Introduction

Without doubt, the topic of theory in sociology and the need for a formalization of existing theories today are of the utmost significance for the discipline.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of books (Willer 1967; Stinchcombe 1968; Dubin 1969; Blalock 1969; Reynolds 1971; Gibbs 1972; Hage 1972) pleaded for more formal theory and in some instances attempted to indicate how formal theories could be constructed. Yet, this surprisingly strong surge of interest in formal theory died adorning as it were. By the middle of the 1970s, although a few more books appeared (most notably Chavetz 1978), concern for formal theory had largely died and graduate courses on the topic disappeared.

For scholars interested in the sociology of knowledge this rapid birth and death of an intellectual movement poses a number of questions. Why did such a widely based effort fail so quickly and decisively? Certainly, the authors involved were not minor figures in the field. Many of them were located at the most visible universities and several subsequently became officers of the American Sociological Association. Therefore, their visibility is not in question. Nor is the reason that inherently the subject matter of sociology prevents the development of formal theory convincing, because economics has clearly continued to emphasize formal theory and did not suffer from the attacks against positivism that emerged during the 1970s (see the Collins contribution in part 1). We should, therefore, look elsewhere for an explanation to the demise of this short-lived effort.

With this thought in mind, I applied to the American Sociological Association to organize a conference on the causes for the "death" of formal theory. With a generous grant from the Association and institutional support from the University of Maryland, a conference was held at the University of Maryland in August of 1990, just before the annual meetings. Significantly, the conference took place almost two decades or a "generation" after the publication of these books on theory construction that were cited previously.

A major motivating idea behind the conference was that, by understanding why this movement had failed, we might be able to provide insights into how to renew interest in formal theory. Certainly, I hoped that we would develop recommendations about necessary changes in the nature of graduate education in sociology, a topic that is discussed in part 3. Even more directly, participants were asked to consider the following but related question: Have the circumstances that prevailed in the late 1960s and early 1970s changed enough so that a similar effort might be more successful? History teachers but only those who are willing to reflect upon the past and discover the mistakes that were made so as not to repeat them.

WHY CHOOSE TO HAVE A CONFERENCE ABOUT FORMAL THEORY NOW?

After two decades of reflecting upon the fact that my own theory construction book did not have as much impact as I hoped, it occurred to me that others who have also attempted to influence the nature and the direction of the discipline probably had, like me, reflected a great deal about this issue. Failure frequently teaches more than success!

I also felt that twenty years is a long enough time to give someone distance about one's work. Certainly, in hindsight if I were to rewrite my own book on theory construction, there would be considerable changes in what was emphasized (chapter 9). The field has changed, of course, and any book on formal theory would inevitably reflect these changes. Furthermore, I can now more easily perceive errors in my own reasoning. It seemed reasonable to assume that this would be true for the other participants as well. A conference in the mid-seventies would have been likely to produce an ideological response upon the part of those who were interested in formal theory. Hopefully, time and intellectual distance gained through additional experiences generates wisdom. The reader will have to judge for himself or herself whether I waited long enough for such wisdom to emerge.

But even more fundamentally, I have been concerned over the past decade, specifically from the beginning of the Reagan attacks on social science in general and sociology in particular, about the vulnerability of sociology to criticisms about its intellectual merit. For years, sociology has been viewed as the weak sister in the social sciences, especially when compared to economics and psychology, and even to political science. Whether one uses indicators such as enrollment demand at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, number of employment positions in industry or government, funding by the National Science Foundation or other relevant funding sources, academic salaries, and so forth, it is readily apparent to all that sociology is not in a powerful position. Therefore, I felt that a conference about formal theory was useful in the light of ten years of continued cuts in funding for sociology.

Consistent with signs of weakness, other, stronger disciplines have begun to absorb or solve many of the problems that were once the sole concern of sociologists, as Collins and Waller mention in the first part of this book. Specifically economics is attempting to analyze a number of issues that are important to sociology, including the family, the sociology of education, and organizational sociology. Conversely, some of the new perspectives in sociology are merely economic paradigms thinly disguised: rational choice theory, governance theory, and even population-ecology theory, while also having biological roots, are all based on the primordial concern for efficiency. Cognitive psychology is similarly encroaching upon social psychology, threatening many of the job opportunities that would otherwise be available for our PhDs.

Confirming my concerns about the intellectual invasion from stronger disciplines, I saw the closing of the sociology department at Washington University as an ominous sign. Admittedly many issues were involved in this decision but the closing enjoyed wide publicity and received considerable support in the general community. Since the conference held in 1990, we have observed the struggles to retain sociology at San Diego and most critically Yale university. And while the latter was a success story, the fact still remains that in many universities serious doubts about the utility of sociology endure. As the funding of higher education becomes more and more precarious—and it will be during the 1990s—universities will cut those departments that they believe are less central to their mission. The University of Maryland has already done so and closed seven departments. Fields perceived as weak will be the first ones to be endangered. So a second and hardly minor reason for holding a formal theory conference now was the relevance of formal theory for the status and survival of the discipline. Admittedly, strengthening formal theory is not the only answer to critiques of the discipline, but it is one that speaks directly to the issue of the intellectual merit of the field.

The concerns that I have just outlined were shared by the participants in our conference. While not all contributors to this book agree about whether formal theory should be used in sociology, they do agree that research projects must articulate with the development of theories in specific subfields so that the discipline accumulates knowledge. Furthermore, some of this knowledge should be relevant to the real world if the discipline is to gain power, prestige and most critically prepare its practitioners for nonteaching positions. These positions only emerge when people believe that sociologists have worthwhile insights that are not obvious and that relate to at least some practical concerns. This does not mean that sociology should become applied but with predictive theory sociologists will be hired to analyze social issues.

