Theory

The Newsletter of the Research Committee on Sociological Theory
International Sociological Association
Autumn/Winter 2009

CURRENT BOARD

Chairs

Philip Smith
Fuyuki Kurasawa

Secretary/Treasurer

Ronald Jacobs
1400 Washington Ave.
Arts & Sciences 351
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
r.jacobs@albany.edu

Board Members

Jeffrey Alexander
Gianpaolo Baiocchi
Patrick Baert
Mabel Berezin
Allen Chun
Nick Crossley
Veena Das
Paul Jones
Agnes Ku
Guiseppe Sciortino
Ken Thompson
Peter Wagner

Associate Board Members

Pekka Sulkunen
Brad West
Maeve Cooke
Craig Browne
Marcel Fournier
Seung-Kuk Kim
Vikki Bell
Kiyomitu Yui
Edmond Wright
Elisa P. Reis

Editors of *Theory*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Vieux Motard que Jamais – Better Late than Never

We know one shouldn´t start the year with a confession, but we owe you one. This issue of theory is late, because we completely forgot that we had to produce one. But when we finally realized our negligence just before Christmas, we contacted some friends to help us out. And so they did. Many thanks. Along with some pieces already scheduled a while ago, they provide a lively view of some trends in sociology and sociological theory today.

In what follows you will find six texts and an obituary. The issue opens with a vigorous discussion of the origins of Human

Rights and their relation to sociology by Hans Joas. Piet Strydom addresses the renewal of critical theory especially vis-à-vis cognitive theory and Bernard Lahire gives a preview of his book in which he offers an important correction to Bourdieu's theory of the literary field. Next, Andrea Brigenthi presents us with some cutting edge observations on territory and visibility, while Rodrigo Cantu relates the still ongoing economic and financial crisis to economic sociology. Broadening the scope of the debate in a global direction Cheris Shun-ching Chan reviews the development of sociology and in particular sociological theory in China. Finally, Frédéric Vandenberghe provides the obituary of an important, yet relatively unknown social theorist, Michel Freitag, who has recently died.

We hope you enjoy the issue. Although short, these are strong and insightful sociological pieces. Somewhat belatedly, we wish you a prosperous, progressive and productive new year.

José Maurício Domingues
Frédéric Vandenberghe

The Sacredness of the Person

The triumphant march of Human Rights proves wrong those who want to interpret present times or, more generally, processes of modernization solely in terms of moral decay and loss of common values. Looking at the endless literature on the history and the prehistory of Human Rights, one could perhaps best formulate the dominant impression by saying that success has many fathers. When one asks for the origins of the theme of Human Rights, it seems imperative to focus on the late 18th Century. For it was in those days that the first solemn declaration of Human Rights occurred in France, and even before that in North America. But to mention France *and* North America in this context raises a problem that one cannot avoid even when one radically delimits the question of the origins of Human

Rights in time. After all, a common view concerning the genesis of Human Rights could be summarized like this: human rights came up during the early phase of the French Revolution. They stem from the spirit of the French Enlightenment, which is anti-clerical if not openly hostile to religion. Human Rights do not stem from any specific religious tradition, but rather from the resistance against the power of the (Catholic) Church and Christianity. Even if the French revolutionaries themselves produced a successful declaration of Human Rights, they did, however, not succeed in presenting a really consistent conceptual foundation of their historical breakthrough. This is found for the first time in Kant's moral and legal philosophy, which delivers a more or less irrefutable foundation for the idea of Human Rights and the universal dignity of Man.

This idea has not been diffused to the same extent everywhere. Moreover, there are national variations. Opposition against every single aspect of this idea is not uncommon either. I only mentioned the common view here because it offers a counter-image to the view I want to defend. Now a brief concise characterization of my thesis becomes possible, namely that Human Rights did in no way emerge in France, but in North America. I concede that the spirit of the Enlightenment is essential for its origin, but not that it necessarily had to take the form of antireligious Enlightenment. And I also want to claim that Kant's philosophy does not offer the irrefutable rational foundation of Human Rights, though it is, no doubt, the most impressive expression of a cultural change which it condenses in a not unproblematic way.

