because the experiments most commonly conducted involve “tests” of the remedies prescribed in the classical texts which always result in their confirmation, and because the link between causal reasoning and experimentation in the Western scientific sense is commonly absent.
- 13 In fact, this notion of grounding is one of the key distinguishing features of critical theory, which I take to be considerably broader than the Frankfurt School itself. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, has made this sort of self-reflexivity and grounding a central part of his sociological enterprise. See especially *Homo Academicus* (1988) and *Leçon sur la Leçon* (1982).
- 14 On this, compare Nicholson’s assumption in ch. 3 of this volume that Marxism simply *is* transhistorical; she does not even recognize the ambiguity in Marx or the different lines of interpretation among his followers.
- 15 See Postone 1983 and, one hopes, his eventual book for an excellent statement of the view that labor should be treated as a historically specific category.
- 16 On the notion of epistemic gain as an alternative to complete relativism and absolute truth claims, see several of the essays in Charles Taylor 1985a, b). See also Gadamer 1975: esp. 280ff) on the essential orientation to action which is a part of the knowledge of the human sciences, and which limits both absolute truth claims and relativistic failure to decide on approximate truths.
- 17 In the immediately following discussion I shall accept the premise that there is some scholarly position of sufficient coherence to warrant the single label “postmodernism.” In fact, it is not at all clear that this is so. In France, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and other thinkers commonly grouped together in American discourse appear largely as rivals; their differences are much more strongly accented. “Postmodernism” is associated less with them than with its self-declared apostles like Lyotard. Questions could also be raised about the meaningfulness of the label postmodernism, which seems to me unfortunate at best. Its implied historical frame seems especially misleading.
- 18 The writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida have gone further in this direction than those of any other major contemporary theorist, sometimes frustrating those who wish to read them monologically by their continuous playing of perspectives against each other. Both, but especially Derrida, have experimented with novel presentations of text on the page. Foucault and Lyotard, by contrast, tend to write more or less monologically even when their writings are meant to critique the monological normalization imposed by modern society and culture.

- So do most of the “American deconstructionists” who half-follow and half-distort Derrida (Norris 1987) and other postmodernists who declare but often fail to evidence commitment to a plurality of voices.
- 19 Though current popular usage extends the term “polyphonic” very widely, it was introduced by Bakhtin specifically to refer to the internal play of voices within a certain sort of novel. The same novels of Dostoevsky were seized upon by Freud as exemplifications of psychoanalytic insight before the invention of psychoanalysis. This connection warrants the observation that polyphonic discourse ought not to refer simply to a toleration for the voices of many individuals each speaking monologically, but rather to a capacity for internal speech, a tolerance for the internal complexity which suggests that the singular human being is not altogether monological, and accordingly is not strictly speaking *individual* – an irreducible whole – at least not in all senses.
 - 20 This is an advantage of many of the uses of the textual metaphor for society (advocated for example by Richard Brown in chapter 9 of this volume). It is crucial that such a metaphor always be used in a clearly polyphonic or dialogical way, to describe a “text” of many contending voices, and not allowed to encourage a notion of monologically “reading” society. At the same time, the textual metaphor does have serious drawbacks, not least a tendency to treat society only or mainly as a symbol system and not as a material historical process.
 - 21 See also Stephen Turner (1986 and ch. 4 of this volume) for other reasons bearing on the same point.
 - 22 More specifically, this is true of deductive theories which claim considerable autonomy from induction. It does not apply equally to the place of deductive, formal reasoning as a moment in a more contentful theory. Formalization may serve a useful role of codification, rigorous self-checking and suggestion of new hypotheses in the latter sort of case.
 - 23 See also critical discussion in Wacquant and Calhoun (1989).
 - 24 I am thus sympathetic both to Nicholson’s call for use of narratives and Brown’s pluralism and suggestion that multiple and overlapping accounts are necessarily involved (as presented in chs. 3 and 9 of this volume), though I have some difficulty with specifics of each proposal.
 - 25 In this theory, Blau never addresses gender in any very substantial way. Ironically, his main exemplification of how groups can be defined by the prevalence of in-group over out-group association is intermarriage rates. Needless to say, he does not show homosexual marriages outnumbering heterosexual, yet gender remains a salient category. This suggests some problems for his contention that there is

no significance to culturally defined membership categories which are not characterized by such prevalence of in-group association on all or most important dimensions.

