

Comprehensive Examination in Sociological Theory
Summer 2002

This examination has three parts: Part A, Part B, and Part C. Please answer exactly one question from each of the three parts. Thus you should answer a total of three questions.

Part A: Answer either question A1, or question A2, or question A3.

- A1. One of the difficulties of teaching theory is figuring out what to cover. This becomes especially difficult when theorists keep generating new theories. Construct a graduate theory curriculum for a sociology department in a large university. Assume that the department has no specializations. Develop seminars that will provide students with the basis they need in sociological theory. The number of seminars is up to you, but you must justify what you offer. At minimum, address the following: (1) What will your curriculum include and why? (i.e., What does social theory contain? What is important in social theory?) (2) What are the objectives of the curriculum? (i.e., What should students come away with?) (3) How are the seminars organized? (i.e., Chronologically? Topically?) (4) What seminars will be required and what, if anything, will be optional? (5) How will your department assess students' overall theoretical knowledge? (i.e., Will you have some form of comp exam?)
- A2. In an influential 1998 article published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische discuss the structure-agency problem in sociology. They write:

[H]uman agency needs to be radically reconceptualized. Neither rational choice theory, norm-based approaches, nor any of the other sociological perspectives extant today provide a fully adequate understanding of its significance and constituent features....[O]ne key to understanding the variable orientations of agency toward its structural contexts lies in a more adequate theorization of the temporal nature of human experience. (*AJS*, volume 103, page 1012)

Emirbayer and Mische also say that "in the struggle to demonstrate the interpenetration of agency and structure, many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right" (pp. 962-3). This failure could stem from the reluctance to use concepts that represent psychological processes or psychological structures. Without these, "the person" remains under-conceptualized, as does the relationship between person and social structure. Discuss the concept of the person as it appears in sociology. Discuss how this concept relates to the concept of agency. Give relevant examples to illustrate your points. Explain what is missing in most sociological thinking about structure and agency. Where do we need to look, theoretically speaking, to resolve the structure-agency problem?

A3. What is the postmodern critique of the social sciences? Does it undermine the very possibility of social science? What alternative to social science does postmodern theorizing about method and social reality offers? Choose a social phenomena and present both a sociological analysis and a postmodern analysis in order to illustrate your views.

Part B: Answer either question B1, or question B2, or question B3, or question B4.

- B1. Marx and Weber both developed theories of capitalism. Present three of their main theoretical propositions and identify the principal differences between them. Do you consider their views to be mainly contradictory or mainly complementary? How do they respectively conceive the essence of capitalism? Are their views relevant for the study of contemporary capitalist societies? Explain why the ideas of Marx and Weber on capitalism either continue to be or are no longer sociologically relevant. Give some examples to illustrate your argument.
- B2. Among the three "founding fathers" of sociology, Durkheim is the most self-consciously sociological. His work has had a formative and lasting influence on mainstream sociology. What are the reasons for this lasting impact? Choose three of Durkheim's major contributions and explain both their significance within his own theoretical development, and their influence in shaping the "sociological imagination."
- B3. The concept of structuralism has been associated with social theorists as diverse as Claude Levi-Strauss, Talcott Parsons, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens. What is structuralism? Is it a consistent theory of society? Why is it associated with so many diverse thinkers? Briefly develop a structuralist explanation of some social phenomenon. What are the strengths and weaknesses of structuralist thinking?
- B4. Explain the meaning and the difference between *methodological individualism* and *methodological collectivism*. Use each of these principles to explain a sociological process of your own choosing. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each principle. State and defend your own position regarding the proper role of *methodological individualism* and *methodological collectivism* in sociological theory.

Part C: Answer either question C1, or question C2, or question C3.

- C1 A recent article in the *American Sociological Review* (Hout and Fischer, April 2002) finds that "the proportion of Americans who reported no religious preference doubled from 7 percent to 14 percent in the 1990's". Most people who reported no religious preference held

mainstream beliefs about the existence of god, life after death, heaven and hell, and religious miracles. The increase in Americans reporting no religious preference has occurred mainly among political moderates and political liberals (i.e. not among political conservatives). Develop a theoretically based explanation of these findings. Clearly specify the theoretical principles you are using.

- C2 Feminist theory emphasizes the role of gender in every part of social life. In particular, it shows how the experience of gender bears upon the formation of consciousness. The noted feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith proposes the concept of “bifurcated consciousness”. By this she means two forms of knowing and feeling often combined within female awareness. One form is located in the body and is based upon direct everyday experience. This form of consciousness unifies the knower with the object of knowledge. The second component of bifurcated consciousness is abstract, conceptual, and strives for objectivity. This kind of awareness denies the validity of feeling as means of obtaining truth, separates the knower from the object of knowledge, and reflects the power and status of males. Discuss the value of bifurcated consciousness as a sociological concept. Is this concept useful for understanding social relations? Why or why not? Apply this concept to the social world in a way that illustrates either its limitations or its strengths (or both) as an instrument of sociological theory.
- C3 Two principal lines of interpretation have emerged to explain the attacks of September 11. One type of interpretation explains these attacks as a reaction to American imperialism and its role in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The second type of interpretation explains the September 11 attacks as a consequence of Muslim fundamentalism and its hostility towards the modern world including democracy, individualism, and the emancipation of women. Root each of these interpretations within a tradition of sociological theory. Show how a particular approach to sociological theorizing could lead to a particular interpretation of September 11. Make each of these explanations as coherent and as plausible as possible. Try to make these connections between theory and interpretation in an even handed manner that does not reveal your own position about the September 11 attacks.