Still a third reason for the conference flows from the previous one. The attacks on sociology as a discipline have had precisely the kinds of effects that Simmel would have predicted. There is now much greater cohesion in the field. But even without these attacks on the discipline there have been a number of changes in the past twenty years that make a reconsideration of the pros and cons of formal theory a timely exercise. The Vietnam War is not only over but the country appears to have come to terms with it. Parallelly, the politicization and paradigmatic conflict that have characterized sociology has largely damped (Ritzer 1990). The generation who completed their graduate degrees in the 1960s are now in control of most sociology departments; they have become the power structure and therefore the problem of power for them appears less central.

Reflecting this change in zeitgeist, synthetic articles are now more and more common in the journals. It is not unusual nowadays to read, in the inevitable review of the literature, a discussion of several different paradigms. Furthermore, most of the articles are written by several authors, indicating that teamwork is becoming the norm, amounting to an amazing change. One major advantage of multiple authorship is that it allows for the kind of methodological sophistication that Blalock asks for (chapter 7), combined with a serious consideration of theory.

Generational swings occur in intellectual interests as well as in the economy, as Wiley (1990) has suggested. Not unexpectedly, several articles about the state of sociology have appeared by some of the contributors to this conference (Collins and Blalock), calling for a return to the idea of sociology as a science. There are new articles appearing in theory construction (Walker and Cohen 1985) that also reflect a renewed interest in formal theory. Pawson (1988) has proposed a new approach, a realist perspective, that bridges a number of differences in the old debate about positivism. Hage and Meeker (1988) have done the same in the area of social causality, suggesting an ontological paradigm that is more appropriate for the social sciences.

But perhaps the best signs of synthesis and collaboration are to be found in the new debates within theory itself. The discussions of agency and structure, and micro and macro reflect attempts to combine the disparate branches of the discipline and encourage people to work on issues that bring together different kinds of epistemological and ontological assumptions. The theory section of the American Sociological Association now alternates in its selection of officers to reflect a much wider vision of what is important in the field. In short, all of these signs indicated that a conference on formal theory might be useful.

THE CHOICE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Seusing that many of the individuals who were originally involved might have reflected upon the reasons why *their* particular contributions did not

make a dent on the consciousness of the sociological fraternity and sorority, I invited a number of them to share their views. Specifically, Blalock, Chafetz, Cohen, Davies, and Gibbs—all of whom have written formal theory construction books—were invited to attend. Because of a prior commitment, James Davies was unable to participate. In addition, Peter Abell, who has written the only book on theory construction published in England, was invited to participate in order to provide a different perspective.

However, restricting the conference to original participants could lead to distortion. Therefore, a general appeal was advertised in *Perspectives*, the theory section newsletter. Unfortunately no one responded. Given this, several scholars—Jonathan Turner, Randall Collins, and Gerhard Lenski (again, he was the only one who could not attend)—who have written about theory and from different perspectives, were invited to analyze the same set of issues. In addition, two discussants, with quite divergent views about the wisdom of formal theory—Stephen Turner and David Willer—were asked to comment about the papers that were prepared.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PAPERS.

As anyone who has organized a conference knows, one can ask people to write papers about certain themes or topics but what emerges is not necessarily congruent with the plans. Although I had detailed conversations about themes of the conference, the authors proceeded to move in new directions that were of interest of them. This does not mean that the papers were scattered. On the contrary, all of the participants mentioned how pleased they were about attending a conference that had such focus and where all the papers were reasonably on target. Rarely are conferences as specific in topic as this one was, and the result is the remarkable coherence of the papers collected in this book. Given this strong focus, the arrangement of the papers became somewhat arbitrary. They have been organized into two parts, but many of the topics in part 2 contain ideas relevant to the theme of part 1 and vice-versa. As a consequence, I have written extended introductions to each part so that the reader can skip back and forth depending upon the topic that is of interest.

The basic question of the conference—why did the theory construction movement die so quickly—is the theme of part 1. Besides presenting a wide diversity of reasons, these papers present a most interesting debate. The first three (Collins and Waller, Turner, and Hage) argue that a scientific approach to sociology has not been taken seriously within the discipline and for a wide variety of causes, while the fourth chapter (Cohen) suggests that this is too global and sweeping a judgment, and that there are some areas where formal theory has thrived and continues to grow. Thus, one issue is whether or not the influence of formal theory did wane completely. Particularly in-

teresting is the fact that Cohen is the one who has most recently written a book on formal theory construction, one that has been successful enough to be reprinted.

But not surprisingly a new and unanticipated topic emerged from the papers. The second part centers more directly on this emergent theme: What is formal theory? It is one thing to argue that the remedy for providing substance to the discipline is formal theory and quite another to agree upon what formal theory is. Thus, the nature of formal theory becomes an important issue for debate in the second part (although, again, ideas on this topic appear in the first part as well). One of the most interesting points being made is that the meaning of formal theory has largely shifted in the past twenty years from the emphasis on hypotheses to more deductive modes of reasoning and certainly much more complex theoretical models.

Finally, the contributions in this book represent the considered opinions of individuals who have thought about these matters over a very long time. As a consequence there is an intellectual density to them that makes this collection of papers quite unusual. It was clear that the conference could have easily spent several days debating these issues—plus others—and that there was not enough time in a single-day conference to have a full hearing of all of the issues. But it is our hope that these papers will encourage others to think and reflect about formal theory and its relevance for the power and status of the discipline.