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Edited by Thomas Janoski, Robert R. Alford, Alexander M. Hicks and Mildred A. Schwartz

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INTRODUCTION

Political Sociology in the New Millennium

Alexander M. Hicks, Thomas Janoski, and Mildred A. Schwartz

Although modern political sociology has existed for more than a century, it came into its own during the decades bridging the victory at the end of World War II and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Especially important in setting the direction for political research with a distinctive focus on “the social bases of politics” was Seymour Martin Lipset’s *Political Man* (1960), published in twenty countries and deemed a “citation classic” by the *Social Science Citation Index*. The transformative potentials of the social bases of politics were redirected away from the pluralist theoretical tradition by William G. Domhoff’s *Who Rules America?* (1967), which stimulated interest in capitalist power; William Gamson’s *The Strategy of Social Protest* (1975), which expanded attention to the popular bases of power beyond interest groups to social movements; and James Petras and Maurice Zeitlin’s *Latin America: Reform or Revolution* (1967), which excited new interest in the politics of labor movements. The 1980s’ ascent of state-centric institutionalism registered a major impact on political sociology with its *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (1985). The works of these times had a common focus on the societal determination of political processes and outcomes and on how state structures cause varied outcomes in different countries.

Since the early 1980s, political sociology has moved to include the unique and powerful perspectives of Michel Foucault (1979, 1980, 1984,

1990, 1991), Pierre Bourdieu (1994, 1998a, 1998b), and other poststructuralist or culturally oriented theorists; of feminism (Butler, 1990; Hobson, 1990; Hobson and Lindholm, 1997; Young, 1990); of racialization theory (Goldberg, 2002; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2001); and of rational choice theories (Coleman, 1966; Hechter, 1987; Lange and Garrett, 1985, 1987; North, 1990; Tsebellis, 1990, 1999; Wallerstein, 1999). Along with other perspectives, these have all shaken the theoretical dominance of pluralist, political/economic, and state-centric theories.

Today, political sociology stands out as one of the major areas in sociology. Its share of articles and books published is impressive. For example, in 1999, 17 to 20 percent of the articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* and about 20 percent of the books reviewed by *Contemporary Sociology*, the major reviewing journal in American sociology, dealt with political sociology. A number of political sociologists, including Seymour Martin Lipset, William Gamson, and Jill Quadagno, have served as president of the American Sociological Association (ASA). The political sociology section of the ASA continues to attract an above-average membership.¹ Yet, along with all this vitality, the field remains fluid, stimulated by the following processes and theoretical transformations.

¹ In 2003, membership stood at 560 compared to the average of 463 for all sections. Dobratz et al. (2002b) also report that a high percentage of articles in the *Annual Review of Sociology* are on the topic of political sociology.

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[More information](#)

First, although state-centered, and later policy-centered, theory associated with Theda Skocpol and others (e.g., Evans, Rueschmeyer, and Skocpol, 1985; Skocpol, 1979, 1992) has garnered a great deal of attention in political sociology; new developments in pluralist, political/economic, and elitist theoretical traditions have largely flown beneath the radar these past two decades. With similar stealth, new approaches to policy domains (Burstein, 1991; Knoke et al., 1994) and civil society (Hall, 1995; Jacobs, 2002; Janoski, 1998; Keane, 1988) have emerged without widespread recognition from political sociologists. These developments indicate that the time is ripe to move from differentiation of theoretical work to more synthetic theory building by bringing civil society, policy domains, voluntary associations, social movements, interest groups, and the state into more meaningful theoretical relations.

Second, although the print and electronic media have been studied in detail, these institutions have not been adequately integrated into political sociology. Even though political sociology may often refer to the media, within its own theory it has failed to integrate the media as an oblique force that has strong but not always clear impacts on political candidates, elections, ideologies, and legislation, and on the implementation and evaluation of policy. Except where political parties or candidates control the media, such as in Italy with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the impact of mass media is often indirect and not obviously, or at least continuously, in favor of any party. But the media are political actors, not just fuzzy filters of news and views. The integration of the media into empirical research, especially comparative work, is particularly important for the comprehension of the role of mass media in the public sphere (Keane, 1991; Kellner, 1990; Schudson and Waisbord, Chapter 17, this volume; Wheeler, 1997; Zaller, forthcoming).

