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THE GRAND THEORY IS ALIVE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN H. TURNER

Jonathan H. Turner is the Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Riverside and, for many decades, the world's leading authority on sociological theory, with research interests in many other areas such as human and societal evolution, social stratification and inequality, philosophy of science, and historical sociology. Professor Turner has authored, co-authored, edited, or co-edited a number of works, including more than 43 influential books, which have been published in twelve different languages, including *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, *The Emergence of Sociological Theory*, and many others. He is a member of the American Sociological Association and a former president of the Pacific Sociological Society and the journal editor for *Sociological Theory*. Professor Turner received a B.A. with honors from University of California at Santa Barbara, an M.A. and a Ph.D. in sociology from Cornell University.

The interview is Professor Turner's critical reply to the arguments raised in the article "Against Grand Theories: A (Cautionary) Tale of Two Disciplines," which presents the view that universally accepted grand theories in social sciences are not achievable because of the lack of a common methodology or a theoretical core which results in their multiparadigmatic nature, value-ladenness, and insufficient objectivity. The interview took place on March 23, 2021 online.

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Petr Jedlička: Your diagnosis of the state of sociological theory is that it is a hyperdifferentiated, overspecialized, and fragmented discipline[1] *– which is similar to the one that appears in my article. I inferred from this that it is a permanent characteristic of sociology given its limitations as a social science. However, you disagree and you still see a possibility for a grand theory. On what do you base your optimism?*

Jonathan Turner: I re-read your article about the demise of grand theory,[2] which assumed grand theory was dead. And I'm here to say, it's not, I'm not dead yet, and the theory is not dead. There are several ways how to do it. And the possibility for the theory is always going to be alive, people will just take the opportunity to do it.

Obviously, I believe that grand theory is important, but not the way it was practiced originally with, say, Parsons, if he was the person who got that label thrown on him. I was very fascinated with Parsons's work when I was a graduate student and his work still influences me but you wouldn't know it. He had a fundamentally wrong approach. He basically created a large category system; I call this a kind of the periodic table in chemistry of categories. He thought that if you studied a particular phenomenon, you could find the category of his analytical scheme that just puts boxes and arrows and things. And if you find the box you will have explained that event, because this is connected to all other things. Well, that's not a very dynamic way of looking at the world.

Our job as theoreticians is to take those events that are fundamental and generic to the nature of social organization. One of the joys of social sciences is to discover what's related to what, how things are related to each other, and then to explain the dynamic processes that generate that relationship, and how one affects the other and how that outcome feeds back and affects the things that cause the outcome. All this is what theory is about.

Now the term grand theory was attached to Parsons but it could have been attached to Marx, Durkheim, or Spencer and some thinkers in the early part of the 20th century, at least in the United States. But the problem with all those approaches is they weren't very scientific. I mean, the closest to doing

[1] Jonathan H. Turner, "Sociological Theory Today," in *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, ed. Jonathan H. Turner (New York: Springer, 2001); Jonathan H. Turner, *Theoretical Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1 (New York: Springer, 2010).

[2] Petr Jedlička, "Against Grand Theories: A (Cautionary) Tale of Two Disciplines," *Teorie vědy / Theory of Science* 42, no. 2 (2020): 175–99.

real science was Herbert Spencer, when he wrote *The Principles of Sociology*.[3] There are real principles there, there is an underlying theoretical scheme loosely derived from physics. And then he applies it in the study of societies at all stages and sizes and shapes. His 16 volumes of descriptive sociology are really impressive. They are just simply descriptions of the structure and culture of diverse societies from the simplest hunter-gatherers' societies to the most complex ones at the time when they were assembled. And that's why something like *The Principles of Sociology* is so long – it's full of data. And he's using a general theory, a set of principles – he means principles, and they're there, they are really easy to see when you read Spencer. (Of course, no one ever reads Spencer anymore which they should and it's a mistake not to. He is one of the best of the sociologists of the classical era.)

And that was grand theory and that was a theory that had a lot of explanatory power. And it's one of the reasons I have written books on Spencer and tried to formalize his theories to show people that there are real principles there as lawlike relationships. You don't see that in Comte. Comte talked a good game about what it should look like but in fact he never did it.

And Durkheim sort of did. But again, you have to extract the principles from him. So, when I was in graduate school and in the early years of my career, I spent a good part of my time reading all the classical theorists in the original. If you are an undergraduate you get summaries of these people which are just little snippets, but I sat down and read everything and took very careful notes because I figured I needed to know this base from which sociology comes from. And so many of my first books and articles were efforts to formalize the theories of all the great theorists.

