Book Review

You Say You Want a Revolution

Nicholas Gane, *The Future of Social Theory*. Continuum: London, 2004. 210 pp.

In one sense social theory is a kind of eternal activity, the theoretical form of the apprehension and reflection on social life that exists in all societies. In another sense, of course, it is a problematic closely, perhaps irrevocably, bound up with what the Germans called the "social question" or "social problem" of the 19th century, meaning the group of conflict-generating problems that arose as a consequence of the emergence in Europe of a working class that was urban, politically organized, and free from any sort of personal bond with their employers of the sort that their ancestors in the countryside a generation before had labored under and from the bonds that held workers to their employers in the small industries that covered Europe at the time.

The change was stunning in its extent and mysterious in its significance. It swept away the last element of a social order that had existed in Europe since the ebbing of Roman slavery 1,200 years before, and challenged the understanding of human nature and the nature of human relations that had grown up during that period, as well as challenging the intellectual constructions of the Enlightenment, which had for the most part failed to anticipate the consequences or even the phenomenon of the industrial working class.

Today the industrial working class is, for most intents and purposes, gone. The expectations of social theorists who originally attempted to make sense of the industrial working class as the face of the future were consistently confounded, though Leninism and actual existing socialism kept them alive long after it should have been obvious that there was to be no total revolution, no leap into freedom, and no "communism." The Frankfurt School had a simple solution to the intellectual problem posed by these predictive failures: false consciousness. This, together with the depression and the vogue for "planning" the economy it produced, kept Marxism alive. But false consciousness was an excuse that eventually wore thin even for its most devoted adherents.

The end of the Communist regimes provoked a new round of questioning, under the heading ''what is Left?'' (Viale, 1997) which raised the question of what it meant to be a progressive or a vanguard intellectual if no one knew where history was going. One answer to this problem was to seize upon one or another of the more promising shards of the vanished Marxist consensus and construct an approach based on the prioritizing or centralizing of this or that particular piece and discarding or reinterpreting the rest as the source of the errors that led to the misapprehension of the proletariat as the agent of progress. Another approach was to regard the original story as essentially correct but mistaken with respect to the identity of the heroes and villains, or the oppressors and oppressed. Yet another approach is to simply treat the notions of class and the like as having earned their retirement on, as Bruno Latour once put it, the rocking chairs on the porch of the old folks home, and search for some new set of categories more appropriate to the task (which raises the question of what the ''task'' is). And there was always the temptation to add just one more epicycle to the traditional Marxist story to keep it plausible.

The End of "the Social"

This is the setting of Nicholas Gane's book, which is a collection of interviews of major figures participating in what he takes to be a major turn in the history of social theory. He does not explicitly articulate the principle governing the selection of the figures who represent ''the future of social theory,'' but he drops a substantial number of hints about what sort of break has occurred which justifies asking the question of whether social theory has a future. He has in mind for the most part post-Marxist thinkers, people who no longer think adding epicycles is enough. They represent six of the eight interviewees. But this turns out to be an extraordinarily diverse bunch. And further diversity is added by Bruno Latour. What is in common is that each of them in some way represents a turn away from ''the social.'' Thus, we get a story line in which the social diminishes or is replaced by the mediated and hence, as Scott Lash suggests, by the media, which calls into question the subject matter of social theory as distinct from literary theory, media theory, and other kinds of theory, which calls into question the future of ''social'' theory. Classical Marxism, which is treated as a ''social'' and thus reductive approach to culture, politics, and the economy is superseded for the same reasons.

The interviewees in this collection present various mixtures of the strategies identified above. Zygmunt Bauman reprises his substitution of

the modernity problematic for the capitalism problematic, a step that has
the effect, so to speak, of mentalizing the problem of the nature of modern
society, but differently than the mentalization that occurs in the Frankfurt
School notion of pervasive false consciousness, making the modern
mentality the constitutive feature of modern society, and then accounting
for the all too apparent breakup of the certainties of modernism, and the
loss of direction of even progressive thought, by characterizing the
present as a period of "liquid modernity" in which the constitutive fea-
tures of the modern mentality are themselves in flux.

Bauman is the paradigm elder apostate from Communism who leaves
Communism by way of the problematic of modernity and surpasses the
problematic of modernity by arguing that modernity has been itself sur-
passed by "liquid modernity," which is the social analogue to post
modernity. Ulrich Beck arrived via critical theory, from which notions like
reflexivity are taken, applied to the notion of modernization, yielding
reflexive modernity, which is a condition which relegates classical social
theory and its concepts to the dustbin of history. Judith Butler is part of
the story as a radicalizer of what I have called the mentalization of social
theory who practices the "affirmative deconstruction" of social concepts
into the linguistic or the rhetorical but who nevertheless insists on some
sort of residual role for the social and opposes the reduction of the social to
the linguistic. Lash, in books like *The End of Organized Capitalism* (1987)
and his writings on detraditionalization, represents a parallel path in
which the revisions of Marxism are further revised and point particularly
explicitly to the idea that the mediation of social life implies the replace-
ment of the social by the media and of social theory by media theory.

