

Preface to the 2021 Edition

This is not the way to begin a book. But the times, such as they are, seem to demand it.

Over the life of this book—now more than a quarter-century since 1993—I have tried to introduce an emergent theme on issues acute in the historical moment when each edition appeared—even while all but a few of the familiar classical and more contemporary selections remain unchanged. The reason for the occasional additions (and deletions) is that social theory itself changes as time goes by. Social theories are different from other scientific theories because they pay particular attention to the practical conditions of their times. Practical conditions, I should say, are local and personal realities not readily captured as data. They are very often strange even to the scientific mind. This fact of the matter invites attention to issues that may not have been salient in earlier historical moments. But none of those moments was quite like the one we are living through as I write these words on May 11, 2020.

Today, the world over, people are locked inside whatever shelters they may have. Those who are unsheltered scramble for what food they can find, as they try to survive in makeshift cardboard villages under highway overpasses or in nasty urine-stained alleys or in a hidden corner of a nearby park or wood. But the issue of the current moment is not homelessness or poverty. They have been destroying lives for many years, perhaps from the beginning of human time. The issue today is death.

Death is always with us. But these days, death is on everyone's mind. Whether people die sheltered or on the streets, we who knew them are still sad—but not as surprised as previously we might have been. We talk more about death because of a plague that seems capable of rivalling the Black Death of 1347–1352, which killed millions. Until now, many might have thought of plagues as being strictly medieval. We who are well enough fed and sheltered forget that there are plagues in our time in the poorer regions of the world. But the plague at large today does not respect class differences, as indeed the Black Death and the plagues of old did not. Poverty and homelessness could be thought of as economic plagues for which the germ is social indifference to the needs of the poor.

Today's plague, however, is biological—and that is an important difference. Biological plagues creep up on those infected as if coming from nowhere, when in fact they cross over from animal populations. In his 1947 novel, *The Plague*, Albert Camus tells of a small town in which people began to notice dead rats—a few at first, then many, and then townspeople began to die. Then one day the plague stops. The town celebrates with fireworks. It is assumed, but not known for certain, that life will return to normal. *The Plague* ends on an uncertain note: “perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.” At the moment no one knows for sure when today's plague will end, if it does, or, as Camus would have it, whether our plague will come back like rats. All that the global *we* of this moment know (when they are thinking straight, as some are not) is that we face a plague that cannot be wished or washed away. Biological plagues come and go. We can spread them, and sometimes stop them, but they come to us in their own time.

One could say that plagues are, in their way, democratic. They can kill anyone, whatever their station in life. To be sure, they are more likely to threaten the lives of those who live in impoverished quarters or on the streets. But plagues also kill skilled medical and social service professionals who are trying to help the poor and homeless. They even kill those who use their wealth to quarantine themselves from the rest of us. Everyone is at risk. Strictly speaking, a democracy is a system in which the people [*dēmos*] have political power [*kratia*]. To be sure, *the people*, understood collectively, do not have power over a biological plague. But, if they follow good public health advice, they may have the power to stop its spread.

Still, in a broader sense, a plague like today's COVID-19 is democratizing in another more salient way. At the least, on any given day, the evening cable news talks about little else. As recently as yesterday, May 10, 2020, Chris Hayes, himself a cable news show host, tells of his experience in a published interview for *The New Yorker*:

I think there's probably some fatigue setting in. I have some. I think we all do. But I would also say that what really makes this story different than any other story I've ever covered is that it encapsulates the full spectrum of human institutions, structures, forms of knowledge, and zones of interest. It's a medical story; it's a biological story; it's an epidemiological story; it's a public-health story; it's a sociological story; it's an education story; it's an economic story; it's a government story; it's a political story. There is no story that is not a COVID-19 story right now.

COVID-19 is also a love story of people caring for others—hence the irony that Chris Hayes's bleak words were published on America's Mother's Day when, in the normal course of life, the story is of loved ones, dead and alive, who have cared for us when we were too young to do for ourselves.

Talk does not solve a problem like this plague, but it does at least democratize *awareness* of its threat. Still, the anxious global chatter is not the most important way this plague has forced us to think again about democracy as a staple of modern, progressive societies. The conjuncture of a deadly, global plague and today's global deterioration of democratic cultures is what is upon us. This is not a question of whether one is the cause of the other. Biological plagues do not work that way. In the end, COVID-19 may or may not kill millions, but news of its being out of control with no immediate treatment at hand is the basis for the idea that we are all in this boat together. This may not be exactly a democratizing effect, but the very thought of an out-of-control plague creates a sense of human community—if by human community is meant a common understanding that all human beings face a threat to their lives.

In my lifetime, a different shared threat of the kind was the fear of nuclear war early in the Cold War era when I was a schoolboy. Yet today we remember this fear, if at all, through comedic films like *Dr. Strangelove* with Peter Sellers—a terrific film but one that jokes in its way about the seriousness of that threat. Today, and for some time now, the more serious threat is climate change, which could well be more deadly than a nuclear holocaust. Climate change, like nuclear warfare, is a shared threat that can be ignored. Then and now, there is sufficient sanity among leaders of nuclear states to see the foolishness of atomic warfare. But the foolishness of the assault on our breathable atmosphere is more difficult for all to understand because the global economy is so beholden to capitalism's impossible search for evermore economic growth. Global capitalism is fueled by fossil fuels that contaminate because capitalism cannot restrain its breathless search for profit long enough to convert to renewable energy sources. The idea that we are destroying our natural environment by our dependence on fossil fuel consumption has never gotten inside the head and heart of the global imagination. The very notion that bovine flatulence is a killer is seen by many a joke, even though it is true. Unlike the threat of an atomic nuclear holocaust, the fossil fuel threat to our atmosphere doesn't quite rouse our sense of urgency about the fragility of human life. There is a reason for this, for which social theory offers the explanation.

The human community, such as it is, remains a kind of shared theoretical fiction. If there is an Achilles' heel to social theory, it is that "the social" has been conceived as somehow separate from (even contrary to) the natural world upon which humanity depends for air to breathe, water to quench our thirst, food to fill our aching guts, and resources to construct shelters, towns, and cities. We live in a built environment—an environment built out of materials nature supplies. Human survival depends on a healthy natural environment, the health of which is always at risk. This fact of life entails the natural fact that when nature imposes a limit to human survival, then only a radical, even universal democracy committed to change can save us.

Hence the irony of the COVID-19 plague. On the one hand it is possible, if not yet likely, that a vaccine will be developed in time and the disease stopped. Yet, until then, and because the nations most at risk are in North America and Europe, COVID-19 is more likely to be taken as a global risk. Today, on May 11, 2020, the greatest numbers by far of cases and deaths in the world are in the United States, which is also the global center of broadcast news. Hence, also, a deeper irony. A once great global nation remains the operative center of the capitalist world-system while being unable to rein in the sicknesses unto death of its own people.

This sickness we must live with now, early in the month of May 2020, is more than the plague that haunts us all. To double the trouble, the biological plague descends at the same time as a very human ghost—that of the less palpable but just as disastrous specter of a worldwide deterioration of democratic values. I am not speaking simply of the problems created for American political life by a president who is either completely ignorant of, or ferociously hostile to, the nation's democratic values as they were settled into law late in the eighteenth century. Donald Trump is what he is, but then so too is Jael Bolsanaro, the current president of Brazil who is of much that same ilk. Then, too, when thinking of anti-democratic leaders and nations, one hardly need mention Vladimir Putin in Russia, whose sins against democracy are too many to list, and Xi Jinping in China, who is on course to closing down Hong Kong among other atrocities. Narendra Modi in India, elected in 2014 as the leader of the world's largest democratic republic, turns out to be a Hindu nationalist who has reverted to the kind of anti-Muslim exclusionary practices he oversaw in 2002 as Chief Justice in Jurarat, his home state. Modi in India naturally brings to mind Arif Alvi, President of Pakistan, which for years now has been anything but a model of democratic values—mostly because of the partition of India after independence in 1947, which carved the Islamic Republic of Pakistan out of British India, thus to establish the conditions for an ongoing interstate tension that puts at risk what democratic values each might have.

Then, also, there is the deeply entrenched authoritarianism in Singapore, which in a way suggests all the normal flirtations of many European states with authoritarian right-wing parties in Hungary and Austria, among others. Worse yet, to Europe's east there is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, who has all but destroyed the democratic republic established under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Nearby, Bashar al-Assad in Syria makes Erdoğan look like the Abraham Lincoln of the region. Speaking of the region, one may want to avoid mentioning Israel, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ability to hold on to power in spite of criminal indictment, while backing Israel's military suppression of the Palestinians, betrays better days when Israel managed to defend itself in a hostile region while maintaining a more democratic state. Of course, at the other end of the world, there is also Rodrigo Duterte, President of the Philippines, whose violence ranks him with at least Bashar al-Assad. One might as well add Iraq and Afghanistan and other places where democratic leadership, if any, is a game of musical chairs. If Iraq and Afghanistan, then also Iran, where it has been a long time since there have been democratic chairs much less musical politics. In such a litany, it is hard not to mention the autocratic impulses of Boris Johnson's violation on democratic traditions in the UK by dismissing Parliament to get his way with Brexit.

One could go on—but not without favorably mentioning the three women leaders who have demonstrated strongly democratic values in leading their nations out of the way of the initial

wave of the COVID-19 disaster—Angela Merkel of Germany, Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand, and Mette Frederiksen of Denmark. Still, gender differences aside (or perhaps because of them), the scale tips precariously against democratic values around the world.

In one sense, it is almost silly to mention names in the news on May 11, 2020. One day in the future, readers will come upon this prefatory essay and exclaim whatever then might then be the equivalent of today's WTF. *Why is this guy writing about events and people long forgotten?* This is a good question. One that should be asked of a preface to a book dedicated to representing the various important social theories over the years—a preface that its author began by admitting that what he is doing may not be the best way to open such a book.

There is a good enough answer, even in these trying times, namely: Social theory is unlike other scientific theories because, to repeat, it is a theory that necessarily begins in ordinary, local life all around. *Where* one is when writing *and* reading social theories makes all the difference in the world. I was once at a social theory conference in South Korea where the theme was “Risk Society,” the author of which, Ulrich Beck, was a famous German scholar. As it happened, I was one of but two or three participants who was a native speaker of English. After three days, I had the gall to ask: “I’ve been wondering, since the origin of the concept of a *Risk Society* risk is German, what are the Korean characters for ‘risk’?” After a very long pause, the Koreans present were stumped; then, after another while, one Chinese participant said that in Mandarin the best equivalent is “He who stands against the wind.” I can assure you that we had not been discussing social risk in terms that were more than remotely associated with the Chinese term. So, there we were in Seoul, South Korea, where the language seemed to have no equivalent to “risk”—all of us discussing in English a concept of German origin. What language one uses to think about a local problem makes a difference, even if one is fluent enough in English and German, Korean, or Mandarin to think well about the problem.

