

Perspectives

Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section

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Notes from the Chair

After Kant: Protestant Ethics and Social Theory

Philip Gorski, *Yale University*

Alfred North Whitehead famously quipped that “Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato.” One could argue that modern social theory is but a series of arguments about – and against – Kant. Not so much an argument over his epistemology as about his ethics, which turn out to be peculiarly Protestant. It is thus not without some irony that Kant’s ethics entered into social theory mainly via Max Weber and then into American sociology via Talcott Parsons. From the beginning, however, the action-theoretic approach they both championed has been criticized by theorists of practice who mobilize pre-Christian and/or non-Protestant traditions of ethical theory. The battle between action theory and practice theory, then, often restages the old clash between classical and Christian ethics in their Aristotelian and Augustinian instantiations, and its outcome has implications that stretch far beyond the realm

of social theory, farther, I suspect, than most sociologists realize, to the relationship between “fact” and “value.”

The principal goal of Kant’s first critique, of course, was to counter the skeptical epistemology of David Hume and, more specifically, to show that we can have valid causal knowledge about the world. But Kant’s solution to the epistemological problem generated an ethical problem: if human beings are part of the natural world, and the natural world is governed by causal laws, then how are human freedom and moral choice even possible? Then, as today, some thinkers happily affirmed that they weren’t. Atomists like Lucretius and proto-utilitarians like Hobbes argued that we are pain-avoiding, pleasure-seeking, mini-maxing machines, as do reductionistic neuroscientists such as Paul and Patricia Churchland. Kant resisted this response. He sought to rescue human freedom by locating it in a mysterious faculty called “the will” and oppos-

ing the good and the right to bodily desire and self-interest. Likewise, he sought to rescue the “moral law” by locating it in the ineffable realm of the “noumena” and opposing it to the “phenomenal” realm where “natural laws” obtained. The result was an ethical theory that emphasized the conformity of the will to the moral law.

The influence of Kant’s ethics on social theory is especially evident in the work of Max Weber. In *Economy and Society*, Weber attempts – unsuccessfully in my view – to found his sociology on a theory of *action*, where “actions” are conscious choices about “means” and “ends.” Weber’s well-known typology of action also bears a Kantian imprint. Actions are “actions” to the degree that they involve discrete and conscious decisions about “means” and “ends.” Thus, the highest and purest types of action are “instrumentally rational” and “value rational”; “affective” and “traditional” (*continued on page 9*)

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Morality as a Cultural System: On Solidarity Civil and Uncivil¹

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Solidarity is a central dimension of social order and social conflict, yet it has largely been absent from influential theories of modern society. Most of the big thinkers (classical, modern, and contemporary) have conceived prototypically modern relationships as either vertical or atomised. Modernization is thought to have smashed affectual and moral fellow-feeling: because of commodification and capitalist hierarchy (Marx); because of bureaucracy and individualistic asceticism (Weber); because of the growing abstraction and impersonality of the collective consciousness that allows egoism and anomie (Durkheim). Postmodernity is typically seen as liquefying social ties and intensifying narcissistic individualism (Bauman), or as creating new forms of verticality, for example the disciplinary cage (Foucault).

It might be objected that none of these influential modern and postmodern thinkers actually wanted to dispense with solidarity, and that each saw it as something that some future order might be able to restore, or at least should try. But their sociological contributions, the concepts they created and the empirical picture of modernity they painted, pointed towards and explained (*continued on page 2*)

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Alexander, continued

the dissolution of solidarity, not its maintenance and creation.

It would, of course, be foolish to deny the modern forces that dissolve solidarities. Classical, modern, and postmodern theorists have identified destructive tendencies. Any effort to theorize contemporary social systems must give them their dangerous due.

It would be equally wrong-headed, however, to accept the idea that solidarity has disappeared as a fundamental dimension of social life. As such pragmatist theorists as Cooley demonstrated, “primary” groups continue to provide intimate associations inside modernity. The face-to-face associations are the bread and butter of the ethnographic sociological tradition that emerged from the Chicago school, which demonstrates the continuing vitality and centrality of solidarity, without usually evoking that term.

This American ethnographic tradition, however, is almost entirely micro-sociological. Neither the phenomenon of modern solidarity nor the intellectual idea of it can be found in the macrosociological traditions that, for better and often for worse, have withstood the test of time. This is not to say that there are not conceptual strands of it floating around, like an intellectual version of junk DNA. As Durkheim began to appreciate primitive religion, as he struggled to break free from the constraining yoke of modern rationalism, he spoke about “*le plaisir d’associer*” [see J-C Filloux, *Durkheim et le socialisme* (1977)]. Even in his earliest work of macrosociology, *The Division of Social Labor*, Durkheim famously evoked the term. Parsons actually made solidarity into one of his four boxes, but he identified too closely with social integration and rule following, suggesting the I-subsystem created not values but norms.