With this alternative (which I can only indicate here), I do, of course, not simply want to invert the conventional view. Durkheim´s ideas on the dynamics of processes of sacralization are decisive for my whole argument. In the context of the Dreyfus affair that nearly tore apart the

French republic at the end of the 1890's, he transposed ideas he had developed mainly with reference to 'primitive religions' of the Australian aboriginals and North American Indians to his own time and related them to the idea of human rights. He thereby refuted the accusation that the spirited defense of human rights implied the release of individualism that undermines the social order and community. To the contrary, properly understood, individualism represents an ambitious ideal. Those who believe in that ideal and strive to realize it consider the human person as 'sacred'. 'It was akin to the transcendental majesty that the churches of all times had given to their Gods. They are considered as if they were endowed with these mysterious properties that created sacred things from emptiness and removed them from usual contact and common treatment' (Durkheim, 1898; see also Hans Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion?* (Do human beings need religion?, pp. 151-168).

What do these reflections mean for the question of the Christian-religious or secular-humanist roots of Human Rights? Central to my answer is the idea that the attachment to values does not grow out of rational considerations. For sure, philosophical writings can question axiological attachments or contribute to a redefinition of existing self-interpretations, but they cannot provide the impetus for the attachments to values. That does not mean that religious traditions can invoke with self-satisfaction or triumph   their indispensability for the factual development of universal values or even rights. In plain language, everybody who thinks that Human Rights can already be found in the gospels has to face the question why it took more than 1700 years to transform religious revelation in applicable law. I do not attribute anything to Christianity that does not belong to it; but I want to show that the belief in the sacredness of every person is a belief that is grounded in experience. Durkheim had a good sense of

the dynamic of the experience that leads to universalist value attachments, but he nevertheless thought Judaism and Christianity *passé* and backed a new secular doctrine of salvation: that one based on the (French) nation-state that orients itself to Human Rights. Even if Max Weber on the other hand understood the role of religion for the formation of the characteristics of modern societies, he got it wrong when he interpreted human rights as an expression of the sacralization of Reason. The study of the human rights movements following the first codifications – from the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century till the processing of national-socialist crimes in the UN declaration of 1948 and the continuing discourse about the crimes of the gulag or colonialism – shows us the preconditions for their success: a heightened sensibility for distant suffering; the global interconnection of social relations with the changing sense of responsibility that comes with it; and a transnational public sphere that makes it possible to name and shame violations of human value with political success. The opposition of believers against non-believers is only misleading; it drains the forces of the necessity for every tradition to interpret itself always anew and prevents the formation of alliances in the common struggle for the realization of Human Rights.

Hans Joas

Immanent Transcendence: Pragmatism, Critical Theory and Cognitive Social Theory

One of the most important debates impacting on social theory today is what has been called 'the renaissance of pragmatism'. What makes it so potent is the fact that it is by no means just about pragmatism, but at its core concerns the relation between pragmatism and critical theory. The contact between these two has given rise to a promising new key social theoretical concept, 'immanent transcendence', while proposals from both

sides are being made for the incorporation of insights emanating from the cognitive revolution.

It is important to note that both critical theory and pragmatism derive from the Left-Hegelian tradition as represented by Marx and Peirce respectively. Despite this commonality, however, the debate draws its animus from very different interpretations of this shared heritage. A highly visible dimension is the clash between Rorty and Habermas. For Rorty, Habermas is caught in the Kantian transcendental trap of foundationalism and needs to completely detranscendentalize to be able to escape at all, while, for Habermas, Rorty fell into the bottomless relativist and anti-realist pit of a strict contextualism which deprives critique of its transcending force. These conflicting arguments indeed give an indication of what is at stake in the debate, yet one has to penetrate a little deeper to grasp the social theoretical implications.