I started with Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Spencer, and I wanted to say what are the abstract principles that they're articulating in all these texts. There's a lot of text, but you've got to be able to extract the abstract principles. And then I did something else, I took the level of abstraction up a notch. So, in Marx, rather than use the vocabulary, which is all ideologically loaded about proletariat and bourgeoisie, I just kicked the abstraction up to super- and subordinates in a society in a system where resources are distributed unequally, and how does that generate pressures for the subordinates to revolt or wage a conflict. Now, there's nothing about that vocabulary of Marx there, I took the theory and made it more abstract. And that is a very powerful theory.

[3] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898).

And so a lot of my articles, and certainly *The Structure of Sociological Theory*[4] published in 1974, had some of the formalizations, and over the years I improved upon them. I didn't know why I was doing that. I just thought it was an interesting thing to do, and no one else had really done it. And it seemed to me, it made a lot of it clearer, that I was very well aware of the dangers of ideology. Marx has ideology, Spencer has ideology. And if you get rid of a terminology that's full of loaded words that have political implications, and make it more neutral, you're very likely to see a much better theory than that is actually written down. And that's been the case of everyone. So, I did it for George Herbert Mead, and Charles Horton Cooley, and basically any theorists that I read.

I want to get it down to what's the principles this person was arguing. And then along the way, I started doing these causal models like analytical models where your time flow is left to right, then you always get reverse causal effects back because outcomes always affect the social world – the very thing that causes those outcomes. There's always a feedback – we're dealing with intelligent animals that will always be responding to things that are pushing them around, they'll just push back and affect those causes. So, between those two, developing the abstract principles, that's where I started.

And then I said, the principle doesn't tell you exactly why say size and differentiation are related to each other. That is, the more the size of a population, the more differentiated it's going to be. That's the nice law, you can say: differentiation is some function of size, and some other things (productivity). But that doesn't say how and in what way the mechanisms generate differentiation. That's what analytical models do; you start with size – you say what a size is going to do to the structure of a society and you draw a model out over time. And the other side of the model is increased differentiation. That way, you get a sense of the causal things that are actually going on.

I was doing that when I was an undergraduate, but I didn't quite know what I was doing. And I began to develop my own epistemology, which was very self-convenient – I was like, this is the way we ought to do science in sociology. And I really haven't retreated from that for the last 50 years, but I've gotten better at it. That's what I continually try to do and that is what I'm doing right now.

[4] Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (Homewood: The Dorsey Press, 1974).

I'm doing a book on intersocietal dynamics – it's the effort to take all that world systems theorizing and kick it up a level – to the level of abstraction. So, you get rid of all the Marxism, capitalism, all ideologically loaded words, and get neutral words. And then take all those approaches, the data, and the theories, the conceptual models that have been developed. And then say there is an underlying general model here of geoeconomics and geopolitics. I've done that in articles and I am going to do it with my former graduate students in a book form.

So that's why I think it's possible to do grand theory. It's a real theory, it's not a category system, it's not ideology, it's series of principles that are very abstract that I assert are good for all times, in all places, whenever humans, or, I suspect, all intelligent life forms organized.

Petr Jedlička: What was your relation to Parsons's work and how did you try to overcome the shortcomings of his grand theory such as its inherently descriptive and static nature for which he had been criticized?

Jonathan Turner: Well, first of all, in the case of Parsons it wasn't very good grand theory. It was something else. It was a good kind of cognitive mapping to tell you what's important to look at. But you need to have the theory itself.

Parsons, as a grand theorist, was doing a lot of harm. I mean, not many people actually learn Parsons's theory. I learned it because I was fascinated by it. When I went to Cornell, I took classes from people who have been students of Parsons. And I said, wow, this is really interesting, it talks about real things, things that are important and fundamental. But there was something wrong of all the categories, the boxes and arrows. I don't mind boxes and arrows, but they got to be all variables that are dynamically related to each other. It can't just be boxes.

I asked Parsons once when he was at UC Riverside and we're walking across campus. And we were talking about a lot of things, but I asked him very clearly: Your view of explanation – a situation where if you could find the category to which something belongs which is connected to other categories – do you think that constitutes an explanation of a phenomenon? He said: Yes, that's what I mean by explanation.

