Grand Theories and the Challenge of Comparative Analysis

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More than half a century ago, C. Wright Mills (1959) coined the term “grand theory” as a caveat against overly ambitious systems of interpretation. Around the same period, Robert K. Merton (1949) developed the notion of “middle range theory” as a cautiously applied framework for analysing limited sectors of social reality without extending into major conceptual structures.1 Furthermore in the same vein, the most influential anthropologist of his generation, Clifford Geertz (1993 [1973], p. 4), famously declared that “calls for a ‘general theory’ of just about anything social sound increasingly hollow”.

Decades later, efforts to promote one grand theory over another still feature prominently in the sociological mindset and key authors continue to exert a great influence over the thinking of their disciples. However, the diversity of available approaches makes it virtually impossible for any of the competing traditions to claim control over an increasingly complex social scientific landscape. Sadly the outcome has been less space for discussion, and even debate, and a growing attitude of mutual disdain and withdrawal into one’s more or less limited world of reference.

Self-contained schools of thought orbiting around seigniorial figures of authority, dedicated research centres, journals and book series, as well as exclusive conferences endlessly commemorating the legacy of their founding fathers, have become an all-too-familiar reality. In this “feudal” environment, allegiance to a conceptual apparatus serves as a sign of recognition and the researchers most likely to be lionised are those who can produce findings that support the analytical prominence of their respective strongholds. These young champions, having recently grasped and started to teach the thought of

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1 It should be added that though Merton did not consider sociology mature enough to provide grand analytical schemes, doing so remained a suitable ambition in his eyes – as is apparent from the revised (1957) version of Social Theory and Structure.
their intellectual guide, are often its most categorical exponents. As a result, in some universities, students are typically exposed to a monolithic view of the social sciences. Equally, it is not uncommon to come across PhD dissertations where the candidate has encyclopaedic knowledge of a certain tradition, and seems to master little beyond that.

To refer to one of my own areas of expertise, I was surprised to discover, during a book tour, how a simple panoramic presentation of the fifteen central contributions to the theorisation of social distinction – and the hardly objectionable statement that each had merits and limits from a comparative perspective – could elicit strong reactions of disapproval from colleagues convinced of the inherent superiority of their own school of thought.2 In their article here, Kauppi and Swartz mention the conference that was organised in Paris five years ago celebrating the 30th anniversary of the publication of Pierre Bourdieu’s book: La distinction. In my view, the latter event was symptomatic of what conferences have too often become nowadays. It would be interesting indeed to attempt a sociological analysis of this type of gathering, which essentially brings together “keepers of the flame”, established continuators and new aficionados in what might best be described in Bourdieusian terms as an “exercise of reproduction aiming at the reproduction of the group”. The object of that conference and of the ensuing publication was above all to argue that the grand theory in question was not in the least out-dated and could claim international validity. Major critical counter-arguments and rival interpretations were superbly ignored or mentioned condescendingly – passed over in favour of endless celebrations of Bourdieu’s legacy and umpteen glosses leading to the presentation of purely deductive research.3 Needless to say, the same kind of narrow-mindedness can easily be found among many other schools of thought.

The following collection of papers and the symposium from which they proceed constitute an attempt to avoid such dogmatic impasses. A conference was held in March 2014 at the University of Strasbourg under the auspices of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Comparative Sociology (RC 20).4 Distinguished scholars representing various schools were invited to reflect on the state and nature of comparative analysis. More often than not, what we find at the basis of established research traditions are

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3 Coulangeon & Duval (2013).
4 I wish to acknowledge the support of both the I.S.A. and the University of Strasbourg’s new research centre (SAGE) which made this conference possible.