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HOW “NATIONAL” IS SOCIAL THEORY?

A Note on Some Worrying Trends in the Recent Theorizing
of Richard Münch*

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Within every universalizing cultural endeavour there are national trends. “Universalistic and particularistic orientations in science are in continuous tension”, Nedelmann and Sztompka (1994: 9) point out in their introduction to *Sociology in Europe: In Search of Identity*, the edited volume distributed free of charge to every registered participant in last year’s World Congress of Sociology in Bielefeld, Germany. They go on to describe this tension between universal and particular, quite rightly in my view, as “stimulating [to] scientific development”. Yet, while empirically inevitable and theoretically stimulating, as Hegel himself well knows, the particularistic side of this productive tension need not, and should not, be applauded regardless of its form. Indeed, my point in the following note is to argue that in a recent and highly visible essay Richard Münch introduces the particularistic moment in a one-sided, distorted, often chauvinistic way. By challenging the universalist aspirations of social theory in this manner, Münch has opened the door to more virulent exercises in particularism that he himself would certainly abhor.¹

In marked contrast to the volume’s other contributions, “The Contribution of German Social Theory to European Sociology” (Münch, 1994) dwells at

* This note is drawn from a substantially longer discussion of the nationalist trend in Münch’s recent work, which includes an analysis of an earlier article (Münch, 1991) from which Münch 1994 is largely drawn. It was first circulated in *Theory*, Newsletter of the Research Committee on Social Theory of the International Sociological Association (Autumn 1994) and reproduced at the request of the author, with kind permission of the editor of the Newsletter, Professor Kenneth Thompson (The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom). The longer discussion is available from the author.

1 Speaking of Münch “himself”, I should say that the following can be read, not only as a theoretical criticism, but as a query made by an old friend to a former comrade-in-arms, one who had seemed to be as reflexive about his “German” theoretical identity as I have tried to be about my “American” one. In this sense, I am asking “Richard”, as compared to “Münch”, the following questions: Am I merely a provincial American, confined by my isolated country’s naivete and blinded by its own chauvinism, or has your work, in fact, taken a decidedly nationalist turn? If so, what has happened to change your mind about social theory, about the bases of its construction, about its American forms? What kind of influence do you want your new work to have?

length on the superiority of European ideas and dismisses American sociology in a disdainful way. I will not dispute here these evaluations. While I myself have made many criticisms of American sociology, I doubt whether many impartial observers of sociology on either side of the Atlantic would agree with the empirical evaluations Münch makes (e. g., Tominaga, 1994). In this brief response, I am interested not in the substance of the charges *per se* but rather in the theoretical framework which allows them to be made. For in making them Münch does not engage in theoretical argument as such. He relies, instead, on a broadly reductionist sociology of knowledge, one that gives an exaggerated and dangerous primacy to geopolitical forces like “nation”.

Lurking just beneath the surface of Münch’s arguments, in fact, one finds the suggestion that social theory is national, the contention that, while theorists may aspire to universalism, most of their (our) ideas actually reflect the social structures and ideologies within which they (we) live. Münch’s position argues, in effect, that most sociological theories function as supporting ideologies for the struggles of their regions and nation states. Not only are theories instruments in the struggle and competition of national powers, but their varying intellectual influence, Münch clearly suggests, depends upon the relative economic and political power of their respective nations. Such arguments, to be sure, are not novel in the history of social theory. Nonetheless, they are something new in the history of post-war theoretical sociology, and they seem particularly threatening when against the background of the political cultural conflicts that have emerged in the post-Cold War world in which we live and think today.

From the beginning of his contribution to *Sociology in Europe*, Münch approaches theoretical issues in national terms. Referring to the role of voluntarism and consensus in functionalist theorizing, for example, he describes Merton and Parsons as having “assimilated *European* social theory to genuine *American* thought” (p. 45, this and all subsequent italics added, unless noted otherwise). In itself this observation certainly is not objectionable. It begins to be, however, when it is linked to Münch’s objection that this assimilation “narrowed down the variety of *European* social theory” (46). The pejorative implications become fully evident, however, when Münch approaches the antifunctionalist micro and macro challenges of the late 1950s and 1960s, not in terms of their theoretical innovations, but in terms of the national origins of their theories. These primarily American theorists were able to mount this challenge, Münch argues, only because they could “draw upon the greater sharpness and distinctness of *European* social theories” (46). Rather than speaking about the theoretical and empirical references of these challenges to functionalism in scientific terms, Münch represents them geopolitically, describing as contributions that strengthened, not American, but European

thought. He writes, for example, that "Coser, Dahrendorf, and later on Collins revitalized *European* conflict theory from Marx to Pareto, Weber and Simmel"!

Yet, according to Münch, these macro and micro challenges ultimately failed to overcome the theoretical limitations of functionalism. Why? Because they had not made a sharp enough break from American society and thought. Because "they all [still] related [their] variety of theories to *American* thought and reality", their theories actually continued the simplifying "Americanization" of *European* social theory that Merton and Parsons had begun. Other observers (e. g., Sztompka, 1994, Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994) have viewed this new wave of micro and macro-historical work as marking a theoretical golden age. Münch disagrees. These theorists incorporated the *forms* of European thinking but not the real content. "In terms of content", he insists, these American theorists actually distorted European social theory. The point of Münch's argument, it seems, is to argue that such distortion was inevitable; according to emphasis on the nation, "American social theory" can only be "a reflection of American thought and its relationship to American reality". Neither America's thought nor its social reality "correspond to the whole variety of thought and reality in the different European countries".

