

A FIRST STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

By the late twentieth century, then, the core areas of theoretically ambitious social thought had undergone a dual development.

On the one hand, the theories that invoked the idea of a deep logic of transformation – Marxism first among them – were in an advanced state of disintegration. To accommodate their central ideas to historical reality and contemporary practical experience it was necessary to dilute them more and more. Each succeeding dose of dilution turned out to be insufficient. You had to withdraw back into the theoretical system and do violence to unblinkable facts. Or you could let the system fall apart into a series of slogans and concerns without cohesive explanatory force. The root of the problem seemed to be the reach and nature of contingency in history. Practical or visionary conflict could transform every aspect of material or spiritual life. Whatever existed in society depended on a foreclosure of fighting. No master logic governed the making or the abandonment of basic institutional arrangements.

On the other hand, marginalist economics and its sequels had taken refuge in analytic neutrality. To the extent that this economic theory remained coherent with its own premises and program, it could not hope to be more than ancillary to some other body of substantive explanatory or normative ideas. It could not itself become these ideas. To the extent that it tried to make large explanatory or normative claims of its own, it had to smuggle in empirical or evaluative premises, to treat them as generated within economic analysis, rather than as stipulated on the basis of independent views and observations.

A key element in the decline of these two traditions of explanatory ideas was the failure of dogmatic assumptions about the limits to possible combinations of institutional arrangements. At times these preconceptions took the form of claims attributing a built-in, uncontroversial content to abstract institutional projects, such as a market economy or a representative democracy. At other times, as in the synthesis of deep-structure views and functional explanation, the constraint was represented by the belief that only one combination of institutions can sustain the development of the practical productive capabilities of society. Either way, the restrictive dogmas implied that institutional systems are indivisible wholes.

In the face of such prejudices the task of social theory became to grasp the extent to which the apparently lawlike routines and regularities of social life depend for their force on distinctive, fragile groups of institutional arrangements and enacted beliefs. To avoid the errors charted in the preceding pages, you had to understand the history and the internal composition of these shaping institutional orders without repeating the second and third moves of deep-structure social theory: the appeal to the idea of indivisible types of social

organization and the invocation of the developmental laws or the deeply rooted constraints that supposedly account for the content, the realization, and even the sequence of such types. Easier said than done. The effort to work out such an approach required change in the preception of the basic alternatives open to students of society – another way of seeing and talking.

Much more was at stake in this intellectual reconstruction than a point of theoretical clarity. The adherents to the modern ideologies of emancipation and equality, whether liberal or socialist, had to fight to prevent their transformative proposals from being discredited together with the understandings and explanations that informed these proposals. Either the inherited emancipatory programs would survive as frozen statements of commitment, without a vital link to views of social reality and possibility, or they would emerge, remade, from the reconstruction of explanatory ideas.

POSITIVIST SOCIAL SCIENCE AND NAIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Avoidance of Context

The discussion so far has focused on deep-logic social analysis: the disintegration of its evolutionary version in the course of the history of Marxism and the failure of political economy to provide it with a persuasive nonevolutionary statement. But deep-structure social analysis is no longer the only or even the most common style of social and historical analysis. A retrenchment of theoretical ambition, wrapped in the garb of scientific method, has produced the style of positivist, empiricist, or conventional social science. And though the method of positivist social science might seem in many respects to be the very opposite of narrative history writing, it converged with naive historiography on the crucial point of its attitude toward institutional and imaginative structures. The choice between deep-structure analysis and conventional social science has come to define the predicament of social thought, though a sufficiently diluted version of the former merges imperceptibly into the latter.

A decisive feature of positivist social science is its refusal to take the distinction between the formative context and the formed routines, or between structure-preserving and structure-transforming conflict, as central to the practice of social and historical explanation. The positivist social scientist sees in society and history an endless series of episodes of problem solving or interest accommodation. What the deep-logic theorist presents as a specific institutional and imaginative framework, context, or structure of social life, exemplifying an indivisible and repeatable type of social organization, the

positivist social scientist may see, when he sees them at all, as merely a series of more influential routines, the hardened residues of past episodes of interest accommodation or problem solving.

A corollary of this attempt to discount the significance of the contrast between the structure and the structured is the downplaying of discontinuity among structures. The positivist social scientist and the naive historiographer understand history as the experience of similar people struggling with similar problems in changing circumstances rather than as the creation of radically distinct social worlds, each of them supportive of a specific set of practical and passionate dealings, each of them a different way of being human. The one-dimensional and gradualistic quality of positivist social science and naive historiography is a direct result of their implied repudiation of the contrast between context and routine.

This style of analysis draws much of its seduction from the discomfiture of deep-structure explanation. The second and third characteristic moves of deep-structure theory – the subsumption of a framework under an indivisible and repeatable type of social organization and the invocation of constraints capable of generating a closed list or sequence of such types – have been shown to produce results increasingly hard to reconcile with research and experience. So long as no way is found to separate the first move from the other two, the former appears discredited by the failures of the latter.

In the social sciences, additional support comes from the ideology of science. The framework-denying mode of analysis is supposed to be scientific, in its avoidance of uncorroborated speculation and in its commitment to the gradual discovery of verifiable correlations among particular events and influences. Yet it contrasts with post-Galilean natural science in its repeated failure to reach counterintuitive results. For the most part it resembles instead an Aristotelian science of the social world, organizing and reinforcing familiar beliefs and commonsense perceptions. The rejection of the context–routine distinction, when combined with a preference for narrowly focused investigations, leads social scientists to study routines of conflict and compromise at a particular time and place. These routines depend in fact on the stability of a particular institutional and imaginative framework. Nevertheless, so long as the stability persists, the influence of the framework can be forgotten. The routines can be attributed to inherent economic, organizational, and psychological constraints or to a logic of interest accommodation and problem solving, carried on within a framework that is itself uncontroversial if only because it results from previous accommodations and solutions. Thus, despite his claim to detachment, the positivist social scientist sees society with the eyes of a resigned insider, who takes the fundamentals for granted and shares his subjects' sense of reality

and possibility even when he has claimed indifference to their interests and ideals. No wonder the results of his studies so often tally with their beliefs.

Consider an example drawn from political science. The study of voting and legislative behavior is a typical topic. Why do voters prefer some parties or candidates to others? Why do they switch party allegiances? And why do their elected representatives in turn vote as they do? A characteristic line of answers to such questions attempts to develop correlations between electoral decisions and the places that voters occupy in the system of group divisions: the contrast of classes, communities, ethnic or religious groups, generations, and regions. Then each correlation can be glossed with the help of other, similar correlations to bring out the latent rationality of the voter's choice. To explain this vote is to trace it back to a series of social stations and to the material or ideal interests these stations generate. The point of successful electoral campaigns is to combine credibility with coalition building. Legislative behavior can in turn be explained by a series of approximations to the norm: get yourself reelected – reelected, that is, by voters who decide in the manner described by the studies of voting behavior.

This style of inquiry can successfully map and even predict outcomes so long as politically active groups continue to avoid escalating conflict over the fundamentals – the formative institutional and imaginative structure of social life – and concentrate instead on redistributive quarrels or spiritual crusades that take this structure for granted. But as soon as such controversy does begin to develop – and it can never be more than slightly below the surface – the platitudes of these electoral studies cease to hold good. You then need ideas about frameworks, about how they get remade, and about the relation of disputes concerning them to quarrels within them.

For one thing, escalating conflict never turns out to mean merely the more intense pursuit of the same interests that carried the day during the earlier period of quiescence. The search for preemptive security and for immediate material advantage may redouble under the influence of broader and more intense fighting. But the preexisting logic of group interests also starts to dissolve as the assumptions about the possible and about the necessity or authority of group divisions begin to lose their basis in an unshaken institutional and imaginative order of social life. You need a way to understand the inhabitants of such a dissolving world other than by presenting them as puppets of a structure they have helped break down.

For another thing, to develop a view of events and attitudes in situations of framework-disturbing politics, you need independently supported beliefs about the transformability of these frameworks. Do the people engaged in these more basic conflicts remain in the

thrall of unjustifiably restrictive assumptions about feasible alternatives to their current arrangements? Or are they, on the contrary, disoriented by voluntarist fantasies and subject to constraints they fail to appreciate?

The political scientist may try to extend his methods to the circumstance of escalating conflict. Alternatively, he may frankly acknowledge that his science has dealt only with the relatively stable, normal situations; beyond a certain level of disturbance, all bets are off. But the implications of the acknowledgment are not easy to contain. If the routines of voting or legislative behavior studied by the political scientist depend on the stability of a framework whose emergence, content, and persistence he cannot explain, if this framework cannot in turn be explained by any higher-order necessity, and if in fact we have no formed ideas about the composition or reproduction of the framework, how can we do anything but describe the routines of this quiescent world and express what it feels like to inhabit it? If we lack insight into how or when conflicts within a structure turn into struggles about that structure, how can we have confidence in the claim that a given social circumstance will continue to provoke a given political response?

Techniques of Avoidance

The problem of the framework is so pervasive that it can hardly be overlooked in many forms of social and historical study; but a number of intellectual techniques have been developed to minimize its impact on social analysis. Positivist social science and naive historiography consist in these intellectual stratagems as well as in the framework-denying view these devices help protect.

There are three main techniques of avoidance. Each is exemplified by a distinct style of economics. As its chances of providing a basis for a nonevolutionary version of deep-structure social theory faded, economics became a model for several variants of positivist social science, each distinguished by the technique of avoidance it emphasized. The methodological rigor and self-consciousness of economics may account for the comparatively prominent role these methods of containment have played within it.

The first method is the technique of the disclaimer. You make no claims about the significance or insignificance of frameworks, or about their nature and transformation. You present your discipline as an analytic apparatus, empirically and normatively agnostic. You offer it as a limited though powerful tool to be employed by some other discipline able to supply descriptive data and explanatory hypotheses.

