



**Junior Theorists Symposium Harvard  
University, July 31, 2008  
Sponsored by the Theory Section of the  
American Sociological Association**



*Organized by Isaac Reed, University of Colorado and Erika Summers-Effler, University of Notre Dame*

**Schedule with Abstracts**

**8:15-8:45 Breakfast**

**8:50-9:00 Opening remarks**

**9:00-10:50 Session I: Legitimate Knowledge and its Discontents**

**Heroes, Devotees, Addicts and Nostalgics: Repertoires of engagement in the quest for self transcendence**

*Claudio E. Benzecry, University of Connecticut*

Sociologists have looked at high culture as the cipher of an elitist and exclusive experience. They have focused on how the participation in the world of high culture correlates with strategies to attain upward mobility, or attempts to solidify group bonds among those who share other circles of affiliation. In all of these positions high culture consumption is subordinated to or dependent upon a more encompassing series of social phenomena and presented as a resource to be exchanged for or converted into a different kind of capital: either symbolic, social or economic. In this paper, based on intensive fieldwork and archival research among operatic fanatics in Buenos Aires, instead of looking at the relationship between social affiliation and aesthetic proclivities I rather look at how these cultural practices are forms of social affiliation in themselves. I do so first by showing how the object-cathexis is not allowed to circulate, neither inside the opera house—as it is jealously guarded against other audience members—nor outside of it, since it doesn't get converted into other sub-species of capital. Then, by taking the metaphor “the love for” literally, I use it as a template to produce a typology for practices of intense attachment, explaining how each of the types can be attributed to a specific dimension of the “love for” something.

The ideal-types I will present—the devotee, the hero, the addict and the nostalgic—not distinctive positions in social space, rather they are a repertoire variously drawn upon by different actors. The diverse styles of engagement are unified by a quest for self-transcendence achieved through listening to opera. All of the fans are devotees, working hard at achieving a one-on-one intimacy with opera, as an idealized object; yet they extend their engagement in three different ways, one that emphasizes the moral economy of its organization (heroes); a second one that centers on the dissolution of their selfhood because of opera (addicts); a third one that focuses on the past-centric character of the practice (the nostalgic). In the conclusion I argue for the usefulness of this typology to explain practices of intense attachment in realms as different as surfing, comic collection, soccer, photography and food consumption.

**Toward a Theory of Scientific Legitimacy**

*Brian Dick, Department of Sociology*

Concerns over legitimacy have traditionally been associated with the state. However, more recent work in organization studies and social psychology has shown that other social institutions confront the problem of legitimacy as well. If an institution is to reliably reproduce itself, it requires a certain amount of approval from its relevant constituencies. Who the relevant constituencies are and which shared beliefs provide the justification for such approval are historically and culturally variable, but the problem of

legitimacy remains. While scholars have expanded the scope of the applicability of this concept, it has yet to be applied systematically to the institution of science. My paper attempts to fill this void by laying the groundwork for a theory of scientific legitimacy. This will require highlighting the relevant constituencies, the different types of legitimating processes, and the mechanisms responsible for establishing and undermining scientific legitimacy. I examine both the internal constituents of science within the scientific community as well as external constituents, including the state, the private sector, and the general public. In addition, I address the various ways in which scientific legitimacy is achieved, maintained, and lost. My intention is to demonstrate the explanatory power that legitimacy provides for social scientific inquiries into the workings of science.

**Theory: general, middle range, variation-finding, inspiring**

*Monika Krause, New York University*

Reflections on sociological practice have produced a number of distinctions regarding the ways “theory” is used. Most common is a distinction between abstract general theorizing and a more pragmatic use of concepts to explain specific phenomena in theorizing of the middle range. We can add that “theory” has become a relatively autonomous tradition of its own and is often studied as an object in its own right through interpretation of key texts by key authors.

