Cutting-Edge Developments in Contemporary Theory

Chapter Outline

Queer Theory (by J. Michael Ryan)

Critical Theories of Race and Racism

Actor-Network Theory, Posthumanism, and Postsociality

Practice Theory

My goal in this final chapter is to bring the discussion of contemporary sociological theory as up-to-date as possible by looking at some recent developments in theory. Doing so, however, is not as easy as it may seem because new theories are coming to the fore all the time, and often it is hard to distinguish those that will last from those that will quickly be relegated to the theoretical dustbin. Nonetheless, an effort has been made to identify at least some of the newest theories that show significant promise of standing the test of time. Other recent theoretical developments are dealt with at various places throughout this book. Cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan social theory, for example, are discussed in Chapter 16 on globalization theory. Indeed, globalization theory itself is arguably *the* most important development in theory today and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Four theories are discussed in this chapter: queer theory, critical theories of race and racism, actor-network theory (as well as the related ideas of the postsocial and the posthuman), and practice theory.

Queer Theory[1]

Any attempt to define queer theory should begin with an apology for doing so. Queer theory holds dear the idea that naming something constitutes a form of closure. Thus, to assign a definition to queer theory is to go against the ethos of postidentity that is at the heart of queer theory. Creating boundaries around the term with a definition of any kind takes away the malleability and inclusive potential that makes it what it is.

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[1] This section was written by J. Michael Ryan.

Thus we apologize for "straightening" out queer theory and point out that by so doing much of its essence will inevitably be lost. Nevertheless, there are basic tenets of queer theory that can be outlined to provide at least a partial glimpse of that which does not want to be named.

Queer theory is a set of ideas rooted in the contention that identities are not fixed and stable and do not determine who we are. Rather, identities are historically and socially constructed processes that are both fluid and contested. Thus, according to queer theory, to talk about "gay men," "Jewish women," "black transsexuals," or any other group is meaningless because each of those identities necessarily ignores a host of others (e.g., gay men who are Jewish; Jewish women who are lesbians). It is therefore impossible to view people collectively on the basis of a single shared characteristic because countless other characteristics differentiate people but are silenced by the focus on a single characteristic. Consequently, one of the aims of queer theory is to challenge notions of fixed identity and to champion a more open and inclusive identity project.

What Is It?

The term *queer* can take on a number of different meanings. To some people, especially an older generation, it is a derogatory term for individuals with a same-sex desire. To others, *queer* has become an all-inclusive umbrella term for, among others, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, curious, intersexed, questioning, and allied identities. To still others, including many queer theorists, it refers to such a broad multiplicity of identities that it implies a sort of anti-identity or even a non-identity. Piontek (2006:2) has suggested using the term *queer* "to refer not to an identity but to a questioning stance, a cluster of methodologies that lets us explore the taken for granted and the familiar from new vantage points." *Queer* also can be used as a noun, to describe such an identity or a nonidentity; as an adjective, to modify a particular noun such as *theory;* or as a verb, turning something into that which is not normal. In the context of queer theory, the word has come to be used in all three ways as part of a broad intellectual and political project.

Academic journals devoted to the study of sexuality that are outlets for work in and around queer theory include the British journal *Sexualities,* the Australian journal *Critical InQueeries,* and the North American journals *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* and the *Journal of Homosexuality.* Also, prominent periodicals such as the *Socialist Review* (vol. 22, no. 1, 1992) and *Sociological Theory* (Summer 1994) have devoted entire issues to queer theory.

It is impossible to develop a comprehensive list of the identifying characteristics of queer theory, but Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1994) have noted four prominent "hallmarks":

1. "A conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides" (Stein and Plummer, 1994:181–182). Any understanding of sexuality relies on relations of sexual power that are found in multiple forms of social life, even those forms not traditionally thought of as immediately sexual, such as popular culture,

politics, education, and economics. This power is maintained by a constant reenactment, reproduction, and policing of the boundaries between sexual categories. For example, that which is heterosexual is kept at a safe and guarded distance from that which is homosexual. Each of the two categories is defined by the other, and hence by what it is not, creating a strict boundary to insulate two supposedly distinct categories. This sexual power is maintained by granting privilege to "normalized" sexual identities (e.g., heterosexual, missionary-style sex, monogamy) over "deviant" identities (e.g., homosexual, sadomasochism, multiple sexual partners).

2. "Problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacement of identification and knowing" (Stein and Plummer, 1994:182). The very boundaries that are used to construct and maintain sexual power as a basis of conceptualized sexuality are put into question. Sexual categories such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual" have been shifted from starting points as units of analysis and have become discursively produced subjects for research. They are viewed as ways of "doing" rather than as ways of "being." Behaviors, knowledge, and confessions are all examples of phenomena that are used to challenge dominant categorizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Identity is viewed not as a stable, knowable category but rather as one that rests on ever-shifting and unknowable grounds.

3. "Rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics" (Stein and Plummer, 1994:182). Political claims based on identity, such as the claims made by the gay and lesbian rights movement, are shunned in favor of a more ironic, transgressive, and playful approach. The argument is that advocating for rights based on a minority identity only legitimates the very power structure against which one is fighting. To resist is to legitimate the position of one's oppressor.

4. "A willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer 'readings' of ostensibly heterosexual or nonsexualized texts" (Stein and Plummer, 1994:182). Areas of social life such as the media (Walters, 2001), music festivals (B. Morris, 2003), popular culture (Sullivan, 2003), education (Kosciw, 2004), American literature (Lindemann, 2000), social movements (Gamson, 1995), and even archaeology (Dowson, 2002) are all investigated as sites where sexuality is an active player. No area of social life is seen as immune from the influence of sexuality, and even the most seemingly innocuous of texts are open to an interpretation through the lens of sexuality.

Although those four hallmarks can be expanded, contracted, contested, and shifted, they help to provide a loose framework for a theoretical approach that seeks to break the frame. The first two constitute an activity of radical deconstruction in which the solid of identity is melted into the air of a welcomed uncertainty. The last two set the stage for subversive sexual politics.

