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Nordic social theory Between social philosophy and grounded theory

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Let us understand social theory as a notion of theory which spreads among social scientists under growing influence from the humanities.¹ We find such a pattern of influence in Nordic social science in the 1980s and 1990s. We distinguish this period from two earlier ones. Through the postwar period before the 1960s, the term 'social theory' was not used at all. Theory was linked to disciplines and mainly legitimated with reference to an ideal derived from the natural sciences. In the next period – roughly from the early 1960s to the late 1970s – Nordic words for the German term 'Theorie der Gesellschaft' were now and then employed. But only very recently, a direct translation of 'social theory' into the Nordic languages has occasionally been used, as an emulation of an increasingly popular Anglo-American terminology.

Thus, in the two earliest periods it is impossible to delimit a separate group of Nordic contributions to social theory. We shall instead focus on the emergence, growth and consolidation of the social science disciplines (sociology in particular, but also anthropology and political science) within which a style of argument that might today be counted as 'social theory' emerged. Our periodization provides a context for this analysis. It refers both to internal social change in the Nordic area, and to changing impulses from the broader western social science community. But its focal point is the relationship between social science and the humanities – how close it is and in which direction the influence goes.

The early postwar phase – positivism, the humanities and upstart social science

In the early postwar period, the dominance of the natural science ideal was close to total. Physics was seen as the paradigm science, varieties of the deductive–nomological model provided master examples of scientific explanations, and the measurement of correlation between variables was seen as the self-evident empirical foundation of social science. We shall refer to this as the *standard attitude* (approach, view, etc.) in social science and even in certain parts of the humanities (Mjøset 2003, forthcoming).

Aiming to gain credibility for their disciplines, the upstart social sciences adopted this approach, inspired mainly by US social science. But the universal validity of the natural

science ideal was challenged already in the mid-1950s. The 'critique of positivism' was a response to the spread of this unity of science ideal in the humanities, particularly via the philosophy departments.

That critique is by now familiar, and clearly relevant to the conduct of social science: research into society is different from research into nature. For the sciences involved in the 'study of man', the object consists of interactions between fellow subjects, and these have the capacity to challenge whatever knowledge science would produce about them. The philosophical emphasis was on meaning/understanding as opposed to causality/explanation, an incarnation of the Neo-Kantian *Natur-/Geisteswissenschaften* dualism, pitting phenomenological understanding against explanation by law.

In Norway, this criticism was first launched by philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957) and by philosophically oriented sociologist Dag Østerberg (1961). They had some influence in Norden more broadly, but inspiration also came from international sources, such as the early work of Habermas and Apel in Germany, Sartre in France, Winch's work in the Wittgensteinian direction and the Anglo-American debates on historical explanations. In Finland, Georg Henrik von Wright had a similar influence, but his was more of an internal criticism of philosophies projecting the natural science ideal on historical explanations (von Wright 1971).

In the 1960s, such inspirations seeped into humanities faculties across Norden. The debates were less heated in Sweden and Denmark: Sweden already had a quite broad social science tradition within economics, and sociology developed from within philosophy (Segerstedt in Uppsala). In Denmark, German immigrant T. Geiger sustained interest in German, non-standard sociological traditions, but he died in 1952 before sociology had become an autonomous academic discipline.

Only a small number of researchers were active as empirical researchers in the upstart social sciences in the 1950s and early 1960s. Whether these knew about the philosophical criticism or not, they did not relate to it in their own research. Typical of this period, then, is the gap between humanities and the social sciences. Presenting critical theory, Skjervheim (1976 [1962]: 219–20) explicitly made sociology into a 'philosophical discipline', and he later (1973: 190f) stated that it was 'outside the scope' of his analysis to discuss various types of empirical research. The natural science oriented notion of theory was countered by a humanities oriented notion of theory as the transcendental conditions of the sciences of man. The critique of positivism pitted one high-level notion of theory (transcendental conditions) against another one (explanation by laws). The unfortunate consequence was that quite a share of the empirical researchers simply regarded their work as 'positivist' or at least 'atheoretical' only because it was empirical.

In fact, the researchers who really tried to live up to strong versions of the standard ideal, produced the least successful empirical research. Who today considers the work of K. Svalastoga – notably *The Social System* (1974 [1969]) and *On Deadly Violence* (1982) – to be important parts of the knowledge accumulated by Nordic social scientists? Svalastoga was the first sociology professor in Copenhagen, trying to practise the gospel of the arch-positivist US Lundberg school.

Paradoxically, then, work that is still remembered and looked back upon as lasting contributions to Nordic sociology, fit neither the humanities – nor the natural science-inspired high level notions of theory. We shall mention three examples of such seemingly non-theoretical, but highly influential contributions.

