

THEORIZING FOR 'REAL'

Chapter 9, pp. 163-175 in S. Miles (2001)
Social Theory in the Real World, London: Sage.

The ability to theorize about social life is a skill and one that many people never actually manage to command. But the simple recognition that social theory is a skill and not something that needs to be rote learned is a significant achievement in itself. Learning 'theory' or the body of knowledge associated with a specific theorist is not an end in itself, but a means to an end: the skill of critiquing theories and, more importantly, the ability to actually and actively theorize. *Social Theory in the 'Real' World* has attempted to illustrate that social theory can have interesting things to say about the world and is about far more than the partially relevant theories of long-dead classical theorists. Indeed, the book's abiding philosophy is that social theory is only exciting if you make it exciting. If social theory seems boring, it is because, more often than not, those people who study it are reluctant to make the necessary effort to apply it to real-life situations. It may seem somewhat pretentious to say so, but it is worth suggesting that by discovering social theory you may even discover a small part of yourself. The benefit of social theory lies in its potential for shedding light upon circumstances that you may have previously taken for granted. Such insight can potentially tell you as much about yourself as it does about the world in which you live.

In this concluding chapter I want to outline some of the major themes that have emerged from the book as a whole, indicating as I do so the apparent status of social theory as we enter the twenty-first century. What state is the endeavour of social theory actually in, and where might or should it go in the near future? There does seem to be plenty of evidence to suggest that the world is, indeed, undergoing considerable social change, but what does this change mean for social theory itself? The first issue I therefore want to consider briefly is whether the degree of social change perceived by the social theorists I have discussed during the course of this book is genuine or whether it says more about the process of theorizing than it does about the social change it is attempting to theorize.

Continuity or change?

Many of the theories I have discussed have been concerned with the degree to which social change constitutes an epochal shift. In other

words, is the world in which we live now so radical and so different to the one in which we used to live that it justifies us in talking about a whole new type of society? This debate is perhaps most closely associated with discussions over post-modernism. In this context many authors prefer to talk about late or high modernity than post-modernity. In effect, they regard social change as representing a continuity with the abiding aspects of modernity. The interesting thing about this is that despite disagreeing about the magnitude of the change involved, theorists often appear to be talking about virtually the same themes. In this sense, whether or not such change constitutes an epochal shift can amount to a matter of opinion. Such divergence in opinion represents one of the abiding appeals of social theory. But there is also a more serious concern that we should consider as critics of social theory. There may be a case for arguing that social theorists are predisposed or pre-programmed to exaggerate the degree of social change they are trying to account for.

The world is constantly changing, but there is a danger that because as individuals we are part and parcel of that change we assume that it is happening at a faster rate than any previous period in history. And there is also a danger that social theorists focus on any patterns of change whilst either consciously or sub-consciously excluding contradictory evidence of continuity. The work of Daniel Bell (1973) provides a case in point. Bell is no doubt perfectly justified in drawing attention to key aspects of social change in employment patterns, for instance. But such changes co-exist with continuities. And even if a number of social realms can be seen to have been affected by social change, we should not jump to the conclusion that in tandem these trends constitute a whole new society. In short, social theorists are human beings and, like many human beings, are attracted to the melodramatic. You might criticize George Ritzer for using the self-consciously melodramatic label of 'McDonaldization', which hints at massive social change, but which, under the surface, perhaps says more about the continuity of social change than its radical transformation. Social theorists are likely to focus on the transformative nature of the changes which they chart. There is certainly no intention on the part of such theorists to mislead, but the reader of social theory should come to his or her own conclusion as to how far the changes charted by such theorists amount to a radical break with the past.

In considering the dilemmas involved in charting social change, and, in particular, the fact that social theorists are, at least in some form, part of that change themselves, it is worth considering whether or not social change is predictable enough to be theorized in the above sorts of ways. In particular, can projective social theories which are concerned with the way in which the social world will develop in

the future really be effective? The important thing to remember here is that social theory cannot provide all the answers. A social theory that accurately predicted the future would be a disappointment in the sense that it may well not provide an effective enough platform for continued debate. A social theory should be evaluated not according to the extent to which it accurately predicts change, but rather according to how far it stimulates debate about that change. Perhaps we should not therefore talk about 'good' or 'bad' social theories but about theories that either do or do not serve to bring the sociological imagination to life (see Mills, 1959).

