The Prominence of Formal Theory in Sociology

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In sociology, work in formal theory is more extensive and intensive today than at any time in the past, but remains invisible to some, including S. Zhao [(1996) "The Beginning of the End or the End of the Beginning: The Theory Construction Movement Revisited," Sociological Forum, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 305–318]. I trace the growth of formal theory in sociology focusing on theoretical research programs and show that, whereas formal theory came after the books on theory construction, it was not based on them. Elementary Theory's research program provides an example of that discontinuity. Some misunderstandings concerning formal theory can be traced to the Maryland Theory Conference of 1990 and a critique of selected ideas of that Conference is offered.

KEY WORDS: formal theory; theory growth; theory programs; elementary theory.

INTRODUCTION

"Rick, what in heaven's name brought you to Casablanca?"
"My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters."
"Waters? What waters? We are in the desert."
"I was misinformed."
Claude Rains and Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca

The leading formal theories of sociology are today broader in scope, better constructed, and more fully tested than at any previous time (Berger and Zelditch, 1993a). Those theories and their tests are published in lead-

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ing sociology journals (cf. Lovaglia et al., 1995; Fisek et al., 1995; Markovsky et al., 1993; Skvoretz and Willer, 1993; Berger et al., 1992). And the scientists who build and test them routinely give presentations at the meetings of the American Sociological Association, their own meetings, and other prominent venues. Yet Zhao asserts that “the formal mode of theory construction is dead now” (Zhao, 1996:305). My purpose here is not to give evidence that there is a substantial and growing body of formal theory work: proof of that assertion is found in leading journals as referenced above and elsewhere in this paper. Instead, I seek to understand how Zhao has been misinformed. Since Zhao is not alone in making this error, the issues I address extend beyond his paper to a larger literature focusing on the Maryland Theory Conference of 1990 sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

This paper has three main sections. In the first, I show that the series of books on theory construction that spans the 1960s and into the 1970s does not constitute a “theory construction movement.” Then I turn to the claim that formal theory is dead and show that what Zhao interprets as a termination of the drive toward formal theory is, instead, a discontinuity. The theory construction books came before the development of formal theory, but formal theory did not rest on their foundations. I trace this discontinuity to three problems that the books on theory construction were not able to overcome.

The second section shows why Zhao’s measure for the life and death of formal theory necessarily misinforms him. To do so I note the steps through which theory develops beginning with methods of theory construction and extending through cycles of testing and theory extension that are my daily work and the daily work of others who are engaged in cumulative theory development. This work is the kind that Lakatos called “theoretical research programmes” (1970 and 1978). Though Lakatos bases his ideas of how theory develops exclusively on physical, chemical, and biological sciences, the processes in the development of sociological theory that I trace are the same as those he finds for other sciences.

The third section critiques misinformation from Maryland Theory Conference of 1990 that Zhao highlights in his introduction. At the conference only one of the presenters, Bernard P. Cohen, and I, as a discussant, knew from firsthand experience the then current state of formal theory. Even though Cohen traced important recent developments in formal theory, the other papers, astonishingly, offered reasons for formal theory’s death. Hoping to inform the other presenters of their errors prior to publication, both Cohen and I cited extensively from the literature of formal theory. Whereas in science it is expected that evidence will be carefully weighed, when pub-