



# After Neoliberalism: Social Theory and Sociology in the Interregnum

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## Abstract

Charles Thorpe argues sociology lacks a “language of society as a whole.” He holds that positivist sociologists de-legitimated holistic theories or broad normatively oriented “social theories,” leaving the discipline without discursive means to critically assess and deliberate its overall directions and those of society. Thorpe does not address holistic theory directly or explain how it differs analytically from standard “sociological theory.” My intent is to clarify these matters by extending facets of his argument to illuminate the interdependence between holistic theorizing and empirical-historical social science, which is necessary to create the type of “reflexive sociology” that Thorpe argues would make sociology more cosmopolitan and capable of addressing the turbulent sociopolitical conditions in the interregnum after neoliberalism.

**Keywords** Holism · Sociological theory · Social theory · Neoliberalism · Interregnum · Earth systems science

Positivism... took great pains to conceal from itself the abyss which lies behind all particularist thought. This was necessary on the one hand to promote the safe continuation of its search for facts, but on the other hand this refusal to deal with the problem often led to obscurity and ambiguity with questions about the “whole.”

Karl Mannheim ([1936] 1955, pp. 103-104)

In January 1970, *Time Magazine* published a substantial article on “The New Sociology” announcing a disciplinary renaissance – “the field is generating a highly visible, adventurous and activist new type of scholar who respects no scientific boundaries, least of all his own, and who rejects the traditionalist’s antiseptic analyses of how society works in favor of passionate prescriptions for its betterment” (p. 38). At the time, early in the Nixon presidency, Fordism and sociology were still flourishing. *Time* reported that

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“new sociologists” were helping drive a sociology enrollment “boom” in higher education. Among the leading figures of the ascendant new sociology were then left-leaning social theorists Irving Lewis Horowitz, Tom Bottomore, and Alvin W. Gouldner, whose pictures graced the article. *Time* (1970, p. 39) held that they and other new sociologists were “certainly and excitingly freeing sociology.” The prominence of the new sociologists was based on their empirically-historically informed normative or “critical” assessments of what Mannheim called the “whole” or overall directions of society and sociology. Gouldner’s *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) appeared a few months after the *Time* article. Charles Thorpe treats this book as a “central reference point” of the transformations and crises of American society and sociology he portrayed in *Sociology in Post-Normal Times*.

As Gouldner predicted and Thorpe described, the postwar upswing of sociology ended later in the decade, after which its conceptual trends and its leading thinkers hardly would be newsworthy for top mass media venues.<sup>1</sup> In 1992, however, *Newsweek* warned of sociology’s possible imminent demise. The article reported sociology department shutdowns and cuts, and the decline of sociology bachelor degrees to substantially less than half of those awarded at the previous disciplinary high tide in 1973. “In a generally conservative time, sociology may seem expendable” Princeton sociologist Paul Starr asserted. *Newsweek* also stated that at American Sociological Association meetings members grumbled “that the subjects are often trivial and that jargon has overtaken thought” (Kantrowitz, 1992).<sup>2</sup> Issuing a stinging “disinvitation” to sociology, conservative sociologist, Peter L. Berger (1992) suggested the same and asserted that the discipline had given up on the “big questions” and “cosmopolitan spirit” of classical theory.<sup>3</sup> Foretold by *The Coming Crisis*, Thorpe (2022, p. 2) holds, the end of the “*sociological moment*” followed the collapse of the hegemonic postwar “Fordist-Keynesian” regime for which sociology provided a coherent reformist ideology. In the current “interregnum” after the Great Recession and coronavirus pandemic peak, the legitimacy crisis of the neoliberal successor regime and global ascendance of ethnoracial nationalism and authoritarian populism is reminiscent of the mid-1930s “crisis” of which Mannheim spoke, when he stressed the need for a holistic language to critically evaluate nascent sociopolitical dangers and theorize alternative paths. Responding to today’s multifaceted crisis, Thorpe (2022, p. 6) declares Trotsky’s World War II era assertion that only “socialist revolution” can save us from global catastrophe has “renewed urgency.”