Theorizing the ordinary

Reading social theory is in one sense a very personal experience. No social theory will, or even necessarily should, say the same things to different people. This is what I mean when I say that social theory should, if anything, be most remarkable for what it says about your own everyday life. Applying aspects of social theory to your own experiences is a fundamental aspect of your evaluation of a theory. It is therefore worth reiterating the suggestion that in developing a theoretical mind-set the mundane or the everyday is especially important. Throughout the book I have attempted to illustrate in particular how aspects of popular culture are especially important from a theoretical point of view. They are important because they appear to be trivial and therefore are particularly susceptible as arenas of ideological intent. We may feel we are being exploited or alienated in the workplace, but are less likely to feel that way in our own time. In effect, then, aspects of social change which are underpinned by power relationships, and in particular the relationships we associate with the development of capitalism, are potentially reinforced in the most trivial aspects of our everyday lives during which our 'guard' is most likely to be down. This realization reflects the changing nature of social theory in general and in particular the increasing recognition that cultural aspects of life are worth considering in their own right. It is partly for this reason that the realm of consumption is one of the fastest-growing areas of social theory, and this reflects the realization that consumption is more than merely the trivial by-product of production.

The implication of the above is that everybody everywhere is implicated in the process of social change. Broad patterns of social change have a real impact upon each and every one of our lives on a daily basis. But this point itself raises an important class dimension to debates concerning the role of social theory. If social change affects us

all regardless of our class background, then how effectively does the social theorist deal with such change? In short, the vast majority of (if not all) social theorists are middle class. They have a peculiarly middle-class vision of the world. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it may mean that their vision of the world is an inherently biased one. It is in this context that Callinicos (1989) accuses post-modernism of saying more about the disillusioned nature of the post-modernist than it does about social change itself. Many post-modern theorists talk about the aestheticization of everyday life, for instance (see Featherstone, 1991). They discuss the way in which consumption plays such a key role in people's lives and how consumers are able to pick and choose their identities from the menu of life. But again, such sentiments tend to be generalized ones that fail to deal with the complexity of social change. For instance, it is true to say that consumption and consumer culture have an important role in constructing people's identities. But the way in which they do so may be radically different from one person to the next. Somebody without adequate resources may indeed have an intimate relationship with consumer culture precisely because he or she is unable to access that culture. Meanwhile, the post-modernist's own point of view may be the product of his or her own sense of identity, or indeed of a sense that his or her academic identity is in some way being undermined by the ramifications of social change. My point is that social theory does tend to focus on the broad brushstroke at the expense of detailed analysis. Social theory is by definition social, but as a result can underestimate the degree of personal complexities underlying broad patterns of social change. Like the rest of us, social theorists live social change and they do so through their own eyes. Those eyes may not be reflexive enough to take into account how the same patterns of change may affect people's lives in radically different ways.

Social theory as rhetoric

It is absolutely essential that social theory does not degenerate into meaningless rhetoric. As I mentioned above in the context of McDonaldization, there is a constant danger that consumers of social theory are won over by the superficial appeal of a theory. Globalization is a good example of how a particular theoretical perspective has become a sociological buzz-word. The same applies to many of those theoretical themes I have addressed in this book, such as risk, post-modernity and consumption. It is almost as if theorists feel obliged to address such issues in some guise regardless of their actual salience.

