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THE MAKING OF SOCIAL THEORY

Abstract: *This article analyzes the practice of making social theory in terms of the changing styles manifested in writing social theory texts. It is claimed that, taken generally, "writing" social theory has not moved beyond its most widespread form of being an exercise in the systematic treatment of the phenomena under study rather than being a genuine problem-solving activity. As demonstrated on selected historical examples of "writing" social theory, it seems evident that there is no standard form or style of "making" social theory apart from commentary. And that social theory, unlike related styles of academic writing, uses "commentary" not as a part of the argument being elaborated, but as a standard and routine way of making knowledge claims. It is argued here that commentary is not the basic method only in the contemporary and largely educational and instructive forms of social theory, but also in the supposedly original achievements of the field's leading figures. The argument elaborated here suggests that the inability to arrive at a standard form of "making" social theory may be a consequence of individual, authentic, original, creative thinking drawing its inspiration from sources that are heavily derivative and sometimes permeated by very chaotic and strenuous efforts to demonstrate the coherence of the thinking that it some way refers to the social world.*

Keywords: *social theory*; *styles of writing*; *commentary*; *interpretation*; *canon*; *social knowledge*

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Jak se dělají sociální teorie

Abstrakt: *Tato studie se zaměřuje na způsoby, jakými se standardně vytváří sociální teorie, a to především z hlediska proměn stylů psaní textů. Tvrdí se zde, že celkově vzato způsoby psaní využívané v rámci sociální teorie jsou navzdory proklamacím spíše cvičením v systematickém uchopování zkoumaných jevů než akademicky vyzrálou činností usilující o řešení problémů. Na několika vybraných historických příkladech „psaní" sociální teorie je ukázáno, že neexistuje žádná standardní forma vytváření sociální teorie, jež by překračovala stádium „komentáře". Na rozdíl od jiných stylů akademického psaní sociální teorie nepoužívá „komentář" jako součást rozvíjení určité argumentace, nýbrž jako standardní a rutinní způsob vznášení poznávacích nároků. Komentář přitom není výchozí metodou pouze v současných z velké části edukačních a instruktážních podobách sociální teorie, zakládá také způsob práce vůdčích představitelů této oblasti, jejichž příspěvky jsou současnými sociálními teoretiky považovány za originální a hodné důkladné interpretace. Zde rozpracovaná argumentace naznačuje, že neschopnost dospět ke standardní podobě „vytváření" sociální teorie je důsledkem skutečnosti, že je inspirace pro individuální, autentické, originální či kreativní myšlení čerpána ze zdrojů, jež jsou prostoupeny nepůvodností a často také velmi chaotickou a úpornou snahou prokázat koherenci myšlení, jež se určitým způsobem vztahuje k sociálnímu světu.*

Klíčová slova: *sociální teorie*; *styly psaní*; *komentář*; *interpretace*; *kánon*; *sociální vědění*

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Given the number of monographs, textbooks, guides, anthologies and readers on the subject, social theory seems to be one of the most prosperous branches within the social sciences. As is evident in "standard" social theory texts, "social theory" is usually presented not as a continuous research activity pursued in collaboration among social scientists, but rather as an undertaking stimulated by a growing market for social science students on one hand, and, on the other hand, as a chance to overcome, and escape from, the limitations imposed by more meticulous disciplinary approaches. Although it is by no means self-evident that there is a clear distinction between, for example, political, psychological, sociological, or even economic theory, "social theory", at least in its recent forms, is by definition understood as an interdisciplinary activity with no clearly specified research agenda.[1] It is often claimed that, unlike the "standard" form of summarizing accounts that attempts to introduce, organize and capture the basic line of social theory's historical development, most often exemplified by selected leading figures, paradigms, schools or intellectual movements, the making of social theory in its original and non-derivative form seems to lack any stabilized pattern. In textbooks, anthologies and readers, it is customary to assign a few intellectual authorities to every formative period of social theory's development, nevertheless the history of social theory is constantly being rewritten in any new textbook, anthology or a reader. The canon of social theory is always open to revision, whether in terms of new interpretations of the founding figures and the formative periods, or in relation to the latest discoveries and findings, and, especially, in relation to the newly emerging fashions. The historically shaped format, layout and project of social theory