Whatever queer theory is, one thing it most certainly is not, or at least should not be, is synonymous with gay and lesbian studies (for more on this, see Giffney, 2004). Queer theory is *not* a theory of queers. This is not to say that both queer

theory and gay and lesbian studies do not have a focus on sexuality and sexual practices at or near the heart of their project or that each does not, to some degree, overlap with and make use of the other. Instead, it is to say that there are fundamental differences in the basic premises and goals of each.

Gay and lesbian studies takes the homosexual as its subject; queer theory rejects the possibility of a known subject. Gay and lesbian studies puts sexuality, particularly homosexuality, at the center of an identity project; it becomes a standpoint theory. Queer theory decenters and deconstructs sexuality and identity more generally, leaving both categories permanently open; it becomes a poststructuralist, postmodernist, multicultural, queered theory. Critics of gay and lesbian studies point out that such an approach only legitimizes the assumption of a heterosexual norm against which homosexuality acts as the Other. It establishes boundaries between dichotomous collectivities based on sexual attraction or practice. Queer theory, however, seeks to transgress those boundaries, to do away with any dichotomies, and to define itself as undefinable.

Despite an aversion to boundaries and reifying sexual categories, queer theory maintains an interest in the heterosexual/homosexual divide. It does so, however, in the terms of a Foucauldian genealogy. In other words, of greatest interest to queer theorists is the particular knowledge-power relationship of the hetero/homo binary. Queer theorists seek not to simply supplant the dominant heterosexual center of inquiry with a homosexual one, but rather to deconstruct both heterosexuality and homosexuality to understand how they are mutually constituted in historic and culturally specific ways. Sexuality is not seen as natural but is seen as something that is continuously socially constructed and policed. Thus queer theory is not interested in explaining why homosexuals are oppressed and repressed but rather seeks to explain how the heterosexual/homosexual divide is a figure of knowledge and power that orders desires, behaviors, social institutions, and social relations.

The heart of queer theory thus lies in challenging normative knowledge and identities as well as ways of knowing more broadly. Norms are examined, deconstructed, and disassembled, and there is no fear of indeterminacy. In fact, some argue that queer theory is not a body of institutional knowledge but rather a broader deconstructive process.

Where Did It Come From?

The origins of queer theory are as ambiguous and as contested as the terms, tenets, usefulness, and future directions of the theory itself. Some argue that its formal beginning in academic circles was its use by Teresa de Lauretis at a conference at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1989 or in her introduction to "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," a special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991. Others point to key publications by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick— *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)—and by Judith Butler—*Gender Trouble* (1990)—as the origins or queer theory in academic discourse. Still others point even farther back to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly to *The History of Sexuality,* Volume 1 (1978), as the point at which queer theory really began to take hold.

The search for the exact origins of queer theory does as much damage as the attempts to define it. It is instead more fruitful to do a Foucauldian genealogical analysis (see below) in order to situate the knowledge base of queer theory within the broader institutional dynamics in which it first appeared. Whatever its precise origins, queer theory began to gain a strong foothold in the academy in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. A series of key publications, academic conferences, political organizations, and published texts all helped to nourish the growing area of inquiry. Queer theory finds its academic roots in many fields, including feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, social constructionism, cultural theories, poststructuralism, and literary criticism. Two of these—social constructionism and poststructuralism—were of particular importance.

Social constructionism, following from the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), seeks to illustrate the social nature of phenomena and to debunk myths of "naturalness" or "inherency." In the context of sexuality, this means illuminating the social origins of sexuality and the differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality. It also means simultaneously critiquing the assumed fundamental nature of such a difference. This goal is shared, in part, by queer theory. Unlike social constructionism, however, queer theory does not assume that once-established sexual identities are empirical or valid ways of representing identity, nor does it assert that the cultural realms of heterosexuality and homosexuality are distinct. Rather, it argues that both are signs in a larger system whose meaning is derived from their relationship to one another and are part of the same underlying system of unstable and shifting cultural and linguistic signification. This assumption can be traced to another foundation of queer theory—structuralism and, more important, poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism is described in detail in Chapter 17, but it is worth discussing a few of its core premises here in order to understand how it helped to foster the growth of queer theory. The poststructuralists' delight in the belief that there is no single answer to any question, and their emphasis on the unimportance of even finding such an answer, helped to legitimate the queer theory project of reevaluating knowledge claims. Poststructuralists also emphasize the need to deconstruct social phenomena in order to understand them—another key project taken up by queer theorists. Further, the poststructuralist and postmodernist aim of delegitimating the humanist subject helped set the stage for queer theories dedicated to challenging notions of fixed and determinable identity.

Outside of the academy, queer theory also has strong ties to a larger project of queer politics. The AIDS epidemic, in particular, sparked a wave of grassroots activist organizations—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Queer Nation, and others—that sought to disrupt the dominance of heterosexual understandings. Queer politics also unsettled many gay and lesbian groups as it contested the hierarchies of privilege and oppression found within the homosexual community, such as those based on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, education, and class. Queer politics is therefore critical of any normalizing regime and prefers a more open and free politics of inclusion.

Another way to get at an understanding of queer theory is by taking a look at the work of some of its founding scholars. Although there are many who have done

work in this field, arguably the most important has been Foucault. Aside from the work of Freud, Kinsey, and a handful of others largely outside the realm of sociology, the relationship of sexuality to the individual or to society had, prior to Foucault's work, been largely ignored in the academy. Since Foucault, however, this has, at least to some degree, begun to change. Although sexuality has yet to attain the centrality of race, class, or sex in sociological analysis, it is at least now recognized as a variable to be taken seriously.

Two of Foucault's more seminal ideas—archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power (see the preceding chapter for more on these ideas)—have perhaps had the greatest impact on queer theory. An archaeology of knowledge (Foucault, 1966) represents a search for the universal rules that govern what can be said in a particular discourse at a particular historical moment. The goal, therefore, is to describe, analyze, and organize such discourses rather than searching for origins or seeking to make predictions. Instead, the analysis should be a focus on what exists in actuality. The goal is thus one of understanding, not defining.