Third, some process-oriented subtheories in political sociology have been underemphasized. Public opinion needs to be pushed in the direction of social network and media contexts rather than seen as something that is just out there (Burstein, 2003; Gamson, 1992; Huckfeldt and

Sprague, 1995). Theories of political deliberation certainly should play a stronger role, especially in considering the impact of small group democracy, deliberative polling, and electronic town meetings (Bohman, 1996; Fishkin, 1991; Fishkin and Laslett, 2003; Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996). Process theories of democracy are important as well in regard to the transformation of political parties and trade unions, multiple and changing political identities, and participation in voluntary groups that cause cross-cutting cleavages (Manza, Brooks, and Sauder, Chapter 10, and Schwartz and Lawson, Chapter 13, this volume). Structural and process explanations involving political mechanisms need to be brought more into play, and the growing area of cultural explanation needs to be integrated into this mix (Diamond, 1999; Fung and Wright, 2003; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Tilly, 2003).

Fourth, the conceptual gulf between the two vastly different locations in space – “all politics are local” and “all politics are global” – needs to be bridged, as is being done in the literature on antiglobalization movements and perhaps with the political slogan to “Think Globally, Act Locally” (e.g., Khagram et al., 2002; see the McMichael and Evans chapters [Chapters 30 and 32] in this volume). More attention needs to be paid to the urban and local studies of the political and neighborhood politics of William Gamson in *Talking Politics* (1992) (see also Berry et al., 1993). Means need to be found that integrate theories as diverse as the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein in *The Modern World System* (1989) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000). Finally, efforts that directly link the local and the global (e.g., Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002; Hay, 2001; Ranney, 2003) need to be encouraged.

Fifth, although it is sometimes denied, the study of politics is affected by cycles of political power. On the one hand, politics and policies themselves change, depending on whether the right or left is in power. On the other hand, social and political hegemony can shift from democratic processes in the community and the welfare state to privatization and market processes. This creates oscillations in political

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Political Sociology in the New Millennium

3

research, such as the leftward and rightward tilts, respectively, in the political scholarship of the 1960s and then the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., see Hunter, 1991, on “culture wars” and Linz and Stepan, 1978a, 1978b, and Diamond et al., 1988, on “cycles of democratization”). Yet the eagerness to explain the expanding welfare state is hardly matched by the comparative lack of enthusiasm to theorize and explain its decline (Korpi and Palme, 2003; Pierson, 2001). Moreover, social movement research seems much more enthusiastic about the civil rights movement than the New Right/fundamentalist and neoliberalism movements. Still, the mobilization of the religious right has attracted significant attention from sociologists (e.g., Diamond, 1995; Liebman and Wuthnow, 1983; Luker, 1984; Marshall, 1994). Indeed, the sociological study of the neoliberal movement looks like a burgeoning academic cottage industry (e.g., Campbell and Pederson, 2001; Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002; Simmons, Garrett, and Dobbin, 2003; Swank, 2003).

Sixth, the influence of poststructuralist and postmodern theories, and the feminist expansion of the “political,” have broadened the concept of power from formal political institutions to the informal political processes often involved with the market or private spheres (Dyrberg, 1997; Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1991; Torfing, 1999). Poststructuralist and postmodern authors have also questioned the objectivity and narrowed the empirical scope of sociology (at least insofar as any theoretical/empirical correspondence is concerned), sometimes to the extent of denying the possibility of theoretical realism and trading away the theoretical domain to be explained for the specific case to be interpreted. These authors have equated political sociology with nearly “all of sociology,” revealing previously neglected aspects of politics. However, when everything is political, political sociology itself becomes diffuse and unfocused. Although researchers, especially those who look for the wide-ranging “social bases of politics,” naturally abhor the imposition of boundaries on the political, some redelineation of what constitutes political sociology is necessary. The denial of theoretical

realism conflates sociology and literary fiction, whereas the diminution of theoretical domains (at times to a vanishing point) blurs the distinctiveness of sociology from biography, journalism, and descriptive historiography.