Social theory uses languages both to understand what is going on in the world and to describe how those local things come down from global structures often to create local problems. If the subject talked about is social risk, it is obvious that what risks there are in daily life, wherever they come from, are understood differently from place to place. This is obvious today when the risk is that of becoming a victim of COVID-19. The risk is much greater in New York City than in Christchurch, New Zealand or, it would seem, in Seoul or Munich where there are significantly fewer proportionate risks. This, by the way, is not simply a matter of public health or medical expertise (with which New York City is very well endowed). Rather, the differences have to do with just how well the democratic process of a national culture works. Sadly, things being what they are these days, it is not beyond dispute that the higher rates of infection in the United States are an unarguably serious problem. Still, the U.S., with but 4.3% of the world's population, has 29% of the world's COVID-19 cases. Such a wild disproportion cannot possibly be due to scientific incompetence. It can only be a crisis resulting from a breakdown in the nation's social and democratic habits. It would seem that in America, not only have many of those in authority assumed a hostile attitude toward those they perceive as opponents—but, still worse, these attitudes have caused them (and especially those associated with the nation's current president) to pretend that the infection is a sometime thing. They even insinuate that the regions and cities where the rates are unusually high are somehow associated with the people who live there, not to mention their presumed political attitudes. Thus, though Korea, Germany, and New Zealand are nations governed by similar political systems with different political leaders, they have managed to prevent and otherwise deal with the COVID-19 virus better than America has.

Having said all this, the reader might suppose that this edition of *Social Theory* will be front loaded with selections on plagues as much as democracies. In fact, there is, none. But there are quite a few new selections on democracy—its origins and its risk of failures. These will be easy to spot, especially in the new subsection, *Social Foundations of Modern Democracy*, that now begins

Part 1 on *Modernity's Classical Age*. Previously, Part 1 began with a subsection of the contradictions of modern societies that featured writers like Marx and Weber, Freud and Durkheim—all of whom, and others in this group, wrote after the 1840s and well into the early 1900s. Selections from these social theorists are still well in evidence. But now the book begins with selections from prominent writers whose writings appeared as early as 1690 and well into the early 1800s. Obviously, the point is to begin this edition of the book with a foundational structural feature of modern societies, a feature that, today, is in a global crisis—hence: *Social Foundations of Modern Democracy*. Few would deny that societies became modern when governments became democratic and that Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Thomas Paine, and James Madison were among those who laid down the theoretical principles that made possible democratic revolutions like the ones America after 1775 and in France after 1789. Some might quibble that authors included in this group were political and not social theorists—to which the brief, if arguable, reply is that in the 1700s there was no social theory of the kind Marx, Durkheim, and Weber began to fashion late in the 1800s. The only note I would add is that in developing a section on *Social Foundations of Modern Democracy* I came to realize that I was mistaken not to have begun this way in the first place, hence, an axiom of sorts: Global crises focus the mind.

Otherwise, there are a few new selections on the crisis of democracies here and there, notably that from George Orwell's *1984* and Erich Fromm's *Doublethink*, Afterword to *1984*. But the remaining new selections on the crisis of democracies are in a new section in Part 6, *Global Realities in Uncertain Times*, which includes provocative selections written more or less in the current political situation: Hardt and Negri, *The Multitude Against the Empire*; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny*; Louis Menand, "1984" at *Seventy*.

Generally, I don't like to forecast a book's contents in a preface, but I break with habit this time because the book has been used over many years and these are the most substantial changes yet to be made. I believe thereby that readers deserve some explanation both for the changes and the reason I take the risk today, May 11, 2020, in beginning the book with a longish and perhaps too newsy preface.

Whatever the reader may think of what I have said to this point, there remain two questions worth answering. Both were discussed in previous editions. Both are meant to offer general advice on the nature of social theory, as well as how to read texts a few of which will appear to be difficult, perhaps even strange, to a reader just beginning her study of social theory. The first of the two questions is: What does it mean to claim, as I do, that social theories are practical theories of unsettled worlds?

How Can Social Theories Be Practical Theories of Changing Worlds?

When do very big things in life start to change? This is surely one of the more gripping questions anyone can ask. What were the first signs that the love of your life was about to leave? Or when do kids begin to realize that their parents are going to split up? Or, in the larger frame of human events, when exactly did Rome start to decline, or capitalism begin to change how business is done, or the British first realize they were losing their empire, or the telephone first become a virtual body part, or, as now, that democracy may be losing its sense of itself? Whether the questions are personal or global, people have good reason to wonder when changes of all kinds got under way. Perhaps we worry about this because we want to know why things must change. In the absence of good answers to the why, we settle for a when.

No question is more basic to social science than "why?"—and none is harder to answer than the why of social changes. It is likely that there would be no social science at all without ordinary people asking why things are as they are. Why do apples, ripe but unpicked, fall to the ground? Gravity is the answer everywhere except in outer space. But "gravity" is merely a name for less

than self-evident laws of nature. Why, for another example, do people in large groups get along as well as they do? This, it turns out, is a question still more difficult to answer because, as anyone honest with herself knows, to live with others is to be impressed by how impossible they are and how little they respect our perfect social manners. Social scientists would be more than pleased were they able to agree on a term like “gravity” that would explain why, in spite of the countless troubles and conflicts of social life, people in groups do as well together as they do. That it happens, we know. How things happen as they did or do is hard to know because social things are tricky, even devious. If *how* people live together changes, then *why* do they still get along more than you would suppose?

Hence, asking *when* important social relations and structures begin to change is a central question of any social science. We would like to know the *why*, we may be dimly aware of the *how*, but we will settle for the *when*. None of the three types of questions is easily answered, but at least the *when* question has the merit of being as common to everyday life as it is to academic social science. Though it might seem so in some cases, social theories are of justifiable value only when they suggest something to say about the practical concerns of ordinary people living their mundane lives. People may not ask the questions social theories answer. They may not even know that a question is there to be asked. But when a question touches people up and down their streets, or in line with them at the soup kitchen, it begins to be more widely considered. What is this virus? Will I get it? Why must I wear a mask? Where did this thing start? Why don't those in charge do something about it? And so on. The questions are immediate. Their answers, if any, require a social theory that goes beyond the public health programs to a theory that answers the question of the day: Why did a modern democratic society replete with scientific and medical expertise, and wealth beyond all others, allow this plague to get out of control?

Herein is found the special role of social theory. The first duty of social theorists is to ask fresh *why* questions. Knowing when the love of one's life may have decided to quit the relationship is some solace to the jilted lover. Was it at that party when she seemed so happy to see that new guy? Is she with him now? *But why?* Popular music, from country to rap, would be more bereft of coherent lyrics than already they are if it were it not for the devastations love can visit upon the young at heart. At the other extreme, social studies might not have become sciences if people had not wondered, from the start, just *when* and *why* this modern world came into its own, thus to change how people lived together. Anyone who loses a love may doubt his or her self-worth. The people who lose their traditional ways may wonder what will become of them without the old, familiar ways and *why* they have faded away.

Social theories are often able to propose a *why*, sometimes a *how*, and even a *when* to solve these mysteries. Still, when social theories suggest answers to any or all of these questions, they usually start arguments that can last for years to come. The lover who loses out usually gets over it. Social theorists never get over the *whys* and *wherefores* they are obliged to ask, even when they admit that answers are hard to come by.

Social theory is the art, if not always the science, of asking the right questions at the risk of irritating the hell out of those who, in their own minds, have already settled the matter. *Social Theory* is a collection of readings that is not meant to be an answer book so much as a compendium of the struggles of modern social theory to ask and answer the *why*, *how*, and *when* of the unthinkable nature of social worlds. The answers once thought convincing may still be. When it comes to social theory, few answers are completely right or wrong, which gives them a good shelf life and makes them worth reading even today. To be a social thinker, if not a professional theorist, is to live with uncertainty—in respect to which the most certain social thing in the modern world is that sooner or later everything changes. This may sound a bit daunting, but when you stop to think about it, most things in life that we consider absolutely certain are not. In life with others, the important thing is to accept the changes that cannot be prevented and to understand them.

The social theories you will read here are more than that, to be sure, but they are at least that, which is what makes them interesting, even exciting.

How Can Social Theories Be Taught and Read?

This then is the second question. If, as I think, social theory is inherently exciting because, when it is good, it tries to identify and explain the big questions that all individuals and collectivities must face, then what might be the corollary to this assumption in respect to reading it, which is also the question of teaching it?

My personal answer is that reading is itself a matter of teaching oneself to figure out how to answer questions that may not have dawned before the reading. The single most touching letter I have received from a reader of this book was written by a woman in mid-life, with kids still at home, working a full-time job, attending a community college in Florida. She claimed that what she read in the book changed her life. She didn't say which texts had this effect, nor did she explain how she found time to read amid all else she was dealing with in life. But it was a sincere message that, over the years, has been repeated many times by others. Let all teachers remember that much of what Karl Marx wrote was written *for* the working class, or that Max Weber's famous essays on science and politics as vocations were given as public lectures, or that Émile Durkheim was the leading public intellectual of his day, or that no one was more influential in the development of American public education than John Dewey. On it goes. So, rule number one is: *Don't be afraid!*

When it comes to teaching, I am sure that some teachers look at this book and say, "interesting stuff but the selections are way too short for what I do." A few have said just this to me; to which I reply, "fair enough." On the other hand, one thing I have learned both as an editor and teacher is that it is amazing how quickly it is possible to go to the core of an argument if that is what you are required to do. I do not claim to have gotten this right in every case. A few times I've gotten it quite wrong and have tried to correct the selections when the time came. I do not claim any special genius at this. If there is a skill here, it is to take seriously the practice of Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in his day, read nearly everything (almost literally), but who claimed that he *never* read any book from cover to cover. He was a philosopher. Nonfiction works are easier to treat this way. I would not recommend this approach for the reading of fiction. But for social theories, like philosophies and similar writings, there is wisdom in Emerson's method. There is always a core idea and, in my experience, only the very best theories have more than one of them, revised and elaborated on. Some of my friends and colleagues in the field will think ill of me for saying it, but Marx's *Capital* is the only classical book of social theory that has quite a few ideas. Happily, they are all in a single section near the start of the argument. By the time he gets to the long chapters on the working day, a good reader will have already gotten his point. By contrast, there are few books, still read today, that are very long but with not much more one than one idea. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is an example—though quickly I add what an idea it was to conclude that Kant's theory of knowledge was wrong because knowledge belongs to the collective life, not the categories of mental life.

