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Teaching Sociological Theory for a New Century: Contending with the *Time Crunch*

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Abstract Despite being a decade into the 21st century, sociological theory continues to be taught at the undergraduate and graduate level in nearly every program in the United States as if it were still 1970. 40 years ago, it made sense to dichotomize theory into two courses—"classical" and "contemporary"—because the latter of the two only covered theory from about the 1930s to the "present." Today a literal and figurative *time crunch* has emerged that makes teaching theory difficult and at times, arbitrary based on the professor's training, mentor, ideological/epistemological biases, and structural factors like textbook choice and number of academic weeks allotted per course. That is, we spend a large amount of time debating who should be in or out, and not enough time preparing our students for the application of theory towards the ultimate goal: knowledge about the social world. Students, then, leave confused at how one uses theory, what theory actually is, and, often times, disengaged from theory because of the density with which some theories approach the social world. In the paper below, the *time crunch* and its tendency to produce a "lost generation" of theorists is examined. After elucidating how the *time crunch* constrains sociology, four possible solutions are presented. This list of solutions is neither definitive nor exhaustive, and is meant to generate a rich discussion about the direction the discipline should head in the new century.

Keywords Sociological theory · Teaching sociology · History of sociology · Contemporary sociological theory · Social theory

Introduction

I have been struggling for some time with a series of pedagogical issues concerning the common approach to sociological theory instruction. As a graduate student

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lecturer, the concerns seemed to be part of my intellectual development, and my advisors entertained my critiques with interest and concern—and with a lack of answers. Now, as an assistant professor who sits on our department's graduate program committee and who is responsible for teaching the graduate and undergraduate theory courses, the criticisms necessitate serious attention.

The main problem derives from what I refer to as the *time crunch*, or the simple fact that there is a considerable amount of theory to teach as the body of theory we deem sociological has been building upon itself for nearly two and a half centuries—if we take Smith (1776 [1991]) as a possible marker of the first systematic effort to apply science to social phenomena. The breadth and depth of the knowledge to be covered requires compromises when limited to a quarter or semester, or even a full year of coursework. The strain is increased by the cross-purposes of theory courses: socialize neophytes into the profession and provide a foundation that motivates sociological research. Put simply, the *time crunch* and the continued pedagogical decision to teach classical and contemporary theory, or worse yet a single "blended" theory cannot be sustained as we are truly doing a disservice to both our undergraduates and graduate students. In the paper below, I will (1) examine the problems associated with the *time crunch* and (2) offer some tentative solutions.

The Problem

As noted already, the *time crunch* is a "temporal force" increasingly affecting theoretical pedagogy. In practice, the *time crunch* exacerbates the conventional dichotomization of sociological theory into classical and contemporary, a dichotomy which has been institutionalized in the textbook industry and which 80 % of the top 101 graduate programs reproduce in training their students (see Table 1)[1]; the internalization and reproduction of this dichotomy is nearly guaranteed as 70 % of these programs require both courses.

In addition, many departments (62 % of undergraduate programs and 21 % of graduate programs) have opted for the "blended" approach which is, in essence, a condensed, accelerated course that crams 200-plus years of sociological theory into 10–16 weeks (see Table 1).[2] There may be nothing worse than the blended approach for three reasons. First, there are so many theories and theorists to choose from, that important ideas will almost always be omitted because of convenience, the instructor's training, and/or their preferences in perspectives. Second, there is no possible

[1] These data were obtained by examining the websites of the top 101 sociology departments as determined by National Research Council (http://chronicle.com/article/nrc-sociology/124663/). In addition to the graduate programs dichotomizing theory in the conventional way, 19 % of all undergraduate programs in the same sample split theory into classical and contemporary, though only 9 % required students to take both. This discrepancy, incidentally, leads to students taking contemporary theory without the requisite training in classical theory, and in my experience in a department that did just that, the students were thoroughly ill-prepared and lacked a grasp of the most basic concepts like "division of labor," "power," and "status."

[2] Blended courses were counted in two ways. First, many course descriptions used both of the words "classical" and "contemporary" (or their equivalents), and were thus considered blended. Second, if the course was the only course on the books and did not have a clear title such as "Classical" or "Development of", it was assumed they were blended.

Table 1 Undergraduate and graduate theory courses

	% Class/Cont	% Require both	% Blended theory
Undergraduate program	19 %	9 %	62 %
Graduate program	80 %	69 %	21 %

Graduate $N=101$, Undergraduate $N=100$

Data collected from websites of top 101 Sociology Departments as ranked by the National Research Council

way to do justice to sociological theory in one course. Third, the effort to cram as much as possible without overloading students nearly always leads to a disconnect between theory and methods. Indeed, one may simply peruse the recent textbooks designed specifically to provide content for blended courses to see how much of a challenge teaching 200–300 years' worth of theory can be as they are either tomes (Edles and Appelrouth 2007; Kivisto 2012)—the largest of which I could find has 932 pages (Turner 2012); while the briefest of sketches fits 150–200 years into 352 pages (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2012).

Avoiding the blended course in favor of the typical dichotomy does not makes things better. In the 1960s, when most of my generation's mentors or our mentors' mentors were being trained, it made sense to draw a line between theories before Parsons (or the 1930s) and that which had come since. Thirty years of modern theoretical work was manageable in a semester, especially considering the general lack of eclecticism before the 1970s. Fast forward 50 years and the *time crunch* is becoming unbearable. Contemporary theory is now responsible for *80 years worth of theory*, and unlike the 1960s, the amount of eclecticism borne out of schisms and new traditions underlines the challenges we face today. It may even be plausible to suggest that (a) the general decline in theory as a vital, central component of our discipline (J. Turner 2001a) and (b) the lack of general and grand theorists in sociology today is due to the burden of too many theories!