In 1965, Vilhelm Aubert published *The Hidden Society*, a collection that can be seen as the first empirically oriented 'social theory' in Norwegian sociology. Describing common fea-

tures of his essays, Aubert (1965: 3) conveys a self-denying disinterest: 'they lack reference to an explicit methodology, a clearly defined set of relevant data, and a precise theoretical framework. I have, in principle, no preference for this kind of "unscientific" approach and feel no need to defend the mode of sociological thought which the essays exhibit'. Still, he regards it as a 'mode of sociological thought'!

Like Aubert, the Danish sociologist Verner Goldschmidt was educated in law. His research in the 1950s related to the formulation and implementation of a criminal code in Denmark's former colony, Greenland (Bentzen and Agersnap 2000). Such research explicitly participated in the development of society, but its notion of theory was unclear. That social science should be useful was also Svalastoga's ambition, but given his absurdly crude social-engineering approach, nothing in his research – e.g. on deadly violence – was of any value to planners or decision makers!

Third, Norwegian political sociologist Stein Rokkan (1970) made a pioneering effort to move out of the 'national empiricism' of variables-oriented survey research, towards a comparative approach that relied as much on 'intensive nation-specific' case studies as on national data archives. Contact with Rokkan's networks played a crucial role for Erik Allardt, who was the most important figure in Finland's early postwar sociology. Rokkan pioneered a tradition of research that started from analysis of local cases, using these (and/or other Nordic cases) as analogies that inspire the comparative mapping of cases within a broader region. This strengthened their ability to get to the crucial aspects of their own country's development.

Mobilization and revolt – the social sciences gains an independent and offensive role

The second phase, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, is marked by early welfare state expansion and reforms of higher education that (unexpectedly) led to major inflows of students into the upstart social sciences. Academic reorganization created separate social science faculties. Experiencing turbulent times, the new social sciences became the core location of the student revolt, which launched notions of critical (participatory) social science. Despite internal tensions, social scientists here played an offensive role, influencing the humanities, rather than the other way around. Ahead of the student revolt, an educated, leftwards-leaning public sphere emerged, including a number of publishers. This was an important precondition of the student revolt, but that revolt soon turned dogmatic, creating generational tensions within Nordic social science. The student revolters radicalized the philosophical critique against the standard view, but given their concern with oppressed groups, they turned it in an empirical direction.

This empirical turn, paradoxically, also led the student movement intellectuals towards convergence with the humanities, and thus away from empirical studies! The student revolt expressed revolutionary romanticism: it identified the working class as an essentially revolutionary critical subject. Reformist social democracy was the main target of their attack. They projected an image of the mid-nineteenth century working class on to Norden's postwar social compromise mass consumption society, a society regarded as legitimate by most workers. The main proof that capitalism was breaking down was thus *not* drawn from empirical studies, but from classical texts. The student revolters read the mid-nineteenth century works of Marx – together with Hegel and Lukacs, adding various other secularized philosophies of history – with a degree of philological precision only possible after years of

higher education. There is the impressive case of two Danish translations of Marx's *Grund* the far-left publisher finding the mainstream publishers' translation unreliable!

When the student movement faded in the mid-1970s, this paradox of revolutionary romanticism gave way to a polarization between two different ways of practising science: we shall call them the reformist/empirical and social-philosophical/reconstructive approaches.

The latter line extended the student movement's philological concern with one classic (Marx) to a larger selection of sociological and philosophical classics. Institutionally, the social scientists worked in universities. Their style of research was very similar to that of the humanities: reading and commenting classical texts. They continued the criticism of the standard approach by developing the humanities-inspired notion of high-level theory already promoted by the philosophers of the earlier phase. This yielded a social-philosophical notion of theory ('Theorie der Gesellschaft').

In Norway, Dag Østerberg (1971, 1974) turned from a purely philosophical critique of positivism to essayistic treatment of topics such as power, material structure and social class in the early 1970s. Simultaneously, he published on both Marx and Durkheim. His classic reader in 'sociological theory' (Østerberg 1978) contained excerpts from both European and American classic texts. It may well have been the first Nordic reader in 'social theory', widely used as a textbook.

There were a number of parallel works in the other Nordic countries. In Sweden, Göran Therborn (1976) surveyed the relationship between sociology and Marxist historical materialism. Jukka Gronow in Finland and Torben Hviid Nielsen (1977) in Denmark focused on the relationship between Marxism and reformist politics, which also implied close attention to the 'bourgeois Marx', Max Weber. In Finland, a main trend – exemplified by the work of Arto Noro – was to investigate whether Marxist analysis could be fused with formal analysis of daily life interaction, particularly as analysed by Simmel.