[1] As Stephen P. Turner argues in a recent text describing the role of social theory within contemporary academic culture: "Social theory is ordinarily not thought of as autonomous academic field, a genuine and complete academic identity, or as an appropriate, or feasible, academic career choice, or as much more than an amorphous publishing category for books that are nonempirical, not strongly identified with a discipline, which make some 'social' reference. Sociologists typically think of it as the theoretical side of the discipline of sociology or as a subfield of sociology, thus a secondary identity that is submerged in, and subordinate to, the primary identity of 'sociologist.' Non-sociologists think of it as a kind of supradisciplinary collection of themes traditionally associated with sociology or with left-wing politics, and now associated with cultural studies and feminism." Stephen P. TURNER, "The Maturity of Social Theory." In: CAMIC, C. – JOAS, H. (eds.), *The Dialogical Turn: New Roles for Sociology in the Postdisciplinary Age*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2004, p. 141 (141–171).

suggests that every single manifestation of social theory "in the making" is to be interpreted and accepted as an expression of the author's personal intention, and not as the result of any pressure from within the discipline itself, as might be the case with respect to the particular practices required by sociological, political, psychological, or anthropological theory. The making of social theory, by contrast, seems to be, or at least claims to be, permissive towards associative, non-prescriptive, heterogeneous and unaffected styles of writing, with only a few rather auxiliary requirements, such as the use of attractive explanatory diction that can appeal to the public and the promise of enrichment through reading.

To sum up, with a slight exaggeration, at the core of the enigmatic charm and seductive force of social theory is the fact that it seems to have no other assignments and objectives apart from the very task of making sense of social theory's relevance. Given that its main effort is directed at the reconstruction of the past, and that its main object is to understand the past intellectual achievements of selected figures, schools or traditions, social theory is by its very nature a reductionist, arbitrary, imperialistic, or even, some might say, an imperious enterprise. The notions and projections of the unifying canon, founding figures, and emergent traditions, imparting an image of coherence and compactness always within reach of any new assemblage of social theory, provide the introductory narratives with the dynamics necessary to make an appealing promise to organize something that, as is historically documented, has always defied orderliness. In his book analyzing the debates about the "founders, classics, canons" of the sociological tradition, Peter Baehr distinguishes between the discursive and the institutional founding of the discipline. He argues that "in the case of institutional founding, the criteria of validation are empirical and, in principle straightforward."[2] In terms of discursive founding, which had commonly been thought to be the agenda of social theory – also conceived of as a discourse with its own criteria of validation –, the situation is much more complicated:

> The origins, coordinates and authority of a discourse are a matter of insoluble controversy; there are no accepted criteria that can definitely settle the issues they raise. Or to put it in more technical terms, the criteria of validation for discourse are aporitic, which is to say, intrinsically open-ended, endlessly hypothetical and contestable [...] this inherently equivocal and uncertain property

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[2] Peter R. BAEHR, *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes Over the Origins and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage.* New Jersey: Transaction Publishers 2002, p. 8.

of discourse reveals itself in [...] the dissensus that surrounds: which concept or theme in the founder's discourse is the central one; which intellectual tradition the founder's work is closest to; who the first "real" sociologist was; and what kind of break with the past founding entails. It is important to stress that the aporitic quality of discourse is not supposed to reflect an ontological difference between discourses and institutions such that the former are deemed to be less real, material, substantial than the latter. Rather, the aporia of discourse rests on the fact that discourse can only be known through, and has no animation without, the categories and interests of interpretative communities: and these are constantly in flux.[3]