Unpacking the *Time Crunch*

Pitirim Sorokin once wrote, in his now-ironically titled *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, that "the field of sociology has grown to such an extent that, for a sociologist who is devoted to a study of a special sociological problem, it is extremely difficult to have an adequate knowledge of the whole field of the science" (1928:xv). As a guide for our discussion Sorokin highlights both the enormity of the problems we face in teaching sociological theory and a hint of sadness at how little we have advanced as a discipline. For Sorokin, *contemporary theory began where social philosophy and ambiguously conceptualized "social theory" ended*,[3] and rigorous efforts at understanding and explaining social phenomena began. That is, classical

[3] The close link between philosophy and theory, and the epistemological debates of the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Abrutyn (forthcoming; Reed 2011), often contribute to the time crunch. Rousseau, Hobbes, Saint-Simon, Nietzsche, Kant and Hegel, and a wealth of other philosophers are clearly guiding influences over the classical theorists. But, one must ask where we should stop? Kaldhun (1377 [1989]) and his conflict theory? Plato's (1955) *Republic*? To draw inspiration is one thing, but to craft a social science from philosophy seems redundant given the classical theorists' efforts and the advances of contemporary theory.

theory was just that: classical statements that had little utility, but were the roots of contemporary theory, which were the backbone of research. Nearly every theorist he considers important and contemporary would be unrecognizable to sociologists today (see Table 2 for examples), except for Spencer, Durkheim, and Marx. In his critique of Marx, Sorokin argues that normative or critical theories may be important as humanists, but lack utility in scientific research and thus only intensify the *crunch*.

Let's put Sorokin aside and take stock of where theoretical pedagogy stands today. The basics of the classical canon appear to have been somewhat settled[4]: Marx (1978), Durkheim (1893, 1912), Weber (1978), and Mead (1934) comprise the core of the canon; often Simmel (1971), Spencer (1874–96), and Comte (1851–4 [1968]) round things out (Turner et al. 2012). But, other classical theorists have exercised staying power: for instance, Mannheim (1936), Veblen (1899), Thomas (1951), and Cooley (1902 [1964])—see Coser (1977), while some have found their way back into the discussion in some classical theory textbooks—in Calhoun et al. (2012): Freud (1961), Rousseau (1743), or de Tocqueville (1835). To this list might be added the near-universal canonization of DuBois (1978), and the less consistent canonization of either Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Harriet Martineau (1837 [2009]; cf. Edles and Appelrouth 2007; Ritzer 2010; Kivisto 2012). As the classical foundations have grown, the textbooks have entered a sort of "arms race," to ensure they are keeping up with their competitors while giving students and consumers something slightly different.[5] This arms race includes going backward in time, as Calhoun et al. (2012) include Kant and Adam Smith and recently added Thomas Hobbes (a seventeenth century "political theorist"); Kivisto (2012) introduces Nietzsche, William James, John Dewey, and Jane Addams; and, Edles and Appelrouth (2009) add Anna Julia Cooper and Tönnies. This unending desire to go backwards ignores Sorokin's argument that sociological theory begins where philosophy ends, and thus the needless search for some ignored social philosopher or thinker or one that might "deepen" our contemporary understanding of Weber or Marx seems unproductive because either Weber's principles stand on their own *sans* historical context, or they are no longer useful for studying societies today. Classical textbooks, however, do not just look backward, but because their writers' lives keep moving forward they are compelled, by the *time crunch*, to redefine what is classical. Ritzer (2010), for instance, has moved the cutoff point to Parsons and Merton, though both theorists

[4] By settled, I am referring to theory textbooks and courses, because even a cursory review of the Introductory textbooks available is an embarrassment due to the unbelievable variation and, thus, the arbitrary decisions Intro professors make in choosing one text or the next. Consider for instance, that two textbooks, Newman's (2012) and Macionis' (2013) barely mention founding scholars, but choose to discuss the paradigms. The latter, however, does provide an in-lay on DuBois (2013:13). Newman's text does take Durkheim's *Suicide* in the first chapter as a serious example of sociological research and imagination, whereas Macionis' textbook is, essentially, a magazine. In Ritzer's (2013), Giddens et al. (2013), and Ferris and Stein (2012), Weber, Marx, and Durkheim are all introduced in slightly different, but complimentary ways, while all three choose different theorists or founders as supplementary. For Ritzer, Simmel, DuBois, and Veblen important early theorists; Giddens et al. add Comte, Martineau, and DuBois, while leaving Mead to "Modern" founders; and, Ferris and Stein add Comte, Spencer, and Mead to the discussion. If anything, this review demonstrates the complete lack of accepted foundations, the arbitrary decisions made about who to discuss and who not to discuss, and the trained ineptitude our students are learning as they choose sociology as a major and cannot figure out what exactly sociology even is.

[5] The sole exception, from what I can surmise, is Turner et al. (2012), which maintains the agreed upon classical canon and only adds Comte's earliest influences like Saint-Simon in the briefest of discussions.

Table 2 The lost generation(s) of theorists and thinkers

Pre-1900s[a]	1900s-1950s[b]	Post-1950s[c]
		Robert Bales
	Jane Addams	Daniel Bell
	Reinhard Bendix	Lewis Coser
	Crane Brinton	Kingsley Davis
Henry Charles Carey	Kenneth Burke	Ralf Dahrendorf
Adam Ferguson	Ernest Burgess	S.N. Eisenstadt
Ludwig Gumplowicz	James Frazer	Norbert Elias
L.T. Hobhouse	Sigmund Freud	Amos Hawley
Ibn Khaldun	Erich Fromm	Max Gluckman
William James	Everett C. Hughes	William Goode
Gustave Le Bon	Antonio Gramsci	Gerhard Lenski
Frédéric Le Play	Georg Lukacs	Claude Levi-Strauss
Machiavelli	Bronislaw Malinowski	Gaetano Mosca
Henry Summer Maine	Robert Michels	Robert Nisbett
Harriet Martineau	H.L. Moore	E.E. Pritchard
Lewis Henry Morgan	Vilfredo Pareto	Arnold Rose
Herbert Spencer	Robert Ezra Park	Tomatsu Shibutani
Gabriel Tarde	A.R. Radcliffe-Brown	Edward Shils
	Pitirim Sorokin	Neil Smelser
	William Graham Sumner	Anselm Strauss
	Lester Ward	Ralph Turner
	Edward Westermarck	Robin M. Williams

By no means is this meant to be a complete list, but rather one that demonstrates the breadth and arbitrary character of the sociology of sociology. Furthermore, it should be noted that sub-fields and disciplines have not forgotten some of these scholars, such as the evolutionary and macrohistorical school's embrace of Lenski and Hawley. The point is most graduate students likely have never heard of, or read a work of these scholars

[a] List compiled, in part, from Sorokin's (1928) *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, in addition to various other texts, graduate training, and conversations with Jonathan Turner

[b] List compiled, in part, from Sorokin (1928), Turner (1978), graduate training, and conversations with Jonathan Turner

[c] List compiled, in part, from Turner (1978, 1998), Gross (1959, 1967), and Brodbeck (1968), graduate training, and conversations with Jonathan Turner

wrote well into the second half of the twentieth century; Calhoun et al. (2012) includes Parsons and Merton, and adds Frankfurt school alums Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Benjamin.

