

Book Reviews

Derek Layder: *Modern Social Theory. Key Debates and New Directions*. London: UCL Press. 1997

Derek Layder has recently written a splendid book, actually a few of them, but especially in *Modern Social Theory: Key Debates and New Directions* Layder presents his most individual statement this far. The book fluently continues Layder's earlier efforts at least from the early 1980's but is possibly best suited to be read in companion to *New Strategies in Social Research* (1993), *Understanding Social Theory* (1994) and finally together with *Sociological Practice* (1998). However, Layder's contribution that is reviewed here is by all means capable of standing on its own. At the same time *Modern Social Theory* illustrates analytically important continuities, which deserve due credit, but also a healthy share of autonomy that makes it interesting as an individual statement as well. For these reasons alone it is worth considering if *Modern Social Theory* really lives up to its subtitle's promise.

In a nutshell Layder's thinking culminates in what he calls *a theory of social domains*. Domain theory is described as an attempt to analyze and make explicit the relations between society, social encounters and subjective experience, and this, Layder contends, subscribes to the need for a dialogue between classical and contemporary social theory. What is clearly implied is a lost unity of distinct yet interrelated levels of sociological (or social psychological) analysis that classics like Marx, Weber or Durkheim seemed to have preserved: nowadays the

fragmented nature of sociology and social theory appears for many commentators to be a far cry from "classical attempts at theoretical synthesis", as for instance Jeffrey Alexander (1982-83) has discussed in great length. In this vein echoing Alexander's views, Layder is clearly longing for a lost tradition of a truly multidimensional theory. Another close parallel is Anthony Giddens whose structuration theory bears certain resemblance to Layder's thoughts even if Layder considers himself as critical of Giddens' *oeuvre*. Likewise Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* comes easily to mind when reading Layder. However, Layder feels compelled to interrogate modern social theory for being too one-sided and restricted in its scope of analysis despite of some undoubtedly honorable endeavors like Giddens' or Bourdieu's.

Layder's cure for the myopia of many contemporary thinkers is his own theory of social domains. He claims to draw on existing theoretical formulations while providing a viable alternative that not just bypasses but fixes what he considers to be the main weaknesses in others work. Who are the others? For the most part Layder deals with the social psychology of Goffman and Sheff and the "sociology" of Giddens, Habermas and Foucault. He clearly admires the classics and doesn't forget Parsons's contribution that has significant overlaps with domain theory. And of course, a host of others like Mead and Blumer are presented as the plot thickens. Hence, if Layder calls his approach multidimensional, the same can certainly be said about his influences.

However eclectic this selection appears on the surface, Layder succeeds in

presenting his point in an admirably concise manner. He argues that while modern sociology has drifted too far away from its classical roots those recent approaches that have tried to transcend the prevailing dichotomies – most notably the dualism between agency and structure or macro and micro – have also failed, because they wrongly characterize the levels of our social and psychological existence as one ontological realm in an attempt to bring "sociologies" of life and structure together. Different dimensions of being should be equally included in social analysis but not without maintaining conceptual boundaries between certain oppositional categories.

In other words Layder arrives at a conclusion that it is necessary to preserve some of sociology's often criticized dualistic characters for analytical purposes (even if reality *itself* would be something else). Otherwise the view of the social terrain flattens out and the differences we perceive fade away. Poststructuralism, that is also discussed, and other related approaches are clearly not an alternative for Layder.

This far everything sounds good and argumentation follows a solid logic. What instead remains little less clear is the fact that Layder attempts to undo a debate with much longer history than is usually made explicit. Although, as Alexander and Giesen (1987: 257) have written, "the micro-macro theme has entered sociological theorizing as a distinct and firmly established issue only in recent decades, its prehistory can be traced from late medieval thinking through postwar metamethodological debates over science, epistemology and political philosophy". Of course, Layder

knows he is tackling with fundamentally philosophical issues that overarch social theory from its early origins up to present day debates but chooses not to contextualize his analysis any deeper than necessary. This problem concerns more or less the question of defining the framework of inquiry, which is quite nicely confined, but I still feel that a certain amount of historical depth would have been more than appropriate in this particular matter.

For domain theory's credit it must be emphasized that the case in point is not just an inadequate balance between micro- and macro-sociologies. Much more is at stake in a game Layder has entered. On the philosophical side of social theory Stephen Toulmin (1990), for example, has blamed Descartes and the 17th century rationalists for initiating a process that has resulted in a profound separation of reason from emotion, humanity from Nature and a number of other dichotomies of similar kind. According to Toulmin ever since the time of Descartes' epistemology, Galilei's observational methodology and Hobbes' political "program" modern science has been reaching for reason and rationality. It was only when Nietzsche and Freud started to reverse the hierarchy of modernity's agenda, first the psychological and later the social psychological aspects of our very existence were given their status as distinctive and important objects of study.

However, "the sciences of man" (Taylor, 1994) divided along these lines in the course of the 20th century. Social theory bifurcated and lost its touch with its father figures resulting in a highly fragmented and professionally specialized field. It is precisely this imbalance that

Layder recognizes even if he has written earlier that pluralism as such is not regrettable by any means (Layder, 1996). The crucial thing is not the diversity of opinions but the overall picture which according to Layder has remained incomplete. In contrast to either sociological or psychological approaches to theorize the social, the theory of social domain tries to incorporate both.

Layder's central concern thus becomes to give an account of face-to-face encounters by showing how they are formed out of the combined effects of social and (social)psychological factors. Although one of the main themes in *Modern Social Theory* is an attempt to outline the contours of what Layder calls "situated activity", it is equally emphasized that this can only be done in the broader context of social organization and structural framework as a whole. Different social domains intersect and are interdependent with each other, Layder reminds the reader until exhaustion.

The principal domains that Layder differentiates are psychobiography and situated activity on the psychological side of our being and on the sociological side social settings and contextual resources. These levels are bid together by social relations and positions, power, discourses and practices. Particularly interesting is the notion of psychobiography which refers to individual's lived experience and history, because, if there is one neglected theme in social theoretical thinking, it is precisely this dimension. The domain of situated activity has received its share of attention at least since Goffman and the remaining levels of analysis (the structural or systemic properties of society) have pretty

much been high on the sociologist's agenda anyway. However, our most intimate feelings, emotions and experiences have been undervalued as an object of empirical research and theoretical reflection. At this point Layder's social theory meets social psychology if not purely psychological issues.

Now, the crucial question becomes whether domain theory is capable of handling what it promises or not? For several reasons I am inclined to think it does just that but for the philosophical nature of Layder's inquiry I must give a negative answer. Fundamentally Layder deals with issues that have remained under dispute for ages. At least as far as I am concerned no clear-cut solutions are in sight because deep down in substance the questions Layder proposes are unsolvable. Yes, our existence is depending on material or structural conditions and yet, we do behave intentionally and as conscious subjects we do have a capacity to change our surroundings. It is, however, impossible to say which one or neither of these dimensions prevails because both are essential. What Layder manages to express convincingly, in spite of my criticism, is the fact that this far most contemporary social theoreticians have been too much inclined to the materialist direction. Sociologists have ignored the existential and subjective side of our life for too long in favor of seemingly "objective" and cold structures.

Against this context the theory of social domains is a refreshingly balanced account of social life and its surroundings. It also reminds of the risks behind overspecialization of science. The division of work between the social sciences and psychology is firmly and rightfully

established but not without sometimes harmful consequences for our mutual quest for deeper and more profound understanding of the social.

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Pasi Pyöriä

Department of Sociology and
Social Psychology
University of Tampere
Tampere, Finland