It may seem either a conceit or foolishness on my part to suggest that shorter selections can often get at the heart of a social theory (the conceit being that I have been able to do this well). Teachers who do not want to teach shorter selections from a big book are not wrong to think this way. A good many of them (myself included) get around the problem by assigning whole books to provide what *Social Theory* does not or cannot. I have regularly assigned the whole of Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (while excusing college students from responsibility for the footnotes, which constitute more than half the book's mass). Why this book? One reason is that I love the challenge of encouraging students to learn to follow a long and sometimes wayward

argument that covers what, to them, can be weirdly obscure subjects like *extra ecclesium nulla salus*. But, also, because, Emerson notwithstanding, I do believe that reading books is important and that everyone should do it often. I happen also to think that Weber's book is one of the few from which it is very difficult to snatch a few pages to make the main points.

This brings me to another generic point that, to me, has never been more important than now: *Read!* We all know that not many kids today read books. This does not mean they are stupid. But it does mean that when they become students pursuing higher degrees, they are often ill equipped to do the work. Social theory and other kinds of writing can be difficult if readers have not spent a lifetime facing the daunting task of reading long and complicated books, whether fiction or non-fiction. I am not actually a gifted reader. I grew up in a home without books. My wife, on the other hand, has been reading since she was a child when she locked herself in the only family bathroom to read *War and Peace*. I am eighty-three and that book is still on my list (while right now my wife is reading it for the umpteenth time). It's a very long book. I have tried to read Dickens's *Bleak House*. It drives me crazy. One summer I gave up. At my age, I must save time for *War and Peace*. On the other hand, Dickens's *Great Expectations* is just as long as *Bleak House* and I could hardly put it down. Tastes are always involved in what one reads. In school, teachers usually determine what is required according to their own tastes. But students and other readers just getting into the habit serve themselves very well if they take what is required and then follow it up by spending time in a good library wandering through undiscovered stacks. If you browse, you will find all manner of mysteries.

One Sunday, as my wife and I rode the E train uptown, I read. Having lost interest in the subway ads for hemorrhoid laser surgeries, I had brought along a collection of Raymond Carver's short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. I finished the first story in the few stops between Canal Street and Penn Station. I paused only a moment. My wife said, "Amazing, isn't it?" I just nodded. It was.

Later, while we were walking in the park, on the East Side just north of the zoo, a jogger lunged toward us at a good pace. His stride was strong but broken. He was disabled. Cerebral palsy, we thought, saying little else. After, we took the shortcut to the West Side. Soon, he came again, having already circled most of the six-mile circuit. Then, my wife said, "I've seen him running here for years. Think of what it takes." I did. I imagined a solitary life, ordered around chaotic limbs, a life he ran with dignity among hundreds of beautiful bodies on roller blades. She had her thoughts, too. We said a little, but less than you would suppose.

Reading is like that. A relatively few abstracted marks or events evoke worlds others already know. But how does it work? When I was a little boy, I asked such a question about the radio. How was it that, each weekday evening at 6:15, I could tune in to *Tom Mix* on the Magnavox console in the safe, far corner of the living room? Though I have since learned many theories about reading, I still do not understand either it or the radio. Somehow, something is broadcast in the air. We get it. Others do, too, even those with whom we share no intimacies at all. In a blurb on the back of the book of stories I read on the subway, Frank Kermode says, "Carver's fiction is so spare in manner that it takes a time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition is represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch." Though Raymond Carver was among the masters of this sort of writing, much the same can be said of all writing. It succeeds at whatever it does in spite of the sparseness of its means relative to the worlds evoked.

The difference between reading and radio listening, though, is that reading seems to have become an activity of no necessary limits. Among the people I talk to, it is common to refer to the analysis of many different sorts of situations as a "reading." I once heard a little story in which the term was used in such a way. At a dinner party some time ago, a guest had delivered a crude ethnic insult that angered and embarrassed most of those at the table. In a response calculated to set things straight without disrupting the dinner, the hostess gave him what the teller of the story

described as “a postmodern reading of the anti-Semitism in his remark.” Apparently, that reading did little of its intended good. The old insult was still raw. Just the same, in this case a “reading” is a vastly more complex communication than whatever it was that allowed my wife to understand what I was feeling about a story we had both read and a jogging man we saw. If “reading” is an activity inclusive not just of books and events in the park but even of delicate retorts to gratuitous insults, then it is possible that there is no end to what reading might be. Nor should there be.

Whatever way it works, reading does seem to be an accurate way to describe what happens when different people discover a similar sense in an event as spare as that of a disabled man running well. In the same way that there is not an infinite number of meanings to be derived from a written text like one of Carver’s short stories, neither is it that the true nature of that man’s world is likely to be much different from what most people might imagine. Different, surely, but certainly not random. Otherwise, nothing we read would make sense. However it works, reading cannot work all too differently from the radio. Somehow, in Kermode’s words, “a whole culture” is out there. Reading is what is done with it in order to make worlds for ourselves.

Reading, in this expanded sense, is the natural corollary to social theory. If the least common denominator of social theory is telling one’s world into being, then reading must be the means by which others recognize that story as somehow familiar to them. Many will disagree with this view. One of the anonymous academic readers of this book was particularly irritated at my suggestion that scientific social theory is no different from the theories people produce in ordinary life. There is a difference, of course. But however people may cherish and defend that difference, I do not think that professional social theories are degraded in any way by enjoying common ground with ordinary human activity. On the contrary.

I would not say that social theory is nothing but reading, of course. But, in my experience writing books and essays, I have learned a lesson that worked very well in my teaching. It seems certain that one of the best ways to read difficult material is to force oneself (or be forced) to write about it. Some years ago, I picked up a tip from Audrey Sprenger, an excellent teacher, who assigned to her students what she called “close readings,” by which she meant for students to write short essays that closely interpret a text. Invariably, some of my own students called these “closed” readings, either as a joke or because, unconsciously, the stuff seems closed to them. Yet, even when they do not quite understand the material very well, the work of trying to say something about it usually paid off in the long run. I asked students to write one of these a week. They were never graded or returned. The point was to get them engaged as writers. Sometimes, what they wrote was awful. But, by the end of a semester, when they had written these short essays, they had the makings of a substantial essay. They liked it and the serious students never complained. So, my second rule is: *Read and write ’til you drop.*

We who have made a life out of writing social theory are usually also teachers even when not in a classroom. So far as I know, it is impossible to be a social theorist without a day job, and teaching is the one most social theorists have. In my experience, there are few things more interesting than listening to a really first-rate scholar talk about teaching and its effect on research. It happened to me not long ago at Yale when Peter Bearman, a distinguished sociologist at Columbia, spoke to faculty and students. Bearman generally does highly mathematical sociology, but, on this occasion, he spoke of writing an ethnography. I don’t recall the last time I was so well taught by a serious scholar talking about teaching. Experiences like these remind those who read and write social theory that the point of it all in the long run is to *teach* it.

It is not—nor should it be—just the teachers who teach. Students, it is well known, are really good at this sort of thing. I learned this when I happened on the practice of organizing students into groups assigned to read a list of theories together *and* write a joint paper they were to present to the class as a whole. At first, they hated this assignment, if only because it takes time and trouble to meet with others outside of class. Of course, there were always free riders who tried to

get away with doing very little. It turned out that I seldom had to deal with this problem because their fellow group members were often more punitive than I would have been. This is because, I assume, they formed a social bond of a temporary kind with fellow group members. More often than not, they produced very good social theory that sparked excellent discussion. Many reported that they actually had fun.

So, if my first rule of reading social theory is *Don't be afraid*, and the second is *Read and write until you are blue in the face*; my third rule is *Have fun!* Truth be told, I have had quite a lot of it reading, thinking about, writing, and then teaching social theory, and I am not alone.

Acknowledgments

Over the six previous editions since 1993, this book has benefited from the generous work of many excellent editors at Westview and now Routledge. In fact, over the course of the book's history there have been, if memory serves, eleven different editors. Such is the way of book publishing these days. I have thanked them all along the way of the editions they helped bring to life. As much as all my editors have done, the first fact is that this book would not have come to be without its original editor, Dean Birkenkamp. Since 1993 we have become friends. He remains one of academic publishing's most imaginative editors. And now, as things have turned out, Dean became editor of this seventh edition when Routledge bought out not only his Paradigm publishing enterprise but also the remains of the once noble Westview Publishing House.

Between the first and second editions, Florence Brown Lyons died. The dedication of the first gave her much pleasure. The subsequent dedications to her memory give me pleasure of another kind, though one chastened by her absence.

Between the second and third editions, we lost Matthew to a suicide I have come to accept and even to respect. I miss him still and will until whatever comes next. Then between the sixth and seventh editions, we lost Noah to a vicious cancer. He had twenty more years than his brother, not enough for such a noble person who helped others with his brilliantly understated wit and generous kindness, as Matthew did in the ways he stretched the limits of the possible and deployed his own kind of brilliance to entertain those around him. Such is the hand we have been dealt, aces beaten by a full house, now less full. Anna Julia, Geri, Adrienne, and I live on with memories of what is now past, looking to the future.

Over the years, many colleagues, students, teachers, friends, and strangers have contributed to my understanding of what the book required and how, over time, it needed to change or remain as it was. I have thanked them in the previous editions. The list by now would be so long as to risk mockery of the gratitude I feel. I think of them often, always with thanksgiving.

Some may find it odd for me to mention here Immanuel Wallerstein, who died at the end of summer 2019. Immanuel was hard to get to know, but over a good quarter-century he warmed to me as I did to him. In time we became friends. Geri and I had dinners with Immanuel and Beatrice, the most memorable of which is when we brought then five-year-old Anna along. She wanted to do nothing but watch one of her TV shows. This created a memorable scene. Immanuel went to the TV room, then in the basement. He fell to his knees to attempt to find a program that would satisfy Anna. He did not give up until she was happy. This was a vital aspect of his nature not always evident in public lectures. We shared a good many special days. His, Geri's, and my birthdays are all within a few days in late September. We often celebrated birthdays together. Toward the end, I was invited to join in celebration of his last, 57th anniversary with Beatrice. Their daughter Kathy and granddaughter Layla joined us by FaceTime from San Francisco. It hardly need be said that he influenced my thinking over the years and therefore shaped the general idea of this book. But the point here goes beyond our relations.

When reading social theory, we should remember that none of those represented in this book were unloved by friends and family. The most poignant early story of this is the sad fact that Émile

Durkheim died of a broken heart after his son André was killed in the Great War. There are others I could mention. But I mean to make the general point that, even when what social theorists write requires effort to read, they were, and are, human beings with mundane lives in which they are loved—and missed when they pass away.