The most rigorous and generalized forms of microeconomics and econometrics prefer the technique of the disclaimer. One problem is

the transfer of responsibility: the tactic charges another science with the task. But where is that discipline? Only deep-structure social theory has a developed view of context change, and that view has been discredited. Another problem is the difficulty of keeping up agnostic innocence and of resisting the temptation to smuggle in unconfessed empirical assumptions.

A second route to avoidance is the technique of idealization. You acknowledge the framework but you explain and justify it (justification and explanation being inseparable in this mode of thought) as the optimal solution to a problem of institutional design: namely, the problem of establishing the framework within which first-order problems can be most effectively solved or independent interests and viewpoints most freely accommodated. In other words, you treat the attempt to find an optimal answer to the choice of a framework by analogy to the effort to find optimal solutions within such a framework.

The more aggressively ideological forms of market economics (and the related historiography of modernization) illustrate this option. The market, by which the proponents of this view mean a highly particular set of economic institutions and private rights, supposedly represents the tangible form of economic rationality, the one structure within which all other resource-allocating decisions can approach maximum efficiency. But the internal evolution of economic and legal thought has shown not only that a pure logic of maximizing choice is neutral among market and nonmarket systems but that a market order itself can assume an indefinitely wide range of alternative institutional forms, some of them far removed from the arrangements that right-wing economists hope to justify. The lesson of this evolution may be generalized. There is no way to get from principles of choice within a richly defined system of assumptions to principles of choice among such systems.

The third and most interesting method of avoidance is the technique of hollow concession. It consists in granting that, yes, in principle everything depends on the framework, at the same time continuing to describe and to explain situations as if this proviso were largely irrelevant. If the framework is disturbed, its disturbance can be counted on to be temporary; once a revised framework gets stabilized, the framework-disregarding analysis can begin all over again.

For an example, look to the "macroeconomics" practiced by American Keynesians. Faced with criticisms like those presented in the preceding pages, they had a dismissive and evasive response. Of course, they said, we know that the correlations we study – between inflation and the level of employment, for example – depend on particular institutional conditions. They recognized that these conditions included many detailed arrangements such as the form and reach of unionization and the accepted relation of government to the

economy. Yes, of course, they added, but let's get back to business. Business consisted in relating large-scale economic aggregates, like the levels of inflation and employment, directly to one another, against the assumed background of institutional arrangements.

There are two objections to be made to this response. First, the sense in which we affirm such economic regularities changes radically when we attribute them to quiescence over distinctive institutional arrangements rather than to, say, the intractable problems and built-in constraints of an advanced industrial society. Second, if we take seriously the influence of the institutional and imaginative framework of economic activity and if we think of the components of this framework as unique and pliable, the relation of economic phenomena to such institutional and imaginative structures has to become the central topic of economics. We cannot hope correctly to describe or to explain routine activities unless we have a way to think about this relation.

A SECOND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:
HISTORY WITHOUT A SCRIPT

*Trouble with the Script:
The Shared Embarrassments of Deep-Structure
Social Theory and Positivist Social Science*

Reconsider now the situation of social and historical studies from the vantage point offered by the preceding criticism of deep-structure social theory and positivist social science. The key idea to have come under assault is the belief that the history of society has a ready-made script. Must social and historical analysts respond to this assault only by limiting their sense of what the script contains and by retrenching their explanatory ambitions? Or can they avoid the appeal to the script altogether and find an alternative basis for generalization?

The core of this idea of the script, shared by deep-structure social theory and positivist social science, is a belief that our practical and imaginative fighting over the terms of social life is not entirely in earnest. The fighting is not in earnest in the sense that the conflicts over the formative contexts of social life or over the procedures for social problem solving and interest accommodation take place under the controlling influence of forces the contenders cannot master and do not even fully understand. The fighting may also not be in earnest in the sense that whatever the intentions of the disputants, only a narrow range of possible outcomes can stand the test of practical reality. Inflexible economic, technological, or psychological imperatives determine which forms of governmental or economic organization can and cannot work.

The idea that history has a script assumes different forms in the varied traditions of social theory. In deep-structure social theory the script appears as a set of practical and psychological constraints or of overpowering developmental tendencies. In the nonevolutionary variant of deep-logic analysis, deeply rooted constraints generate a list of possible social worlds and even specify subsidiary conditions that determine when each of these worlds becomes actual. In the evolutionary variant of deep-structure social theory, the script consists in the developmental tendencies that specify an actual compulsive sequence of types of social organization.

That positivist social science accepts the idea of the script is a good deal less obvious. But this mode of social analysis embraces the notion of a preestablished plot to social and historical life in the form of a belief in the existence of a relatively uncontroversial setting for problem solving and interest accommodation. The techniques of avoidance that play so prominent a role in positivist social science make it possible to treat particular, accidental arrangements as if these arrangements represented a better or worse approximation to a procedural scheme for rational social choice. Thus, for example, a historically distinct set of market institutions may be treated as a more flawed or less flawed embodiment of the one true and necessary form of market order. It may suffer from too much oligopoly or governmental regulation. It may allow too many economic agents to escape paying for the harms their activities inflict on others. But its basic generative principle – the use of property claims that are nearly absolute in both scope of usage and temporal succession – is supposed to be the sole basis on which a market can rest. The view of actual institutions as better or worse approximations to a relatively uncontroversial standard of rationality represents a version of the idea of the script because it drastically restricts what is understood to be at stake in the fighting that goes on in history.

My entire discussion of the contemporary situation of social thought can be read as commentary on the problems produced by the appeal to a script. The growing awareness of these problems and the devices employed in order to resolve them form a major part of the contemporary situation of social and historical thought. In the tradition of deep-structure social theory the sign of this self-critical advance is the increasing dilution of the necessitarian assumptions with which the contrast between frameworks and routines has traditionally been associated. This dilution becomes evident, for example, in the varieties of Marxism that play up the relative autonomy of class conflict from social structure. In positivist social science, on the other hand, the main sign of concern with the difficulties of the script is the increasing importance accorded to what I earlier called the techniques of avoidance. It has become increasingly clear that

not one of these social sciences can solve its key explanatory problems without referring to the institutional and imaginative contexts that overshadow the routine activities of social life and set the terms on which social conflicts or exchanges take place. Thus, the particular social sciences have become ever more absorbed in efforts to allude to these frameworks and to recognize their importance without breaking with a style of description and explanation in which the distinction between formative contexts and formed routines has no secure place. These efforts, I have argued, cannot succeed. Either the reference to formative context must remain empty of significant consequence or the habits of conventional social science must be drastically reformed. The problem is nowhere clearer than in the particular method of avoidance labeled earlier the technique of the hollow concession. The social scientist who embraces this solution acknowledges in principle the importance and the uniqueness of particular institutional settings. But he then returns to his normal practice of description and explanation as if this concession hardly mattered.

In both the major traditions of contemporary social analysis those who try to hold on to the part of their inherited explanatory practices that relies on the idea of the script find themselves locked into increasingly self-defensive and implausible positions. They confront a mounting tide of inconvenient facts and persuasive objections. But those who seek to rid their disciplines of everything that depends on the neonaturalistic idea that society and history are scripted seem to deprive themselves of the sole basis for explaining social facts and historical events. At least, they seem to forswear all explanations that go beyond the most narrowly focused and causally agnostic correlations and the least probing historical narratives. Skepticism about the script seems, inevitably, to result in skepticism *tout court*. The effort to prevent the complete disintegration of the naturalistic element shared by deep-structure explanation and positivist social science appears inseparable from the attempt to uphold the very possibility of social explanation. Conversely, the relentless insistence on freeing contemporary social thought from its residual attachments to the naturalistic view of society begins to seem a desperate surrender to nihilism. No wonder the same social theorists, social scientists, and historians often oscillate between the narrower, more orthodox and the looser, more skeptical strands in their traditions. For if the former commits them to necessitarian illusions, the latter appears to lead them into nihilistic impotence.

The great inspiring idea of the most successful efforts of modern social thought has been the idea of emancipation from false necessity. At any given time, the existing forms of social life may seem more or less the ones that have to be: at most, the corrupt or deviant forms of a small stock of possibilities. This impression is likely to apply

with special strength to the most central aspects of society: the formative relations of power and production and the ideas, embodied or implied by institutions, about the possible and proper ways that people can and should associate in the different areas of social life.

Before the emergence of modern social theory the most influential social doctrines in and outside the West had disregarded or downplayed the collective power to create an unprecedented social world rather than just to regenerate a corrupt one. Modern European social thought did not limit itself to proving that history could innovate rather than merely ring the changes on a small number of associative options. It also showed that the understanding of any dense social reality had to begin in the discovery of a history of accomplished or failed transformations and a set of variational possibilities. You grasped the relations among different elements in social reality by seeing how they might be recombined or replaced and by discovering that some recombinations or substitutions were easier to come by than others. The facts most resistant to willed transformation were the most fundamental.

Marx stated the relation between enlightenment and emancipation from false necessity in the most powerful and uncompromising way. The social world was not a natural order, but a domain of collective struggle, constraint, and acceptance. The material relations of society were real relationships of domination and dependence among people. The whole structure of society was the expression of temporary constraints and particular contests rather than part of the inherent nature of things. Economic growth, which had once required oppression, would soon make it superfluous. The role of social thought, as an accomplice of emancipatory social practice, was to demystify society and to reveal it to itself.

This core conception reappeared, in more limited ways, in other bodies of social thought. It came up, for example, in the idea of the progressive economic innovations that would be possible if people were free to combine the factors of production for themselves, free from coercion and privilege and from the illusions of necessity or sanctity that supported these restraints. Or, the ideal reemerged far afield, as in Freud's view of the way that true self-understanding, worked out in relation to another person, would liberate the patient from a rigidified pattern of conduct and perception that made him helpless in the face of his own unconscious and of life's sufferings.

