

WHAT IS THEORY?

Charles Lemert (1993): "Social theory is the normal accomplishment of social human creatures figuring out what other creatures of the same sort are doing with, to, or around them" ("Social Theory: Its Uses and Pleasures," in *Social Theory: Classical and Multicultural Readings*, p. 2).

Jonathan Turner (1991): "Theory is a 'story' about how and why events in the universe occur. Sociological theory thus seeks to explain how and why humans behave, interact, and organize themselves in certain ways. ... Theory is a mental activity. It is a process of developing ideas that can allow us to explain how and why events occur" (*The Structure of Sociological Theory*, pp. 1, 4).

Jeffrey Alexander (1987): "Theory is a generalization separated from particulars, an abstraction separated from a concrete case ... What *general* theories do is take these special theories and bring them together. General theories are theories about everything, about 'societies' as such, about modernity rather than about any particular modern society, about 'interaction' rather than any particular form or genre of interaction" (*Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory Since World War II*, pp. 2-3).

COMPARISON OF MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

	FUNCTIONALISM	CONFLICT THEORY	SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM
CENTRAL FIGURES	Herbert Spencer Emile Durkheim Talcott Parsons Robert Merton	Karl Marx Max Weber C. Wright Mills Ralph Dahrendorf Lewis Coser	George Herbert Mead Charles H. Cooley W.I. Thomas Herbert Blumer Howard Becker
VISION OF SOCIETY	A system of interdependent parts, all of which operate (“function”) to help keep the system working (“functioning”) smoothly	Marx: Society is characterized by conflict between classes, in capitalist society between owners and workers Moderns: The social world is an arena of constant conflict and change	Society is the collective product of individuals’ “definitions of the situation” as created and maintained through shared symbols in everyday interaction
MAJOR CONCEPTS	*Institutions *Interdependence *Equilibrium *Manifest/Latent Functions *Dysfunction	*Class *Power *Exploitation and Alienation *Ideology *Class and False Consciousness	*Symbols *Meanings *Definition of the Situation *Self *Other
BIG QUESTION	How does a given social structure contribute to the overall stability of the social system?	Who has the power in a particular social arrangement? Who is exploiting whom?	How do people interact so as to reach a shared definition of the situation?
TYPICAL FOCUS	Macro-level behavior of major social institutions	Macro-level struggle between large groups, organizations, or classes	Micro-level social processes involved in the everyday activities of individuals and small groups
CRITICISM	*Pays little attention to the process of conflict and change in societies. *Ignores micro-level processes	*Pays little attention to the cooperative aspects of social life. *Ignores micro-level processes	*Neglects conflict *Ignores macro-level processes and thereby overemphasizes individuals’ freedom to create society