They do their best often against personal losses and other twists and turns of ordinary life—as I have tried to do here. It is the nature of social theories that, in the long run, the best is seldom good enough. Such is life.

Introduction—Social Theory

Its Uses and Pleasures

Charles Lemert

Social theory is a basic survival skill. This may surprise those who believe it to be a special activity of experts of a certain kind. True, there are professional social theorists, usually academics. But this fact does not exclude my belief that social theory is something done necessarily, and often well, by people with no particular professional credential. When it is done well, by whomever, it can be a source of uncommon pleasure.

When, many years ago, my now-adult son Noah was in elementary school, he came home one day with questions that led to some good social theory. After Noah had spent his first two school years in an informal, somewhat countercultural school, we moved. He was then enrolled in a more traditional public school. Thus began a more lively and sociologically interesting line of dinner table talk. He observed, for example, that when his class marched from its classroom to the lunchroom, the boys were told to form one line, the girls another. The march itself was under a code of silence. Having grown accustomed to schools with few rules of any sort, my son found this strange. At dinner, he reported this exotic practice with the ironic question, “What was this for? Do they think we are going to attack the girls?” He was perhaps seven at the time.

Later, in junior high school, he began to figure this out. After some years of close observation, Noah determined that schools impose arbitrary social rules, like walking silently in sex-segregated lines, because they are institutions concerned as much with civil discipline and authority as with learning. He used his own words, but he had developed a social theory congruent to his earlier questions. This he enjoyed because he felt the power of being able to say something persuasive about the world he was then just beginning to engage with the quiet rebellion of a young man in the making.

Most people—whatever their social class, age, gender, race, or sexual orientation—develop a good enough repertoire of social theories of this sort. Usually, one suspects, these theories come into some focus in childhood and early adolescence, often in reply to innocent questions about daily social practices. When such theories are stated, very often in ordinary language, innocence is already lost. The world as it is comes into being.

In *There Are No Children Here* (1991), Alex Kotlowitz tells the story of two boys trying to survive in one of Chicago’s most dangerous public housing projects. I read the book a good many years ago; the boys are now grown up like my son. Lafayette, then age ten, said: “If I grow up, I want to be a bus driver.” The “if” suggests one of the reasons Kotlowitz took the book’s title from an observation by Lafayette’s mother: “But you know, there are no children here. They’ve seen too much to be children.” This, too, is a social theory. The boy and his mother both put into plain words the social world of the uncounted thousands of urban children whose lullaby is gunfire. If not pleasure, there must at least be some satisfaction in knowing and being able to describe one’s place in a world. If you cannot say it, how can you deal with it? Between the experiences of the middle-class, White boy (my son) and a welfare-class, Black boy (Lafayette), there is common ground. Both knew they knew something important about their social worlds, and they knew what they knew because they could put it into words.

Thus considered, social theory is the normal accomplishment of socially adept human creatures figuring out what other creatures of the same sort are doing with, to, or around them. Such theories are everywhere, though they are not easy to come by. David Bradley, in his classic novel *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), explains why:

The key to the understanding of any society lies in the observation and analysis of the insignificant and the mundane. For one of the primary functions of societal institutions is to conceal the basic nature of the society, so that the individuals that make up the power structure can pursue the business of consolidating and increasing their power untroubled by the minor carpings of a dissatisfied peasantry. Societal institutions act as fig leaves for each other's nakedness. . . . And so, when seeking to understand the culture or the history of a people, do not look at the precepts of the religion, the form of the government, the curricula of the schools, or the operations of businesses; flush the johns.

Bradley then put into words what his readers all know but never have reason to say: The toilets on buses are foul, while those on airplanes are neat and well supplied, and it is no accident that poor people ride buses, while the less poor fly. It is, thus, a plausibly coherent social theory to say that such a society considers its poor filth, yet wishes to disguise this unpleasant attitude.

Social theory, Bradley might suggest, is about the mundane and the concealed—those hidden aspects of social life we sometimes encounter in the ordinary course of daily life. We don't always see them; thus, we aren't always in a position to speak of them, for at least the following reasons: (1) The powers that be want them concealed (Bradley's idea). (2) Either the empowered or the weak may resist talking about them because they are too threatening (Kotlowitz's implicit idea that some people deny the reality of urban life because it's too much to deal with). Or (3) people need time and experience to learn how to put into words the reality they live with (but not everyone has the time to do this). Social theories don't just occur to us. Some we never get. Others come in time. Some we have to work to get at. But they are there to be known and said.

It could therefore be said that an individual survives in society to the extent he or she can say plausibly coherent things about that society. Our ability to endure, and on occasion to enjoy, the worlds of irrational lunch-line rules, of crack wars in the hallways, of clean airplane restrooms, and much more depends on our knowing something about *why* things are as they are. And we only *know* such things well enough when we can talk about them.

Professional social theorists may find this too simple a definition of their stock-in-trade. Presumably, no one likes the idea that what he or she does for a living is but a specialized version of what any person on the street can do. Yet the evidence supports the idea that there is at best a difference of degree, not of kind, between practical and professional theories of social life. Professional social theorists, if they are honest, must admit that they encounter this truth whenever they teach students who invariably say in introductory courses, "Interesting stuff, but it sounds like jargon for what everyone knows." The comeback to the wisdom of these students should be: "Perhaps, but can they all *say* it?" Though professional social theorists sometimes get carried away with *how* they say what they know about the social world, they at least are skilled at coming up with something coherent to say.

From this uneasy balance of trade between practical and professional social theorists, I draw the justification for this collection of readings in social theory. Everyone can do it. Everyone should do more of it. Responsible practical members of society presumably would live better—with more power, perhaps more pleasure—if they could produce more social theories, that is, if they could use their already considerable practical sociologies to greater advantage. One of the ways lay members can learn to say more about their social worlds is to pay attention to what professional social theorists have said and are saying. This is not because the professionals are more likely to be right—only because they are more practiced.

The Origins of Social Theory

The surprising thing is that professional social theorists have not been practicing their trade for very long, at least not in great numbers. In fact, professional social theory has been around only for the past several hundred years, roughly since the beginning of modern times. Though it has been argued that earlier peoples did a type of social theory (the Greeks are usually cited in this regard), social theory as we know it really began only in the eighteenth century in the various expressions of Enlightenment culture. It did not become a popular activity among the urban intelligentsia until the middle of the nineteenth century, when there first were relatively free and open social spaces. The development of civil society in the eighteenth century, mostly in European (and a few North American) urban centers, permitted enough freedom of expression to encourage independent thinking. These were the circumstances in which a critical mass of literate citizens began to pose the questions that social theory tries to answer.

It is even possible to say that the foundational categories with which social theory first began were themselves an attempt to account for what was then a striking difference between modern societies and the preceding traditional ones. The modern/traditional dichotomy became, therefore, a technical expression with innumerable variations. Max Weber wrote of a rational, future-oriented ethic as the distinctive feature of modern, capitalist societies and distinguished this ethic from traditionalism. Émile Durkheim wrote of different types of moral cohesiveness, the modern being a more complicated social division of labor in which individuals tended to become lost without the more immediate social controls of traditional societies. Karl Marx, of course, wrote of the uniquely subtle forms of alienation under the capitalist mode of production in which despotism, slavery, and feudal domination were replaced by less overt, but still exploitative, aggressions against the human spirit. Though these three, and many other nineteenth-century social theorists, held sharply different views on the actual state of the modern world, all began their social theories with an explicit theory of the modern world's differences from the traditional.

In the briefest of terms, they all believed what no thinking person could deny: Beginning with the cultural, political, and economic revolutions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fewer and fewer people could avoid the responsibility to have something to say about the new society. This was not just because the society was new and changing. More importantly, it was because this society demanded, in effect, that its more urbanized and literate citizens participate. Little in early or later modernity was settled. Little remained the same for any period of time. As a result, in a world where change was everywhere, those who desired to have a public life and to participate in the economic and political activities of the new times had to make up their own minds about what was going on.

The contrast with the immediately preceding period must have been quite compelling, perhaps shocking. Few of us who live in the Europeanized, Northern world today have any inkling of what the change must have meant. Even those who come from rural areas can only catch a glimpse. I once lived in rural southern Illinois. On a Sunday's drive, one could visit small villages like Buncombe (population 850), where the boarded-up general store and the peeling paint told of the effect of the new Walmart outlet in Carbondale, twelve miles to the north. There, the traditional rural world was still passing away. But today's passings of the premodern order in rural Illinois or Nebraska are but occasional glimpses of the early modern experience when *everywhere* the old life was disappearing.

Today, we can only imagine, at some remove, the traditional world that the early social theorists saw fading. Consider a passage from R. W. Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953):

By the thirteenth century . . . the main features of village life were established as they were to exist for another five hundred years. Materially, there was probably remarkably little difference between the life

of the peasant in the thirteenth century and the village before it was transformed by modern mechanisms: the produce of the land had increased sixfold or tenfold during these centuries, but very little of this increase went into the pocket or stomach of the individual peasant. Compared with the rest of the community, he remained immune from new wants, or the means of satisfying them. Everywhere the peasant kept himself alive on a diet whose scarcity and monotony was broken only by intermittent feasting, at harvest time, at pig-killing time, and when people got married or died. There were great differences in the fortunes of individual peasants: families rose and fell, holdings grew and withered away again, following laws similar to those which governed the rise and fall of kingdoms. Over the fortunes of all, high and low, there presided the unpredictable factors of marriage and childbirth. The rules of succession, infinitely various and complicated, often modified, but with the general authority of centuries of growth behind them, were the framework within which the pattern of village—as of national—life was woven.

Since R. W. Southern wrote these words in 1953, social historians have learned a great deal more about the underlying strains and potential for rebellion and change in the traditional medieval world. Just the same, one can take this view of village life as a fair guide to the traditional, pre-modern world. Yes, there was change. But change was a “rise and fall” of fortune. Everything social was pressed under the “general authority of centuries of growth.” For at least five hundred years, social life in these villages remained much the same. Hence, we have Max Weber’s eloquent definition of traditional values as those adhering to the “eternal yesterday.”

By contrast, read the description of modern life written in 1903 by a friend of Weber’s, Georg Simmel, in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903):

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individual is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences, i.e., his mind is stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded. Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrast between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions—with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life—it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with these lower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythms of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.

