

# Revisiting General Theory in Historical Sociology\*

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## *Abstract*

*This article revisits the debate over general theory in historical sociology with the goal of clarifying the use of this kind of theory in empirical research. General theories are defined as postulates about causal agents and causal mechanisms that are linked to empirical analysis through bridging assumptions. These theories can contribute to substantive knowledge by helping analysts derive new hypotheses, integrate existing findings, and explain historical outcomes. To illustrate these applications, the article considers five different general theories that have guided or could guide historical sociology: functionalist, rational choice, power, neo-Darwinian, and cultural theories. A key conclusion that emerges is that scholars must evaluate both the overall merits of general theory and the individual merits of specific general theories.*

The role of general theory in the field of historical sociology has been the subject of a long and heated debate.<sup>1</sup> Although one would not necessarily expect this debate to have produced consensus on the merits of general theories, one might hope it would have “clear[ed] up enough confusion for practitioners to decide where to place their bets” (Gould 2005). Yet, this does not appear to have taken place. The debate has failed to yield a single, intelligible definition of “general theory,” much less a solid understanding of the ways in which general theories are intended to contribute to substantive research.

The goal of this article is to clarify the use of this kind of theory for empirical research in historical sociology. Three arguments are advanced. First, I argue that

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general theories are postulates about foundational causes. More specifically, general theories identify particular “causal agents” (i.e., basic units of analysis) and particular “causal mechanisms” (i.e., abstract properties of causal agents that produce outcomes and associations). Causal agents and causal mechanisms together constitute the “hard core” of general theories (Lakatos 1978).

Second, I argue that general theories can yield three types of empirical contributions: the derivation of hypotheses, the integration of research findings, and the explanation of outcomes. In conjunction with these contributions, general theories help analysts avoid the problems that arise when a theory fails to specify the ultimate reasons why a given association or outcome exists. General theories overcome these problems by attributing final causation to an abstract mechanism that lacks specific temporal and spatial content.

Third, I argue that three general theories — functionalist, rational choice, and power theories — currently inform research in historical sociology, and that two additional theories — neo-Darwinian and cultural theories — potentially could be recast as general theories for historical sociology. These theories are built around different causal agents and causal mechanisms, and these differences in turn shape their capacity to contribute empirical insights.

The debate over general theory in historical sociology has been one of the most important efforts by sociologists to discuss the role of scientific theory in their research. At the same time, however, the polemical nature of the debate has not always been helpful. This article seeks to offer a more dispassionate analysis of general theory. Above all else, it seeks to encourage scholars to be clear about the meaning and intended empirical purposes of general theory before they outright dismiss this mode of analysis or suggest that one particular general theory should guide all sociological investigation.

### **What Is General Theory?**

A lack of consensus concerning the meaning of general theory has characterized the debate over general theory. Initially, as Somers (1998:748) points out, Kiser and Hechter (1991) did not formally define general theory, despite their view that such theories are essential to cumulative research programs. As a result, the critiques of their argument tended to assume that a general theory constitutes a set of nomothetic or law-like statements that apply to all times and places (e.g., Boudon 1998:818; Paige 1999:784; Quadagno & Knapp 1992:491, 495-96; Skocpol 1994:322-25). Not surprisingly, critics dismissed the potential of general theory, and rational choice theory in particular, given the inability of historical sociologists to identify interesting causal propositions that hold true across broad spatial and temporal domains.

The exchange was sometimes unproductive because it too often assumed that general theories are “general” by virtue of their universal application (see Goldstone

1998). In fact, a given general theory may not be appropriate for all research questions, and the hypotheses derived from a general theory may be probabilistic and apply to only a limited range of cases defined by scope conditions. Rather than universal application, the aspect of a general theory that is general is its use of an abstract causal mechanism that exists outside space and time. In a reply to Somers, Kiser and Hechter (1998:794-95) cleared up some of this confusion by defining general theories as follows: "General theories constitute paradigms that can lead to research programs. They consist of explicit assumptions about causal relations, mechanisms, abstract models, and conditions delimiting the scope of such assumptions" (see also Kiser 1996). While useful, this definition is still vague about the meaning of key ideas such as "causal relations," "abstract models," and "mechanisms." In what follows, I propose an alternative definition intended to be more precise and more parsimonious.

#### A DEFINITION OF GENERAL THEORY

A general theory is a postulate about a foundational cause that features two components: a causal agent and a causal mechanism. First, the causal agent is the basic unit of analysis and the entity whose properties ultimately explain outcomes and associations. In rational choice theory, for example, the causal agent is the individual. Other general theories posit alternative causal agents, at both lower levels of analysis (e.g., the gene in neo-Darwinian theory) and higher levels of analysis (e.g., the social system in functionalism). The causal agent of a general theory is not an irreducible entity; rather, it is a compound of other entities at lower levels of analysis. However, a causal agent corresponds to that level of analysis at which a specific causal mechanism is operative. For example, the causal mechanism of functionalism is assumed to be operative at the system level, not at lower levels of analysis where the entities that constitute the system exist.

Second, a general theory identifies a property of the causal agent — what I call a "causal mechanism" — that produces effects. A causal mechanism is the particular feature of the causal agent that actually brings about outcomes and associations. These mechanisms are empirically underspecified, exist outside specific spatial and temporal boundaries, and cannot be directly observed. Nevertheless, in a general theory, causal mechanisms are treated as ontologically primitive causes of outcomes and associations; they are original movers or "ultimate causes." For example, instrumental rationality — the causal mechanism of rational choice theory — is an unobservable property devoid of precise empirical content and specific time/place referents. Yet, in rational choice theory, this property is understood to be the ultimate cause of many outcomes and associations in the world. The positing of omnitemporal and unobserved mechanisms that serve as primitive causes has been discussed primarily in the natural sciences (Bhaskar 1975; Churchland & Hooker 1985; Hacking 1983; Harré 1970; Hempel 1965, 1966; McMullin 1984), but the

same practice applies to the social sciences (Bhaskar 1979; Hedström & Swedberg 1998).

Taken together, a causal agent and a causal mechanism represent the hard core of a general theory, or that part of the theory that is shared by all scholars who use it (Lakatos 1978). This hard core is not usually directly tested, and it is questioned primarily when the theory consistently fails to contribute to empirical research.

General theories contrast with other kinds of theory in historical sociology, including sets of testable hypotheses, research orientations, and general concepts. For example, one may have a theory about the variables that affect some outcome, but this does not mean that one has a general theory, given that a general theory is not itself a testable hypothesis. Likewise, research orientations such as conflict theory or state-centric theory entail a series of propositions about important causal factors in the world, but they do not specify causal agents and primitive mechanisms like a general theory. Finally, general concepts such as “habitus” (Bourdieu 1980) or “communicative action” (Habermas 1984) help us think about and understand various facets of the social world, but they too do not posit a primitive cause of outcomes.

Nor should particular methods of hypothesis testing be conflated with general theories. Rather, the methods used to test the hypotheses generated by general theories are diverse, ranging from multivariate statistics to small-*N* comparative methods to narrative presentations. The relative strengths and weaknesses of these methods raise separate issues unrelated to the defining features of general theory.

