

A Scientific Q and A with Professor George Ritzer

My dear professor , as I have mentioned to you before , in the next issue of our journal , Nameye Olum-e- Ejtema'i (Iranian Social Science Journal), I would like to have an interview with you. Hence , I am going to write to you the major questions which I think is good for us. If you think that the other questions are necessary to raise or some of the questions which I have raised are wrong , you can add or drop them.

Now , would you mind , kindly , answering the following questions ?

1. Considering your theories , how much are the scientific , cultural, and social plannings based on them ? And what rules have been deduced?

It is difficult to assess the impact of one's work, especially during one 's lifetime . I do think I have helped to move American sociological theory in a more integrative and synthetic direction .

I also think my more recent books applying social theory to everyday economic phenomena such as fast food restaurants , credit cards and shopping malls is helping to legitimate such applied work . I also think that there is a growing interest in the sociology of

consumption in the United States . It is much harder to think about larger social and cultural effects . If they are there , they are more subtle and will not be clear for many years.

2. Do you think you are a theorist or a social researcher , why ? If it is so, isn't it itself a sort of theorizing ?

I find it impossible to draw a clear line between theory and research. Much of my work has involved metatheorizing and in doing that my empirical data are theories . In that work , I see myself doing empirical research on sociological theory . When I work with everyday economic phenomena, my examination of those phenomena is always deeply related to the theoretical perspectives with which I examine them.

Theory-research is a false dichotomy which has probably created far more problems for sociology than it has helped the discipline move forward.

3. Is there an emphasis on a specific method in the contemporary sociological theorizing ?

There does seem to be a growing emphasis in the United States on positivistic theorizing . I am thinking of theories like rational choice theory , exchange theory , network theory and expectation states theory. I do worry that they pose a threat to more philosophical social theories. Thus , there seems to be little interest in and sympathy for postmodern social theory , and related developments , in the U.S. The situation in Europe and much of the rest of the world is different because these areas have much stronger philosophical traditions .

4. How much have your scientific activities caused development in the culture and technology of an imaginary society ?

I am not clear what you are asking .

5. Can one find out any sort of development and evolution in your theories diachronically ? If the answer is "Yes" , please explain "How?"

Yes , as I look back on my career , I started out as a metatheorist seeking to better understand sociological theory and its underlying structure . I did that kind of work for the first 25 years of my career , and still do to some degree . However , in the last decade I have become increasingly impatient with the abstractions of metatheoretical work and have sought to do more applied sociology . All of my books in recent years - THE McDONALDIZATION OF SOCIETY (1993,1996) ; EXPRESSING AMERICA : A CRITIQUE OF THE GLOBAL CREDIT CARD SOCIETY (1995) ; THE McDONALDIZATION THESIS (1998) and ENCHANTING A DISENCHANTED WORLD : REVOLUTIONIZING THE MEANS OF CONSUMPTION (1999) - have involved the application of various sociological theories to the everyday realities of consumption .

One thing that has remained constant throughout my career has been an interest in Weberian theory and in rationalization theory . I wrote major essays on these issues in the 1970s and 1980s. The McDONALDIZATION OF SOCIETY is based on Weber's theory of rationality and that theory , as well as Weber's thinking on disenchantment , are central to

ENCHANTING A DISENCHANTED WORLD.

In THE McDONALDIZATION THESIS I wrote an essay on Karl Mannheim's theory of rationality and I am planning to do a book on a number of different theories of rationality and how each relates to McDonaldization and enhances our understanding of the McDonaldization of society .

6. Which of the major trends in sociology do you believe more ? And what kind of deduction caused and formed this belief ?

While I am not opposed to the positivistic trend in social theory , I continue to believe that the greatest insights into the social world are to be derived from theories with rich philosophical traditions . I can see the importance of a theory like exchange theory , but I have never been able to generate much insight into the social world from such positivistic theories . On the other hand , a theory rich in philosophical tradition like rationalization theory is endlessly useful to me. Lately , I've been drawn to postmodern social theory which is similarly steeped in philosophy . I find the ideas of thinkers like Baudrillard and Foucault to be very useful in thinking about the social world .

7. I wonder if you know that the Iranian sociologists are very interested in your theories and scientific activities . Why do you think they have this interest ?