Foucault's (1969) genealogy of power represents a concern with the linkages between knowledge and power. Genealogy is a method of intellectual history that does not seek to describe on the basis of lawlike historical processes but rather to outline open-ended trajectories thereby allowing for a multiplicity of pathways. In line with poststructuralism, everything is seen as relational and contingent. In line with social constructionism, there is an inherent criticism of "naturalness." A genealogy of power also seeks to understand how people regulate themselves and others through the production and control of knowledge. The emphasis, however, is not on the actors themselves and their position within a structure but rather on the structure of knowledge and power itself.

Sedgwick (1985, 1990) is another of the early pioneers of queer theory. Her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) explores the twin concepts of "the closet" and "coming out." The closet is a metaphor meaning a place where people hide their identity. Coming out is the process of revealing this hidden identity to others. Sedgwick compares these twin processes to ideas of secrecy and revelation, and she views both as politically charged as both seek to crystallize the identity of the homosexual. As a genealogy of power, the relevance of coming out also constitutes a particular knowledge-power relationship. For example, the closet creates possibilities for others to gain power by using knowledge of people's sexuality against them.

Butler[2] (1990) takes off from the knowledge-power relationship to argue that gender and sexuality are both performances based on repetition. She argues that heterosexuality has come to lay claim to titles of "naturalness" and "normalcy" because of its constant repetition and enactment, including by those who are not heterosexual. It is not, therefore, based on the expression of any inherent psychic reality (1997b). In other words, sexuality is a form of drag. Whether or not individuals are aware of their performances of their sexuality, such performances are going on. Butler offers hope to those wishing to disrupt compulsory heterosexuality through her notion of a

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[2] For more on Judith Butler and her particular relationship to queer theory, see Breen and Blumenfeld (2005).

"repetitive disruption." Such a disruption would be a conscious act aimed at undermining the repetition of the norms of heterosexuality. Butler elaborated on and updated this theme in her work *Undoing Gender* (2004). As a suggestion for what it means to undo hegemonic gender constructions, she notes that "to intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality and to use . . . one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim" (Butler, 2004:27).

Critiques and Potential Solutions

In spite of being an advance over previous knowledge and ways of doing theory, queer theory is not without its critics. Many argue that its amorphous politics of inclusion and rejection of single characteristics of identity such as race, class, or sex undermine the potential for real political action (e.g., T. Edwards, 1998; Kirsch, 2000). This rejection, in turn, ignores the everyday lived materiality of experience (Stein and Plummer, 1994) and the role of the social in constructing the sexual (A. Green, 2002). If identity is not a motivation for action, then how do groups dealing with the manifest means of oppression organize and fight for justice? There is also an argument that the more queer theory is accepted into academic discourse, the farther removed it is from its revolutionary potential. Halperin (1995:113) has noted that "the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer 'queer theory' can plausibly claim to be." By being enshrined in academia, it is losing its power to transform; by being normalized, it loses its ability to queer. A further critique is that much of the knowledge generated by queer theory is often not made available, or intelligible, to those whom it might most benefit. For example, Butler's writing is often so opaque that it lies outside the comprehension of the lay person (and academic!) to whom it might most appeal.

In light of these critiques, some have tried to find ways to modify queer theory in such a way as to make it more socially sensitive to the position and lived experiences of actors and the more politically astute. Max Kirsch (2000) has offered a potential solution by arguing that we need to differentiate between identifying *with* and identifying *as,* with a preference for the latter, in order to maintain a basis of identification while still distancing ourselves from the problems of identity. Thus, identity is used as "a mode of affiliation rather than strictly as a category of personal definition" (Kirsch, 2000:7). This approach is thereby able to maintain the critical stance of queer theory toward the dangers of essentializing or concretizing identity, while at the same time still allowing for identity by association to remain a powerful tool for collective social action.

Adam Isaiah Green (2002) has identified at least two strains of queer theory. The first, *radical deconstructionism,* "superimposes a postmodern self-concept onto the homosexual subject, thereby glossing over the enduring institutional organization of sexuality" (Green, 2002:523). The second, *radical subversion,* "superimposes a politically marginal self-concept onto the homosexual subject, thereby grossly oversimplifying complex developmental processes attendant to sexual identification" (Green, 2002:523). At base, each strand is seen as not giving sufficient priority to the

materially lived and institutionally dependent situation of actors. Green (2002:537), therefore, calls for a post-queer study of sexuality, one that "brings to bear the categorical scrutiny of queer theory on concrete, empirical case studies."

Whatever its shortcomings, queer theory also has many strengths. It seeks to broaden acceptance and promote inclusion. It reminds us of the importance of studying the center as well as the margins. It gives voice to the issue of sexuality that has so long been silenced in the academic world. It helps to further disrupt hierarchies of privilege and to dispel myths related to identity. All of this in just its first few decades of existence! Wherever it began, whatever it is, and wherever it is going, the important thing is that queer theory did begin, that it is something, and that it is indeed going somewhere. Its contributions to sociology have, no doubt, yet to be fully realized.

Critical Theories of Race and Racism[3]

As mentioned in this chapter and discussed in detail in Chapter 13, there has long been a body of feminist theory dealing with sex (and gender) and sexism. However, theories of race and racism, though part of multicultural social theory, have tended to lag behind feminist theory. (Of course, there is no clear dividing line between these theories. Mohanty [2002:2], for example, describes herself as an "antiracist feminist." Some of the most important developments in feminist theory and multiculturalism [e.g., P. H. Collins, 1990, 1998] relate to giving black women their due in such theorizing.) This is not to say that scholars have ignored theorizing about race and racism. Certainly, W.E.B. Du Bois, for one, has long been recognized as an important theorist of race and racism, and evidence of his importance has increased significantly in recent years (see Chapter 11 in *Classical Sociological Theory* [Ritzer, 2008a]; Goldberg and Essed, 2002). However, in the last decade or two, theories of race and racism have begun to expand dramatically. It is time (perhaps even a bit late) to acknowledge that development and to offer at least a brief overview of such theorizing.

Although sociologists and other social scientists have been making significant contributions to theories of racism since Du Bois's work around the turn of the twentieth century, and before, the recent boom in this mode of theorizing received an important impetus from the development of "critical race theory" largely in the field of law (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001:3; Valdes, Culp, and Harris, 2002). That theory came about as a result of the growing realization that the civil rights movement of the 1960s had lost its momentum, if not been reversed, and there was a need not only for a revivified social activism but also for new theorizing about race. The ideas associated with critical race theory developed from a wide range of sources, but some of them are quite familiar to social theorists, such as those derived from Marxian theory (e.g., Gramsci), poststructuralism (e.g., Derrida), feminist theory, and, of course, Du Bois's contributions.