Some pragmatists simultaneously criticise Rorty's effective hermeneutical evacuation of pragmatism and Apel and Habermas' transcendentally inspired appropriation of Peirce. This leaves one, however, with the kind of truncated action-oriented pragmatism that Peirce emphatically rejected in favour of what he instead called 'pragmaticism' which, far from excluding it, considered action – along the lines of Kant's 'ideas of reason' as situated in 'concrete ethical life' by Hegel – in the medium of general theoretical and normative ideas. It is at this juncture, which the two contemporaries Marx and Peirce grasped equally clearly in the mid-nineteenth century, that other pragmatists and the critical theorists meet today. This fecund meeting point is marked by the currently emerging key concept.

The idea of immanent transcendence went through a long and rather involved subterranean process of gestation and use from the late-eighteenth to the mid-

twentieth century before its core figure of thought was clearly stated and the explicit term was introduced – in both cases with reference to Peirce. Apel encapsulated the idea in the early 1970s by the phrase 'the dialectic of the real and ideal communication community', and Habermas explicitly termed it *Transzendenz von innen* in the late 1980s, apparently prompted by one of Hillary Putnam's happy turns of phrase. For both Apel and Habermas, critical theory needs the Left-Hegelian input of pragmatism. It is this understanding, in the context of the debate with Rorty and the deconstructionists, that led Thomas McCarthy in the early 1990s to detranscendentalize or pragmatically deflate Kant's ideas of reason to what he calls 'socio-practical ideas of reason' or cultural forms which are both 'immanent' and 'transcendent' – i.e., presupposed in social practices as idealizations, yet effective by both structuring action and relations and pointing beyond actual situations. His proposal to pragmatize critical theory as a 'practically significant, socio-historical critique of impure reason' was almost immediately followed by Honneth's attempt to recuperate the authentic Left-Hegelian core of critical theory which, in his view, was captured precisely by the concept of *innerweltliche Transzendenz*. A decade later in his debate with Nancy Fraser, which took place at the same time as the internal critical theory debate between Apel and Wellmer about the status of regulative ideas, Honneth reinforced the claim that this is the key concept of contemporary critical theory. What he did not bring out, however, was the pragmatist contribution to Left-Hegelianism and, hence, the important threefold sign-mediated epistemology shared by Peirce and Marx but worked out in detail only by the former. This epistemology, it should be noted, allows for linking pragmatic critical theory to democracy, including the role of the public – a link James Bohman, appealing to Dewey, stresses.

4

There is a developing understanding that cognitive social theory is an indispensable part of the approach to an analysis of immanent transcendence – i.e., the process of the social construction of pragmatic presuppositions into cultural forms, the structuring in turn of action, practices and relations by such cultural forms, the corresponding attempts to realize the potential of such forms, and interferences or blockages by social and/or cultural structures. In the context of the overlap between critical theory and pragmatism, the focus is on the process of interrelated dynamic structure formation on the micro, meso and macro levels rather than adopting either the strong naturalistic approach of Sperber and Luhmann or the methodological individualist rational choice approach of Boudon and Esser. A critical account of intervening social and/or cultural structures requires, moreover, the realist moment of the sign-mediated epistemology.

Piet Strydom

The Literary Game or the Writer's Double Life

(Translated from the French by Rita Felski and Jim English)

What does it mean to speak of a writer's double life? It is to acknowledge that most authors are authors only in a partial and qualified sense. The literary universe is poorly professionalized and offers little financial remuneration, especially for those who are the "purest" and most "advanced" in their art, even though it can provide large symbolic rewards and generate intense personal investment (a sense of vocation). It thus brings together many individuals who otherwise belong to quite different social worlds. Participants in the literary universe often need a second job (which is, in fact, frequently their first job). In this sense, they are akin to players – who regularly exit the game in order to make a living outside – rather than to agents firmly embedded in a field of literary activity. For this reason, I develop the notion of a "literary game" rather than "literary field" (the latter term popularized by the work of Pierre Bourdieu). Literary game denotes a secondary field that operates very differently from related fields such as those of the academic or scientific professions, which have the economic means to turn participants into permanent agents who devote most of their energies to their work. Literature is systematically compared to and contrasted with these neighbouring fields throughout *La Condition littéraire. La double vie des écrivains* (Paris, La Découverte, 2006).