Not surprisingly, these "additions" often find their way to the back of the textbook, where they become casualties of end-of-the-semester exhaustion—e.g., Coser (1977) perhaps started this trend as he added Park, Thomas, and Znaniecki to his second edition as perhaps a nod to their value and a nod to filling space in his own course. Those who do not end up in the back, are often given "supplementary" treatment as having an idea or two that shaped some other big scholar—e.g., Cooley to Mead, or

Nietzsche to Weber (Edles and Appelrouth 2009). Of course, the attempt to canonize the minority social thinkers has led to numerous time constraints of their own, and solutions that are not necessarily perfect—e.g., Ritzer (2010) simply lumps all of the female social thinkers who have found support from various camps into a chapter titled "Early Women." In most cases, however, this is window dressing or marketing strategies, as the vast majority of textbooks devote the bulk of their pages to either sociology's "Holy Trinity" of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, or to its big "Four" with George Herbert Mead joining the trinity. There are, without a doubt, massive differences in their output, theoretical insights, scope of interest, and/or sweeping historicity compared with all other potential classical theorists. In either case, the *time crunch* continues to exert its influence over classical theory.

The immense problem of the *time crunch* becomes clearer when we turn our attention to "contemporary" theory. Consider, for instance, that Mead's major contribution came posthumously in 1934, and his *Philosophy of the Act* was published in 1938. Often, Parsons (1937) was the line demarcating classical and contemporary as his *Structure of Social Action* was published in 1937, while Merton's paper on strain theory and anomie followed the year after—though, as noted above, that line is beginning to fade in some textbooks. In other words, Mead is considered classical and Parsons contemporary, yet there is only a 3 year difference between Mead's most famous work and Parsons first work.[6] Thus, how we define classical and contemporary has to be rethought in light of the *time crunch*. Certainly, Parsons and Merton were *contemporary* while they were alive. Does that make them "classical" now because they are dead and the discourse has shifted? If death is the line, then does that make Bourdieu, Goffman, and Blau classical? If so, how do we make room for them in an already tight classical canon? Though some have tried (e.g., Ritzer 2010; Calhoun et al. 2012), the answer is that we generally do not. And, because of numerous biases as well as Collins' (1998) 'law of small numbers' which argues a very limited number of schools can be prominent at any one time, the influence of both theorists has eroded despite their undeniable impact on the discipline and the breadth of their contributions.

The Lost Generation Chronologically, the divide between what is classic and what is contemporary is fuzzy at best, and has became an inefficacious means of dividing knowledge. This is exacerbated by the existence of a set of scholars I call the *lost generation*. Parsons and Merton were relative heavyweights and cast a shadow over modern sociology, but there were a lot of sociologists in the early to mid-twentieth century (and, bizarrely some post-1950 that published well into the 80s or 90s) that have simply been forgotten, yet whose work remains potentially important to modern sociology. Just like Sorokin's list of theorists that would be unrecognizable to many young sociologists today, the *lost generation* make this list encyclopedic. Table 2 offers a list of sociologists worth reconsidering or reading who have been lost.

For example, who now reads Sumner (1906 [1960])? Or, how about Robert Park—who was an important urban ecologist (1915, 1928, 1936), or even Sorokin

[6] To be sure, Mead was "writing" a decade or so earlier than Parsons' work, and it was published after his death by students and a colleague. Yet, the point still stands that even a decade or so difference is an arbitrary distinction.

(1927 [1959], 1957)? These three merely scratch the surface of theorists whose contribution often surpasses the various "theories of" found in many contemporary theory courses, yet to teach them all would necessitate three or four theory courses, which would be unreasonable and probably impractical. Some of these scholars have faded because of time and the 'law of numbers', others like Sumner because of identity politics, and still others, like Parsons, are casualties of both time and ideological/epistemological differences in which the victors tend to write history—e.g., Tarde's (1903) fate was similar at the hands of Durkheim (1897 [1951). And, with every decade passing, a new set of theorists who have passed away falls into the fuzzy interstices of the classical-contemporary divide: Thus, where do we put Merton (1938, 1967), Homans (1958), Mills (1959), Blau (1964), Eisenstadt (1964a, b), and yes, Parsons? It is clear, then, that having too many theorists robs us of the possibility to fully explore the potential richness of theory in general, while making the design and implementation of a single course nearly impossible.

The 'Death' of General Theory? For many, the solution to this problem has been to turn away from the general discipline, and build theory within the safe confines of a sub-field or specialized area. Since at least Smith (1973), feminist and gender theory has often been built in opposition to more general theory—e.g., for exceptions, see Blumberg (1984) and Collins et al. (1993)—and within a self-reflexive space (cf. Harding 1986; Butler 1989), or within the broader framework of intersectionality between various dimensions of inequality (Collins 2000). On the one hand, the decision to move away from general theory was predicated on formal and informal boundaries white, male sociologists had erected. On the other hand, the drive for specialization rewarded the parochialization of sociological subfields. Thus, what is true of gender or race is also true for the so-called 'hard' or experimental social psychologists whose empirical and theoretical advances are, in many ways, unmatched, but their methods and tendency to speak primarily to each other have alienated them from general sociology (Cohen 1989; Burke 2006). And because we continue to teach theory by theorists and specific theoretical traditions, it becomes impossible and costly for graduate students to try and learn everything. Instead, we give the Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Mead along with an assortment of "leftovers" followed by contemporary courses on whatever theorists the professors think are the most important or best. By the graduate students second or third year they are reading their subfields journals and are generally ignorant about the other theoretical frameworks available.