In sum, general theories propose that certain basic entities and mechanisms produce social reality. These theories are concerned with the fundamental ontology of our world (i.e., what entities and mechanisms really exist), and they seek to locate ultimate causes, the identification of which should be a central goal of any theoretical science (Jasso 1988).

#### **EXAMPLES OF GENERAL THEORIES**

In the field of historical sociology, analysts have used or could use at least five general theories: functionalist, rational choice, power, neo-Darwinian, and cultural theories. These theories differ with respect to the causal agents and causal mechanisms that comprise their core assumptions (see Table 1).

In functionalist theory, the causal agent is the social system and the causal mechanism is the “needs” or “functional requisites” of that system (e.g., Aberle et al. 1950). Functionalism is built around the assumptions that social systems really exist, that these systems have unobservable requisites (e.g., equilibrium) that must be met for their survival, and that those requisites are an ultimate cause in the social world. Functionalism is a macro theory in that it attributes final causation to system-level attributes.

By contrast, rational choice theory is a micro-level theory. It assumes that individuals are the basic agents and that the instrumental rationality of these

**TABLE 1: Typology of General Theories**

	Functionalist Theory	Rational Choice Theory	Power Theory	Neo-Darwinian Theory	Cultural Theory
Causal Agent	Social System	Individual	Collective Actor	Gene	Collectivity
Causal Mechanism	Needs/ Requisites	Instrumental Rationality	Resources	Contribution to Fitness	Semiotic Practices

individuals is the causal mechanism that produces events and social regularities. Instrumental rationality is an unobservable cognitive trait defined above all as the process by which the optimization of interests is achieved (Abell 1992; Coleman & Fararo 1992; Kiser & Hechter 1991). That is, individuals evaluate behavioral options in light of their costs and benefits, and they pursue the option that maximizes the differences between benefits and costs. The approach therefore holds that individuals are purposive and goal-oriented actors. Beyond this, however, rational choice theory does not directly identify the content of any individual interests, choice options, or potential pay-offs.

Power theory works at a meso-level. It assumes that collective actors (e.g., social groups and organizations) are the key causal agents and that the resources that define these actors are the ultimate causes of outcomes and associations. Resources are potentially unobservable bundles of ideas and materials that provide collective actors with both the motivation to carry out certain kinds of behavior and the capacity to shape particular outcomes. Although power theory has been implicitly used in a number of studies in historical sociology, it has not been developed in any formal way. Hence, we must flesh it out below before we can evaluate its uses in historical sociology.

Finally, neo-Darwinian theory and cultural theory are two important research orientations that could be recast as general theories for historical sociology. Neo-Darwinian theory is radically micro in that it treats genes as causal agents, and it assumes that the past contribution of these genes to human fitness is the key causal mechanism. Cultural theory works at both the meso and macro levels, given that its causal agent — the collectivity — refers to groups of varying sizes. A general cultural theory is built around the specific claim that the semiotic practices (i.e., systems of meaning and associated practices) of collectivities are the key causal mechanism. Because neo-Darwinian and cultural theories have not been explicitly used as general theories in historical sociology, they too must be fleshed out below.

## General Theories and Empirical Research

One could explore the use of general theories by focusing on their normative implications. For example, scholars who believe that rational choice theory encourages self-regarding behavior might criticize the theory on these grounds. However, the normative entailments of general theories are rarely straightforward,<sup>2</sup> and too much concern with normative criteria can obscure the empirical assessment of general theories. While scholars must be accountable for both the empirical and normative implications of their general theories, separate debates can and should be held over these issues.

In this article, I focus on the use of general theory for empirical science. I discuss three specific strategies through which general theories can be employed in empirical analysis: deriving testable propositions, integrating existing findings, and explaining outcomes. Before considering these strategies, however, it is helpful to examine how general theory is intended to improve on other kinds of research.

### AVOIDING THE BLACK BOX PROBLEM

Research oriented toward causal analysis that does not employ a general theory almost inevitably suffers from the “black box problem” (Hedström & Swedberg 1998; Goldthorpe 1997; see also Hume [1748] 1988). This problem refers to the difficulty of explaining *why* a given causal variable exerts an effect on a given outcome variable. For example, while statistical methods can estimate the average net effects of independent variables, they do not themselves locate the reasons why the independent variables have the effects they do. These reasons are left as an unopened black box.

The “problem” here is twofold. First, because researchers cannot meaningfully identify the connection between cause and effect, they are left uncertain whether a given association reflects true causation or whether the association is simply the spurious product of an unknown antecedent variable. The black box problem thus is linked to the selectivity and omitted variable biases that plague social research (Liebersohn 1985).

Second, while researchers often discover that a heterogeneous group of independent variables are associated with an outcome, they lack tools for understanding why such diverse factors are related to the phenomenon. The result is an absence of theoretical integration, which in turn fragments social science knowledge (Dessler 1991; Sørensen 1998).

Researchers usually respond to the black box problem by speculating about the reasons why a given association should exist, perhaps drawing on established research orientations and general concepts. Sometimes they may attempt to identify intervening variables that link a cause and an effect through statistical procedures (e.g., structural equation and path models) or qualitative techniques (e.g., process tracing and narrative analysis). However, unless a general theory is actually used,

these strategies will not fully resolve the black box problem. Rather, they will end up explaining an association between variables by appealing to another association between variables; the new association itself will contain a black box and require a separate explanation. Without the identification of a mechanism, then, the analyst will be forced into an infinite regress as he or she pursues deeper and deeper intervening variables (King, Keohane & Verba 1994:86; McMullin 1984:206).

General theories provide a potential solution to the black box problem. If an empirical association or outcome can be derived from a general theory, one has reason to believe that the causal mechanism of the general theory explains the existence of the association or outcome. This is true because the postulates used to deduce the predicted association or outcome — which include an appeal to what is viewed as an ultimate cause — carry the explanation of why the association or outcome logically and necessarily must exist. Indeed, the fact that the causal mechanism exists outside time and space is precisely why it can serve as a transcendent cause that fills all black boxes rather than as simply an intervening variable that leaves behind temporal gaps (for an opposing view, see Somers 1998).

General theories can yield benefits besides overcoming the black box problem. For example, they force analysts to be explicit about underlying assumptions that otherwise might remain implicit and hidden. They also allow work across diverse substantive domains to be linked in a common research program that is united by concern with a single causal mechanism (cf. Kiser & Hechter 1998). Furthermore, general theories can be a source of new hypotheses and new puzzles, thereby stimulating empirical research agendas (Burawoy 1989; Kiser & Hechter 1991; Paige 1999). Indeed, general theories often show how findings that initially seem inconsistent with a given causal mechanism can in fact be explained by that causal mechanism (e.g., rational choice theorists often explain collectively irrational outcomes). Nevertheless, when compared to research that does not employ a general theory, the most distinctive virtue of research that employs a general theory is probably avoidance of the black box problem (see also Boudon 1998:18).