During the course of this book I have discussed the work of Georg Simmel as an example of impressionistic social theory. Simmel's contribution to social theory is a considerable one, but his work, or at least the implication of his work, should be considered with a note of caution. Impressionistic social theory is one thing; theory that has no real basis other than the mutual affirmation of fellow theorists is another. In other words, it is important that social theories are based in some sort of practical context rather than in an ocean of rhetoric. Social theorists should be particularly wary of technological determinism. Authors like Daniel Bell and even Ulrich Beck could be criticized for exaggerating the technological factors underpinning social change to such an extent that social change ends up being assumed as opposed to analysed. The buzz-word is the adversary of reflexive social theory. It may appear to provide shelter in times of uncertainty but ultimately that shelter will never withhold the shower of criticism that will befall it. Students of social theory should therefore be prepared to critique theories that hide behind the security of a particular theoretical school or approach that has more credibility than the theory itself. More specifically, they should be very wary of reading off too much from patterns of social change that appear on the surface to be self-evident, but which in fact may be less certain than they initially appeared. For example, many journalists are currently preoccupied with the proliferation of the internet and how it appears to be transforming our relationship with technology and in many cases with the workplace. But the internet is still in its early days and its long-term effects are uncertain. A social theorist should not be dragged along by the hype associated with the internet, which, as I suggested above, may actually engender more stimulating lines of thought in the context of who does *not* have access to the internet than to who actually does. The truth beneath the hype may actually tell us more about the nature of social change. At the end of the day current discussions concerning the internet may simply tell us more about the influence that the mass media have on the culture in which we live.

The 'real' world

Bearing in mind my warning about being too swayed by theoretical fads and buzz-words, it is worth considering in some detail an issue which I touched upon in Chapter 5, namely the extent to which in a so-called 'post-modern' world it is even possible to study or theorize about any such thing as the 'real' world. This issue accounts for the italics in the book's title. Post-modernism has undermined the whole

business of social theory and has forced social theorists to reconsider their contribution to 'knowledge' creation. This is not in itself necessarily a bad thing. Any theoretical development that forces social theorists to be more reflexive has to be positive.

Modern social theory was concerned with discovering and charting reality. Post-modernists often argue that there is no adequate means for representing reality, and some even deny there is any such thing as reality at all (Rosenau, 1992, p. 110). In this context, Rosenau discusses Baudrillard's (1988) work, in which he argues that there is no 'real' world and that the apparently archetypally 'unreal' Disneyland is in fact authentic because it doesn't *pretend* to be real. It is rather an amalgamation of images or 'simulacra'. Reality, then, is only how we as consumers of reality actually perceive it. We construct our own universes in our own minds and through our own individual experiences. To try to define some form of generalizable real world on this basis would therefore be foolhardy. Other post-modern theorists have pointed out that reality is a linguistic convention. There is no reality beyond language. Reality is little more than a linguistic habit (see Flax, 1990; Rosenau, 1992). But perhaps the most convincing argument of all those raised by Rosenau is that this whole debate over whether or not there is any such thing as an independent reality is little more than a game played by intellectuals who are conveniently insulated from the savage realities of the 'real' world. Perhaps post-modern intellectuals know absolutely nothing about the harsh lessons inherent in the real world and thus can only conceive of it as a mental construction. This latter position is the nearest to my own. There is a constant danger that social theory becomes so self-obsessive and so removed from the actualities of everyday life that it becomes completely impotent. It is in danger of making itself so remote, so abstract and so exclusive that reality becomes something that nobody wants to explore beyond the surface: not because it does not exist, but because it simply is not worth worrying about to that extent. The effect of post-modern thought on social theory in general has been an exciting one. But as Thomas and Walsh (1998) point out, ultimately sociology (and as such social theory) is the product of modernity. It is the product of a world in which human beings are at least to some extent concerned with understanding and making sense of the world around them. Such an understanding may not make the world a better place in which to live, as theories such as those presented by George Ritzer and members of the Frankfurt School tend to suggest, but at least it represents an acknowledgement that our own individual lives can, in whatever limited way, be improved. This in itself may or may not be realistic, but it does not condemn us to a life of doom and despair. Contemporary society is undoubtedly very complex and cannot be understood in its entirety. But ultimately, as

Thomas and Walsh point out, a post-modern sociology is an impossibility. If we accept that grand narratives no longer have a role to play in an ever-changing world, then the development of a post-modern sociology which takes on post-modern thought and all its contradictions wholeheartedly would simply replace one set of meta-narratives with another. Rather, we need to develop a sociology and a social theory of post-modernism (see Lash, 1990). As social theorists, we need to understand the complexities of the world around us reflexively, without adopting an epistemological position that predetermines our conception of that world.

