Metatheorizing in Sociology

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this essay is to describe and make the case for metatheorizing, or the systematic study of sociological theory, as a significant endeavor within sociology. In many ways, the most visible aspects of metatheorizing up to now may have been the criticisms, often quite severe, leveled at it (Collins, 1986a; Turner, 1985, 1986; Skocpol, 1986; for a review and analysis of these critiques, see Ritzer, 1988). This a rare event in academic history—the appearance of highly visible and influential critiques before the overt emergence of the field being attacked. What this means, of course, is that the field, at least in an inchoate state, actually was there all the time. Much metatheoretical work has been done under a wide range of other headings—sociology of sociology, sociology of science, sociology of knowledge, history of sociology, and most notably, as an integral part of sociological theory. In fact, most of the criticisms have been made by closet metatheoreticians.
(e.g., Collins, Skocpol, Turner) who may not have had a clear conception of what they were criticizing. Clarification of the nature of sociological metatheorizing can lead to the elevation of the level of such criticism and to the realization that most of the critics are, themselves, metatheoreticians (as Turner admits in his essay in this volume). More importantly, I hope that sociological metatheorizing will come to be seen as a legitimate and crucially important enterprise within sociology. As the literature cited in this paper makes abundantly clear, metatheorizing already is widely, if largely covertly, practiced.

What distinguishes work in this area is not so much the process of metatheorizing, but rather the nature of the end products. There are three varieties of metatheorizing largely defined by differences in their end products. The first type, metatheorizing as a means of attaining a deeper understanding of theory (M_U), involves the study of theory in order to produce a better, more profound understanding of extant theory (Ritzer, 1987, 1988). (While in my earlier work I tended to equate this type with all of metatheorizing, I now see it as only one of three major types. I also now prefer to discuss metatheorizing as the generic process rather than metatheory that, as we shall see, but one of three possible end products of metatheorizing.) M_U is concerned, more specifically, with the study of theories, theorists, communities of theorists, as well as the larger intellectual and social contexts of theories and theorists. The second type, metatheorizing as a prelude to theory development (M_P), entails the study of extant theory in order to produce new sociological theory (Ritzer, 1989a). There is still a third type, metatheorizing as a source of perspectives that overarch sociological theory (M_O), in which the study of theory is oriented to the goal of producing a perspective, one could say a metatheory, that overarches some part or all of sociological theory. All three types involve the systematic study of sociological theory; they differ in terms of their objectives in that study.

The third type of metatheorizing (M_O) is not identical to O_M, or the creation of an overarching metatheory without a systematic study of theory (e.g., Furfey, 1953/1965; Gross, 1961). Such overarching perspectives seem to materialize out of the imaginations of the creators or to be drawn vaguely from other disciplines (cf. Turner, 1986). M_O is derived from theory while O_M imposes itself on theory; thus, O_M is not a type of metatheorizing. M_O is the preferable approach because, even though it too may ultimately come to be imposed on theory, we are able to assess the process by which the perspective was created. In the case of O_M we have little or no way of ascertaining how the perspective came into existence.

Nevertheless, both M_O and O_M produce overarching theoretical perspectives, and in so doing, they share the likelihood that they will embroil us in a series of irresolvable controversies. Later we will examine examples