

INTRODUCTION  
**Symbolic realism and cognitive aesthetics:  
An invitation**

RICHARD HARVEY BROWN AND STANFORD M. LYMAN

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The terms of our title – structure, consciousness, and history – are three loci of debate in what is conventionally referred to as the crisis in sociology. That there is a crisis is a matter of little doubt to many concerned scholars.<sup>1</sup> Yet such a claim is by no means new. Indeed, an historical understanding of science would have to recognize that crises, rebellions, and revolutions are irregular but necessary features of the development of any discipline. One such instance is the revolt against positivism in the 1890s. As H. Stuart Hughes notes, “In this decade and the one immediately succeeding it, the basic assumptions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thought underwent a critical review from which there emerged the new assumptions characteristic of our own time.”<sup>2</sup> Despite Hughes’s implication that there has been continuity in social thought since the turn of the century, other scholars have noted upheavals of equal magnitude in the intervening decades. For example, in his essay of 1925 introducing *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*, Nicholas Spykman writes,

Western civilization has reached a crisis . . . Our knowledge and control of social life has never kept pace with its growing complexity, and we are farther behind than ever before . . . Our problem is the problem of the adequacy of our knowledge about social life and the means of obtaining it. It concerns the methodology of the social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Almost a half century later Alvin Gouldner again raised the specter of crisis haunting sociological theory: “Functional theory, and Academic Sociology more generally, are now in . . . a continuing crisis . . . When a system undergoes crisis, it is possible that it will soon no longer be the thing it was; it may change radically or may even fail to survive.”<sup>4</sup>

In general, it might be said that the current awareness of a crisis in sociology focuses on three main issues. First, no available paradigm has

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achieved dominion in the discipline. Instead a plurality of approaches, rooted in different and even opposed epistemologies, compete for regnancy. Second, none of these paradigms appears to have attained internal consistency with respect to its own epistemological, ontological, and praxiological assumptions. Finally, despite sociology's lack of preparedness, a host of moral and political issues demand from it both explication and resolution. As in earlier crises, the task confronting sociology is complex. On the one hand it must resolve its own internal problems as a form of discourse; on the other it must respond with authority to practical questions of social order and change. And, to make things more difficult, it must do both at once.

For most critics of conventional sociology the paradigm that has reached marginal utility is structural functionalism, especially that variant associated with the work of Talcott Parsons. The system that apprehends reality in terms of societal consensus, equilibrium, and slow, orderly, and progressive change has been called retrogressive, conservative, and utopian.<sup>5</sup> Still other critics have asserted that structural functionalism begs the very questions that it originally set out to answer<sup>6</sup> and that it fails in its analyses of the important issues of our time.<sup>7</sup> Finally, irruptions, dangers, and injustices in world politics have accelerated the demand for a social science that is both scientifically sound and socially relevant.<sup>8</sup>

A theory that integrates both sociology of consciousness and sociology of structure, and that also lends itself to a humanizing practice, would have to go beyond the functionalist or positivist models and draw on elements currently represented by divergent paradigms. Yet efforts to integrate such paradigms immediately confront a fundamental obstacle: Each paradigm is founded on different, and often mutually exclusive, criteria of adequacy. Thus theorists are forced to choose between epistemological consistency and partial theory, or general theory and epistemological self-contradiction. An epistemologically consistent general theory would have to meet the following criteria:

- 1 The theory must be phenomenologically grounded in the actors' own experience and understanding.
- 2 It must be self-reflective, that is, conscious of its own interests, logic, method, and historical embeddedness.
- 3 It must be predictive at least at the level of probability.
- 4 It must be comprehensive, that is, appropriate to social realities at any level of abstraction and scope.
- 5 It must lend itself to a humanizing practice.

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One difficulty with these criteria arises from the fact that each criterion suggests a different paradigm. Seeking to remain faithful to its assumptions, each current paradigm resists encroachment by others. Yet often the basic idea of one paradigm, refused entrance at the front door of another, is smuggled in at the back. For any single paradigm, adequacy at the levels of both logic and substance seems unlikely; achieving the one is purchased by sacrificing the other.

Another problem in creating adequate general theory is the relationship of theory and practice. It is at least imaginable that the causes of social phenomena have nothing whatever to do with the cures of social ills – that is, that there is a radical disjunction between the explanatory devices by which we understand how things have come to be and the praxiological methods we employ to cure the social ills we face. From its very beginning – and with only a few outstanding exceptions – sociology in America held fast to the melioristic assumption that causational knowledge would lead to curative action. But there still remains an immense gap between the sure knowledge of causes and the efficacious practice of societal improvement. Moreover, the achievement of self-reflective and phenomenologically grounded knowledge would appear to preclude the establishment of predictive and comprehensive theory. To be true to itself and to the nature of its subject matter, theory in the social sciences may have to remain dialectical and retrospective. Conversely, to yield an objective and predictive theory, the social sciences may have to dehumanize their subject matter and eliminate human agency.