This absence of accepted criteria of validation renders social theory an ever searching, non-disciplined style of writing that adapts its explanatory tasks to the permeable structure of its agenda. As Richard Rorty very comprehensibly demonstrated in his famous text "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing",[4] philosophers, although they commonly act as if they were developing and cultivating great ideas and solving great problems, tend, to a much greater extent than what corresponds to claims about the originality of one's thinking, to adopt and reproduce certain historically conditioned ways and styles of writing. And by acquiring them they prove their professional competence and demonstrate their intellectual authority. If we accept Rorty's view of the matter, various traditions, schools and intellectual movements appear to be divergent not so much in terms of their ideological foundations, cognitive interests, and theoretical or methodological claims, but rather in terms of the preferred forms, styles and ways of "writing" texts. If researchers understood this, the ideological disputes commonly regarded as the real triggers of various "wars between schools" would lose their overriding significance in historical interpretations of the development of individual disciplines. This is not just about ideas and how they are articulated, which testify to the historical context of particular scientific disciplines' devolved, it is also about the ways in which we are allowed to investigate and write about such ideas. The element of "adapting" to standard practice is of crucial importance, since particular scientific disciplines have fortified their borders not only by defining their subject matter, but also by defining acceptable writing styles, as is clearly evidenced in two fundamental forms of scientific "writing": in the academically more rigorous style of "writing" journal articles, or in the

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[3] *Ibid*., p. 9.
[4] Richard RORTY, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida." *New Literary History*, vol. 10, 1978, no. 1, pp. 141–160.

more individualized, formally more detached and creative style of "writing" monographs. Of course, the styles of writing governed by practices within a given discipline provide evidence of the scientific maturity and the level of unification within the given discipline, and scientific practice suggests that the more progressive disciplines are those that are able to eliminate, as consistently as possible, non-standard ways of "writing", and, at least in their mainstream production, reject any alternatives. By the logic of this argument, scientists prove their originality by demonstrating how "uniquely" they are able to adapt to the standard practice.

In their most transparent form, these insights are particularly relevant for disciplines with no fixed way of writing, a prime example of which is social theory. It would be very difficult to challenge its effect on shaping various social sciences. From an institutional perspective, social theory is currently a generally accepted, specialized activity that is relatively firmly established in academic structures: it has many publishing channels in the form of prestigious journals and monograph series published by major publishing houses,[5] and its educational curriculum is surprisingly uniform.[6] Yet in terms of its discursive founding, its existence is still somewhat precarious or chronically unclear, not only in terms of the scientific relevance of its production, but also in terms of the standards that govern the "writing" of academic texts in this field. This is so regardless of the fact that hardly any other research area has put such a systematic effort into clarifying what it is founded on. To sum up, without much exaggeration, the enormous amount of texts striving to answer the question, what is social theory, may arouse the impression that the very subject matter of social theory is to define itself, what it could be, how to arrive at that, and how to adapt to the process of getting there. Unfortunately, often the first and insurmountable barrier turns out to be that it is impossible to agree not only on whether there is such a thing as social theory, but also on whether there *ever* was such a thing as

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[5] The fascination of the leading publishing houses with "social theory" seems endless. Each year brings new accounts and interpretations of this area's history, subject matter, founders or more recent figures from Sage, Routledge, Blackwell and other leaders in the "textbook" market.

[6] The teaching curriculum, as Peter Baehr claims, "is the key institutional mechanism" and the word "canon" is crucial for the battle "over the university and college curricula. This battle encompasses such issues as how best to teach the 'great books' or 'classic texts' of the social sciences, which of them to teach, whether they should be taught at all, [...] and whether the prestige accorded to them is defensible or desirable in a late modern, ethically plural, gender-conscious, economically and politically divided social world." BAEHR, *Founders, Classics, Canons*, p. 151.

social theory, such that we would wish to give evidence of its embodiment. The history of social theory, like the history of philosophy, about which Alfred N. Whitehead said that it "is a series of footnotes to Plato," suggests that the main problem may not lie in the disintegration of its subject matter or its discursive content, but rather in the lack of clarity in and the recurring opacity and derivativeness of its way of "writing." Although the whole existence of social theory as a field of study seems to rest on the assumption of the originality and distinctiveness of its founding figures, it is much more the case, as Stephen P. Turner puts it, that "social theory is primarily commentary [... and commentary] is the most common form of writing in social theory."[7] He further claims:

> The great thinkers in the canon, Weber and Durkheim and Marx, and including Parsons and Habermas at the next level, wrote works that were almost entirely commentary and conceptual improvement and revision. Even such a text as Durkheim's *Suicide* has virtually no original content as distinct from commentary [...] Weber's writings are almost entirely commentary as well. If we do not recognize them as such, it is because he did not identify very explicitly the sources on which he is commenting, and typically we are not aware of them. But usually they are easy to identify and Weber's original contribution is clear. Weber of course had a kind of general system of categories into which the texts he commented on were reinterpreted, and this gave the material a great deal of coherence. But what he says is nevertheless commentary, though, as with Durkheim, it is commentary on figures who are not as great in retrospect as he.[8]

Thus, contrary to the widespread conviction promoted in the self-legitimizing diction of social theory textbooks, anthologies and readers, claiming that the inevitable task of "making" social theory is to elucidate original, enigmatic and often impenetrable ideas of past figures, social theory can be revealed to have functioned through commentary since its very beginning in those founding texts now retrospectively considered the epitomes of sheer individual creativity, inspiration or imagination. It follows that, unlike related styles of academic writing, social theory uses "commentary" not as a part of the argument being elaborated, but as a standard and routine way of making knowledge claims. The work of the founding figures, especially in terms of social theory's agenda, forms probably the only real, undisputed and tangible research material in the field, regardless of whether

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[7] TURNER, *The Maturity of Social Theory*, p. 156–157.
[8] *Ibid*., p. 157.

the significance of those figures is being elevated or refuted, for instance, in contemporary approaches highlighting the oppressive character of social theory's "white" and "masculine" history. There is not much doubt about the fact that the disciplines authorities have been conceived of and presented as the main source of inspiration for subsequent generations of social theorists, and that their treatment has been crucial in forming a style of "writing" typical of social theory up to the present. In terms of social theory's production, the number of texts "writing" *about* theory/theories certainly exceeds the number of texts that at least claim to be articulating a certain theory. The interplay between a social theorist's original contribution, the derivativeness of that original contribution and its appropriation by the social theory agenda can be clearly exemplified in one of the most important theoretical books in this field, Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*, which for a long time set the standard for theoretical work in the social sciences. This book, as Charles Camic puts it:

> By virtue of its sweep, its determination to take a single, bold line of argument and to work it out with regard to issue after issue, Structure is a great specimen of the theoretical logic of sociology in operation. In coming to understand this book, one comes to understand not only the views that one theorist put forth but also something about the manner in which a theorist reasons, about what underlies a particular form of theoretical reasoning, and about the critical limitations of that form.[9]

At the same time, however, from a different point of view this book was first and foremost a structured summary elaborating on the work of Parsons' predecessors[10] with the primary intention of revise their ideas. And it may be the case that the continuing appeal of Parsons' synthesis for social theory lies much less in the supposed originality of his effort than in the promise of a systematic revision of the past and commentary on past achievements, all with the prospect of creating new foundations. As Camic admits, theorists and students of theory have been drawn to the book again and again, "though generally without coming into terms with the vast body

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[9] Charles CAMIC, "Structure After 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 95, 1989, no. 1, p. 94 (38–107).

[10] See also Charles CAMIC, "Reputation and Predecessor Selection: Parsons and the Institutionalists." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 54, 1992, no. 4, pp. 421–445; Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER – Giuseppe SCIORTINO, "On Choosing One's Own Intellectual Predecessors: The Reductionism of Camic's Treatment of Parsons and the Institutionalists." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 14, 1996, no. 2, pp. 154–171.

of piecemeal commentary that has accompanied the volume's rise to classic status."[11] Interpretations, revisions, summaries and especially commentaries thus have become dominant tools employed to make and write social theory, which ordinarily tend to reproduce in just a different conceptual rendition those same divergences or negative or residual categories, as Parsons would have put it, that lead past social theories to a dead end. Because the material on which generic social theory is based and explored is limited to just a small number of authors – to avoid endless disputes it would be possible to agree on only a few dozen canonical figures in social theory –, it is evident that also the texts, which are composed in the form of interpretations of certain interpretations, accounts of certain accounts, revisions of certain revisions, summaries of certain summaries, have been essential in forming the academic style of writing that predominates in social theory. And it also seems plausible, if we follow the logic of the above-stated argument that commentary is the basic method not only in contemporary and largely educational and instructive forms of social theory, but also in the supposedly original achievements of the field's leading figures, that the inability to arrive at a standard form of "making" social theory may be a consequence of inspiration for individual, authentic, original, insightful, creative thinking being drawn from sources that are heavily derivative and sometimes permeated by very chaotic and strenuous efforts to demonstrate the coherence of the thinking that it some way refers to the social world.

