Abstract: The way theory is used by a discipline might seem a somewhat oblique aspect of its operation, perhaps not warranting its own chapter. But we think it to be a vital index of the way a discipline like sociology operates. In this chapter we consider the different ways in which theory is defined in Australian sociology, the way theory-in-sociology operates as both a means of disciplining the discipline and a supposedly special area of expertise, the way in which theory is taught within sociology, the way in which theory is situated in sociology textbooks, and the way in which the members of the Australian Sociological Association regard theory. The chapter shows theory to be a part of sociology’s fragility and rivalry, but also part of its survival.

Keywords: Australian sociology; disciplines; social theory; sociology textbooks; theory use

Introduction

In 2004 the Social Theory Committee of the European Sociological Association organized a conference around the question, ‘what is theory for?’ This somewhat unusual question offers us a means of further exploring the operation of sociology in Australia. After all, despite the fact that ‘theory’, as a separate aspect of the discipline, no longer has a central place in every Australian sociology department’s curriculum, as we saw earlier and will further discuss in this chapter, in its guise as an idea or ideal, theory continues to have a powerful presence in this country, as it does elsewhere. For example, the ISA’s ‘top 10 books’ exercise, mentioned in the previous chapter, ended up with a list in which every item was, at least in part, an avowedly theoretical work (ISA 1998). In line with this sort of reverence for theory, pretty much every introductory sociology textbook used in Australia instructs students on the importance to the discipline of particular ‘theorists’, especially the ‘holy trinity’ of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (Becker 1979: 24).

Theory, then, with its remarkable capacity to remain revered at the same time as it is downgraded, or even ditched, is clearly not a straightforward entity. Just as sociology is not simply a knowledge endeavour promoting social inquiry but a messy, complex, changeable mix of overt or covert agendas, institutions, practices, arenas, products, arguments, and careers, so too theory-in-sociology is an equally messy, complex, and changeable beast.

In the following sections, we will, first, offer a more detailed discussion of the complexities of defining theory in Australian sociology; secondly, consider the way theory-in-sociology has been used in Australia as a means of disciplining the discipline; thirdly, explore the way theory-in-sociology in Australia has operated as a supposedly special area of expertise; fourthly, discuss in more detail the way theory has been taught within Australian sociology; fifthly, discuss in more detail the way theory has been situated in the main sociology textbooks used in this country; and finally, discuss in more detail how members of Australia’s professional sociology association have regarded theory. In these sections we will offer commentary on the matter of whether theory is part of Australian sociology’s fragility or part of its survival, ultimately arguing that theory delivers slightly more to the discipline’s fragility than it does to its survival.

We need to make two clarifying points before we proceed. First, because the research presented here will demonstrate that Australian