

# END OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

## Implications and Lessons for Bangladesh

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Sociological theory is seen here as formal theory and as the core of the discipline so that, a study of sociological theory, of necessity, refers to a study of the whole discipline. Theory, here, refers to abstract generalizations with possible empirical support and potential for prediction. Sociological theories, that I am interested in, are those that have significance for the whole discipline and not a part of it or for a sub-field, theories that resemble those attempted by the founding fathers.

Sociology, as it has grown up to be, is essentially an American discipline. So that, when I talk of the crisis of sociology or the "end of theory", I am referring to the crisis or the end of theory in American sociology. I am treating sociology as synonymous with American sociology. This paper is, thus, an attempt to examine the present demise of sociological theory through an examination of the growth and development of sociology in the U.S. and assess the probable implications and lessons it might carry for sociology in Bangladesh.

That sociology, and in particular sociological theory, is in a state of crisis is no longer an absurd proposition. C.W. Mills (1959) was aware of the crisis in the 1950s; Gouldner (1968) warned about the impending crisis in the 1960s. Many others have noted this in the form of crisis of paradigm or crisis of theory. I have been writing about crisis since the 1980s. And over the past decade or so it is becoming increasingly clear to me that sociological theory has come to an end. In a recent collection of essays, titled *Formal Theory in Sociology*, Jonathan Turner (1994), like me, asked the final question, "Why did formal theory die in sociology?" The volume itself, Turner lamented, was "eulogy to formal theory" in sociology.

My conception of theory is very much based on philosophy of science, comparative study of societies in time and space, rather quantitative, formal and macro-level or grand theory. In this conception of theory, symbolic interaction, exchange theory, ethnomethodology and the such were found to be very inadequate and I began my works on the crisis of sociological theory. Over the past years of my concern with the crisis in sociological theory I have studied the issue in relation to paradigms, the macro-micro debate, the concern with subjectivity and objectivity, society versus individual etc. Most sociologists treat these and other issues dealing with the subject matter of sociology as crucial for understanding and dealing with the crisis. But all along I have had the feeling that it is not these issues at all but the setting in which sociology has grown that needs to be addressed. *It is not sociology as such but the sociologists themselves, and their organizational structure which need to be studied in order to understand this crisis or why theory building in sociology has come to an end.*

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\* The first part of the essay is authored by N. Islam while M.I. Haque joins him for the Bangladesh portion.

Although sociology in America began with a heavy dose of Spencer and Comte, its development then and its later growth was quite independent of the happenings in Europe. I have dealt with these elsewhere (Islam 1987). Other sociologists like Hinkle (1994), Turner and Turner (1990), and volumes of collected essays by Gans (1990) or Hage (1994) have also dwelt on these differences at length.

One thing comes out very clearly from these studies is that all through the growth of the discipline in the U.S. theory has been the greatest sufferer. In spite of the initial flirtation with theory by the early American sociologists, not much of theory grew in the U.S. sociology. Both Hinkle (1994) and Turner (1994) have shown that there was very little theory in the early American sociology. Turner (1994) argues that the early American sociologists were not "trained" in sociology nor were they even scientists, so that, there was very little chance of the development of formal theory. Hinkle (1994) notes that prior to 1935 "virtually no session on theory were part of the annual program of the ASS" (American Sociological Society - later American Sociological Association or ASA). This lack of formal theory continued to plague sociology through the first half of this century as well. Hinkle (1994) shows that between 1921 and 1937 no article was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* with the word theory in its title. "Most disturbing of all" Hinkle comments, is that theoretical stance had also disappeared from even the personalized statements of sociologists in this era. During the whole period of thirty years between 1915 and 1945 Maclver was the only president of the ASS whose reputation was gained in theory.

Even then, whatever development of theory occurred in American sociology, it began at about this period -- from the 1930s on ward. A paper published by Wells and Picou in 1982 showed from a review of 707 articles chosen at random from the *American Sociological Review* between 1936 and 1978 that although a little more than 12% of the articles represented discussion on theory, a large portion, over 51% of the articles during this time used theory for empirical studies. Indeed, the use of theory for empirical studies continued to increase from 33.6% or one third of the articles during 1936-49 period to over 66%, or two thirds, during 1956-78 period.

