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978-1-107-07675-4 - Order on the Edge of Chaos: Social Psychology and the Problem of Social Order

Edited by Edward J. Lawler, Shane R. Thye and Jeongkoo Yoon

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Order on the Edge of Chaos

Order and stability are tenuous and fragile. People have to work to create and sustain a semblance of stability and order in their lives and in their organizations and larger communities. *Order on the Edge of Chaos* compares different ideas about how we coordinate and cooperate. The ideas come from “micro-sociology” and offer new answers to the classic question of Thomas Hobbes: “How is social order possible?”

Edward J. Lawler is the Martin P. Catherwood Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations and Professor of Sociology at Cornell University. In 2001, he received the Cooley-Mead Award for career achievement from the Social Psychology Section of the American Sociological Association, and in 2003 his paper “An Affect Theory of Social Exchange” won the 2002 Theory Prize from the Theory Section. His recent book (coauthored with Shane Thye and Jeongkoo Yoon), *Social Commitments in a Depersonalized World* (2009), won the 2010 James Coleman Best Book Award from the Rationality and Society Section of the American Sociological Association.

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Social Psychology and the Problem of Social Order

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Preface

The classic question posed by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, “How is social order possible?,” is an enduring issue for the social sciences. Throughout the history of the social sciences, however, the prominence and salience of the issue waxes and wanes. A plausible hypothesis is that in times of great transformational change (e.g., the Industrial Revolution), the problem of social order tends to become front-and-center, whereas in times of great stability, it recedes into the background as social change takes precedence and becomes the dominant concern. This is a broad-sweeping and arguable hypothesis, but there are many reasons for viewing the early period of the twenty-first century as the dawn of another period of great transformational change, manifest, for example, in employment contracts, the technologies for communication, and global political and economic processes that blur nation-state boundaries. In this context, we address the larger problem of social order in a unique way, namely, by examining the micro-level foundations of social order.

By “micro-level” we mean social interactions and group processes within which people construct meanings, pursue individual goals, engage in group tasks, and generate collective goods available to them and perhaps a larger population. The social interactions are framed and shaped by macro structures and cultures, but it is in social interactions that larger structures and cultures are instantiated and essentially “come to life.” The central premise of this volume is that macro-level social orders, in the form of organizations, institutions, nations, and societies, are necessarily grounded in the interactions of people within those larger orders. Macro orders exist and endure only if individuals in interaction with others enact, produce, or reproduce them. Thus, it is important to delve more deeply into how micro processes generate, sustain, or reproduce patterns of behavioral regularity that constitute social order.

This volume brings together in one place the major theories in sociology that concern micro-level social interactions. The intellectual traditions represented

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here are sometimes termed “micro-sociology” and sometimes termed “sociological social psychology.” Whatever the value of these particular labels, the important point is that micro-sociologists have for many years developed theories of social interaction with implicit or explicit implications for social order. For this volume, we invited leading scholars from diverse theoretical traditions within sociological social psychology to develop the implications of their theories for the problem of social order, using Hobbesian framing as a foil. It is worth noting that eight of the authors in this volume have received the prestigious Cooley-Mead Award for career contributions from the Section on Social Psychology of the American Sociological Association.

We aim to produce an edited volume with greater coherence and unity than is typical of such volumes. The Hobbesian framing was one device for achieving this goal. We are especially indebted to the authors for taking this framing as a guide as they undertook to develop, recast, or reconceive their theories in these terms. They also worked to develop chapters that speak to the broader social science audience of graduate students and scholars. We greatly appreciate their efforts here and in other respects, such as in meeting deadlines and conforming to style guidelines. This was a great group of authors to work with. We also express our deep appreciation to Peter Marsden for providing us with a capstone chapter for the volume.

Finally, we would like to thank Kathy Roberts for administrative assistance as we prepared the volume for submission, Robert Dreesen, Senior Editor at Cambridge University Press, for his guidance and support, and Brianda Reyes also of Cambridge University Press for her assistance with the production process. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has supported our related theory and research over many years; that NSF support enabled us to think about broader implications of our research on social exchange for social order at the micro and macro levels.