Nevertheless, in all these branches of social thought, the liberating intention was dragged down by the theoretical instruments with which it armed itself. The history of modern social thought can be written as a history of the paradoxical relations between the idea of emancipation from false necessity and the theoretical strategies and concepts through which this idea was worked out.

Here are some examples of the way the execution compromised the purpose. Sometimes, through the sacrifice of an acknowledgment of contingency to the search for fake laws and the imitation of some preconceived notion – modeled on the physics or the biology of the day – of what respectable science had to look like. Sometimes, through the substitution of politics by social structure: the belief in a natural history of forms of social life, propelled forward by social classes that had natural boundaries and whose only two options were either to understand their own true interests and identities, or to fail to understand them, thereby slowing down the history machine. Sometimes, by the reification of concepts that described a contingent historical reality, as when the different elements that went into someone's working definition of capitalism were treated as naturally connected with one another or the abstract idea of a market was confused with some tacit picture of property and contract rights. Sometimes through physicalist models in psychiatry and psychology, the image of forces working against each other and maintaining a perilous balance of energy and control.

By the 1980s social theory, imprisoned in discredited orthodoxy or dissolved into flaccid eclecticism and mock scientism, had failed to adjust its theoretical instruments to its original aim. It had simply forgotten about the aim. It continued to use, in more fragmentary fashion, all the conceptual strategies that betrayed thought to false necessity. Because these strategies no longer belonged to a cohesive and deliberate theoretical project, they stopped being mistakes, and became superstitions.

The Modest Eclectic Response

What should our attitude to this situation be? The most common response can be called modest eclecticism. Modest eclecticism blends into the more diluted versions of positivist and deep-structure practice. Only its heightened self-awareness of a shared predicament and its self-conscious attempt to make the best of a bad situation mark it out for special treatment.

The modest eclectic dilutes and combines the traditional claims of positivist social science and deep-structure social analysis. He believes that the appeal to a script can be made plausible only if the constraints and tendencies that form the script are recognized to leave open a broad range of variation. He therefore also advises that explanatory claims in social and historical studies must be drastically deflated if they are to be supported. But though he wants to limit the scope of his explanations he does not want to change their character. For the modest eclectic accepts the assumption that only by referring to a

script can we explain social situations and historical transformations. His message is: Abandon heroic pretenses, but do not go too far. Even excessive skepticism can be dangerous.

If the modest eclectic comes out of a Marxist tradition he may insist that there is something to the story about forces and relations of production. But he treats the story as highly exaggerated and simplistic because, for example, it fails to recognize that there are many pathways from one mode of production to another and because it drastically understates the autonomy of class conflict from economic circumstance. This modest eclectic typically continues to employ the term capitalism even though he may refuse to swear by the assumptions that would entitle him to use a category like this one as more than a label for a historically unique constellation of arrangements.

If the modest eclectic comes out of the positivist tradition he will be attentive to the importance of the institutional arrangements that define the setting for the ordinary deals and disputes of social life. He will not go so far as to claim that the organizing principles of modern Western market economies represent an approximation to an ideal scheme for rational economic choice. But he will nevertheless be quick to emphasize the facts of convergence among institutional systems of constraint upon institutional invention. He may, for example, claim that any advanced industrial economy is bound to end up with something like the mass-production style of industrial organization; that any market order in similar conditions is sure to look something like the regulated market orders of the contemporary Western democracies; and that any representative democracy in a populous and pluralistic society will probably be something like the democracies that have in fact been bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century North Atlantic states. The vagueness of the "something like" in these views is crucial to the beliefs of the modest eclectic. He reminds us that the constraints which produce these convergences allow for a wide, even an indefinitely wide range of variation. But he is also convinced that drastic reconstructive proposals will shatter against limits more unyielding than a mere accumulation of institutional and imaginative biases.

Like any richly defined diagnosis of an intellectual situation, modest eclecticism suggests a therapy. It sees hope for intellectual progress in an incremental, inductive clarification of the respective roles of determining constraint and undetermined freedom. It treats the distinctive procedures of the major traditions of social and historical analysis cavalierly and jumbles them together, because it is unwilling to abide by the stricter necessitarian assumptions with which these methods have been associated. It sees no unavoidable discontinuity between its incremental and inductivist program and the weakened

versions of positivist and deep-structure accounts, for it identifies the difficulties faced by these accounts with the problems that any adequate practice of social and historical explanation must confront.

Notice that the modest-eclectic agenda usually goes hand in hand with a nonradical attitude toward the present formative contexts of social life. Even the modest eclectic whose heritage is Marxist finds himself tempering his faith in the redemptive power of the dialectic, extending his appreciation of the resiliency of "capitalism," and refining his awareness of the many disasters and perversions threatening all societies that attempt to break out from capitalist arrangements. (I later argue that at least one plausible response to the contemporary situation of social thought does combine extreme skepticism about general social or historical explanations with equally extreme disbelief in the necessity and the desirability of contemporary social frameworks. But modest eclecticism is not this response.)

Objections to the Modest Eclectic Response

Implicit in my discussion of positivist social science and deep-structure explanation is a criticism of the modest eclectic approach to the predicament their disintegration has created. One way to make explicit this critique of modest eclecticism is to insist upon a distinction between the facts of constraint and convergence and the ways of explaining them preferred by the adepts of the ruling traditions of social analysis. It is indeed a fact that only a few major systems of governmental and economic organization have flourished in the modern world, that many campaigns against these systems have been defeated, and that many would-be alternatives have failed. But it does not follow that these triumphs and failures are best accounted for by deep-structure or positivist explanations, no matter how much these explanations may be weakened. For a thesis of my critical argument is that no weakening is ever enough. The modest eclectic avoids falling victim to further doses of the criticisms that made him modest only by surrendering more and more of the explanatory claims that drove him into his modesty in the first place. Thus, he backs himself into nihilism – the very nihilism for fear of which he both clings to the residues of the idea of the script and refuses to consider more radically antinecessitarian styles of explanation.

Consider, for example, the modernized Marxist who says that there are three or four rather than just one institutional pathway to a certain level of development of the productive forces of society. New historical learning and surprising social experiments compel him to expand from time to time his estimate of the variety of possible trajectories. With each revision the suspicion grows that his exercises

in detailed analysis have lost touch with the basic Marxist story about forces and relations of production or with any story that can take its place. His approach begins to seem so elastic as to be empty. It can all too easily be adjusted, the next time around, to accommodate the most recent invention in politics or the latest discovery in scholarship. Excluding nothing, it explains nothing.

Or take the neo-Keynesian macroeconomist. He may begin by hoping to find a constant relation between aggregates such as savings and investment levels. Then he may discover that these relations vary according to factors as detailed as the nature and amount of unemployment insurance and as intangible as investor expectations about the faithfulness of governmental decisions to declared governmental policies. At the next stage he may be driven to conclude that a certain type of unemployment insurance produces a certain effect at one time but a completely different effect later, either because other attitudes and circumstances have changed or because workers, employers, and governments take into account the past effect of the arrangement. Each new source of variation can be assimilated by his methods of analysis and explanation: things are simply more complicated than they seemed at first. But as the sources of actual or potential variation in the connection among the macroeconomic constants increase, the point of searching for general relations among them becomes unclear. For what could these relations show, if they exist, other than that a certain area of social practice has not been shaken up for a certain period?

Modest eclecticism may also be criticized from the angle of its lack of clarity about the role of the framework–routine distinction. We must either accept this distinction as central or dismiss it as illusory or unimportant. If we reject it we run into the problems encountered by an unreconstructed positivist social science. But if we accept it we face unavoidable choices. We need a way to think about how such formative contexts are made and internally constituted. We must decide whether to accept the assumptions with which the framework–routine distinction has traditionally been associated: the idea that frameworks such as capitalism are indivisible wholes that stand or fall as a single piece; the appeal to the lawlike constraints or the developmental tendencies that can generate a list of possible social orders or a compulsive sequence of stages of social evolution; and the belief that contexts always keep the same relation both to the context-breaking freedom of the agents who move within them and to the constraints or tendencies that shape them. Modest eclecticism evades these choices. Better to give up the pretense of explanation altogether than to insist upon explanations as confused as the accounts that result from such equivocations.

Beyond Modest Eclecticism

The persuasive force of the case against modest eclecticism depends to a large extent upon the availability of alternatives. After all, the modest eclectic does not claim to offer a theoretical panacea, only to do the best that can currently be done with a thankless subject matter. The sole argument with a chance to convince would be the actual formulation of an alternative theoretical practice. We would have to work out the ideas that can in fact dispense with the makeshift compromises of modest eclecticism and carry forward the antinaturalistic view of society. This task is taken up by the constructive work that the book in your hands introduces.

It is possible to suggest a direction for such an alternative without actually formulating the alternative. The suggestion has an appropriate role to play, even in a book primarily oriented to a critical analysis of the situation of social and historical thought. In fact, it is already implicit in the critical argument. A major theme of *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* has been that the disintegration of the available traditions of social thought is no mere entropic process: the disintegrating traditions have forged many of the instruments required for their transformation. Our view of an intellectual situation, like our conception of a political circumstance, is formed in part by our ideas about how we can change it. Here, as elsewhere, no hard-and-fast distinction separates criticism and construction. A critical analysis of an intellectual situation incorporates a hypothesis about constructive opportunities. Conversely, our constructive ideas about better ways to explain social and historical events alter retrospectively our understanding of the present circumstance of social thought.