In Denmark, French structuralism was absorbed within the humanities since the late 1960s (Ditlevsen *et al.* 1972). Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev had already made important contributions to that tradition. Physicist, peace researcher and philosopher of science Arne Boserup worked on 'structural dialectics', fusing inspiration from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition with the Bachelard-Canguilhem-tradition in French history of science, including influences such as Althusser and Foucault. Ethnographer Thomas Højrup made it his task to continue what Boserup started. The structuralist influence was also marked in Sweden, where, in the early 1980s, a group of educational sociologists began to publish and comment on Bourdieu's work (Broady 1991).

The other group, the reformist researchers were concerned with problem areas of the welfare state, relying on links between academia, the expanding sector of research institutions and the state apparatus, often mediated through research programmes of the national research councils. Many of them sensed the irrelevance of the philosophical criticism as well as the romanticism of the student revolt and returned to the standard attitude. Some relied on mainstream techniques of statistical generalization, working with large datasets of relevant data for the management of an increasingly generous welfare state.

Others realized the weaknesses of pure behaviourism, and turned to rational choice theory which allowed them to combine far-reaching formalization with a focus on action. Norwegian philosopher Jon Elster emerged from Oslo's left-leaning intelligentsia (Mjøset 2000) to become an internationally acknowledged pioneer in this line of study. Given the links to classical economics this understanding of theory became a branch of the standard approach. Another influential Norwegian social scientist, anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1966),

already earlier promoted modelling inspired by game theory and evolutionary genetics, but emphasized that the models' logical operations should represent empirical processes. Thanks to this requirement he could retain grounding in the situated interaction that the anthropologist experiences during fieldwork (Barth 1981).

The upgraded versions of the standard approach were criticized by the reconstructionist social philosophers: one notion of high-level theory pitted against another. But before we evaluate this controversy, we shall ask again as we did for the first period: were there trends in empirical research that were not captured by the two high-level notions of theory?

Smaller groups of scholars resisted the 'methodological nationalism' of reformist empirical research. The content of their studies – topics such as the welfare state, consensual labour relations, egalitarian social relations – often paralleled the reformists, but the comparative focus on peculiarities of Nordic political and economic structures led them to specify context rather than to search for high-level generalities. Already in the late 1970s, one could see the contours of a comparative political economy research frontier combining typological thinking and historical periodization.

The ambition to map diversity by means of comparisons paralleled Rokkan's efforts (Rokkan (1999) contains his work from the 1970s) to establish taxonomic maps that would provide context enough to allow the explanation of the various trajectories of state formation and nation building in Western Europe. Many of Rokkan's followers (Kuhnle, Østerud, Aarebrot, and others, cf. Mjøset 1998) made important contributions to the comparison of Nordic state formation and welfare state policies. Therborn (1977) combined political economy and the comparative study of Western European political systems in the Rokkan tradition. The political economists could also hook on to the work of Walter Korpi (1983), who followed up his large 1978 monograph on Sweden with ambitious variables-oriented, but comparative, work on strikes, industrial relations and class politics in Western Europe.

Another set of empirical studies escaping current notions of theory was conducted by researchers who – unlike the student revolters – related to real existing critical subjects. The feminist movement is a major case in point. Reflecting the rising female educational attainment and labour force participation, a main focus was the double labour of women, their non-paid work and the specific rationality of the caring work at the domestic level and in the welfare state (Wærness 1982). Only the *standpoint* – standpoint theory is another term for critical theory – of women could make visible patterns of male domination (Holter 1996).

Feminist social science experienced a split similar to that between reformists and political economists. It developed its own reformist branch which produced nationally oriented research that supported 'state feminists' who through political parties influenced legislation e.g. on self-determined abortion and maternity leave provisions. But in academia, groups of scholars opposed the reformist turn by going for case-based, often participatory, action-based research linked to feminist grassroots mobilization. This research seldom discussed the macro level. The political economy situation was seen as a background (Holter (ed.) 1975) to the focus on female experiences.

This case-/action-oriented trend extended more broadly than the feminist movement. In line with Aubert's focus on the 'hidden society', several studies focused on the many 'underdog' groups both in modern national welfare capitalism and at the international level. In Norway, Thomas Mathiesen's and Nils Christie's research on prisoners, control, and violence extended to activism within movements for prison reform, but also yielded reflections on the principles of action research. There were similar studies, e.g. in criminology, across Norden. These studies all fit the broader literature on 'social construction' of social problems, an established branch of sociology's symbolic interactionism/ethnomethodology traditions.

At the international level, peace research turned to development problems and at the national level, social scientists addressed the problems of uneven regional development.

There is no room here for a detailed survey of Nordic varieties, nor for a discussion of its distinct methodological properties (see Mjøset forthcoming). Common was their aim at participatory interaction with the 'objects' of study in order to promote legitimate claims to social change. In Norway, both feminists and other action researchers joined to criticize the so far most prestigious project of reformist research: the government-sponsored study of power. But they left the theoretical critique to reconstructionist social philosophers (cf. Østerberg in Andenæs, *et al.* 1981). Even if both political economists and action researchers were empirically oriented, none of them discussed the kind of theory that was really involved in the empirically most successful individual studies. They lived up to Aubert's (1969: 194) statement: 'I prefer to do sociological work rather than talking *about* sociology'. They accepted that theoretical debates took place at the high level: social philosophers versus the standard view. This created a vicious circle between philosophical criticism of 'neo-utilitarianism' and the revised standard approach of rational choice.

