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## PREFACE

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Most introductory courses in sociological theory aspire to provide students with an overview of the intellectual history of the discipline. This approach has a number of implications. It ensures that the main organizing principle of a course consists of *theorists* rather than *theories*. Dutiful students learn what a Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian approach to sociology entails. Because the ideas of all theorists who are worth their salt (such as those featured in these pages) develop over the course of their careers, this labeling invariably bowdlerizes: early Marx differs in important respects from late Marx, early Durkheim from late, early Weber from late, and so forth. Attempts to force a false consistency to each theorist ring hollow and mislead.

More importantly, because the focus is on theorists rather than questions, students never have the opportunity to compare the kinds of explanations that theorists provide. Newcomers to social theory are ill-equipped to draw out common analytical threads. And there is no common substantive focus that would facilitate this kind of intellectual effort.

Further, the standard historical approach leads naturally to a division of classical from contemporary sociological theory. Naturally, there is ample justification for such a division. It is difficult to understand any given theorist's contribution unless it is placed in its historical context. How can one fully appreciate the contributions of Marx or Durkheim without first knowing those of Rousseau? But just as the focus on theorists rather than on questions hinders the development of students' analytical understanding, historical divisions also serve to obscure the connections that may hold between theorists. For example, it is difficult to fully understand control theory (Hirschi 1969), a theory much discussed by contemporary criminologists, without considering what Émile Durkheim, a preeminently classical theorist, had to say about the causes of suicide. Adherence to a strict distinction between classical and contemporary theory makes it difficult for students to appreciate how, and to what extent, theoretical knowledge has cumulated in sociology.

Not only is there little coherence in the substantive questions being addressed, but strong disputes about the concept of theory itself abound as well. Theory is variously seen as constituting explanation, the description of empirical regularities, or interpretation.

Typically it is taught in isolation from classes in methods and particular substantive areas. Perhaps as a result, students often finish such courses wondering what implications theory has either for their own lives or for sociological research in general.

Unfortunately, the analytical weaknesses of the standard introductory theory course do not exist in isolation. These tendencies contribute to the benighted place that theory now occupies in the discipline today.<sup>1</sup> Although every sociology department in the world compels its students—both undergraduate and graduate—to undergo at least some instruction in sociological theory, this activity is more often viewed as a rite of passage than as an opportunity to acquire a set of tools that can help guide empirical research. Indeed, the importance of the theory for the development of empirical research is all but obscured in the standard course format.

*Theories of Social Order* offers something different. By linking theories with empirical applications, it aims to reveal the implications that different theories have for contemporary research. And by focusing on theories of one important question rather than on the theorists of most everything, it facilitates the exploration of common analytical themes. The question addressed is the problem of social order.

Once widely regarded as the single most important problem in all of social theory,<sup>2</sup> in recent years social order has receded from view. This inattention has at least two independent sources. The first source is political. During the turbulent days of the late 1960s, a concern with social order was often perceived as a barely disguised conservative apology for an ethically dubious status quo. Students' interest shifted to matters of social transformation. Now many of those same students constitute the senior faculty in sociology departments around the globe. The second source is intellectual. Sociologists of the postwar generation who were devoted to grand theory wrote much about how values and culture resolved the problem of social order. Because these concepts are inherently ambiguous, however, too little of this work had any recognizable empirical implications.

But these are not good reasons to abandon a concern with social order. Although for some (Adorno 1976), grand theory's lack of empirical implications was taken as a badge of honor rather than a lacuna remaining to be filled, this was far from the mainstream view. As the emphasis on sound empirical research increased in sociology and the allied social sciences, many scholars and teachers found, and continue to find, precious little to admire in these highly abstract treatises. Further, dismissing social order as a concern of conservatives alone obscures the point that order is simply the flip side of conflict and change. A full explanation of social order requires an understanding of its transformation as well as its production.

No comparable intellectual rationale for sociological theory has ever superseded the problem of social order. Without social order, there can be no agriculture, no industry, no

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1. Indeed, one influential sociologist has characterized theory's marginal position in the discipline as nothing less than a scandal (Goldthorpe 2000; see also van den Berg 1998). For a less damning view of the state of theory in contemporary sociology, see Grusky and Di Carlo 2001.

2. Thus, the most intellectually influential reader on sociological theory in the 1960s, *Theories of Society* (Parsons et al. 1961), was largely organized around the problem of social order.

trade, no economic investment, no technological development, no justice, no art, no science, and no human advancement. Although it is frequently unacknowledged, the problem of social order underlies questions of central concern to sociologists in substantive areas as diverse as crime and deviance, social movements, organizations, politics, religion, international relations, and the family.

Linking classical texts on social order, contemporary theoretical extensions, and recent empirical research, the present volume contends that the principal justification for theory in the social sciences lies in its fruitfulness for understanding real-world phenomena. The early sociological theorists dwelled on the problem of social order. Since the 1980s, new theoretical and empirical literatures have arisen that also address the issue. Articles and excerpts have been selected for this volume on the basis of their relevance to classical theoretical issues. We have aimed to include only well-written, nontechnical pieces that are accessible to a broad undergraduate readership. Moreover, in the introductions to each section, we endeavor to draw explicit links between the classical and modern texts.

Although we believe that the approach taken in this volume is analytically superior to that found in traditional volumes on sociological theory, it comes with its own limits. Obviously, *Theories of Social Order* is substantively narrow. It provides no biographical information about the discipline's founding fathers. Moreover, it conveys nothing of the history of theory in sociology. We make no effort to present the theories in chronological order; for instance, Hobbes, the seventeenth-century writer who first articulated the problem of social order in its modern form, does not make his appearance until after the introduction of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sociological theorists—many of whom explicitly reacted to Hobbes. Rather than present the history of theory, which necessarily is a tale of attack and counterattack, we have simplified the narrative by presenting the core solutions that have been advanced to resolve the problem of social order.

In this second edition, we have reorganized the topics, creating separate sections for groups and networks, and replaced some of the earlier readings with newer material. We have tried throughout to link the broad themes in each section to public policy.

This reader gives students the opportunity to explore and compare the various factors and mechanisms that have been held responsible for social order. We think this strategy facilitates a deeper theoretical understanding. Moreover, by wedding these alternate explanations to empirical applications, *Theories of Social Order* helps students grasp the essential lesson that sociological theory must have empirical implications. This lesson makes it easier for students to appreciate the relevance of theory for their own lives, for the research enterprise, and for the development of better social policies.

There is a companion website to this edition: [www.socialorder.com](http://www.socialorder.com).

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