

# NEWSLETTER OF THE *Comparative & Historical* SOCIOLOGY SECTION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Vol. 6: No. 4

## Issues in Sociohistorical Criticism:

### Are We Critical Enough?

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*Editors' note: at our invitation, Robert Antonio prepared the following article, written in response to the article written by David Zaret, "Historical Sociology and Hypercritical Theory," which appeared in the Spring 1994 issue of the newsletter. We invite readers interested in addressing these or other issues to contact the newsletter. See page 2 for details.*

I share David Zaret's desire for stronger historical sensibilities in the "theoretical enterprise." Sociological theory could benefit enormously from more history and less detached conceptual discourse. I also agree that, at least some strains of critical theory and postmodern thought express a "hypercritical" pessimism that is no longer productive. As Luc Ferry (1994) argues, there is a growing sense that the broader deconstructive movement in philosophy and social theory is exhausted and that current conditions call for "historicization" of social theory and recovery of the method of "internal criticism" (which presumes that resources for democratic change have not evaporated and that people have the communicative capacities to utilize them effectively). I have much respect for David Zaret's substantial contributions to historical sociology, and consider his work on the rise of print culture and public life to be a rich and worthy project. His message about exercising openness and care in analyzing the diverse spaces where critical rationality operates is surely timely. Although my own work is primarily theoretical, I believe that we both embrace a similar type of historicism. I am concerned, however, about his use of broad strokes and too easy global dismissals of alternative approaches in order to frame his own ideas. While my points are critical, I intend to amplify the type of historicism that he values.

"Critical theory" and "postmodernism" are very broad streams of thought with fluid borders and many opposing points of view. Their contradictory features and particularities deserve the same consideration given to other "historical" differences. David Zaret's statements about critical theory stress the highly pessimistic "one-dimensionality" thesis and Habermasian theory. There is, however, much more to critical

theory. Even the term is contested, and originates from a specific period of work that precedes both types implied by Zaret (e.g., Dubiel 1985, pp. 35-67). Leo Lowenthal (1987, pp. 61-64), a founding thinker of the "tradition," held that he did not even know what "critical theory" means and that the only unifying feature was an effort to rethink Marxism in the face of "changed historical conditions." Because many "critical theorists" now embrace "post-Marxist" positions, the borders of the approach are even more problematic today. Yet, if one peruses journals that frequently publish writers identified with the tradition (e.g., *New German Critique*, *Telos*, *New Left Review*, *Constellations*), he/she will discover that many, if not most, of the articles are historically oriented discussions of pressing contemporary social, cultural, and political problems. Thus, one finds debates over German reunification, Russian nationalism, the Lombard League and Federalism in Italy, global neoliberalism, the resurgence of fascist thinkers and parties, prospects of the greens, feminism, and other new social movements, transition to democracy in postcommunist regimes, and German anti-Semitism. Theoretical issues are discussed in historical context and with respect to their relevance for contemporary public issues. For example, Heidegger and Jünger are debated in the context of Weimar, National Socialism, and the Holocaust as well as in relation to the return of protofascist thought to legitimacy in Europe. While sociologists would surely disagree about the value and quality of contemporary work by critical theorists, it would be hard to deny that their selections of theoretical problems are governed by considerations of cultural and historical significance. Moreover, while they are critical of capitalist culture, they do not dwell entirely on its dark side; many point to affirmative conditions or possibilities for change. Finally, neither the one-dimensionality thesis nor Habermasian theory dominates current critical theory. Conversely, they are among the most frequently debated and criticized positions.

Postmodernism also should be viewed with a regard for its historical particularities. Rather than being readily dismissed, the theoretical and academic versions of this stream of thought ought to be evaluated in the context of wider

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**FUTURE PUBLICATION DEADLINES:**