I have discussed the dearth of solidarity in our theoretical legacy from a critical point of view, implying that solidarity’s presence in contemporary social life can hardly be doubted. My 2006 book, *The Civil Sphere*, makes the case that solidarity remains a central dimension of cultural, institutional, and interactional life in contemporary societies. The book is a systematic theory of civil solidarity, but it is also a polemic against how so much of contemporary social theory has tried to make solidarity disappear.

Solidarity should indeed be given new attention as a sociological concept, along with the morality and the possibilities for altruism the idea of solidarity implies. But my warning is this: we cannot make solidarity into an easy idea. We must “think the hell out of it.” We must explore the weaknesses that are betrayed in traditional ways of thinking about solidarity, and face the real moral dangers that solidarity often poses in the world today.

We might begin by recognizing the “psychologizing” that discussions of altruism and morality often imply. From ancient times until today, altruism and morality have typically been understood as individual qualities, as issues of virtue and character (see Vincent Jeffries’s scholarly piece on the virtue tradition in the first section newsletter). The implication is that moral individuals make moral societies.

But it seems to me that the very essence of sociology is to challenge such a suggestion. There is a micro-reductionism at work here, a failure to recognize the emergent properties of collective social organization. How far into the collective and with what social organizational strength does moral “motivation” extend? Individuals can be altruistic to their friends and family, and immoral to members of other, less intimate and immediate circles. To what others among the innumerable others whom the scope of our actions effect do we extend the umbrella of our personal moral principles?

This is a critical philosophical issue. The communitarian tradition doesn’t see extending micro, or local, morality as a major problem. But it is the very heart of Rawls’ moral philosophy. In his famous thought experiment, the test of morality is not whether you are kind and generous to your friends, but what you would do once you wrap the “veil of ignorance” around your eyes, such that you enter into the “original position” where you know nothing about who you are, what your identity is, or what your interest is. What is moral is what is just. What demonstrates respect for the autonomy of every single individual in society, no matter what their position, virtue, or character.

Durkheim became the founding father of moral solidarity theory because he clearly understood this micro-macro distinction. Rather than being the communitarian *avant la lettre* that so many have tried to make of him. Durkheim sociologized Kant’s *(continued on page 9)*

On the semiotics of truth claims in the non-positivist Human Sciences: Review of Isaac Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*

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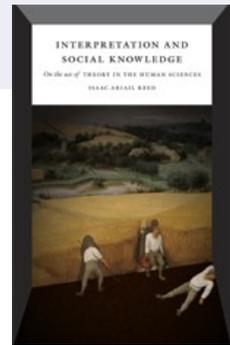
What do researchers really do in the Human Sciences when they use theory to explain or interpret empirical events or processes? In a short but very sophisticated book, Isaac Reed presents an impressive panorama of the non-positivist rationales that underlie several contemporary forms of integrating theory and evidence in the Social Sciences and Humanities. *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On The Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011) is an important accomplishment of meta-theorization, one that invites the reader to revisit many exemplary contributions to non-positivist Human Sciences, with systematic attention to how theoretical signification really works in different modalities of research.

Reed's book is an important contribution to a growing literature on the nature of explanation in the Human Sciences. This literature emerged after a brief and now increasingly distant moment in which fatalistic forecasts about the death of metanarratives seemed to suggest the inadequacy of any kind of scientific research about the social world (unless you were a positivist social scientist, in which case the radical versions of the post-modern requiems probably sounded just like just another chic fad). For non-positivist social scientists and philosophers of the social sciences, the fashionable anti-scientific versions of post-modernism worked as a productive other (together with positivism) against which new metatheories about the relevance, the specificities, and the logics of the social sciences could be elaborated (e.g., Bhaskar 1979; Sayer 1992; Somers 1998; Steinmetz 2005).

Reed's endeavor is almost necessarily controversial since the author is trying to bring order to such a vast landscape of works and theories. Reed reconstructs three non-positivist "epistemic modes," or three different modalities of integration of the "language game of the-

ory" and the "language game of evidence" used to advance truth claims about the social world: the Realist, the Normative and the Interpretive epistemic modes. Reed argues that the most important aim of research in the Human Sciences is the development of "maximal interpretations," a form of text in which abstract theories are used to reevaluate and re-signify empirical evidence. Furthermore, Reed develops an eclectic model for the use of theory – although a deeply interpretive one – that aims at the metatheoretical integration of meanings, mechanisms and motivations in social research.