#### **HYPOTHESIS DERIVATION, KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION, AND OUTCOME EXPLANATION**

Three empirical strategies are used in conjunction with general theories to avoid the black box problem: the derivation of testable hypotheses, the integration of existing associational findings, and the explanation of historical outcomes (see Table 2). All three strategies are built around the deduction of propositions from postulates (see Jasso 1988; cf. Hempel 1965, Homans 1967, Popper 1972). *Propositions* are testable hypotheses and predictions about the occurrence of outcomes. They are the deduced consequences of postulates, representing the conclusion of a logical chain of reasoning. By contrast, *postulates* are assertions about conditions in the world and the logical relationships that govern these conditions. In historical sociology, postulates are often inductively formulated

though case-oriented research, including research that relies on the various kinds of non-general theory discussed above. The logical relationships that govern postulates may be quite varied, ranging from non-deterministic probability functions to claims about necessary and/or sufficient connections (Fararo 1989:17-22). Taken together, postulates and propositions follow the rules of a syllogism: if the postulates are true, the proposition must also be true. More specifically, if the postulates are true, they are jointly sufficient for the truth of the proposition.

When a general theory is used, the starting postulate assumes a given causal agent and mechanism. Since the causal mechanism refers to an abstract property, subsequent postulates are “bridging assumptions” that add empirical content to this mechanism (Hempel 1966:72-82; Kelle & Ludemann 1998; Morton 1999). Additional postulates also specify conditions in the world that work in conjunction with the mechanism. Overall, the analyst moves from postulates of a high level of abstraction (i.e., a causal mechanism) to postulates of a concrete level of abstraction (i.e., an empirical proposition) (see Lindenberg [1992] on the “method of decreasing abstraction”). In a research program, certain postulates may become commonplace (e.g., wealth maximizing and egoistic assumptions in rational choice theory). In this sense, scholars do not necessarily have to start from scratch in their model construction but can sometimes rely on the postulate formulations of previous researchers. Even so, however, analysts must still draw heavily on their specialized knowledge about a given research topic to formulate many of the more concrete postulates needed to effectively deduce propositions.

*Hypothesis derivation* entails the use of untested postulates to derive testable hypotheses about associations between variables. As Jasso (1988:19) puts it, “Test the predictions [i.e., propositions], never the postulates.” With this strategy, scholars employ Occam’s razor by using as few postulates as possible to generate as many testable propositions as possible. The postulates themselves are judged based on their capacity to yield empirically supported hypotheses, especially hypotheses that fill gaps in knowledge, solve empirical problems, or are counterintuitive (Cohen 1989; Laudan 1996; Popper 1959).

Hypotheses derived from postulates can be false for two reasons. First, the analyst may have violated a logical rule in the process of reasoning from postulates to proposition. When this happens, the truth of the postulates is not sufficient for the truth of the hypotheses; a logical fallacy has occurred. Hypothesis derivers must therefore be concerned with checking “the postulates for logical consistency, doing whatever repair is necessary in order to achieve internal coherence” (Jasso 1988:9). Second, one or more of the postulates — including an initial postulate about a general theory’s causal mechanism — may be false. Even if a testable proposition is derived in a logically valid manner, we have no reason to believe it will be true if the assumptions from which it was derived are not true.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when a hypothesis derived from a general theory is not empirically supported, the analyst must review whether the problem is a breakdown in deductive reasoning or the falsity of a

**TABLE 2: Hypothesis Derivation, Knowledge Integration, and Outcome Explanation**

**A. Hypothesis Derivation**

Assumptions that are not tested.	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Postulate 1 (Causal Mechanism)} \\ \textit{Postulate 2} \\ \textit{Postulate n} \end{array} \right.$
Hypotheses that are tested.	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Proposition 1} \\ \textit{Proposition 2} \\ \textit{Proposition n} \end{array} \right.$

**B. Knowledge Integration**

Assumptions that are not tested.	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Postulate 1 (Causal Mechanism)} \\ \textit{Postulate 2} \\ \textit{Postulate n} \end{array} \right.$
Hypotheses that were previously tested.	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Proposition 1} \\ \textit{Proposition 2} \\ \textit{Proposition n} \end{array} \right.$

**C. Outcome Explanation**

Assumptions that are tested.	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Postulate 1 (Causal Mechanism)} \\ \textit{Postulate 2} \\ \textit{Postulate n} \end{array} \right.$
A historical outcome.	$\left\{ \textit{Proposition 1} \right.$

secondary postulate. If neither condition seems to apply, doubt is cast upon the causal mechanism of the general theory.<sup>4</sup>

*Knowledge integration* works backward from an existing set of hypotheses that have already been tested and empirically supported to a set of postulates (Hempel 1966:70). Theorists who use this strategy try to illustrate how diverse associations can all be viewed as the product of the same basic causal mechanism.

Knowledge integration helps overcome the fragmentation that arises when researchers discover that a wide range of independent variables are associated with a particular outcome. The strategy shows how the associations are the product of a single causal mechanism, thereby supplementing empirical research that begins without the aid of a general theory. However, when compared to hypothesis deriving, the exercise of knowledge integration provides less convincing support for the

existence of a causal mechanism, given that the validity of the hypotheses is already known (Abell 1994; Cohen 1989; Hage 1994).

Finally, *outcome explanation* refers to the theoretical practice of logically deducing outcomes — rather than testable hypotheses — from a set of postulates. Outcomes can be either particular events that occur at specific times and places (e.g., the French Revolution) or classes of events of which particular cases are examples (e.g., social revolutions in agrarian monarchies). For either kind of outcome, the analyst does *not* test the outcome that comprises the final proposition, since this is simply a descriptive referent for one or more historical cases.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the analyst seeks to test as many as possible of the postulates other than the causal mechanism used to logically deduce the outcome. The strategy of outcome explaining is thus fundamentally different from the strategies discussed above; in particular, outcome explaining violates the maxim “test the predictions, never the postulates.”

In some respects, the strategy of outcome explaining is best suited for the field of historical sociology. For one thing, the formulation of the testable postulates used to deduce a historical outcome may allow researchers to take advantage of their case expertise to a greater degree than with the other strategies, where postulates are not tested. Moreover, historical sociologists are often more interested in explaining outcomes (e.g., welfare policies, political regimes, and revolutions) than in integrating pre-existing knowledge or deriving new hypotheses, though they typically value these other contributions and may use them in conjunction with outcome explanation (e.g., as in the Brustein example below). If their goal was primarily hypothesis deriving, they would not need to study past events for which it is difficult to gather data and test associations (Goldthorpe 1991). For its part, knowledge integration is the activity of theorists who work in an area marked by a plentitude of existing correlational/associational findings that require theoretical explanation. At this stage, most areas of historical sociology have not generated enough correlational/associational findings to require knowledge integration.

## **Functionalist and Rational Choice Theories**

Functionalism and rational choice analysis are widely considered to be two examples of general theories.<sup>6</sup> However, previous discussions of these theories have not been explicit about how analysts use them with the strategies elaborated above.

### **FUNCTIONALIST THEORY**

Traditionally, many functionalist studies in the field of historical sociology sought to explain the existence of social structures and institutions found widely across past and present societies, such as religion, government, and stratification (e.g., Davis 1959; Davis & Moore 1945; Levy 1952). In addition, they often were

concerned with explaining outcomes such as the presence of crime, violence, and suicide that appeared anomalous given common bridging assumptions that specified system needs in terms of stability or equilibrium. At worst, these outcome explaining studies simply asserted that a given social institution was functional for society, never going beyond an ad hoc account of the reasons why. At best, they would posit the causal mechanism of functionalist theory (i.e., social systems have functional needs) and then specify particular system needs, building toward the outcome of interest. All of this was done quite informally and loosely, making it difficult to evaluate the internal logic of many functionalist accounts.