This essay builds on Thorpe’s argument about the neoliberal-era fracturing of sociology, when Chicago School, Austrian School, and neo-classical economists replaced Keynesian economists and socially-liberal sociologists as chief sources of justification

<sup>1</sup> Superior sociology books on key public issues and major controversies involving sociologists are still occasionally considered newsworthy— e.g., Pulitzer Prize (2017) winner *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond or highly publicized battles over Alice Goffman’s dissertation research and book *On the Run* (Lewis-Kraus, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a related box with the story listed “required reading” from sociology – all were broad theoretically oriented classics by Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, Robert Bellah, and William Julius Wilson.

<sup>3</sup> Berger reversed the theme of his earlier acclaimed concise, introductory *Invitation to Sociology* (1963).

for the regime of accumulation. Drawing on ideas of Stephen P. Turner, Thorpe says that neoliberal-era American sociology, in reaction to increasing dissident critiques and disciplinary splits, stressed more exclusively and emphatically “normal science” statistical methods, which he claims reify and normalize existent bourgeois social relations. Turner held that this methodological dominance has been perpetuated by a “labor cartel” of “top twenty” departments and the top two journals (*American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*) (Thorpe, 2022, pp. 4, 63–65). Facing challenges from heterodox theorists (e.g., hermeneuts, ethnomethodologists, feminists, phenomenologists), Thorpe argues, positivist sociologists exercised “hyper-normal” boundary maintenance that delegitimized “the entire discourse of theory” and consequently made the discipline more “self-referential, insular, divorced from broader intellectual culture, hostile to the humanities, and unquestioning of technocratic liberalism...” (p. 64).<sup>4</sup> Stressing the absence of a “shared conception of the social whole” and “sociological language of society as a whole,” Thorpe (2022, pp. 63, 67) implies holistic theories were banished, leaving the discipline without discursive means to critically assess and deliberate its overall directions and those of society.<sup>5</sup>

Thorpe argues that neoliberal globalization eroded the political-economic bases of Keynesianism, Fordist nation-state institutions, independence of universities and intellectuals, and social-scientific efforts to mediate problems of public life. The 2007–2008 financial crisis and Great Recession intensified soaring neoliberal-era economic inequality. The Trump election, coronavirus pandemic, disrupted supply chains, and inflationary spiral made matters worse. The consequent legitimacy crisis of hegemonic neoliberalism, manifested especially by resurgent ethnoracial nationalism and authoritarian strongmen has resulted in a Gramscian interregnum in which democratic institutions have been eroded and democratic alternatives to the neoliberal regime are not yet visible on the near horizon. Arguably, the “holistic” or big-picture type of theory that Thorpe implies is no longer practiced legitimately in sociology provides a language for assessing, analyzing, and deliberating about such problems. Focusing on substantive issues, Thorpe does not address holistic theory directly or explain how it differs analytically from dominant types of theoretical approaches still practiced in sociology and other specialized social science disciplines. Thorpe (2022, pp. 183–184) mentions the “social whole” often and holds that sociologists no longer contemplate “society as a whole,” but he does not elaborate the type of constructive holistic theory that could make sociology less insular and more cosmopolitan.

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<sup>4</sup> Turner (2004) contended that holistic theory or “social theory” had become an independent practice primarily exercised outside of American sociology within the humanities and interdisciplinary programs, or beyond academe in other locales in civil society. He argued that by the millennium major sociology departments taught little or no social theory and social theorists read little standard sociology and did not rely on it for their theoretical practices. Turner distinguished social theory from more narrowly drawn, empirically focused sociological practices. The distinction between holistically focused social theory and sociological theory will be developed below.

<sup>5</sup> Following Turner, Thorpe (2022, pp. 64) also contends that an alternative “post-normal sociology,” stressing identity politics, arose within sociology and on its disciplinary borders, which splintered off into cultural studies programs and became as “self-referential” as hyper-normal positivism.