In spite of the great accomplishments of this work, a few points of this metatheoretical reflection are weaker than others. Reed wisely analyzes the different semiotics of truth claims, but "theory" itself remains under-theorized throughout the book. Theories are described as meaningful worlds, models for and model of, abstractions existing primarily in the minds of the researcher and the pages of books. This lack of clear parameters for what the author is dealing with when he refers to "theory" is surprising, especially given the relevance of recent discussions about the polysemy of the term "theory" (e.g., Abend 2008). The many examples provided throughout the book – psychoanalytic theory, theories of the sacred/profane, "deep play," among others – are so diverse that the only possible aspect that seems to unite them is the fact that they can be presented as "abstract," or not directly connected to any case. If that is a satisfactory definition of theory, it would be helpful to know if any "abstraction" that circulates in the minds of researchers and on the pages of books and articles that at a certain moment acquires academic value can be considered theories – in which case the definition of theory would not be a problem for metatheorists anymore, but one that sociologists of knowledge and intellectual historians should tackle.



This is particularly important given Reed's distinction between maximal and minimal interpretations – the latter presented as relatively uncontroversial texts with low levels of theoretical depth. Without a more fleshed out notion of what theory means, there is a risk that minimal interpretations are, in fact, maximal interpretations in which only commonsensical theories (or theories with low academic value) were integrated for the task of interpretation. This is also relevant given Reed's focus on issues of epistemology and a (strategic, I presume) neglect of issues of ontology. The author rarely talks about "the world" or "reality," but mentions instead the "meaning-system of fact" and the "language game of fact," which leads one to conclude that there is a certain degree of choice, arbitrariness or, more generally, interpretation in the reconstruction of those referential language games in the first place. According to Reed, evidence works indexically. But one should remember that for Peirce (on whom Reed selectively draws) an index always indicates the *presence* of something, but the *thing* whose presence is represented is rarely uncontroversial. In other words, the "language game of fact" is itself a form of interpretation to a great extent. Also, on a different but related note, one could argue that the notion of abstraction does not cover many contemporary definitions of social theory – for example, couldn't one argue that Marx's *18th Brumaire* is not only a maximal interpretation, but also a modality of historical theorization? In other words, in recent contemporary non-positivist research, the disjuncture between "use of theory" and the construction of "maximal interpretation" is not always as stark as Reed proposes.

(continued on page 4)

Bortoluci, continued

The reconstruction of the three epistemic modes is extremely elegant and well informed, and a lot could be said about each of them. Reed's readings of Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese cockfight are particularly remarkable. Nevertheless, after reading each one of these chapters, the reader will very likely have the impression that the author is trying to fit very different texts into the same epistemic modes. For example, is Theda Skocpol's realism the same as Margaret Archer's realism? Or how helpful is it to argue that Habermas and Foucault follow the same logics of theory-evidence integration, in spite of the different political valences of the models of practice and consciousness they mobilize to construct their maximal interpretations? This is certainly a problem that anyone would face when trying to organize such vast material. Nevertheless, at least in the case of realism, Reed's attempt to include many different theoretical models under the same heading is problematic. Reed correctly stresses the centrality of "mechanism" as a productive metaphor for many different versions of realism, but his strict reading of mechanism as a direct translation of the reasoning from the natural to the social sciences can only be explained by his unsatisfactory conflation of different versions of realism – e.g., Peter Hedstrom's analytical sociology, Theda Skocpol's logics of comparison and Roy Bhaskar's critical realism. Reed suggests that all of these theorists conceive mechanisms as general, almost timeless causal processes that can be effective in all times and places. This is particularly striking given the many attempts by realist social scientists – particularly the ones influenced by Critical Realism – to theorize mechanisms as contingent (Steinmetz 1998), relational (Somers 1998; Vandenberghe 2009), reflexive (Archer 2003), activity dependent (Gross 2009) and concept dependent (Bhaskar 1979; Sayer 1984).

In my opinion, Reed's highest accomplishment is his chapter

"Explanation," in which he lays out a theory of interpretation as explanation that is quite eclectic, despite its strong emphasis on the primacy of interpretation for the elaboration of truth claims about the social world. In this chapter, Reed tries to overcome traditional dichotomies still very much alive in contemporary social research – particularly the agency-structure dichotomy, but also the problematic distinction between explanation and interpretation. Based on an Aristotelian theory of causality, he provides a metatheoretical framework for the integration of landscapes of meaning, motivations and mechanisms for the explanation of social action. Meanings are depicted as the forming causes of mechanisms and motivations, which are the forcing causes of action. In other words, Reed argues that landscapes of meaning are the fundamental bedrock of social processes, since they form the mechanisms and motivations that lead to social action. This metaframework is certainly a productive formalization of what an open interpretive modality of social explanation can be, and it will enhance current conversations about the integration of semiosis and social practice.