In more recent periods, functionalism has appeared in structural Marxist frameworks, including qualitative strands of world systems theory. In these works, a capitalist mode of production is treated as a system with coherent reproductive needs, and it is argued that these needs in turn call forth human behavior and major world events. Again, much attention is devoted to seemingly anomalous outcomes. For example, while the creation of welfare states might seem to contradict the needs of a capitalist system, Poulantzas (1968) argues that in fact welfare provision enhances the long-term viability of capitalism. Likewise, while the French Revolution might seem to threaten stability in the world system, Wallerstein (1989) explains this event in terms of its stabilizing role through the promotion of bourgeois values.

Although functionalism has sustained research programs, thoughtful analysts argue that it has not produced compelling explanations of outcomes or derived interesting and empirically confirmed propositions (see Turner & Maryanski 1979). In part, the problem is simply that its practitioners do not formally specify their postulates and the lines of reasoning they use to deduce propositions. More fundamentally, the testable aspects of functionalist arguments often appear to be false. For example, upon empirical scrutiny, traditional functionalist studies are often criticized as offering false premises (e.g., Cullen & Novick 1979; Stinchcombe & Harris 1969; Tumin 1953). Likewise, critics of structural Marxism and world systems theory present powerful empirical evidence to show that their respective postulates about dominant class control of the state and the marginal role domestic class struggle are unsustainable (e.g., Brenner 1977; Skocpol 1977). In this sense, the rejection of functionalism by many contemporary sociologists is at least implicitly grounded in the belief that this research tradition has not produced important or valid empirical insights through the use of the strategies described here.

#### **RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY**

Rational choice theory has been at the center of the debate over general theory in historical sociology. Advocates assert that it is currently the only viable general theory for the social sciences (e.g., Abell 1992; Kiser & Hechter 1998; Wallerstein 2001), and critics respond that it contributes little or nothing (e.g., Green & Shapiro

1994; Somers 1998). What this debate lacks, however, is an explicit discussion of the three strategies through which general theories can make empirical contributions. Thus, while rational choice theorists have discussed their common bridging assumptions (Friedman and Hechter 1988), they have not clearly noted the different strategies with which these bridging assumptions can be used. To explore this issue, it is helpful to consider two different applications of rational choice theory.

William Brustein's *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933* (1996) is an outcome explaining study that also pursues hypothesis derivation to empirically validate untestable postulates. Brustein is centrally concerned with explaining the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. Since this party became the nation's strongest during elections in July 1932 (though Hitler did not win these elections), Brustein needs to explain why more individuals chose to vote for the Nazis than any other party. The outcome is nicely suited for his purposes because it appears counterintuitive vis-à-vis rational choice analysis: Why would large numbers of rational voters choose the Nazis?

To answer, Brustein begins by assuming that: (1) German voters are rational individuals, and (2) economic interests significantly — if not entirely — define voter preferences vis-à-vis the alternative parties. He then postulates that, among the various Weimar parties, the Nazi Party's positions offer the greatest material pay-off to the greatest number of individuals. It follows that the Nazi Party receives more votes than any other party (see Table 3a).

This argument appears to be logically valid, but one must question whether its premises are true, especially postulates 1 and 2. These postulates are controversial because a large body of literature suggests that anti-Semitism and emotionally-driven fears motivated German voters. In these formulations, voters are not viewed as rational, and their interests are not understood in material terms.

Brustein's strategy for testing postulates 1 and 2 is to use them in the derivation of other hypotheses that can be more directly tested. Thus, by taking his initial postulates as a starting point, he adds the assumption that the class position of individuals shapes their economic interests (see Table 3b). This leads to a new testable proposition: Germans tend to vote for the party that best serves the class to which they belong.

Much of the book is an effort to test this proposition, under the assumption that support for this hypothesis lends plausibility to the postulates from which it is derived, which in turn supports the overall argument about the Nazi electoral victory. In other words, support for this hypothesis adds credence to the idea that Germans are instrumentally rational voters and material interests define their preferences, the two key untestable postulates in Brustein's central argument.

Although Brustein uses rational choice theory to develop his key orienting hypothesis, he further specifies the hypothesis without the use of any general theory. In particular, he employs historical narrative to locate specific classes and estimate the extent to which they will benefit from particular parties. For example, his

**TABLE 3: Summary of Brustein's Arguments**

## A. The Central Argument: Outcome Explanation

- Postulate 1a:* German voters are rational.
- Postulate 2a:* Economic interests define the core preferences of German voters.
- Postulate 3a:* Of the Weimar parties, the Nazi Party's policies are the most economically beneficial to the greatest number of voters.
- Proposition 1a:* Germans will vote for the Nazi Party more than any other party.

## B. Argument with Testable Proposition: Hypothesis Derivation

- Postulate 1b:* German voters are rational.
- Postulate 2b:* Economic interests define the core preferences of German voters.
- Postulate 3b:* The class position of German voters determines their economic interests.
- Proposition 1b:* Germans will vote for the party that best serves their class.

narrative suggests that the Weimar tariff policy was especially damaging to dairy and livestock farmers; individuals of these classes stood to benefit economically from the Nazi's agrarian reform program. By contrast, grain producers were protected under Weimar arrangements, and thus stood to benefit from policies and parties that would maintain the status quo. He supports the specific hypotheses that emerge from the narrative with a statistical analysis that shows that class membership is generally associated with votes for and participation in the Nazi movement in the predicted ways. In the end, Brustein argues that the Nazis won the elections because most classes — and most individuals — stood to benefit from the Nazi policies more than those of any other party.

A second recent work of historical sociology — Gerard Alexander's *The Sources of Democratic Consolidation* (2002) — primarily pursues the hypothesis deriving strategy. In particular, Alexander formulates a general proposition about the conditions under which democratic consolidation will occur: democratic consolidation occurs only when conservatives see the left as reliably moderate. As Table 4 shows, Alexander arrives at this proposition by assuming the causal mechanism of rational choice theory and then formulating a series of bridging assumptions. Many of these bridging assumptions are inductively generated through a rich analysis of political development in Spain before and after the Civil War, in France and Britain before World War I, and in France, Britain, Germany, and Italy in the inter-war period and after World War II.

Since this is a hypothesis deriving study, the main burdens on Alexander are to: (1) demonstrate that the hypothesis follows logically from the postulates; and (2) show that the hypothesis is empirically supported. Although Alexander does

not use formal notation, it appears that his hypothesis does follow logically from the postulates. Assuming this to be the case, the burden of proof becomes one of actually testing the proposition and convincing readers that it is true.

Alexander does this by gathering information on conservatives' views of the left (from interviews, newspapers, diaries, letters, public statements, and memoirs) and then correlating these views with conservatives' commitment to democracy and to actual democratic stability. For example, conservatives are understood to perceive the left as moderate when conservatives believe it is highly unlikely that the left will initiate violence or carry out extremely hostile economic policies. Conservatives show a commitment to democracy when they forego the opportunity to maintain access to instruments that could be used to overthrow democracy. Although the test is limited to a small number of cases, Alexander's comparative-historical analysis is persuasively presented. In addition, he offers insights for testing his key proposition using a broader range of countries.