Bruno Latour is in some sense the odd man out in this book, but in
another sense its most radical and consistent thinker. Latour lacks the
lingering attachment to Marxism that pervades the reasoning of many
of the other theorists in the book, but he is as relentless as Beck in
attempting to retire the concepts of classical social theory and especially
the notion of the social. Indeed what makes Latour particularly relevant
here, given the emphasis on technologies of mediation, is his strategy of
treating physical objects as surrogates for social relations or even to
human beings in social relations (doorstops for servants, in his classic
example) and his granting of a particular kind of agency to these
physical objects.

Nicholas Rose is a more traditional case. He started out as a sci-
entist attracted to Marxism and evolved into a theorist of technology
who thinks that Marx got the technology story wrong. Saskia Sassen
also began, though this is not a subject of the interview, as a "political
economy" Marxist who evolved into a theorist of cities, especially

global cities, who replaced the traditional physical conception of the city that was intertwined with a social conception of urban processes with a virtualized conception of the city in which the reach and impact of the city consisted in such things as electronic transactions or the visual images generated for the world movie market. François Vierges is a theorist of oppression who argues that liberalism or French Republicanism was bound up with the exclusion and subjugation of the Other, and was inseparable from colonialism, which persists after decolonialization at the political level in its mental form, that is to say as an opressive way of thinking which is deeply engrained in the French mind.

John Urry is the thinker in this group who best exemplifies Gane's basic picture. He argues that the idea of the social world as a separate topic which is theorizable apart from the physical world is a piece of 19th century hubris, and that the dissolution of the distinction between social and physical is needed to understand "complex hybrid systems – such as the Internet, automobility, information, global flows of waste products, international terrorism" (120). In a word – "mobility" needs to replace "society" as "the basic subject matter of sociology," and the means of understanding should be complexity theory.

Is this Revolutionary?

Beck speaks for the contributors as a whole when he says that the "cosmopolitan turn" (his jargon for the new reality)

> means that the fundamental concepts of modern society and their relationships need to be re-examined and reinvented. Household, family, class, social inequality, democracy, power, state, commerce, public, community, justice, law, history and politics all must be released from the fetters of methodological nationalism [i.e. the idea of society as more or less corresponding to nation-states] and reconceptualized and empirically established within the framework of a cosmopolitan social and political science, which remains to be developed (165–6).

Part of this statement is trivially true: the business of social and political theory is the examination of concepts with a concern for their applicability, including their applicability to the present. And it is also true that, although this business is occasionally slow and occasionally more brisk, all these topics are in a more or less constant state of change, and the changes require that they and their relations to other

concepts be continually re-examined and reinvented. And much of the time this re-examination forces us to reflect on the ways we think, on a second-order level, of the concepts themselves – meaning that we must ''inquire into the presuppositions'' of the enterprise.

But is any of this true in a non-trivial sense? The skeptic would naturally question whether everything has changed, or changed so much that the older forms of these concepts are *radically* inapplicable. ''National'' identities (as in the ''we want to remain Dutch'' of the recent EU vote) remain potent political forces, so it seems doubtful that a program of replacing ''national'' concepts with cosmopolitan ones, as opposed to the usual extending of familiar concepts, such as ''democracy'' or ''publicity,'' to the international sphere, makes much sense. The old regime persists, and not just in the fetters we place on our own theorizing.

Behind the skepticism there is a point of principle. In a sense, there is nothing that social and political theory *can* do but take concepts that are already intelligible and apply them, revise them, extend them, and re-examine them in the light of new situations. The ''social question'' of the 19th century is a paradigm case of revision occasioned by the entry of the working class into politics. The questions that arose were, for example, ''What does 'the public' mean when it is composed not of landowners, who have a stake in the preservation of the social order, but of workers, who have instead a narrow and largely economic set of interests?'' This was the question raised by Dicey's *Public Opinion and Law* (1905/1962). And much of ''classical'' social theory was devoted to the problem of conceptualizing, describing, and understanding the transformation, and the answers worked in the same way: the theorist took some feature of the already known social world, such as ''social relations of an impersonal character,'' and projected a future in which these expanded.

The novel theoretical views mentioned in this book are constructed in the same way: certain novel relations, such as those mediated through the internet or media, are projected onto a future in which they loom larger, and labels are put on this imagined future. In this respect, there is nothing revolutionary here.

The lesson of the failure of Marxism is that the project of doing more than this – of turning social theory into a *Weltanschauung* that can be a source of political and moral guidance with an authority above the mundane business of revising our concepts – is precisely, to borrow a phrase from the book, a form of hubris. One suspects that the often inflated ''revolutionary'' language with which several contributors articulate the need for the wholesale revision of our concepts is not far from this temptation.

References

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STEPHEN TURNER
Department of Philosophy
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL, 33620, USA
(E-mail: turner@shell.cas.usf.edu)