A distinguishing feature of *La Condition littéraire* is its intensive scrutiny of aspects of authorship that have been poorly studied or neglected: the social origins and education of writers, the multiple social frames of their personal experiences, the amount of time they can afford to devote to writing, the material constraints that compel them to write quickly in order to make a living or that slow down the pace of publication, the nature of their extra-literary professional activities, the economic pressures that shape how and what they write, and even the surprisingly under-examined links between the writing skills required by their "second job" and the type of literature they write. The book thus offers fresh theoretical and sociological perspectives on the everyday lives of authors as well as elaborating on the implications of such insights as they change our view of the role of literature and the autonomy of art.

The book develops the model of the "literary game" in contrast to competing theories of literary production: field theory as developed by Bourdieu, the theory of art worlds pioneered by Howard Becker, and various kinds of structuralism and formalism. The problems of field theory arise from the frequently careless and indiscriminate use of the term "field" as a synonym for any sphere of activity, social realm, or area of practice. Little attention is paid to clarifying the differences be-

tween social microcosms that are fields and those that are not, and in differentiating between types of field. The term is frequently used less as a starting hypothesis – in need of verification – than as a way of categorizing *a priori* the social realities that are being studied. The use of the term is especially problematic when applied to the condition of authors whose identities cannot be reduced to "agents in the literary field," precisely because they lead double lives that are characterized by competing affiliations, attachments, and practices. One of the intellectual goals of the book is to bring greater clarity and precision to our understanding of what constitutes a social field.

The book also develops and extends the metaphor of the "literary game" and explores its rich semantic possibilities (e.g., the opposition between game and work, secondary activity and main activity, what is fun and what is serious) in order to differentiate social spheres that offer radically different conditions of life and possibilities of development to those taking part in specific games. A primary concern is to honour the complexity of individual creators whose lives as writers cannot be reduced to their position in one particular field of activity. The book also emphasizes the differences between social worlds that have varying relations to the state and the market and that are characterized by specific ways of living and distinctive cultural practices.

La Condition littéraire also differs from Howard Becker's well-known discussion of "art worlds," which focuses on the larger structures of cooperation and the professional conventions that make creativity possible. Such an approach, when applied to literature, requires a consideration not only of writers and publishers, but of anyone working in publishing (readers, proof readers, press attachés), as well as printers, publicists, booksellers, librarians, members of local literary organizations, etc. Because of this focus on macro-structures, however, Becker's institutional

approach pays little attention to the creativity and individuality of authors, as well as overlooking the fact that they cannot be wholly defined by their involvement in the literary universe.

In this regard, the book also takes issue with structuralist and formalist frameworks which study literature as a closed system without considering authors and the material conditions under which they create their works. Such internal readings of art – Russian formalism, Anglo-American New Criticism, French literary structuralism, etc. – explicitly exclude the author as an object of study. Offering a powerful rebuttal of clichés about the death of the author, *La Condition littéraire* develops a sustained argument for the importance of the material and social conditions of authorship in understanding how literature operates.

Bernard Lahire

Visibilities and Territories for Social and Sociological Theorising

The recent debate on humanism and post-humanism has highlighted some of the major challenges social and sociological theorising faces today. In particular, a wide-ranging epistemological *problématique* has been raised and opened up for discussion: while there is a recognition that new ways of conceptualizing social subjects, objects, spaces, times, actions and changes are most needed, the proposed solutions are contested and their insightfulness is yet to be fully ascertained. Collectives, associations, networks, mobilities, control and governance are some of the crucial phenomena which are currently being explored – or, in some cases, re-explored – by social theorists. In respect of these topics, a growing dissatisfaction with the categories inherited from twentieth century sociology has emerged: indeed, those categories seem to have lost their grip on a number of crucial social phenomena. Partly in response to this situation, a growing number of authors are

currently turning for inspiration and new theoretical insights to late nineteenth century theorists, at the aural stage of the discipline of sociology – such as Gabriel Tarde – and other non-systematic classics – such as Georg Simmel – or even socio-logical outsiders – such as Elias Canetti. These attempts could also be characterised as attempts to overcome the strictures of methodological individualism on the one hand and reified collectives (as well as reified representations) on the other.