Seventh, although institutions have always been the mainstay of sociological explanations, new challenges have emerged from alternative perspectives. In recent years, economists and political scientists have been applying rational choice theory to the formation of institutions and to action in an institutional context (Booth, James, and Meadwell, 1993; Hardin, 1995; Kiser and Bauldry, Chapter 8, this volume; Knight and Sened, 1995; Lewin, 1988, 1991; North, 1990; and Tsebelis, 1990). The *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* has been at the forefront of these efforts, reinforced by the Nobel Prize awarded to its preeminent spokesman, Douglas North (1990). Political sociologists have been stimulated to move beyond verifying and describing the existence of institutions to explaining their creation and transformation (Brinton and Nee, 1998; Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, 1992), as well as examining how emotions affect political outcomes (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2001; Hochschild, 1983). Yet we still see the need for much more theoretical and cumulative work on institutions (Boudon, 2003).

Amidst this swirl of change, there is a need for intellectual tools that can survey and integrate the family of disparate subfields called political sociology (Turner and Power, 1981). Such a survey needs to do the following four things: (1) bring the diverse contributions to the field of political sociology together and place them within a clear and encompassing conceptual framework; (2) synthesize, or at least counterpose, new developments in theories of political sociology in ways that still recognize some residual fragmentation; (3) consolidate sociological explanations of politics through the “social bases of politics” and state institutionalism while advancing the recognition of “civil society” as a key aspect of the state’s social foundations and achievements; and (4) incorporate the expanding theories of globalization and empire. We present the *Handbook of Political Sociology*, partly

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Alexander M. Hicks, Thomas Janoski, and Mildred A. Schwartz

based on a “Visions of Political Sociology” session at the 1998 American Sociological Association convention and a 2001 conference on “Theories of Political Sociology,” as a means to reorient sociological explanation of politics. We believe that it can advance political explanation not only by providing new directions but also by energizing students of politics with creative insights from previously unassimilated literatures.

THE PLACE OF A HANDBOOK
IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

The purpose of this handbook is to sharpen our focus on what has been somewhat blurred by the seven entropic developments just discussed. Although political sociology has had considerable success with its focus on “the social bases of politics” and its new institutional approaches, it needs to be more inclusive of recent developments while retaining a critical sensibility. Reintegration of the field and a possible synthesis of new developments into existing theories, where practicable, are important ways to extend and refocus the goals of political sociology.

The second, most obvious, reason that a *Handbook of Political Sociology* is needed to clarify political sociology is that one has never been assembled before. This handbook is the first of its kind to bring together original articles covering a coherent range of topics. The gap it fills was dealt with in the past by a number of edited volumes that included both classical and current readings, including Lewis Coser (1966), Frank Lindenfeld (1968), S. N. Eisenstadt (1971), and Kate Nash (2000a). One two-volume collection by William Outhwaite and Luke Martell (1998) contains classical statements by Marx, Weber, and Gramsci along with a large number of reprints of more current articles. These compendia relied on previously published sources to construct an overview of the field. Instructive surveys of the field were also written, such as those by Barrington Moore (1962), Morris Janowitz (1970), Edward H. Lehman (1977), Tom Bottomore (1979), Mildred A. Schwartz (1990), Keith Faulks (2000), Anthony Orum (1977), Philo C. Washburn (1982),

Robert Dowse and John Hughes (1972), Arnold K. Sherman and Aliza Kolker (1987), George Kourvetaris (1997), Kate Nash (2000b), and Baruch Kimmerling’s edited volume (1996).² One may also read Richard Braungart (1981), Jonathan Turner and C. Power (1981), and Anthony Orum (1988) for summary essays on the field. Robert Alford and Roger Friedland did an impressive review of pluralist, managerial, and class theories of political sociology (1985), which we examine in more detail shortly, and Martin Marger followed with a somewhat similar classification (1987).

More recently, edited volumes have emphasized particular theories or approaches. An emphasis on “state-centered” theories is presented in the Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol book (1985). George Steinmetz (1999) and Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (2004) emphasize the fusing of the “cultural turn” and rational choice in political sociology. This handbook differs in not arguing for a single perspective. We shall err toward presenting as many points of view as possible, and we indicate where theoretical explorations, syntheses, or other responses are needed.