In this paper, I invite attention to two additional ways in which theory is used in sociological work: One is theory as variation-finding, the other theory as inspiration. Theory as variation-finding examines aspects of the empirical world in terms of actual and imagined comparisons to question assumptions, sharpen descriptions, and develop concepts for further research. Theory as inspiration provides a set of problematemes, questions, sensitivities to researchers and alerts them to that which is not yet conceptualized for empirical research.

The role of theory in providing inspiration has often been misrecognized, in ways that have hindered reflection on this dimension of sociological work. Proponents of general theorizing sometimes imply there is nothing they have yet to conceptualize, but they achieve completeness only by the short-cut of abstraction. They take inspiration as a substitute for empirical research. Pragmatic theorists of the middle-range, on the other hand, sometimes dismiss as entirely outside the realm of scientific inquiry that which is incompletely conceptualized and can not yet be empirically tested.

**Think tanks and the production of policy-knowledge in America: on the notion of an interstitial field**

*Thomas Medvetz, University of California, Berkeley*

This paper applies and extends the notion of field to the case of American think tanks. The field concept allows us to capture the instability and contestedness of the “think tank” category without reverting to a purely interpretive analysis. It also permits us to go beyond the opposition of “internalist” versus “externalist” accounts of the think tank by underscoring both the distinctive criteria of intellectual production which think tanks have developed and the broader system of relations in which they are embedded. Think tanks make up an emergent subspace of intellectual production in the U.S. that traverses, links, and overlaps the more established institutions of academics, politics, business, and journalism. While the field concept offers a useful analytic framework, the empirical case nonetheless stretches the notion of field by underscoring the challenges of theorizing social action carried out in a structurally intermediate zone.

**Commentary on Papers from Session 1**

*Jeffrey Alexander, Yale University*

**11:10-1:00 Session 2: Selves and Social Situations**

**The Feeling Subject and the Reflexive Self: Bridging Cartesian Dualism**

*Michal Pagis, University of Chicago*

This paper aims to correct the existing bias in sociological thought that defines self-reflexivity as an internal conversation grounded in abstract and discursive processes.

I claim that language is not the only medium through which reflexivity can be actualized. The body carries reflexive capacities, and these reflexive can be used in conscious processes of self-reflexivity. Drawing on pragmatism and phenomenology, I return to the notions of firstness, immediacy and qualitative thought, demonstrating that embodied feelings are icons and indexes to psychological states, emotions, and past experiences, while monitoring embodied responses is central to self-monitoring. Building on the claim that embodied channels carry culture at a deeper level than discursive acts, I suggest that using the body as the medium for self-reflexivity can be an important source for agency, self transformation and social change.

### **Consumer Demand as Socially Constituted**

*Frederick Wherry, University of Michigan*

This paper examines how consumer demand is generated through social processes, rejecting the notion that consumer preferences are either biologically based or solely dependent on the idiosyncratic psychology of individuals. Leading economic sociologists lament the dearth of consumption studies in a language understandable to their field as well as the focus on the supply curve to the exclusion of demand. By synthesizing consumption studies at three levels of analysis, this paper offers a valuable translation enabling communication between--and more adept navigation within--the disciplinary fields. At the societal level, consumption preferences 1) have been deliberately constructed (sometimes openly, sometimes clandestinely) by capitalist operators, 2) have emerged mid-course as an unexpected response to large-scale persuasion projects gone awry, or 3) have resulted from seemingly unrelated path-dependent events. At the sites of purchase (department stores, malls, and other marketplaces) located at the meso-level of analysis, planners influence preferences and purchases by configuring the space in such a way as to spur new interactions while utilizing the existing ones. At the micro-level, the concatenation of network interactions generates preferences by accumulating (or disposing of) emotional energy from one ritual interaction to the next. Likewise, preferences crystallize as a result of market matches where individuals forge and contest correspondences between how they define the relationship of the persons engaged in a transaction and what media of exchange are deemed socially appropriate in different types of situations. This paper demonstrates how economic sociology can extend and modify its existing framework for studying path-dependent market outcomes, the social construction of markets, transaction costs economics, social networks, circuits of commerce, and interaction ritual chains into a robust empirical and theoretical agenda that brings the previously elusive demand curve more clearly into focus.