Hardly anyone who lives in or has recently visited a modern metropolis could fail to understand intuitively what Simmel meant by the psychological individual who, even on crossing an urban street, must react differently from—and thus become some other sort of human individual than—a rural cousin or an ancestor in an early thirteenth-century village. But what is most interesting is that it would have been impossible for Simmel merely to describe the metropolitan mental life. He had to produce a theory. The passage is, of course, a sometimes abstract but clear enough social theory, not just of urban mentality but also of modern life itself. Few people in those earliest decades of the new urban society, even as late as 1903 when Simmel wrote, could have spoken of the new life without comparing it somehow to the traditional or the rural. This necessity was the first condition of social theory.

Thus, we may say that the first professional theorists were individuals who could not have done social theory without the new society. At the same time, they were individuals who, having begun to think of that society, could not help but think about it theoretically. It was as though the open

space and rapid pace of the new world meant one could best embrace it not with any act of the will or reflex of feeling but only with a theory. The first form of that theory was comparative. Simmel and the others writing a century and more ago thought of the modern social world in comparison to the traditional.

Today, these are no longer the necessary conditions for doing social theory. The social worlds in which people must now do their theories are sharply different from those in the late nineteenth century. Still, always in the background somewhere is that foundational condition of social theory: It would not have come into its own, certainly not as a professional activity, had it not been for the new modern society that encouraged and even required thoughtful talk about what was going on.

Thinking an Earlier New World Order

Today's changed conditions for doing social theory have disturbed the original balance of trade between lay and expert social theorists. Were we to compare, say, the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, we would soon find two major differences in the circumstances affecting who thinks about social life and how they think. First, the number of people with ready access to a culture supportive of critical thinking has increased dramatically, especially after the hold of the European powers lost control on their colonies in the 1950s and 1960s. Second, the people normally engaged in critical social thinking today are no longer necessarily identified with a dominant class of bourgeois intellectuals. Many of the new social theorists do not consider themselves bourgeois (even if they are), and many are visibly not anything like the white, male advocates of European culture who wrote the first, best-known social theories.

These two differences—one of number, another of kind—make social theory today an enterprise largely, but not entirely, different from that in the nineteenth century. Among the more salient differences is that today's social theory is produced in more intimate intercourse with the lives of people who are not at all professional in the subject. Hence, the balance is different. At the end of the nineteenth century, social theory was chiefly done by experts; today, even the experts pay closer attention to what some call everyday-life social theory.

Alvin W. Gouldner, a social theorist who wrote in the period when these differences became evident, would have referred to these as cultures of critical discourse—cultures that encourage large numbers of people to think critically about the social world *and* that provide these people with the tools with which to do the thinking. Gouldner himself thought of this change in what turned out to be overly general terms. He assumed there was one culture of critical discourse and that it was ready-made within the culture of modern life. In one important sense, Gouldner was correct. Modern life, in contrast to the traditional, *did* seem to encourage critical thinking. This was, in effect, the main point of the Enlightenment—the idea that, in Immanuel Kant's famous definition, modern, enlightened people would “dare to know.” Daring to know and daring to use that knowledge are attitudes toward life and the world that could only arise among people willing to break with tradition, thereby looking to new, future possibilities. In this sense, modernity was a culture of critical thinking and thus of social theory. Just the same, the present social world encourages a state of mind more complicated than an essential and universal humanistic attitude of critical reasoning. Increasingly in the last generation, the world seems to engender any number of different cultures, many of which, in turn, encourage critical social theories—theories that may each be in a different voice.

Very often, these differences are subtle, barely detectable. My son and Lafayette were about the same age when each put into words a shrewd diagnosis of his worldly circumstances. On the surface, both boys might seem to have been producing social ideas appropriate to a certain level of male psychological development. On close inspection (whatever developmental psychology

might teach us about when children can formulate cognitive or moral objects), the differences between the theories of the two boys are there to be seen. The White, middle-class boy who diagnoses the duplicitous and confusing functions of his school does so in a gesture of prowess. What he discovers and says about this aspect of his world is, to be sure, armament against a sometimes frightening, often goofy social arrangement. Yes, even members of the middle class have reason to fear the world. Some individuals make the journey to adult life with ease, some with great pain. And a few do not make it at all. But most do, somehow.

Lafayette's real world was different. He said "if I grow up" in recognition of the harsh world in which he lived. By the time he met Kotlowitz, Lafayette had witnessed the murder of other children not much older than he. Like the middle-class boy in a safer, suburban life, he was a shrewd observer. Yet Lafayette was expressing something that went well beyond keen observational sense. He was putting into words what every Black, male child growing up in urban projects knows to be true: Poor Black boys do not always grow up. Boys like my son can be enrolled in countercultural schools or private schools where, on occasion, the rules make more sense. They might have options.

But boys like Lafayette, whatever their options, cannot escape the simple, hard facts of their social situation. Their odds are different, and the difference is a complex result of powerful social forces that go well beyond anything Lafayette and his brother and their mates could hope to manage. He was not using the technical language of social theory, but he was saying that he recognized the meaning of being poor, Black, male, American. These four social forces—class, race, gender, nationality—form a matrix that defines and limits, at an early age, what and who boys like Lafayette can be. Some may outrun the limits; some grow up; some grow up whole and well. But boys born into Lafayette's social circumstances must, somehow, figure out who they are and what they want to be in relation to the limiting condition "If I grow up." This makes his theory of his world different from my son's.

But what about this is new? Surely this is not the only world in which a generation of children, even a generation of children of a specific race and gender, has been under threat of extinction. No, but it may be a time when the culture in which children grow up believes that a person's social identity is fixed somehow in relation to the particulars of his or her life. The children themselves cannot be expected to grasp such abstractions, but a child like Lafayette must, it seems, understand his concrete difference from others. "If I grow up, I want to be a bus driver." Lafayette understood, and answered, the question asked of all children. The "if" was local knowledge of his reality.

The world today, early in the twenty-first century, is less dominated than it once was by a single, unified dream of how things should be. People living in areas influenced by modern European culture have always exaggerated the truth of their dream. For several centuries, they and quite a few others were persuaded that theirs was also the world's dream. European modernity's idea of human history moving progressively toward a better world—one in which life everywhere would be more and more like life in some European or North American metropolis—was an ideology of global proportions and quite a successful one. But today, boys like Lafayette are not alone in refusing to be taken in by such promises. Whatever is noble in it, the dream of one world or one America getting better all the time does not speak to them.

This is the big and recent change in social theory. The new social theories are no longer beholden to the West's ideology of human history. At the beginning, the classic social theorists accepted with modest reluctance the idea that European culture was the future for humankind. The great ones had their reservations, true. Still, Marx's *Manifesto* began with a famous line about the specter haunting Europe then quickly shifted to a discussion of "the history of all hitherto existing society," which turned out to be a history of the West. Durkheim, likewise, wrote humbly of the foundations of knowledge in the most elementary and non-European religious societies, yet his primary scientific and political preoccupations were to explain and develop a thoroughly modern society, of which Third Republic France was the ideal.

Weber, too, was restrained and judicious in his scholarly studies of non-Western religions, but his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has contributed mightily to the myth of the superiority of Western rationality over Eastern traditionalism. Certainly, Weber's doubts about the future of the West were severe—but not because he preferred some other civilization. He was vexed because he believed in the West. These three men, along with Sigmund Freud, are usually considered the greatest of the original social theorists, and surely their greatness is due in some part to their intuitive sense that something was wrong with the West's dream of having discovered the final solution to humanity's problem. Others before them (like Auguste Comte) and after them (like Talcott Parsons) dreamed the dream with much less caution.

Until the past generation, most of the recognized experts in social theory took for granted the parochial idea that the culture of a relatively small number of White people in the North explained the “is and ought” of the world. Because the modern culture that invented social theory also invented the various myths of the inherent superiority of the West, one can easily see the limitations built into the classic versions of the best-known social theories in the last century and a half. It is tempting to conclude that just as the late nineteenth century required its version of critical social theory to account for the startling emergence of the modern, so the late twentieth century required some other sort of social theory to reckon with the disturbances in the culture and political economy of the European and American spheres of influence. This is why the changes in social theory could first be detected with the rebellions and revolutions in European and American societies that began in the 1960s. If social theory, whether lay or expert, is a theory of a kind of world, then the type of theory must change as the world turns.

At the very end of the twentieth century, hardly any public issue was more controversial than this, particularly in the United States. There are those who still insist that, whatever has changed, America and the world can still be unified around the original Western ideas that Arthur Schlesinger described as “still a good answer—still the best hope” in *The Disuniting of America* (1991). Schlesinger—White, male, Harvard, liberal, intellectual, historian—is the most persuasive of those in this camp. Against them are others who say, “Enough. Whatever is useful in these ideas, they don't speak to me.” Audre Lorde—Black, feminist, lesbian, poet, and social theorist—put this opposing view sharply in an often-quoted line: “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” Between these two views, there is more than enough controversy to go around. Even now, well into the twenty-first century, the controversies over America's place in the world continue as in a prominent political sloganeering, of which the most famous is, “We'll make America great again!”, against which serious public figures and academic theorists have taken very strong exception.

In large part, the controversy is between two different types of social theorists *and* over how social theory ought be done. It involves who has the right to say what about the social world. As the world turns more and more into an information age of uncertain globalizing effects, hardly anyone can refuse to say something about the social world. Social theory, thus, becomes ever more a virtual imperative of life in the global society. This is an odd turn. The change in social theory has brought social theory back full circle to at least one important aspect of its origins. Though the first social theorists were bourgeois intellectuals, they were also, for the most part, public figures. Marx stirred the masses, wrote for newspapers, and roused the suspicion of the authorities. In Paris a generation later, the public took note of what Durkheim had to say on any number of topics, from the innocence of Captain Alfred Dreyfus to the reform of French schools. At about the same time, Weber's public lectures were packed, and the early recruits of the Chicago School of sociology were reformers, journalists, settlement house workers, and clergy. Then, social theory was a public activity. Now, after a long exile in the guise of an academic science, social theory is slowly working its way back into the public sphere—as provocateur of social conscience, as object of ridicule and controversy, as source of new thinking about the social world.

The reason for this is clear. Everyone, from the politician to the common man or woman, is aware that there seems to be something different in the world, something that can reasonably be called a new world order. Few can define it. No one can be certain what it is. Some do not believe in it. Some consider it their best hope in a long while. Yet whatever one thinks, the changes in the world between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s seem gradually to have cumulated to the point where now hardly anyone refuses to speak of them.

What is meant by the new world order? What place will it allow for the old ways? What new demands will it put before human beings? Questions like these nag at us, whatever our politics or ethics or situation in life. In this respect, the end of the twentieth century is a time much like the end of the nineteenth. We are asked what to make of the new order. We are asked to think about the world in terms different from, and more serious than, those used before. This is why social theory has changed. This is why having something different to say about the world is of broad human interest—even, and especially, to those with no particular professional investment in social theory. Social theory has come back to its roots.