As a final comment, I believe that Reed's metaframework of interpretation as explanation should more consistently address two crucial points. First, how has materiality (or the "built environment" – Sewell 2005) been theorized in contemporary non-positivist explanations of social action and social mechanisms, especially in relation to the processes of meaning making, and how would that impact the metaframework proposed by Reed? Second, Reed's "landscapes of meaning" still operate as "unmoved movers": they seem to be the dimension of the social world that does not have to be explained. If my reading is correct, wouldn't a more dynamic metaframework – one in which motivations and mechanisms also condition the landscapes of meaning – capture the most nuanced recent attempts to articulate a semiotic theory of practice (e.g., Archer

2003; Bourdieu 1990; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Joas 1996; Sewell 2005)? These are two of the many questions that this inspiring book raises for the continuation of a serious interdisciplinary conversation about the logics of what we do as Human Scientists and how we can do it better.

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Reflections on Nearly Three Decades of Teaching Sociological Theory

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At Rutgers, in 1983, I taught the undergraduate classical theory course—my first theory course as a newly minted (1982) Ph.D. Young and ambitious, I refused to use a textbook. We struggled through “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” a less than ideal choice, since my students required a crash course in French history and still missed most of Marx’s sarcastic wit. Much of what I learned from that experience has guided me in teaching classical theory to our incoming graduate cohorts at Purdue. Most notably, we begin with J. S. Mill’s, “On Liberty,” before turning to Marx’s critique of enlightenment liberalism. By my second semester, however, when I taught the undergraduate contemporary theory course at Rutgers, I admitted defeat and assigned the contemporary theory text written by Wallace and Wolf. From them I borrowed the idea of using theory to analyze higher education, which is, in fact, the only thing that my students and I have in common. It was, perhaps, this endeavor which later encouraged me to explore theory through popular music, beginning on the first day of class with the Pink Floyd video, “The Wall,” an Eighties rock opera and critique of the British education system. The video includes images of students sitting at their desks on the assembly line headed for the meat grinder, interspersed with scenes from the classroom and from a general revolt in which students burn their books and desks in a raging bonfire. This video is the sole survivor of that “theory through music” course. Whenever I teach the undergraduate theory course, I start class on the first day with that video.

Of all the gimmicks and tricks I have employed over the years, however, the one that the students seem to like the best, according to course evaluations, is my website. Originally, this began as part of Purdue’s attempt to put course content online. Something then called WEB-CT allowed enrolled students to access mate-

rials that the instructor provided online. There was also a chat room and a listserv, where students could post questions or comments. That last feature was wonderful when there was at least one student sufficiently engaged to post something interesting, but most of the time students used it in lieu of showing up at office hours to ask about material missed due to absence. The major problem with that system, however, was that it was controlled by university computer technical support (which has since grown in size and stature) and by the registrar. Access was limited to officially enrolled students, and the software changed frequently, so that maintaining the site was a part-time job where faculty seemed to be working for administrative support staff (rather than the other way around).

Frustration with the computer technical staff and the endless software changes inspired me to create my own website some twenty years ago. The original site is now something of a museum, and a cluttered one at that, created by a clerical who wanted to show that she had administrative/technical skills. Since then I have learned that I can create my own site in Microsoft Word. Since my webpage is on my Purdue career account, however, I still have periodic problems and depend upon computer tech support. When they reconfigured Purdue’s intranet, for example, I had to redo all of the links on my webpage. With all its drawbacks, however, I continue to use my website for all my courses.

My undergraduate theory course site contains, in addition to course outlines (currently being supplemented with Power Point Shows for use in larger classes), something called “outlines” that should be called “other cool stuff.” These are my rants—what once would have been mimeographed handouts, including one with some comments on and a link to “The Wall.” There is also a Cliff Notes version of

the General Law of Capital Accumulation (which I wrote up originally in graduate school), and a contextualized quote from the SDS speech at the 1968 ASA convention. Yet more helpful, perhaps, are the syllabus, explanations of how to write what ultimately become the contents of a portfolio, and some examples of different types of writing that I have produced as a model for the students. In keeping with its status as a museum, there are also remnants of the time when there were objective quizzes and take home essay exams, including a couple of essays written by former students. The graduate classical theory website is more modest, but I plan to add more of these learning aids as I continue to struggle with the fact that some of our incoming graduate students have not yet learned how to write analytical essays.