Other edited volumes address methodological approaches. Theda Skocpol (1984) examines historical methodologies. Thomas Janoski and Alexander Hicks (1994) cover a range of quantitative methods and formal qualitative approaches like those presented in Charles Ragin (1987, 2002). In addition, a recent survey of historical/comparative sociology by James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2003) focuses largely on political sociology. As with theory, we believe allowing a thousand flowers

² Two widely used textbooks using elite theory, one in sociology and the other in political science, make little attempt to cover a broad range of theories but, nonetheless, connect to parties, interest groups, legislatures, and government: G. William Domhoff (1967, 1983, 1998, 2002) and Thomas Dye and Harmon Zeigler (2000). Kate Nash (2000a, 2000b) captures the cultural turn in political sociology but rarely mentions political parties, interest groups, legislatures, or government. She focuses on cultural theory with most of her attention on social movements, citizenship and rights, identity politics, international organizations and movements, and the displacement of the nation-state.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Political Sociology in the New Millennium

5

to bloom is preferable to confining investigative methods to a few strains.

Betty Dobratz, Lisa Waldner, and Timothy Buzzell have recently edited three special issues of *Research in Political Sociology* with the intent of “assessing the state of the field of political sociology at the start of the twenty-first century” (2003:1). The first, more specialized, volume looks at social movements and the state along with a symposium on the 2000 presidential election in the United States (2002a). The editors describe the second volume on theory (2002b) as “not a comprehensive overview” but a volume that gives “examples of several new promising trends” and “a critique of current approaches” in the areas of pluralist, class, elite, world systems, and postmodern debates (Waldner et al., 2002:xiii–xiv). The third volume (2003) is a more general survey of public opinion, civil society, electoral politics, social movements, and a historical/comparative analysis of the state. It also contains a few more specialized chapters such as Paul Luebke’s reflections on being a progressive legislator in a very conservative state and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva et al.’s article on the new racism in present-day American society. The result is an important contribution, but one, as the editors make clear, without the intention of providing the kind of comprehensive overview that is our objective.³

This handbook intends to provide readers with an integrated overview of major theories and findings, lead them conveniently to topics of interest, and assist them in the common

challenge of synthesizing a disparate field. For many researchers in specialized areas, this integrative view should bring cutting edge research in adjacent fields and also offer as definitive a panorama of political sociology as space permits. In addition to the intellectual need for integrating theory, delineating the scope of the field, and developing multiple perspectives on society and politics, a *Handbook of Political Sociology* of this scope has never been done. We, and the authors of subsequent chapters, offer this work as an attempt to provide what has until now been missing.

TWO NEW CHALLENGES

In the mid-1980s, the field of political sociological theory was effectively summarized and partially synthesized in Robert Alford and Roger Friedland’s *The Powers of Theory*. In their masterful book, action and structure are analyzed at three levels (individual, organizational, and societal) each with its characteristic mode of power (situational, bureaucratic, or systemic). Three major theoretical perspectives, each closely tied to a level and to a mode of power, anchor their conceptions of theory. One is the pluralist perspective: individualistic, situational, and tied to a characteristic problematic of governance, in particular democratic governance. A second is the managerial perspective: organizational, bureaucratic, and focused on problems of state capacity that is comparative. A third is the class perspective: societal, systemic, and focused on the conundrums of resistance to economic inequality and societal “crisis.” To these theoretical perspectives and elements are added an additional emphasis on either politics (political structure and process) or function (the consequences of politics). As with many holistic articulations of social science phenomena, this scheme evokes the metalanguage of systems theory. Individual and group actions link the societal environment and the organization(s) of the state. Insofar as modes of power are concerned, situationally embedded actions have their impact as inputs and throughputs on and through the bureaucratic structure of the state, feeding

³ There are also a number of handbooks in political science, such as those by Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (1975), Robert Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1997), and, in its overall effect, Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (2002). However, political science does not emphasize the “social bases of politics” to the extent that sociology does, and much of its approach to political behavior in international, comparative, and national politics involves more psychological and rational choice approaches. Although much closer to us in subject matter, a recent handbook in political psychology refracts the political through the lens of psychology (Sears, Huddy, and Jervis, 2003). The present handbook responds to our perceptions of what is missing in sociology itself, where we also learn from political science and allied fields and borrow freely from their accomplishments.

