

Rethinking Sociological Theory

*Introducing and Explaining
a Scientific Theoretical Sociology*

Stephen K. Sanderson



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Preface

This book stems from my profound dissatisfaction with the state of sociological theory over the past three decades. "Theory" has become a major area of specialization within sociology in a way that it never was before, and the majority of sociologists who call themselves "theorists" have little connection with the rest of sociology. Most "theorists" have little interest in testing the theories they formulate, or even encouraging others to test them. Indeed, in many cases the very idea of theory testing is seen as being based on the wrongheaded epistemology of Western science. Too much of what passes for theory is concerned with exegeses of the "masters" and with the largely nonscientific work of chic European thinkers like Bourdieu or Habermas. And too often its aims are ideological rather than explanatory.

In this book I seek to recapture a scientific theoretical sociology, one that takes as its fundamental aim the formulation of real theories that can be empirically tested. To this end I pass in review the major theoretical traditions within contemporary sociology, explicating their key principles, critically evaluating these principles, and showcasing exemplars. With respect to each tradition I inquire into its degree of "scientificity," which I judge by asking whether it has generated falsifiable research programs in the sense of the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos. If a tradition has generated research programs, how successful have they been? To use Lakatosian terminology, have they been progressive or degenerating programs? My contention is that the best theoretical traditions are those that have produced both the most research programs and the most progressive research programs.

If this book is seen entirely as a work of theoretical critique, then some may feel that my expositions are too long and cover too much familiar territory. This reaction is understandable, and yet it is clear that misrepresentation and distortion of theoretical traditions in sociology abound. For example, I have listened for several decades to rational choice theory being badmouthed and trashed on the basis of utterly incorrect understandings of this approach. But the same can be said to one extent or another of all of the major theoretical traditions. This is why I spend a considerable amount of time on exposition. If one is going to attack something, then one is obligated to be attacking a target that is accurate.

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The time spent on exposition also makes the book suitable as a textbook in theory courses. Those who agree with my judgments of particular approaches would be the ones most naturally inclined to use it as a text, but even those who disagree may find it suitable for the classroom. Instructors can always pick at it and argue with it. Too many textbooks try to convey an air of neutrality or impartiality. This has its place, but I think that critically informed textbooks have a special value in helping to sharpen readers' thoughts as they are reading along.

This book is the result of nearly forty years of thinking about and teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses in sociological theory. Many people have contributed to the sharpening of my ideas, but the most important ones have been the students in these classes. As everyone who has ever taught at the university level knows, being forced to explain complex ideas in simple terms is one of the best ways to deepen one's understanding of these ideas.