Delgado and Stefancic, as well as Matsuda et al. (2003), outline at least a provisional list of the basic tenets of critical race theory:

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[3] I am here employing a title used by my colleague Patricia Hill Collins rather than the more common label "race theory."

- Racism is not an aberration; it is "normal" and endemic to American life. This makes it difficult to deal with.
- Much of the population has little incentive to eradicate racism. White elites gain from it materially (through exploitation of blacks and other minorities). Working-class whites also gain materially as well as psychically by having a group of people to whom they can favorably compare themselves in spite of their own difficulties.
- Race is not an objective or fixed reality. It is a social construction that changes over time (this idea aligns critical race theory broadly with the social-constructionist approach in sociology; see Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Such social constructions are created, manipulated, and sometimes even retired, though usually to be replaced by new social constructions. This social-constructionist orientation is related to skepticism about the supposed ahistoricism of American law and skepticism about legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy. That is, they all may be seen as social constructions that can be manipulated, revised, or even jettisoned when such actions are deemed necessary.
- Differential racialization "involves the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001:8). Thus, although blacks have been racialized since practically the inception of the United States, other minorities have come to be racialized over time. Examples include the Japanese during World War II, Muslims after September 11, 2001, and Mexican Americans in recent years as a result of growing concern over legal and illegal immigration.
- As in feminist theory, intersectionality (P. Collins, 1990, 1998) and anti-essentialism are key ideas in critical race theory. Thus, blacks (and other minorities) have no "single, easily stated, unitary identity" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001:9). Rather, they, as is true of all others, exist, at least potentially, at the intersection of "conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001:9). These may include religion, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and political preference.
- Great importance is accorded to the experiential knowledge of people of color and to communities of origin.
- The emphasis on the experiential knowledge of people of color is related to, but also somewhat in contrast with, the anti-essentialism of critical race theory. It suggests the highly controversial idea (given the postmodern critique of essentialism) that blacks, and other racial minorities, are uniquely able to speak and write about race and racism because of their specific histories and experiences with oppression. Beyond its essentialism, another of the reasons this emphasis is controversial is that it could be argued that the unique history and experiences of whites in and with systems of oppression give whites a similarly specific, albeit different, perspective on race and racism. The history and experience of whites would seemingly make it as legitimate for them to speak on racial matters as it is for blacks.

- As part of a broader goal of eliminating all forms of oppression, critical race theory is oriented to the elimination of racial oppression.

Critical theories of race and racism (CTRR) have much in common with critical race theory, including the goal of dealing with social injustices, the reduction or elimination of social inequalities, and a strong focus on intersectionality. However, there are also important differences stemming from the fact that CTRR are rooted much more in the social sciences, including sociology, than is critical race theory with its base in legal scholarship and activism. This difference serves to sensitize CTRR to, and involve them in, cutting-edge issues in theory such as the relationship between race and racism and agency-structure, political economy, and globalization. Included in, or related to, globalization is a concern for race and racism as it relates to nation-states, nationalism, and ethnonationalism (Connor, 2007), transnationalism (Remennick, 2007), colonialism, neocolonialism (Go, 2007a), decolonization (Go, 2007b), imperialism, empire, and so on. Thus, while critical race theory focuses on the United States and American law, CTRR have a much broader, even global, focus (Goldberg and Essed, 2002:4). In addition, CTRR are open to a much wider array of classical and contemporary theories as they apply to race. For example, Darder and Torres (2004:23) adopt a political economy approach to race, one that is heavily indebted to Marx and that adopts a "historical materialist approach." In articulating their approach, Darder and Torres criticize critical race theory for ignoring issues of political economy.

A far broader theoretical approach is adopted by Michael Brown et al. (2003) in *Whitewashing Race.* They operate from an even broader macrostructural and macrocultural approach to race. They explicitly contrast their orientation to what they call "realist analysis," which adopts a micro-focus on individuals and their intentions and choices, thereby ignoring larger structures and institutions.

The realist focus leads to a concern with individual prejudice and discrimination (Law, 2007) and allows for the conclusion that white racism has ended, or is at least in decline. In contrast, Michael Brown and colleagues focus on a wide range of social structures and institutions that, in their view, have led to white accumulation and black dis-accumulation, to cumulative structural inequality in society. They look not only at the structure of law but also at racial stratification, labor markets, housing markets, government policies, and so on. Racial disparities have existed in these structures historically, and they continue to exist. Thus, blacks continue to face racial discrimination, and they must deal with the legacy of racial discrimination in these domains. It is therefore not enough to deal with the operation of contemporary structures and institutions; the legacy of discrimination at these levels needs to be confronted and rectified.

A more general conclusion to be derived from critical theories of race and racism is that, as Cornell West (1994) pointed out, "race matters" and that it continues to matter not only in the legal system but throughout the structures and institutions of society.

Many other scholars show that race continues to matter in the United States. For example, Guinier and Torres (2002) draw an analogy between race and the miner's canary used to indicate problems, indeed impending human death, in mines. Race in the United States is like the miner's canary in the sense that problems associated with

it point to broader, perhaps fatal, problems in the larger society. Guinier and Torres (2002:12), however, do not limit their analysis to blacks but develop a broader concept of "political race" that, among other things, includes various minorities and even some whites (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Nevertheless, it is still people of color who will take the lead in social change movements reflective of the political dimension of political race.

Guinier and Torres explicitly seek to embed their work within critical race theory. However, they also go beyond it in various ways (e.g., shifting the focus from law to politics), and in doing so they move toward CTRR.