Most importantly, these calls for an epistemological renewal of social and socio-logical theorising are not mere intellectual amusements. Quite the contrary, they are intimately interwoven with the ethical-political issues we must urgently address in early twenty-first century: issues of human dignity, inequality, democracy, public space, surveillance, ecology and the natural environment. Of course, sociological notions do not simply mirror a given historical situation, yet it has become clear that several by now commonsensical social scientific notions had been designed and constructed taking for granted a context that since then has significantly changed. The point is not historical determinism, rather the fact that notions and theories are tools with which we tackle and unfold certain problems we have diagnosed as well as, ultimately, intervene upon reality. Thus, it is not by chance that some of the most pressing ethical-political contemporary issues can hardly be spelt in the traditional social scientific vocabulary. Probably, the very fault-lines between subdisciplines or research areas in the social science and social theory need a serious reconceptualisation. For instance, we may discover that social collectives, political agency and new communication technologies, while usually split into different domains of study and research, in fact form a complex sociotechnical and biopolitical whole.

In the general context of such a quest for the renewal of social and sociological theorising, I would simply like to point to a few concepts that, once aptly developed and constructed, could bear some promise as enriching sociological notions. In a sense, they represent an attempt to bring together the legacies of phenomenology and ecological thinking. These are certainly two traditions that are not commonly associated and one could even doubt that they can be reconciled at all. However, the notions of territory, visibility, rhythm, inscription, affection and resistance are all notions that on the one hand are grounded in a relational social ontology (like ecological thinking), while on the other are not confined to the identification and description of grammars or diagrams of action but rather inherently incorporate the material and energetic dimensions of social reality (a recognition that lies at the root of phenomenology).

Consequently, an analysis of the social carried out through the analysis of the creation and transformation of social territories accounts for both the material here-and-now and takes into consideration the incessant prolongations of the here-and-now towards elsewhere and at-other-times. Territories are compositions of affections and resistances created through the inscription of certain rhythms and critical distances within an element of sensibility which, for lack of better words, I suggest to call 'visibility' – a notion which certainly contains much more than the merely visual. The visible thus ulti-mately appears as a 'flesh' of the social, to retrieve another phenomenological con-cept. In its very constitution, visibility is neither simply political nor simply tech-nological; rather, it is at the same time sociotechnical and biopolitical: it is socio-technical because it concerns linkages and mediations which occur in the middle realm where ideas and material forces coexist, and it is biopolitical because it concerns social collectives.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

Derivatives of the World Risk Society

The last months of 2008 saw the outbreak of the most severe economic crisis since 1929. This crisis has already led to a major reconfiguration of world economic councils (from G7 to G20) and to profound changes in the relationship between states and the economy. Although economists appear as its most frequent interpreters, social theory has much to say about the current economic crisis. In this short paper, we indicate how sociological thought can help to understand the financial innovations, such as the financial derivatives, which were directly responsible for the subprime crisis, as economic weapons of mass destruction.

According to the well-known formulation of Ulrich Beck (1986), contemporary modernity is marked by its reflexive character. Society becomes aware of the danger that accompanies the very process of modernization. As financial technologies that allow for risk control, derivatives can thus be understood as an economic symptom of the "risk society". But how does the economy deal with the perception that its activity is surrounded by threats? The economic system understands things in its own terms (Luhmann, 1998); its understanding and control of risk are based on pricing and transactions in the market. The financial expression of reflexive modernity is the creation of instruments for the transfer, through market relations, of hazards that come along with economic and financial development.