Dunn (1998) argues that the current state of the world in which we live has created a particular problem for social theorists. In short, 'The dominant modes of theorizing today are often unduly conditioned by the workings of contemporary culture itself, uncritically reproducing the basic structures, conditions, and values of consumption society' (p. 221). In other words, the consumer society in which we live so infuses every aspect of contemporary life that it actively limits the terrain in which theorists work, 'reframing the problems they work on, and relocating the "subjects" they study' (p. 221). *Social Theory in the 'Real' World* has self-consciously adopted a cultural perspective on social change. Dunn argues that the world is such that it is actually very difficult to avoid doing cultural analysis, which itself reflects the politically correct middle classness of those undertaking theoretical exploration:

Thus, while a concentration on culture represents an appropriate response to a culturalization of society, this concept has become too exhaustive (and exhausted), too overworked and encumbered by special intellectual and political preoccupations, absorbing that which surrounds it in a fashion reminiscent of the larger society. Accordingly, we should question whether theory has lost a desired critical perspective in becoming too identified with the actually existing society and culture. (p. 222)

In this context, Dunn expresses his concern that the material and historical conditions underlying cultural production and transformation are undermined. I share this concern. None of the theories discussed in this book holds any water without appropriate consideration of its economic and social undercurrents. More than anything, social theory should be 'social'. This is not a book about cultural theory but one that argues that culture is the manifestation of social change. In other words, structural change is expressed through the individual's interaction with social institutions. Individuals are active negotiators of social structures and the primary realm in which they do so is the cultural one. It is for this reason that the relationship between structure and agency, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, is so

important. In this respect, culture is just as much a product of social relations as it is 'constitutive of these relations' (Dunn, 1998, p. 224). Dunn advocates a focus on questions of identity and difference. I would agree with this sentiment, but would add the caveat that contemporary social theory should focus on the question of identity as it is actively played out in the actual life of the person using or reading that theory in what has to be an imaginative and reflexive fashion. An individual's identity is played out through his or her ongoing relationship with social change. Our identities are a complex product of the subjective and the objective and represent the means by which we consciously and unconsciously navigate the complex uncertainties associated with the relationship between structure and agency.

Imaginative theory

The fundamental conclusion of this book is that social theory can only really be of value if it is used in an imaginative and creative fashion. Social theory is not a passive pursuit, nor does it or should it represent a static body of knowledge. A student of social theory will get very little out of social theory if he or she expects to be energized by simply reading and internalizing what a particular theorist has to say on a given topic. Social theory is near to useless as a source of reference. It does not provide a magic box of answers or solutions; it provides a resource from which you can develop your own interpretations, ideas and insights. Social theory only comes to life when the reader puts his or her own life into it. Imagination is therefore the key.

A reflexive social theorist is not satisfied with what a theory tells him or her, but is concerned with adapting that theory in original ways. There are a number of options in this respect. It is a particular concern of mine that when thinking about social theory there is an inherent danger of being unnecessarily constrained by disciplinary boundaries. In short, the most effective or stimulating way to theorize is not always within the constraints of a particular disciplinary tradition. We, of course, all have or are undertaking some form of training associated with a particular discipline, even if that training is undertaken off our own backs. However, this should not prevent us from exploring ideas more immediately associated with other disciplines. The question of identity, for instance, is of fundamental importance to theorists from all sorts of disciplines. To depend on the insights of one disciplinary approach would be to cut off numerous, and potentially profitable, avenues of exploration. However, the fact is that

disciplinary boundaries are for all sorts of professional reasons jealously guarded and protected (see Archibald, 1976). It takes the most imaginative of minds to overcome such barriers. But one way to do so in a theoretical context may well be to identify 'mediation phenomena', important foci for debate that apparently fall in the voids between disciplines (see Holland, 1977). Theory is not a strait-jacket and neither should be the disciplinary contexts in which theory operates. Unfortunately, disciplinary traditions are such that the onus is on the reader of social theory to make the necessary connections beyond the often blinkered boundaries presented to him or her by his or her own discipline. In this context, Stones' (1996) call for a 'post-modern' sociology is of considerable interest. There is, indeed, a need to find a middle way between 'sociological modernism' and what Stones describes as 'defeatist postmodernism'. The former underestimates the complexity of the social world and overestimates the ability of the sociologist to construct a 'true' understanding of that world, whilst the latter sees sociological analyses as being no more than a mere fictional account. As such,