These studies by Brustein and Alexander illustrate how rational choice theorists use general theory to make empirical contributions in the field of historical sociology. Though focused on different substantive issues, the books clearly speak to one another: Brustein and Alexander have the same "first principles" grounded in the assumption that instrumentally rational individuals are the final movers of events. In this sense, they join other prominent rational choice analysts such as Robert Bates, Michael Hechter, Edgar Kiser, Margaret Levi, and Barry Weingast in a common research project (see Bates et al. 1998).

As a final note, however, it is worth emphasizing that even many advocates of rational choice theory recognize its limitations as a general theory. For one thing, there are a series of well-known practical difficulties formulating rational choice models in complex social settings (see Munck 2001 for a review). Moreover, the universality of instrumental rationality has been questioned, suggesting that the theory also has important "ontological" scope limitations. In particular, the work of cognitive psychologists (e.g., Halpern & Stern 1998) and sympathetic skeptics (e.g., Elster 1989) has led many rational choice analysts to conclude that instrumental rationality is a subset of human decision making that applies in some domains but not others. For example, assumptions about instrumental rationality often break down in environments that promote emotional, impulsive, or habitual behavior (Kiser & Hechter 1998:800). Likewise, when individuals face real uncertainty about potential options and their consequences, the "rational choice" may be to pursue rigid behavioral rules rather than to attempt to optimize interests (Heiner 1983). In short, the scope of rational choice theory is limited by practical modeling issues and by the fact that the core ontological assumption of rational choice theory is not universally applicable.

**TABLE 4: Stylized Summary of Alexander's Hypothesis Derivation**


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<i>Postulate 1.</i>	Individuals are rational.
<i>Postulate 2.</i>	When a democratic regime is present, individuals can “commit to democracy” or “not commit to democracy.”
<i>Postulate 3.</i>	Individuals with conservative preferences (i.e., conservatives) above all seek to ensure their well-being and safety.
<i>Postulate 4.</i>	A commitment to democracy by conservatives is a necessary condition for democratic consolidation.
<i>Postulate 5.</i>	Conservatives make predictions about their well-being and safety under democracy in light of assessments of the likely political behavior of individuals with leftist preferences (i.e., the left).
<i>Postulate 6.</i>	If conservatives see the left as reliably moderate, they conclude that their well-being and safety will be securely protected under a democracy.
<i>Proposition 1:</i>	Democratic consolidation occurs only when conservatives see the left as reliably moderate.

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## Power Theory

Historical sociologists from several different traditions invoke the concept of power in their work. For example, functionalists sometimes view power as a requisite that systems need to achieve, and rational choice analysts occasionally explain an individual's power by drawing on the distribution of preferences within a population (Coleman 1990:133). Here, however, I focus on those historical sociologists who treat power as the foundational cause of outcomes. For these scholars, resources constitute collective actors with enduring identities, capacities, and motivations, and these actors in turn drive events in history.

### FORMAL SPECIFICATION

The causal agents of power theory are collective actors, or aggregations of individuals who engage in relatively coordinated behavior, such as states, classes, movements, and organizations. Collective actors control specific kinds of resources that empower their action. The resources can be material in nature (e.g., technological artifacts and large numbers of human beings) or ideational in nature (e.g., prestige and information). Resources constitute collective actors in the sense that they literally are defining parts of these actors. For example, a defining feature of a state is its near monopoly over the use of force within a territory, and nearly any definition of a class actor treats control over economic resources as a constitutive dimension.

The power of a collective actor corresponds with the extent of resources that the actor mobilizes to exert effects. Powerful actors are precisely those who exercise their capacity to exert important effects; actors who are not powerful do not marshal

capacity to shape outcomes in important ways. One therefore observes power through the *exercise* of ability, not simply through the presence of latent ability. This conceptualization of power is consistent with the physical sciences, where power is defined as work accomplished (or energy emitted) per unit of time (Blalock 1989).<sup>7</sup>

Power theory focuses centrally on conflict between collective actors. The theory assumes that collective actors usually cannot shape outcomes without obstruction. Rather, outcomes emerge from the conflict of multiple actors motivated to pursue competing ends. At the same time, power theory does not necessarily assume that one actor exercises domination over another; rather, differences among actors in level of power reflect differential contributions to outcomes. In this sense, power theory is consistent with feminist writings that focus on an actor's "power to" accomplish an end rather than an actor's "power over" another actor (see Hartsock 1983:224; Morriss 2002:32-35). Whereas frameworks that look at "power over" are helpful for understanding zero-sum domination, frameworks that emphasize "power to" are more suitable for analyzing events characterized by mixtures of positive-sum and zero-sum relations, as is true of many outcomes in historical sociology. In the case of power theory, the focus is specifically on the extent to which actors exercise their "power to" in actual practice.

For the purpose of formalization, we can treat power like linear momentum in the physical world and disaggregate it into two components: capacity and emanation. *Capacity* refers to the total latent ability of an actor to effect outcomes in a given arena, acting as the equivalent of mass in the physical sciences. The capacity of an actor is relative to a particular arena within which specific resources can be used to accomplish certain ends. Depending on the resources that define a collective actor, the actor may have great capacity vis-à-vis outcomes in one arena but not another.

*Emanation* refers to the extent to which the capacity of an actor is actually directed at a given outcome, acting like velocity in physics. Just as massive physical objects will not accomplish work if they lack velocity, actors with substantial capacity do not have power if that capacity is not emanated toward some outcome. In power theory, as in all theories in the social sciences, it is necessary to make certain assumptions about the motivations of actors, otherwise the actors are inert and there is no stimulus for movement (Emmett 1976). Power theory assumes that actors' motivations derive from the resources that constitute their identity as a collective actor. For example, a social movement is motivated to challenge authorities because the movement is constituted by individuals who possess informational and material resources that encourage this kind of behavior. Insofar as the movement does not possess these resources, it ceases to be a social movement. Likewise, the economic and political resources that define classes and states compel these actors toward certain kinds of behavior and not others. In short, the same resources that define the capacities and identities of collective actors also provide them with motivation to carry out behavior.

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An actor's power is the product of its capacity and emanation. This idea can be expressed simply as:

$$P_{iy} = C_{iy}E_{iy} \quad (1)$$

where  $P$  = power,  $C$  = capacity,  $E$  = emanation,  $i$  = a particular actor, and  $y$  = a particular outcome. The concepts of capacity and emanation are abstract and not directly observable. In this sense, power theory is no different than other general theories that propose mechanisms that can be tested only through the use of bridging assumptions.

Different models can be built using power theory. For example, in a simple balance of power framework, outcomes reflect the sum of the power of all actors, with the understanding that the power of some actors will promote the outcome of interest, while the power of others will hinder this outcome. The extent to which a given outcome takes place can therefore be expressed as:

$$Y = \sum_{i=1}^n P_{iy} \quad (2)$$

where  $Y$  is the outcome of interest and  $P$  is the power (positively or negatively directed) of the actors with respect to  $Y$ . More complicated models may make different assumptions about how the power of collective actors should be aggregated. For example, in certain coalitional theories, the addition of a new actor expands the power of the coalition to a degree greater than simply the contribution of the new actor alone. Likewise, for some purposes, analysts may be centrally concerned with changes in the power of particular actors over time (due to alterations in their capacity or emanation, or both). In principle, if analysts are explicit about their underlying assumptions, these coalitional and temporal considerations can also be modeled.