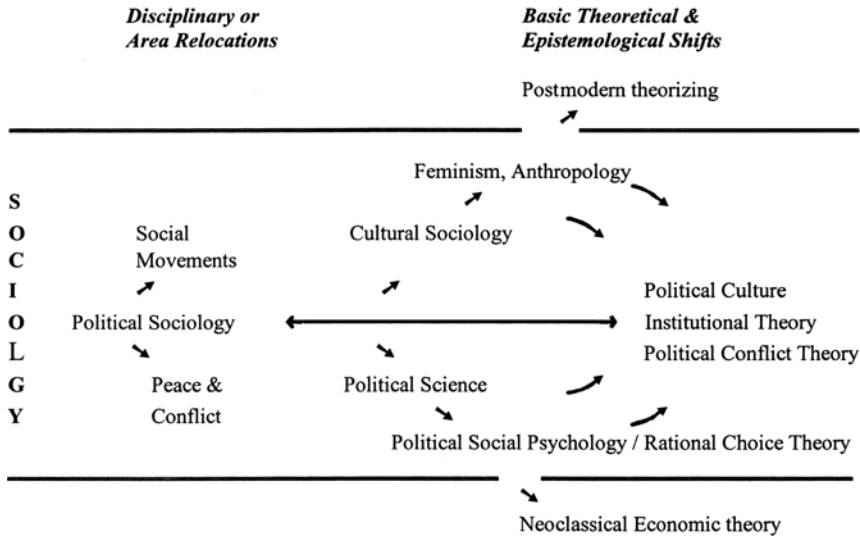


Figure 1.1. The Directions and Redirections of Political Sociology.

back, in systemslike fashion, on actors and their social situations (organization and society). In short, although beginning from some distinctive roots and moving toward a number of original objectives, Alford and Friedland echo long-held views in sociology and political science about how to conceptualize the social and political world (e.g., Easton, 1965; Parsons, 1969; Wallerstein, 1989).

But much has changed in the nearly twenty years since they presented their work. From one direction, the epistemology of science has been challenged by more contextualized and cultural conceptions of politics and by less positivist (e.g., more realist and interpretivist) views of causal origins. Although frequently stopping short of an antiscientific “postmodernity,” a postmodern influence can be seen in the emphasis on subjectivity and “capillarity” (a Foucaultian term for diffused and extensively networked power), a turn to structural and discursive conceptions of *objective* culture, and a major rejection of materialist and other determinisms. From the direction of economics and political science, rational choice and game theorists have influenced political sociologists with an innovative stress on rational motivation that brackets most forms of “subjectivity” – everything beyond preferences, information and rational calculation – and

increasingly assesses politics in complex, even nested, situations.

To some degree, these postmodern and rational choice positions lead in orthogonal or even opposite directions as follows: (1) with a diffusion and *deconstruction* of power (and domains for its explanation) associated with postmodernism and the cultural turn and, at times, emphasized in feminist orientations toward the private sphere, and (2) with the integration of all social science around modes of rational action (that arguably are more psychological and economic than sociological) associated with the rational choice approach. These diverse and contradictory pressures are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

The cultural and feminist paths lie within sociology but may lead to postmodern theory in anthropology and the humanities, both of which strongly emphasize culture. The rational choice approach has seeds in much of power resources and political economy theory but leads outward toward political science and economics. In many ways, both theories lay claim to institutional theory. A coherent approach to political sociology would strive toward the sort of *rapprochement* between, or even integration of, two of the theoretical orientations that Campbell and Pedersen (2001) sketch out for conflicting schools of institutional theory: “rational choice” and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Political Sociology in the New Millennium

7

“discursive” institutionalism. These orientations differ greatly in their views of how universal or historically specific (or “local”) theories should be, with rational choice theory at one, universalistic, pole and historical and discursive theories at the other, highly particular, pole. These are at opposite ends as well in their views of how positivistic or interpretivist theories should be. Yet although new theories from across the aisle from one’s own preferred side of the universalistic/local and the positivist/interpretivist divides often are dreaded, Campbell and Pedersen show how institutionalists of every stripe are “finding ways to connect their turf to others” (2001:273). We return to these distinctions when we discuss the challenges presented to political sociology by the “cultural turn” and the rise of rational choice theory.

