Social Theory:
Its Uses and Pleasures

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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 one of my sons was in elementary school, he came home one day with questions that led to some good social theory. After he 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?"

Later, sometime in junior high school, he began to figure this out. After several years of close observation, he 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 of people with whom he lived.

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,* Alex Kotlowitz tells the story of two boys trying to survive in one of Chicago's most dangerous public housing projects. Lafeyette, 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 Lafeyette'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 (Lafeyette), 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 novel *The Chaneysville Incident,* 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 lay 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 invari-

ably 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 lay 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 lay 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 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. Emile 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 (pop. 850), where the boarded-up general store and the peeling paint told of the effect of the new Wal-Mart outlet in Carbondale, twelve miles to the north. There, the traditional rural world was still passing away. But today's passings of the pre-modern 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 the early social theorists saw fading. Consider a passage from R. W. Southern's *Making of the Middle Ages:*

> 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 feastings, 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 child-birth. 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, premodern 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 Modern Life":

> 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 in-

ternal 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 rhythm 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 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 the 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 on their colonies came to a formal end, primarily during the 1950s and 1960s. Second, the people normally engaged in critical social thinking are no

longer necessarily members of or 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, one of kind—make social theory today an enterprise largely, but not entirely, different from that of 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 might 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—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 Lafeyette 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.

Lafeyette's real world was different. He said "if I grow up" in recognition of the factual world in which he lived. By the time he met Kotlowitz, Lafeyette 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 Lafeyette 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 Lafeyette, 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 Lafeyette 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 Lafeyette can be. Some may outrun the limits; some grow up; some grow up whole and well. But boys born into Lafeyette'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 Lafeyette must, it seems, understand his concrete difference from others. "If I grow up, I want to be a bus driver." Lafeyette understood, and answered, the question asked of all children. The "if" was local knowledge of his reality.

The world today 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 Lafeyette 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 collapse of Europe's hold on its colonial empires in the 1950s and the rebellions and revolutions within 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 is 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.* 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. 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. 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 plain. Everyone, from the politician to the common man or woman, is aware that there seems to be something different in the world, some-

thing 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.