

## Introductory Comments

### Common difficulties in mastering sociological theory:

- Most sociology is *not* theoretical — mostly counting, describing, criticizing, moralizing.
- Theory building involves a higher level of *abstraction* than most sociology — this can be challenging (in the same way that math is challenging).

### What is meant by theory?

- Addresses "*why*" (causes) and "*how*" (mechanisms or processes) of social phenomena — not just "who" or "what" or "do I think it's good or bad".
- Provides *unified* framework for interpretation — unified and consistent set of propositions.
- Theory construction requires recognition of *alternative possibilities* and assessment of *relative importance* of factors — theory is constructed through processes of dialogue, debate, and empirical research.

### Typical errors of commonsense theorizing:

- Over reliance on *human nature* (known as "reification") — "it's just human nature" — this often ignores historical and cultural variation.
- Over reliance on *socialization* — exaggerates human malleability, leaves underlying causes or reasons for existing patterns of socialization unexplained.
- Vulgar *functionalism* that anthropomorphizes "society" — e.g., statements that society "requires" (or "needs" or "wants") us to do this or that — "society" is not an intentional agent.
- *Ad hoc*, middle-range explanation — lacks consistency, rarely stands up to historical, cross-cultural comparisons. Generalizability is the ultimate test of theory.

### "Development of Sociology" — What will the course focus on?

- "Development" falsely suggests linear, additive, cumulative growth — instead *controversy* will be stressed — sociologists are still debating Marx a 100+ years after his death
- Impossible to cover entire history of theory — we will focus on three classical thinkers.
- *Marx* — most important social thinker of the last 200 years; inspiration for social criticism and revolutionary movements in 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- *Durkheim* — founder of modern academic sociology; functionalist theory and positivist method.
- *Weber* — most sophisticated critic of Marx; precursor of modern interpretative sociology (emphasizing subjective meaning) including postmodernism, discourse theory, etc.

### Why study classical theory?

- These are important, influential thinkers who have shaped the discipline — writing at the beginning of the modern era they inspired much of what followed.
- Their writings constitute the repertoire of terms and concepts used to discuss theory today . It is difficult to participate intelligently in sociological dialogue without a familiarity with their ideas.
- They can be used as examples of different approaches to theory construction — *not much really new* in terms of the basic choices in social explanation; these theorists cover most of the basic possibilities.
- Understanding the *origins* of widely shared ideas can often be revealing — makes it easier to see theories as *constructed* under specific *historical* conditions; dispels the taken-for-granted quality of how we understand social life.

### General approaches to social theorizing

- Theory construction flows from analysis of (1) the partly rational decision making of intentional human subjects; which, in turn, depends on (2) the culturally specific social meanings through which humans understand the world and (3) the objective structural constraints that limit or channel their action.
- Different approaches to social theorizing place greater or lesser weight on these three factors: (1) rational choice theory; (2) interpretative theory; (3) structuralist theory.

### Political implications of social theory:

- Value-laden labels (e.g., "profit maximization" vs. "exploitation"); identification of "problems", assigning "blame" (cause); assessing prospects for change.
- Key dimensions: (1) social conflict vs. harmony; (2) historical variability vs. universal laws.
- *Conformist* sociology (e.g., Durkheim) — harmonious conception of the status quo; obscures social antagonisms.
- *Critical* sociology (e.g., Marx) — status quo seen as contradictory, subject to change; critique of unrealized potential of existing social arrangements; sharpens awareness of possibilities of change; illuminates the historically constructed nature of existing society.
- Sociological "*pathos*" (e.g., Weber) — recognizes conflict and oppression; may offer piecemeal suggestions for minor improvement, but sees no fundamental solution to the causes of human suffering.