Preface

It is unfashionable these days to offer “a grand theory” on the dynamics of human social organization. For many, this is the kind of activity that failed scholars like Herbert Spencer or Vilfredo Pareto once did, although sociology still continues to worship Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim who also offered encompassing theoretical schemes. More recent general theories such as Talcott Parsons’ efforts to develop a general theory of action are often held up as exemplars as to what can go wrong when theorists think “too big.” Postmodernism has not helped with its criticism of all “grand narratives,” even as postmodernists themselves have proceeded to offer such narratives. Another roadblock to general theorizing has been the overspecialization of sociology, not just in the arena of empirical research but also in theorizing. Good theories are testable, and it is presumed (incorrectly), testable theories must be narrow or even “middle range.” The result is the partitioning of theories into various camps and theoretical research programs. Even rather general theories on cultural dynamics, conflict, exchange, symbolic interaction, and human ecology, to name a few, remain rather insulated from each other, with little cross fertilization. There are, then, many obstacles to developing a grand theory in sociology today.

The problems with grand theorizing are not so much that they are (or were) “grand” and seek (sought) to explain a large part, if not all, of human social organization; rather, the problem has been their execution. Both Spencer and Pareto, for example, are actually quite formal in their presentations, and yet, their theories still seem rather vague. Talcott Parsons’ approach produced a large category system in which to push and shove empirical reality, but it offered few laws on the dynamics of reality denoted by this category system. And postmodernists, like all critical approaches, have been so busy critiquing science and its presumed pretensions that their own pretentious assertions go untested because to do so would be to invoke the standards of a “failed epistemology.” And so, most sociologists today
believe that grand theorizing is one of those mistakes of the past and, moreover, that sociology has moved beyond such theoretical blunders by positing more manageable and testable (and narrow) theories. Thus, the intellectual climate is not right for yet another effort to present a grand theory, and perhaps the iconoclast in me has chosen just this moment to break with current conventions and propose a general theory of human social organization.

In my view, theoretical sociology has developed a large body of explanatory principles and models that have yet to be fully integrated. We know a great deal more about how and why the social universe operates than we did when I entered the field over 4 decades ago, but we fail to appreciate this fact because this knowledge is fragmented and lodged within narrower theoretical and research traditions. And, because of incessant epistemological criticism of any effort to develop general theories, most theorists have been content to stay within their own supportive networks and not venture out into this world of carnivorous critics. It is time, I think, to ignore these critics and see just how far general theorizing can take us; in this way, we will have a much better sense of where sociology stands as an explanatory science. The classical theorists, especially Marx, Weber, Spencer, Durkheim, Simmel, and even Mead (who was not a sociologists) gave us many theoretical principles, and this is why we still read and reread their works today. More contemporary figures have also sought to do the same, but to less acclaim because, for reasons that are not clear to me, principles by the classical figures are acceptable whereas the same effort by contemporary figures is “naïve” or “inappropriate.” I have deliberately titled this and the other two volumes in the spirit of Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology* (probably not a wise move, given sociology’s unfair prejudices against Spencer), but others like Walter Wallace in his *Principles of Scientific Sociology* (1983) have traveled this same, rather bumpy, road. The point is that, if sociology continues to reject efforts to develop the laws of human social organization, then we are lost as a discipline; we become another kind of discipline that, in my view, is not much good to anyone – certainly not to a world filled with problems in how to organize large numbers of people in macro societies.

What I propose, then, is to bring together theorizing from very diverse traditions into a general theory. As I will argue, the social universe unfolds at the macro, meso, and micro levels; and although these are analytical distinctions, they denote how the social world is actually structured. A grand theory must, therefore, (1) develop general concepts that denote the key properties of these three levels of human social organization, (2) articulate principles that explain the operative dynamics of these properties, and,
thereby, (3) provide a general explanation of social reality at all levels of social organization. This is a tall order, but in fact, much of the heavy lifting has already been done by others. What is now necessary is to bring this work together into a set of relatively few abstract principles and models on the operative dynamics of the social universe. The theory is grand, to be sure, but it is also explicit and testable.

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