Sociological Theory I

Week 2: Philosophical Foundations of Social Theory

1. Briefly summarize the main assumptions and principles of rational choice explanations in sociology as outlined by Daniel Little in chapter 3 of Varieties of Social Explanation. Give a simple example that demonstrates how rational choice arguments can be used to account for the mechanisms that mediate between cause and effect in a sociological explanation. Contrast the “thin” theory of human agency found in rational choice theory with the “thick” descriptions favored by interpretive theorists. How does rational choice theory lead to the conclusion that individual rationality is typically incapable of producing collectively rational action (the “free rider” problem)? To what extent and how do you think that the narrow economic rationality assumed by rational choice theory should be modified so as to better account for instances of collective action?

2. Briefly summarize the main assumptions and principles of interpretation theory as outlined by Little in chapter 4 of Varieties of Social Explanation. Give an example that illustrates the distinctiveness of the interpretive approach to sociological explanation. What difficulties does interpretation theory pose for the verification and generalization of sociological explanations? How do advocates of interpretation theory arrive at the conclusion that all sociological explanation must be culturally specific and that the motives and forms of rationality implicated in social action cannot be generalized across cultures? Critically evaluate this tenet of interpretation theory and contrast it with one or more alternative views concerning the generalizability of sociological explanations.

3. Summarize the various meanings of the concept of “positivism” as outlined by Russell Keat in chapter 1 of The Politics of Social Theory. To what extent do these varieties of positivism tend to be associated with one another (either logically or as a matter of empirical tendency)? Which kinds of positivism (if any) do you find defensible from an epistemological standpoint and which indefensible?

4. Discuss the various arguments by which critical social theorists (including many Marxist, feminist, humanist, and postmodernist theorists) have sought to challenge the notion of “value-freedom” in social theory and research (Keat, The Politics of Social Theory, chapter 2). Summarize and critically evaluate Keat's defense of the notion of value-freedom.