A more clearly CTRR effort with an American focus is Bonilla-Silva's (2003) study and critique of color-blind racism (Guinier and Torres also attack this idea) in the United States. Bonilla-Silva is also critical of the view that racism today is of little more than historical interest. Rather, he sees color-blindness as a smoke screen that allows white Americans to continue to perpetuate racial discrimination. He concludes that color-blind racism provides a "sanitized . . . way of calling minorities niggers [Kennedy, 2002], spics, or chinks" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003:181). Based on this conclusion, Bonilla-Silva (2003:185) proposes a variety of practical steps (such an orientation toward praxis is common the CTRR literature) to combat the problem of "'new racism' practices and color-blind idiocy."

Although there is much focus in CTRR on race in the United States, others associated with this orientation seek to demonstrate that race also matters globally. Thus, for example, Winant (2001) deals with race historically and in the United States, as well as in South Africa, Brazil, and Europe.

CTRR are clearly still in the early stages of development and that makes it difficult to delineate clearly their fundamental characteristics, but Patricia Hill Collins has made a good start in this direction by delineating the following distinguishing features of critical theories of race and racism:[4]

1. CTRR do not simply study race and racism; they seek to deal with social inequalities and to advance social justice.
2. CTRR eschew all binary oppositions and look at everything from the perspective of intersecting entities. Such a view requires the use of multifaceted research methods.
3. CTRR are inherently multidisciplinary.
4. CTRR draw upon and advance intersectionality, looking at the relationship between race and racism and gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nation.
5. CTRR are increasingly drawn to materialist (political economic) analyses of race and racism, as well as to how race and racism relate to globalization.
6. Structures of power are increasingly central to CTRR. Earlier concerns with the power of the American social welfare and criminal justice systems have been extended to topics such as nation-states and nationalism, democracy, empire, transnationalism, and imperialism.

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[4] The following enumeration is derived from the syllabus from Collins's graduate course Critical Theories of Race and Racism, University of Maryland (Fall, 2005).

This enumeration, especially the last three items, clearly aligns CTRR with other very contemporary, if not cutting-edge, issues in social theory.

In conclusion, however, it is safe to say that there is as yet no "theory," critical or otherwise, of race and racism. But there is a historical body of theory to draw on (e.g., Du Bois, Said), a plethora of theoretical ideas and perspectives of great relevance (e.g., critical theory, Gramsci on hegemony, Hardt and Negri on empire), as well as a series of ideas developed from within CTRR (e.g., intersectionality). Out of this array of ideas, and undoubtedly many others, critical theories of race and racism will crystallize and expand their theoretical perspective in coming years.

Actor-Network Theory, Posthumanism, and Postsociality

A recent theory (although it is often seen as more a method than a theory), with powerful roots in structuralism and poststructuralism,[5] is actor-network theory (ANT). "Actor-network theory," in the words of John Law, "is a ruthless application of *semiotics*. It tells us that entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other entities. In this scheme of things entities have no inherent qualities" (Law, 1999:3). The idea of the relativity of *subjects* is shared by a number of theoretical perspectives. What is new here is that *material objects* as well are seen as being created and acquiring meaning in a *network* of relationship to other objects. Thus, "action-network theory may be understood as a *semiotics of materiality.* It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relativity of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials—and not simply those that are linguistic" (Law, 1999:4).

That perspective is drawn more from structuralism, but other basic ANT perspectives are drawn from poststructuralism. Implied above is the idea of *anti-essentialism.* That is, entities are lacking in inherent qualities; what they are is a result of their relationship to other entities. In other words, there is *no* essence to any entity or material object, including people. In addition, ANT is *opposed* to the very modern idea of the *search for origins*, either in history or contemporaneously in the idea that human agents are at the root of everything. Like poststructuralism (and postmodernism), actor-network theory is also *antifoundational*—that is, it is opposed to the idea that underlying everything is a basic structure and it is the task of the analyst to uncover that structure.

However, the poststructural concept that goes to the essence of ANT is *decentering.* Generally, this means shifting focus from the center (or essence, or origin, and so on) to the periphery. More specifically, it means in ANT the shift from a focus on the agent taking some action to that which exists, especially networks and nonhuman objects. The actor becomes part of the network; we can think in terms of the

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[5] There are many other theoretical inputs, especially ethnomethodology. Negatively, ANT seeks to avoid the problems it associates with agency-structure and micro-macro theory (see below). Other theoretical influences and affinities are with "feminist theory, cultural studies, social and cultural anthropology, other branches of post-structuralism" (Law, 1999:3).

" 'networkization' of the 'actor' " (Gomart and Hennion, 1999:223). Actors are subordinated to networks and, in a way, are creatures of networks: "actors are network effects, they take the attributes of the entities which they include" (Law, 1999:5). The focus shifts from the modern concern with the agent to the network and to objects, nonmaterial entities. This, as we will see, is one of the most distinctive contributions of actor-network theory: it "opened the social sciences to nonhumans" (Callon, 1999:182). (By the way, nonhumans and the relationship of humans to them is a significant aspect of what Knorr-Cetina [2001] calls *postsocial relations.*) We will have more to say about this below, but although it is important to focus on the nonhuman, we must remember that "objects are *inferior* partners" to the human (Gomart and Hennion, 1999:223).

ANT leads to a rejection of both micro-macro and agency-structure theory (see Chapter 14). For one thing, those two continua are seen as examples of the kind of modern dualities that are rejected by poststructuralists and postmodernists. (According to Law [1999:3], "all of these divides have been rubbished.") In addition, the problem with both continua is that a shift to one pole of the continuum inevitably leads to dissatisfaction with what is learned about the other pole. More important, the continua are focusing on the wrong things. The central topic is *not* agency/micro or structure/ macro but rather social processes as circulating entities. In other words, the real focus should be on the network, another key topic discussed below. As Latour (1999:22) puts it, ANT is a theory not of the social but rather "of the space of fluids circulating in a nonmodern situation."

That observation leads us to a very useful definition of ANT[6]:

> We may conceive of only basic formal units of substance (actants) which enter into relationships (networks) by way of encounters (trials of force) wherein questions regarding the powers and identities of these selfsame units come to be temporarily settled by reference to the overall compound nexus of relationships within which they are now embedded.
>
> (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:34)

The term *actant* (borrowed from semiotics [Fuller, 2007c]) is worth clarifying. It is meant to imply that it is not just humans that act. Nonhuman entities can act—can be actants! As a result, the same explanatory frame should be used for actants of both types.