After nearly thirty years of teaching undergraduate and graduate theory courses I have learned to use power point presentations and my web page in lieu of writing on the board and handing out mimeographs. For my current undergraduate course, with 80 students in lecture, divided into four recitation sections, subdivided into four writing/discussion groups, where my TAs and I sit in and discuss the students’ weekly writing assignments, the web and the power point presentations are an effective tool for accomplishing the mass communication function. But the most important work is done in recitation, the small groups. Since my graduate seminar is usually a small group (N=10-15), the computer is less appropriate, and the blackboard is more user-friendly. Nevertheless, even there the website materials are invaluable. My homemade (SOC 600) website is not pretty and my museum piece (SOC 402) is always under construction, but my students seem to appreciate the fact that even this old dog can still post material online.

Undergraduate course: http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~hoganr/soc402/fall_2011/Soc402.htm

Graduate course: <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~hoganr/soc600.htm>

Georg Simmel: Life, Self, Culture and Society, A Review of the Conference

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Georg Simmel: Life, Self, Culture and Society (<http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/simmelconference>) was a two-day conference organized by Donald Levine and held at the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago on November the 11th and the 12th. The main purpose of the conference was to commemorate the recent English translation of Simmel's last major philosophical work (his "last testament"): *Lebensanschauung* (translated as *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Aphorisms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press). This is a complex and wide ranging work, a book that cannot be easily classified according to contemporary disciplinary standards (its thematics deal with social theory, meta-ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of biology, and theology, among other subjects). Accordingly, the conference brought together an incredibly diverse (from a disciplinary, linguistic and cultural perspective) set of scholars from across the social sciences and the humanities in order to examine the implications of Simmel's innovative metaphysical reflections for the study of social and cultural forms. I was lucky enough to be invited to the conference as an "observer." In the brief remarks that follow I will attempt to distill my own (highly selective) "view" of what I think were some of the most important moments in what was a remarkably intellectual and social occasion.

The first day of the conference was devoted to dealing with issues of Simmelian scholarship and interpretation – e.g. Simmel's place in contemporary philosophy. The day was punctuated by several highlights. Mario Small, the chair of the sociology department at Chicago, set the tone of the conference with a set of gracious and insightful opening remarks dealing with Simmel's place in the distinctive intellectual tradition of "Chicago Sociology." Donald Levine followed with a brief but illuminating discussion of the (checkered) history of Simmel's reception in American sociology, pointing to the role of such influential "canon-setters" as Talcott Parsons in preventing a full appreciation of Simmel's impact until relatively late in the trajectory of 20th century sociological scholarship.

A number of panels stood out, both for the liveliness and level of intellectual discussion that they inspired. A particularly excellent exchange was sparked by a session dedicated to chapter 5 of Hans Joas' *The Genesis of Values* ("The Immanence of Transcendence" where Joas discusses the work of Simmel in regards to the question of the emergence of evaluative orders). Commenters took Joas to task for what appeared to be too hasty a dismissal of Simmel's contribution to this problem. Joas' gracious and insightful reply (under significant time-pressure) served to put Simmel's efforts in their theoretical and intellectual context. Joas' key message here is that we must continue to ask Simmel's questions even if we abandon the particular language that he used to formulate them (that of the *lebensphilosophie* or "Philosophy of Life").

Andrews and Arthur Franks discussed the formal and rhetorical strategies used by Simmel in his published aphorisms (translated as an Appendix to *The View of Life*), where they put Simmel's efforts in the context of other authors who relied on this particular literary device to convey their insights. Ingo Meyer and Elizabeth Goldstein headlined an excellent panel dedicated to both answering the riddle of Simmel's (non-existent) place in the history of twentieth century philosophy (in spite of his tremendous impact on the thought of such figures as Heidegger) and of establishing Simmel's characteristic "philosophical style" which Goldstein characterized as retaining certain formal features that can only be characterized as "modernist." The afternoon was capped by a fascinating presentation by Berthold Hoeckner showing how the rationalization and modularization of film music exemplifies the validity of certain fundamental Simmelian (and Weberian) insights regarding the defining characteristics of modern culture.

The second day got started with a stimulating intellectual bang, in the form of an excellent panel featuring Elisabeth Clemens, Annette Disselkamp and Paola Castaño. All three took up particular elements of Simmel's "eidetic method" (e.g. the construction of ideal "social types") for the understanding of specific social forms: in Clemens' case, the sort of exchange characterizing social transfers during the period of federal expansion during WWI, where the category of "the poor" comes to play a crucial role; in Castaño's case, the notion of "victim" as a possible Simmelian social type in the context of state reparations in the post-conflict "transition" in contemporary Colombia. Disselkamp's talk dealt with the intertwining of individuality and sociality in the notion of secrecy and the secret (a classic Simmelian insight).