The New Social Theories, the Multicultural, and Beyond

It would not be very far wrong to say that social theory sets root only in the soil of social disruption. This seems to be equally true for both practical and professional social theories. The evidence is reasonably clear.

Social theories arose in their classic form when Europe was most disrupted by the uncertain progress of the modern world. Marx and Engels wrote their *Manifesto* on the eve of the 1848 revolutions. Marx's *Capital* was written during the flood and ebb of economic confusion in the two decades that followed. Durkheim wrote during the bouleversements caused by France's attempts, during the Third Republic, to conclude its century-long revolution by founding a thoroughly modern social order. Weber and Simmel wrote during the social conflicts caused by Germany's transition from the traditionalism under Otto von Bismarck's reign to its role as a world industrial power under the ineffectual principles of the Weimar Republic. Each of these men, in their personal lives as in their published theories, reflected the tensions of their times.

Tensions expressed in the master concepts of the great White men—Marx's alienation, Weber's iron cage, Durkheim's anomie—were felt throughout their societies. What they sensed through the veil of their bourgeois culture was confirmed in other writings, repressed until recently, by social theorists who experienced more directly the brutalities visited on ordinary people for reason of their race or gender—and more. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), now understood to be a classic of feminist writing, is witness to more than the oppressive attitudes of the men in her life. Though fiction, it documented the way in which the female character's insanity was not a wholly inappropriate reaction to the modern world. Gilman's fictional character was modeled on her own experiences during a rest cure for a mental disorder, after the leading (male) specialist on "the nervous disorders of women" had prescribed complete abandonment of all work. Gilman's then-husband enforced this cure, which only deepened her distress. The wallpaper in the room to which she was confined became a projective field for her character's (and her own) experiences of the world:

He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

How different is this from the madness Max Weber saw in the superficially rational patterns of modern life? He spoke of this in the closing words of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905): “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” Was not his image of the iron cage of the modern world Weber’s figure for the odd, disturbing effect of a world in which the rational front pattern moved irregularly against an irrational back pattern, in such defiance of reason that the normal mind was unsettled?

And what of W. E. B. Du Bois’s now-famous figure of the “twoness” haunting and defining the American Negro? In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois spoke of the social experience of his race in words that described what had to have been a widespread, if not universal, social experience of the earlier moderns—of a social world divided within, and against, itself:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois, like Gilman, wrote in the more autobiographical languages that gave them access to the conditions and dreams of ordinary life. Anna Julia Cooper—writer, early Black feminist, and educator—used the same languages. In *A Voice From the South* (published, like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in 1892), Cooper spoke of the “colored woman’s office,” of the Black woman’s responsibility to redeem America and the West by showing the moral path beyond the limitations of race and gender—a path between the good race-men (who could not understand women) and the good White feminists (who could not understand Blacks). Cooper, in her way, wrote of a double-consciousness, or perhaps a multiple consciousness, that was incumbent upon American Black women, who bore the several obligations of race and gender.

Writers like these, some only now coming into the public eye, help us see the deep, mysterious ties that bind all people thinking about their social worlds in times of change and turmoil. In many ways, the writings of Du Bois (especially his more personal books, *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*) are near-perfect repositories of the struggles of early modern social thinkers. They provide today’s readers access to the trained thought of expert social theorists shaken by reverberations of the suffering and desires of ordinary folk. Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness could be said to be one of those rare ideas that entered both theoretical literature and the popular imagination because it resonated finely with both. This was its power. As the passage just quoted suggests, Du Bois, though trained at Harvard and educated in Europe, was very much in touch with the pathos of Black Americans during his lifetime. Born just after the Civil War, he lived for ninety-five years—from Reconstruction, through Jim Crow, Booker T. Washington, the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Marcus Garvey, to the Civil Rights Movement. Du Bois died in Ghana on the morning of August 27, 1963, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. was preparing to deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech the next day in Washington, D.C. In a certain sense, Du Bois’s life embodied, even acted out, a good portion of the social history of race in modern America (which is why his *Dusk of Dawn* is subtitled *An Autobiography of the Race Concept*). Du Bois had been a student of both William James and Max Weber (though he was much closer to James). The formal aspect of his double-consciousness concept was reasonably close to James’s idea of the social self. “A man has as many social selves,” said James, “as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.” Against this, compare Du Bois’s “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” In addition to its apparent relation to James’s social self, Du Bois’s double-consciousness appeared in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, one year after Charles Horton Cooley defined the looking-glass

self and just over a year before Max Weber wrote of the strangely double nature of the modern world—rational, yet irrational; freedom bound by the iron cage.

Men and women, both writers and ordinary others, reflecting on their world around the end of the nineteenth century seemed to have been thinking along similar lines. Whatever the subterranean passages connecting the professional and the amateur social theories, the similarities in the separate writings of Simmel, Weber, Du Bois, Gilman, James, Cooper, and Cooley are evident—not neatly linked and certified, but present nonetheless.

Perhaps because of the social disturbances of the present time, we are only now able to appreciate the complexity of classical social theory. The great White men—Weber, Marx, Durkheim—were great social thinkers because they did not buy the official story of the modern world uncritically. They were circumspect (Durkheim), conflicted (Weber), or passionate (Marx) in their reservations about the progressive glory claimed by modern European culture and industry. In this respect, they understood quite well the underside of progress, the destruction visited on ordinary people by a changing world. They understood, if vaguely and uncertainly, that no single dream of progress for all of humanity could soothe the just (if sometimes inarticulate) complaints of those living outside the security of bourgeois society. At the same time, the voices of people like Du Bois, Cooper, and Gilman were muffled by the prejudices of the times and for that reason were necessarily truer expressions of what those less able to put their words into a public voice might have been thinking.

Thus, by juxtaposing the writings of the great official social theorists and those of the great but ignored (though now rediscovered) theorists, today's reader can begin to see the many complex sides of social theory's contributions to survival in the social world. On one side, the expert social theorists themselves are always, in some sense, conflicted because their task is to be at critical odds with the world about which they are speaking. The more disturbed the social order, as in the late nineteenth century, the more open the social theories. But on another side, one can entertain a supposition for which there is now compelling evidence: that official, professional, expert social theories (by whatever name) ought not always be considered the most articulate expressions of the social thinking of inarticulate, ordinary people. One must *never* assume that those without a public voice are inarticulate. The arrogance of intellectuals lies in the assumption that they alone know and speak the truth. Even the most radical, most passionately critical of thinkers fails to escape this arrogance for long. Marx, for one, certainly did not. The oppressed people of any social world *always* have a voice and thus something to say. For very good and sensible reasons, those in the privileged position in any society seldom hear what the oppressed say—not because they are ignorant and inarticulate (though they may be) but often because the weak have the good sense not to tell us, in so many words, what they think. The weak know very well that their truth—their understanding of social arrangements—may be a weapon for their survival if kept hidden but a cause of deepening their misery if revealed to the wrong authorities. Thus, what they know, when written, is very often hidden under pseudonyms or otherwise kept at a secretive distance from those in a position to punish.

In 1861, Harriet Jacobs published (under the name Linda Brent) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which included an astute analysis of the plantation household in which she had been held. The following passage is from her analysis of the household's delicate political balance. It came just after she described with analytic precision her mistress's pained restraint on hearing the slave's confession of how the master, a physician, had made sexual advances toward Harriet:

I did as she ordered. As I went on with my account her color changed frequently, she wept, and sometimes groaned. She spoke in tones so sad, that I was touched by her grief. The tears came to my eyes; but I was soon convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. . . . I pitied Mrs. Flint. . . . She was completely foiled and knew not how to proceed. She would gladly have had me flogged for my

supposed false oath; but, as I have already stated, the doctor never allowed any one to whip me. The old sinner was politic. The application of the lash might have led to remarks that would have exposed him in the eyes of his children and grandchildren. How often did I rejoice that I lived in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other! If I had been on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city, I should not be a living woman.

On the surface, the confrontation with her mistress put Harriet Jacobs at risk. Yet as the narrative suggests, she held the upper hand. Mrs. Flint was to be pitied. Harriet had the power of understanding more exactly than her mistress the complicated workings of the rural community and the power of protection it gave her. Narratives of this sort and their equivalent among women in the White community were the early resources for Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The original narratives may be described as lay social theories of a local world—the frank reflections of ordinary people forced to think through that world. The subsequent writings drew on this knowledge to fashion theories poised midway between the official theories that were salient in the eyes of the dominant culture and the reflex of pain and hope in the hearts of common, oppressed people.

This is the culture of social theory—any social world unsettled enough to disturb the natural tendency of social thought to relax, any social world that discomforts the easy acceptance of appearances as realities. Social theories, as distinct from the formal theories of social sciences and official policymaking, work in the tense, unreconciled spaces of social turmoil. Social theories require the energy and vision that come from those who are less comfortable in any society. *Social theory*, therefore, is simply a name for talk about the social world, talk rooted in the common experiences of those least able to avoid the consequences of social disruption. Were there ever a world in which all people were comfortable with whatever was, a world in which whatever appeared in daily life was a good enough reality, then social theory would slowly fade away, to be replaced by the confident pronouncements of enlightened science or well-intended policies. The most creative moments in the modern history of social theories were those when fewer and fewer of the privileged could relax as more and more of the disadvantaged could speak. The classic period of social theory, we now know, was one such moment. Not until the mid-1960s was there another quite the same.

Between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s, social theory remained more on the margins. In the interwar years, 1917 to 1945, social theory was preoccupied with the turmoil felt most acutely in the European sphere—political instability, depression, fascism, another world war. In this period, the disruption tested the ability of the West to believe in itself and to make that belief work in successful political and economic systems. Social theories of this time gave voice to the urban poor in new industrial cities, to the new marginal working class, to the dislocated in urban areas, to Jewish people suffering under Hitler, and to the first liberation movements among what were later called Third World people. These were the people whose suffering provoked social theories. Yet this period of world conflict ended in 1945 with the world order essentially the same as it had been at the end of the nineteenth century, with only one crucial difference: The Americans now reigned where once the British had.

For a moment in the 1950s and early 1960s in America, many thought they were within reach of a world order in which, indeed, one could relax in order to enjoy the benefits of an affluent society and the apparent reality of America showing just how good society could be. Then, social theory went underground. A newly confident social science dominated thinking about society, only slightly disturbed by the hedged bets of writers like Erik Erikson, Erving Goffman, and David Riesman. Riesman, principally, suggested in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) that the old ideas of the world no longer suited as they once did. He described a change in the American and modern character from the inner-directed entrepreneur of early modernity to someone else: the other-directed conformist.

