Differentiation Theory and Social Change: Comparative and Historical Perspectives. by Jeffrey C. Alexander; Paul Colomy
Review by: Thomas J. Fararo
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Reviewer: THOMAS J. FARARO, University of Pittsburgh

This book contains a number of stimulating and important contributions to a type of theory that lies in the zone of overlap between general theoretical sociology and world-historical analysis. Some of the articles also overlap normative social theory. In the classic phase of sociological theory, the blend of these three types of components — generalized concepts and principles, historical and/or comparative analysis, and normative doctrine — was present in all interesting writers but with differential weights. For instance, Weber gave primacy to world-historical analysis with rationalization as the fundamental sociocultural trend. His general sociology emphasized the role of ideal types as conceptual models, but Weber did not make any attempt to construct theoretical models. Thus, Weber went only a partial distance in producing a viable combination of general theoretical sociology and world-historical sociology.

In the postclassic phase of sociological theory, say between 1935 and 1975, there was a strong effort on the part of a number of sociologists to develop general theoretical sociology. In the present context, the most relevant postclassic theorist is Talcott Parsons. Especially in his later work, Parsons focused on a blend of general theoretical analysis and world-historical sociology with functional differentiation as the fundamental principle. The paradigmatic example was the traditional household with its fusion of economic and socialization functions splitting into two differentiated and integrated institutional structures, the firm and the modern family. The treatment was sketchy and seemed to glide over and somehow make irrelevant the actions of actors with varying interests in different collective outcomes. These and other deficiencies were noted years ago, but the generality and conceptual rigor of Parsons's work kept alive the notion of somehow reviving and building on his ideas.

This brings us to the book under review. It contains contributions by eleven sociologists, including the coeditors, committed to studying problems in the zone of interpenetration of general theoretical sociology and world-historical analysis via Parsons's principle of functional differentiation. Theorists of an earlier generation who were among those who noted the problems in Parsons's sketches and made early efforts to solve them (such as S.N. Eisenstadt and Neil Smelser) as well as those in the younger generation (such as Duane Champagne and Frank Lechner) are represented. They proceed in the spirit of revision around an accepted core involving the master principle of differentiation by function. But much else is open to modification, both in style and substance. Most important, the abstractions are articulated to the concrete materials of historical cases. The contributors differ among themselves in at least one important way: their degree of commitment to Parsonsian conceptual schemes, such as the symbolic media and the AGIL scheme. Some authors, such as Richard Munch, draw substantially upon such notions; others, such as Niklas Luhmann, make no use of them that I can see. My own assessment is that those who do draw upon these additional conceptual schemes gain a definite analytic advantage in each case study, and also, very importantly, permit abstractly important comparisons across the cases.

Many of the analyses give considerable play to the intentional construction of social structures. This entails much more attention to political processes, including
conflicts, making up concrete historic paths of social differentiation. A good example is the paper by Gary Rhoades on differentiation in higher education: interests of concrete groups such as faculty figure heavily in his analysis. A number of contributions answer to the need for more detailed and coherent theoretical analyses of solidarity production as the functional core of society. Especially noteworthy in this regard are the outstanding papers by Alexander on mass media and by Leon Mayhew on solidaristic publics. And for some authors, as mentioned earlier, a more explicitly normative element enters the theory. This is especially true in the paper by David Sciulli on what he calls societal constitutionalism.

One of the most solid contributions in the volume appears under the guise of a summary closing chapter, written by coeditor Colomy and following upon two impressive historical-comparative case studies of his own in the book. In this final chapter he treats differentiation theory as a research program that is extending and elaborating, even as it revises, its core conceptual scheme featuring the basic differentiation principle. I strongly recommend this summary to anyone interested in the metatheoretical mapping of recent theoretical sociology.

As the coeditors recognize, more needs to be done in differentiation research beyond the hybrid theory-and-cases contributions we find in this book. There is a need for a stronger focus on the construction and study of idealized models with the objective of deriving unobvious consequences of assumptions that define the models. This is easier said than done, but I suspect that computer simulation will be an appropriate vehicle for this purpose. Probably another useful step would be to articulate the ideas to those of others who theorize about social differentiation and integration.

World-historical sociology is like cosmology in terms of its spatiotemporal scale and its sense of what has been most significant in the historic advance of the social world. And like contemporary cosmology with its link to high-energy microphysics, world-historical sociology gains power by articulation to a theory of action. This has been the enduring importance of Parsons’s foundation of social theory and it remains vital in current efforts of a similar kind (such as Coleman’s). This book, with its intriguing mix of theoretical abstraction and historical concreteness, marks an important event if seen in this light. I recommend it highly to theorists as well as to comparative and historical sociologists.

The Global Crisis: Sociological Analyses and Responses.

Reviewer: ROBERT J.S. ROSS, Clark University

The crises of the 1970s and early 1980s appear as two moments in this collection of eight essays by scholars from a variety of countries. One is material: worldwide inflation and unemployment; debt crisis, and frustrated development in the Third World; the painful (to the West) shift of economic power from the European West to the Western Pacific of Asia; environmental degradation as a global threat.

The second moment of this decade-old look at global crisis questions the ability of social science and sociology in particular to contribute to understanding of crisis, to survive the breakdown in moral consensus and belief in progress that had previously sustained the idea of sociology.