The evocation of an alternative theoretical agenda can have two roles, even in the absence of an attempt to develop the theory in detail, to put it to work, and to assess it. First, the statement of such an intellectual program can clarify precisely what it would take to break out of the intellectual predicament presented by the disintegration of these traditions of thought and by the hesitations of the modest eclectic response. If a theory like the one anticipated here were possible (judgment suspended), we could indeed do better than modest eclecticism.

Such an outline of constructive intellectual opportunities can also accomplish a second, more ambitious task. Once this alternative direction is formulated, it becomes clear that there are no reasons to reject it on its face. The alternative may turn out to be disappointing for any number of reasons. But it is at the very least not an unreasonable agenda for work, given the disarray of the current forms of social analysis and the weakness of the arguments that attribute this

disarray to the infancy of a science or to the inherent nature of a subject matter. The initial plausibility of the alternative approach is strengthened by its kinship with many of the themes, categories, and conjectures that have emerged from the internal criticism and self-transformation of the dominant traditions of deep-structure social theory and positivist social science.

My presentation of an alternative to modest eclecticism passes through four stages. The first step of the argument adds one more element to my reading of the contemporary structure of controversy in social thought. The point of this addition is to show that the reach for a constructive program – indeed, for a particular type of constructive alternative – already takes place under cover of what appear to be merely destructive maneuvers. This point helps support the belief that some of the building blocks already lie at hand, forged in the course of the internal reconstruction of the available forms of social analysis. The second stage is the enumeration of some of the categories and themes of an alternative. This part of the argument very directly anticipates the theory offered by *Politics*. It is meant to perform precisely the two roles mentioned in the preceding pages. The third part of the discussion singles out a few implications of this view that have an especially direct bearing on the problems of transformative political practice. These practical implications illuminate the nature of the theoretical endeavor outlined in the preceding step of the argument. They also suggest the rudiments of a way to advance the radical project. The fourth stage of the argument indicates a way of waging the antinaturalistic campaign that differs from the route taken by *Politics* and prepared by this book. This other response (“ultra-theory”) seeks to avoid rather than to revise generalizing explanations in social and historical study. Yet it does so without returning to the tacit positivist acceptance of current institutional arrangements as an uncontroversial basis on which to solve practical problems and to reconcile individual or group interests.

Before embarking on this four-step argument, remember that more is at stake than our ability to escape the twin illusions of deep-structure social theory and positivist social science. Our capacity to get critical distance on the current institutional and imaginative contexts of our societies is also on the line. Above all, the issue becomes our ability to imagine and to further the radical cause without relying on unbelievable assumptions about how things happen and what things are possible.

THE REINTERPRETATION OF CONSTRAINT

Another controversy is superimposed upon the debates discussed in my previous account of the situation of social and historical thought. This controversy reappears in all branches of contemporary social

and historical studies, from the analysis of the present to the study of the past, from comprehensive social theory to specialized social science, and from empirical to normative studies. Basic, novel, and bafflingly simple, this dispute is easily missed. Its themes are regularly misdescribed by a patchwork of categories borrowed from other quarrels.

On one side of this debate stand the protagonists of the dominant traditions and methods of social thought discussed in this book. Those who take this position hold on to one of the many variants of the idea of the script distinguished in the preceding section. They see in the constraints on social invention the reality that makes possible general social and historical explanations. They attribute these constraints to relatively inflexible economic, organizational, and psychological imperatives, or to powerful developmental tendencies, or to the requirements and consequences of rational decision making and efficient resource allocation. The advocates of this view differ only in the extent to which they believe social and historical reality to be thus scripted, in the particular version of the script to which they appeal, and therefore also in the confidence with which they advance general causal explanations.

The opponents of the believers in the script do not deny the reality of constraint. But they refuse to attribute the frameworks, sequences, procedures, situations, and events emphasized by their adversaries to intractable economic, organizational, or psychological imperatives, to overpowering developmental tendencies, or to the implications of rational choice. Faced with such constraints and such alleged products of other yet deeper and more universal constraints, they often say something like: It's all politics. But what do they mean? Or, if their intentions are, as seems probable, both undeveloped and ambiguous, what should they mean?

At a minimum, they want to see the formative contexts of social life (if the critics define their ideas in a polemic with deep-structure theory) or the procedural frameworks of problem solving and interest accommodation (if they begin from a criticism of positivist social science) as nothing but frozen politics: conflicts interrupted or contained. They want to deprive these frameworks or contexts of their aura of higher necessity or authority. Above all, they want to affirm that things can be otherwise.

In this largely subterranean argument the term politics seems to have both a narrower and a broader meaning. Politics means conflict over the mastery and uses of governmental power. But it also means struggle over the resources and arrangements that set the basic terms of our practical and passionate relations. Preeminent among these arrangements is the formative institutional and imaginative context of social life. Politics in the former sense represents a special case of

politics in the latter sense: governmental power is often the single most important tool for the stabilization or remaking of a formative context. Those who say that it's all politics claim that the fighting should be taken seriously, not dismissed as the mere enactment of a preestablished design.

Consider two characteristic theaters in which this controversy appears: one an explanatory discipline; the other, a field of normative controversy.

Most contemporary economists continue to hold on to stronger or weaker versions of the idea that an industrial economy changes and operates according to well-defined constraints. Politics, in either the narrower or the broader sense, can shift the distributive effects of different economic policies, assign larger or smaller areas of economic activity to market or command systems, and facilitate or obstruct efficient production and exchange. But it cannot alter the constraints, the constants, and the correlations that form the core subject of theory. There are, however, other economists, fewer in number and often disguised from others and even from themselves, who insist that *everything* depends upon power relations, upon the always surprising course of conflict over the uses of government and the nature of privilege, and upon the institutional settings within which these struggles take place.

You can claim to be a follower of Keynes, for example, and adopt either stance: interpreting the writings of the master in one case as an analysis of the economic laws of regulated market economies in democratic polities (a general type of economic organization capable of being reproduced in different countries at different times) and in the other case as a commentary on the particular consequences of particular institutional compromises. The Keynesians who prefer the latter view have a different intellectual and political agenda from the Keynesians who choose the former course. As economic analysts, they must place the interplay between detailed institutional arrangements and economic activities at the center rather than at the periphery of their studies. As citizens or policy advisers, they must insist on the revisability of these arrangements and refuse to treat them as fragments of an indivisible and repeatable type of economic organization.

The contrast between the two types of Keynesians goes a long way toward answering a superficially plausible objection to the preceding account of the controversy between the evokers of constraint and their critics. According to this objection, the contrast dissolves into a difference of degree. Economists, like all other social scientists, vary in how much of the phenomena they study they consider to be predetermined by practical imperatives that cannot be disregarded. But this objection misses the point. The economists who represent the party of politics do not merely opt for a script with more blanks;

they present a view of economic reality that dispenses with a script altogether. To develop their position into an intellectual program they must therefore show what economic analysis looks like, once the idea of general economic systems with built-in laws is abandoned.

Now, consider legal theory as a branch of social thought that, though explicitly normative in its concerns, plays host to the same dispute in other forms. Just about everyone has agreed that you cannot adequately understand the law as a system of rules that provides determinate solutions to particular problems of choice. But many believe that doubts can be settled through an appeal to impersonal policies and principles. The adherents of this rationalizing legal analysis wage a war on two fronts.

On one front they attack the methods of legal analysis that leave the body of the law as a vast heap of low-level legislative compromises and judicial analogies. Against this view of legal doctrine they demand a higher order of consistency, safeguarded by a form of legal reasoning that presents extended bodies of law as the expression of a coherent and defensible plan. They dismiss as mistaken the judicial precedents or doctrinal understandings that fail to fit the plan they see embodied in the main corpus of the law.

On a second front these rationalizing analysts fight radical theorists who insist upon seeing and treating legal doctrine as one more arena in which to carry on the struggle over the basic terms of social life. By opposition to these critics, they emphasize a sharp discontinuity between legal doctrine and all-out ideological or philosophical debate. To justify this discontinuity, it is not enough to assimilate the issue of what legal analysis should look like to the question of what judges should or should not do under a particular democratic regime. It is also necessary to claim that large areas of law can be retrospectively organized as coherent sets of principles and policies. These principles and policies supposedly articulate a plan – for efficient resource allocation, for a system of free and equal rights, or for any scheme of social order the rationalizing analyst may credit with the greatest authority.

If more than a small part of the law failed to fit this plan, the law applier would have to choose one of two solutions, either of which would be fatal to the objectives of the rationalizing analyst. On the one hand, he may give up the pretense that large parts of the law do add up to an intelligible scheme. On the other hand, he may repudiate as mistaken broad areas of existing law and doctrine. This alternative would undermine the cherished contrast between restrained legal analysis and free-wheeling ideological criticism. It would also make restraints on the judicial role depend on narrowly drawn institutional or prudential considerations rather than on the very nature of legal reasoning.

The rationalizing analyst avoids these dangers by seeking to rep-

turning point in history. The theory to emerge from the substitution of these assumptions would be as comprehensive in its scope and as detailed in its conjectures as the theory it replaces. The issue is whether we can execute such an endeavor without repeating at another level the problems of deep-structure social theory.

But this route is not the only way to develop the thesis of the critics. In an alternative view, the slogan that everything is politics should be taken as the starting point for an attempt to break with general social theories. The purpose of this attempt is not just skepticism but skepticism with a point. General theories are to be replaced by a series of explanatory, critical, and constructive-utopian practices that enable us to carry forward the conception of society as artifact. The practitioner of this armed skepticism patiently discredits every historical thesis that represents a set of formative contexts or a series of context changes as the expression of irresistible necessities. He sees in the defeated alternatives of the past and in the underemphasized deviations of the present the materials with which to build alternative social orders. He believes that the way to find directions for this work of social renewal is to imagine forms of social life that extend the aspects of current experience that seem most fully to emancipate and empower us. He seeks moral learning – to the extent that it can be had – from a conversation between our unfulfilled longings and our efforts to satisfy them.