Failing to address the question of whether empirical work could be done also on non-standard conditions, the critical alliance undercommunicated the differences between humanities/social philosophy and social science. In the humanities, research is basically work on written texts and in history, on archival sources. In the social sciences, the research process is more diversified, involving participant observation, interviewing, and/or analysis of large data-sets. In the humanities and philosophy, both sources and research work come out as personal works, while generation of empirical knowledge in social science largely is a collective project.

Recent decades – differentiation of social science, parts of which moves closer to the humanities

The reconstructionist turn in Western sociology culminated in the early 1980s, as a cluster of works (by Habermas, Münch, Luhmann, Giddens and Alexander) took up the old Parsonian project of writing 'the history of theory with a systematic purpose': the goal was a transcendental theory of action, structure and knowledge – of relevance not just to sociology, but to social science as a whole.

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the interaction between higher living standards and emphasis on education as a way to postpone entry into a slack Nordic labour markets led to the most rapid expansion in higher education since the late 1960s. Social science expanded both in terms of students and personnel in higher education and research. With a multitude of disciplines, academic social science became a big 'education factory', as ever larger shares of Nordic youth aspired to gain higher education. A share of the large, recently graduated cohorts of social scientists engaged in rereading, translating, editing, writing introductions to and teaching about older and more recent classics.

An independent Nordic contribution to this literature was Østerberg (1988). It is obvious from that book – as from many similar surveys – that controversies were emerging within the social philosophical camp. In the early 1980s, a Franco-German tension had surfaced: Habermas responded to the French post-structuralists, in continuation with his critique of Luhmann in the 1970s. These tensions were imported into the Nordic area. Østerberg chose to go with Touraine and Bourdieu against Luhmann and Deleuze–Guattari, retaining a focus on practice (rather than discourse) and on knowledge about structures of material power (rather than seeing all knowledge as expressions of the will to power).

Post-structuralism was not unknown in the Nordic area, but now became more influential. In the Western world, rising living standards among the majority of the population implied a culture where consumption choices became increasingly important in identity-formation. In Norden, furthermore, the upwards trend in public service employment faltered, while private services picked up: publishing houses, new privatized media, marketing, and 'communication' consultancies, the latter an addition to the more well known social science related fields of management and labour relations consultancies. Concerning the lower end of the labour market, the population inflows from the Third World increased: both immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers became more marked features of urban life. As for international high politics, the end of the Cold War 1989–1991 was a major historical juncture. This implied the decline of 'arms race'-focused international relations, and a resurgence of ethno-nationalist mobilization, especially secession movements in the former Eastern bloc.

In this situation, post-structuralism was added to the portfolio of what was now more often called social theory. The reception was broader than in sociology only. Given the exposure to social science thinking in the earlier period, humanities scholars all over the Western world had rid themselves of their ties to 'national legacies', reaching a 'post-national' stage. Post-structuralism came via Anglo-American humanities and publishers, strengthening the influence of the humanities on social science.

The impact of post-structuralism differed by discipline: in fields like political science and international relations, where the earlier philosophical criticism had not gained much ground, it became a substitute for earlier varieties of criticism against the standard approach. In these disciplines, the role of the sociological classics was obviously less crucial than in sociology itself. But the French influence paved the way for impulses from a broader literature on 'construction of social problems', decades after its postwar rehabilitation in sociology with action-/case-oriented research. Emerging from the social science side, being committed to empirical research, these approaches did not go as far towards a relativist sociology of knowledge as the French post-structuralists, but defenders of political science's standard views would often identify any challengers as complete relativists. In a situation where the 'unholy alliance' between rational choice and variables-oriented approaches represented the standard approach, the stage was set for dramatic clashes along several dimensions of the *Natur-Geisteswissenschaften* dualism.

The Danish penchant for structuralism here developed into the Copenhagen school of international relations (Buzan *et al.* 1998), innovatively applying the philosophy of speech acts to the interaction between decision makers and public spheres: under certain circumstances, a field may not just be politicized, but *securitized*, meaning that measures are legitimated with reference to an 'existential threat'. This approach linked the post-structuralist focus on feelings and desires to the older tradition of social problems construction in sociology.