If we ignore the operations accomplished in order to visualize, disentangle and standardize risk into derivative instruments, we turn a blind eye to all the work of financial engineers, which is quite similar to that of the scientists and engineers studied by Bruno Latour (1987). First, the risk is rendered visible through categorization (market risk, credit risk, operational risk, currency risk, etc.). Second, once visible, risk may be disentangled from its source through contracts that fix in the present the future price of an asset. Both visible and disentangled from the economic activity of a specific company, risk then becomes mobile. It can be dissociated from the place where it is created, circulate and be transferred among different hands. The acceleration of its mobility still depends on another operation: risk needs to be standardized. When contracts are drawn up with equal terms and the same values, they can be traded by banks in an aftermarket. It is only at the end of this protracted circuit that artifacts of risk manipulation can become ubiquitous in the economy.

To understand the current crisis, one also needs to be able to describe derivatives as an instrument of financial domination. Bourdieu's concept of the field goes in this direction, for it frames financial innovations as weapons used in the disputes over dominant positions in the financial field. Inside this field, different agents are engaged in struggle: on the one hand, those whose activities are closer to traditional financial intermediation; on the other hand, those who explore the boundaries of speculation instruments. The first group represents the more heteronomous pole of the field. It does not rely exclusively on the promises of a mercantile virtue, remaining close to industrial or even civic commitments. The second is the more autonomous pole. It adheres to the values of the financial world and seeks to expand its domain. It is within this second group, the financial avant-garde, that the financial innovations that produced the subprime crisis were developed. A differential sociology of financial actors can both show within which groups speculative innovations are produced and also indicate the role of theses innovations in the agonistic space of finance.

The concept of field also suggests how the financial world turned into a dominant actor in the economy by means of its

vanguard activities. Financial domination (Hilferding, 1981, Mintz and Schwarz, 1985; Orléan, 1999) is a result of the rise of financial assets as one of the most valued resources in the field of power (Bourdieu, Heilbron and Raynaud, 2003). This position was achieved by a long and painstaking labor on the part of the autonomous pole in order to impose to the whole economy its particular modes of conceiving and carrying out its activity (from organizational, entrepreneurial or yet exploitational values towards the control of the adequate exposure level of assets, balancing speculation and hedging). The crisis that erupted in the last months of 2008 seriously jeopardized the rule of this financial avant-garde. Firstly, because it destroyed a major part of the fictitious capital these actors imagined they had. Secondly, since the financial institutions themselves were weakened and because they provoked so much uproar in the entire world, the financial field is once again opened to heteronomy as well as to state regulation. The recent crisis denaturalized financial hegemony and showed how this setting can be reversed not only through resistance of counter-hegemonic programs, but also as an unintended consequence of its own instruments.

Bibliography

Beck, Ulrich. (1986), *Risk society*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, J.; Heilbron, J.; Raynaud, E. B. (2003), "Les structures sociales de la finance". *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*. v.146-147, pp.3-7.

Hilferding, Rudolf. (1981) [1921], *Financial Capital*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Latour, Bruno. (1987), *Science in Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Luhmann, Niklas. (1988), *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Mintz, B; Schwarz, M. (1985), *The Power Structure of American Business*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Orléan, André. (1999), *Le pouvoir de la finance*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

Rodrigo Cantu

Sociological Theory in China

Sociological theory, along with the discipline of Sociology, was first brought to China in 1897, when Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* was translated into Chinese by a scholar named Yan Fu. Since then, the development of sociological theory in China can be divided into three stages, though the first stage remains the most significant one.

The earliest stage of development took place during the turbulent period from the late 1890's through about 1950. Imperial China was overthrown in the 1910s, and the Republic of China was invaded by Japan in the 1930s. The Sino-Japanese war lasted from 1937 to 1945, followed by another three years' civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. It was during these social and political crises that the first localized sociologists emerged. Wu Wenzao, trained in Columbia University, was renowned for his efforts to develop localized sociology and anthropology when he returned to Yenching University. One of his students, Fei Xiaotong, received his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics, and became a prominent Chinese sociologist and anthropologist. Fei's thesis *From the Soil* (*Xiangtu Zhongguo*), published in 1947 and translated into English in 1992, was, in the words of translators Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng, the "first and only effort to construct a non-Western theoretical foundation for a sociology of Chinese society." Fei's thesis lays out the foundations of Chinese society, and how they differ from the West. It offers a framework of structure and action unique to the study of Chinese society and remains the most widely cited original work from a Chinese scholar. In addition to Wu and Fei, the other scholars that

emerged during this period all strove to develop localized theoretical frameworks for studying and reforming Chinese society.