In all these ways, the armed skeptic (whom I later call the ultra-theorist) wants to free the distinction between formative contexts and formed routines from its traditional associations. But he refuses to give general answers to such questions as how frameworks are constituted or how they are made. For he believes that we cannot dispel the illusions of false necessity without putting a stop to the enterprise of general theorizing about society. The question for him is whether he can continue to get a critical distance on the past and established frameworks of social life without devoting himself to the development of such theories or whether their absence will not drive him back, against his will, to the preconceptions and equivocations of positivist social science.

Those who uphold the view that everything is politics seem rarely to have considered the implications of the choice between these two intellectual programs. Both programs might shock them: one by its extravagant theoretical ambitions; the other by its unrestrained negativism. For all their intellectual radicalism, sympathizers with the idea that everything is politics do not yet appreciate how much more radical they must be in order to carry the antinaturalistic campaign to a successful conclusion. Thus, these two accounts of their cause are less interpretations of what they mean than alternative and parallel proposals for intellectual action. *Politics* works out the extravagantly

theoretical rather than the relentlessly negativistic proposal. But that is just one man's choice about what to do now. I argue here that both responses should be tried out and judged by their results.

MAKING SENSE OF THE SLOGAN
"IT'S ALL POLITICS":
TOWARD A RADICALLY ANTINATURALISTIC
SOCIAL THEORY

Themes of a Theory

Consider now a few of the central themes of a social theory that develops the ambitious speculative version rather than the armed skeptical interpretation of the claim that it's all politics. The worth of the view that elaborates these themes cannot be assessed until the theory has been worked out in detail. The thematic outline can nevertheless show what it takes to break loose, through the means of general theory, from the contemporary predicament of social thought. It can also strengthen our sense of intellectual possibility by suggesting an alternative that we have no reason to reject out of hand.

The Theme of the Distinction Between Formative Contexts and Formed Routines. In every social and historical situation we can identify a contrast between formative contexts and formed routines. An institutional or imaginative framework of social life arises through the containment and interruption of conflict. Defeated or exhausted, people stop fighting. They accept arrangements and preconceptions that define the terms of their practical and passionate relations to one another.

These terms are then continuously recast as an intelligible and defensible scheme of human association: a set of models of sociability to be realized in different areas of social life. This reconstruction is more than an imperative of justification. It is an aspect of what it means to settle down in a social world and to make out of it a home. People then no longer need to understand the organization of society as merely the truce lines and trophies of an ongoing social warfare. They can read one another's words and deeds against a subtext of shared assumptions.

A stabilized social framework, context, or structure sets the conditions of people's material, emotional, and even cognitive access to one another. It shapes the routines of conflict over mastery and use of the tangible and intangible resources that enable the occupants of some social stations to set terms to the activities of the occupants of other social stations. These resources include governmental power, economic capital, technical expertise, and prestigious ideals or the

forms of argument that claim to show implications of these ideals. Once in place, a formative institutional and imaginative context regenerates a system of social division and hierarchy, of roles and ranks. It also gives life to cycles of reform and retrenchment in governmental politics and to business cycles in the economy.

You can tell whether an institutional arrangement or a belief about the possible and desirable forms of human association deserves to be included in the definition of a society's formative context by applying two complementary criteria. First, the belief or arrangement must be taken for granted by the strategies with which people pursue their recognized individual or group interests. Second, its substitution must change the form and outcome of conflicts over the key resources of society making. (A complication in the use of this second standard is that some substitutions may be functional equivalents.)

In contemporary North Atlantic countries the institutions that satisfy these two criteria include a style of government that combines an eighteenth-century commitment to the fragmentation of governmental power with a nineteenth-century mode of partisan rivalry incongruously related to the persistent class and communal divisions of society; a form of regulated market economies that employs property rights nearly absolute in use and duration as its preferred device of economic decentralization while using regulation by professional bureaucrats and judges as its favored method of social control over decentralized economic activity; and an approach to the representation of labor and to the organization of industry that results in the differential unionization of the work force. The imaginative preconceptions that meet the two criteria are expressed clearly, though often tacitly, in the specialized discourses of party-political and legal controversy and more richly, interestingly, and contradictorily in popular expectation, argument, and sensibility. These premises include images of private community for family and friendship, of civic equality and official accountability for governmental politics, and of voluntary contract and technical hierarchy for work and exchange.

A formative context does not exist in the same sense as the atomic structure of a natural object, open to external observation. Nor does it exist as a mere set of illusions that insight can dispel. The primary sense of its existence is practical. It exists because (and in the sense that) it is hard to disturb and even to grasp in the course of ordinary activities. Its power to shape a world of routine deals and quarrels depends upon the extent to which it gains immunity – or rather immunizes itself – against the possibility of challenge and revision.

The Theme of the Relativity of the Contrast Between Context-Preserving Routine and Context-Transforming Conflict. Formative contexts must be reproduced in the banal activities of daily life such as the forms

of economic exchange, the habits of party-political competition, and the discourse of moral and legal controversy. These activities generate an endless series of petty conflicts – a Brownian motion of social life. These disputes are the small wars fought to save a social world from the wars that can pull this world apart. Yet the context-preserving disputes can always escalate into context-transforming struggles. For no ultimate difference divides them other than their relative scope and intensity. Some circumstances encourage escalation while others discourage it. But neither the actual occurrence of this escalation nor its outcome is governed by higher-order laws.

As practical or imaginative conflict widens and intensifies, different parts of the formative context are shaken. As a result, established assumptions about group interests, collective identities, and social possibilities also begin to come unstuck. For these assumptions are never more secure than the arrangements and preconceptions that supply the armature of a stabilized social world.

In a theory like Marxism, escalating conflict acts out the directional forces that lead from one preordained mode of production to another. It therefore also clarifies the logic of class interests embodied in each mode of production, or each transition between modes. But in a theory such as this one, the effect of escalation is just the opposite: to obscure and ultimately to dissolve the logic of class and communal interests. Nor is there any substitute system of interests waiting to take the place of the system that has been dissolved.

The more radically a formative context is disrupted, the more people find themselves thrown into a twofold circumstance of insecurity and openness. On the one hand, they descend into a Hobbesian war in which individuals and groups try to grab whatever apparent benefits they can seize and social life is consumed by a search for preemptive security. On the other hand, people divide into parties of opinion whose recruitment fails to map the preexisting lines of communal or class division and whose orientation fails to echo the interests and ideals that their members recognized at the earlier moment of stability. Instead of making the script fully explicit, escalation shows that there is no script.

Such a view recognizes that people will fight to retain the gross benefits and privileges of their acquired positions or to grab the privileges and benefits that, in the climate of expanded conflict, they no longer believe to be irretrievably beyond their reach. To account for this self-defensive or grasping activity, you need make no large assumptions about alternative systems of class interest: you need only acknowledge the impulse to seize the nearest and most tangible advantages in the midst of danger. Even this crude worldliness will be disturbed by the anxieties, animosities, and uncertainties of the moment.

The fierce struggle over material preferment will be accompanied

by another series of events that the adherent to a theory like hardcore Marxism must try to dismiss as a temporary and self-correcting aberration. People whose class positions and material circumstances were similar when the fighting accelerated will find themselves disagreeing more often and more deeply than before. They will be divided by conflicting opinions and assumptions about what is good for them – or for the rest of society – and what they can reasonably expect or fear from the troubled situation. This fragmentation and regrouping will be all the more acute because the views of collective opportunity and of the social ideal on which they depend are incurably controversial. No simple historical sequence or list of alternative social orders exists to show each group its next best chance.

Thus, this view predicts that the experience of aggravated group struggle will regularly be a strange mixture of straightforward individual or collective self-aggrandizement and high conflicts of vision. Both the selfish and the ideal aspects of ordinary struggle will be exaggerated and, in their exaggerated form, they will taint each other ever more pervasively, until people can no longer tell them apart. Classes, rather than becoming more and more themselves, will, at least for the duration of the intensified conflict, become indistinguishable from parties of opinion. Indeed, in a very real way, parties of opinion will replace classes. Such predictions supply ways of testing the superiority of this view over its rivals. They will also be seen to have important practical implications.

The Theme of the Variability of Entrenchment. Formative contexts differ in the extent to which they are entrenched, that is to say, protected against being challenged and revised in the midst of ordinary conflicts and deals. The more entrenched a formative context, the greater the number of intermediate steps that must be traversed before context-preserving routines become context-transforming struggles. For example, before some of the society's formative institutional arrangements are seriously jeopardized, the habits of conflict over the mastery and uses of government that characterize a relatively more entrenched framework will have to undergo a longer and more easily interruptible process of escalation than the corresponding practices in a relatively less entrenched context. Similarly, the style of legal argument in a relatively more entrenched context will have to expose more concealed disharmonies among recognized principles or between pretense and practice before it turns into an attack on the dominant imaginative scheme of possible and desirable forms of human association.

Relative entrenchment and disentanglement are not just things that happen to a formative context. They are consequences of particular ways of organizing and understanding social life. An advance toward

disentrenchment should therefore not be mistaken for a move toward anarchy. A relatively more denaturalized or disentranced context is at least as distinctive and detailed in its content as its relatively more disentranced counterpart. In fact, if anything, it is richer in worked-out detail because the people who establish and reproduce it are more keenly aware of its artifactlike character. Compare, for example, the relatively more disentranced frameworks of the contemporary North Atlantic countries to the relatively more entrenched contexts of the prerevolutionary monarchies. The former are no less richly defined than were the latter. Nor is there any reason to suppose that other, even more revisable orders would have any less detailed and distinctive substance.