Nevertheless, I have lived off of AGIL. My first book was called *Patterns of Social Organization: A Survey of Social Institutions*,[5] and I wrote about it in my book on the evolution of institutions, *Human Institutions: A Theory*

[5] Jonathan H. Turner, *Patterns of Social Organization: A Survey of Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971)

of Societal Evolution[6] – and basically that analysis is always AGIL. It got a little more theoretical each time. But at the basic core, the way I go about analyzing institutional evolution is AGIL – and I just translate the notion of functional requisites to selection pressures. So, it is very literally an interpretation of AGIL, but mostly for descriptive purposes. That's not explaining to me – it is just saying what's going on. Now, as I've gotten more theoretical in these books, I've had to create principles and propositions to explain the dynamics of these thing and how they work.

So, my point is I started there with Parsons. It allowed me to get a handle on the information. And then, in the original version of the book, I drew the boxes and the arrows and all that stuff. But I said, this is not going to go over well if I do it this way because at that time in 1970s there was a lot of hostility towards Parsons. But he's right, at least in this sense. He's giving you a roadmap to what you need to explain. He doesn't explain it, but he's given us what to explain in theory. And then it came to me, I realized I now have the phenomenon that I wish to explain. Now, I need a theory. And that's why I started formalizing all the existing theories that I ever encountered.

Petr Jedlička: The Structure of Sociological Theory *was published in 1974 and it has become one of the most read books on social theory. What is your view of the further development in sociology and where is the discipline now?*

Jonathan Turner: *The Structure of Sociological Theory* was designed as a textbook, a very high level one. And, to my great surprise, it ended up being the best-selling social theory book in the world for maybe 20 years and made my career. That was the first time I'd written down in book form what I was trying to do – to draw or to propositionalize all the masters and contemporary theorists where you can. As I said, I did it with Parsons and others and showed that you could do something that looked like science. I always picked a level of abstraction above the vocabulary of a thinker, because vocabularies are almost always ideologically loaded and I'm trying to get rid of that. My view is, the majority of sociologists in 1974, when that book was published, felt that you could do science like that and that's why it was popular. Now, over the next 50 years, I've seen an erosion of that commitment to science to the point we're at now, in the United States, that I think it's time that sociology is reinvented.

[6] Jonathan H. Turner, *Human Institutions: A Theory Of Societal Evolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

Petr Jedlička: In our previous correspondence you stressed that social theorizing should be kept aside from outside social issues and politics as much as possible. How do you view contemporary sociology from this angle? Do you think it is possible to keep it as a pure theoretical discipline separated from an activist sociology which can interfere with its scientific objectivity?

Jonathan Turner: Sociology was always corrupted by the fact that it's relevant to social problems, social issues, and politics. It's very hard to keep those things out of sociology. Recently, in sociology, it's been very difficult – and especially in American sociology, which I now consider almost trivial. It is so consumed with the issues of justice, equality, and equity. Those are all important issues that are politically and socially important, but they can't be the reason for a discipline. Because if that's the reason for discipline, the discipline is becoming just what American sociology is becoming – a discipline of activists.

It wants to be a social movement organization. But it's kind of a lousy one, it's so bureaucratized, with a bunch of academics. There's plenty of good social movement organizations out there in America right now, really doing great work. They don't need sociologists. They know how to do social movements, they know how to get people fired up and protesting. You don't need a Ph.D. to be an activist, you might as well get out there on the street and do what you want to do. But for God's sake, don't say you can't do science in sociology. You can.

I am a very politically and ideologically driven person in my political life, but I try to keep it as best as I can out of my sociology. Now, I can say that, honestly, as somebody who is probably more than most of the people who consider themselves activists, a real activist. I've been in jail in the South for my activism, but that's part of my personal life, not my intellectual life.

Well, you could never do it completely, obviously. And that's not just true of social science, that's true of hard science. I used to eat lunch with hard scientists all the time, they had all kinds of ideological biases, and I can see how it affects their work too, maybe not in such fundamental ways as it might affect sociological work. But they have biases, real bias, pretty awful biases in some cases, very conservative bias.

But in some ways, we have a great advantage over physicists because we live in the world that we study, we have a little more intuitive sense for what might be generic and fundamental to the social universe, if we're willing to put our ideological biases and our politics to the side, save those for our personal lives, which I do.

Petr Jedlička: Did you get any inspiration for you writing from your activist period regarding social issues?