To be linked to empirical analysis, the abstract components of power theory must be specified through bridging assumptions that appear as postulates in a deductive model. As with other general theories, the actual specification of bridging assumptions is often an inductive process that draws on an investigator's specialized knowledge of particular cases. Among the key bridging assumptions that must be formulated are: (1) the definition of the relevant collective actors; (2) the estimation of each actor's capacity and emanation; and (3) the rules for aggregating different actors' power into predictions about outcomes.

The difficulties inherent in developing these bridging assumptions suggest the limitations of power theory. Because there is heterogeneity in the resources that collective actors may possess, and because these resources may not be directly observable, one cannot easily measure capacity. Rather, to estimate capacity, analysts must rely on their specialized knowledge of the actor and a series of heuristic rules. No matter how thoroughly this is done, the best one can hope to achieve is a reasonable approximation of the capacity of actors. Furthermore, the ways in which

resources shape emanation may not be easily established for certain arenas, creating problems for theorizing the degree to which and the very targets at which capacity is directed. Difficulties also can arise if the relevant resources shift rapidly in an evolving situation. For all of these reasons, power theory faces important limitations in application, even if the power of collective actors really does drive the phenomena of interest.

#### EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS

If only implicitly, power theory has underpinned empirical research in the field of historical sociology. To illustrate this point, I reconstruct the arguments of two well known works: Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens's *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992) and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (1979).

Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) seek to explain the presence or absence of democracy in a broad range of capitalist countries, arguing that "power relations . . . determine whether democracy can emerge, stabilize, and then maintain itself" (5). They begin by assuming the causal mechanism of power theory: resources determine the exercised capacity (i.e., power) of collective actors (postulate 1). Next, they argue that social classes are critical collective actors, and that social and economic resources constitute five main social classes: workers, rural peasants, middle classes, the bourgeoisie, and landed elites (postulate 2). Finally, using a straightforward additive rule for aggregation, they suggest that democracy is significantly a product of the relative balance of power among different social classes (postulate 3). By treating these assumptions as untested postulates and employing the proposition derivation strategy, they therefore generate the following testable proposition:

$$Y = \sum P_{w,r,m,b, \text{ and } l}$$

(3)

where  $Y$  = the presence or absence of democracy,  $P$  = power,  $w$  = working class,  $r$  = rural peasants,  $m$  = middle classes,  $b$  = bourgeoisie, and  $l$  = landed elites.

The bulk of *Capitalist Development and Democracy* is an effort to test this hypothesis by estimating the power of classes in particular countries and determining whether countries that are predicted to have democracy in fact do have democracy. To estimate capacity and emanation, the authors focus attention on the resources that define different classes. For example, because landed elites usually control dependent labor resources, they tend to possess substantial capacity in agrarian settings and a motivation to resist democracy. By contrast, the working class controls unions and wage earners, making it more likely to mobilize on behalf of democracy. Historical narrative provides the empirical basis for comparing the relative capacity and emanation of particular classes across cases.

A nice illustration of how the authors use this model in practice is their explanation of contrasting outcomes in Sweden and Italy during the interwar years. In the case of Sweden, the relative power of the classes vis-à-vis the outcome of democracy is approximately as follows (these are my estimates): landed elites = -1, bourgeoisie = 0, middle classes = 0, rural peasants = +3, and working class = +5. By contrast, for interwar Italy, the numbers could be assigned as follows: landed elites = -5, bourgeoisie = -3, middle classes = -3, rural peasants = +3, and working class = +5. Hence, given the proposition in equation (3), the model predicts (correctly) that democracy should be present in Sweden between the wars because the country has a favorable balance of power (i.e., a sum of +7). By contrast, democracy should be absent in Italy during the same time because of its unfavorable balance of power (i.e., a sum of -3).

The historical narratives of the book provide the justification for assigning particular power values to the classes. For example, in both Sweden and Italy, landed elites' control over dependent labor motivated them to emanate nearly all power in a negative direction (i.e., they strongly opposed democracy), but their capacity differed considerably: the Swedish landed classes were tiny and had almost no capacity (thus a power score of -1), while the Italian landed elites were well developed and had considerable capacity (thus a score of -5). As for middle classes and the bourgeoisie, the difference lay not in their relative capacity, but rather their relative emanation: in Italy these classes controlled a substantial rural electorate and thus were an antidemocratic force (-3 each), whereas in Sweden they did not possess similar resources and thus were a neutral force (0 each). Finally, in both cases the peasantry and working classes emanated nearly all power toward democracy, but the working class was more organized and thus had more capacity. Hence, the peasantry receives a score of +3, while the working class receives a score of +5.

By offering historical narratives that show how specific kinds of resources shape the relative power of different class actors, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens use power theory to explain the presence or absence of democracy across a large number of cases. Each successful case study provides support for the authors' overall proposition found in equation (3). That is, the confirming case studies suggest that society is indeed composed of five major class actors and that the resources of these actors ultimately drive major political outcomes.

Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979) also implicitly uses the assumptions of power theory, in this case to explain the occurrence of social revolution in agrarian bureaucratic societies. Skocpol theorizes that the potential for social revolution is driven by the emanation and capacity of key actors, especially states and classes. Three relationships concerning relative capacity are especially important: (1) the capacity of a state relative to other states; (2) the capacity of the dominant class relative to the state; and (3) the capacity of subordinate classes relative to the dominant class and the state. Skocpol argues that social revolutions

will occur when the capacity of a state is weak relative to other states, when the dominant class has significant capacity relative to the state, and when the subordinate classes have significant capacity vis-à-vis the dominant class and state.

In this outcome explaining work, Skocpol develops this argument by assuming the causal mechanism of power theory and inductively formulating testable bridging assumptions about the resources of states and classes. For example, she hypothesizes that agrarian-bureaucratic states that are financially and militarily weakened in the international system through wars will seek to carry out modernizing reforms. However, insofar as dominant-class wealth is independent of the state, this class group will have sufficient power to block these reforms, which will throw the state into a crisis. Furthermore, she hypothesizes that the main subordinate class of agrarian-bureaucratic societies — peasants — will revolt against elites if they have the structural resources to do so. In turn, Skocpol postulates that the combination of state crisis and peasant revolt is sufficient for a social revolution.

Skocpol tests the key postulates using evidence from France, Russia, and China. She roughly measures state capacity by considering the effects of wars and international competition on the fiscal stability of absolutist regimes, and she assesses the capacity of dominant classes through a detailed analysis of their ability to buy and hold offices along with their ties within the military. As for subordinate groups, she puts great emphasis on the structural cohesion of peasant villages, especially the extent to which they can function autonomously from landlords and state agents. Through this analysis, Skocpol tests her postulates about the ways in which resources affect the relative balance of power among states, dominant classes, and peasants. To reinforce the test, she examines other agrarian-bureaucratic societies where one of more collective actors lacks the appropriate resources and thus social revolution does not occur. For example, the peasantry in late-nineteenth century Japan lacked the community resources necessary to sustain collective revolts against landlords, whereas the state in mid-seventeenth century England did not experience a devastating loss of financial resources through international competition. Hence, also in this well known work, the resources of collective actors — not the choices of individuals or the needs of systems — underpin the main theoretical logic.