One must begin to pay careful attention here to the way in which Münch homogenized two binary relationships. In the pointed contrasts he makes between America and Europe, he evokes, time and time again, the contrast between homogeneity and variety. In doing so, he is suggesting the following analogy: America is to homogeneity as Europe is to variety (America: homogeneity:: Europe: variety). Constructing this kind of complex analogy represents cultural, not just social-scientific work. Rather than merely empirical observations, these contrasts and homologies are strongly evaluative. They establish frameworks of sacred and profane, purity and danger, categories that legitimate pollution and exclusion (Alexander, 1993). This conflation of cognitive and evaluative strategies is clear when Münch argues that a series of well-established empirical facts – the "professionalization of sociology" in America, its "well-equipped leading departments and journals", the "establishment of a unified national discourse" in America, its competitive and individualistic social structure – have combined to produce a constraining "standardization" (47) in American empirical research and theorizes. Mixing condescension, disappointment, surprise, and criticism, Münch describes post-war American sociology, not simply as homogeneous and standardized, but as bland and impoverished. The discipline's character is exemplified by what he calls "the uniform standard article" typically published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*. For Münch, American sociology becomes the paradigm case for the demagicalization that Weber

described as the bane of modernity. In American sociology, he rues, “there is little space for the extraordinary, whether in the negative or in the positive sense”. His analogical series has now been further stretched. It reads, American: Europe::American sociology: European sociology::homogeneity:variety::standardization:creativity::uniformity:extraordinary.

What a misfortune that the intellectual challenges to functionalism originated, not in Europe, but in America, the standardized, homogenized, and demagical country of the common, ordinary man! But what good fortune that the world’s geopolitical situation, the regional and national distribution of power, is now undergoing such significant change. The antidote Münch offers to the deplorable condition of American sociology rests, in other words, on geopolitics rather than social theory. “With Europe’s rise to the level of one of three superpowers” -Münch notes East Asia in passing – European sociology has regained the material power “to challenge the American hegemony in world sociology”. Only a strong and united Europe can purify the pollution of social theory that its debilitating sojourn in America has caused.

While my main point in this discussion has been to highlight the reductionism that underlays Münch’s argument rather than to criticize the argument as such, in closing I cannot resist offering a few observations about the contents of his claims. If post-war American social scientists have often been guilty of a presentist chauvinism that neglects the importance of European theoretical and empirical work, Münch and some of the other contributors to this debate (e. g., Albrow, 1994) are guilty of an equally one-sided Eurochauvinism. There is no doubt, of course, that American developments have been highly stimulated by classical and contemporary European ideas. Yet neither is there any doubt that virtually every strand of contemporary European sociological theory builds in fundamental ways upon American post-war thought. Boudon would be unthinkable without the influence of Homans, Blau, Merton, and Coleman. Bourdieu formed his post-1972 praxis theory as much from his encounter with Goffman and Garfinkel as from anything else. Giddens’ structuration theory is deeply dependent on the pragmatist and interactionist American traditions. As for Habermas and Luhmann, the representative cases for Münch’s claims about the superiority of contemporary German thought, their ideas could be read as efforts to “Europeanize” Parsons if this nation-based nomenclature were acceptable, which I believe it is not. Despite the fact that Luhmann has made original and important theoretical innovations, his thought stands firmly upon Parsons’ in the most elaborate and apparent ways. Habermas’ later critical theory of communicative action builds upon Luhmann and in many ways “corrects” his systems technicism by drawing upon, and revising, the developmental cognitive and moral emphases of Parsons himself. And the

very theoretical framework Münch himself employs to analyze American and European sociology represents merely a variation, albeit an innovative one, on the interchange model that organized Parsons' later work. This is not even to mention, of course, the high degree of interpenetration that exists among European and American sociologies across a large number of more specialized subfields, including social problems, social movements, mobility, historical and comparative sociology, religion, organizations, media, gender and politics.

Albrow's (1994: 89) suggestion that between European and American sociologies there is "limited exchange and enduring tension" appears, then, to be quite as mistaken as Münch's claims for the utterly derivative quality of American work. Scaff's (1994: 215) observation that, since 1945, "the flow of ideas and personnel in both directions has created a disciplinary matrix" gets much closer to the truth. Whether one considers networks or ideas, empirical fields or general theories, one sees an extraordinary efflorescence of international communication between European and American sociology. One may ask, in fact, whether it is tenable any longer even to speak of such a bounded entity as "European" or "American" sociology. I have argued here, indeed, that one confidently can do so only if one is willing to subsume ideation to social structure, to replace theoretical with geopolitical thinking, and to understand nations or regions themselves in an unrealistically isolated, culturally distinct, and internally homogeneous way.

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