Hence, we are falling prey to the *time crunch* and a graduate student-soon-to-be-professional will only be as good or capable as the theory professor they have and the textbook she or he chooses, and the way she or he links theory to social scientific research. These are a lot of big "ifs," and given the tendency to advertise for "Theory" assistantships based not on whether the person is a theorist, but whether he or she can teach theory and do other types of research, the chasm between theory and practice grows even wider. It may even seem strange to the reader to imagine a specialization such as theory, because there are few schools that specialize in theory, let alone have theory professors who can teach theory building.

Below, I identify two interrelated challenges arising from the *time crunch* that are worth delineating because a healthy debate, and subsequent solution, are impossible without considering how these two dynamics shape pedagogy. The first is what I label "*the vacuity*" of classical training and the second refers to the lack of general training in favor of eclecticism.

The Vacuous Classical Class

Vacuity, I contend, is a product of two things: the biographical nature of classical theory courses and the post-Parsonsian aversion to general theory and theorists, as well as to positivist goals. In setting out his plan for his book, Sorokin rejected the biographical route arguing that it would result in a "dictionary" that fairly or unfairly favored some sociologists over others, while also becoming a descriptive tool bereft of explanation. He chose, instead, to "segregate all the important sociological theories into several classes or schools, and to analyze *not so much the works of individual sociologists as the fundamental principles of the schools*…[This plan] is likely to give a more systematic and *coherent* knowledge of the field…[and thus] appears to be more plausible scientifically than any other one" (1928:xvii, emphasis mine). Sorokin was vitally concerned with conveying the scientific principles sociology had worked to formulate over against "speculative and 'philosophical' works" (ibid. xix). Biographical dictionaries cannot help but encourage the inclusion of fact *and* speculation, theoretical rigor and ideologically driven fantasy—a point perhaps highlighted by the fact that physicists do not study Newton's biography nor do biologists Darwins's. Apparently, the latent functions of biographical exegeses are for (a) historical contextualization and (b) socialization of neophytes into the profession. The former purpose, however, makes little sense when we consider the frequent omission of biographies of Parsons, Goffman, or Habermas. The latter purpose may help create a shared *conscience collective*, but is at odds with linking theory to methods and clearly elucidating why students must learn Durkheim and how he may be relevant to contemporary research problems. In other words, it does little to advance sociological inquiry.

Thus, classical theory in particular becomes a vacuous course that, on the one hand, is really about socializing a common narrative of sociological origins and, on the other hand, is nearly always lacking a serious analysis of the social forces, generalizations, or principles argued for in classical theory. Moreover, the classical theorists did not formalize their theoretical work, and as such, they are often read as one would read philosophy, which serves only to confuse students and encourage pure interpretation when Marx or Durkheim's theoretical intentions were actually quite clear. In the event that primary sources are not assigned, students are beholden to the textbook market which ranges in depth and systematization. Weberian sociology becomes a caricature linked to a couple of key concepts detached from his nearly 4,000 pages of work: ideal types, four types of action, three types of legitimacy, power/authority, bureaucracy, the iron cage of rationality, and the *Protestant Ethic* thesis—which may be presented as a statement of cultural determinism or treated as Weber intended, that is, an argument for the reciprocal relationship between material and ideal forces.

The gross distortions in the results are not hard to surmise, and any sociologist who has attended a conference or taught a graduate class knows what we are often teaching: Durkheim was a functionalist who was concerned with solidarity; Weber was an interpretivist who studied bureaucracy, legitimacy, and authority; Simmel studied fashion, dyads, and conflict; Mead was a symbolic interactionist who talked about the 'me,' the 'I,' the 'generalized other,' and baseball. The simplifications do more harm than good. For example, it goes unsaid more often than not that Weber wrote the first 27 pages of *Economy and Society*—the sections on *Verstehen and social action—after he had written the other 1,442 pages that focused entirely on macro social orders* and after he had written nearly 2,000 other pages on religion as a social order and not in a microsociological context. Therefore, to call him an interpretivist is not only a disservice to him, but is flat out incorrect. Or, despite the fact that Marx's work is not only full of empirical problems—e.g., his so-called "Primitive Communist" societies never really existed), but it is theoretically flawed and is built on top of an eschatological understanding of history (Turner 2012: 176–80; Münch 1994:70–3). Students are rarely taught that without significant reconceptualization of his theoretical work (e.g., Wright 1978, 1985, 2000; Burawoy and Wright 2001), Marx is not very useful beyond a framework for criticizing capitalism, modernity, and exploitation. Yet, we teach it as fact despite the reality that "theories which try to preach what ought to be, in what way the social world should be changed, and what ought to be done for this purpose…are out of science" (Sorokin 1928:xx).

The scientific method and the *testing* of hypotheses to validate or generate scope conditions around a theory are lost on students who cannot tell the difference between facts and ideological statements. In part, this is due to paradoxical distaste and distrust for general theory, in spite of the overwhelming need for a division of labor between empiricists and theorists. I cannot begin to count the number of times I have heard naïve statements like, "My mentor told me Parsons was *proven* false" or, "My advisor told me Durkheim has no real value today." It has become quite obvious that only the most basic "sound bites" regarding each classical theorist are being conveyed and the *lost generation* is truly being lost. If anything, as a science we should have already isolated the most enduring principles that have stood up to empirical scrutiny and moved forward. Even more disconcerting is the fact that I have presented papers like this one and have sat in audiences of panels presenting papers like this one where large numbers of people agree that sociology needs to move forward and synthesize and mature; yet, when someone tries to synthesize a large body of work (e.g., Turner 2010a, b, 2011), they are ignored or, worse yet, attacked for "grand theory." This is ironic, of course, because general theorists could (and do) *alleviate* the *time crunch* by reducing the number of theorists and theories and underlining the principles of sociology as well as the areas or phenomena we know little about and *should know more about*—e.g., the link between biological and environmental effects on gender or sexuality. Physicists do not teach a classical physics course that examines Newton's life, or a contemporary course on Einstein. They teach what they know or think they know about the physical universe so that their students can go forth, be physicists, use those theoretical principles to ask scientific questions, revise the theories when they do not work, and discard them when better theories emerge. Newton was not *proven* false; Einstein supplemented and supplanted aspects of his theory.