- 26 This is at least as reasonable as gloom, of course. There was no rational reason why Weber's Calvinists, believing in predestination, faced with the prospect of likely damnation and a distant God unwilling to reveal the elect, chose to seek the simulacra of salvation through hard work and worldly asceticism; an attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry" would have followed just as logically from their predicament.
- 27 Nicholson correctly notes that the observation that truth contains a dimension of power does not entitle us to deduce that truth *is* power, a faulty deduction too often made by those fighting on the postmodern barricades. Nonetheless, Nicholson does set up a false opposition between potentially authoritarian claims to adjudicate universal truths and her postmodern tradition. She neglects to consider arguments (such as that in Charles Taylor's work) that all real choices are among imperfect alternatives and made according to criteria of epistemic (or ethical, or political) *gain*, not perfection.
- 28 Presumably these claims can be seen as general in their proposed scope of application, rather than other senses.
- 29 Nicholson states the excellent general goal of retaining continuity between feminist politics and feminist theory. This is not only sensible, it speaks to a real contemporary problem. But, as the text suggests, although postmodernist authors tend to share an apparent value on differences of all sorts, it is hard to see how on Nicholson's or any other postmodernist account we are to *ground* a positive value on gender (or other) differences. It is not clear whether she sees gender-based biases and limits to knowledge as potentially rectified by mere addition of knowledge or as requiring more fundamental categorial reconstruction of social theory. I assume the latter, but to my view again that would be hard to ground in any very extreme postmodernist account.
- 30 It seems a widespread anthropological neurosis at present to combine, despite their logical incompatibility, a highly critical stance towards "first world" depredations and often towards the play of power in all settings with a radical relativism and a cultural survivalism.
- 31 It is worth noting, however (since sociologists are often confused on this issue), that though Foucault was firmly anti-positivist, he was very much an empiricist, and one able to command a masterful range of sources, even if his deployment of data was disturbingly decontextualized, his willingness to generalize on the basis of highly particular evidence sometimes misleading, and his manner of citing sources sometimes cavalier.

- 32 Dews in fact argues that “despite all appearances, *différance* is itself a powerful principle of unity,” an absolute (1987: 43).
- 33 Thus Simmel raises a number of the themes characteristic of today’s postmodernists, including especially that of the fragmentation of culture, yet he emphatically must be considered a theorist of modernity (Frisby 1985a, b). Of course, both Simmel and Weber share with many of the postmodernists the stamp of Nietzsche’s influence.
- 34 Poststructuralism itself is a move visible only retrospectively in the careers of former structuralists who decided they could decenter the subject and still reflect critically on the categories of thought, and thus could give up structuralism’s denial of epistemology which was based on the belief that it could be pursued only in terms of a philosophy of the subject.
- 35 Like many other postmodernist theorists, Lyotard here turns the social almost entirely into the linguistic – a radical reduction of even social relations in which communication plays a part, let alone of material factors in social life. Where for structuralists like Lévi-Strauss linguistic phenomena provided an instructive heuristic example of social phenomena, perhaps even a privileged and pre-eminent one, for many postmodernists – Derrida more extremely than Lyotard, for example – the linguistic becomes the only form of the social to which their theory gives them access.
- 36 Most of Foucault’s followers among historians do more or less conventional investigations which recognize the importance of situation while exploring Foucaultian themes, like how structures of medical knowledge are implicated in control over the body. Some, however, also head down the path of historical decontextualization, interpreting ideas or events with no attempt to relate them to a more general understanding of their epoch.
- 37 Western scientific discourse has been typical of modern culture in its monologicality, especially its tendency monophonically to declare itself as self-sufficient. Not only do theories frequently present themselves as containing the whole of the truth on some matter, or at least at some level of analysis, even more basically, they nearly always put themselves forward as self-sufficient statements of their own meaning. But this they never are. Theories, as I observed earlier, always exist in discursive fields, in relation to other theories; their meaning is graspable and their epistemic contributions are made only within this larger discursive field (cf. Bourdieu’s various writings on academic fields (esp. 1988) where not only other theorists but the practical struggles of theorists help to define not only the success but the actual content and meaning of theoretical work). While “postmodernist”

- work directs our attention to this aspect of discursive fields generally, postmodernists themselves often write as though their discourse could be self-sufficient, as though it were not comprehensible in some substantial part only as a reaction to more conventional modernist discourse. More specifically, so-called postmodernist contributions offer a very inadequate and highly partial grasp of social phenomena on their own. It is not as separate modes of understanding that they make their contribution to the enterprise of social knowledge, but as moments – particularly but not exclusively moments of negative critique – in a more general modern discourse of social understanding.
- 38 It is high time, by the way, that more work of this kind be done in non-Western and/or third world settings.
- 39 In fact, it seems to me that at least as much danger of intellectual violence or “totalitarianism” lies in such a refusal to engage in a process of discursive justification as in the foundationalist project against which postmodernists levy those charges.
- 40 This, for example, is perhaps the most important critical counterweight which they offer to Habermas’s highly universalistic theory.

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