The First Challenge: Culture (and Postmodernity)

From the perspective of the new cultural sociology, the theory that had dominated sociology following World War II was modern in epistemology (objectivist and scientific) and modern in politics (a creature of industrial society).⁴ Epistemologically, it was marked by an antitraditionalist and antireductionist skepticism that preceded the postmodern skepticism toward scientific objectivity certainty yet remained objectivist (or “realist”) and scientific. Politically,

⁴ The “modernist political sociology” presented by Alford and Friedland articulates not merely a scientifically ambitious concatenation of accounts of theories of the state – that is, of state, state and society, state and economy, state in capitalist society, and the like – it conveys an ontology appropriate to the scientific sociological study of states. *The Powers of Theory* world is one of action and structure, structure and function, and function and process, where structures are presumed to be like the social relational structure articulated by Peter Blau (1964) or Erik Olin Wright (2002, 1997) but not like the symbolic structures described by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979) or William Sewell, Jr. (1980, 1985, 1992, 1994). And it is from this latter direction that the first major challenge to political sociology has come.

it was founded on the assumption that social cleavages and interest groups shape the election, legislation, and social and foreign policy outcomes of states. The theory’s conceptualizations, much like those stressed by Alford and Friedland (1985), are tersely characterized by Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2004) as involving a “double reduction” of phenomena to social (and state) structure and to utilitarian action (the last constrained, if not prefigured, by structure). In case the quoted use of “reduction” appears pejorative, we note that “reduction” was a respectable theoretical goal for the modernists in question and remains so to the many modernists (or perhaps “neomodernists”) who continue in political sociology today, two decades after Alford and Friedland’s (to use a literary trope) “high modernist” work.

Adams, Clemens, and Orloff’s critique is not entirely new, having been anticipated by microinteractionist theories ranging from symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology in the United States (e.g., Herbert Blumer, Howard Garfinkel, Anselm Strauss, and Erving Goffman) to hermeneutics, phenomenology, and historicism in Europe (e.g., Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Paul Ricouer, and Hans-Georg Gadamer). As described by Stephen Pepper (1972), the epistemological basis for this new contextualism lies in the meaning created in small contexts, with its strands dissipating as it moves beyond the originating context to other situations. Such contextualism is commonplace within the more encompassing orientation toward social reality sometimes termed interpretivist (Steinmetz, 1999). By and large, the postmodernists, feminists, and race/ethnic social constructionists may be termed interpretivists. However, as we shall see, we believe that interpretivism leaves social scientists in need of an epistemological midpoint between such antimonies as explanatory theory and orienting framework; and between covering law explanation and contextually specific interpretation.

The path to the assimilation of culture into *political* sociology has been a lengthy one. In the 1950s and 1960s, political sociology focused on power structure research and pluralism and on

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

value consensus and functionalist equilibrium. Political culture was often viewed in what has come to be known as “essentialist” nationalist terms, which left most cultural variability as a distinction between nations. Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba set the tone of early cultural studies with *The Civic Culture* (1963), in which they examined the cultural constants affecting political participation in five nations. Laboring long in the gardens of political culture, Ronald Inglehart presaged some aspects of postmodernity through his studies of postmaterialist values (1990, 1997). Murray J. Edelman (1964) took an early look at symbolic culture from an interpretivist perspective unusual for American social scientists during the first post–World War II decades.

Under the aegis of neo-Marxist concerns with capitalism and the rise of the working class, various scholars did cultural research in political sociology. Edward P. Thompson probed the meaning of religion and craft in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966) and helped create a “social history” movement that explored the meaning of everyday life under the shadow of capitalism. Basil Bernstein (1975), Raymond Williams (1973, 1977), and Garth Stedman-Jones (1983) examined how language and symbols in a social context affected socialization, learning, and action. Later in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the upsurge in critical theory was oriented toward advertising, gender, the media, and culture in general.

An important precursor to all of this was Weber’s (1922, 1930) cultural work on religion. Weber argued that capitalism was created through the religious insecurities of a band of religious heretics “irrationally” believing in predestination.⁵ Weber, working largely within the German tradition of the “cultural” or “human sciences” (e.g., Dilthey, 1989) and influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (Turner, 1992: chapter 10), can be interpreted as equally as antipositivist as

the previously mentioned neo-Marxist practitioners of cultural political analysis.