In sum, the reliance on biography and the aversion to general theory is problematic. First, it invites debates that are actually unproductive about who should be included in the canon, as well as *ad hominem* attacks on people like Spencer for being a typical white, middle-upper class, English male in the late 1800s, which leads to *all* of his work being thrown out, when in fact some of it has nothing at all to do with these characteristics. Second, we continue to teach philosophies and prescriptions as *theory* when in fact they are not. As Sorokin puts it, we should be "grateful and reverent to all the builders of sociology, [but] the *best way in which we may be faithful to them is to separate what it true and what is false in the large mental heritage*" (1928:xx, emphasis mine). Third, in departments where only one of the two theory courses is required and a student chooses classical theory, we should not be asking the question, "How do we socialize this student," but instead, "What are the most important principles to take from the classical canon that would help them understand the social world as well as prepare them for graduate school by fostering the development of research questions and agendas"? Our goal, in all curricula, should be first and foremost giving our students, whether undergrads or grads, the tools sociology offers for lives in and out of academia. We teach, better than most disciplines, critical thinking and communication skills; biographies and meandering portions of Marx are not necessary for developing and enhancing these skills.

Eclectic Mish-Mash

Again, let's return to Pitirim Sorokin:

> sociology has not suffered…from a lack of various theories. They have been produced in a great abundance, and have been appearing like mushrooms after rain. At the present moment the field of sociology is overcrowded with a multitude of various and contradictory systems. *Every novitiate who enters the field is likely to be lost in it, and what is more important, such a novitiate has the greatest difficulty in discriminating between what in all these theories is valid and what is false*. Therefore, one of the most *urgent tasks of the contemporary sociologist* is to *separate what is really valid* from what is *false* or *unproved* in these theories (1928:xvi, emphasis added).

My guess is that if I had not given credit to Sorokin, many readers might attribute this to a contemporary sociologist discussing the current state of theory. Modern sociological theory is eclectic to a fault. This is due, in part, to the accumulation of theory upon theory. But, as Jonathan Turner asserts, it is also due to the fact that "theories in sociology do not compete head on with each as much as they coexist" (2001a:1). That is, rather than subject Parsonsian theory to rigorous analysis, sociologists introduced new sets of principles in new "paradigms," established new journals supportive of these paradigms, and worked to institutionalize them as accepted paths of careerism. What lessons do we impart to students when we accord Foucault or Bourdieu, or a non-sociologists like Derrida, "*rock star status*" rather than isolate their principles, subject their theories to rigorous empirical scrutiny, and discard their "names" (cf. Schlosser 2012)? Subsequently, there is no core, no "peg" for *all* sociologists to hang their hats on besides the biographies. This process has only

worsened with the rise of the 'post'-everything philosophies (e.g., Baudrillard 1972 [1981]; Seidman 1991; Bauman 1997) that spent a good deal of time deconstructing everything, and very little time positing constructive alternatives for empirical research. If these philosophers are correct, and there is nothing objective to study or sociology *can't* be a science, then what is the point of sociology? Why did the classical theorists spend all of that time demonstrating the distinct contribution sociology as a science could make if we simply want to deconstruct and discard their efforts and others like Parsons or Dahrendorf—who offered a systematic, positive theory of conflict and power that is largely ignored in favor of amorphous Foucauldian theories of power?

Thus, as Sorokin lamented 85 years ago, we are doing a disservice to our students. First off, they have no way of discriminating what theories work or have been validated through empirical evidence vis-à-vis those which remain untested or are just ideologically inspired. Furthermore, the premium on "sociologists devoted to a study of a special sociological problem" and the aversion to hiring (and training) general sociological theorists who are devoted to building and disseminating theory make it "extremely difficult to have an adequate knowledge of the general principles *all* or *most* sociologists accept" (ibid., xv). On the one hand, this latter problem can and often does lead to the "reinvention" of the wheel (Sorokin 1956), which not only wastes time, but also sets up ideological debates over names of concepts or slight differences in conceptualization of the *same phenomenon*. For example, the new institutionalisms (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Nee 2005; Scott 2008) have spent nearly four decades studying *organizations*, and not *institutions* (Abrutyn 2009, 2012, 2013a; Turner 2010a; Abrutyn and Turner 2011). New institutionalists would argue they are studying institutions, but the definition of an *institution* is difficult to get a purchase on because it varies widely across the new institutionalisms and often touches on the colloquial definition of institutions: *everything* and *anything* that endures—e.g., voting, the presidency, the handshake, Harvard, sexism, and so on (Jepperson 1991:144–5). Furthermore, the meso-level approach to *organizations* and not *institutions* has led to taken for granted macro-institutional environments with few discernible dynamics, despite the considerable work on macro-institutional dynamics (cf. Hawley 1986; Turner 2010a; Nolan and Lenski 2009; Abrutyn 2009, 2013a, b). Part of the problem is that there are *too many theories* to know, and any new institutionalist is going to read, primarily, only other new institutionalists and not devote precious time to the plethora of theories/theorists out there. The other part of the equation is the premium put on "inventing" a theory that is linked to a sociologist's name; this reward system encourages the pouring of 'old wine into new bottles' and does little to advance the discipline (Merton 1979).

Secondly, not knowing the general premises of sociology engenders, encourages, and enhances the divides that unfortunately pock mark the sociological landscape: macro vs. micro, structure vs. agency, "functionalism," vs. conflict, hermeneutics vs. positivism, deductive vs. inductive logic, and so on. At this point in sociology's history, we have taken to task the problems of the old functionalist school, introduced a series of needed reforms that have allowed for the sociological lens to be trained on gender, power, conflict, and other elements that older theory failed to address satisfactorily, and are better for having done so. It is time to take the next step, though, and reassess what we know, what we are not sure we know, and what it is we

would like to know. Continuing to teach the three "paradigms" and arguing functionalism or conflict theory is wrong, contributes little to our understanding of the social world and creating a new generation of researchers.