Intellectual fireworks continued to go off during the day's second session, which featured a stimulating (and provocative) presentation by Barry Schwartz in which he argued against Simmel's "anti-realist" (e.g. constructionist in the Kantian sense) stance in the philosophy of history, a point echoed in John Levi Martin's talk. For Schwartz, there is not incompatibility in acknowledging both the experiential and textual construction of historical objects and events *and* their status as intersubjective social facts endowed with their own special objectivity *qua* remembered events. It is precisely because history is made up of *collectively remembered* forms that its objects are not pure constructions of the *individual* cognitive framework imposed by the historian.

According to Martin, both Simmel and Weber understood the importance of defining a mode of cognition that required the capacity to generate intersubjectively valid knowledge of historical particulars and for each, this was the defining feature of knowledge generation in the cultural sciences that differentiated them from the natural sciences. They erred, in Martin's view, in thinking that the *only* model available for the construction of such methodological foundations for the cultural sciences was that offered in Kant's first (*continued on page 8*)

Junior Theorists' Symposium, 2011

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On Friday, August 19, 2011, the ASA Theory Section, in cooperation with the sociology department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, co-sponsored the fifth Junior Theorist Symposium. Since its inception in 2005, the JTS has become an exemplary occasion for nurturing the development of "theory"-oriented work in sociology. After a two-year hiatus following the inaugural event, the JTS resumed in 2008 and has been held every year since then on the day before the ASA Meetings. Carrying on the tradition of recent years, this year's symposium was a vibrant event featuring intellectually stimulating papers from nine promising early-career sociologists, hard-hitting but judicious commentary from three senior scholars, and pointed discussion from a highly-engaged (and engaging) audience.

As Claire Decoteau, one of the organizers of the 2010 JTS, noted in the Theory Section newsletter last year, the event's "popularity and reputation has grown at a tremendous pace." This year's JTS marked a continuation of that trend. Perhaps the clearest sign that the JTS has become a true juggernaut is the intense competition that has developed to present at the event. The event's co-organizers, Michal Pagis and I, were flooded with entries—nearly 90 of them, sent from seven countries—many of them by postdocs and assistant professors¹. Taken together, the submissions offer an interesting (if unsystematic) survey of the theoretical problems and puzzles with which early-career sociologists are grappling. Reviewing the submissions, we noted three especially salient themes:

1. *The tight knitting of theory and data*

The first theme was the eschewal of pure abstraction—aka "theory for its own sake" or theoreticism—in favor of a clear impulse to marry the tasks of analytic construction and concept formation with empirical research. While the sub-

stantive foci of the submissions varied widely, a few specific empirical topics (among them, race and ethnicity, nationalism, and the changing nature of expert and professional authority) emerged as common areas of scrutiny among the young theorists. To encourage a wide range of submissions, the co-organizers operated with a broad definition of "theory" in mind and did not pre-specify any empirical theme for the conference.

2. *Grappling with the legacy of Pierre Bourdieu*

Second, more than a tenth of the JTS submitters explicitly mentioned Pierre Bourdieu or used Bourdieu's terminology in their submissions—a proportion higher than that of any other social theorist. Even those abstracts and *précis* that did not mention Bourdieu bore the mark of his legacy. The French sociologist's influence was apparent, for example, in the focus on certain goals that were central to Bourdieu's work, including the desire to overcome false theoretical polarities and the impulse to understand the "embodied" aspect of social experience. The prominence of Bourdieu's work among the submissions—whether it was mined as a source of analytic tools or used as an intellectual foil—suggests that the task of assessing his overall impact on sociology will extend into the foreseeable future.

3. *Women theorists*

Finally, the organizers noted the prominence of women theorists among this year's JTS submitters. In fact, this year's symposium was the first at which a majority of the presenters—six out of nine—were women. While the growing participation of women theorists at the JTS is a trend that can be traced across the event's history, only time will tell whether this pattern signals a broader shift in the composition of a traditionally male-dominated subfield.

