

Teaching Sociology

<http://tso.sagepub.com/>

Book Review: *Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology*

Thomas DeGloma
Teaching Sociology 2010 38: 383
DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10380694

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://tso.sagepub.com/content/38/4/383>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



American Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Teaching Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tso.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tso.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 15, 2010

[What is This?](#)

Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner
Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology.
 Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press,
 2009. 256 pp. \$34.95. ISBN 0-802096-824.

Teaching Sociology
 38(4) 383–396
 © American Sociological Association 2010
<http://ts.sagepub.com>



Reviewed by: Thomas DeGloma, *Hunter College,*
City University of New York, New York, NY, USA
 DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10380694

Thomas S. Kuhn is certainly a foundational figure in the sociology of knowledge, but Kuhn has also influenced the more recent and more broadly envisioned sociocultural approach to the study of cognition (see Brekhus 2007; Cerulo 2002; Zerubavel 1997). In their engaging and detailed book *Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology*, Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner center their treatment of contemporary sociological theory on Kuhn's ([1962] 1996:111-35) notion of the paradigm shift. Kuhn, a physicist by training, famously argued that the most significant advances in science are not the product of a gradual accumulation of experimental data (as they are commonly thought to be) but instead are due to major transformations of worldview—revolutions in the way members of the scientific community determine their objects of attention or perceive the subject matter at hand. Such paradigm shifts occur when previously established paradigms fall into crisis and no longer provide a sufficient framework for analysis or produce convincing explanations (Kuhn [1962] 1996:77-91). Hancock and Garner harness this fundamental Kuhnian notion to argue that contemporary advances in sociological theory are properly understood as radical shifts of focus (Kuhn used the metaphor of a gestalt switch). Given various social, intellectual, and economic currents, new sociological problems and new details of social life rise to the fore of our theoretical attention, while others, previously at the forefront, may recede into relative obscurity. Herein lie the strengths of the book as well as its weaknesses.

Changing Theories gives us a provocative history of the recent development of sociological ideas. However, in line with Kuhn's views on science, the authors treat contemporary theory as if it has supplanted, or is in the process of supplanting, other previously valuable theoretical frameworks. Although they consistently note the influences

and, in a few cases, the limited persistence of classical and early twentieth century theories (see especially their concluding chapter, pp. 209-20), Hancock and Garner's more dominant underlying argument is that theories are reinterpreted because of the need to account for new and changing circumstances—a framework that implies that old theories are, in most cases, no longer good enough to make sense out of such circumstances. Even when they account for subfields of sociology in which previous models are still thriving (pp. 209-11), “new critical perspectives” are said to “compete with existing ones” (p. 211), and “paradigm persistence” (p. 214) is explained as an exceptional characteristic of those few areas of study (the authors suggest the family) that have not seen fundamental social transformations. Furthermore, because they treat ‘real world’ (authors' words, authors' single quotation marks) social conditions as a determining factor for theoretical innovation, a somewhat troublesome materialist and teleological notion of theoretical progress underlies the authors' detailed discussion of theoretical change. Such an approach runs the risk of downplaying both the flexible utility of theory and the enduring value of classical models.

That said, *Changing Theories* does what it claims to do. In the tradition of Lewis A. Coser's (1971) *Masters of Sociological Thought*, Hancock and Garner provide us with a stimulating discussion of the social and intellectual conditions that accompanied the development of sociological theories in the latter half of the twentieth century. For Hancock and Garner, theory never exists disconnected from large-scale social forces and widespread conditions in the world. This underlying premise will help students understand why sociological theories have developed to account for some very important (and sometimes morally and politically controversial) societal trends. The authors admit their rather apparent Marxist

leaning (p. 94), and their materialist orientation (articulated as the determining primacy of “circumstances—the material conditions and historical moment of our lives”; p. 219) might be an asset if their approach is critically noted in the classroom. However, it may also work to inhibit students’ ability to detach theory from these developmental circumstances and use it in new and creative ways. Teaching theory with a heavy anchor of historical materialism runs the risk of keeping students from using theories to think beyond the confines of the “material conditions” in which they evolved. It may obscure the transcontextual and transhistorical potential of good theory. Thus, although *Changing Theories* is a useful tool (as the title clearly suggests) for teaching students about how and why theory has changed over the second half of the twentieth century, it is less useful for teaching students how to *do* theory.

Yet there is strong pedagogical potential in using the book with a more flexible approach to theoretical paradigms. Beyond the diachronic dimensions of paradigm shift, we should also teach students to treat theories as a synchronic multiplicity of paradigms that they can flexibly and selectively use as they struggle to make sense of the world and develop their own theoretical visions in the process. From this perspective, theoretical communities are akin to what Ludwik Fleck ([1935] 1979:38-51) called “thought collectives.” The field of sociology can be defined by its multiplicity of “thought styles” (Fleck [1935] 1979:38-51), and we can teach our students to recognize the relative value inherent in each of these styles (classical *and* contemporary) today. Such a comparative flexibility is quite evident in Zerubavel’s (1997) approach to cognitive sociology and, more particularly, his notion of “optical communities” (pp. 33-34) as sociocultural communities distinguished by their particular ways of “seeing” and interpreting the world. By viewing contemporary theories as poignant and influential articulations of various “optical styles” (Zerubavel 1997:33-34), and the theorists themselves as representative members of various optical communities, we can teach students (undergraduate and graduate alike) how to “put on” and “take off” different and seemingly contradictory theoretical lenses without saddling them with a teleological materialism that might restrict their own developing cognitive options. Cognitive sociology, in the Zerubavelian sense, suggests a framework with which to see theories

as flexible tools that can be applied to various contexts, cases, and substantive topics—both historical and current. Using this perspective, we can articulate the strengths and weaknesses of multiple theoretical visions while avoiding the dismissive pitfalls and biases of a more polemical approach, intentionally fostering a theoretically engaged mental flexibility (see also Zerubavel 1991:115-22). Such an approach allows us to lay theories out like various sets of lenses and invite students to think theoretically from multiple perspectives as they expand the contents of their theoretical tool kits.