The image of coherence has been recurrently enlivened in social theory's agenda in attempts to substantiate a conceptual profile of various historical forms of social theory, be it its classical, modern or contemporary version. When it was not possible to document the existence of substantive theoretical achievements,[12] conceptual analysis promised to be the appropriate means of organizing divergent insights elaborated by individual thinkers. Historically taken, social theory relied on the possibility to set up uncluttered relations between concepts, as it continually strived to elaborate a coherent conceptual scheme and repeatedly addressed the (correspondence/non-correspondence) problem of the relation between concepts and reality. The fact that conceptual analysis was then an undisputed prerequisite of analytical scientific work also seemed to promote the knowledge claims

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[11] *Ibid.*
[12] This point was highlighted by Robert K. Merton: "We have many concepts but fewer confirmed theories; many points of view but fewer theorems; many 'approaches' but fewer arrivals." Robert K. MERTON, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press 1968, p. 52.

steadily contained in modern forms of "making" social theory. The adequacy of social theories belonging to the classical and modern period was assessed through the criteria of the logical consistency and the orderliness of the concepts employed in various attempts to conceptualize the logic of society's development. Social theory tried to adapt and process many concepts in order to link them together and use them as building blocks of a theory of society. A great part of its production prior to the so-called "postmodern turn" in social theory, which to a large extent dismissed the very idea of all-embracing concepts and conceptual schemes, in fact worked on the presumption that if we manage to arrange and link together those concepts by means of which we are capturing social phenomena, then we will also be able to organize and hold society together. To put it succinctly, without attempts to arrange concepts there would be no society, at least in the form it is conceived by theorists, and without transformations of concepts, there would be no history of social theory. The very idea of a conceptual scheme can also be seen as an expression of the conviction that the "war between schools" can be overcome and that divergent theoretical and conceptual approaches can be squeezed into one comprehensive frame of reference. What was also of crucial importance in forming modern social theory, was the overall conviction that it is possible to interconnect in a systematic manner the many concepts historically accumulated in the area of social theory, and, principally, that it is possible to sort them out, to delimit them and decide which of these concepts belong to this area and which ones do not.

This self-interpretation of social theory's mission was dramatically challenged in the late 1960s when the promise of scientific relevance was replaced with the promise of public relevance. Social theory became a base camp of politicized radical alternatives rejecting the concept of professional social science. New meanings became attached to the "social theory" label. Also its agenda was transformed beyond recognition and new concepts came into prominence. The new "disobedient" generation[13] refused to differentiate between academic and popular styles of writing, or, to put it more precisely,

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[13] The autobiographic memories of eminent social theorists who studied in the 1960s and were active in the "new" theoretical movements can be found in Alan SICA – Stephen TURNER (eds.), *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005. This book provides a highly valuable insight into this period of a great generational change within the social sciences, as it offers, as the editors claim in the preface, "a 'class portrait' of those who lived through a cultural and political period of history which was fraught with anxiety, even danger, and that virtually pushed these scholars into sociology and social theory, sometimes even against their will." *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

between scientific and public relevance. It drew inspiration and referred to different intellectual sources, distinctly deviating from "mainstream" production. Books such as Orrin E. Klapp's *Heroes, Villans and Fools* (1962), Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963), Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), or Richard Sennet's *The Fall of Public Man* (1967), represented a real alternative to the required university reading of the generation of postwar "baby boomers," keeping alive the promise of social analysis sensitive to urgent social problems, which itself played a major role in individual choices to study the social sciences. If every new strident theoretical community strives to create its own "canon," then this generation tended to follow the examples of texts that, as Herbert J. Gans put it, "share this common objective to study [...] society at large in an interdisciplinary manner."[14] Social theory's method of "interpretive" commentary employed in attempts to reconstruct the preceding theories, ideas, concepts, has been largely renounced in favor of more engaged political and moral commentary. It was becoming more and more evident that the desirable outcome of social theory was not the reconstruction or renewal of some type of thought, but rather the renunciation of the previous would-be scientific approach to social reality and the replacement of the project of unified theory by political and moral analysis, which appeared to harbor the only possibility of restoring social bonds with the public. As summarized historically by Steven Seidman and Jeffrey Alexander:

> In the 1970s, theory textbooks were dominated by discussions of disciplinary crises. Conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and exchange theory were presented as alternative paradigms for resolving the crisis and building a new and more adequate social science. In the 1980s as the specter of Parsonian domination receded into distant memory, such polarizing and fragmented discourses no longer dominated theoretical consciousness, even if they remained in the reified structures of textbook life. They gave way to grand efforts at theoretical synthesis, while much less empiricist, more explicitly philosophical, and much less narrowly tied to specific disciplines, remained closely connected to the project of providing an effective framework for a universalizing social science. Debates about structure and agency, expressive and strategic action, positivism and post-positivism were the order of the day. These debates seem decidedly less relevant to the contemporary scene. While it

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[14] Herbert J. GANS, "Best-Sellers by Sociologists: An Explanatory Study." *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 26, 1997, no. 2, p. 133 (131–135).

is not certainly the case that these analytical concerns have been resolved, the conversation about them has assumed an entirely different form. The language of contemporary social theory has dramatically changed. The scientific project has been abandoned, not only in theory but also in some of the most influential empirical research. Not only has the disciplinary focus disappeared, but there has also been a marked shift away from the ambitions of a specifically social science.[15]

A great number of programmatic texts in the late 1980s and in the 1990s repeatedly pointed out the significant shift in social theory's discursive identity and also the thorough transformation of its agenda.[16] The rise of postcolonial, multicultural, feminist, poststructuralist and other rhetorically very cogent approaches[17] seemed to constitute a radical departure from social theory's traditional commitments. It was claimed that a historical chance had opened up for social theorists to adopt a new role allowing them to reveal what had so far been repressed, that is the heated and authentic interest in contemporary social and moral problems. And, of course, this was

[15] Steven SEIDMAN – Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, "Introduction." In: SEIDMAN, S. – ALEXANDER, J. C. (eds.), *The New Social Theory Reader: Contemporary Debates*. London: Routledge 2001, p. 2 (1–29).
[16] The early 1980s brought new incentives also for social theory's more traditional project to elaborate a general and systematic theory of society. The work of social scientists such as Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Jeffrey Alexander, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and others seemed to promise a new founding of social thought. It also solidified the standard style of writing in social theory, which was entirely derived from "commentary", given that the work of these prominent figures immediately became the object of immense interpretative activities within the community of social theorists, as it is evidenced by the enormous number of articles concerned with their theories in professional journals in the 1980s. Although books such as *Theory of Communicative Action*, *Systems Theory*, *Structuration Theory*, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, themselves also almost entirely dependent on "commentary" (with the possible exception of Niklas Luhmann), raised great hopes of revitalization of theoretical thinking, these expectations were rather short-lived in terms of reinforcing more solid inter-disciplinary identity. In consequence, these grand theories – soon becoming classics in their own right – were absorbed as ritual objects of standard and routine practice within social theory. Despite the fact that, from an analytical point of view, attempts (elaborated in the early 1980s) "to re-centre the discipline look more like exercises in theoretical recidivism than renewal," as John Holmwood suggested (John HOLMWOOD, "Abject Theory." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, 1996, no. 2, p. 96 [87–108]), they furnished the interpretative and summarizing activities of social theorists with new material and also with a sense of continuity.
[17] For an overview of these approaches and their relevance for theoretical thinking in the social sciences, see Radim HLADÍK, "A Theory's Travelogue: Post-Colonial Theory in Post-Socialist Space." *Teorie vědy/Theory of Science*, vol. 33, 2011, no. 4, pp. 561–590.

to be achieved not by means of theoretical argument or disciplinary research practices but by means of "narratives." As Steven Seidman, one of the most passionate advocates of the "new" approaches, argued in his famous article, postmodern social theory would replace established disciplinary styles of producing socially relevant knowledge, which from now on should take the form of "social narratives with a moral intent," as "postmodern social analyses amount to stories about society that carry moral, social, ideological, and perhaps directly political significance."[18] And, as Seidman concludes:

> Postmodernist narratives would be well advised to discard the configuration of core modernist concepts such as progress, domination, liberation, and humanity. The basic postmodern concepts will revolve around the notion of a self with multiple identities and group affiliations, which is entangled in heterogeneous struggles with multiple possibilities for empowerment. Finally, postmodern narratives would acknowledge their practical-moral significance. Moral analysis would become a part of an elaborated social reason. Theorists would become advocates, abandoning the increasingly cynical, unbelievable guise of objective, value-neutral scientists. We would become advocates but not narrow partisans or activists. Our broader social significance would lie in encouraging unencumbered open public moral and social debate and in deepening the notion of public discourse. We would be a catalyst for the public to think seriously about moral and social concerns.[19]

Such arguments intensified the already established obsession of social theorists with their public relevance and indicated in which direction the debates on a desirable style of writing social theory would go. The conceptual charisma appeared to have dissipated,[20] definitely in case of such concepts as action, structure, order or society in their universalizing form. The same holds true for basic criteria assessing the adequacy of making social theories, such as logical coherence or empirical correspondence.

However, as the enthusiastic rhetoric has evaporated from social theory's programmatic texts in the last decade or so,[21] it is more and more apparent

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[18] Steven SEIDMAN, "The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 9, 1991, no. 2, p. 142 (131–144).

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[20] See Murray S. DAVIS, "Aphorisms and Clichés: The Generation and Dissipation of Conceptual Charisma." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 25, 1999, no. 1, pp. 245–269.

[21] It may be added that such a concept of social theory based on the arbitrary identification of morally and politically relevant problems would ultimately lead to the evaporation of the very substance of social theory, as it has been historically formed, and to the institutional dissolu-

that, apart from incorporating new figures, ideas, concepts or references, the practice of writing social theory is still largely reliant on commentary that organizes social theory's agenda in customary ways. Taken generally, as regards writing social theory, it must be admitted that it has not overcome its most rampant form of being an exercise in the systematic treatment of the phenomena under study rather than a genuine problem-solving activity. Whether unfolded in an essayistic fashion, or in a more rigorously academic form, social theory has not developed any standard style of writing that does not proceed from individual capabilities to comment on some past achievements. In a similar vein this is reaffirmed by the fact that social theory seems to be at its best, at least judging from educational and commercial interests, when it recounts the story of the past in as comprehensive form as possible, with a promise to shed light on some past actions and to mediate inspiration for some future actions. The inclusive character of social theory and the accompanying heterogeneity of both its theoretical interests and its styles of writing probably reflect the fact that social theory is aimed at diverse audiences. The loss of a "general paradigmatic style for organizing research"[22] in the social sciences is particularly acute in the case of chronically unrestricted areas of inquiry mixing various disciplinary approaches and agendas with their own historically formed established style of reading, writing and thinking. Social theory is undoubtedly one of the best exemples of such areas of study. As there seems to be no standard form or style of "making" social theory apart from commentary, it may be the case that social theory will develop more in accord with literary methods than with the disciplines that historically provided social theory with its research material, such as sociology, political science, anthropology, etc. The coexistence of more rigid forms of theoretical argument, striving to uncover the continuity of theoretical research programs, with unrestrained essayistic or morally committed forms of social inquiry, under the "social theory" label, suggests that the ideas, images or visions of standard theoretical work may only be

tion of this field of research as such. The resulting uncertainty concerning the basic means and ends of social theory, together with a hyper-tolerance towards the delineation of social theory's agenda, would inevitably lead to the identification of relevant problems only on the basis of individual choice, inspiration, creativity, or imagination on the side of social theory's practitioners, which is something significantly inconsistent with preceding styles of making social theory that wished to impose limitations on its research practices.

[22] See George E. MARCUS – Michael M. J. FISCHER, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986, p. 8. It is of course issuable whether there ever was any general paradigmatic style in the social sciences.

illusions spread by self-sustaining interests. In such a case, "making" social theory might finally come to terms with one of its avowed ends: "making" social theory means keeping it alive.