However, in spite of this apparent emphasis on theory, the period was known for the growth of methodology and *not of theory*. Let me quote from Wells and Picou (1982) again. The two most frequent use of theory they found in their study of the ASR articles was a) the development of testable hypotheses and, b) interpretation of research findings. Less than 5% of the articles dealt with the development of theory per se. The period saw a phenomenal growth in the use of statistics, including multivariate techniques. The Wells and Picou (1982) study found that over 87% of the articles used the survey research format and statistics. So that theory during this period became supplemental, if not incidental, to survey research.

Turner and Turner (1990), similarly, note that as a consequence the role of theory, as seen by the methodologists of this period, was that a) theory was to serve as a means of clarifying the domains to be rendered precise and, b) was to be a source of hypothesis. Which, as we note in the Wells and Picou (1982) findings, were exactly the case. Thus it was not theory but methodology that grew by leaps and bound in what is mistakenly thought to be the hey-day of theory building.

The result of this emphasis on methodology would be very easy to predict. There was less and less concern with theory and little or no integration among the research works. Turner and Turner (1990) show that one result of this proliferation of research was that for the first time in the history of the discipline researcher of the quantitative sort typically knew little "theory" and had few "theoretical" ambitions. Students in large "research shops", they note, "received virtually no exposure to theoretical literature". The use of theory merely to serve as an appendix to research also meant an end to the "history of social thought" kind of study. Increasingly, it became difficult to cultivate interest in theory as more and more journals refused to publish articles without empirical research. And soon employment in theory also became scarce.

This subordination of theory to research was not accepted by many who felt that the kind of research that was gaining supremacy had any possibility whatsoever to build up a theoretical resource base for the discipline. Therefore, some like H. Zetterberg and Mullins and A.L. Stinchcombe sought to organize theory and research into a meaningful combination that would produce formal theory. This effort to formalize theory building, or "theory construction" as it came to be called, was taken rather seriously by many. Indeed, most universities from the 1970s began to teach "theory construction" courses to its graduate students. Turner (1994) feels that this extra effort to formalize theory building and shape sociology into a science like the natural sciences, ironically, turned out to be the final undoing of theory building in sociology. This happened, Turner (1994) argues, primarily because of the strictest demands that were put on theory construction, which was difficult even for the natural sciences to meet. The strict requirements demanded by the "theory construction" approach also fueled debates against quantitative research in particular and positivism in general. As it is, anti-positivism was gaining in strength. The bid to formalize theory construction merely supplied the anti-positivists with the final nail for the coffin of formal theory in sociology.

However, it would be an over generalization to conclude from all these that theory building in sociology came to a halt. On the contrary, theory building proceeded in two specific areas, a) in the numerous sub-fields and, a) as "metatheories". Neither of these developments, unfortunately, meet the requirements of formal theory and clearly point to the lack of genuine theory.

Most of these theorizing took place in the various sub and sub-sub fields and the proliferating specialty areas. So that, today you can have a "theory of (choose your topic)". These, even if they met the requirements of theory, are not what would cut across the discipline. In most case they loose their relevance when applied to areas beyond the specialty areas for which they were developed. Although the proponents of such theories often claim applicability beyond the boundaries of the specialty areas or the sub-fields, none live up to the promise. Moreover, as Turner and Turner (1990) argue, the proponents themselves do not accept each other's claims.

The other group of theories that have developed recently are what is now collectively known as "metatheory". However, the metatheorist at best talk to each other, in my opinion, mostly past each other, and there is no one out there to listen to them. In the end, there are perhaps only about 500 or 600 who form a community of theorists, comprising mostly of the sociologists from the older generation, who are largely isolated from the

rest of the discipline. The rest of the discipline is too engrossed in its own sub-fields and specialty areas to bother to listen to these theorists (Turner and Turner 1990), And that's what really spells the end of sociological theory.

So, what went wrong? And what to become of theory building, and the discipline in general in the future? In recent years, some sociologists, metatheorists, I might add, have become interested in these questions. Their studies point to three different but mutually inclusive areas where one needs to look for answers. First, the subject matter of sociology and the numerous sub-fields within it. Second the organization and the institutions within which sociology operates. And, thirdly, the resources at the command of the discipline, including student enrollments. Put mildly, and as I suggested at the beginning of the paper, it is the whole enterprise of sociology in America that has done away with the need for theory.