Jonathan Turner: Yes, six of my books are books about American society, and its problems and the things that need to be done to change it. The original titles are: *Oppression: A Socio-History of Black-White Relations in America*,[7] *Inequality: Privilege and Poverty in America*,[8] *American Society: Problems of Structure*,[9] *American Dilemmas: A Sociological Interpretation of Enduring Social Issues*, [10] and *Social Problems in America*.[11]

So, you can see, I was writing books like that and they were normative books. I tried to be fairly neutral in my analysis, but I was making political statements in those books – what needs to happen to change. Some things can't be changed; we can't get rid of all inequality, but you could certainly mitigate it. And if you have a system discriminating against ethnic minorities, you can certainly do things to mitigate that, too. It's pretty hard sometimes to fully get away from discrimination because people do notice differences. And they use those as the basis for discrimination, that's in our nature as humans and our minds think that way.

Petr Jedlička: How did you manage to keep the two domains – theorizing and activism – separate? Is it at all possible for the social theorist to abstract from his or her cultural, educational, or professional background?

Jonathan Turner: I had the realization about in 1982 that my theorizing was being affected by ideological biases, I realized that some of my theories couldn't happen, or couldn't happen the way as much as I would want them to. And I would often ask myself. Am I teaching, am I biasing things for the students? And I was. So, I said I was going to stop it. And from that moment on, students come up to me after class and say, we don't know your politics. And I said: Good.

[7] Jonathan H. Turner, Royce Singleton, and David Musick, *Oppression: A Socio-History of Black-White Relations in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984).
[8] Jonathan H. Turner, *Inequality: Privilege and Poverty in America* (Northbrook: Scott Foresman & Co, 1976).
[9] Jonathan H. Turner, *American Society: Problems of Structure* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
[10] Jonathan H. Turner and David Musick, *American Dilemmas: A Sociological Interpretation of Enduring Social Issues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
[11] Jonathan H. Turner, *Social Problems in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

In most sociology classes, the first thing that the professor does in America is – tell them he is a liberal maniac. And you've got to listen to his ideological preachings and write them down as God's truth. Well, they're not. They are political opinions.

That's not what you should be teaching people in sociology – they should analyze the world themselves, and make their own conclusions, whether it's good or bad or indifferent. So, I really made an effort to do that. And even my graduate students would say: Well, we don't know your politics. And I said: Good. And I won't tell you until you have your Ph.D. They were always asking: What are your politics? I said, my politics are just as liberal as yours. I don't want you to know it. Because even I don't want to know when I'm doing my sociology. I kind of push it out. Now, it is possible to do that, but you should try as much as you possibly can, and it starts with using neutral vocabulary.

It starts with one thing. What is one of the most fundamental and generic properties of human social organization? What are those? There aren't very many. When I did the three volumes of *Theoretical Principles of Sociology*[12] you can see there aren't very many. And then, the next question is, how are they connected to each other? And what are the forces driving that connection? And when you ask neutral questions like that, that naturally leads you to think more analytically, as opposed to politically, as opposed to trying to change the world.

The world needs sociology – it needs sociologists who actually think without bias. And the best way to do that is to present theoretical knowledge. Because you can be assured if it's truly a grand theory or theoretical knowledge, it's good for all times and places. I'm saying that's a pretty easy criteria to understand – it is the property of the universal that I am positing as critical. If it is not universal, generic to all human social organization, then it is not the subject of grand theory.

What is grand theory about? And what is science about? Not about American society, circa 1950 to 1964, or European society before World War II. It's not about that – that's history. Sociology as a theoretical discipline has to be explanatory – it explains why you have something like Hitler's rise. Not a history, that's a different kind of explanation – you're talking about a sequence of events that occur. That's very critical data for a sociologist, but there are some principles – inequality and stratification involved – why and how could Hitler arise. You can develop a theory, that's not nearly as exciting

[12] Jonathan H. Turner, *Theoretical Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (New York: Springer, 2010–12).

as the history, but it's probably more fundamental, because then we understand the conditions under which you get that kind of political moment. So, we need grand theory, but we don't have grand theory. The current structure of sociology in United States or Europe or anywhere else can't work that out, we have to reinvent it.

Petr Jedlička: So, how would you formulate a program for theoretical sociology today and how it should look like in terms of methodology? Is there still a potential to model it on the natural sciences?

Jonathan Turner: I can summarize it pretty clearly for you because your question deals with the ability to have a real hard science and sociology in which you have some people developing general theories that are tested and assessed or changed.

If I were younger, I would try to create a Department of Social Physics. It would be more disciplines; it wouldn't just be sociology. Anyone who is committed to the view that the social world is understandable, that its fundamental processes that can be discovered, and modeled and theorized as in physics (or biology). That's why I wanted to use that name physics, not only because I like to poke people in the eye...