To conclude this section, I would like to suggest that many works in historical sociology implicitly employ power theory in their analyses. Unlike functionalist and rational choice studies, these works start with collective actors and their resources and build toward an understanding of how these resources define capacity and emanation. For example, Barrington Moore's (1966) seminal work on the social origins of the modern world explored the power of different classes and class coalitions. This study has influenced scholars who make similar assumptions in analyzing political outcomes (e.g., Luebbert 1991; Paige 1997). The literature on social welfare also has been strongly influenced by a balance of class power model (e.g., Huber & Stephens 2001). Many other works on collective action, social movements, revolution, and democratization have assumed that the

power of societal challengers and the state is of central importance (e.g., see the literature cited in Goldstone 2003; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996).

More generally, whole theoretical traditions like Marxism could be viewed in terms of power theory. Although Marxist theory is often characterized as a general theory (e.g., Burawoy 1989; Paige 1999), the specific causal agent and causal mechanism of this theory are the subject of debate. Indeed, scholars associated with both rational choice theory (e.g., Elster 1985; Roemer 1982) and functionalism (e.g., Cohen 1982) have subsumed Marxism within their general theories. Given the concern of Marx and his followers with the relative capabilities of competing social groups, however, power theory is arguably more consistent with Marxism's major analytical orientations.

These various examples suggest how power theory might have broad application in historical sociology. They also suggest the potential *theoretical unity* of many leading scholars who work in the field, including Evelyne Huber, Jack Goldstone, Jeff Goodwin, Ann Shola Orloff, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol, John Stephens, and others affiliated with the comparative-historical analysis tradition.

### Other Potential General Theories

The three general theories examined so far represent the principle general theories that have been used implicitly or explicitly in the field of historical sociology. Here I consider two other theories — neo-Darwinian theory and cultural theory — that suggest alternative causal mechanisms that could be used to inform historical sociology. If we include these theories alongside functional, rational choice, and power theories, we arrive at the full typology of five general theories presented above.

#### NEO-DARWINIAN THEORY

Scholars in the field of evolutionary psychology use neo-Darwinian theory to explain social phenomena in light of the evolutionary past of human beings (see Freese 2000 for a review). Work in this area self-consciously treats the gene as the elementary unit of analysis. In particular, the gene is the unit through which the process of natural selection operated when early humans were evolving into their current biological form.

Although for analytic purposes evolutionary psychologists will sometimes treat genes as if they are rational actors seeking to proliferate in subsequent generations, in fact the characteristic of genes that allows them to proliferate is their non-purposive contribution to the fitness of individuals (Dawkins 1976). In evolutionary terms, the fitness of individuals corresponds with the number of offspring they introduce into the next generation (Ehrlich 2000:16-20). Because natural selection assumes that individuals with different genetic endowments will have differential contributions of offspring, the fundamental causal role of genes

in neo-Darwinian theory is to shape the relative fitness of individuals in the ancestral environment (i.e., in the historical settings within which humans evolved).

This perspective has informed a growing body of sociological literature that draws on the empirical strategies discussed above. Although most of this work falls outside historical sociology, a neo-Darwinian approach is not inherently incompatible with macro-historical research (Hopcroft 2001:159). For example, because evolutionary theorists assume that all humans (except perhaps men and women) share the same basic genetic material,<sup>8</sup> these theorists use the outcome explaining strategy to account for recurrent patterns of social organization, such as stratification and sex discrimination (Wright 1994). Likewise, certain crucial events and transitions in human history — such as the advent of monogamy, the creation of settled agriculture, or even economic growth — are explained in neo-Darwinian terms because the genes that made these occurrences possible conferred an adaptive advantage to their carriers in the ancestral environment (e.g., Galor & Moav 2002; Kanazawa & Still 1999).

Beyond this, neo-Darwinian theory is used to explain why humans respond to social structures in patterned and predictable ways. For example, one might ask why poverty and crime are associated with one another. A potential neo-Darwinian answer is that the association exists because genes that encourage norm breaking and risk taking in the face of social marginalization contributed to fitness in the ancestral environment. In this sense, neo-Darwinian theory explains variation in human behavior by deriving propositions that treat environmental conditions as independent variables; evolved human biology is the omnitemporal mechanism that accounts for the existence of the association in the first place. When applied to historical sociology, this kind of analysis could help integrate knowledge about broad correlational patterns, such as the relationship between urbanization and nationalism (Whitmeyer 1997), economic development and fertility decline (Turke 1989), and subsistence technology and family structure (van den Berghe 1979).

Even though neo-Darwinian scholars embrace the project of general theorizing, there are good reasons to predict that the contribution of neo-Darwinian theory to historical sociology will be modest. One important reason is the resistance that evolutionary approaches face within the sociology discipline. Many sociologists see this work as advocating a kind of biological determinism that is inappropriate for explaining the tremendous diversity found across human societies. While these kinds of criticisms often reflect a poor understanding of neo-Darwinian theory, they carry a great deal of weight within sociology (Freese 2000; Turner 2004).

Beyond the difficulty of encouraging mainstream sociologists to take seriously modern evolutionary biology, however, I believe that the potential of neo-Darwinian theory for explaining outcomes in historical sociology is limited. Outcomes such as revolutions and democratization represent the conjuncture of numerous actors and separately determined processes that conjoin in complicated ways. Although it is certainly true that neo-Darwinian theory might be able to explain pieces of these complex outcomes, the theory would need to introduce a huge range of

postulates to account for all of the differentially motivated behavior that combines to produce the overall occurrences. In practice, this may prove impossible. Even more than the other general theories, then, the practical utility of neo-Darwinian theory for outcome explanation may be inversely related to the complexity of behaviors underlying the social phenomenon of interest.

#### CULTURAL THEORY

In sharp contrast to neo-Darwinian theory, cultural theory works at a super-individual level of analysis, given that “culture” is a property of collectivities — societies, social groups, and communities — rather than individuals. The collectivity remains the main level of analysis even though many cultural theorists treat cultures as weakly bounded, dynamic, contested, and loosely integrated (Sewell 1999). Furthermore, since Durkheim, theorists have assumed that cultural communities exhibit emergent properties that cannot be reduced to the constituent individuals that compose these communities (Sawyer 2001). This is one reason why cultural theorists have insisted that the analysis of cultural collectivities yields insights that cannot be generated by the analysis of individuals alone.

The term culture is used in many different ways in this field, and it is impossible to offer a single definition that encompasses all conceptualizations (see Ortner 1984; Sewell 1999). But one possible definition that captures the spirit of many recent conceptualizations is culture as “semiotic practices” (Wedeen 2002) or “systems of meaning and the practices in which they are embedded” (Steinmetz 1999:7). This definition is useful for the present discussion because it suggests a potential causal mechanism: the meanings and associated practices embodied within a given collectivity. Like other causal mechanisms, this one is abstract and underspecified; to be empirically useful, it is necessary to employ bridging assumptions that add substantive content to its omnitemporal core. In conjunction with bridging assumptions, however, there is no reason why a cultural theorist could not use semiotic practices in much the same way that a rational choice theorist uses instrumental rationality to pursue the strategies of hypothesis derivation, knowledge integration, and outcome explanation.