However, the subject matter of sociology as such, is not at fault. What is at fault, is the proliferation of that subject matter. This makes the sociologists themselves directly responsible. No one has ever defined in an exact manner the subject matter pursued by sociologists. Although in most cases the American sociologists worked with social problem and social welfare related topics, over the last one hundred years or so, sociology has added numerous areas, often exotic ones, to its subject matter. It has, in the process, divided and subdivided its field, sometimes losing some of its areas to other disciplines as well as encroaching upon other's territory. ASA now recognizes more than 50 sub-fields as specialty areas and within each specialty area, multiple sub-sub-fields. So that we can end up with hundreds of specialty areas which continue to proliferate without control.

The agencies which could exercise such control, the ASA for instance, have not only tolerated such diversification but have actually contributed to it by passively accepting these multiplications. From the very beginning, the American Sociological Society and later American Sociological Association have looked the other way and have allowed the specialty areas to grow under its own patronage and protection and giving these the legitimacy they require.

Similarly, over the years, the ASA has allowed many associations to be formed along with the growth of specialty areas. Today there are about 40 specialty associations within the ASA. Along with this there has also been a phenomenal rise in the number of journals catering for the specialty areas. There are over 200 journals in the U.S. alone and more than 100 in the rest of the world to which a sociologist may refer to and one or more of these are likely to print his or her specialty area papers.

Add to this the nature of teaching and the competition in the job market. In fact, it is the competition in the increasingly shrinking job market that forces many sociologists to move to, and often invent, one's own specialty areas. The more exotic or uncommon the area, the more likely that it will attract students and thus be sought after by the departments. And in a market where tenure is very difficult to get one needs to excel - to make a name - in any way one can, the urge to create ever new areas is indeed very strong. And many do. So that, as Turner and Turner (1990) argue, "there is, in a very real sense, a specialty for everyone in American sociology".

No discipline can achieve theoretical unity without having a unity of its subject matter. With literally hundreds, if not thousands, of specialty areas sociology seems to have dispersed beyond any recognizable boundary. Sociology has, thus, turned into the most undisciplined discipline anywhere. To build a theory to cut across this mess called sociology would be a task fit for Hercules. No wonder, Turner and Turner called sociology an "impossible science" (1990).

Another crucial factor for theory building is the question of resources at the disposal of sociology in America. Resources, in terms of research money, turned out to be a hindrance for the growth of the discipline from the earliest of times. From the very beginning, sociology received research funds from philanthropic organizations, including the churches and the state, and corporate money. Researches carried out through such public money, of necessity, were oriented to social reform or social problems. This forced American sociology to be biased towards the question of order and stability and how to achieve these. Mills (1959) warned that research carried out through such money could not be beneficial to the growth of an academic discipline. And it has not been. Most of such money has been channeled to the various specialty areas, to the hot topics of the day.

Indeed, there has been very little fund available for purely academic research. These funds normally come from the universities. And the universities dish out such money to disciplines that attract larger number of students. The plight of sociology in recent years, in terms of student enrollment, also point to the pathetic end that formal theory has met with.

A declining number of students obviously mean fewer resources and a very tight job market. The recent statistics for the U.S. sociology is really alarming. The number of students graduating with a Bachelor degree in sociology reached all time high of over 35,000 about the middle of the 1970s. Since then it has dropped very sharply to less than one third and is now hovering around 10,000 to 12,000 students. The number of graduate students, although lower than the mid 70s has not fallen to that extent. These have meant two things. First, and the most obvious, is that with the falling number of students the university support has declined and in many instances the faculty sizes have been reduced, forcing many to retire and / or to join the unemployment lines. Second, there are many more Ph.Ds in the field than the job market can accommodate, forcing greater competition and more unemployment. We saw earlier how sociologists try to keep afloat, by creating specialty areas for instance, in such a tight market.

We also saw the implications of these for theory building in sociology. This general loss of jobs translates into fewer jobs in teaching theory as well. With more and more students taking specialty area courses and ever fewer numbers moving to theory, most departments are obliged to drop theory courses, often discarding them altogether. Meaning even fewer jobs. Thus, with such a dwindling number of students and even fewer teachers engaging in theory or finding a job there, I am afraid, there may not be enough people in the next century to teach theory courses and, possibly, none to build theory.

This doomsday scenario, as I noted at the outset, is the creation of the continued lack of control over the discipline, which allowed it to grow in every direction without ever reaching any boundary line or finding a core. The organizations of control, such as the ASA, or the institutes have all contributed to this end. The proliferation of specialty areas, with students, sociologists, and research money all running after these, has spelled the doom for theory building. Thus, it is the sociologists and their institutional setting that have brought an end to formal sociological theory.