Despite Weber’s dynamic account of capitalism and Thompson’s nuanced view of the working class, prevailing approaches to political culture were severely criticized for their static nature and for their stereotyping of entire peoples (e.g., Almond and Verba, 1963). Culture itself became infused with a fixity that clearly overgeneralized. Although Weber and Thompson had shown one way out of this bind, cultural studies did not really emerge as a force until it embraced a vibrant intellectual community relatively isolated from the kind of social science practiced in the Anglo-American world, namely the French poststructuralist community of Michel Foucault, Frederik Barth, Roland Barthes, and (in some ways) Raymond Boudon and Pierre Bourdieu, plus such postmodernists as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Foucault removed the critical aspect of determinism from his theories by talking about “what was possible” in various social contexts between groups and people with varying levels of power/knowledge. This changed the analyst’s viewpoint toward culture as something of an epiphenomenon of industrialization to one that perceived cultural processes to cause material outcomes or even to supplant the “social as material” with the “social as text.” This approach allowed the static theories of culture to become dynamic and the secondary nature of culture under capitalism to become primary. It also declared as essentialist both the predictions about revolution and the leadership role of the working class in Marxist theory and the social scientific laws and generalizations about the inevitability of progress or economic development.

For many advocates of the cultural turn, claims for culture’s broad relevance to the constitution and explanation of social reality come laden with epistemological and methodological implications. For them, social reality is evanescent – frequently changing and subject to unpredictable change – as well as geographically heterogeneous. If culture as a pervasive source and constituent of social institutions

⁵ The Weberian framework of social action utilizes four types of rationality – instrumental, practical, subjective, and theoretical – but it also recognizes traditional and emotional action as equal components (Janoski, 1998; Kalberg, 1980).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Political Sociology in the New Millennium

9

is thus impermanent and heterogeneous, then such cultural volatility undermines the degree of social stability needed for the sort of stable and homogenous domains required for valid “universal” theorizing (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2004; Steinmetz, 1998, 1999).

Culturally induced social-theoretical instability raises some disturbing questions. What if cogent causal regularities, and thus robust theoretical domains, are not only institutionally conditioned, as is typically assumed for middle-range theories? What if institutions themselves have an irreducibly cultural aspect, as in William Sewell’s (1992) Janus-faced view of institution and social structure?⁶ Then class groupings and actions would be contingent on workers’ own historically contingent conceptions of themselves and their labor.

What if the political movements of even class-conscious workers are dependent on workers’ conceptions of the movements in which they participate? Here one outcome is described by Nader Sohrabi (1995, 2002), for whom revolutionaries in the early twentieth century (e.g., the Russian of 1905, the Iranian “Constitutionalist” insurrectionaries of 1906, and the Young Turks of 1908) enacted a constitutionalist/parliamentary paradigm of political revolution while themselves members of the paradigm’s ecumenical, and by no means simply class, variety of revolutionary coalition. If workers did not enact socialist revolutions as members of *class*, or even cross-class, projects, then the universalizing aspirations of class theories to theorize politics for the entire industrial age contracts into a relatively small, culturally

restricted space, confined mainly to the Soviet era. Not only does much of the pre-Soviet era lack “worker” as its revolutionary actor or “socialist revolution” as its dominant revolutionary project, the Soviet era of class revolutions ends with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which vitiates the socialist revolutionary vision. In other words, theoretical domains can be hemmed in by history and its cultural infrastructure (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999), leaving them at risk of sudden and unpredictable terminations beyond which new theory is needed.⁷

If in natural science the history of concepts and theories tends to play catch-up with reality, in social science the histories of scientific sign and social referent rush forward on separate tracks running in rough tandem. In this latter case they do so as new social phenomena enter the world, requiring new concepts and opening the door to new theoretical domains (Somers, 1995). True, the challenge of such volatility may be manageable. Historical and institutional specificity may, at times, only call for carefully constructed middle-range theoretical domains (Paige, 1999), a move anticipated by Merton (1968:39–72). It may merely require the kind of attention to statistical interactions that now permeates institutionally sensitive macro studies of politics (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1993; Garrett, 1998; Goodwin, 2001; Pempel and Williamson, 1989; Steinmetz, 1993; Swank, 2002). Yet, as Janoski and Hicks (1994:10–12) indicate, there are times when an explanatory domain may be quite specific, even to a particular nation in a particular era. The degree to which a theoretical domain is temporally and spatially localized must be evaluated through the lens of history (Goodwin, 2001:293–306).