A science, even a social science, is founded on the idea of cumulative, explanatory theory (B. Cohen 1989; Reed 2011). However, the few research programs sociology has, such as those in experimental social psychology (Burke 2006), are generally omitted from theory courses because they are allegedly too positivistic, while Foucault (1972) is taught to our next generation despite his insistence that there is no objective reality and in spite of his disregard for sociology as a science. It is already a challenge to organize a course in contemporary theory, but when we are forced to contend with those philosophers who dismiss the entire sociological enterprise and give them a voice while tossing aside other theorists such as Parsons, who were truly committed to the production and dissemination of sociological knowledge and being able to explain social action and organization, we are in trouble.

Solutions

Below, I offer four possible solutions to the dilemmas delineated above. The first is primarily reformist, while the latter three require qualitative shifts. These suggestions are neither definitive nor is the list exhaustive. My only aim is to initiate a discussion about where we, as a discipline, might go as we move further into the 21st century. Recognizing that I will be met with resistance from the "old guard," all four suggestions are predicated on departments everywhere introducing a course, at least on the graduate level, called the "History of Social Thought." On the one hand, this course will achieve the latent function of classical theory courses today: socializing and professionalizing neophytes into the classical body of theorists and the place where most of us found the spark for our sociological imagination. On the other hand, biographical material could and would be appropriate in a course like this, because it is about social *thought* and the context in which thought develops—a sociology of knowledge if you will. While the typical canon will continue to be represented, the amorphous nature of a course like this would give instructors the opportunity to add thinkers they feel are important to the development of social thought, and thus reduce the polemical nature inherent in canonization by encouraging the inclusion of women, persons of color, and even those often omitted like Ibn Kahldun. To be sure, this does not get us away from the potential arbitrary selection of thinkers, but it reduces the stakes by making the course a "proseminar" about knowledge and separating the theoretical stuff that guides researches.

Reformism: The 1920s-1960s and the 1970s to the Present

If sociologists are not comfortable radically redesigning the way we do theory, perhaps making more clear the time periods that are currently "classical" and "contemporary" would reduce the burdens of the *time crunch*. Thus, if a History of Social Thought course covers the classics, then we could make a course on theory from 1920 to the mid-1960s the new "classical" theory, and theory from 1970 to the present contemporary or modern theory.

The first course, as I see it, would cover five threads. The first would be Parsonsian sociology that reviews his impact on the discipline, both as a purveyor of functionalism and a foil for both conflict and critical theorizing; the goal would be to parse out the useful strands and critique the problems. Both exercises would teach students how to identify testable principles, think critically about theories, and build synthetic theories from old sources. The second thread would focus on the origins of the contemporary conflict school found in theorists like Coser (1957), Dahrendorf (1959), and Mills (1959). This thread would look at the influence Parsons had, as well as the important shifts each theorist contributed. Turning to the non-Meadian Chicago school, the third thread is aimed at linking pragmatic philosophy to urban sociology, human ecology, and ethnography. Fourth, the rise of social psychology would be examined: from the splitting of Mead into Blumerian (1969) symbolic interaction and Kuhnian structural social psychology (cf. Stryker 1980), to the emergence of role theory (R. Turner 1956, 2001), exchange theory (Homans 1958; Emerson 1962; Blau 1964), Goffmanian dramaturgy (1959, 1967), and finally ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1964) and phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The final thread would consider the rise of critical theories—especially those in the Frankfurt school that predate feminist critical theory, critical race theory, and postmodern/post-structuralism.

Unfortunately, the second course—the 1970s onward—would still suffer from eclecticism, but could easily be tied to the first course as a continuation and branching of threads. For instance, it could include the following: the splitting of social psychology into the so-called "hard" social psychology (cf. Burke 2006) and "soft" social psychology (Blumer 1969); World-Systems analysis that built on the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt school, the emergent conflict tradition, and Parsonsian system theory (Wallerstein 1974; Chase-Dunn 1998); and the state-centric historical-comparative school born of the neo-Weberian conflict tradition (Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1990). Other options include, but are not limited to, Bourdieu (1977); cultural sociology (Alexander 2003); neo-evolutionary theory (Sanderson 1999; Turner 2003; Turner and Maryanski 2009; Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010; Abrutyn 2013b); the "old" institutional analysis (Eisenstadt 1965; Turner 2003; Abrutyn 2009, 2013a); human ecology (Hawley 1986); the new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983); social capital (Portes 1998); social movements/collective behavior (Snow and Soule 2010); power (Lenski 1966; Mann 1986); or, some mix of race (Wilson 1990; Winant 2000), gender (Smith 1973; Harding 1986; Butler 1989), sexuality (Foucault 1978), and/or intersectionality (Collins 2000) This split would at least reduce the burden of cramming two centuries worth of theory by limiting the lens to the 1920s to today; while not a perfect fix, it would be easy to achieve.

Macro/Micro

A second solution might be to change the dichotomy from classic-contemporary to macro–micro. The strengths of this method are obvious. First, it does not unduly encourage biographical sketches. Second, as Sorokin suggested, it would force sociologists to delineate general principles that have been tested, principles that we think should be tested as they anecdotally seem correct, and those non-theoretical

principles that should be removed. Third, it would offer a slightly more coherent view of the social world so that students can better "visualize" it and better grasp what sociologists actually do. Macrosociology, in essence, is the study of human societies (Nolan and Lenski 2009) and/or the largest "sub-systems" of societies like institutions (Abrutyn 2013a) and stratification systems (Lenski 1966; Turner 2010a). In addition, most macrosociology focuses on social change, whether evolutionary (Nolan and Lenski 2009), revolutionary (Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991), rooted in institutional processes of differentiation and adaptation (Eisenstadt 1964b; Abrutyn 2009), or through global cycles founded in economic cycles (Chase-Dunn 1998). Some macro theories consider societies from an ecological perspective (Hawley 1986), others as networks of overlapping bases of power (Mann 1986), and others as a division of globally linked sectors of labor (Wallerstein 1974). Finally, substantive areas of macro-level social reality such as general stratification patterns and the evolution of economy, law, kinship, religion, polity, and education can further deepen the link between theory and methods (cf. Polanyi 1944; Eisenstadt 1963; Unger 1976).