My intent is to clarify these matters to extend facets of Thorpe's argument in a fashion that illuminates the interdependence between holistic theorizing and empirical-historical social science, which I contend is necessary to create the type of "reflexive sociology" that Gouldner hoped for and Thorpe argues has not yet been achieved and to theorize deliberative democratic alternatives to neoliberalism and ethnoracial nationalism. Gouldner (1970, p. vii) asserted in the preface that *The Coming Crisis* was part of a yet to be completed larger plan of work aiming "to contribute to an historically informed sociology of *social theory* [emphasis added]." This effort culminated in his multivolume "last project." My discussion and definition of social theory elaborated below in this paper has been, in part, inspired by Gouldner's works on the topic.<sup>6</sup>

### **Foundations of Holistic Theory: Interdependence of Normativity and Factuality**

Mannheim (1955, p. 5) contended that a "new type of objectivity in the social sciences is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them." Arguably Thorpe converges with this view because he supports his normative critique of sociology and neoliberalism with empirical-historical claims about capitalism and sociology he deems accurate. Thorpe sees Max Weber's advocacy of value-neutrality to be a root of mainstream sociology's uncritical posture on objectivity and affinities for technocracy. Yet discussion of Weber's ideas on the topic will help illuminate what Mannheim and Thorpe mean by holistic theory. Thorpe (2022, pp. 132, 152) discusses Gouldner's classic "Anti-Minotaur" essay which critically engaged Weber's vision of "value-neutrality." However, Gouldner held in the essay that Weber did not contend that social scientists should be morally indifferent and that conventional views of value-freedom in American sociology diverged from Weberian ideas on the topic.<sup>7</sup> Although acknowledging that factual and ethical experiences are entwined and have "fluid borders," Weber held that the two types of judgment fundamentally differ on discursive and logical grounds - questions about "what is?" and "what should be?" require divergent modes of argument and validation, and respect for consequent boundaries in inquiries, analyses, and debates is "imperative" for "intellectual honesty" and "intellectual integrity" (Weber, 1949a, [1917], pp.

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<sup>6</sup> His last project included one previously published volume, three volumes published in the decade after *The Coming Crisis*, and one posthumously published volume. He reportedly drafted another manuscript that has not been published. This constitutes one of the most substantial projects on social theory of the last century (Antonio, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Gouldner (1982) argued that Weber stressed the vital role of ethical decision in all matters, and that American sociologists often understood value-freedom to mean avoidance of critical standpoints toward their own society. He suggested that they seldom had read closely Weber's arguments about "value neutrality" and "objectivity," and distorted his views when they justified their own allegedly "scientific" ideas about these matters in his name.

2-4).<sup>8</sup> Weber argued that conflation of the two types of argument was rife in social science and distorted its knowledge and related policy debates. However, he put “ethical neutrality” and “objectivity” in quotation marks to stress their problematic, complex, and conditional nature. Weber’s advocacy of “dispassionateness” in social science aimed to avert partisan propaganda posed as “facts” rather than totally eliminate normative influences. He thought that complete separation of the factual and normative domains of experience and judgment is impossible because we continue to be embodied, emotional, valuing, cultural beings, even when we are doing science and striving to be “objective.” Paralleling Nietzsche, he believed that everyday moral judgments, which are often habitual and made rapidly without much critical reflection, diminish our attentiveness and diligence in our observations and interpretations of worldly experience and additionally undercut reflexive ethical action (Weber, 1949a [1917], 1949b [1904], 1968, pp. 21-26; Nietzsche, [1889] 1968, pp. 64-65).

Thorpe (2022, p. 130) refers to Weber’s assertion that science cannot answer Tolstoy’s questions “what shall we do and how shall we live.” Weber contended that science cannot justify its research directions or even its own existence by *purely* “scientific” or empirical-historical inquiry and judgment. His views about the role of values in problematizing finite segments of reality and animating inquiries about them illuminate the interdependence of normative and empirical argument. Weber contended that the substantive directions of social science are driven ultimately by normative or evaluative ideas, which make factual knowledge potentially derived from a proposed line of social research “worthy of being known.” These normative standpoints make specified facets of worldly experience “value-relevant” or “culturally significant” and motivate focused inquiries about them Weber contended (1949a [1917], pp 72-82; 1949b [1904], pp. 143-144). In this way, normative judgments according to Weber provide sociocultural steerage for social scientific research and, thus, at least indirectly contribute to the constitution of “facts.”