However, whatever isomorphisms exist across such big system levels – the physical universe, the biological universe, the social universe – they are limited. There might be some sort of a rough isomorphism. For example, I've been very interested in biology and biological theory and bringing biology back into sociology, because I'm partly trained as a biologist. But I decided in the 60s, when I had a choice to make between going to get a Ph.D. in biology or a Ph.D. in sociology. I chose sociology and I never regretted it – I've regretted what's happened to sociology, but I've not regretted being a sociologist.

Anyway, one of the things I've always been criticized for – having fights with people in biology and also in sociology and psychology and economics as well – is they want to import a Darwinian modern synthesis of biology right into the social world. You can't do that because it's a different world. That's a theory based upon natural selection – selecting on phenotypes, and weeding out those phenotypes that are not fitness enhancing and preserving those that are fitness enhancing and passing it on. There's no genealogy, there's no purpose, there's no goal. And all that because selection is all. That's fine for explaining. It's the most powerful theory we have for explaining the evolution of biological life.

But if you try to just take that over into sociology it doesn't work. Now, if you want to explain, as I've tried to do in my latest book on human nature called *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion by Means of Natural Selection*[13] – the evolution of humans and some of the biological capacity that humans have that is hardwired at our genome inherited from our great ancestors – the greater part of the book is Darwinian. But natural selection changes. The selection that is natural for the socioworld is different than the selection that is natural for the biotic world. We have socio-cultural selections as human beings, all of which are teleological and goal oriented – it can change the structures that organize themselves. Biologically we can be subject to biological selection or selection described by the modern synthesis.

However, if we want to bring the idea of selection to sociology, it's going to be a sociological view of selection – I've tried to outline the various kinds of socio-cultural selection that occur in human societies. I used religion with my co-workers because it illustrates that you use a dual biological and sociological explanations. The first half that is biological but then, once you have that brain, that brain can create culture and language and socio-cultural systems, and set goals and plans and thinks ahead in the way that most animals cannot do. So, the nature of selection changes – warfare is selection, but it's not Darwinian, it's socio-cultural warfare.

So, there is an isomorphism, it's that the selection that operates in both biological and socio-cultural universals, but the nature of the selection, the nature of the objects of the selections, the objects that are evolving, all are different. In biology, the selection is about genotype and underlying phenotype. And it's the population of phenotypes or the gene pool that's evolving. Whereas in socio-cultural systems selection is on the corporate units, groups, organizations, societies, intersocietal systems. Selection is not working on a phenotype and its underlying genotype, because there's nothing equivalent to the genotype of human societies. So, everything's different. Selection is still there, evolution is still there, but the nature of selection, the mechanism of selection, is different. So, you can't just ever take across those things.

Petr Jedlička: Where are the limits to which concepts and theories from natural sciences can be borrowed and applied to the social world and across social

[13] Jonathan H. Turner, Alexandra Maryanski, Anders Klostergaard Petersen, and Armin W. Geertz, *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion by Means of Natural Selection* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

sciences? It seems obvious that the transfer is not trivial and is burdened with lots of issues due to the deep differences as I suggest in my article.

Jonathan Turner: When I was done as an undergraduate, I was fascinated by general systems theory, I thought originally: here we are, we've got something now we could talk about – we can say everything's a system and we have some general principles of systems. And we're going to have a totally unified science. Physicists were all at the forefront of this. By that time, I was through my first year of graduate school, and I went to Cornell, because they had a general systems program. I said, this is not going to work. I didn't quite know exactly why it wasn't going to work. Anything that's common to systems across the universe from the physical and biological to the sociocultural, it's going to be so general that it is not going to be very useful.

You have discovered that when you went to study physics that you can occasionally borrow some types of physics or mathematics – say the fluid mechanics, and then and you can start to use some of that mathematics to describe collective behavior mechanics. You know, it's possible, they are social movements. But don't take it too seriously, you're just borrowing some tools, but you're not borrowing even the equations – you have to create your own equations.

You can import something, but in general it doesn't work very well. Just look at, say, Pareto. When Pareto becomes a sociologist, he tries to take the useful line of economics and apply it to cultural and political processes but it doesn't work very well. You see some cycles, a lot of the social world does have a cyclical pattern, but the modeling doesn't work very well. It doesn't even work very well in economics. Economics is a discipline with beautiful mathematics that's completely non-isomorphic with the way the real economies work. So, I just wonder about people if they believe what economists say – they can do certain kinds of technical things when making rough predictions based not upon other theories, but on past patterns. They're not using any sophisticated theory to say we're going to get over a recession. They are using past experience – they don't have a really good theory.

Petr Jedlička: Thank you.

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