Being denounced as "useless" and "pseudo-science" by the Chinese Communist Party, sociology practically disappeared during the Maoist regime. It was not until the late 1970s, during Deng Xiaoping's reforms, that sociology began its second stage of development. During this period, Chinese scholars concentrated on translating Euro-American texts. A local journal, *Foreign Sociology* (*Guowai Shehuixue*) was launched by Su Guoxun from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and specialized in introducing Western sociological theories. Translations first focused on sociological theory textbooks, before moving to the classical writings of Weber and Durkheim. Contemporary theorists, including Schutz, Garfinkel, Goffman, Giddens, and Bourdieu, were either translated or introduced in edited volumes. Most of these sociological theories appeared in locally edited textbooks as teaching materials, where their applicability to the Chinese context was discussed by Chinese editors and authors. Local original works were rare, with a few notable exceptions, such as Su Guoxun's *Rationality and Its Limitations* that evaluates Weber's theory of rationality and modern society, and Liu Xiaofeng's *Preface to Social Theory of Modernity* that discusses sociological theories of modernity and their applicability to non-western societal contexts.

A movement among the younger generation of Chinese sociologists toward social, instead of sociological, theories characterizes the third stage of development. Beginning in the mid 1990s, an increasing number of young scholars found classical and contemporary sociological theories inadequate for understanding Chinese modernity. Instead, they became increasingly interested in theories from the 17th-18th centuries,

studying the works of Adam Smith, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. At the same time, they began to revise the aforementioned local social theories from the first stage of development.

Thus, during the past three decades there has been a dearth of original work in sociological theory among Chinese sociologists. One reason is due to sociological theory, and the humanities in general, being viewed as lacking (immediate) "economic" or "practical" value, for a society climbing the international social hierarchy. With the state underscoring "hard science" as the surest means of strengthening the nation, only empirical and policy-related social sciences were seen as "useful." Another reason is that the re-establishment of sociology in China since the late 1970s has been clearly influenced by sociologists from Hong Kong and the US, where many students go for their doctoral degrees. The emphasis on empirical research and the marginal status of sociological theory in these academic communities unsurprisingly produced Chinese sociologists that are empirically oriented and lacking a tool-kit for generating original theoretical works.

Cheris Shun-ching Chan
Zelin Yao

Obituary Michel Freitag (1935-2009)

Michel Freitag, a great, but unrecognized social theorist of the second twentieth century, died of a sudden heart attack in Montreal at the age of 73. Built like a woodcutter, the man fell like a tree, leaving a whole generation of fine dialecticians he had trained without mentor. The news of his death spread instantaneously across Québec, confirming belatedly that (like Charles Taylor, his Anglophone counterpart in Montreal) he had been recognized all along as one of Canada's prominent intellectuals.

Born in Switzerland in 1935, Freitag went to Paris in the 1960´s. Under the supervision of Alain Touraine, he started writing a Ph.D. on economic theories of development in Africa. After a detour via Algeria and extended traveling through South Asia and the Middle East, he arrived in Montreal in 1970, joining ex-colleagues from Touraine´s *labo* in the newly founded sociology department of the Université de Québec à Montreal (better known by its acronym UQAM) from which he retired in 2001. Working at the margins of the institution, more at home in the countryside than in high society, he nevertheless succeeded in gathering a strong group of young sociologists and philosophers of high caliber around his ideas. He also animated a monthly seminar at UQAM and founded in 1981 the journal *Société* (some 30 issues).