As Crawford (2005:2) puts it: "Investigators should never shift registers to examine individuals and organizations, bugs and collectors, or computers and their programmers." Furthermore, in discussing the actant, the focus once again shifts from the actor to the network. As Latour (1999:18) puts it, "actantability is not what an actor does . . . but what *provides* actants with their actions, with their subjectivity, with their intentionality, with their morality. When you hook up with this circulating entity, then you are partially provided with consciousness, subjectivity, actoriality, etc. . . . To become an actor is . . . a local achievement." Even something as seemingly human and individual as intentionality is defined in network terms as a

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[6] Actually, this is offered as a definition of the "sociology of translation" seen as the generic form of ANT (Brown and Capdevila, 1999).

"circulating capacity . . . partially gained or lost by hooking up to certain bodies of practice" (Latour, 1999:23).

Basically, actors (or actants) cannot be understood apart from the networks in which they exist and of which they are part. In fact, actor and network are "two faces of the same phenomenon" (Latour, 1999:19). Thus, actor-network theorists seek to bypass the micro-macro and agency-structure dichotomies that have characterized much of social theory (see Chapter 14).

The idea of networks is hard to get at, but Crawford (2005:1) does a good job of defining them and relating them to actants: "Networks are processual, built activities, performed by actants out of which they are composed." Most generally it implies a series of transformations and translations. A more specific sense arises in Latour's (1999:17) argument that a network is not society or an anonymous field of forces but is "the *summing up* of interactions through various kinds of devices, inscriptions, forms and formulae, into a very local, very practical, very tiny locus." Thus, a focus on networks leads one closer to, rather than farther away from, the local. This idea is closely linked to the roots of ANT in science studies, especially the detailed and local study of, for example, the operations of scientific laboratories. However, ANT rejects the micro-macro distinction. Thus, in discussing the local, or the network, and even the actant, there is a sense that the micro-macro, as well as the local-general, cannot be distinguished from one another. More specifically, the macro should be viewed not as "big," "but [as] connected . . . local, mediated, related" (Latour, 1999:18).

Related to the idea of network is *performativity*. This means that entities do not exist in any essentialist sense but rather are performed in, by, and through relations, or networks (Law, 1999:4). It is easy to think of human actors as engaging in such performativity, but ANT goes beyond this to see material entities as being characterized by performativity. If people and objects are performed, then "everything is uncertain and reversible" (Law, 1999:4). There are times when durability and fixity result, but the focus is on how those things are performed so that such durability is achieved. In other words, durable networks, to take one example, are performed, and this means that no matter how seemingly durable they are they can fall apart. Just as networks can be performed into durability, they can be performed into disintegration and even disappearance. However, even ANT theorists recognize some measure of durability, as best exemplified in Latour's concept of "immutable mobiles," which can be defined as "a network of elements that holds its shape as it moves" through space and time (Law and Hetherington, 2002:395–396). Thus, there is a durable network here, but it is one that is in constant movement (and there is the ever-present possibility that it can fall apart).

What is perhaps most distinctive about actor-network theory is its concern with material entities or artifacts: "Material artifacts may exercise something which resembles agency. But this proves to be a peculiar form of *agency,* one entirely *devoid of intentionality*" (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:40). This is one of the reasons, as mentioned above, that material artifacts are "inferior" objects. The key to these artifacts is their lack of meaning; it is this that gives them a "will to connect" with other elements of a network. It is this very blankness that leads the network and its elements to seek to connect with the artifact. To put it another way, by inciting connections,

an artifact "drives networks to incorporate and fold around actants" (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:41). Humans can be seen in much the same way: "they perform their own functional blankness . . . incite and form relations on the basis of what they do not present, do not say . . . [they provoke] the will-to-connect to ever greater excesses" (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:40).

Relatedly, there is a concern in ANT with "practical materiality" (Dugdale, 1999). Material artifacts play a key role in constituting networks and subjects. Thus, artifacts are not simply acted upon (e.g., connected with by the network); they also act. Material artifacts, like human agents, are actants. For example, Law and Hetherington (2002:394) discuss how things like carpeting and decor are performative: they act; they "participate in the generation of information, of power relations, of subjectivities and objectivities." Thus, nonhumans are active participants in networks, in social relationships. Of course, material artifacts lack what defines human actors—intentionality! Verran offers a good summary of all of this:

> this interpretive frame avoids any separation of the material and the symbolic in proposing worlds as outcomes of mutually resisting/accommodating participants, where participation goes far beyond the human to encompass the non-living as active in routine (and novel) actions, which constitute the world.
>
> (Verran, 1999:143)

The focus on relations, circulations, and networks obviously has a spatial implication, but ANT has a unique view on spatiality: "different and nonconformable spatialities (e.g., regions and networks) are formed" (Law, 1999:11). Thus, ANT seeks to distance itself from a simple Euclidean view of space. In one of its most distinctive views on space, ANT makes much of the issue of a "fold" in space formed "like a blunt scissors edge across paper, such that what were distant points suddenly become neighbors. Things . . . get crumpled together" (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:29). Also of interest is the fact that Latour (1999:19) argues that the "empty spaces 'in between' the networks, those *terra incognita,* are the most exciting aspects of ANT because they show the extent of our ignorance and the immense reserve that is open to change."

Given its roots in science studies, actor-network theory is oriented to micro-methods (although the term *micro* is anathema to this perspective): "actor-network studies attempt to become part of the networks of which they speak. To be able to trace a network means becoming interior to its activities" (Brown and Capdevila, 1999:43). Or as Latour (1999:20) humbly puts it: "for us, ANT was simply another way of being faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology: actors[7] know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. . . . [It is] a very crude method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an *a priori* definition of their world-building capacities" (Latour, 1999:19–20). In fact, as is the case with ethnomethodology, some supporters describe ANT as a method and *not* a theory (Callon, 1999:194).

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[7] This word seems to be at odds with the earlier point about the broad concern with actants and to imply a focus on human actors. This also tends to support Callon's (1999:182) critique of ANT for offering "an anonymous, ill-defined and indiscernible" perspective on the actor.