Following a format similar to that of past JTS meetings, this year's symposium consisted of three paper

sessions, each featuring a trio of thematically linked presentations. The first session, on the theme of "Action and Interaction," began with Karen Danna (Hampshire College), who drew on her study of the scripts, schemas, and performances juggled by working parents as an empirical basis for a general micro-sociological theory of "role switching." The second paper, by Steve Viscelli (Wisconsin), reported on the author's grueling fieldwork as a long-haul truck driver. Viscelli's analysis merged a fine-grained analysis of the experiences and understandings of self-employed owner-operators with a macro-structural account of the changing economics of the trucking industry in an era of "flexible" labor relations. Finally, Yuri Takhteyev (University of Toronto) presented a chapter from his book-in-progress—an ethnographic study of software developers in Rio de Janeiro. Takhteyev used his data to reflect on the complex relationship between the "global" and "local" contexts in which Brazilian software developers are simultaneously embedded. The session's discussant, Andrew Abbott, offered both pointed critiques of the three papers and a series of more general comments about what "theory is" and "theory isn't." Good theorizing, Abbott maintained, does not draw its authority from ritualistic citations of classical texts, from complex self-positioning in relation to other theorists, or from fuzzy or clever oxymorons. Neither is it rooted in impulse to create concepts or invent neologisms. Instead, good theorizing, which must always be grounded in reflection on empirical data, involves abstracting what Abbott called "interesting" patterns and relationships from observed social phenomena in ways that allow us to "get new insight into how we might think about them (and other things) in new ways."

The second session of the day, "Economy & Culture," featured three papers focused on the symbolic aspects of economic exchange, with discussion and commentary provided by Viviana Zelizer. The first paper, by Rachel Harvey (Columbia), examined the cultural ethos of "genteel (*continued on page 8*)

Medvetz, continued

fair play” that predominated on the London gold market of the 1970s. Using interviews and archival records, Harvey sought to reinsert a robust, unabridged notion of *culture* into an institutional framework. The second paper, presented by Kyle Arnone (UCLA), offered a Polanyian theory of the process by which American labor struggles have become “embedded” in society. The final paper, by Lauren Rivera (Northwestern), set out from a case study of hiring practices in elite law firms to test and extend Randall Collins’ theory of “emotional energy” as a factor in the stratification process. Rivera’s analysis underscored specific mechanisms that tended to facilitate or inhibit the development of emotional energy and discussed their consequences in the hiring process. Zelizer’s comments elegantly linked the three papers, drawing out their connections and using these as points of departure for discussing several current issues facing economic sociology.

The final session of the day featured papers focused on the broad theme of “Morality and Politics.” The first, by Paola Castaño (University of Chicago), examined the social constitution of victimhood in the context of acute social suffering. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out at the National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation in Columbia, Castaño’s paper thematized the primacy of experts as agents in the process by which suffering gets converted into a form of authority. The second paper, by Stephanie Lee Mudge (UC Davis), developed an ambitious neo-Durkheimian framework for political sociology and sought to show its implications for the analysis of contemporary political struggles. Recasting partisan political struggle “as an essentially moral contest over claims to political authority,” Mudge’s analysis foregrounded the importance of conflicts over religious and scientific authority—the main “symbolic weaponry” in contemporary politics. Empirically, her paper drew on an analysis of the changing authority of disciplinary economics in American politics. The last paper of the

day, by Carly Elizabeth Schall (Wisconsin), put forward a theory of national closure focused on the strategic choices made by powerful actors in moments of crisis. Drawing on the case of a postwar Sweden beset by refugee and welfare crises, Schall sought to identify general processes by which conditions of national closure (including the cultural assumptions that establish the “ground rules” for national inclusion) vary from country to country and over time. Like Abbott and Zelizer, Loïc Wacquant offered incisive commentary on the three papers that functioned, at one level, as a general disquisition on what it means to “do theory.” For example, Wacquant highlighted a series of prerequisites for effective theorizing and their attendant pitfalls. To theorize well, he argued, one must find an appropriate match between theory and evidence while observing strict rules of logical and conceptual rigor and establishing a clear differentiation between folk and analytic concepts. By the same token, Wacquant suggested, one must strenuously avoid ritualistic displays of trendy concepts or theorists, empty recitations of “generalities and banalities,” and tautological constructions that project one’s own hopes and expectations onto the empirical data.

As co-organizers, we were pleased with the event, and—judging from the many emails we received congratulating us on its success—so were the attendees. Accordingly, the JTS will be held again next year in Denver. All graduate students and some postdocs and junior faculty members are encouraged to submit précis for consideration. (Precise eligibility rules will be laid out in a forthcoming call for proposals to be circulated widely.) All are encouraged to register for the event and join in the stimulating discussion that will inevitably ensue. Next year’s co-organizers will be Stephanie Mudge of University of California, Davis and Iddo Tavory of the New School for Social Research.