Is there a way out? The answer is both "yes" and "no." Yes, because building theory of the type that I associate myself with were once the central core of the discipline. There is no reason why it cannot be done today with far greater resources, in terms of data bases, available to us. In a recent critique of sociological theory building and sociology in general, Jonathan Turner searched for a way out. He was forced to conclude that it is not in the realm of specialty areas nor even with the theory construction approach that theory building can resume in sociology. He argued very strongly that the only way out is to construct "grand, general, formal and abstract theories" the variety of theory built by the "armchair theorists". He goes on to say that "unless some try to build such theories and demonstrate their relevance to specialists, sociology will remain the "impossible science". He further adds that "[s]ociology can become the 'possible science' if general, armchair theorists can formulate theories that appeal both to researchers and fellow theorists" (Turner, 1994).

No, because American sociology is not the place for such grand theories. Grand theory requires grand vision and that requires knowledge of other societies and cultures both in time and space. I am sorry to conclude that American sociology, to date, has not displayed any possibility of that grand vision. Like rest of the society, American sociology has remained bounded by the two oceans. Very little of what lies beyond ever matters to it. Very rarely, if ever, American sociologists refer to the outside world in their works. They are too busy with the "here and now". There has been little or no comparative study of societies and practically no historical studies of other societies. It is this lack of concern and the failure to appreciate the realities of other societies that have forced American sociology to abandon the search for macro level theories and concentrate in ever-finer micro settings and on individuals. Grand theories cannot grow out of such a situation.

Let's now look at the implications of all these for sociology in Bangladesh and what lessons we might draw from them. To begin with, let's not even pretend that sociology in Bangladesh and American sociology are comparable either in their organizational aspects or the contributions made by them. All we seek here is to see if we too have some common little experiences and what they speak for the future of sociology in Bangladesh.

Keeping these in view we look at the implications of the study above for Bangladesh. First, the status of theory. We have not really achieved much by way of building theory. But in terms of teaching theory there has been definitely a gradual decline in interest both among the students and the teachers. Although the number of courses have increased in all the universities, these have been mostly in the specialty areas. At Dhaka University students enroll for the compulsory theory courses but few register where these are optional. The Contemporary Sociological Theory course, taught by the co-author, has

only one student. During the last fifteen years I have been able to encourage one teacher, my co-author, but no student to take up theory seriously. Indeed, I am worried that soon there may not be any one to teach theory courses in Bangladesh either.

Much like the U.S. experience both students and teachers are moving increasingly towards the specialty areas. This is happening as teachers with training abroad come back with degrees in specialty areas. New courses are opened in the sociology departments to accommodate them. And as new areas open up, students rush for these courses expecting future job openings in those areas. Most jobs for a sociologist in the country today are in the specialty areas, like population and demography, environment, women issues and in various development related areas. Many reform and social welfare oriented programs of the government and particularly of the NGOs also attract sociologists. So that with training in a specialty area one has a better chance of getting a job in Bangladesh as well.

In terms of research and research money, there is very little or none in the universities for purely academic research. No one, to my knowledge, has received funds for such research from the government either. The research money that is available from the government and the various donor agencies directly relate to the specialty areas and social welfare projects. These researches have little to contribute to the academia as there is almost a total lack of communication between these research organizations and the universities. Although some teachers and students work on some research projects outside the universities, their works never form a part of the class room teaching. Thus, no one can really expect to build theory in Bangladesh with the research money from these sources.

So far as the organizational aspects are concerned, there is virtually no influence of the two sociology associations of Bangladesh on the growth or the direction the discipline may take. It is the universities who, for the most part, decide the fate of sociology in Bangladesh. The move towards the specialty areas was in response to the teaching needs and not so much because outside organizations were asking for them. There really isn't too many jobs available out there.

To conclude from these then, sociology in Bangladesh is also falling behind in its practice of theory, with fewer theoreticians available for the future. Specialty areas are where the students and teachers are moving to in greater numbers and the university departments are reciprocating by offering courses in such areas. There has been little contribution in the theory area in any case but I feel that, given the strong foundation that earlier programs offered in theory, there might yet be some prospects of theory building in Bangladesh and this will, of necessity, have to be of the armchair variety.

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