The cultural turn and the uses of culture in political sociology come in close association with other new directions in sociology, for

⁶ Moreover, the resulting variance in social regularities across time and place appears more perturbed by cultural volatility if one is a realist who sees social phenomena as “over determined” (e.g., Steinmetz, 1998). The same hypervariability reigns for an interpretivist, who will tend to see any given account of social (or regularity) as an artifact of the interpretive scheme in use and who will tend to see the scheme as bracketting the favored foci of other schema (e.g., Steinmetz, 2003). As advocates of the cultural turn have long been and increasingly are realist, interpretivist, or both (Adams, Orloff, and Clemens, 2004), skepticism toward theoretical universalism in the sense of causal regularities invariant across wide swaths of time and space is especially rife.

⁷ This is not simply a state of affairs unique to a few theoretical entities. For example, what appears to be a quite general “interest group” in one theory may turn out to be a local creation of Progressive Era politics (Clemens, 1997), and the truths about *Finanzkapital* (Hilferding, 1981[1910]; Lenin, 1933[1916]) may turn out to be local and transient German truths (Hicks, 1988; Zysman, 1984).

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example the feminist one (e.g., Adams, 1999; Orloff, 1993). Feminist thought may not only add new variables, unsettling old theories and investigations (e.g., Orloff, 1993), it may also introduce new cultural dimensions to the analysis of power with all their potential complications (Adams, 2003; Misra, 2003).

In short, many participants in the cultural turn – for example, postmodernists, feminists, and race/ethnic social constructionists – may be regarded as interpretivists, who view theoretical domains as local and evanescent because of the operation of culture (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999). This elaborates our earlier claim that participants in the cultural turn need, if their advance is to strike a healthy balance, to find an epistemological midpoint between positivist universalism and interpretivist historical and institutional specificity. The cultural turn directs political sociologists down a slippery slope from positivistic universalism, through increasing degrees of institutional and historical specification of theoretical domains, into a realm where theory serves not so much to capture social regularities as to regulate the interpretation of unique events. In our view, middle-range theory provides the missing midpoint. Of course, the objects of some quests for theoretical understanding may prove elusive, receding from the general to the particular. However, we think sociologists should strive to resist the pull of cultural theorizing into particularism. Our methodological injunction should be, with due institutional and historical alertness, to find the interaction that clarifies the order that lies beneath what at first appears to be confusingly heterogeneous processes, never to lightly abdicate the search for explanatory empirical patterns (Paige, 1999).

As one of three different approaches to the new cultural sociology, Robert Wuthnow's *Communities of Discourse* (1989) provides an explanation for major political changes. He examines environmental conditions, institutional contexts, and action sequences to demonstrate how ideologies of change are produced and how subsets of these are then selected for institutionalization into roles of world-historic importance. The “performativity” of such cultural

articulations establish the mechanisms by which entirely new cultural formations are created: the selection of new ideas by actors (Protestant ministers, *philosophes*, or labor organizers) who use specific behavioral scripts to create figural actors (i.e., narrative heroes or heroines of the pilgrim, freethinker, or worker) of new ideologies and the different institutional carriers of these ideas (1989:5–18). Wuthnow goes on to explain these three ideologies appearing on the Western stage: the Reformation (joining the pious in church, as guided from the pulpit, in direct communion with God), the Enlightenment (rational, secular intellectuals based in royal courts and later in bourgeois salons), and Socialism (as a party and labor union project mobilizing employees for revolution and the future leadership of society). Wuthnow's focus is on ideologies as ideas that promote momentous change, much as we see in Weber's (1930) consideration of the Protestant ethic in promotion of capitalism, Philip Gorski's (1999, 2003) examination of religious pietism in the formation of the bureaucratic disciplinary state in Prussia, and Steinmetz's (2003) account of “pre-colonial ethnographic discourse” in the construction of Wilhemine colonial governance.

For a second approach, fusing postmodern and Marxist theory, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) present a skeptical two-stage theory that avoids essentialism by proposing a pluralist governing scenario and a leftist strategy within it. Their politics embody a radical plural democracy that accepts liberal democracy to the extent that the left extends and deepens the principles inherent in it (Mouffe, 1992). Liberal democracy is seen as a contradiction between libertarian norms of unrestricted rights and communitarian norms of cooperation (Mouffe, 1993; Torfing, 1999:249–52). From this tension emerges an “agonistic democracy” that gives political space for varied and even contradictory political strategies that allow for a wide diversity of viewpoints without striving for an ultimate utopia (Mouffe, 1993:4, 1996; Torfing, 1999:255).

A third approach is supplied by feminist analysts of politics who have challenged much that