## What is Holistic Theory? Sociological Theory vs. Social Theory

Robert K. Merton’s (1967, pp. 1-72; 1957, pp. 4-10) widely read postwar-era thoughts about “middle-range theory” and “classical theory” helped shape current reigning conceptions of the role of theory in sociology. His views on the two types of practices have been influential, but arguably also reflected and systematized conventional wisdom about the relation of theory and research in American sociology. Merton held that empirically based, middle-range theories systematically grow sociological knowledge, while the “total systems” and “general schemes” of classical theory and contemporary theories of similar scope and

<sup>8</sup> With Weberian qualifications in mind, doing our best to be “objective” and speak “truthfully” is an essential facet of the discursive foundations of social theory and sociology, and what distinguish these scholarly practices from ideology understood in the narrow sense as false or distorted communication. Why read or listen to those who fail to observe the simple rules of “truthful” speech and scholarship (Antonio, 1991)?

style generate some brilliant concepts and hypotheses, but motivate polarization rather than “cumulative knowledge” and thus are moribund practices. By contrast to the more extreme marginalization today portrayed by Turner and Thorpe, Merton held that “the classics” should still be part of sociological training and occasionally revisited. However, his view of classical-style theory as a prescientific practice, no longer, a living tradition, is an important albeit nonexclusive root of the de-legitimization of holistic theory implied by Thorpe. At least tacitly, American sociologists of Merton’s era and after have generally favored middle-range theory’s emphases on closely linking concepts to data and advancing cumulative science (Sztompka, 1986, pp. 102–118). They usually see studying and practicing holistic theory as a distraction that does not foster scientific “productivity.”<sup>9</sup>

Although they are not formally standardized usages and are sometimes employed interchangeably, the two divergent practices discussed by Merton are often referred to today as “sociological theory” and “social theory.”<sup>10</sup> *Sociological theory* is aimed to facilitate integration, extension, and cumulation of specialized social science research with “value-free” intent.<sup>11</sup> Social theorists sometimes employ social theory to signify a more humanistic, evaluative, big picture, or “holistic” theoretical practice than sociological theory (Turner, 2004; Harrington, 2022). I employ the term *social theory* to refer to the tradition, which originated with classical theory and sometimes has been referred to as “theories of society.” These approaches of broad scope are framed with normative intent and employed to map and criticize social structures, social processes, and entire social formations, and to pose alternative ones.<sup>12</sup> Mannheim (1955, pp. 98–108) argued that major crises in modernity motivated the rise of historically based “holism” or efforts to theorize the social “totality,” inquire “into the total interrelationship of phenomena,” and plot fresh political-economic and sociocultural courses. Practiced properly, social theory mediates between facts and values, and science and public life, and provides critical “big pictures” needed for assessing, rethinking, debating, and deliberating normative directions of science and society, strategies to motivate collective action, and

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary sociological critics of holistic theory usually hold that serious study of primary texts from classical theory or classical-style contemporary theory saps time and effort that would be much better spent on statistics, methods, and substantive topics that facilitate research productivity demanded by cultures of strong sociology graduate programs and for success in highly competitive academic and professional job markets (which now call for much more robust records of research and publication for placement than demanded in Merton’s time). Moreover, critics often see these types of theories to be value-laden and unscientific, and thus to cultivate scholarly bad habits.

<sup>10</sup> Thorpe does not employ the term social theory in *Sociology in Post-Normal Times*, but the term appears frequently in the titles of the books he cited and arguably is what he practices.

<sup>11</sup> Sociological theory includes abstract general theories (e.g., rational choice, network theory), constructed to motivate and guide varied research programs (including experimental design) in addition to Mertonian middle-range theories, which integrate conceptually determinate bodies of related specialized empirical research.