In anthropology, case-orientation has always been crucial. As immigration made multiculturalism a challenge (first in Sweden, then in Denmark and Norway, now possibly even in Finland), anthropologists could increasingly do their fieldwork at home. The study of ethnic relations has been a strong field for the kind of constructionism that came with the post-structuralist impulse. Generally, the absorption of post-structuralist ideas was much smoother in anthropology than in political science. In Sweden, for instance, Ulf Hannerz (1996) turned from urban anthropology to investigate transnational connections – the many flows that cross nation-state borders – focusing recently on the production of foreign news, bringing anthropology closer to both international relations and sociology.

In sociology, with an established tradition for criticism of the standard view, post-structuralism was added alongside reconstructionist social philosophy. An important basis

for its influence was the split within feminist social science. The reconstructionist turn was less interesting to feminists who embarked on careers in academia. The classics of social science were overwhelmingly male, as were the reconstructionists. The split within 1970s feminism had been between reformists and action researchers, now there was even a split within the academic sphere. The focus increasingly turned to private relations, e.g. persistence of patriarchy in the domestic division of labour, on rights and conflicts in a situation of increasing divorce rates, and on darker sides such as violence against women. This was also the stuff of literature and psychology. Many feminist social scientists felt at home in the borderland between humanities and social science. To the extent they related to classics, these were found in the humanities. In Paris was one grand classic, Simone de Beauvoir, and more recent forerunners: the Parisian turn to post-structuralism had taken place within the 'sciences humaines', in the borderland between aesthetics, linguistics and psychology, and several female intellectuals had participated. The works of Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and others, were now translated into English, making feminism a strong faction in the post-structuralist movement.

Also other new interdisciplinary fields emerged, some with the ambition to become new disciplines. The field of science, technology and innovation studies illustrates how practical concerns in the mixed economies (how to retain industrial employment in a high wage context) combined with the academic process of closer humanities/social science ties. History and political economy showed how technological development was path-dependent, and that social institutions influenced the innovative success of firms, regions and countries. From the humanities side, US feminist philosophers turned to science studies, asking to what extent science expressed male ideals and whether there was feminist science. From Parisian post-structuralist circles, the work of Latour inspired such studies.

Whether these new interdisciplinary fusions emerged within the humanities or social science faculties, differed between countries and universities. A general phenomenon was the coming of separate fields named 'cultural studies', more or less dependent/independent of older ethnography/history of ideas disciplines.

There have also been important contributions to science studies independently of the feminist movement. In Denmark, two scholars with a background in the humanities have published surveys that do not mainly reconstruct classical contributions, but relate their work (cf. Olsen and Köppe 1981, Olsen 1988) to single natural science disciplines, or simply give impressive interpretations of the recent development of such disciplines (Köppe 1990). In Norway, psychiatrist Svein Haugsgjerd (1986, 1990) has published surveys of modern trends in psychiatry, including the work of Lacan, but seen in the context of therapeutic work, not in a high-level philosophical setting.

In Finland, the move via Simmel towards cultural studies led to an interest in consumption. Post-structuralism always had a focus on the cultural construction of desires and wants, and its debt to psychoanalysis and surrealism. Falk (1994) combined case-based studies with psychoanalytic and linguistic frameworks. Gronow (1996) emphasizes fashions and 'taste communities' as important creators of order in present day society. These studies exemplify an interplay between the two social-philosophical branches, but more often, post-structuralism challenged reconstructionism. The former pointed out that the string of social philosophical syntheses remained personal ones, indicating that the search for fundamentals was an 'essentialist' fallacy. This was a deconstructionist criticism, returning a scepticist sociology of knowledge inspired by Nietzsche. We see here the contours of a pendulum movement between two social-philosophical positions: back and forth between re- and de-constructionism.

The reconstructionist line of defence was already indicated in Habermas' combination of his fundamental notions of lifeworld and system into an interpretation of the present as a case of 'colonization of the lifeworld'. Also the other proposed transcendental frameworks (including Giddens) were followed by reflections on the kind of society that gave rise to such a search for basic concepts. After all, from the start the philosophical criticism had implied that social researchers were participants, thus bound to interpret their own presents. The present was periodized as 'modernity', a term from art history and the history of ideas. The present was thus stretched out, covering all of modern history, equating the classics' present with our own, retaining thus a connection to the classics' fundamental concepts. While already the student revolters had taken Marx' statements on class struggle and the 'impoverishment' of the working class under capitalism as a direct interpretation of the postwar present, social philosophers now related in the same way to statements on rationality (Weber), anomie (Durkheim), and selected other statements (mostly) of cultural criticism.

This led social philosophers towards empirical studies, converging with a broader tradition of social scientists addressing critically contemporary developments. Some of these works relate to modern Western civilization (Beck, Baumann, Castells – to mention just a few). Other works relate to particular countries, trying to eke out the 'national identity', or pinpointing 'what is wrong with' one's own country. Such works cross the boundaries between the scientific community and the public sphere. Some of these scholars become 'stars' in Western or national culture as their broad descriptions of the present as 'risk society', 'information society', 'knowledge society', 'globalization', or the like, promote transdiscursive concepts (Miettinen 2003) adopted by broader strata outside of research, inspiring both public debates and legitimation of political strategies.