Sociology's praxiological dilemma also includes the unresolved relationship of social theory to the problems of identity, value, and social policy. The positivist paradigm leaves both the investigator and the objects of his investigation in a state of fatalistic determinism, proposes a sterile neutrality toward values, and conceives of policies either as rationally facilitating a given ethical system or as ideological and hence scientifically unsound. Yet, despite the arguments of positivists, commitment to values and to the possibility of moral agency and personal authenticity seems necessary if sociology is to be made a humanizing resource for societal change. But how can this be achieved without violating the canons of established sociological methods and theory?

In the face of these problems a number of thinkers have sought to invent fundamentally new paradigms for a human-centered science of conduct – ones that are at once objective and subjective, at once scientifically valid and significantly humane. These efforts at paradigm innovation can be seen in relation to three fundamental issues facing the social sciences: the

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methodological debate among philosophers as to the proper epistemic foundations for sociology; the dispute between various sociological schools as to what type of theory offers the most fitting description of social reality; and the controversies among philosophers as well as sociologists on the proper relationship between theory and practice. Put slightly differently, the focal attention of paradigm innovators has been on the philosopher's concern with reason, the scientist's interest in explanation, and the humanist's struggles for emancipation.

Contributions to this great enterprise have proceeded along somewhat independent lines in the social sciences and philosophy. Whereas social scientists usually have been uncritical about the metaphysical problems involved in using such concepts as truth, self, or action, philosophers by and large have not attempted to integrate their work into the substantive agenda of social science theory. Moreover, within the social sciences different schools have different notions about value neutrality and about their relationships to existing structures of power. The present collection of essays attempts to build several bridges: from philosophy to the social sciences, from positivistic to humanistic approaches within sociology itself, and from philosophical sociology to practical political action. Figure 1, which sketches the main themes of this volume, highlights these relations:

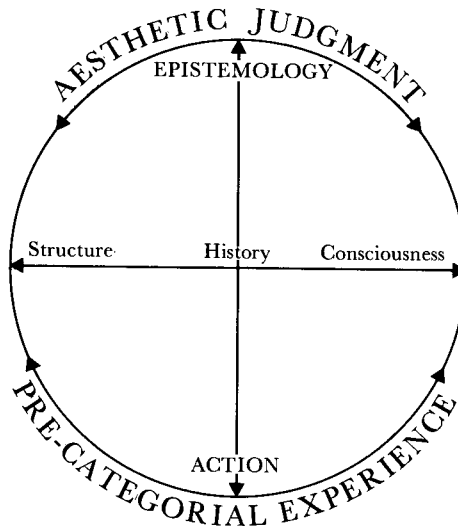


Figure 1

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On the horizontal line are the three modes of inquiry referred to by our three key terms. This line is intercepted by a vertical one representing not different modes of analysis, but different levels of thought and action. At the top of this line we place epistemology; in the middle, substantive theories in the human studies; and at the bottom, political praxis, social planning, or citizen action. In addition, at the top of this axis we have drawn an arch – the arch of aesthetics – which covers and provides a vocabulary for these other forms of inquiry and experience. Underneath the axis, we have drawn an arc – the embracing arc of precategorical experience. Together these two – arch and arc – define the circumference of our discourse.

Much of the writing in this volume is informed by what might be called a “symbolic realist” or “cognitive aesthetic” perspective. The two terms are not quite synonymous. Symbolic realism stresses ontology; cognitive aesthetics stresses epistemology. The first focuses on the possibility of our having symbolic worlds; the second provides criteria of adequacy for judging whether such worlds constitute knowledge. Cognitive aesthetics is not the romantic aesthetic of the nineteenth century, but instead a critical theory of interpretation and judgment that has much in common with dialectical hermeneutics and semiotics.

Thinkers from Giambattista Vico to Wilhelm Dilthey to George Herbert Mead have told us that man is the symbol-making animal. Unlike animals that merely live, we have lived experience. The world is apprehended and organized through the mediation of our concepts, categories, and structures of thought. To say this is to say that all knowledge is perspectival: Anything we know is known *as* something; it is construed from some point of view. A library, for example, becomes a different object of experience for the accountant, the scholar, and the custodian. Likewise the rules of baseball define what will be seen as a ball or a strike, much as the rules of psychopathology or of sociology respectively define what is to be apprehended as schizophrenia or role conflict. In this view we cannot know what reality is in any absolute or objectivist fashion; instead, all we can know is our symbolic constructions, the symbolic realities that are defined by our particular paradigms or frames of vision.