**Fall: September 15, 1994**  
**Winter: December 1, 1994**

**Greetings from the Chair**

Ann Orloff

I'm looking forward to seeing all of you in Los Angeles, where our section will be sponsoring a number of interesting sessions and other events on our section day, Monday, August 8, 1994. We will begin our program at 8:30 a.m. with a session on "Current Controversies in Historical and Comparative Methods: Text, Rhetoric, Narrative" (organized by Carole Turbin and David Zaret), featuring presentations by Claude Fischer, John Hall, Jerry Lembke and comments by Sonya Rose and Carole Turbin. Here, we'll have a chance to pursue in person the excellent debates about methods which have appeared in the pages of the newsletter. Following this session will be the Council meeting, then the section Business meeting at 11:30 a.m. At 12:30 p.m. we have "The Shattering Mosaic: The Politics of Immigration, Race, and Xenophobia," co-sponsored with the Section on Political Sociology (organized by Kathleen Blee and Bill Brustein). In this session, which includes presentations by Mainak Mazumdar, Antoine Joseph and Elizabeth Clifford and a comment by Kathleen Blee, we bring comparative and historical perspectives to bear on an issue of great contemporary political importance. Our Section Refereed Roundtables, described by organizer Jeremy Hein in the last issue of this newsletter, will be held at 4:30 p.m. The reception, also co-sponsored with the Section on Political Sociology, will follow the roundtables at 6:30 p.m. I promise that we'll do our best to have lots of drinks and munchies available (within budget constraints of course). Finally, the following morning — Tuesday, August 9 — we are co-sponsoring a session on "Theory in Historical Sociology" with the Theory Section (organized by Theda Skocpol and me), with papers by Randall Collins, Richard Biernacki, Philip Gorski, and Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter.

Section members may also be interested in a teaching workshop on "Teaching Comparative Historical Sociology" (organized by Judith Stepan-Norris), scheduled for Sunday, August 7 at 12:30 p.m. Panelists Hector Delgado, William Martin, Thomas Janoski, and Kum-Kum Bhavani will discuss their experiences in teaching comparative and historical courses on methods, gender, race/ethnicity and the world system. I will be leading a discussion about the specific issue of promoting comparative research methods among students during the section's Roundtable session at 4:30 p.m. on Monday (this is not listed on the Preliminary Program).

I would like to invite all of you to attend the business meeting as well. At this meeting, to be held at 11:30 a.m. on Monday, the section's award for best article and the new award for best graduate student article will be announced. In addition, we will make plans for next year's three section sessions, one of which will be co-sponsored with the Theory Section. Section members' input has always been important in deciding session topics, so please come armed with suggestions. Also, Jeremy Hein has suggested that we discuss ways in which we can make better use of our Roundtable session. One possibility would be to use this slot for member-generated panels (i.e., people would put together a full panel to be submitted to organizers, who would make the final determination whether to accept the whole proposed session — members of the Social Science History Association will recognize this as that association's regular practice for all sessions). And people might want to keep in mind that our section day will be the last day of the ASA meeting next year — Wednesday, August 23, 1995. We have built up quite a reserve of funds in the Section treasury, so people may also want to come with creative ideas on how

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## Are We Critical Enough? (cont. from page 1)

cultural conditions and changes. Postmodernization is a historical process that deserves serious inquiry. For example, postmodernism was the dominant tradition in architecture in the 1970s and 1980s; it is a definite style that has been described and periodized by architects (e.g., Jencks 1986, pp. 371-89). Postmodern modes of expression and representation have also been very important in design, literature, cinema, and other arts and media. While postmodernism may be "trendy" in sociology, it was a convention in certain other spheres before 1980. Postmodern views have had a significant impact on built environments, material culture, and popular culture. Fredric Jameson's (1984) argument that postmodernism is a "cultural dominant" is an empirical point, not an abstract theoretical proposition, and is based on his detailed knowledge of a variety of types of cultural representation. Other writers like David Harvey (1990) or Paul Lineburger and Bruce Tucker (1991) analyze parallel changes in political economy and complex organization (i.e., decentering and restructuring of vertically integrated enterprises, flexible accumulation, and globalization). Responding to these sociocultural changes, postmodern "theorists" issue a variety of epistemological and normative challenges to the presuppositions of theoretical and empirical social science. Like sociological discussions of foundational issues, postmodern approaches have varied widely with regard to their seriousness and quality. But since they have been at the center of what is considered by many thinkers to be the most important interdisciplinary debates of the late 1970s and 1980s, they deserve to be a serious topic of inquiry, regardless of questions about the validity of their empirical and normative claims. Postmodern "theories" are themselves part of an ongoing historical process of sociocultural postmodernization.

David Zaret asserts that critical theory and postmodernism "strongly express one of modern academic life's deepest impulses, namely, to cultivate an antagonistic relationship to the larger social world." These approaches, however, have been entwined with cultural events outside academe and continue to be developed, read, and embraced by many nonacademics. More importantly, without further argument, this position ironically psychologizes (or ontologizes) and dehistoricizes both traditions. Rather than dismissing them, sociologists ought to ask, why have the positions had such large interdisciplinary audiences? Why are they read outside academe, while sociological work, especially sociological theory, has become more insular? Why have they had cultural and socio-political impact outside academe?