Even post-structuralists make this turn, just altering the periodization. Given their criticism of Western enlightenment, they regard the present as a state of post-modernity, recounting relativist small stories that undermine essentialist 'grand narratives'. Even this ideal had French roots, in the work of Lyotard, although only loosely linked to the central post-structuralist concerns with the arbitrary nature of the sign. But it also has a foundation in Anglo-American developments, typically in the arts, especially in architecture.

Another effect of the post-structuralist inspiration was the turn to discourse analysis and conceptual history, bolstering the alliance between post-nationalist humanities and social science. The analysis of texts was extended to the analysis of rhetoric in specific settings, implying some cross-fertilization with interactionist approaches to e.g. conversation analysis. A Nordic literature containing tools for such analysis emerged.

All over Norden, scholars reflected on modernity. There is no space here for a detailed survey. Generally, the varieties of such studies can be related to three dimensions: the kind of historical periodization involved, what specific social philosophers they rely on, and what specific fields of social science (local research frontiers) they draw on. In Norway, Østerberg (1999) published a history of ideas account of modernity starting from the mid-eighteenth-century, covering Western cultural history, noting his debt to Cassirer, Parsons and Sartre. Swedish political scientist Bjørn Wittrock (1999) studies the history of Western knowledge-institutions, starting from the same period of transition, noting his debt to Koselleck and Foucault. In Denmark, Lars Qvortrup (2003) claims that the paradigm of hypercomplexity characterizes present-day society since the start of the twentieth-century. His dominant inspiration is Luhmann and he mainly relates to the field of education and information/communication technology.

The controversies within social philosophy goes between theory as either fundamental concepts or as deconstruction of such concepts. Relying *either* on a high-level notion of

theory or on no notion of theory, they claim capacity to analyse the present situation of modernity – post, late or whatever. But such a scope – different delimitations of modernity or post-modernity – allow only the most general, existential questions to be asked. Reconstructionist social philosophers run the risk of repeating the weaknesses of older philosophy of history: they fly way above any substantive research frontiers. Deconstructionist social philosophers run the risk of crashing below these frontiers – they often claim that any notion of theory as accumulated knowledge can be reduced to quite temporary strategies of elites striving to retain power.

However, through this period, we find several studies of considerable importance to the interpretation of the present, but linked to one or more local research frontiers. They study specific situations, in particular regions in historically delimited periods. Thus, like for the two other periods, we need to survey some studies with no high-level notion of theory to go with them.

In comparative political economy, a number of studies worked further from the French regulation school, which emphasized that British nineteenth-century capitalism was in important ways different from twentieth-century US capitalism. The latter – sometimes dubbed Fordism – had influenced postwar development in Western Europe, and Nordic scholars spelt out the specific patterns of capitalism that resulted when these international impulses interacted with specific Nordic conditions (Mjøset 1987). Therborn (1986, 1995a) did comparative work on national variations in unemployment and on Europe's postwar development more broadly. Danish sociologist G. Esping-Andersen compared Swedish and Danish social democracy in 1980. He then joined Korpi's project of establishing a detailed cross-national database allowing fine-grained analysis of trends and structures of contemporary OECD welfare states. This led first to a study of Nordic social democracy and finally to his famous typology of three families of Western European welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). Studies in several other, related fields contributed to the specification of inter-Nordic, Nordic and European specificities (Mjøset 1998).

The comparative focus separates these studies from reformist work. Systematic work on qualitative factors led to higher sensitivity of context, strengthening local research frontiers in areas of relevance to social development. Analyses of ongoing restructuring in OECD welfare states put the achievements of the Nordic type welfare states into perspective. Also the 'Nordic model' became a transdiscursive concept, but a more grounded one than those coined by the social philosophers.

The comparativists were good at explaining interesting present developments, but did not fit current notions of theory. Most of them were in practice agnostic about high level notions of theory. Like the political economists earlier, they did not ponder the question of why contextualization by means of typologies was a main feature of their work. Their work neither fit the social-philosophical notion of theory as reconstructions of classics, nor the standard ideal of decontextualized correlational exercises, or – equally decontextualized – rational choice models. Testing of formal sequences or patterns (or mechanisms) was only done *inside* of the various types! In contrast, adherents of high level notions of theory do not take such types seriously, and thus remain caught in a vicious circle between 'methodological nationalism' and decontextualization.

Space prevents an equally detailed survey of studies at other levels, except for two Danish works from this period. Both scholars combine research on specific questions of regional planning with ambitious theoretical considerations. Thomas Højrup (1983) studied how life modes in a Danish region adapted their permanent features to structural pressures for change. Bent Flyvbjerg (1991) studied political participation and urban planning in a middle-sized

Danish city. In contrast to the agnosticism of the political economists mentioned above, these scholars actually did write extensive sections (in fact separate volumes!) on questions of theory and method, even reaching back to the great philosophers. We shall soon return to these works.