The arrangements and preconceptions that compose a formative context shape social roles and hierarchies. The more entrenched are the preconceptions and arrangements, the more stable and rigidly defined become the hierarchies and roles that they support. For the privileged holds upon resources, or the discriminations of propriety and allegiance, implied by social division and ranking survive intact only so long as they remain hard to challenge and even hard to recognize. In fact, the relation between the revisability of a formative context and the force with which it imposes a system of division and hierarchy is so constant that the relative rigidity of roles or hierarchies may be considered part of the definition of entrenchment.

Thus, we can relate the spectrum of entrenchment to very distinct styles of social ranking. Hereditary castes or corporately organized estates, for example, occur in societies whose formative contexts are relatively entrenched. At the opposite extreme of disentranchment, society would be divided only by freely formed parties of opinion whose membership bore no relation to any antecedent structure of social divisions or hierarchies. Somewhere toward the middle of this spectrum stand contemporary class societies, familiar with political parties that both speak and do not speak for particular classes and communities. The interplay between the weakened and fragmentary hierarchies of class and a practice of party politics that both reflects and transcends these hierarchies is a mark of societies partly, but only partly, emancipated from the constraints of false necessity.

Disentranchment holds great practical interest for us because it can serve as the basis for a broad range of varieties of individual and collective empowerment. By opening social relations more fully to recombination and experiment it can contribute to the development of productive capabilities. By weakening roles and hierarchies it can help reconcile the enabling conditions of self-assertion: the need for engagement in group life and the countervailing need to avoid the dangers of dependence and depersonalization that attend all such engagement. By giving us a more conscious mastery over the settings

of our practical and passionate relations it can turn us more truly into the architects and critics, rather than the puppets, of the social worlds in which we live. Call the sum of these varieties of empowerment that result from disentanglement negative capability.

Disentanglement also matters for another, related reason. We have grown accustomed to thinking that our lives in society are overshadowed by a series of unyielding tensions between, for example, the attractions of the social control of economic activity and the benefits of decentralized markets or, at a still more primitive level, between autonomy and community. But principles like social accountability and economic decentralization or ideals like autonomy and community have little meaning apart from the practical arrangements that are made to represent them in fact. Just as the content of these tensions varies, so does the extent to which they are indeed recalcitrant rather than open to partial resolution. Cumulative disentanglement, if it can be achieved, may increase the part of these disharmonies that can be reconciled. Thus, for example, a market system based on rotating capital funds rather than absolute property rights may extend the opportunities for *both* the social control of accumulation and the decentralization of economic decisions.

The Theme of Possible Movement Toward Disentanglement: Cumulative Change Without Evolutionary Compulsion. A thoroughly antinaturalistic social theory takes the final step in the development of the historical point of view. It affirms that we can change not only the content but also the force of our formative contexts: their relative immunity to challenge and their active encouragement to a structure of social division and hierarchy.

Because more disentangled frameworks make possible a range of forms of empowerment, a cumulative move toward greater revisability is possible. Such a move may occur as a result of intentional action: more disentangled arrangements may be inaugurated by groups and ruling groups who want to secure the benefits of negative capability for themselves or their countries. Alternatively, the move may result from a social counterpart to natural selection: the more disentangled contexts outdo the less entrenched in the worldwide rivalry of practical capabilities and ideological seduction. Cumulative emancipation from false necessity may even result from efforts that override the contrast between intentional and unintentional agency. For example, more disentangled practices and organizations may initially emerge as the unexpected by-products of other endeavors and without benefit of any understanding of the relation between disentanglement and empowerment. Yet these organizations and practices may seem worth preserving for the sake of the advantages they produce. Moreover, the people who control them may have to

develop a conception – of, say, enterprise management or legal doctrine – that requires an implicit, fragmentary understanding of negative capability and its conditions.

The advance toward greater disentanglement is never more than possible. It can be reversed or overridden by other factors. Above all, it does not preset its own practical forms and implications. We can say that a particular formative context is more disentrenched than another. But we cannot generate prospectively a list of the institutional arrangements or imaginative preconceptions that correspond to different degrees of disentanglement. In our efforts to build more revisable and hierarchy-subverting frameworks we work with the materials of the institutional and imaginative contexts that we are in or of past or remote sequences of context making that we study and remember. Even our boldest and most original inventions represent penumbral extensions of these legacies.

Each formative context influences its own sequel without determining it. For some parts of such an institutional and imaginative framework are usually less open to change than others: harder to replace without also replacing other arrangements or preconceptions. The biases that a formative context imparts to its own transformation can reinforce one another over time and thereby open up another source of cumulative context change.

In an evolutionary deep-structure theory such as Marxism the sequence of social frameworks can never be more than an outward product of the directing forces in history. But in a theory organized around these themes the pull of negative capability and the push of the sequential effects of formative contexts are independent influences that disturb and reshape each other. On the one hand, an advance in negative capability limits the force of sequential effects: when formative contexts become more disentrenched, their influence over their own sequels also diminishes. On the other hand, when we set out to change the character as well as the content of our frameworks, we have nothing to work with but the outcomes of many loosely connected histories of context change.

The Theme of the Piece-by-Piece Replaceability of Formative Contexts. While positivist social science disregards the distinction between formative contexts and formed routines, deep-structure social theory sees every social framework as an indivisible package. Once we define a formative context with enough detail to show how it shapes routines of social conflict, we see that its components do not in fact develop simultaneously nor come together in a single moment of closure. The major institutional or imaginative components of a formative context are often changed piecemeal. Their replacement reshapes some of the deals and conflicts that reenact a scheme of

social division and hierarchy and that determine the uses to which economic capital, governmental power, and scientific knowledge are put. Such revisions typically destabilize some parts of the established framework while strengthening others.

Like the style of social theory it exemplifies, the illusion of the indivisibility of formative contexts has dangerous practical consequences. It suggests that all changes short of total revolution must amount to mere conservative tinkering. It thereby induces in its adepts a fatal oscillation between unjustified confidence and equally unjustified prostration.

A view of the internal constitution of formative contexts is always just the reverse side of an account of context making. Thus, the approach to context change outlined earlier suggests an approach to the composition of social frameworks. This approach allows for a piece-by-piece reconstruction of social frameworks. Yet it also identifies constraints upon the replacement and recombination of the elements that make up such an ordering of social life.

These elements may not be able to coexist for long if they represent widely disparate degrees of emancipation from false necessity. Consider in this light the relation between two major parts of a formative context: the method of capital allocation and the organization of government. The property-based regulated market system of the contemporary North Atlantic countries can coexist with many different styles of democratic or authoritarian polities. But it is hard to see how this property regime can survive side by side with arrangements that closely link caste or class privileges in government and privileged degrees of group control over land and labor. Such arrangements are found in formative contexts more resistant to challenge and more supportive of rigid roles and hierarchies than the democratic or authoritarian regimes that ordinarily accompany economic decentralization based on absolute property rights. Neither is that property regime likely to coexist with polities even less entrenched than the polities that now accompany property-based market systems. Such systems include a mobilizational democracy committed to open up every feature of the social order to collective challenge and revision and to liquefy all rigid roles and hierarchies or a mobilizational dictatorship determined to shift people around according to an artificial plan for economic and military strengthening. For different reasons and with different consequences, these political orders would not tolerate the exercise of private privilege and the restraint on social control that nearly absolute and eternal property rights imply.

Institutional solutions at such different levels of negative capability give irreconcilable messages about the extent to which we can or should remake and reimagine society. More important, they permit

and require very different degrees of collective engagement from the bottom up or of reformist initiative from the top down.

Practical Implications

The antinaturalistic social theory whose themes I have just outlined has many implications for transformative practice. The evocation of these practical lessons may help elucidate the character of the theory that inspires them.

A Mission for Programmatic Thought. Programmatic thinking gains a secure place in our ideas only when we believe both that the formative contexts of social life can be remade and reimagined and that the outcome of this reconstructive activity is not foreordained. Positivist social science denies the first of these two conditions by disregarding or downplaying the difficulty of explaining the frameworks of our deals and conflicts in the relatively noncontroversial way in which we justify choices within these frameworks. Deep-structure social theories fail to meet the second condition by imposing predetermined limits on the results of context revision. In a view like Marxism such limits are especially severe. We are told little about the next stage of social evolution (socialism), yet are discouraged from usurping the prerogatives of the dialectic. If a detailed description of the next stage were to fill this gap, we would still be left with no more room for invention than the protagonists of past modes of production enjoyed. Our role would be merely to suit a necessary structure to local variations.

But in an antinaturalistic social theory like the one anticipated here, programmatic thought has its work cut out for it. The formative institutional and imaginative contexts of social life can be remade and reimagined – though rarely all at once. Moreover, the results of this transformative work are not preestablished. For the directional forces invoked by this view do not even select a list of possible frameworks, much less a compulsive sequence of frameworks.

A social theory with the central themes outlined in the preceding subsection does not merely give programmatic thought a mission. It also provides our programmatic efforts with a measure of guidance. It offers us the beginnings of a credible account of context change. It thereby allows us to escape a striking consequence of current views of social reality, which is to equate the realism of a proposal for reconstruction with its proximity to current arrangements. By giving content to a conception of the meaning and conditions of human empowerment, the theory also helps identify a goal for social reconstruction. In particular, it frees the definition of the radical project

from unnecessarily restrictive assumptions about the possible forms of social organization and personal experience.

The Search for Alternative Institutional Forms of Market Economies and Representative Democracies. Even those who hold no conscious allegiance to the assumptions of deep-structure social theory and positivist social science habitually treat abstract types of governmental and economic organization such as command and market economies or representative democracies as if they had a detailed, built-in institutional content. Thus, people speak as if they had to choose among different blends of market and planning but not among radically different ways to centralize or decentralize and to combine centralism and decentralization in the economy. They take for granted an identity between the abstract idea of a market – as an order in which many economic agents bargain on their own initiative and for their own account – and a particular system of contract and property rights. They equate the social control of economic activity with familiar methods of nationalization or regulation. They make the idea of representative democracy equal the peculiar combination of eighteenth-century liberal constitutionalism and nineteenth-century party politics that history has bequeathed them.