<sup>12</sup> These theories often focus on societal level phenomena and beyond. For example, Marx on the “capitalist mode of production,” Durkheim on “organic solidarity,” or Habermas on the “theory of communicative action.”

proposals for sociopolitical reconstruction and for alternative political-economic and socio-cultural regimes.<sup>13</sup>

Social theorists provide a post-traditional alternative to sociopolitical theories that justify normative claims via transcendental grounds, teleology or entelechy, universal human nature, or the authority of tradition. Although sometimes drawing upon ideas from earlier types of theory, social theorists employ empirical-historical and analytical resources from the social, political, behavioral, and natural sciences and from historical fields to support their normative claims.<sup>14</sup> They marshal what they consider to be the best empirical-historical evidence to support the accuracy of their portrayals, critiques, and especially the likely consequences of implementing the trajectory of inquiry or pattern of social change they advocate.<sup>15</sup> Opposed thinkers frame counterarguments also stressing decisive empirical-historical and consequentialist grounds. Social theory makes normative justification public so that claims can be contested empirically as well as philosophically, and be employed to mediate debates over the directions of science and public life, providing informed, conceptually integrated “big pictures” to justify what problems deserve attention, what changes that need to be implemented, and what policy regimes that would best serve the specified cognitive interests and normative ends. Employed properly the two practices are interdependent – sociology and other disciplines provide evidential resources for social theories, which in turn provide directional resources for the specialized disciplines.<sup>16</sup>

My argument about social theory is aimed to be a friendly extension of Thorpe’s views about the de-legitimation of holistic theory in sociology and of his assessment of sociology in post-normal times. Its normative thrust and big pictures provide a warranted language for debating research and societal directions. Concluding

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<sup>13</sup> These concepts of sociological theory and social theory are ideal types - actual theoretical practices often have fluid, blurred borders. Some theories have contradictory features and may occupy a vague middle ground. The two types of theory are sometimes conflated and consequently distort communication and knowledge. However, we should analytically distinguish the two practices with the expressed aim of reducing the tendency to conflate them.

<sup>14</sup> What Merton and others referred to as classical theory signified mainly mid- to later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers who responded to various facets of the political-economic and sociocultural ruptures of capitalism’s second industrial revolution (i.e., rise of mechanized mass production and corporatized “mass society”). This transformation began earlier in England, where Marx fortuitously resided after the failed 1848 revolutions. Marx arguably was the first major social theorist *as defined in this essay*. He combined big-picture mapping of modern capitalism with empirically/historically justified normative criticism (i.e., “immanent critique”). Marx’s (1967 [1867]: 336-507) theorization of “manufacture” and “modern industry” in *Capital* (Vol. 1) addressed the political-economic, technical, and social facets of the transition to mechanized production. Although writing before the rise of specialized social science, Marx supported his critical theory of capitalism with data on historical and economic development, technical and organizational innovations, and conditions of labor and the poor (e.g., reports of British factory inspectors). This decisive empirical-historical facet of social theory, which distinguished it from earlier sociopolitical theories, became much more robust with the 20<sup>th</sup> century development of specialized social science.

<sup>15</sup> Social theories also employ philosophical, normative argument (original or borrowed), but their empirically-historically supported descriptive and consequentialist facets are the decisive feature that distinguish them from earlier sociopolitical theories or contemporary versions of the latter.

<sup>16</sup> For extended arguments about social theory and sociological theory, see Antonio, 2005; 2023.

the “objectivity” essay, Weber (1949b, p. 112) argued that, in an age of specialized science, social scientists would treat “the analysis of data as an end in itself” and cease assessment of the normative beliefs (“value-ideas”) that set the directions of their research or made it “worth knowing.” He implied, however, that when established approaches cannot come to terms with changes wrought by sociocultural ruptures social scientists contemplate substantial changes of direction and conceptual tools.<sup>17</sup> Such moments are when holistic theory as discussed by Mannheim and implied by Thorpe are most needed. Accepting the fundamental differences between factual judgement and normative judgement while grasping the interdependence of fact and value is propaedeutic to clarifying the meaning and value of holistic theory and understanding the consequences of its having been delegitimized in American sociology. However, we now go beyond Weber, who did not advocate normatively driven holistic theory, even though he arguably sometimes practiced it.