I have never been to Iran so I cannot speak to why Iranians find my

theories attractive. I can only say that I have tried to deal with and integrate the most up - to - date social theories although rooted in classic traditions and I have tried to apply those theories to very recent social developments. Perhaps the interest in my work in Iran stems from an interest in being better attuned to the latest developments in social theory and in the social world .

Also , I have struggled to better understand theory and the social world. It may be that Iranian students sense my struggle and are sympathetic to it since they are similarly involved in seeking a better understanding of the changing theoretical and social worlds in which they live .

8. May I ask you to give us some of your suggestions concerning an effective factor so as to enter into the world of sociology well , and how to be interested in the theories of sociology ?

I think one needs to be open to ambiguity . There are rarely simple and clear answers in sociology .If one is looking for the answer , then one is not going to be happy in sociology . What sociology has to offer is not answers , but rather a wide range of ways of looking at and thinking about the social world . There is a nearly unlimited set of perspectives and of insights to be derived from them . This can be quite exhilarating to someone searching for new perspectives, insights and ideas .

Similarly , sociology and its sense of the social world is also continually changing . To like sociology , one must be comfortable with change .

9. What is your idea about the status of theoretical sociology in Europe and in America? Do you notice , qualitatively and quantitatively , any rise or fall in the world of theoretical sociology in comparison with the past decades ?

Theoretical sociology has always had greater status in Europe than the United States . This undoubtedly relates to the longer and deeper philosophical tradition in Europe . As a result , I think in the last two decades European theory (Habermas , Giddens ,Bourdieu, etc) has come, once again , to be the dominant theory in the world . There is a danger in the United States that the dominance of positivism and empiricism will further erode the position of theory in the United States. On the other hand , the U.S. in general , and American sociological theory in particular, is highly dynamic and creative. Thus , it is not unlikely that American theory will at some point respond and move off in some new and creative directions .

10. Your book, entitled, "Sociological Theories" , has been translated into Persian by three different translators in Iran , and this book is one of the major textbooks in this field . Please, tell us what is your feeling and idea about it .

I am delighted to learn that there is so much interest in my theory texts in Iran. I have tried hard to be true to the classical thinkers and to be as up - to - date as I can about contemporary theory . I hope that reading my books will spur Iranian students to read more of the original

theoretical works by people like Weber , Durkheim , Parsons and Habermas .

11. What differences and similarities are there between your book and the other books written in this field , esp. by Turner ?

The major difference between my book and Turner's is that Turner's text is in favor of a particular kind of social theory - positivistic sociological theory . Thus, he tries to turn all theories into positivistic perspectives that yield testable propositions . While useful for empirical research , this sometimes does violence to some theories.

In contrast, I try simply to be as true to each theory as I can and to that end I often use direct quotations from leading thinkers associated with each theory . Turner wants to further research while I want to further understanding of both theories and the social world .

12. Do you think you are a theorist or a metatheorist? Can one be both a theorist and metatheorist simultaneously ?

Both ! Especially in the last decade I find myself simultaneously studying theories and studying the social world . In fact , thinking about the two simultaneously enhances our understanding of both.

13. According to your recent books such as , "McDonaldization of Society", it is said that you are more influenced by Max Weber than by any other sociologists. Do you agree or disagree ?

Yes , Weber has been the major influence on my thinking , but I have found many other theorists useful and have used their ideas in my work. For example , in my most recent book , ENCHANTING A DISENCHANTED WORLD , Weber's theory plays a very important role, but the major influence is postmodern social theory , especially the thinking of Jean Baudrillard . My recent books have also been influenced by the thinking of Marx , Simmel, C. Wright Mills, and others. I think one should be open to an array of theoretical influences.

14. Which reader , do you think , is the real reader of your book, "Sociological Theories", and how much scientific information should he or she have ? (In which levels , undergraduate or graduate one?)

My texts in sociological theory are read by undergraduates , graduate students and faculty members. Undergraduates get a general sense of theory from them , but graduate students can read them in more depth and supplement them with original texts. In America , my texts are often used by graduate students to help them prepare for their comprehensive examinations. Faculty members often use my books as reference works. Basically , my books can be read and used at different levels.

Dear professor, if you think that other questions or points are good to present more your ideas or views, please do it.

Taghi Azad Armaki.