From the Editor:

Can Social Theory Be Liberating?

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On April 7, 2004, the Department of Sociology at UMass Boston launched the Social Theory Forum series, beginning with a conference-workshop on the theme "Liberating Social Theory: Inspirations from Paulo Freire for Learning, Teaching, and Advancing Social Theory in Applied Settings." The present issue of *The Discourse of Sociological Practice* includes papers and commentaries presented in that conference.

It is a great pleasure for me to once again comment on the theme of the conference. The writers have certainly touched on some of the most critical intellectual parameters of the social sciences. With so much of the sociology and psychology wrapped up in numerical analyses of social artifacts masquerading as data, asking questions about theory, that is, about the culture of those artifacts, is quite refreshing.

I should confess that coming from a hermeneutic position, I read theory in everything. That is, I project my unconscious theories on the world, and I see how even my dreams and daytime fantasies are theoretical constructs. So when Behrooz Tamdgidi, Jorge Capetillo and Glen Jacobs came up with the idea of a conference on theory, I could hardly hide my excitement. The organizers have done a superb job in attracting such dynamic and vibrant minds for this conference and we all thank you for taking the precious time to make this short but intellectually lively journey possible.

When I accepted the invitation to present a few remarks at the beginning of the conference, I had neither a burning thought to share with a group of theoreticians nor had a tentative title for those remarks. The only thing that did strike me was the title: Liberating Social Theory. I wondered silently whether a theory could be liberating. I think of a theory as a "prejudicial" mode of engagement with the world, an exclusionary exercise by definition. Here I am using "prejudice" not in the negative sense of the word as used in racism, sexism, or ethnocentrism, albeit they are all based on some theory. I am using the term as used by Hans Gadamer (1989) as a system of anticipatory prejudgments that structure our perception, conception and understanding. One may then wonder whether a theory would promote or bracket reality. If it brackets reality, how could it be liberating and if reality is theoretically constructed, does a theory do more than self-fulfilling prophecy?

It was in this sense that I found the title, Liberating Social Theory, paradoxical, speaking to some tension between the function of a theory as a restrictive mode of interpretation or perception of the world and its alleged function as liberating. It then occurred to me that a systematic reading, an exploration or excavation of the title as a text may exhibit its instability and conceptual tension which is behind the idea of deconstruction. This was behind titling my presentation: Can a Theory be liberating? And by liberation I am referring to epistemological liberation, the fantasy of "seeing' the world the way it is rather than in a bracketed form. This may then entail the old radical phenomenological proposal of engaging with the world on the basis of no theory, no memory, and no desire.

The proposal is of course nothing but an anti-theoretical position that tends to emerge in different faces in various old and contemporary writings.

However, rather than getting into that literature, I have decided to answer my own question by a series of other

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questions. First, isn't the position of no theory, the anti-theoretical position, itself a theoretical position? And is after all a position of no theory possible? That is, is there such thing as pure phenomenology with the rest of our biography and social structure put in bracket? Is a position of no prejudice in Gadamer's sense epistemologically feasible? Is it not that as he argues we are all hermeneutically situated and ready to engage with the world in terms of a particular mode of interpretation? And is it not that "understanding" is nothing but interpretation from a perspective? Is it not that all understandings are necessarily prejudiced in the sense of being socially situated? How could we understand the world outside of a particular social-historical horizon? To Gadamer (1989) our prejudices, far more than our judgments, constitute the historical reality of our being and our judgments are based on nothing but on our prejudices. Murray Krieger (1976) writes in his *Theory of Criticism*: "our choice is not between having a theory or not having one (or two or three or more incompatible ones) .... Our choice is rather between having an awareness of those theoretical issues which criticism inevitably raises or going along without such an awareness." So does the awareness of one's prejudices constitute the beginning of liberation, a process that unfolds through dialogue and conversation? And is it not this one important reason for the emphasis of this conference on Paulo Freire? Now is it too pedantic to ask: what do we mean by dialogue or conversation?

If dialogue is mediated through the world of terror; if we simply repeat the words of the *other* as Derrida insists, if the self is a reflection of the other; if we can tolerate talking only to those who are similar to us; should that form of engagement be called a dialogue, a monologue or a duologue?

Some of papers herein address the question of action, practice or praxis. Does our theory inform our action or our action informs our theory? Jose Harari (1989) has argued that theory is merely the justification, after the fact condition—personal or social—that imposes itself on an author for reasons that may or may not be related to the substance of the resulting theory. You may always ask: how does he know this? Is this his theory, or a statement about his own practice?

My daughter is a graduate student at the American University School of Foreign Services. She called one weekend asking my views on a presentation that she had to make as a member of a study group on the ongoing events in the Middle East. The events were to be explained in terms of authoritarianism. The interest in authoritarianism has been revived in light of Samuel Huntington's (1996) "liberating" theory of the Clash of Civilization. She asked innocently, "daddy: where in that part of the world one may find the source of authoritarianism? Is it located in Islam? Is it rooted in the culture? Does it reside in people's personalities, is it a part of the political system, or is it a fascist mode of response against a fascist attempt at domination?" Rather than answering her questions, I thanked her for giving me ideas for my presentation. I asked myself: Is liberation or the liberating function located in the theory as a text? Is it a part of the ongoing social, political or educational genre? Is it a property of a particular social, political, or educational arrangement? Or is it in the character of the practitioner or as used by some of you praxisener? Did Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy follow from his chance encounter with a liberating educational theory? Or did his particular educational theory come after the fact to help him make sense of his own action in the midst of much educational disorder? Did the holocaust result just because Hitler happened by chance to come across the ideology of National Socialism? Or was the Nazi ideology with its anthropological theory itself a dependent variable? Was racism a product of the racial superiority theory or the theory of racial supremacy come ex post facto to justify the exploitation of the slaves by White Europeans? Was Stalinism located in Karl Marx's theoretical text? Was it located in the Russian culture? Was it rooted in the Russian Orthodox Church? Was it part of the Russian social and political system of the time? Was it a simple outcome of Stalin's personality? Or was it a fascist defensive reaction of an insecure revolutionary movement that was hunkering down to fight the cold war? There is no answer to these questions. These and similar questions are attempts to ascertain causal relationships among arbitrary social distinctions. The order and priority of all such distinctions can be easily reversed based on other social constructs such as a theory or an ideology.

So, do I have anything to say except expressing a sense of nihilism? Can I take any position or make any claim that would not self-deconstruct? Does liberation thus come from deconstruction? Not at all, says Rene Girard (1989) who calls deconstruction a form of "terrorism." So, have I been myself acting as a terrorist resorting to offensive arguments that in the spirit of deconstruction have equally undermined, destroyed, and deconstructed my own claims? After all, one may argue, as has Rene Girard, that terrorism is "the policy of choosing the worst option to destroy your enemy, even though you are destroyed at the same time."

Here I have to borrow Leor Alcalay's opening paragraph in his paper on "A Synergistic Curriculum for the Distressed" (printed in this issue of the journal). The quote is so charming and apt for this discussion that I could not resist the temptation. Leor writes:

> There is a wonderful cartoon in the introduction to a volume in a series, called "Introduction to Literary Theory," in which one man, having been introduced to another man at a cocktail party, says with great relief: "Oh, you're a terrorist! Thank God! I thought you said you were a theorist!

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