### **The Hierarchy of Senses and Situated Punishment**

*King-To Yeung, Princeton University*

This paper explores how human senses are arranged and controlled within a given organizational schema of punishment. Based upon the disciplinary records of an American historical prison, I link sense-related infractions to the spatial, temporal, and socio-organizational situations in which infractions had occurred. The logic of discipline, I demonstrate, can be found in the hierarchy and nested arrangements of human senses, arrangements which in turn shape the differential punishments imposed on prisoners. The paper highlights the importance of incorporating human senses, as cultural and organizational notions, into a sociological theory of discipline.

### **Murder Matters: Fatal Physical Violence as a Form of Productive Power**

*Laurel Westbrook, University of California, Berkeley*

If we were to place acts into the supposed mutually exclusive categories of examples of “repressive power” and “productive power,” nothing, it seems, would more clearly belong in the repressive grouping than physical violence, particularly fatal physical violence. But, as I will argue, even Foucault’s clearest example of sovereign/repressive power—the public execution—is also a moment of productive power. In this talk, I challenge a startling silence within much of post-structuralist theory: the productive aspects of acts of violence. The suggestion that physical violence should be studied as productive power is, of course, not entirely new; any argument we make rarely is. However, although a few scholars have gestured to this as an important intellectual avenue to explore, it remains undertheorized. This paper builds on and extends past theorizations by exploring questions of how violence matters: How do acts of violence shape

subjectivities and practices? How do acts of physical violence, through their doing, produce ideas about what forms of violence are legitimate and what forms of violence are possible? How do the ‘non-fiction’ narratives we tell about violence circulate culturally, influencing ideas about why violence happens and which sorts of violence are legitimate? How do they shape the practices of violence, victimhood, and violence prevention?

### **Commentary on Papers from Session 2**

*Anne Rawls, Bentley College*

**1:00-2:30 Lunch**

**2:30-4:00 Session 3: Institutions and Organizations: New Theoretical Developments**

### **Expanding the Terrain of Welfare State Theory: Core Concepts and New Policy Arenas**

*Tasleem J. Padamsee, University of Michigan*

Common definitions of ‘welfare states’ identify them as countries that assume responsibility for the basic welfare of their citizens by making arrangements for the provision of certain services, most often including pensions, minimum income guarantees, unemployment compensation, health care, housing, and education. In contrast to this inclusive list, most empirical research and sociological theorizing on welfare states disproportionately focuses on explaining historical dynamics and contemporary arrangements in a more limited set of policy arenas: employment structures and guarantees, pensions, unemployment insurance and anti-poverty programs. Concepts and analytic tools from welfare state scholarship have sometimes been applied to our understanding of health, housing, and educational policy, but the underlying sociological theory often fails to account for policy choices in these arenas. This paper explores the history and implications of these omissions, and begins to articulate the parameters of a more inclusive theory of welfare states. Originating in T.H. Marshall’s work on the social rights of citizenship and Marxist explorations of the state’s role in stabilizing social relations in advanced industrial democracies, welfare state theory is now largely dominated by a regimes-centered approach that emerged from analyses of national economic and employment policies. I argue that we must expand our conceptualizations of welfare states beyond these boundaries for both practical and theoretical reasons. I illustrate many of these points through reference to my empirical research on health policy. Practically, a vision of welfare states that excludes health policy is inadequate because (a) health care arrangements constitute a significant proportion of welfare state expenditures, and (b) health issues are intertwined with other social, political, and economic aspects of these societies. More important from a social theorist’s perspective, health care is inextricable from many of the core concerns that underlie welfare state theory, including both decommodification and social rights. Expanding our theoretical terrain is therefore necessary in order to address the intellectual and political objectives that have unified this field since its founding. Doing so requires theorists to engage not only with a range of substantive challenges (regarding, e.g., consistency among and causal relationships between various sub-parts of the welfare state), but also to grapple with normative questions about sociological practice (why should welfare state theorists bother incorporating new policy arenas in their thinking?) that are embedded in very endeavor of welfare state scholarship.