Some of the best social thought has been written by figures with a deep ambivalence or pessimism about their times. Since they often ask questions that others ignore, they are valuable resources. Rather than being "hypercritical," I worry that we academics are not critical enough and, especially, that we often do not situate our practices and selves historically. Living in comfy Bloomingtons and Lawrences, working in institutions that have not yet been restructured, and being in positions that still operate largely under the conditions of the post-World War II capital/labor compromise has its own blinders. I wonder if our optimism about the times and our own practices would remain if our tenured positions were imperiled by the same changes that have nullified the social contract of many workers and managers in the private sector or even if we face soberly the current prospects of our graduate students or conditions of nearby classified staff.

While I am no postmodernist, I take postmodernist representation and expression seriously, especially the currents outside academic sociology. Some postmodernists are naively optimistic about the times, but others have expressed a very grim pessimism that David Zaret says we academics must avert. The total one-dimensionality portrayed in Jean Baudrillard's *Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983), the highly dystopian scenarios of *Blade Runner* and *Robocop*, or the repeated theme in *Beavis and Butt-Head* about a "generation with no future" might say something about our current social situation worthy of critical inquiry, which is absent from "the journals" and polite academic conversations — i.e., the incursionary values of the postwar era, still trumpeted loudly in academe and in middle-class identity politics, are in retreat or have been neutralized for those in the underclasses and marginalized groups outside the middle class and that we face increasingly a zero-sum climate fueled by "fear of falling." From this vantage point, even very moderate liberal values, like "equal opportunity," are viewed tacitly as being far too costly to implement and are reduced to props for Martin Luther King Day celebrations. In my view, this type of sensibility is at the heart of postmodern claims about "simulation" and "the end of the social," suggesting something much more problematic than David Zaret's point about "technical shifts in communication." Is the theme of the formalization of democracy prevalent in some types of

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**Critical Enough?** (from page 3)

postmodern expression being confronted critically and historically within sociology? While claims about the end of modernity are surely overblown, the ending of the institutional complex, geopolitics, and socio-political aspirations of the postwar expansion is a problem worth considering. The kind of project that David Zaret suggests and executes is valuable, but it does not contradict the need for serious inquiries about the current contexts of contemporary modes of thought and culture. Evidence of effective communication and critical rationality in completely different historical situations ought not be used to dismiss contemporary positions that have a less than optimistic view about the current phase of "advanced capitalist culture" and its communicative practices.

At the end of the "Objectivity" essay, Max Weber ([1904] 1949, p. 112) hypothesized that specialized science would make data analysis an "end in itself"; that specialists would be too singularly engaged in their practices to think about their cultural significance. But he argued that sweeping sociocultural changes would eventually make them problematic again. While historical sociologists have generally expressed more sensitivity about these foundational issues than the specialists that Weber foresaw, deeper and more critical reflection about them might be very timely today. Even historical sociologists are not immune from having an ahistorical attitude about the roots of their own projects. It is possible that we live at one of those moments that demands a serious rethinking of the presuppositions of our practices. But we lack an adequate language for identifying, clarifying, and debating the cultural significance of the "problems" that animate and establish the boundaries of our theoretical and empirical work. Normative commitments are often refracted in those all-too-frequent conceptual, methodological, and empirical "debates," where thinkers speak past one another and fail to engage each others' arguments. Coming to terms with such issues calls for a broader historicism that draws out, situates socially, and opens to discussion the ultimate normative standpoints that make our problems worthy of inquiry.

David Zaret's point about rethinking the historicity of theoretical work ought to be taken seriously. But why stress such easy targets, defined so negatively in mainstream disciplinary circles and so seldom seriously read? Rather, one ought to raise the same pressing question about sociological theory and empirical work. What kind of visions of society and global

conditions are visible when we scan the mainstream journals? Is "critical rationality" exercised in the selection of problems? Is this issue even discussed? Are we producing knowledge "worth knowing"? These are old questions asked many times before, but they still have relevance today. Since sociology itself was not fully institutionalized until the middle of the post-World War Two era, its normative foundations and practices are, at least partly, and perhaps largely, shaped by the culture of that possibly bygone era. If the period really has ended, it will be hard to avoid the pessimistic issues now being raised at or beyond our disciplinary borders, especially when the current wave of restructuring reaches our own door.

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**Message from the Chair** (from page 2)

to spend (at least some of) the money in furthering our aims. Finally, there are always committees to be staffed. Attendance at the meeting is the surest way to avoid nomination to committees on which you'd rather not serve — and, of course, to get yourself on to those which do interest you! If you cannot attend, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me about any or all of the abovementioned topics (e-mail: orloff@ssc.wisc.edu, or by regular mail to Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706). ■

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