Conclusion

Considering curricula and teaching in the broadest social science discipline, sociology, a certain pluralism has been institutionalized: standard views dominate courses on quantitative methods, while theory classes provide samples from the many personalized social philosophies. In the courses on qualitative methods, notions of theory are often ambiguous.

Followers of the standard approach are no longer in a position to impose their practical philosophy of social science as a normative canon for all researchers. The social philosophers, on their part, accept the inclusion of a rational choice position. Although they criticize it, they also fit it into the reconstructionist notion of theory as derived from the classics: rational choice is simply a 'neo-utilitarian' reconstruction of older utilitarian, liberal theory. Variables-oriented studies, on the other hand, are met with the same disinterested scepticism as any other empirically oriented 'hyphenated sociology' – perhaps even reproducing the view that empirical research can only be done in the variables-oriented way.

At times, the two positions clash in debates on fundamentals, reproducing the *Natur-/Geisteswissenschaft*-polarization. Such debates tend to reproduce the consensus that at the very least, *theory* is knowledge at a very high level. The possibility that social science could develop a notion of theory based only on its own experience, is lost. This is an unfortunate stalemate situation in which social philosophers and followers of standard views have divided the field between them. Through this essay, we pointed to empirical research that does not fit any of the high-level notions of theory. It is now the time to ask whether there is also a notion of theory for comparative and participation-oriented case-studies.

To find such a notion, let us reject the dualism by turning its two poles into two out of three practical philosophies of social science (Mjøset forthcoming). Besides the standard and the social-philosophical attitudes, we define a third attitude, a practical philosophy of social science which is based on reflection on the participation of social science itself in social development. We call this a pragmatist/participatory attitude. It rejects the imposition of ideals both from the natural sciences and the humanities. Among its recent spokesmen we find those who argue that the impulses of American pragmatists and the Chicago school of sociology actually represent a viable alternative for social science as a whole (Mjøset 2003, referring to the work of Abbott and Ragin). But this attitude also has European roots, namely critical theory understood as the standpoint theory.

Social philosophers might call this 'neopragmatism', since they are inclined to link theory not to substantive findings, but to new permutations of ideas from older schools. But this programme was above all a reflection on the substantive success of comparative historical social research. Furthermore, the link to the Chicago-school programme was not based on a wish to reconstruct core notions of action, structure and knowledge. The pragmatist attitude only involves a thin notion of action: that all interaction is historically situated in a concrete context, and that generalization must be grounded in case-studies of such situated action/interaction. The point was rather to revive social science that had explanatory relevance.

Through the three periods discussed above, we have emphasized influential contributions to empirical research that does not fit high level notions of theory. Our major point is now that the pragmatist attitude yields notions of theory that fits these kinds of research. A classic

account of such a notion, synthesizing the Chicago-school tradition, is Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory. It is possible to choose a neutral term also, such as explanation-based theory.

Whether macro or micro, the concern for the situated nature of action is common to these styles of empirical study. Consider macro-comparisons: they yield theories developed from below (from specific explanations) and these are at a clearly lower level than the social-philosophical reconstructions, but they are more general than social-philosophical deconstructions. They challenge the social-philosophical project of making *modernity* (high, late or post) as such the contextual framework, and also the standard view of theory as decontextualized, so far unfalsified knowledge. Both these notions are unable to account for the kind of knowledge that we possess, e.g. in the typologies found in Rokkan or Korpi/Esping-Andersen's work. These must be seen as general substantive theories which aid the researchers in the complicated task of establishing context. They generalize, without loss of context.

Grounded theory comes in two versions: substantive and formal. A substantive theory would be an explanation that – at the present local research frontier – is accepted by the research community as a valid account with reference to a specified context, such as e.g. the Nordic welfare states in the 1990s. A formal theory, in contrast, would be a module (some prefer the term 'mechanism') that can apply in various contexts (e.g. 'the strength of weak ties' in network theory), but one that only becomes explanatory when used in a context (a set of scope conditions). Despite the fact that Jon Elster's early work belongs to the rational choice tradition, his recent emphasis (Elster 1998) on mechanisms as tools of explanation are quite close to such a notion of theory.

Social philosophers might object that such formal theory is not rooted in a 'transcendental theory of action, structure and knowledge'. But it is a promising thought that such formal notions of theory can be developed from an interdisciplinary venture centred on recent cognitive science. This is a too complex topic to explore further here, but it is an important one, presently being addressed by several research groups, also in Norden. Within education, a group of Finnish scholars, led by Y. Engeström (1999), has already done a lot of work along these lines. More will follow as economists turn more of their attention to cognitive economics.