### **Social Theory in the Interregnum: Mediating Science and Public Life**

Thorpe holds that neoliberal globalization has undercut the capacity of nation-states to organize society and protect well-being. Justified by the “anti-social individualist logic of the market,” he says, capitalist “private appropriation” and nation-state competition prevent the cooperative social relations needed to deal effectively with global social problems and insure social protection. Thorpe asserts that the “contradiction between private appropriation and socialized production has returned with a vengeance” and its global manifestations among nation-states generate conditions that could lead to catastrophic world war. Thorpe argues that conventional American sociological methodology foregoes what Gouldner identified, arguably echoing Marx, as “the broader intellectual ‘culture of careful and critical discourse,’” which “recovers” or makes transparent social realities obscured by reification or ideology (Thorpe, 2022, pp. 11-12).<sup>18</sup> Gouldner envisioned “social theory” to be an essential facet of the culture of critical discourse. The contradictions that Thorpe identifies call for collective action, which if it is to be intelligent and deliberatively democratic requires informed debate about the nature of the problems, mechanisms of change, and new regimes. Especially in an interregnum, social theory provides a language for debating overall conditions and plotting new normative directions.

Thorpe refers appropriately to climate change at a number of junctures as a prime example of the multiple crises and “de-civilizing” processes in the interregnum resulting from the inability of nation-states to organize and secure collective well-being. His points about market-liberal individualism, private appropriation, and nation-state competition undercutting the trust and cooperation needed to solve global problems pertain especially to accelerating climate change and other festering global ecological problems. He mentions the lack of collaboration between Earth scientists and social

<sup>17</sup> Kuhn’s (1970) later work on the natural sciences converged with this Weberian perspective.

<sup>18</sup> Gouldner’s points suggest a parallel to Marx’s (1967, pp. 71-83) famous de-fetishizing critique.



scientists, and drawing on Foucault, implies that climate policy failures arise, in part, from the decline of critical intellectuals and inability of specialists (“specific intellectuals”) to “address and influence the totality” (Thorpe, 2022, pp. 60, 128). He mentions the “social whole” frequently and portrays “contemplation of society as a whole” and the “solidarity project” as constituting a vocation for sociologists that has gone awry in the past and currently is absent (Thorpe 2022, pp. 183–184, 222). Focusing on emphatic deconstructive criticism of American sociology and a withering critique of neoliberalism, Thorpe does not address directly the possible constructive role for social theory. Understanding and coping with climate change drivers and developing effective climate policy that sustains democracy as well as the planet require holistic perspectives to cultivate needed debate, cooperation, and solidarity.

A most important scientific group monitoring climate change, Earth Systems Science (ESS) envisions the Earth holistically as a “complex, adaptive system.” ESS is not social theory, but is a related type of big picture thought that integrates exceptionally complex empirical information into broad conceptual frames governed by a strong normative thrust - “preserving a safe operating space for humanity” (Rockström et al., 2009). ES scientists track 9 major planetary boundaries which if exceeded would endanger civilization and many other life forms with which we share the planet. They are especially concerned with disruptions to major Earth subsystems (e.g., Greenland ice sheet, Siberian permafrost, Amazon rainforest) nearing tipping points, which could be breached by small ruptures causing sudden, irreversible state changes (e.g., Arctic summer ice collapse). Climate change and biodiversity loss have already exceeded their boundaries and could lead to state changes of the entire Earth system. ES scientists warn about a possible “Hothouse Earth” pathway that would undercut planetary habitability for humans and many other life forms. The 1.5°Celsius (C) maximum target for atmospheric temperature rise since the industrial revolution set by the Paris Agreement to reduce possibility of ecocatastrophe and protect small island cultures is now just a technical possibility (IPCC, 2022). The current 1.2°C rise has already helped drive major glacial retreats, tragic droughts, massive wildfires, and catastrophic floods, and substantial sea level rise, and pushed the planet closer to tipping points in multiple major Earth subsystems. ES scientists hold that a 3°C rise would be an existential threat to human civilization. A 2021 *Nature* survey of top climate scientists found that 60% of them believe that we will reach at least 3°C by the end of the century, 82% believe that catastrophic impacts will occur in their lifetimes, and 88% believe that we are already in a climate crisis (Tollefson, 2021).

