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## ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN SOCIOLOGY \*

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Jeffrey Alexander's critique of Richard Münch in the Autumn 1994 issue of the ISA Theory Newsletter was triggered by a response I voiced at Bielefeld regarding the distribution of *Sociology in Europe* at the 1994 ISA meetings. It seemed puzzling that one would greet colleagues from five other continents with a book that begins: "European sociology affirms itself in the negative mood, by showing what it stands against ... The distinction is drawn against sociologies developed in other parts of the world." The editors added that European sociology must define itself "most importantly against American sociology," hoping that "after a long detour to America, the spirit of sociology will return to its cradle" and that "European sociology ... will succeed in competition with scholars from the US at the turn of the century" (1993, 4, 8). Elsewhere in the volume we read that between American and European sociology there has been "limited exchange and enduring tension" (89), and that sociology emerged as "a reflection on modernity as a *European* phenomenon" (76; my emphasis). Even the lone American contribution to *Sociology in Europe*, an exceptionally thoughtful piece by Lawrence Scaff, is praised for having been made "in a truly European manner" (22)!

Why, I wondered, did a number of scholars – with whom I cherish warm collegial ties – celebrate the resurgence of sociology in Europe with exclusionary comments about sociology in North America? Rather than advocate the spirit of sociology returning to its cradle, why not celebrate its spread throughout the world? Some European colleagues then confided to me that the end of the Cold War, the formation of a united Germany, and the growth of the European market had generated fresh currents of academic chauvinism and old-time anti-American sentiment in sociology and other disciplines. This gave me concern.

Although Alexander was at first cool to my concern, he was dismayed to discover the 1991 essay where Münch appeared to dismiss all homegrown American sociology as junk food. That may not be what Münch meant to say,

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\* An earlier version of this paper appeared in the Newsletter of the ISA-Research Committee on Social Theory, Autumn 1995.

but this is what he said: “American sociology in purely geographic terms does not consist entirely of McDonaldized products; it also offers French, German, and Italian ‘cuisine’ to the specialists ... European sociology ... now has indigenous McDonald’s, simply because of the domination by American sociology” (1991, 330).

Such words puzzled me, because I know Münch to be international in perspective and uncommonly appreciative of American sociology. His text on sociological theory includes more contributions from American sociology than from any other tradition – in contrast to texts by many of his European colleagues – and his major tome, *Die Kultur der Moderne*, has been faulted by critics for making U. S. society the standard against which the modernity of European societies seems deficient. Even so, it was hard not to read those words as a dismissal of the intellectual contribution of Americans and an apparent disavowal of the cross-Atlantic interchange that has been so fruitful for sociology. I was no less puzzled to read that German sociologists are not “employees of a huge, professional system appropriate for the mass production of standardized articles [like Americans, but] they are, above all, academics in the strict sense, living in a separate world of ideas, concepts and theories that has its own history independent of what is going on outside” (1991, 326). Whether or not this description caricatures American academics or truly describes German scholars today, the typification of German academics as living in a realm of pure intellect is hard to swallow for one whose associations also include such boundary transgressions as Treitschke’s editorials, Weber’s *Antrittsrede*, and wartime pamphleteering by Simmel and Scheler, not to mention pro-Nazi actions of figures like Heidegger and Sombart.

Münch’s reply to Alexander made clear that he had righteous intentions in mind when he wrote those words. I sympathize with his defensiveness toward Alexander for construing the 1993 chapter so negatively; that piece for the most part contains insightful comment, including an exceptionally valuable critique of Luhmann’s failure to distinguish concrete institutional differentiation from abstract analytic differentiation. However, I do find persuasive Alexander’s interpretation – that Münch’s chapter in *Sociology in Europe* implies the following set of equivalences – American sociology: European sociology:: homogeneity: diversity:: standardization [= McDonaldization]: creativity. Although Münch contends that his sketch must be understood, not as a veridical depiction but as an ideal type, one can hardly read that ideal type in any other way than as a composite of homogeneity, blandness, and mediocrity. The ideal type I would construct of American sociology in the past generation would depict it as extremely diverse – in substance, quality, perkiness, and levels of creativity. From where I sit, conformism in U. S. sociology is no

more a problem than the emphasis on individuality, which constrains scholars to seek difference for the sake of difference at the expense of continuity and cumulativeness in the discipline.

The way I would formulate Münch's concern about standardized production would be in terms of what, in a hobbled effort to synthesize aspects of Weber, Simmel, and Parsons, I once put forward as perhaps the most fundamental tension and imbalance in modernity – between subjective and objectified forms of rationality (1985, chs. 7, 9). Rather than define the objectified side of this antinomy as noxious and project it onto some national scapegoat, I would view it as a complex issue that colleagues of good will from all nations should join energies in confronting.