The greatest strength of *Changing Theories* is that it highlights several growing and theoretically exciting areas of focus, including (but not limited to) the body, identity and difference, new media technologies, power, classification, taste, and discourse. The discussion of new and innovative theoretical approaches to these areas centers on the four chapters that make up part 2 of the book, one each dedicated to theorists who the authors refer to as “transitional giants”—Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Stuart Hall. Hancock and Garner stress the underlying similarities among these innovators, arguing that they exemplify a broad trend named “conflict constructionism” (pp. 90-92). However, noticeably absent are meaningful discussions of various themes important to the contemporary sociological landscape, including cognition, collective memory and commemoration, cultural trauma, time, emotion, mental health and illness, social movements (which is treated only superficially), small-group dynamics, networks, and formal sociology. In addition, some important voices are left behind or mentioned only peripherally—C. Wright Mills, Jürgen Habermas, Harold Garfinkel, Anthony Giddens, Patricia Hill Collins, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ann Swidler, and Eviatar Zerubavel, to name a few. The book is divided into two sections—part 1 (“Changes”) provides a discussion of evolving social conditions. Part 2 (“Transitional Giants”) deals with the theoretical visions of Goffman, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Hall. This structure leaves *Changing Theories* with a pedagogical chicken-and-egg issue. It is difficult to determine whether students will get more out of reading part 1 or part 2 first. This is perhaps because the two sections feel a bit disjointed. Furthermore, both parts of the book assume a rather high level of theoretical ability, making it an appropriate addition to a graduate theory

course but suggesting potential obstacles for some undergraduate students. The best use of the book might involve assigning pages from each of the two major sections simultaneously to complement a thematically organized syllabus (notably, *Changing Theories* is theorist driven in its discussion of contemporary theory and theme driven in its discussion of social conditions). As such, it presents the theory professor with a bit of a challenge but also holds promise to raise the level of class discussion if wielded appropriately and combined with other sources.

Hancock and Garner's more subtle ambition seems to be to approach and convey theory from a humanistic perspective—a laudable mission. The tone of *Changing Theories* makes for a warm and engaging read. The authors have given us a good history and summation of some of the most important contemporary theories in the discipline. Despite its weaknesses, *Changing Theories* would make a strong contribution to the critically engaged contemporary theory course as well as graduate courses on the history of sociology and the sociology of knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Brekhus, Wayne H. 2007. "The Rutgers School: A Zerubavelian Culturalist Cognitive Sociology." *European Journal of Social Theory* 10(3):453-70.
- Cerulo, Karen A., ed. 2002. *Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition*. New York: Routledge.
- Coser, Lewis A. 1971. *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Fleck, Ludwik. [1935] 1979. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. [1962] 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1991. *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1997. *Social Mindscales: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Anna Leon-Guerrero and Kristine Zentgraf,
Editors
Contemporary Readings in Social Problems. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. 2009. 368 pp. \$33.95.

Reviewed by: Melinda Messineo, *Ball State University, USA*
DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10380689

Often, instructors of Social Problems courses lament that it is difficult to distinguish the content of their course from that of Introductory Sociology courses especially if their pedagogy is praxis oriented. The similarity between course objectives and expected learning outcomes can further complicate differentiation. A review of the resources available to faculty for both courses reveals high similarity and the tendency for publishers to match topic for topic across competing books, which increases text homogeneity over time. In response to this challenge, instructors can differentiate their courses through clearer articulation of unique learning objectives and through the adoption of more specialized reading materials.

A reader worthy of consideration to do just this is the *Contemporary Readings in Social Problems* collection edited by Anna Leon-Guerrero and Kristine Zentgraf. The 32 readings represent a wide variety of "new classic" (C. Wright Mills, Martin Luther King Jr., and William Ryan) and contemporary (Saskia Sassen, David Croteau, and William Hoynes) authors. The topics are timely and compelling, ranging from media consolidation, modern slavery, the health care industry, global warming, Katrina, learning race in the aftermath of September 11, and the Iraq conflict, to name a few. The readings themselves are of varying lengths and difficulty levels but are overall accessible to the undergraduate reader. As a guiding theme, the editors suggest that the reader is designed not only to help undergraduates gain a better understanding of social problems but also to encourage them to action. The articles were selected for their ability to illustrate the degree to which social problems are rooted in the macrostructures of society and are maintained and reproduced through social institutions and the daily actions of individuals.

The collection also presents readings that highlight the importance of racial-ethnic, class, and gender inequality in the study of social problems. In the Introduction, the editors note that students often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of inequality revealed through the study of social problems, and they offer three suggestions to help ameliorate this response. First, they encourage students to note that the actors in these articles