Liberals and radicals share these prejudices with conservatives. Liberals fail to confront the constraints that inherited institutional forms impose on the realization of their ideals. Radicals take liberals at their word. They seek alternatives to current market economies in an unnecessary rejection of market principle. They often attack bourgeois democracy in a futile quest for direct democracy and permanent civic engagement.

The antinaturalistic view sketched previously liberates us from these prejudices. It turns our attention to the work of imagining alternative forms of market economies and representative democracies. Economic regimes – it suggests – differ in the success with which they resolve the tension between the social control and the decentralization of economic activity; we can achieve more of both. Democratic regimes differ in the seriousness of the explicit or implicit obstacles they set in the way of bold institutional experiments and of attacks on privilege. Systems of legal rights differ in the facility with which the devices established to safeguard the individual against governmental or private oppression lend themselves to the exercise of subjugation over other people and restrict the plasticity of social life. The interest lies in the practical details of these variations. The liberal and the radical do not awaken from their slumber until they seize the opportunities such variations create and set themselves to the work of imagining and establishing less entrenched frameworks of social life.

The Provisional Force of Group Interests. A theory like the view outlined in this section presents an approach to transformative political practice that recognizes the force of established group interests yet treats these interests as no more secure than the institutional arrangements and the imaginative preconceptions that help sustain them. The transformative movement that begins its work in a relatively stable social situation (and no situation can be more than relatively stable) knows that the ranks and communities into which society is divided have recognized interests. The movement must take care to relate its cause to these interests. However, it also needs to think and act with the awareness that these definitions of interest are not for keeps. They rest on assumptions about collective identities and social possibilities. These assumptions in turn depend on the serenity of established institutional arrangements and enacted models of sociability that shape a world of routine deals and quarrels.

Escalating conflict over such arrangements and models shakes assumptions about group membership and transformative possibility, and it reshapes conceptions of group interest. The direction taken by the new views of group interests depends on the precise ways in which formative contexts have been changed. Because there is no closed list of possible frameworks, and no preestablished sequence of formative contexts, there is also no secure limit on the changes that a current system of group interests can undergo. Thus, the transformative movement must take established conceptions of group interest seriously while anticipating how these conceptions may shift as new institutional or imaginative elements enter into the framework of routine conflict and exchange.

This approach has an important corollary. In a stabilized social world some class or communal alliances are easier or harder to establish than others. Some classes or communities are more likely to welcome or to oppose a given transformative program. But there is no permanent logic of group collaboration or hostility and no class or community anointed to serve as the indispensable agent or vanguard of a particular change of the social order.

The Means of Stabilization Generate Opportunities for Destabilization. In the theory whose themes I have sketched, the fighting that goes on within a stabilized social framework is only a more truncated version of broader and more intense struggles about the framework. Formative contexts differ in the extent to which they effect and enforce this truncation. All practical or imaginative conflicts can get out of hand. None need await the cue to play an assigned part in the script. Through the give-and-take of alliance and animosity, of compromise and contradiction, each petty quarrel hints at opportunities

of human connection beyond the possibilities countenanced by the established order.

An antinaturalistic social theory formulated on these lines enables us to understand how a formative context gains a semblance of deep necessity after practical and imaginative conflict has been contained or interrupted. But the theory also shows how each of these methods of stabilization creates opportunities for destabilization.

Thus, for example, a pacified formative context is both presupposed and reinforced by a set of explicit or implicit deals among groups and of accommodations between groups and parts of the governmental apparatus. So, too, such a context serves as a template for assumptions about collective identities and social possibilities, which in turn help shape conceptions of group interest. Once the deals, the accommodations, and the conceptions of group interest are all in place, the institutional and imaginative order begins to seem almost immutable.

Look closer, though, and you find hidden disharmonies, ready to be seized on and developed. For example, even the most narrowly conceived group interest can always be defended through two different strategies. One strategy clings to the group's present station and prerogatives and defines the closest or the immediately inferior groups as rivals and enemies. The other strategy makes common cause with these groups against higher-ups. These two methods have radically different implications. While the former reaffirms the established order, the latter sooner or later challenges it. For what begins as a transitory tactical partnership often leads to a new collective identity, encourages new views of group interest, and contributes new preconceptions and arrangements.

Thus, too, a stabilized institutional and imaginative order of social life serves as a foundation for the development of a distinctive technological and organizational style. Everything from the way enterprises are managed to the way machines are designed begins to take the basic institutional and imaginative settlements of the society for granted. The overturning of these settlements poses a real threat to a dominant managerial and technological style. The dimension of the threat increases as this style spreads through a system of nation-states at unequal levels of economic and military power. The reforming elites of the more backward countries discover only slowly that they can reach the most advanced levels of productive or destructive capability on the basis of novel social arrangements. Even after they have made this discovery, it takes time to develop an alternative managerial and technological approach.

Nevertheless, practical pressures and rivalries also provide opportunities for destabilization. The development of practical productive or destructive capabilities may require that people and resources be

moved around not just once but repeatedly. The arrangements capable of ensuring this greater plasticity can be either coercive or consensual in their temper, and they can either minimize or maximize the break with the preexisting pattern of group interests. A perennial stream of middle-level crises supplies occasions to begin fighting over the future order of society.

If the transformative movement can find opportunities for destabilization in the very methods of stability, it can discover inspiration in the failure of a formative context fully to inform people's practical and passionate dealings or to supersede the residues of past and distant versions of social life. The vestiges, the anomalies, the deviations, the transgressions represent countless small-scale experiments in the making of alternative social orders. Yesterday's defeated alternative, recast in new institutional terms, becomes tomorrow's triumphant solution.

No decisive crisis ever ensures that any particular reconstruction of an institutional and imaginative order will succeed. But with such opportunities and inspirations, no stability is tranquil enough to give the would-be subversive an excuse for prostration.

The Primacy of Revolutionary Reform. A political imagination formed by positivist social science is predisposed to prefer incremental social reform. For this mode of social analysis encourages us to bring the established procedures for problem solving and interest accommodation closer to a supposedly noncontroversial ideal of neutrality and efficiency. It prompts us, for example, to ask how a given market economy can be rid of oligopoly without jeopardizing the ability to take advantage of economies of scale, how the harms that an entrepreneur imposes on other people may be incorporated into his cost of doing business, or how social needs may be protected by administrative regulation that restricts and supplements market allocation. Those who press such questions ordinarily take for granted particular institutional forms of economic decentralization and social control. By contrast, the deep-structure social theorist treats the formative institutional and imaginative frameworks of social life as indivisible units, each of which stands or falls as a piece. As a result he believes that political action always faces a choice between a revolutionary substitution of the entire formative context of social life and a reformist tinkering that merely wards off serious change.

But for a theory built on the themes sketched earlier the normal mode of transformative action is revolutionary reform, defined as the substitution of any one of the loosely and unevenly connected arrangements and beliefs that go into the making of a formative context. The criterion for the occurrence of revolutionary reform is a corollary of the standard for the inclusion of a practice or belief in

the definition of a society's formative context. A revolutionary reform changes the institutional and imaginative presuppositions taken for granted in the everyday struggles over the uses and mastery of the resources – of capital, governmental power, technical expertise, or legal and moral justification – that enable the occupants of some social stations to set terms to what the occupants of other social stations do. As a result, such a reform changes the plan of social division and hierarchy in content and even in character. The existing cycles of governmental policy and economic prosperity or decline acquire a new structure and new consequences. And a different set of biases is imparted to the effects that forces exogenous to the formative structure – such as demographic or technological change – will exercise on social life.

Thus, in the circumstances of the contemporary Western democracies it would be a revolutionary reform to impose a version of public control over the basic flows of investment decisions in the economy or, on the contrary, to prevent elected governments from influencing investment decisions through differential fiscal policies; to set up a special branch of government with the mission of reconstructing large-scale organizations and major areas of social practice in conformity with unfulfilled ideals of the legal order such as non-discrimination among classes, races, and genders or, on the contrary, to prevent current administrative or judicial officials from pursuing any more modest variant of this reconstructive activity; to require the unionization of all labor (e.g., putting a corporatist labor-law regime in place of a contractualist regime), to prohibit unions altogether, or to replace unions as an instrument of labor representation by a system of joint public and workers' control of enterprises.

Revolution becomes the limiting case of transformative action rather than the sole alternative to the statecraft of stability through tinkering. The vulgar idea of revolution includes two elements. The first part is a process: a violent seizure of the central government, with the participation of large masses of ordinary people and the paralysis or active collaboration of the repressive machinery of the state. The second part is an outcome: the comprehensive reconstruction of an entire form of social life, of its distinctive arrangements and its established hierarchies and divisions. But the process often occurs without the outcome, if indeed this outcome ever takes place at all. Moreover, a revolution in the sense defined by violent upheaval is an event so uncertain in its course and so dependent for its occurrence upon government-shattering events like war and occupation that we are fortunate not to depend on it in order to remake our contexts.

TWO WAYS TO DEVELOP THE IDEA THAT
EVERYTHING IS POLITICS:
SUPER-THEORY AND ULTRA-THEORY

The claim that everything is politics can be developed in two radically different directions. These twin agendas offer alternative responses to the predicament of social thought, alternative ways to go beyond both deep-structure analysis and positivist social science. Let me label them here, ironically, super-theory and ultra-theory.