Symbolic realism is the view that the only realities accessible to us as knowledge are symbolically constructed. Symbolic realism transvalues and transcends both scientific realism and romantic idealism. The first, scientific realism, reduces knowledge to a copy of the thing known, thereby failing to explain the very creativity of science. The second, romantic

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idealism, vaporizes knowledge into intuition, mystical insight, or hunch. Faced with these two versions of knowledge, sociology has been forced to choose between becoming either a science or an art. Yet in the symbolic realist view both science and art are formal means for construing worlds through symbols. Both frame or create their own domains of meaning and use.

The symbolic realist position also makes possible a critical aesthetic reinterpretation of both correspondence and cogency theories of truth. In this view there are neither pure correspondence nor pure cogency theories. Instead, a scientific formulation is judged to be successful when its formal internal cogency and its external objects or correspondences both become elements of a single cognitive structure. Just as science affects perceptual and cognitive transformations by changing our models of the world as natural order, so also art affects paradigm induced expectations. Rather than taking science as the measure of all things – as in scientific realism – symbolic realism argues that there is no fundamental difference in the way in which either science or art empowers us to articulate our worlds.<sup>9</sup>

The perspective of cognitive aesthetics has several advantages for social scientific discourse. First, it permits us to go beyond the debate between the positivists' copy theory of truth and the intuitive approach favored by idealists. Second, a cognitive aesthetic framework draws attention to the central role of paradigm innovation in the development of science. Both the artist and the scientist, as well as the politician or citizen who is seeking to create a new mode of public discourse, are seen as having a basic affinity: They are creating paradigms through which experience becomes intelligible. Third, by stressing the world creating aspects of scientific innovation, a cognitive aesthetic approach provides a bridge between what experts do and what all of us do in our everyday lives. We all create worlds.

From such a perspective not only is it possible to draw upon previously discrete paradigms in sociology for more general and adequate theory, it also is possible to link theoretical and political praxes. True, the hermetic dimensions of theory building (and often of theorists' life worlds) may encourage a closer attendance to the formal, rather than to the praxiological, aspects of theory construction. But this is not to say that the cognitive constructs of ordinary people are entirely without formal properties, or that theories are created in a political vacuum. The notion of paradigm innovation as the creation of a world raises the question of power. Which worlds might be more or less useful to the powers that be or to aspiring nonelites? How is the power or capacity to create such worlds differentially distributed socially? What is the proper role of intellectuals?

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The aesthetic approach makes social theory one means of reconciling scientific and ethical concerns. As we have seen, however, one rub is that the dominant notion of what constitutes a scientific explanation tends to exclude the type of phenomenological analysis of reality construction we suggest. Analysis of meaning construction involves a hermeneutic interpretation of action, rules and reasons, whereas explanation in positive science has spoken of causes and facts and has viewed behavior as determined by impersonal social forces. But by stressing the function of paradigm creation, an aesthetic perspective dissolves the traditional dichotomies between subjectivist and objectivist ways of theorizing. Such a stress also serves as the beginning of the reformulation of the social sciences themselves. The aesthetic approach to paradigm construction draws the social scientist into a consciousness of the paradigmatic limits imposed by his own outlook. In this process he becomes critical of the modes by which his discourse proceeds and opens himself up to the possibility of a multiplicity of discourses by which he might proceed better and farther. In this sense, the aesthetic model offers to humanistic social theory a special mode of reflection. This mode of reflection is not solipsistic; rather, it creates space for integrating various theoretical streams and for discovering their historical sources – a space in which the archaeology of the human studies and the architecture of the self and society may be held in fruitful tension.<sup>10</sup>

The concerns of this book go beyond pure theory; they also include identity, politics, and action. In this sense, the essays convened here are devoted to the human studies in a humanistic sense. When in the fifteenth century Marsilio Ficino defined man as a “rational soul participating in the intellect of God, but operating in a body,” he saw the person as at once subject and object, finite as well as free.<sup>11</sup> That to be human is to be both subject and object also is recognized in Pico della Mirandola’s essay “On the Dignity of Man.” Pico does not say that man is the center of the world, but only that God placed man in the center of the universe so that he might be conscious of where he stands and so free to decide “where to turn.”<sup>12</sup> As Erwin Panofsky tells us:

It is from this ambivalent conception of *humanitas* that humanism was born. It is not so much a movement as an attitude which can be defined as the conviction of the dignity of man, based on both the insistence on human values (rationality and freedom) and the acceptance of human limitations (fallibility and frailty); from these two postulates result responsibility and tolerance.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever luggage the term “humanistic” may have acquired over the centuries, its core referent remains the person as a genuinely conscious

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and intentional actor, capable of exercising choice for his conduct and responsibility for its consequences. In sociology a counterpart of this concern for moral agency would emerge as a theoretical approach that conceives actors as organizers of meaningful acts and social events as patterned according to reasons, intentions, and imagined consequences. With moral agency for its starting point, a humanist sociology would investigate the person in his social and moral settings, his construction of such settings, the role of power in the negotiation, imposition, and resistance to such constructions, and the ways in which cultures, societies, and political economies serve as resources and constraints. Such a sociology not only recognizes moral man in immoral society, but also uncovers immoral man in moral society.