Well versed in classical theoretical traditions, both sociological and philosophical, Freitag´s dialectical sociology is both impressive and demanding. What strikes the reader immediately is the systematic nature of his work. His sociology is part of a larger unified framework that integrates ontology, epistemology, philosophical anthropology and civilizational analysis into a coherent vision of the world. Inspired by Kojève's reconstruction of Hegel, Freitag has developed a monumental social theory that fore-grounds the symbolic mediations that constitute society as a meaningful totality and analyzes its transformations through the ages – from primitive and traditional societies to modern and postmodern ones. Like Lévi-Strauss, Freitag is obsessed with the relation between nature, culture and society; like Weber, he wants to reorganize his vast knowledge of civilizations into a universal deve-lopmental history; and like the Frankfurt School, his ontology of the present is animated by a radical critique of the

dehumanizing tendencies of global-ization.

Dialectique et société is Freitag´s *magnum opus*[1]. Published in two volumes in 1986, its depth, scope and reach are comparable to Giddens´s *Constitution of Society*, Habermas´s *Theory of Communicative Action* and Luhmann´s *Social Systems*. Thematically and theoretically, it is part of the 'new theoretical movement of the eighties' – but written in French and published outside of France, it did not have the impact it would undoubtedly have had if Freitag had stayed in Paris. The original project of *Dialectique et Société* comprised five volumes, only two of which have been published so far (a revised version of the first volume and the third volume will be published soon). In the first volume, the Swiss born sociologist presents a general theory of symbolic practice. Its basic idea is that practice is always already and inevitably caught in a web of symbolic represen-tations and significations that functions as an a priori and transcendental order of determination that regulates and unifies the practices, which in turn reproduce society. By introducing culture as a virtual totality that a priori forms, informs and regulates the symbolic practices that produce and reproduce society, Freitag has successfully forged a dialectical connec-tion between the regulation of practices and the reproduction of society. This 'double dialectic' between agency and structure forms the starting point of the developmental theory of the modes of formal reproduction of society that is presented in the second volume. Analyzed in a historical and diachronic perspective, the idealtypical description of a society that is conceived as a community of language reappears now, formally, as the

---

[1] The two volumes of *Dialectiques et société,* as well as some other texts by Freitag can be freely downloaded at the site (http://classiques.uqac.ca/ contemporains/freitag_ michel/freitag_michel.html).

first mode of reproduction of society, the 'symbolic-cultural' one, which, "sublated", will be succeeded in modernity by the "political-institutional" one and, subverted and tendentially abolished, in post-modernity by the "decisional-operational" one.

Freitag´s vision of postmodernity remains rather bleak and totalizing, akin to the one of the Frankfurt School. The 'totally administered world' may now look more like a Luhmannian world-system that is out of control, the diagnosis eerily echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's: end of society, end of culture, end of subjectivity, end of history. Sympathizing with ecological and anti-utilitarian critiques of capitalism, he unrelentingly denounces America, capitalist chrematistics, technocratic education and postmodern totalitarianism. Convinced that the world would soon destroy itself – lest humanity decides to revert to a simpler, autarchic lifestyle – he became increasingly negative and radical. When I last saw him in Montreal in September, he argued in earnest that to save the world we needed a 'global war cabinet' that would drastically restrain consumption, ban publicity and prohibit stock markets.

Although Michel was in good shape – cutting trees in the forest, repairing cars, producing his own wine – he knew that his time was up. Having finished a major book on globalization (*L´impasse de la globalization. Une histoire sociologique et philosophique du capitalisme*) and another one on the genealogy of liberalism (*L'abîme de la liberté*, forthcoming), he started working frenetically on a major revision of *Dialectique et société*. When he brought the manuscript of the first volume to the publisher, he felt relieved: "C´est mon testament", he said. Although he suffered from the fact that his work had been largely ignored outside of Québec, he was confident that its time would come. It will come and, hopefully, the coming publication of a book in English with some of his best articles will help to establish his reputation as one of the great thinkers of our age, comparable perhaps to Habermas or Luhmann.

Frédéric Vandenberghe