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978-0-521-37258-9 - The Meaning of General Theoretical Sociology: Tradition and Formalization

Thomas J. Fararo

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This book sets out a generative structuralist conception of general theoretical sociology: its philosophy, its problems, and its methods. The field is defined as a comprehensive research tradition with many intersecting subtraditions that share conceptual components. The focus is on formalization and unification as processes that can help advance the state of theory today.

An integrative philosophy of the field is set out in terms of a process worldview, a focus on generativity in explanation, and a conception of the structure of theories as hierarchical meaning control systems.

This philosophy is implemented in two phases. In the first phase, Professor Fararo carefully defines the core problems of general theoretical sociology in the context of setting out and illustrating the logic of a nonlinear dynamical social systems framework. A critical analysis of the outcome of this phase then leads, in the second phase, to formal treatments of action principles and structural analysis. A variety of traditions are drawn upon to treat theoretical problems of order and integration, as well as to examine searchingly problems of formalization and unification in theoretical sociology.

Along the way, many conceptual issues and methodological problems in contemporary sociological theory are discussed as Fararo develops the implications of his generative structuralist conception of general theoretical sociology.

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# The meaning of general theoretical sociology

**Tradition and formalization**

**Thomas J. Fararo**

*University of Pittsburgh*



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## Preface

The main objectives of this book are to set out a conception of a comprehensive research tradition I call *general theoretical sociology* and to show how key problems in this field are defined and studied in formal terms. The Introduction presents an overview of the topics treated in sequential terms in four chapters: a philosophy of general theoretical sociology, a dynamical systems formulation of its main problems, formal studies in action theory and social order, and integrative theory construction centered on the analysis of social structure in network terms.

This work represents two tendencies in my thinking emerging over the past decade. On the one hand, there is a continuity of past and present, of traditions in sociological theory. Despite the pluralism, I have come to regard the various traditions as communicating branches of one comprehensive tradition to which each generation makes its contributions. On the other hand, theoretical advance is through a *unification dynamic*. It is not that some static state of integrated sociological theory, wiping out disagreements, is envisioned. The commitment is to a recursive process of unification of otherwise separate contributions. This can occur at a variety of levels and in diverse ways, involving metatheory, principles, and theoretical procedures, a number of which are discussed and exemplified in this book.

Two overall elements of orientation inform the approach taken in this book. First, I treat the vast body of work of the past and present of sociological theory as a compound of general theoretical analysis, world-historical analysis, and normative analysis. In a wider envisagement of the meaning of sociological theory, all three of these elements of its tradition would be treated. This book treats only the component of general theoretical analysis. Hence, the subject matter is the meaning of general theoretical sociology, which is an abstraction from the concrete body of sociological theory. A further element of selection is indicated by the use of the term *general*. These and other matters of orientation are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of the book. The point here is that what is involved is an element of value orientation; namely, this book is based on a value commitment to the advance of the general theoretical element in sociological theory.

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A second element of orientation informs this book. It is a methodological and sociological approach that I call *generative structuralism*. On the one hand, the approach is based on the idea of generativity. With regard to theoretical method, this amounts to a commitment to the construction of generative theoretical models. Formal elements are intrinsic to this activity. This idea is explicated in Chapter 1. On the other hand, the approach is based on the idea of social structure. Structuralism can mean and has meant many things. In this book, its primary meaning is the treatment of social structure as the problem focus rather than the solution focus for other problems. Whatever else it may mean, the sociology of a phenomenon is its interpretation or explanation in terms of social structure. But general theoretical sociology treats that very resource of explanation in other contexts as the source of its key problems. This idea is explicated in Chapter 2. Accordingly, the generative structuralist approach leads to the view that the meaning of general theoretical sociology is found in the activity of constructing generative theoretical models that answer to problems of social structure.

In a previous book (Fararo, 1973), I advocated and tried to illustrate a set of standards in the use of logic and mathematics in sociological theory. These included, for instance, conceptual clarity, formal consistency, deductive fertility, and empirical meaningfulness. In this book, it has not always proved possible to maintain all these standards. This is true, in particular, of Chapter 3, with its difficult focus on action and order. For instance, some of the formal work does not exhibit deductive fertility. Yet such work may have value in exhibiting a mode of formalization specially adapted to qualitative perspectives and also in its potential to function in unification episodes. In another instance, there is an introduction of primitive quantitative terms without demonstrated empirical meaningfulness as I used this term in the earlier book. This occurs in the mathematical model of dynamic normative control. I doubt that I would have set out this model in a context where we are dealing with the normative meaning of action were it not for the exemplar of David Heise (1979, 1986). Given that his theory rests on a quantitative control systems model supplied with a measurement basis, I feel less uneasy about the problem of empirical meaningfulness than I would otherwise. So one problem for future analysis is to link the normative control model of Chapter 3 to an empirical basis, possibly even the same as that employed by Heise. Another problem is to articulate the two types of theoretical models as such, one addressed to normative meaning and the other to affective meaning. I hope there has been some compensating value in framing the particular model in terms of a process-oriented explication of an important principle of general theoretical sociology.

My aim has been to speak not only to a small circle of committed formalists but also to a broad audience of theorists, teachers of theory, and their students.

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Since the use of formal techniques is an intrinsic feature of the approach taken in this book, there is also a substantial obstacle to the realization of this aim. It may be anticipated that not all readers will be able to follow the more technical developments of the ideas. But much of the book is couched at the level of presuppositions and principles and of theoretical procedures that can be implemented in diverse formal ways. These and related discussions should be accessible to readers who are not totally put off by the more formal aspect of the book.

I have been fortunate in the past decade to have had John Skvoretz as a collaborator on a number of formal theoretical studies reported in this book. I am grateful to him for comments on portions of an earlier version of the book and to Kenji Kosaka and John Mellott for their very useful comments. Thanks also go to external reviewers for prompting revisions that, I hope, improved the form and substance of the book; and I am especially indebted to David Willer. He provided an extraordinarily detailed and sophisticated critical commentary, which nevertheless gave the sort of encouragement an author welcomes. My colleague and friend Robert Avery was more valuable to me than he knows in giving me his reactions to some of the ideas expressed here. And for her encouragement and emotional support, my unlimited gratitude goes to my wife, Irene.

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