Critical aesthetics provides a vocabulary useful for linking a general theory of society with a humanizing practice. One term in such a vocabulary is "metaphor." In the broadest sense, metaphor is seeing something from the viewpoint of something else, which means, by modest extension, that all knowledge is metaphoric. In normal science, as in normal political times, the governing paradigms or root metaphors are not brought into question. But in times of crisis such rules of discourse or action are subjected to critical examination. Armed with the view of paradigms as metaphoric, the sociologist immerses himself in just such moments. It is then that the rich tradition of cognitive aesthetics becomes available as an epistemic resource, a means of criticizing the regnant modes of theory and conduct. For example, today the spokesmen for cybernetic systems theory argue that society is (or is like) a great computer, with its input and output, its feedback loops, and its programs; this machine - society - is in turn guided by a servo-mechanism - the techno-administrative elite. To see this imagery as a metaphor, however, is to reject it as a literal description, to unmask it as a legitimating ideology, and to provide a basis for criticizing its rhetorics. By doing a close textual analysis, it becomes clear that in the rhetoric of social cybernetics, there is an atrophy of the very vocabularies of citizenship, moral responsibility, and political community. In place of these, the machinery of governance, initially conceived as serving human values, becomes a closed system generating its own self-maintaining ends. The polity - the arena for the institutional enactment of moral choices - dissolves upward into the cybernetic state, or downward into the alienated individual, whose intentionality is now wholly privatized and whose actions, uprooted from their institutional context, are bereft of social consequence and deprived of moral meaning.



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To see paradigms for discourse metaphorically, then, is to recognize that they provide the frameworks for structuring appearance, for creating those realities that become accessible to our understanding. To understand that formal thought has this power – the power to name the real – is to understand that intellection is a highly political act. An aesthetic view sees formal thought as a war game with toy soldiers; but it also sees that soldiers have real guns.

To the extent that sociology assumes scientific realism, present values and social structure are taken as given, out-there-to-be-discovered facts. With such a view social theory lacks the cognitive space within which it might construct alternative social orders. Without such utopias the advice of sociologists on social policy is limited to social reform.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, by adopting an aesthetic perspective, realities that once were obdurate become fragile. Our recognition of the fragility of institutions counterbalances our prior recognition of the frailty of man. Our recognition that social order is a construction invites us to actively reconstruct our worlds.

## NOTES

- 1 Important discussions of contemporary crises in sociological theory, capitalist society, and Western civilization in general include Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Norman Birnbaum, "The Crisis in Marxist Sociology," in *Recent Sociology*, no. 2, *On the Social Basis of Politics*, ed. Hans-Peter Dreitzel (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), pp. 11–44; Russell Jacoby, "The Politics of the Crisis Theory: Toward the Critique of Automatic Marxism II," *Telos* 23 (1975): 3–52; Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); and Richard Barnet, "The Twilight of the Nation State: A Crisis of Legitimacy," in *The Rule of Law*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), pp. 221–42.
- 2 H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 33.
- 3 Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1925), pp. v, vii.
- 4 Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, p. 341.
- 5 See Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 64 (1959): 115–127. Also see Tom Bottomore, "Out of this World," *New York Review of Books* 13 (November 6, 1969): 34–9.
- 6 See Kenneth E. Bock, "Evolution, Function, and Change," *American Sociological Review* 28, 2 (1963): 229–37. Also see Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change*

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*and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

- 7 See Stanford M. Lyman, *The Black American in Sociological Thought: A Failure of Perspective* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), pp. 145–70. Also see Richard H. Brown, "Economic Development as an Anti-Poverty Strategy: Notes on the Political Economy of Race," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 9, 2 (1973): 165–210, esp. 181–5.
- 8 See Saul H. Mendlovitz, ed., *On the Creation of a Just World Order: Preferred Worlds for the 1990s* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).
- 9 For a fuller development of the concepts symbolic realism and cognitive aesthetics, and their relevance to the human studies, see Richard Harvey Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 10 On the archaeology of the human studies, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), and *The Archaeology of Language, and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972). On the architecture of mind, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
- 11 Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Torino: Bettega de'Erasmus, 1962).
- 12 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1956).
- 13 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 2.
- 14 We use the term "utopia" in the critical and reflective sense discussed by Louis Marin in his essay in this volume. Such a usage excludes the alternative futures invented by many American policy researchers. These are extrapolations of the current social order and essentially functionalist in their formulation.