In terms of the discussion of modernity in Chapter 15, and the treatment of postmodernity in Chapter 17, it is interesting to reflect, in closing, on Bruno Latour's (1993:39) contention that "the modern world never happened." This notion is based, in part, on the fact that we continue to have much in common with premoderns. In addition, it is premised on the idea that it is impossible to identify points of origin or to clearly identity a point at which one epoch ends and another begins. Because we have never been modern (or premodern, for that matter), it follows that we cannot now be postmodern. Thus, ANT rejects the entire distinction between premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity.

Finally, it should be noted that some adherents of ANT are not happy with the directions taken recently by other thinkers associated with the approach, as well as with efforts (like this one) to clearly define and delimit it. For example, Law (1999:9) is concerned about naming, simplifying, and losing complexity— "the theory has been reduced to a few aphorisms that can be quickly passed on." Even more strongly, the leading figure associated with ANT says: "There are four things that do not work with actor-network theory: The word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen. Four nails in the coffin!" (Latour, 1999:15). Key contributors to ANT are thus intent on maintaining the complexity of a theory that seeks to reflect, at least to some degree, the complexity of the social (and material) world. ANT has generated a great deal of research into such diverse issues as Pest Management (Moore, 2008), sleeping persons (Lee, 2008), Methadone Maintenance (Valentine, 2007), and tourism (van Der Duim and Caalders, 2008).

Related to the development of actor-network theory are the ideas of posthumanism and the postsocial. *Posthumanism* is defined "by its opposition to humanism, as well as moving beyond it. It rejects the notion of the separability of humanity from the non-human world . . . and the division of knowledge into separate domains" (Franklin, 2007:3548). Because humanism lies at the base of much of sociology, especially microsociologies, posthumanism constitutes a profound challenge to the field. However, it can be seen as an opportunity to extend sociology beyond human actors to a wide range of other phenomena and to encompass them all within a single framework.

The idea of the *postsocial* constitutes a parallel challenge to traditional ideas of sociality. Sociality may continue, but it is declining in importance (social forms are being emptied of social relationships) and taking on new forms. Among the new forms are the relationships emerging with the enormous expansion of objects in the contemporay world such as technologies, consumer goods, and objects of knowledge. As Knorr-Cetina puts it:

> Postsocial relations are human ties triangulated with object relations, and forming only with respect to these relations. . . . Postsocial is what one might call a level of intersubjectivity that is no longer based on face-to-face interaction and may in fact not involve interaction at all. . . . Postsocial systems may arise around the sort of relatedness enabled by the Internet. . . . Postsocial forms are not rich in sociality in the old sense . . . but they may be rich in other ways, and the challenge is to analyze and theorize these constellations.
>
> (Knorr-Cetina, 2007:3580)

The emergence of an increasing number of postsocial relationships is related to the development of new types of work and consumption settings. One example of the former is "virtual organizations" that lack a central headquarters where workers can congregate and interact both to handle work-related tasks and to engage in social relationships. In virtual organizations workers are largely, if not totally, on their own, interacting on a much more limited basis with other workers and with superiors by phone, e-mail, or occasional face-to-face visits.

There are numerous examples of such postsocial relationships in the realm of consumption. For example, instead of interacting with tellers in a bank, we are increasingly likely to interact with ATMs. Other bank-related interactions are now increasingly likely to involve automated telephone contact or online banking. Also, rather than interacting with a salesperson in a bookshop, we are increasingly likely to buy books (and other products) through Amazon.com without ever interacting with a human being. In such instances technologies and other objects replace humans as relationship partners or serve to mediate the relationships among people. We often cannot get to talk to a real person until we have exhausted all the options offered on the automated telephone message.

Increasingly, in many of the best-known consumption sites (what I have called the "cathedrals of consumption" [Ritzer, 2005a]), we find much the same process. For example, in Las Vegas casinos, as well as casinos in many other places in the United States and elsewhere, an increasingly large proportion of floor space is devoted to slot machines, and gamblers interact almost exclusively with these objects. Other forms of gambling—keno, for example—also involve little or no human interaction and are replacing the historic focus of casinos on games (blackjack, poker, roulette, craps, etc.) that require direct interaction with other humans as either employees or fellow players. Similarly, the modern department store has far fewer employees than in the past, and customers are supposed to interact with the store and its products, make selections, and only then bring goods to a human employee in order to pay for those choices.

Of course, the Internet is the postsocial setting *par excellence.* We interact with keyboards, computer screens, Web sites, e-mail, chat rooms, massive multiplayer games, and so on. In some cases Internet relationships may come to involve face-to-face interactions (sometimes with dangerous consequences), but most often whatever human relationships exist on the Internet are mediated by the wide range of technologies associated with it.

Practice Theory

Practice theory sounds like, and indeed draws upon, a number of theories and theorists discussed elsewhere in this book. It is derived from the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Garfinkel, Latour, and Butler. It is linked to poststructuralism, structuration theory, ethnomethodology, actor-network theory (and science studies), and performativity theory. There are also more specific works on "practices" (S. Turner, 1994), an original theoretical approach to practice theory (Schatzki, 1996; see also Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny, 2001), and even encyclopedia entries on the topic (Biernacki, 2007). Furthermore, we also are beginning to see efforts to apply practice

theory to specific areas of study including Warde's (2005) application of it to the study of consumption. Given the wide variety of inputs and sources, it is not easy to pin down exactly what is meant by practice theory, but Reckwitz (2002) has done an estimable job of highlighting the central characteristics of that theory, at least in an ideal-typical form.

Practice theory is one of a variety of "cultural theories." Other cultural theories focus on mental qualities (e.g., phenomenology), discourse (e.g., structuralism, semiotics), or interaction (e.g., symbolic interaction). Practice theory, by definition, focuses on, well, practice. What is practice? Above all, a focus on practice emphasizes the impact of "taken-for-granted, pre-theoretical assumptions on human conduct" (Biernacki, 2007:3607). Practice is a routinized way of acting, and those pretheoretical assumptions and routines affect how we act, especially how we manage our bodies, handle objects, treat subjects, describe things, and understand the world. Reckwitz seeks to clarify the abstract nature of practice and practice theory by focusing on its relationship to a number of core concepts.