The micro course, conversely, would focus on the study of microsociological phenomena. This would begin with the smallest units of the self: identity (Burke and Stets 2009), roles (R. Turner 2001), and status (Ridgeway 2006). The self, then, becomes a role-performer within a structural context that requires impression management (Goffman 1959) as well as emotional management (Hochschild 1979; Summers-Effler 2002). From there, one could move into the dynamics of interaction (Turner 2010b), especially rituals (Collins 2004), and norms, power-differentials, and emotions predicated on exchange relations (Homans 1958; Blau 1964; Lawler 2006). Though I am not wedded to this idea, but given the explosion of theory and research on emotions and the way they create and threaten solidarity, in addition to underscore most microlevel processes (Shott 1979; Scheff 1990; Burke 1991; Turner 2000, 2010b; Collins 2004; Turner and Stets 2005; Lawler 2006; Lawler et al. 2009), it might be useful to bring the sociology of emotions into the discussion as it is a relevant and important topic. Finally, the course would culminate in the discussion of small group dynamics: leaders (Burke 1968), how categoric distinctions effect interaction (Berger et al. 1972), how legitimacy is shaped (Zelditch 2006), and the dynamics of reference groups (Shibutani 1962). Certainly there are more areas of interest that could be added to this discussion. For example, the differences between micro-stratification and macro-stratification, or the specific role gender dynamics or race differences that emerge and shape interactions and identity. These are special topics in the more general discussion of microsociology and would give freedom to instructors to fit the courses to shape their specializations, interests, and ideological positions.

Macro/Meso/Micro

A third way would start from the macro–micro dichotomy and add an intermediate course on meso-level analyses that would further deepen a student's understanding and preparedness. There is an abundance of meso-level phenomena worth examining theoretically: research on organizations (March 1962; Stinchcombe 1965), organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), markets (Fligstein 1996), networks (Granovetter 1973; Powell 1999), communities (Logan and Molotch 1988; Brint

2001), and a whole host of structural and cultural phenomena that sit below the abstract macro-level and are produced and reproduced through micro-level dynamics (cf. Turner 2011).

The most obvious downside here is a third theory course requirement. A second drawback to this approach comes from the immense learning curve necessary for a theory instructor to know macro, meso, and micro levels theories. Thirdly, another class increases the odds of fighting over who makes the decisions about what theories to borrow from, what theories to omit, and who is entrusted with choosing.

The advantage, to either the macro–micro or macro-meso-micro pedagogy is coherence. That is, a department can convey some degree of coherent vision to its students about what the social world looks like, even if only as a heuristic device. Currently, students do not quite understand what we mean by "levels of analysis," and these courses could help them refine their own sociological imaginations. As an aside, the reader is likely aware that I believe there is an objective social reality and that it can be comprehended, albeit imperfectly. I think there is a cohesive body of sociological knowledge that can be melded together that helps students conceptualize the social world in a vertical, nested hierarchical sense (see Fig. 1). Despite my insistence that the social world is real, I believe in the power of discourse, debate, and compromise and feel that constructing these courses is an important program worthy of members of the American Sociological Association

The "Principles of…" Approach

This approach may be as radical an idea as I can suggest: teaching two theory courses, the first being theoretical principles we are pretty sure are correct and the second about those we think may be correct, those we are not too sure of, as well as the questions or areas of inquiry we would like to begin exploring. Sociologists, for example, know a lot about organizations and stratification—and we should, given that we have been studying them for about as long as sociology has been a discipline. We have some universal principles worth delineating. For instance, as groups get larger, pressures emerge to handle the most basic problems revolving around control and coordination which leads to internal structural complexity or what has been more commonly called *differentiation* (Turner 2010a). This principle works on the small group level (Burke 1968), the formal organizational level (Blau 1956), the institutional level (Abrutyn 2013a), and the world-system level (Wallerstein 1974). By giving students sets of time-tested propositions, a stronger sense of a common sociological enterprise will be imparted, as will a confidence that sociologists actually *do* do something. Moreover, it would move us so far from the "cult of the personality" and two and a half century coverage that the *time crunch* would cease to be relevant.

In that spirit, there are plenty of theoretical principles or propositions which have not been exhaustively researched or, for that matter, researched at all. For example, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* thesis remains a viable research question, whose testing would benefit from sociologists trying hard to identify testable principles as well as find better methods for examining these principles. Put another way, it is a theoretical area much talked and debated, but it is rare to find Weberian principles isolated, a discussion regarding how one would test them, and then a concerted effort to test

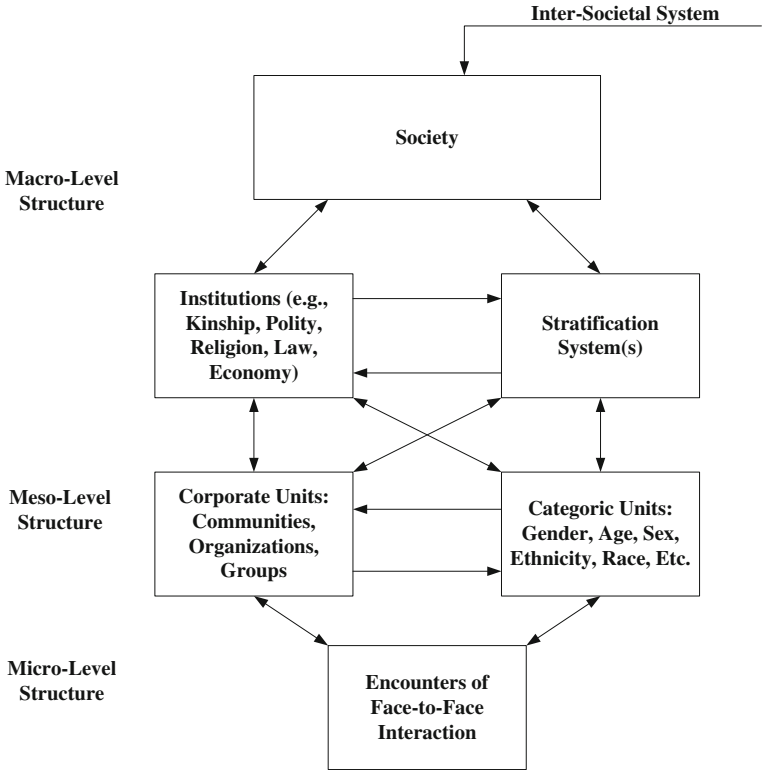

Fig. 1 Model of nested levels of social reality from Abrutyn, Seth and Jonathan H. Turner. "The old institutionalism meets the new institutionalism." Sociological Perspectives 54(3):286–306. © 2011 by the Pacific Sociological Association