Whatever nuances one might load onto this or that statement, Münch and Alexander have done us a service by getting these issues out into the open. Particularistic sentiments of the sort Münch may unintentionally have conveyed are apparently held in more extreme form by a number of German and perhaps other European scholars, and that needs to be aired. On the other hand, Münch's reply should help Americans see that what might be taken as parochial anti-American antagonism could be viewed as a wholesome effort to maintain local diversity in a globalizing epoch. The whole question of globalization and local diversity is surely high on today's agenda, though if Roland Robertson's perspicacious analysis (1995) is to be credited, one need not worry: globalization necessarily works itself out through local and particularistic embodiments.

Beyond this airing of responses to national chauvinisms, real or alleged, is a fundamental epistemological question raised by Münch and the editors of *Sociology in Europe* – the question of the relationship between national background and sociological analysis. The latter liken sociology to art more than to science, affected as it must be by distinctive histories and cultures, and so they claim that it must willy-nilly be colored by distinctive national styles. (This of course begs the question of whether great artists can speak for themselves and mankind more than for their nations.) Münch makes the more general, radical claim that sociologies are inherently ethnocentric. What might such a claim mean?

For one thing, it could mean (1) considering only data from one's own nation. For another, it could mean (2) construing scientific competitiveness in national terms. In yet another sense, it could mean (3) pursuing research programs framed by nationally embedded experiences and concerns. Finally, it could mean (4) that theoretical/methodological orientations inexorably express the outlooks of national traditions. In each of these senses, Münch's claim deserves to be examined.

Do sociologists typically study only the society in which they live? Indeed they do. Of course, home-focused studies are also valuable for social scientists elsewhere, provided the studies are made public. Even so, a good deal of current sociological work is devoted to gathering and interpreting data from societies beyond one's home. Thus, a quick perusal of the *American Journal of Sociology* for 1995 shows that more than 50% of its articles deal with countries outside the U. S., from Brazil, France, Hungary, and Sweden to China, Iran, Israel, and Russia. Sociologists should doubtless do more of this, but I'm not sure that a doctrine of inexorable ethnocentrism will encourage it.

What of national competitiveness? Merton and others have helped us understand ways in which science is simultaneously communal and competitive. Even so, there is no inherent reason why intellectual competitiveness need be organized around geopolitical boundaries. In some scientific fields transnational collaboration has in fact reached new peaks. Insofar as competitiveness is organized around paradigms or research programs, colleagues from other countries often serve as valuable allies. One is more likely to be in competition with fellow-nationals, if not members of one's own department, than with other nationals.

On the matter of nationally-embedded substantive concerns Münch's point about national ethnocentrism in sociology seems to me well taken. Here his effort to characterize diverse national sociologies makes a suggestive contribution, as when he explores, e. g., the effects on local sociological thinking of class solidarity in England or of the centralized French bureaucratic elite in France – matters of a sort investigated in depth in *Die Kultur der Moderne*. Although different outlooks based on experiential differences confer valuable diversity, their down side is a tendency to assume that problems or traits that loom large in one's own society are just as prominent in other societies. Here again, one need not give in to such ill effects, but can correct them systematically through comparative studies.

What, finally, of nationally-colored intellectual styles? Like Münch and the editors of *Sociology in Europe*, I hold that national contexts played an important role in the development of sociology. This is a central theme of my *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995), which documents the role of national traditions in shaping the intellectual presuppositions that were foundational for modern sociology. But then I go on to stress the international character of sociological discourse in the founding generation of 1890–1914, and the emergence from those national traditions of theoretical perspectives no longer embedded in particularistic contexts. As a champion of Simmel and Weber I warm to Münch's contention that German social theory has done much to articulate the antinomies of modernity. Nevertheless, as I relate in

*Visions*, writers in the British, French, Italian and American traditions have also made significant contributions to articulating the antinomies of modernity.

It is possible that I tend to overlook the persisting hold of such national dispositions. This may be due to the fact, mentioned in Carlo Mongardini's essay in *Sociology in Europe* as well as my book, that the course of American sociology reflects its initial openness to so many different European traditions. But surely other countries are open to diverse national scholarly traditions, and members of the International Sociological Association have a special responsibility to cultivate and celebrate that openness. As I suggest in *Visions*, sociology's current mission might well be to model for the world a practice of constructive interchange with those holding different philosophical perspectives and different national origins. While this fully accords with Münch's view of "theorizing as the continuous weaving of a universal network of theories to which every single theory makes a distinctive ... contribution" (1995, 5, 4), I prefer to see the strands of that network *not as national assertions but as diverse intellectual orientations*. One does not argue fruitfully with an idea qua Italian or Scottish, but with conceptions such as organicism or utilitarianism. Should it not be part of sociology's mission to enable us to discourse about the human condition without having to cite or discount the national or ethnic provenance of the speaker?

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