### **Adaptation, reproduction and social change in the institutional analysis of organizations: a dual cognition model**

*Omar Lizardo, Notre Dame University*

The new institutional analysis of organizations in sociology is premised on two primary theoretical postulates: from a macro-level perspective, a view of institutions that emphasizes their cognitive and constitutive roles as taken for granted sets of social constructed, ritualized schemas; at the micro-level a view of the agent as mainly oriented to the job of “sense-making.” Most critiques of institutional theory have focused on what is perceived as their stultifying view of the cognitive status of institutional macro-orders. These critiques have however, largely ignored the account of social cognition at the micro-level offered by DiMaggio and Powell (1991) in their foundational essay. Instead, they have opted to

supplement the sociological institutionalist emphasis on consensual cognitive orders at the macro-level by attempting to incorporate a more supple account of interest an agency at the micro-level. In this paper, I argue that there is a reason for this uneven reception and evaluation of the new institutionalist theory of cognition in organizations: as formulated by DiMaggio and Powell, the account of cognition that undergirds the macro-description of institutions as taken-for-granted and ritualized systems of thought and behavior is largely inconsistent with the micro-level “ethnomethodological” account that emphasizes negotiation through social interaction, sense-making and locally produced vocabularies of motive. In this sense, sociological institutionalism has two and not one theory of cognition. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Maurice Bloch I argue that the account of cognition that has been the workhorse of sociological institutionalism is what Bloch refers to as an “anthropological theory” of culture and cognition. The micro-level theory of cognition that is partially developed in DiMaggio and Powell’s seminal essay is instead a “psychological theory” in Bloch’s terms, an account that as currently formulated is incompatible with a one-sided anthropological view. I explore the advantages of this analytical framework by applying it to two important problems in institutional theory: the origins of institutions and the role of processes of everyday cognition in organizations. In the first regard, I show that the socialized versus adaptive cognition distinction allows us to reveal and clarify various confusions in micro-level theories of the origins of institutions, who drawing on Berger and Luckmann’s influential theory of socialized cognition fail to distinguish between the origins of institutions in adaptive cognition and their reproduction, justification and reification in processes of socialized cognition.

### **Institutional Autonomy: Revisiting Old Institutional Analysis From the ‘Inside Out’**

*Seth Abrutyn, University of California Riverside*

Durkheim once noted that any science of society must begin by focusing on social institutions. To be sure, Durkheim was a product of his time; most classical theorists—including Spencer, Sumner, and Weber—were just as intent to understand macro structural phenomena, or what could be called institutions. The next generation of British anthropologists and structural-functional sociologists continued this type of institutional analysis. However, with the sixties and seventies, traditional institutional analysis receded into the shadows of sociology; while sociologists like Jonathan Turner, Niklas Luhmann, and Gerhard Lenski have advanced this tradition, the New Institutional school has replaced it as the pervasive theoretical discourse of institutions. This paper argues that (a) New Institutionalism takes institutions for granted, while actually elucidating organizational dynamics, (b) the classical tradition can and should be revisited by adding an evolutionary perspective to it, and, finally, (c) by examining the dynamics of institutional autonomy we can link macro and meso level theories. Institutional autonomy is the process whereby certain corporate units—i.e., institutional entrepreneurs—become structurally and symbolically independent by monopolizing certain sets of knowledge and practices that produce power-dependent relationships and, subsequently, independent bases of material and symbolic resources. Once independent, entrepreneurs reconfigure extant social relationships and carve out autonomous physical, temporal, and symbolic space. Ultimately, explaining the dynamics of institutional autonomy will allow us to revisit the traditional school of institutional analysis *sans* the mistakes made by functionalism as well as supplement the important organizational insights provided by the New Institutionalists, by positing a more robust theory of institutions.

### **Commentary on Papers from Session 3**

*Randall Collins, University of Pennsylvania*

### **4:00-4:15 Closing Remarks**