A number of scholars agree that context is important, and advocate modified versions of the standard approach (Merton's 'middle range theories'). But they accept the natural science procedure as their – however distant – ideal. The search for law-like relations bias their notions of theory to what looks like formal grounded theory. But only substantive grounded theory gives meaning to a notion of the scope of theory. Importantly, this is not a question of testing, since a researcher can test competing (explanatory) theories only *within* a set of scope conditions. Neither can scope conditions be deduced from more general theory, they must be established in pragmatist terms, through the participation of researchers in society (local research frontiers), since scope must be a function of what we want to know, that is, our 'knowledge interests'. This is different from explanation by laws: we rather have explanation by causal constellations which establish the context for individual or collective actors. The understanding/explanation-dichotomy is here irrelevant. The analysis of causal constellations is at the core of the more pragmatic sciences such as psychology (as therapy), law and history. Such arguments lead us to conclude that the notion of general theory should *not* be linked to formal theory, but to substantive theory. To be simultaneously general and explanatory, theory must consist of comparison-based contextual factors that are of value to several local research frontiers. Such general theory is not converging in one direction, there may be several general theories, related to clusters of research questions. A general substantive grounded

theory unites a number of local research frontiers (for instance industrial relations, welfare states, political development, ethnic mobilization), but never all.

There are other approaches that emphasize formal theory without invoking explanation by law-like relations. Evolutionary theory (March and Olsen (1989)-type organization theory, evolutionary economics) often search for smaller sets of explanatory modules. This position is quite close to the notion of formal grounded theory, but from a pragmatist standpoint one would not give any priority to analogies drawn from evolutionary biology.

The search for lower level notions of theory has precedents in Nordic social science. Such a programme can look back at and learn from scholars who – as shown – in practice ignored high-level notions of theory (for the case of Rokkan, see Mjøset 2000a). Although Aubert was disinterested in 1965, he put out a Norwegian translation of *The Hidden Society* in 1969, adding an essay on theory and methods, with statements that are very close to the idea of grounded theory. Barth (1981: 1-2) looked back at his programmatic discussion of models in anthropology and noted that his main emphasis was always on generative processes (situated action in Goffman's terms figure importantly in his writings), and that his main background was not other theorists, but his own fieldwork. His plea for 'naturalism' in later writings also brings him close to grounded theory.

To this can be added the rediscovery of classical (as opposed to neo-realist) geopolitics and political geography in political science/international relations, and the (however marginal) efforts to learn from the German historical school, evolutionary and cognitive science in economics.

As for Denmark and Sweden, there are interesting examples of scholars balancing between grounded studies and social-philosophical reflections. Both Wittrock and Therborn have addressed the question of disaggregating modernity. Therborn (1995b) has explored four routes to modernity. As for the Danish scene, we mentioned the grounded case-studies of Højrup and Flyvbjerg. Still, there is a strong element of social philosophy in their work, especially in their reliance on selected classical philosophers. A telling example is Højrup's rediscovery of the idea of the state system by reading Clausewitz. The importance of the state system is after all obvious from numerous geopolitical studies, and Højrup (2003: 2f) is of course, at the margins, aware that he here converges with a broader tradition of comparative historical sociology. Flyvbjerg (1991, 2001) invokes both antique philosophers, as well as the cognitive science of Dreyfus, and Foucault's post-structuralism to arrive at his notion of 'the science of the concrete'.

These elements of social philosophy are strikingly indicated by the lack of cross-referencing between Danish scholars who are actually all suggesting grounded theories as inventive redirections of post-structuralist impulses. The Copenhagen school's work on regional security complexes (Buzan and Wæver 2003) clearly leads to grounded theories about aspects of the state system, but there is no Wæver-Højrup cross-referencing. Højrup and Flyvbjerg both have a connection to regional studies, but show no awareness of contributing to a common research frontier. Different disciplinary location may be part of the explanation of such mutual disregard (Wæver/political science, Flyvbjerg/planning, Højrup/ethnography). But in welfare state research, we see a research frontier to which Nordic and other researchers are contributing, independently of their disciplinary locations. This indicates that the persistence of high level social philosophical understandings of theory – above all in Flyvbjerg and Højrup – weakens the ability of scholars to consider the specific local research frontiers that they relate to. They run the danger of erecting personal theoretical frameworks, rather than contributing to the collective efforts at specific research frontiers.

The question of whether what we have described here as a pragmatist attitude should be seen as yielding *social theory*, or simply *social science theory*, can be left for the reader to decide.

As for the relation to the humanities, our conclusion is that influence from the humanities should be balanced by close attention to the actual practice of social research. The natural science ideal may have been weakened in social science under inspiration from the humanities, but we must build our notions of theory with reference to what we do in substantive social research, not to what scholars do in other lines of academic work.

Notes

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