Still, this was before very many people in so comfortable a world understood the full force of what was coming. They thought the Communists were the problem. Little did they know. This was before those riding the wave of post-World War II affluence in the United States and recovery in Europe could ever have been expected to understand the final effects of the independence of India, the falling away of Europe's colonies in Africa, and the early civil rights movements in the United States. This was before even the best and brightest of liberal people could understand exactly what was happening before their eyes. In the 1950s, they were much too preoccupied with the Soviets' Sputnik, China's revolution, the Korean War, and Cuba's Fidel Castro. The real, long-lasting perturbations were just beginning to erupt nearer to home.

In late October 1960, only days before the American electorate would decide between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Georgia. His life was at risk. Taylor Branch, in *Parting the Waters* (1988), described the moment when Robert Kennedy came face-to-face with a reality he could not yet understand. The account began with a campaign aide's defensive report to Kennedy on King's situation:

"They took Dr. King out of Atlanta on an old traffic charge of driving without a license. Then they sentenced him to four months on the chain gang, denied bail, and took him off in the middle of the night to the state prison. All in one day."

"How could they do that?" Kennedy asked doubtfully. "Who's the judge? You can't deny bail on a misdemeanor."

Martin [the campaign aide] decided that Kennedy may have lost sight of the essential fact that King was a Negro—a detail Southern politicians carefully avoided in their protests against interference in the King case. "Well, they just did it," said Martin. "They wanted to make an example of him as an uppity Negro . . ."

Kennedy paused for a number of seconds and then said, "Uh, goddammit," in a weary expletive that could have cut in many directions.

Without discussion, Robert Kennedy later called the judge. King was freed from danger, and the word spread through the Black community. John Kennedy won the election by a margin attributable to his unexpected voter strength among Blacks. Whatever Robert Kennedy's motivation may have been—political, legal, moral—this was a moment of foggy recognition of the true social circumstances of others about whom he then knew little. Though, like Kennedy's expletive, the experience cut in many directions among different people, it was of a sort encountered by many people—mostly White, mostly privileged—in Europe and North America through the 1960s.

This led to the second important time of creativity in social theory. As the Golden Age of America (what Henry Luce had called "the American Century") faded, there were signs that the movement of Blacks in the American South was not an isolated, regional event provoked by the Communists. Within the decade following the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–1956, the first major event in the modern Civil Rights Movement, it had become clear that the demands of American Blacks were close in content and form to those of other previously colonized people throughout the world. It is too seldom realized that many of the important intellectual resources for the Black rebellion in the United States were of Third World origin—Gandhi, Islam, and Africa.

Between 1956 and 1966, as Blacks eventually moved away from the civil rights movements and turned to Black consciousness, Whites—including early feminists, students, antiwar protesters, and gays and lesbians—began to transform the ideas and political experiences (good and bad) of the Civil Rights Movement into their own demands for change. C. Wright Mills's vision of the sociological imagination in 1959 was a direct inspiration for the early political philosophy of the

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as expressed in their *Port Huron Statement* in 1962. One year later, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* took up (without acknowledgment) the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Friedan was read both by middle-class, White women suffering under the stultifying demands of suburban life and by younger women, often the daughters of suburban housewives, who had heard of Mary King and Casey Hayden's underground manifesto against the sexist treatment of women in the Civil Rights Movement.

Post-World War II feminism was thus born. In 1963, Blacks and Whites also began to read Frantz Fanon, just one of a number of theorists critical of the colonial world. In 1964, following the march on Washington, Malcolm X delivered his stunning "Ballot or the Bullet" speech. At first, the social theories of these thinkers migrated slowly, initially among those young people already engaged in the dialogue and eventually spreading in wider and wider circles. More and more people—more and more White, middle-class people—came to that moment of recognition and turned as Robert Kennedy did—awkwardly, slowly, but definitely.

This was the beginning of the second great period in social theory, a period during which social theory itself changed. The greatest irony of the time was that the social theories of previously excluded and oppressed peoples came increasingly to the fore in large part because of the success of some very abstract philosophical doctrines taught in the most bourgeois and philosophical of world cities, Paris. The year 1966 was the year in which Stokely Carmichael is said to have first used the term Black Power. It was also the year of the first influential pronouncements of the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Hence the irony: Doctrines that are to this day virtually unintelligible (even to trained academics) were somehow part and parcel of the movement that brought lay social theories their most influential public attention.

How could this be? One explanation, not necessarily the most satisfying, is that many people who were young revolutionaries in the 1960s crossed that magical age of thirty in the 1970s. They had to find work, and in the United States and parts of Europe, the universities were then still hiring. Academic work was consistent with their earlier revolutionary thinking, and it paid the rent. The French social theorists, like a different line of German critical thinkers (of whom Jürgen Habermas is the most important), were academically respectable, in part because they were difficult to understand. The appropriation of the ideas of the European thinkers thus contributed to the building of academic careers without seriously compromising political and moral ideals. One of the deepest ironies in the aftermath of the 1960s is that the students who had once rebelled against the academic establishment now moved so *directly* to enter it. In the 1990s, many of them are still part of that establishment. They teach and debate Habermas, Derrida, and Foucault or the ideas that evolved from the movements their writings encouraged. Many became deans, departmental chairs, international academic stars, editors, and worse. One might well appreciate their need to hold a job and the wider appeal of career success and fame. But even this does not explain the irony. The deeper explanation lies in the ideas themselves, the weird but true connection between a new wave of professional social theories and the real-world experiences of many people who would never dream of inventing a word like deconstruction.

In 1966, in a now-famous talk at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Jacques Derrida announced the beginning of poststructuralism, a theoretical movement in which the practice known as deconstructionism came to be well regarded. Also in 1966, Derrida spoke at the first international conference of academics interested in what was then considered the newest, most exciting method in humanistic studies. Although he appreciated the contributions of structuralism, Derrida devoted his talk to the argument that even structuralism's innovative spirit did not make it different from all prior, traditional forms of thought. His principal complaint against all philosophies up to that moment was that they limited the free play of social imagination. They were, he said, methods of thinking that so revolved around a principle of the Center that the freedom to explore and affirm differences was destroyed. Derrida believed he and those who shared

his ideas were living in a revolutionary moment when that principle of the Center was giving way to, of all things, language:

This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse—provided we can agree on this word—that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.

Not, to be sure, the clearest of statements to the uninitiated. But certain key words are clear or clearly implied: decentering, play, differences.

Derrida's poststructuralist social theory uses these three terms in two ways. First, they propose an alternative way of thinking. Social theory, he argued, should reject overarching, limiting principles and open itself to the world of differences. Second, this was justified because only this method could make sense of the world of the mid-1960s—a world in which, in France and the United States, former colonial subjects, women, workers, and Blacks were asserting themselves by asserting their differences. It was, clearly, a time when neither the political nor the economic Center was holding against the play of cultural and political differences. Within two years, Paris and many of the Western capitals would shake with political protest. The complexity of his philosophy notwithstanding, Derrida was drawing the connection between very abstract social theory and political events in the social world. Theory, he argued, had to be decentered because the social world was decentering. Give up the West and its philosophy, he advised (though not in so many words), because the world all around—Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Alabama, Mississippi—was shifting rapidly out from under the sway of the cultural and political powers that had dominated the modern era.

Others, like Michel Foucault, said much the same thing. As their works were translated into the languages of the world, people coming into the universities from lives of political activism found the ideas persuasive, entirely suited to their own experiences, if not to their accustomed way of speaking. Today, the movements that Derrida and Foucault and others spawned in the mid-1960s are still at the center of controversy in the academy, though now they are widely known as postmodernism. To the amazement of those who bother to look into it, postmodernism bears a very close resemblance to other social theories rooted directly in the common language of people who are, in effect, following a lead much like that offered by Derrida. These are the theories of individuals asserting, for political and personal reasons, the authority of their previously suppressed cultures in order to define new ways of understanding themselves and their experiences without regard for the powers of the Center.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), an autobiographically based theory of the new mestiza, described this culture rediscovering its past and present life in the cultural and political borderland between the United States and Mexico:

The US—Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. . . . *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over go through the confines of the “normal.” Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. . . . The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites.

Anzaldúa claims these illegitimate people as her own. She is one of them—a people whose history reaches back before the United States appropriated these borderlands in 1848. Her theory is not really a theory in the usual sense. Its form is more in the tradition of Du Bois, Cooper, and Gilman. It transgresses the formal dependence of theory on prose. It plays with poetry, imagination, languages, and idioms. It rejects the gringo to affirm multiply cultured peoples who live and have lived against the oppressive force of American ambition.

Multiculturalism, like social theory, is a term without any definite denotation. One could say that the former term has come to represent the social theories of those who resist the usual classifications of thought and politics. Whichever terms are used, the evidence is clear that the latest period in social theory has produced theories that disturb tradition. They resist easy classification—neither lay and practical nor professional, neither poetry nor sociology, neither political nor academic, neither American nor Spanish nor African, and so on. Yet the new theories are social theories in every coherent sense of the term. They say something clear about the social world. They do so in words utterly different from anything that has gone before in the West. Oddly, however, they are not that far from the spirit and practice of social theory in its earliest days.

The longer the world lives in a multicultural environment, the more people accept, however grudgingly in some cases, that the unleashing of social differences in the arena of public politics is somehow aggravated by (perhaps even the result of) the odd shrinking of the world caused by new information technologies—not to mention the irony of globalization that the less people are able to avoid distant others, the more they must confront social differences far from their daily lives. The peoples of the many-cultured world are a long way from understanding just exactly how, and why, these technologies have *simultaneously* made us aware of our differences *and* brought us into more intimate contact with each other. Yet the inhabitants of the globalizing world, as they strain against each other in this odd mix of social distance and intimacy, realize that they—that *we*, that is—must assume, at least in spirit, the moral imperatives of the earliest days of modern social theory. Though the structures of the social world of the end of the nineteenth century were light-years distant from ours today in the early twenty-first, we bear the same responsibilities as did our great-grandparents and grandparents in those days. We have no choice but to speak of our worlds, such as they are—and when we do, we become social theorists of a very practical and necessary sort.

As the worlds edged over into a new millennium, the realities of what had come to be known as globalization had set in. Yes, even practical social thinkers had to face up to cultural differences made all the more acute by the speed of telecommunications, not to mention the speed with which danger can strike near to home. September 11, 2001, and its reverberations around the world, seemed to change everything. Whether that one terrible day was the beginning of the changes is uncertain. Some say that 9/11 was but a logical conclusion of the historical contradictions and social inequalities of the modern world—aspects of modernity's uneven development that had become more abrasive in the concluding decades of the twentieth century. This question remains open and will for some time to come. What is certain as the twenty-first century moves into its own is that the ways people engage with their worlds are now changed beyond what could have been imagined, even in the early days of multicultural awareness. It may well be that, though the word “multiculturalism” retains an important meaning, as a phenomenon it has outgrown its earlier forms.