The first is the *body*. Indeed, interest in the body is one of the central and defining characteristics of practice theory (and it is of increasing interest in sociology in general and in sociological theory in particular). In many other theories the body is an epiphenomenon affected by, even controlled by, other phenomena (rational choices, norms, values). But for practice theory the body is of central and direct importance; it is the site of the social. In fact, practices are, at least in part, "routinized bodily performances" (Reckwitz, 2002:251). Practices are the result of training the body in a particular way. "A practice can be understood as the regular, skillful 'performance' of human bodies" (Reckwitz, 2002:251). This definition applies to obvious things such as using a golf club to drive a golf ball, but also to talking, reading, and writing.

Practice involves not only routinized bodily performances but also the *mind,* mental activities. To engage in practice entails the use of the body in various ways *and* engagement in mental activities—"certain routinized ways of understanding the world, of desiring something, of knowing something" (Reckwitz, 2002:251). Notice that while the focus here is on mental activities, they, like bodily activities, are routinized. Thus it is not that we consciously think through either what our bodies or minds will do; we simply act in a routinized manner. For example, playing tennis requires certain bodily movements that we perform routinely without thinking through each step to, say, hit a backhand or an overhead shot. But playing tennis also requires know-how about how the game is played, interpretation (of, for example, what it means when your opponent rushes the net), and aims (such as winning the point and the match). Playing tennis requires *both* routinized bodily and mental activities, as well as the interaction of the two.

Things are integral to practice and as necessary as bodily and mental activities. Practice often involves using things in particular ways. The use of things involves both bodily movements and mental activities. Thus, in tennis, one must be able to use a tennis racket in various ways depending on the nature of the shot required. No matter how good one's bodily and mental activities, one cannot play tennis without a racket. It is in the interaction of body, mind, and object that most practice exists. Overall, practice cannot occur in the absence of objects.

Knowledge also is required for practice to occur. More than just knowing various things, this knowledge also includes "ways of understanding, knowing how, ways of wanting and of feeling that are linked to each other within a practice" (Reckwitz, 2002:253). All of this knowledge is largely implicit. Thus, in playing tennis we know the rudiments of the game, we know how to hit certain shots and return various shots from our opponent, and we know that we want certain things (to win) and not other things (to be embarrassed) and that a certain level and type of emotional involvement (alert but not tense) is needed to do well. All of this knowledge is important, but in most cases it is employed routinely without thinking through all of the issues involved.

To practice theory, d*iscourse/language* is merely one practice among many practices. In contrast, many other similar perspectives (especially structuralism and semiotics)—all part of the "linguistic turn" in sociology—give discourse/language a privileged status. In those other perspectives, discursive practices are merely strings of signs. In practice theory, they are that, but they also are "bodily patterns, routinized mental activities—forms of understanding, know-how (here including grammar and pragmatic rules of use), and motivation—and above all objects (from sounds to computers) that are linked to each other" (Reckwitz, 2002:254–255.). Thus, in practice theory, discourse/language involves not only signs but also all of the other key concerns of the theory.

In terms of *structure/process,* social structure is found in the routine nature of practice. Larger-scale social phenomena, from economic structures like corporations to intimate social relations, are structured by the routines that lie at the heart of social practices. Thus, structure (as well as process) does not exist "out there" in large-scale social phenomena, or in people's heads, but exists in the routine nature of action. Structure is *not,* say, an organization's structure as reflected in an organizational chart, or the structure of the brain; it is the routines of action.

This leads to a very distinctive view of the *agent/individual.* Many social theories, especially microtheories, focus on the agent/individual as, for example, self-interested (rational choice theory) or as controlled by norms and roles (structural functionalism). The focus in practice theory is on practice and *not* on agents. Agents exist, but they are merely "body/minds who 'carry' and 'carry out' social practices." Thus, the agent is neither autonomous (as in rational choice theory) nor a judgmental dope (as in structural functionalism), but rather "someone who understands the world and herself, who uses know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice" (Reckwitz, 2002:256). The key point here is that practice theory deemphasizes the importance of the agent and seeks to focus attention on the practices; it is those practices that are of central importance and *not* the agents who carry them out. This is a radical step, for most sociological theories focus either on agents as creators of their social worlds or on the internal and external forces that constrain the agent and limit that creativity.

Practice theory as it now stands is derived from bits and pieces of the work of a variety of theorists and from a variety of theories. It constitutes a loose network of works and ideas, and there is, as yet, no "grand" practice theory, nor must it necessarily become a "grand" theory. But there are enough distinctive theoretical ideas that cohere

in interesting ways around the idea of practice to suggest the further development of a useful new theoretical perspective.

Summary

This chapter deals with four theories that have shown significant development in recent years and show every sign of further development. Other growing and promising theories are discussed earlier in this book (e.g., feminist and globalization theory), and there are certainly others that could have been included in this chapter. However, the four theories chosen for inclusion here represent a best guess as to the theories that are "hot" in the field today and are likely to be of continuing, if not growing, importance in the coming years.

Queer theory and critical theories of race and racism are the result of growing interest in the larger social world in queerness and race/racism. They also show the influence of developments internal to social theory, such as the impact of the theories of Foucault on queer theory and of those of Du Bois on CTRR. Then there are more recent inputs such as the impact of ideas derived from gay and lesbian studies on queer theory and of critical race theory on CTRR. Queer theory and CTRR have been both positively and negatively affected by these perspectives. More important, they have incorporated ideas from many other theoretical perspectives, as well as from developments in the social world, to develop highly distinctive and promising social theories.

Actor-network theory and practice theory are purer products of prior developments in theory. Although they relate to the social world, they are far less a reflection of developments there. Actor-network theory is most notable for according nonhuman actors their deserved significance in social theory. Practice theory does the same for routinized ways of acting. It is concerned with the ways in which pretheoretical assumptions and routines affect how we act—how we manage our bodies, handle objects, treat subjects, describe things, and understand the world.

Cutting-edge theories like those discussed in this chapter continually refresh sociological theory by adding new subjects of study and new ways of thinking not only about them but about many other subjects of longer term concern in the field. It is safe to predict that more new theories will emerge in the coming years (while others will decline and perhaps disappear), and that they, too, will enrich the field in similar ways.