sociology needs to provide itself with guidelines on how to traverse the bridges and the junctions that connect the insights of ontology and high theory to the empirical evidence necessary to make claims about the real world of any one moment. . . . we need to maintain a clear sense of the real, but . . . we also need to acknowledge the complexity of that real and the enormous demands of subtlety that this imposes upon anyone wanting to come anywhere near an apprehension of it in a given time and space. (Stones, 1996, p. 1)

There may or may not be any such thing as a 'real' world'. But that world is *real* to those people who live in it; for that reason it is the social theorist's responsibility to construct a debate which is concerned with moving beyond common-sense interpretations of that world.

Social theory in practice

The relationship between theory and practice or theory and research will continue to be a fundamental concern to sociologists and social theorists alike. Social theory should surely not exist in complete isolation. Not only should it reflect on 'real' life, but it should also arguably have practical implications and influence. One author who considers this question in some depth is Derek Layder (1998), who outlines what he calls an 'adaptive' approach which attempts to fulfil the needs of both theorists and researchers alike. Layder acknowledges the damaging tendency of theorists to 'do' theory and

researchers to 'do' research. He therefore advocates bridging this gap through the adoption of a new set of rules of sociological method:

Adaptive theory both shapes, and is shaped by the empirical data that emerges from research. It allows the dual influence of extant theory (theoretical models) as well as those that unfold from (and are entailed in) the research. Adaptive theorizing is an ever-present feature of the research process. (p. 133)

As far as Layder is concerned, then, adaptive theory takes into account the complexity of the social world and the multifarious interconnections that exist between social activities and social organization. In this context, Layder and I concur that acknowledging such complexity does not in any way deny that as social scientists we can at least seek what he calls 'best approximations' to the truth (p. 142). We should not abandon the quest for knowledge, but seek to make that quest more sophisticated and reflexive. 'Adaptive' theory is adaptive in the sense that it is capable of adjusting to what emerges during the course of data collection. It is not constrained by some over-arching theoretical position or agenda. However, at the same time it acknowledges that some theoretical positions do exist prior to that data collection, and they therefore have to respond and adapt accordingly. As such,

extant 'theoretical elements' are never simple empiricist 'reflections' of data, they are intrinsically capable of reformulating ('adapting' or 'adjusting') themselves in response to the discovery of new information and/or interpretations of data which seriously challenge their basic assumptions. Such reformulations may involve only minor modifications, but they may also require fundamental reorganization, such as either abandoning one existing category, model or explanation, or creating new ones, depending on the circumstances. (pp. 150–1)

The key theme here is that social theory should be reflexive, as should the social theorist, who needs to be prepared to adapt his or her theory to the world he or she is researching, which, in turn, is inevitably and perpetually adapting to itself. In this sense it is not always appropriate to adopt an entirely objective perspective on the social world. Our experience as human beings is necessarily subjective and should not be denied.

An underlying concern about social theory is whether or not it has or indeed should have any political influence. As Antonio and Kellner point out, any intention to understand society in its totality and to use this type of theory to serve radical or reformist movements is undermined by post-modern thought. Social criticism, from this point of view, has been paralysed by the fragmentation of social life where