As the new millennium in which we find ourselves has already turned into its third decade, social theory has more and more taken global reality as its primary field of reflection—so much so that some have begun to conclude that the original concept of the *social* is no longer the apt term for theories of global social things. One sign that social theory is becoming something other than what it had been in the nineteenth century is the sudden appearance after 2001 of theories

of globalization. Another, less obvious, sign of the ways social theory must be more elastic than it once had been is the extent to which new social theories disturb what once were foundational ideas. Bruno Latour, for example, argues for the erasure of the classical distinction between the social world and the natural. Similarly, economist Thomas Piketty writes of capitalism in a decidedly social theoretical way. In these new worlds, *how* we think and *what* we think require a wide-awake ability to look to new, more global horizons.

When the worlds in which people come up against each other in a global environment are themselves moved by social forces that come from around the globe as if in an instant, then those who aim to live powerfully in such an environment must learn to think differently—to think, that is, not only in respect for the differences they encounter but also of the vast global forces that both accentuate the differences and incomprehensibly pull them together in ways that defy the older logics of causes and effects. Oddly, one of the global methods needed is the ability to put these mysteries into words.

Finding the words to talk about new global world is all the more difficult when what changes is an aspect of the older world that was widely considered permanent and necessary. Thus, in the second decade the future of modern democracies grew uncertain as authoritarian regimes—or, at least, attitudes—seemed to be taking over new nations that were attempting to become democratic *and* older ones where democracy had long ruled the day. It is one thing democracy to fail in newly democratizing states like Iraq after the fall of its tyrannical leader but another for authoritarian rulers in nations as different as the Philippines and the United States to quash formerly stable democratic institutions. It may well be that democracy, once planted, creates the impression that growth and flourishing are its nature. But of course, in the long history of democracies, this was never true. In the late 1700s, the Americans fought, on democratic principles, for independence from a despotic British king on the basis of values they learned from British philosophers and institutions. There are important new materials in this edition of the book meant to illustrate first the origins of modern democratic ideas and, at the end, to represent theories of both radically new ideas about the world itself and attempts to explain the uncertain future of its democratic institutions.

Saying It, Reading It, and Getting By Better

When Derrida announced the beginning of his new social theory, he referred to an event in which “language entered the universal problematic.” What?

Why has language become so much the preoccupation of social theorists in the last half-century? Among academic social theorists, it is normal, almost necessary, to develop a theory of language, literature, or discourse early in one’s career. Other, less traditionally professorial writers—like Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde—tend to *use* language to disturb the world. What both types of social theorists have in common is one basic idea: If our way of thinking about the world has changed, so must our way of speaking and writing. Yet the new social theorists believe that we cannot escape the languages we have. The best course, they agree, is to use language to call attention to meanings. Anzaldúa gives *mestiza* and *borderland* new meanings, just as other people have given *Black*, *Latina*, *woman*, *African*, *queer*, and *American* new political meanings.

The importance of these terms to those who define themselves in relation to them is very often beyond those who are seldom, if ever, called on to explain themselves. One of the unintended consequences of the modern world has been that the original Enlightenment principles have actually worked to better effect than the early moderns ever dreamed. At the end of the twentieth century, we live in a time of confusion wrought every bit as much by the successes of modernity as by its failures. True, by the formal measures of what was promised, the modern age has not paid off. War, poverty, human misery, and hunger recur as they always have, now alongside quite a few

environmental and other miseries the modern world invented of its own accord. Cell phones, iPods, Blackberrys, and other of the ever-changing wonders of technology hardly balance this ledger. Just the same, it is unlikely that any of the bourgeois revolutionaries in the eighteenth century dreamed that human knowledge would be so widely and immediately communicated to every corner and level of global society as it is today. How could they have? Their world was so small. Kant, the author of the Enlightenment's slogan "dare to know," is also known to have been a racist by any standard. Few of the Enlightenment thinkers, political revolutionaries, or even early social theorists gave more than passing thought to the moral, political, or economic powers and rights of those outside their very narrow spheres of social experience.

Such observations may be considered cheap shots, insensitive to moral standards prevailing in the earliest days of the modern age—trendy indictments of White, middle-class males everywhere. But this is the point: It is a fact of no minor importance that, until recently, the culture to which educated people have been expected to conform was invented and sustained mostly by men who encountered little in their experience that would or could broaden their horizons. They may be excused for their original innocence, if not for their clumsy attempt to hang on even at this late moment. Thus, we can rightly conclude that the original idea of a culture in which knowledge would give human beings new power to define and move their world has enjoyed an unexpected success. Our forefathers had an excellent idea. Our criticism of them should be tempered with some forbearance. What they were not able to anticipate a century ago was that this new knowledge would be held so widely, and used so powerfully and in such alarming ways, to criticize the very world they dreamed up.

This is where language entered the universal problematic. Language is the most important weapon of the weak (to borrow a phrase from James Scott). However much people are oppressed, however much they may be systematically deprived of the means to defend themselves or attack their opponents, people can always use words. The poor, the enslaved, the depressed, the illiterate, the imprisoned, and the abused can speak. Even those so disturbed by some primeval trauma in early life so as to lose their minds in later years can speak. They may speak only to themselves or to those who own or are wise to their condition. But they can speak. They may speak in some unusual code—of dreams, of a political underground, of the gang or the cellblock, of the schizophrenic, of the therapist's office, of hushed conversations with others in like circumstance—but they do speak.

For some, this is a revolting idea. It is, indeed. Of all the available human capacities, Putting-it-into-words is the most powerful. Thinking-it, Feeling-it, or Seeing-it, by themselves, are nothing. It is only when people put what they think or sense or see into words that whatever is there to be thought, felt, or seen comes into play as a force in social life. The willingness to trust the language of things is what distinguishes social theory from seemingly similar but often quite different activities—like, say, *social science*. The attitude of science in the modern world is Seeing-it, then Thinking-it. Thus, sociologists and other academics regularly can be overheard describing their current research project in this way: "I'm *looking at* . . . such and such." The ideal of science is that of the enlightened thinker who peers sensitively and knowingly into the world in order to gather up its evidence that data, in turn, may be thought into truth.

Social theory, even in its original forms, tends to be skeptical of science's neat idea of truth—of a world offering up its evidence to the enlightened vision of the scientist. The great classic men—Freud, Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, even Weber in his way—were largely preoccupied with finding some clever way *around* science. Freud based everything on the small, displaced clues to the unconscious life, clues that may appear in dreams and sneak out in the patient's talk on the couch. Saussure developed the original formal theory of the hidden, absent elements of language, the abstract system of grammars and terms that lie behind actual speech. Weber, always master of the tour de force, sought to invent a science of human things that saw the deepest truths of

subjective meanings through the aesthetic trick of ideal types. And Marx believed the only good science was one that refused to take appearances for reality. The truth of the economic value of labor was found not in the marketplace but in the hidden secrets of production. Halfway through the first volume of *Capital*, he said that the social theorist who hopes to uncover this secret must leave the shop floor and the marketplace,

this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in the view of all men, and follow [Mr. Moneybags] into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face “No admittance except on business.” Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making.

Even Durkheim, in his last and greatest work, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), seemed to set aside his earlier confident belief in scientific progress to explain that the secret of knowledge itself was not even the mind’s ability to see the world but the human being’s elementary dependence on the social group.

The classic social thinkers have been used to justify various types of sociologies and other social sciences. This is good. Science is good, important in its way. Sensible social theory need not set itself against science, from which it gathers a good bit of its descriptive information. Whether classic or new, social theory need only accept itself for what it is—that type of social knowledge concerned with putting into words whatever is there, especially whatever is most difficult to see on the surface. Those well trained in social theory do this for a living. Because they devote so much of their lives to it, they are more practiced in finding the words to say something sensible, critical, and revolting about the social world. This, however, does not make them different from any other social creature who, given the right degree of social disturbance and sufficient reason, finds a way to say, “If I grow up, I want to be a bus driver.” Writers like Du Bois, Gilman, Anzaldúa, and Lorde—the other, and new, social theorists—would understand Lafayette as standing somehow alongside the great original theorists.

The world is unevenly cruel. Whatever pleasures it offers are offered only to those who find a way to get by in it. Many, it would seem, are given such a head start that they would apparently have no use for social theory, no need for putting into words the deeper secrets. Yet those who are wise know this is not true. It would be absurd to suggest that Lafayette and my son started from the same place, that a middle-class White boy in America suffers as much as the boy in a city’s failed project who must sleep, if at all, through threats of death. At the same time, it would be another kind of romance to believe that relatively well-off boys with all the necessary comforts do not struggle. The uneven cruelty of the world does not exempt any of us from the only real universal in human experience—that we encounter limits and injuries we must overcome, that survival is the prerequisite of pleasure.

Social theory is what we do when we find ourselves able to put into words what nobody seems to want to talk about. When we find those words, and say them, we begin to survive. For some, learning to survive leads to uncommon and exhilarating pleasures. For others, perhaps the greater number of us, it leads at least to the common pleasure—a pleasure rubbed raw with what is: the simple but necessary power of knowing that one *knows* what is there because one can *say* it.

This, whatever else, is what makes social theory worth reading.

C. L.

Notes

Footnotes are seldom at the foot anymore. Usually, they are at the end and difficult to find. Sometimes, they grow out of proportion to the text at the foot of which they claim to be humbly poised. The notes in Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* are longer than the book itself! Notes, thus, can discourage reading. Yet the reader rightly

desires some information, even if it is difficult to know how much and where. Because most of the references in this general introduction and the section introductions are to familiar sources, often to texts appearing elsewhere in the book, notes are kept to a bare minimum and located just after the introduction.

- Page 1: Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here* (Doubleday, 1991), x.
- Page 2: Bradley, *Chaneysville Incident* (Harper & Row, 1981), 6.
- Page 3: Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages* (Arrow Books, 1953), 78.
- Page 4: Simmel, in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (University of Chicago Press, 1971), 235.
- Page 7: Schlesinger, *Disuniting of America* (Whittle Books, 1991), 83.
- Page 10: Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 53.
- Page 11: Branch, *Parting the Waters* (Simon and Schuster, 1988), 365.
- Page 14: Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Spinsters, 1987), 3.

Quoted material not noted here is usually from a selection elsewhere in this book and acknowledged there.