Some cultural theorists who work in the field of historical sociology are comfortable asserting that culture understood roughly as semiotic practices is a cause of outcomes (Alexander & Smith 2002). For example, Gorski (2003) argues that the particular understanding of Protestantism and the associated emphasis on disciplinary practices that emerged in Calvinist countries was an important cause of modern state formation. Wedeen (1999) argues that the rhetorical practices and symbols that made up the “cult” of President Hafiz al-Asad were a major cause of political stability in Syria. Orloff (1999) argues that the cultural assumptions and practices concerning motherhood in advanced capitalist countries shaped the extent to which welfare systems subjected mothers to market discipline.

Recasting these works as implicit applications of a general cultural theory would require assuming that their authors see semiotic practices as a foundational causal mechanism rather than as one particular independent variable among several others. Likewise, it would be necessary to specify how the authors use case knowledge to formulate key bridging assumptions. Among the key bridging assumptions that would need to be developed are the definition of the semiotic practices of interest, the delineation of the spatial and temporal boundaries in which these semiotic practices are found, and the precise linkages between semiotic practices and other phenomena of interest. This kind of reconstruction could help make explicit underlying assumptions that are implicit in these studies. At the same time, however, it is not clear that the authors of these works treat (even implicitly) semiotic practices as the fundamental starting point for deductive theorizing. Hence, more than is true with the applications of power theory considered above, reconstructing these examples as implicit uses of a general cultural theory may be inappropriate.

Indeed, at least some cultural theorists likely would prefer to distance themselves from general theorizing as understood here. This is true in part because cultural theory as a whole has an ambiguous stance toward causal analysis and often an adversarial relationship with modes of inquiry that are too closely identified with “positivistic” science. For example, some postmodern strands of cultural theory reject causal explanation as a goal (see Biernacki 1999; Bonnell and Hunt 1999) and therefore likely would stand in opposition to efforts to treat culture as a foundational cause of outcomes and associations. Some interpretive cultural theorists may feel likewise, inspired as they are by Geertz (1973) and others who seek the explication of meanings rather than the identification of causes. The argument here is not that these uses of cultural theory are unproductive or inappropriate. Rather, the claim is that their core epistemological assumptions about how to pursue social science lead them to be incompatible with the pursuit of general theory.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to refocus the discussion of general theory in historical sociology on certain basic questions that are not yet resolved: What are the defining features of general theory? What specific strategies are used to connect general theories with empirical research? What are examples of general theories that are used (or could be used) in historical sociology?

The article offered a set of answers to these questions. It argued that general theories are postulates about ontologically primitive causes built around specific agents and mechanisms. Although these theories are empirically underspecified and not directly testable, they can be linked to substantive analysis through the use of bridging assumptions. In particular, analysts can pursue three research strategies:

hypothesis derivation, knowledge integration, and outcome explanation. Each of these strategies attempts to fill the black box of explanation by proposing that final causation rests with an omnitemporal causal mechanism. In the field of historical sociology, analysts have used or could use at least five different general theories: functionalist theory, rational choice theory, power theory, neo-Darwinian theory, and cultural theory. These theories are defined by distinct causal mechanisms and agents: the needs of social systems in functionalist theory, the instrumental rationality of individuals in rational choice theory, the resources of collective actors in power theory, the fitness of genes in the ancestral environment in neo-Darwinian theory, and the semiotic practices of collectivities in cultural theory.

The goal of this article has not been to advocate on behalf of general theory at the expense of other modes of sociological theory. Nor has the article sought to promote any particular general theory at the expense of all others. Rather, the article adopted a middle ground position similar to Calhoun (1998:860), who argues that general theories are “a useful part of the disciplinary tool kit, better for some kinds of intellectual projects and problems than others, but poorly understood as definitive of theory (or science or the advancement of knowledge) in general.” This kind of balanced assessment sets a good tone for future discussions of general theory.

Even so, these future discussions are likely to feature sharp debates over both epistemological and ontological questions. The epistemological debate likely will revolve around the longstanding question of whether a model of inference in which propositions are logically derived from postulates is appropriate for social science research. I would hope that this article helps make this debate more productive by clarifying the specific ways in which this epistemology is employed in conjunction with general theory. The ontological debate likely will involve a dispute among advocates of general theory who agree broadly about epistemology but who disagree about which particular general theory is most appropriate for the field of historical sociology. To this point, rational choice scholars have monopolized this discussion by equating general theory with rational choice theory. But I would hope that this article illustrates that, in fact, several different theoretical traditions are compatible with the use of general theory.

### **Notes**

1. The debate was launched with Kiser and Hechter (1991). Responses to Kiser and Hechter include Quadagno and Knapp (1992); Skocpol (1994); Boudon (1998); Calhoun (1998); Goldstone (1998); Somers (1998). See also Kiser and Hechter's (1998) reply to their critics and the overview of the debate by Gould (2004).
2. Consider, for example, the different visions of a good society generated by rational choice theory, ranging from socialism (Przeworski 1985) to free market capitalism (Friedman 1953).

3. The problem with Friedman's (1953:14) famous argument justifying the use of untrue postulates is that the syllogistic logic for generating propositions depends on the truth of the postulates; a conclusion that follows logically from false postulates may itself be false. Furthermore, insofar as one is committed to scientific realism (which is the case for most proponents of scientific theory, including mid-twentieth-century philosophers such as Karl Popper, Carl Hempel, and Ernest Nagel), one treats all postulates — even those that make reference to unobservable entities — as reflecting an independent reality.

4. In practice, general theories are rarely definitively falsified or proven true; rather, evidence leads scientists to doubt some general theories and favor others. The extent to which and ways in which disconfirming evidence falsifies a theory has long engaged philosophers of science, including Karl Popper, Carl Hempel, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, Paul Feyerabend, Philip Kitcher, Larry Laudan, and followers of Tomas Bayes. Sorting out the relative merits of these alternative views of theory confirmation and falsification is beyond the scope of this article.

5. An exception would be a future outcome that is successfully predicted by the postulates. These predictions provide strong support for a general theory. However, historical sociologists usually study outcomes that occur in the past, making this possibility less relevant to the discussion at hand.

6. Both functionalism and rational choice theory are complex and diverse research traditions in the social sciences (on functionalism, see Alexander 1983, 1998; Kincaid 1996; Turner & Maryanski 1979; on rational choice theory, see Coleman & Fararo 1992; Friedman & Hechter 1988; Kiser & Hechter 1998). Here I simplify these traditions in order to focus on a core set of assumptions that give unity to a general theory. Thus, with functionalism, I am concerned only with those strands of the theory in which system needs (however specified) are treated as a foundational cause. Likewise, with rational choice theory, I limit my analysis to a "thin theory" of rational choice in which actor interests are not specified by the theory itself.

7. There are countless different definitions of power available in the literature. A large collection is available in Scott (1994). The best philosophical analysis of power is probably Morriss (2002), who also offers more recent references. However, Morriss's analysis is explicitly not intended for use in explanatory or predictive social science. Hence, the approach adopted here varies radically from his analysis and conclusions.

8. The field of behavioral genetics, which assumes that variations in the genes of individual humans can explain differences in their behavior, is separate from neo-Darwinian theory as discussed here and as used in evolutionary psychology.

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