any desire for a collective project becomes untenable. The danger is that the above discussion about the status of social theory and of sociology in a so-called 'post-modern' world ensures that social theory is mute; that social theorists can only have opinions about the world, and that these opinions are no more valid than anybody else's; that social theory has no political role to play. This position is an extreme one, and one that should not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that the social theorist should hide away in his or her shell conscious of his or her inability to change or improve the world. Social theorists should avoid the temptation to strip their theories of political content. If we accept the argument I have presented throughout this book that the primary role of social theory is to provoke thought and debate, then political intent (regardless of its actual impact) should be a priority and not an embarrassment. Value freedom is in itself a chimera, and even if it can exist, it ultimately does little more than lull the theorist into a false sense of security based on a superficial veneer of theoretical validity. Social theory should encourage debate, not paralyse it. The work of the Frankfurt School may be politically questionable, but its extremely subjective nature brings alive ideological questions about popular culture. The suggestion that social theory can itself change the world in some fundamental fashion is, of course, itself highly questionable. But the danger is that if social theorists deny the validity of the human subjectivity engendered in politics, then theories they develop will amount to little more than bland, unintelligible and meaningless descriptions. Subjectivity and passion are what bring social theory to life. The end product of that theory may be indigestible, but it is paradoxically in the indigestion that the pleasure of the meal actually lies. I am not advocating a complete disregard for a balanced and considered perception of the social world, far from it. Value judgments are only reasonable when they are based on some observable reality. But ultimately we construct that reality through our own relationships with the social world.

The issue of globalization provides a particularly telling illustration of the benefits of theory that acknowledges the theorist's own perception of the world. An individual may decide to study processes of globalization for a number of reasons. These may include the fact that this topic constitutes a buzz-word and that he or she is personally motivated by the political dimensions of globalization. But to deny these motivations is to deny the very core of what it means to be a human being. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, a social theorist has to take certain precautions in studying his or her subject matter. He or she has to take some measures to stand outside of that subject matter. The social theorist has to look at social phenomena through sociological eyes. But this in itself should not obliterate the essence of that

theorist's desire to address questions of globalization in the first place. I do not believe a social theorist can get *too* involved in his or her subject matter. What I do believe is that a social theorist can get so involved that his or her work is no longer theoretical. It is here that a balance needs to be struck. Social theory should not be motivated solely by politics and it should not deny the value of the sorts of measures outlined by Bauman (1990), such as the use of responsible speech, if social theory is to have anything significant to say. But ultimately a social theory without passion is arguably an empty social theory.

Regardless of the question of subjectivity, social theory should surely at the very least purport to highlight some of the power inequalities that underlie social life. Perhaps social theory cannot claim to liberate but at the very least it can inform, and that constitutes the fulfilment of a political goal in its own right. The discussion of risk and its impact on the political agenda in Chapter 7 is a good illustration of this point. Social theory cannot change social policy alone, but if we begin to recognize its prescience, then it may have more relevance to policy implementation than we might ever have imagined. An effective and thought-provoking social theory is often a vocal one and one that has a point to make. A less interesting social theory is one that concedes defeat to the speed of the change that influences it. A social theory can be politically charged, but to be effective it has to have solid foundations upon which to base such an argument. Above all else, students of social theory need to be critical. If the political extremities of a particular theory or school of thought are what best stimulates such criticism, then so be it. Social theory should be utilized as a tool for stripping away the layers of common sense.

Concluding comments

Social theory will never be truly satisfying. It was never intended to satisfy, but rather to rouse and provoke. It is absolutely inevitable that some people have never been and will never be stimulated by social theory. But it is also absolutely imperative to remember that this unfortunate fact is quite often more about the inadequacies of the theories or theorists concerned than the inadequacies of the person or persons reading or interpreting those theories. When theory becomes especially difficult to comprehend, the last thing the reader of that theory should do is to blame him- or herself.

Social Theory in the 'Real' World has tried to clarify some of the complexities that social theorists have struggled with for over a

century and which they will no doubt continue to struggle with for decades, if not centuries, to come. Social theory is having to adapt to the rapidity of the social changes that are happening around it. But ultimately change is not such a bad thing. Social theory should help us to understand such change, as opposed to making us more scared of it than we were in the first place. And if social theorists can use change as a means of sparking off new avenues of exploration and of stimulating critical and reflexive thought, then they have succeeded. In the end, reality is what we as human beings make of it. Social theory cannot make reality for us. But what social theory can do, if we allow it the room to do so, is to clarify the complexities of contemporary social life; it can highlight the limitations of common-sense views of the world and suggest alternatives. Social theory can only ultimately achieve such an aim if we, as the 'consumers' of social theory, take it out of the abstract world which it has tended to occupy for so long and return it to the realities of our own everyday lives. The impact of social theory can only be 'real' if we actively and self-consciously endeavour to make it so.