ES scientists hold that a “Stabilized Earth Trajectory” that sustains a Holocene-like climate, requires “deliberate management” of our impacts on the Earth system, a “fundamental reorientation” of technology, culture, equity, and political economy on a “supranational” basis, and a “new paradigm” combining ESS with social science (Steffen et al., 2011, 751; Steffen et al., 2015, 736; Steffen et al., 2018). In Steffen’s view, deliberate social transformation requires a fundamental break with the “so-called neoliberal economics,” which rejects limits to growth, regulation, and planning (Aronoff, 2018). In the most comprehensive investigation of “human driven decline of life on Earth,” the natural science team concluded that avoiding catastrophe requires “fundamental system-wide reorganization,” especially

of global finance and political economy (Diaz et al., 2019, pp. 1, 7-8). The postwar Great Acceleration of economic growth, which improved human wellbeing (albeit very unevenly), massively increased the size of the global economy relative to the biosphere and thereby resource throughput and waste production. Neoliberal globalization greatly intensified and deregulated the capitalist growth imperative and accelerated warming (Daly, 2015). The scenario that ES scientists present arguably manifests the fundamental contradictions that Thorpe describes. However, they emphatically stress the need for constructive holism to cope with climate and other global environmental problems. Grasping the normativity of the ESS project, ES scientists include the humanities as well as the social sciences as partners. Some grasp the need for social theory to map the relations between social and biophysical processes and to plot fresh normative directions for science and transnational society. Steffen et al. (2015, p. 82) pointed to Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation* (1957 [1944]) as an exemplary type of text providing needed "holistic" understanding of the social world and ecologically aware critique of market liberalism.<sup>19</sup> New types of social theory could help mediate scientific and public debates about the social drivers of ecological overshoot, its impacts, and alternatives to neoliberalism and to capitalism per se as we have known it.

Climate change and other global ecological problems require elaborating the complex interrelations between the political-economic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural drivers of climate change and their biophysical and social consequences. Adapting to and mitigating climate change necessitate addressing global economic inequality (e.g., decommodifying essential environmental technologies, providing economic assistance to poor vulnerable countries who bear none of the responsibility for climate change but have suffered the worst of its impacts, and coping justly with consequent forced migrations). We must also deal with possible garrison-state responses to increasingly disruptive global ecological problems. How do we sustain democracy and stem ethnoracial nationalism? Mitigating climate change calls for transnational cooperation, socialization, and solidarity, which must be imagined anew beyond former actually-existent types of socialism and capitalism, which all relied on and prioritized the growth imperative.

In an eloquent postscript to a summary report about intellectual exchanges at a late 1960s gathering of 20 of the most luminous American sociologists of the time chosen to deliberate about the scope, objectives, and methods of sociology, Robert Bierstedt (1969, p. 152) declared that the discipline could not seem to deal "with a shattered society, torn with dissension, rent by violence, and tending to disorder that leads to anarchy and anomie." The state of society as a whole, then rife with serious conflicts and tensions, was completely absent from the very sober sounding discourse of the monograph.<sup>20</sup> Bierstedt added that sociologists had not predicted

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<sup>19</sup> In an overall argument for socialized deliberative democracy, Polanyi (1957, pp. 178-191) addressed presciently the threats posed by market liberalism to the environment and even mentions possible impacts on climate.

<sup>20</sup> Gouldner was listed among the 20 sociologists who attended, but his comments did not appear in the conference volume, which was sent to all members of the American Sociological Association (Bierstedt, 1969, pp. v-viii).

the turbulent events of that era and that the discipline needed “renewed respect for our objectives and an enlargement of our scope. The last especially could produce a new design for sociology” he concluded. The key substantive topics Bierstedt said were missing from sociological inquiry are now popular specialties. Moreover, critical perspectives exist in hyperspecialized niches of American sociology and social theory still thrives on its margins.<sup>21</sup> However, Bierstedt’s message about critically rethinking disciplinary objectives and scope is still relevant. Thorpe’s provocative theorizing suggests the same. The reflexive normative language of historical holism or social theory, which if practiced properly draws on and helps steer specialized science and links disciplinary foci to public life should have a legitimate space within disciplinary sociology.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, *Critical Sociology*, *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, *Fast Capitalism*, and *Theory, Culture and Society* provide welcoming venues for social theory, and the Self-Society Symposium (American Sociological Association Preconference) and International Social Theory Consortium provide annual gatherings for social theorists. Also interdisciplinary programs in social theory include sociologists (e.g., University of California at Berkeley interdisciplinary, Designated Emphasis Program in Critical Theory and related International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs; Harvard Committee on Social Studies).

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