The response of super-theory is to develop a comprehensive view, rich in explanatory claims about social facts and historical events. Such is the intellectual direction whose major themes and practical implications are outlined in the preceding section and developed by *Politics*. Super-theory rivals deep-logic practice in the scope, generality, and concreteness of its hypotheses and arguments. It preserves the first move of deep-structure analysis – the distinction between formative context and formed routines. But it also replaces the second and third moves – the subsumption of each framework under an indivisible and repeatable type of social organization and the recourse to the lawlike constraints and tendencies that can generate a list or sequence of such types. The view offered shows how general explanations in social and historical study can dispense with the conception of indivisible and repeatable types of social organization while nevertheless specifying constraints on what can be combined with what within a single framework. It offers an account of context making, indeed even of the possibility of cumulative change in the character as well as the content of our frameworks. Yet this anti-naturalistic social theory does not rely on the ideas of a world-historical evolutionary logic or of a set of criteria that any possible social world must satisfy. Nor does it imply any qualitative contrast between the social knowledge available to historical agents and the insight of a theorist who describes and explains their actions.

The resulting method of social analysis vindicates the principal intention of deep-structure theory – the understanding of social order as made and imagined rather than as given – against the scientific baggage that has compromised the realization of this intellectual project. It therefore pushes to the limit the internal criticism of deep-logic work, recognizing the fragments of a constructive view in what may otherwise seem merely a long series of disappointments. Such a response to the problems of social thought shifts the sense we give to our practices of social and historical explanation and to our modal categories of contingency and necessity. But the reformed explanatory style continues to be recognizable as general theory. In some ways it may be even more ambitious in its self-conception than the

theory it replaces. It therefore also remains vulnerable to the objection that it merely carries deep-logic analysis to another plane, perpetuating its deficiencies in novel or disguised form.

Politics takes the direction of super-theory. The argument of this book anticipates by diagnosis and criticism the broad outline of the super-theoretical view presented more fully in the constructive work that follows. The merit of the proposed view depends in part on its success at escaping the objections leveled against deep-structure analysis and in part on the comparison of its achievements with the results of alternative ways of dealing with the problems of social thought.

For super-theory is not the sole possible response to these problems. There is at least one other intellectual agenda open to whoever comes to share the critical perspective on the situation of social thought described in the earlier parts of this book. Call this alternative ultra-theory. Let me add immediately that ultra-theory, like super-theory, is a project, not an accomplishment. Nobody has actually developed its program or codified its practice though many fragments of both its practice and its program have long been available.

The key difference between super-theory and ultra-theory is that ultra-theory rejects the attempt to develop a theoretical system. The ultra-theorist believes that the quest for comprehensive and systematic explanations betrays the principle that everything is politics (man as maker, society as artifact, conflict as tool) and leads to another version of the problems of deep-structure thought. He sees the deep-logic endeavor as an example of the quest for foundational ideas: for the big picture, the underlying reasons, the ultimate causes, and the hidden truths. He believes, on the basis of his reading of intellectual history, that, whatever its proclaimed intentions, a systematic and comprehensive theory will compromise with foundationalism. And foundationalism in social thought, he adds, means the appeal to controlling structures or to the laws that govern them. It means hedging on the insight that everything is politics. From this standpoint, the ultra-theorist suspects the super-theorist of falling into a new version of the errors of deep-logic analysis. Even the super-theorist can agree with him that the weak point of super-theory is precisely that it might fail in the end to solve the problems from which deep-structure theory came to grief.

Like super-theory, ultra-theory rejects positivist social science and naive historiography. It therefore makes at least one exception to its habitual theoretical negativism: the exception necessary to affirm the central importance of the difference between formative contexts and formed routines. It therefore also insists on the discontinuity and originality of particular contexts. But it does not seek to develop these insights through more defensible counterparts to the second and third moves of deep-structure analysis.

More generally, the ultra-theorist denies that his negativity produces intellectual paralysis or that it undermines a critical perspective on existing society. On the contrary, he insists that only by following his path can we avoid replacing necessitarian superstitions by ideas that resemble them. Ultra-theory defines itself by its recurrent use of a set of intellectual practices rather than by its adherence to a theoretical system. The ultra-theorist believes not only that these practices require no comprehensive system of explanations but that they cannot be reconciled with any such system. Consider three characteristic practices of the ultra-theorist.

The first activity is a negativistic explanatory therapeutic. Each time the ultra-theorist encounters a deep-logic explanation of a social transformation he shows how the same events can be fully explained without deep-structure arguments. He presents them as the outcomes of a particular history of practical and imaginative conflicts. Each time he finds a conventional social-science treatment of a topic he shows how the explanation has been skewed or trivialized by the failure to understand the controlling influence of a framework. But he rejects the attempt to develop a general theory of frameworks, of their making and their internal constitution. He is much less interested in making abstract points than in puncturing the illusory accounts offered by the deep-structure theoretician and the positivist social scientist. What others may deride as intellectual emptiness he defends as a refusal to be drawn to his adversaries' level of discussion.

A second distinctive practice of ultra-theory is the vindication of repressed solutions, of yesterday's missed opportunities, today's forgotten anomalies, and tomorrow's unsuspected possibilities. The ultra-theorist (and in this, as in so much else, he resembles the super-theorist) sees a connection between insight into social reality and sympathetic interest in the losers. The vindication of defeated or deviant solutions follows directly from the criticism of deep-structure or conventional social-science accounts of what actually happened. To the extent that dominant institutions or ideas cannot be adequately explained as the result of an evolutionary logic or of entrenched economic, organizational, and psychological constraints, to that extent they must be ascribed to particular causes and conflicts. No deep change in human nature or social reality would have been required for the result to have been different. If the triumph of certain institutions and ideas was relatively accidental, their replacement can also more easily be imagined as realistic.

The ultra-theorist denies that he needs any general theory of frameworks and of their making in order to develop these themes of contingency and replaceability. He wants, instead, to nurture an imagination of the particular that does not depend on the pretense of a comprehensive knowledge or of a privileged vantage point. He

remembers, he anticipates, and he defies, but he does not claim to disclose secret and fundamental knowledge.

A third practice of ultra-theory is constructive and prescriptive. The ultra-theorist may go beyond criticism and explanation to develop anticipatory visions of more ideal forms of social life. But here too the ultra-theorist avoids first principles or elaborate theories. Rather than relying on a general view of realistic trajectories of transformation, he seeks analogies to the successful changes of the past. Rather than working out the implications of fundamental ideals, he seizes on the deviant elements in our present experience that suggest ways to realize more fully our received ideals and to reevaluate them in the light of these new realizations. If he is pressed to state the standards by which he chooses one such deviant solution as more worthy of extension than another, he denies he has such preestablished standards. He appeals instead to a pretheoretical experience of repressed or disappointed aspirations, and he frankly acknowledges that we have to choose between these aspirations by acts of commitment, choices that are also gambles, gambles that are also experiments.

The weak point of ultra-theory is the difficulty it has in resisting the standpoint of conventional social science without the help of a countervailing theory of formative contexts, of their genesis and internal composition. Though the ultra-theorist claims to acknowledge the influence of institutional and imaginative frameworks and the distinctiveness of the ways of life they shape, he can affirm this acknowledgment only by implication or through narrowly focused acts of criticism, explanation, or utopian vision. Except for a long memory and a vigilant intention, he has no prescription against the danger of taking a particular context for granted. He has no way, at least no general and discursive way, to justify any particular approach to frameworks and their history. He must even deny that he is committed to a particular approach. Nor can he easily explore a theme like the idea that the formative contexts differ, among other things, in their relation to the context-revising freedom of the people who live within them. There is only a tenuous distinction between not having a theory of formative contexts and not having a way to talk about them. When this distinction crumbles, ultra-theory lapses back into positivist social science, like a once militant leftist party that repeats the rhetoric of structure-defying activism while surrendering completely to the politics of structure-respecting redistribution.

When ultra-theory escapes the slide into conventional social science it stands exposed to another peril. It risks expressing a precommitment to a particularly perverse and misleading version of modernism. This version is the existentialist idea that true freedom consists in the perpetual defiance of all settled structure, in the endless flight

from one context to another. This existentialist reading of the modernist message fails to take into account both the bad news that we must live and think most of the time in a context and the good news that we can create contexts that more fully respect and encourage our context-revising freedom. Having asserted that all our structures are historical, the existentialist does not see that the relative force with which they imprison us and turn us into the victims of unseen compulsions is itself up for grabs in history.

The project of ultra-theory has a more than superficial affinity with this form of modernism. Both the rejection of explanatory or prescriptive theories about our formative contexts and the commitment to trash every argument for the necessity or authority of a given context suit a view that sees in the "endless labor of negation" the sole true source of authentic humanity. At the same time the absence of a theory of frameworks suggests by default that, as constraints on freedom, frameworks will be frameworks. No wonder many of the most cogent foreshadowings of the program of ultra-theory are found among the defenders of this modernist heresy.

Ultra-theory may seem at least easier to carry out than super-theory. It does not require a big book, only an open collection of particular exercises. It may not make such sudden and comprehensive claims on knowledge and research nor demand so arduous a translation into small-scale explanatory and programmatic discourse. It may therefore also more easily inspire and be inspired by our ordinary experience of social understanding and social criticism. But the impression of relative facility begins to dissipate once you remember how much must be done to keep ultra-theory from degenerating into positivist social science and to either prevent or to justify its alliance with the negativistic, existentialist version of modernism.

There are nevertheless no persuasive a priori reasons to prefer either super-theory or ultra-theory as responses to the contemporary situation of social thought. Each represents a research agenda, and research agendas have to be judged ultimately by what people do with them. Prospectively, each student makes a gamble, informed by guesses about the relative fruitfulness of a line of work and by his assessment of his own strengths and weakness. Retrospectively, we compare results.

Politics pursues the super-theory route unequivocally and unabashedly. The super-theory perspective already overshadows the ideas of this critical introduction. But I hope the ultra-theorists are out there working away.