them in any corner of sociology. The *Protestant Ethic* thesis is often subjected to random analyses which shed light on his argument (Delacroix and Nielsen 2001; Cohen 2002; Sanderson et al. 2011), but it is never scrutinized in a manner comparable to, say, Einstein's Law of Relativity. The latter half of the second course would be devoted to a whole set of principles that have not been examined and are assumed to be valid, a set of principles assumed to be false, but which may stand up when tested empirically, and several areas that are either on the cutting edge of research or suggestive subfields worth examining. Indeed, the entire second course would be an exercise in thinking through theory, considering how to measure elements of a theory, and perhaps even designing research studies. The first course, on the other hand, would be a lesson in what sociologists have done successfully in the past. In essence, then, the pedagogical focus of the courses would shift from the exhaustive cataloging of theorists and theories, to beginning the process of operationalizing existing theories, logically thinking through sociological problems, and engaging in the creative side of the sociological imagination: exploring previously unexplored areas of social reality.

An approach such as this may not be all that unfamiliar to many sociologists in their 60s and 70s, as it appears to be the approach to teaching sociological theory adopted in, at least, the 1950s and 60s in which chapters were organized not by

names, but by essays on clusters of "big ideas" (e.g., Gross 1959, 1967; Brodbeck 1968). Though there are fewer examples after the early 1970s of this sort of textbook, a few do stand out in which chapters are organized by a series of classical/contemporary essays surrounding a concept like "Social Status" or "Bureaucracy" (Coser and Rosenberg 1982) and the trajectory of entire traditions, which blend "big ideas" with some discussion of specific theorists associated with the development of these traditions (Turner 1998:The Sixth Edition was the last in which this approach was clear; also, Collins 1988). My guess is that the adoption of the biographical-nomenclature approach came about as (1) sociology fractured into warring camps, (2) the *time crunch* forced textbook writers to think about the easiest way to deliver a bunch of information in one or two semesters, and (3) hero worship become institutionalized as a rash of deep exegesis became the least polemic type of theorizing in the 1980s and 1990s and an efficacious way to build a theory-oriented career. The hardships of such a course are obvious: (1) sociologists would have to identify the principles in the first place, though some have already begun this project (cf. Turner 2010a, b, 2011); (2) sociologists would have to be "retrained" to think of theory and the teaching of theory as more "scientifically" directed and less biographical; and/or (3) sociologists would have to accept the work of general theorists as both a legitimate and necessary specialization; and (4) the training would be far more rigorous than it often is today, and students would be expected to grasp more. That being said, beginning with a "what we know course" would prepare students for the more creative side of the sociological enterprise, as they would already begin to categorize theory into formal schema; and the second course would go a long way towards helping them work through research problems from theory to methods, or methods to theory, while also giving them a plethora of potential research topics and ideas.

Concluding Thoughts

The discussion above was meant to elicit debate, discussion, and perhaps some type of action on the part of the professional body of American sociologists. I realize much of this may come across as idealized, but a professional body can and does act in unison to improve the standards and rubrics of training. While bracing for the predictable criticism from the predictable corners of sociology, this paper is really an impassioned plea to recognize that we are in a new century and that we need to address the mounting structural issues related to pedagogy. My hope is that it encourages constructive dialogue rather than the "tired debates" about what we should or should not do, can and cannot do. Sociology, I believe, is ready to take the step into the 21st century because I see so many young, excited sociologists at conferences eager to move things forward. And, while I do not see the sky falling, I do worry about the training of future sociologists, the relevance we, as a discipline, have for the average person, and our ability to actually produce non-academics armed with principles about social dynamics who can go forth and make real differences in the world. Anyone can write a blog or stand on a soap box; sociology can provide the tools to *make real differences in organizations*.

Currently, many students are required to take only one theory course and depending on the professor (and sometimes this is simply farmed out to adjuncts, lecturers, or graduate students) and the course itself, they may get a great theory education or they may hate theory forever. It is no longer enough to talk about Karl Marx, who has been dead for a long time, whose theories guided a series of revolutions that proved unsuccessful, and whose economic theories have been tested and generally do not hold up under empirical scrutiny. In the same way, it is no longer enough to teach Durkheim was a functionalist and functionalists were conservative, status quo theorists. Nor is it enough to simply write Spencer off as a social Darwinist when in fact his contributions to political economy are vital to understanding sociocultural evolution. It is time, instead, to step into the 21st century and discuss what we as sociologists want to impart to future colleagues.

I now have a consistent strategy in my own courses. I begin the first week with a theoretical discussion of the social world as a coherent space. I constantly remind students that this is a heuristic device, but various aspects of it fit very well with empirical reality. From here I spend 2 to 3 weeks isolating the most general theoretical principles that affect the substantive area and slowly funnel downwards to the "theories of" that directly relate to research. The responses I have gotten over the last 5 years were positive enough for me to want to write this paper. My students were tired of taking Intro, Stats/Methods/Theory, and then a series of electives that were completely disconnected from each other because each instructor was coming from perspectives that were sometimes so divergent that they seemed on different planets. My students routinely remark that they had no sense *what* sociologists did or what it was about because it is presented as incoherent and eclectic. I am not calling for draconian measures that force everyone to teach religion or education the way I do, but I am calling for our core courses to reflect the general agreements and cumulative efforts of sociological inquiry. My students eventually take multiple classes with me because I reinforce the knowledge from previous ones and then add to it depending on the nature of the course. They have been more happy, more competent and energized to move further in their studies, and their papers—not coincidentally—have been a joy to read because they had come to grasp the abstract nature of theory far better than in previous attempts when I taught theory as biographies or substantive courses as just a bunch of research being done in a an area with little linkages to other areas or other sociologists.

I have high hopes for the future of our field because we sociologists are naturally inquisitive, curious, and passionate people. Whether we study race or gender, the evolution of states or revolutions, theory or statistics, the underlying goals are the same: to expose the nature of social phenomena in the hopes that society may be able to use what we find to improve the lives of everyone. It is time our theoretical training caught up to our larger philosophical motivations.

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