1. The seven countries were the US, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Spain, Singapore, and Israel.

Lizardo, continued

critique, which in effect argued that the only way of getting valid conceptual knowledge was through the operation of subsumption of the particular under general categories. This, of course, poses a problem for the epistemology of the cultural sciences, which are scientific only when they abandon the specificity of their objects (historical individuals) and are faithful to their object only when they abandon “scientificity” (both Weber and Simmel provided tortuous attempts to resolve this dilemma). Martin convincingly argued that there was a conceptual resource ignored by Simmel and Weber, and that was the model of the production of aesthetic judgments outlined in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.

The post-lunch session was highlighted by a comprehensive and highly informative presentation by Volkard Krech on Simmel’s *Sociology of Religion*. Krech’s systematic, rational reconstruction of Simmel’s approach did a great job of establishing the claim that Simmel’s work of religion dovetails with his philosophical and sociological methodology broadly conceived, allowing for the characterization and study of both “substantive” (e.g. institutional) religion narrowly conceived (as a particular historical contextualization) and of the study of “religious phenomena” and of the “religious impulse” broadly conceived as they manifest themselves in seemingly unrelated social realms (e.g. the economy, romantic relationships, arts, etc.). Finally Krech argued that such a Simmelian approach is useful for our understanding of the origins and historical evolution of religion – here various participants noted the (unintended) “Simmelian” cast of Robert Bellah’s recent magnum opus on the evolution of religion – such as Jasper’s notion of the “axial age.”

In all, the conference was without a doubt a resounding intellectual success. However, as noted by Donald Levine in his opening remarks, the (intimidatingly interdisciplinary) task of grappling with, evaluating and furthering Simmel’s late philosophical achievement has only begun. This conference represents an important first step in that direction.

Gorski, continued

action are lower and impure forms. Further, while “interests” are understood to be external and objective, “values” are taken to be internal and subjective. In short, Weber’s action theory not only privileges conscious actions over practical dispositions, it sharply distinguishes the realm of “values” from the realm of “interests,” echoing Kant’s distinctions between the “good will” and “human desires” or “drives” (*Triebfeder*) and the noumenal and the phenomenal. These latter two concepts, it should further be noted, also ground Weber’s well-known “fact-value distinction.”

Over the last several decades, another tradition of ethical theory has experienced a significant revival: the more Catholic tradition of “virtue ethics” first established by Aristotle. Note that Aristotelian virtues should not be confused with Victorian ones. They are not premised on prudery or opposed to desire, but rather on “flourishing” and “moderation.” To “flourish” means to thrive, to develop one’s innate and distinctively human capacities, especially for reason and speech. Since these capacities can only be developed through education and interaction, human flourishing is only possible in a human community of a particular kind: one that provides basic freedoms, freedom from material necessity and freedom for political engagement. Thus, for Aristotle, ethics is nothing more and nothing less than the practical art of human flourishing. It is an “art” insofar as it is a set of skills that is mastered through practice and habituation rather than through cognition and calculation. The object of this “art” is one’s own character. The life of virtue, Aristotle argues, is neither a life of pleasure (as for Epicureans and utilitarians) nor a life of renunciation (as for Augustine or Kant) but rather of moderation, in which our desires are guided and slowly reshaped by our minds, so that we truly desire that which actually contributes to our well-being. Nor is the well-lived life a purely “subjective” matter on Aristotle’s view. On the contrary, the biological and psychological constitution of the human animal sets certain parameters for individual well-being and human sociality which can and should be studied and reflected on. And the results of these experiences and reflections can and should be preserved and passed on via moral education and tradition.

While “action-theoretic” and “value-free” forms of

social theory remain highly influential, they have been challenged from a number of different directions in recent years, all of which mobilize virtue ethics to one degree or another. This is perhaps most apparent in the late Foucault, specifically in the concluding volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. In volume 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, for example, which contains dozens of citations of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Foucault explores the connection between the individual self-control of the free citizen and the collective self-government of the Greek polis, showing how the ability to govern oneself was seen as a precondition for governing others, and how the desire to govern others reinforced the government of the self. In volume 3, *The Care of the Self*, he shows how the moral thinking of late Antiquity became increasingly preoccupied with sexuality, and increasingly disconnected from politics. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice may likewise be seen as an effort to “twist the stick in the other direction” – away from Kant and towards Aristotle – by refusing a whole series of conceptual binaries that undergird Protestant ethics: mind vs. body, values vs. interests, structure vs. action and so on. Nor was his systematic injection of Greek neologisms such as “doxa,” “hysteresis,” and “hexis” a mere coincidence. Indeed, habitus is simply the Latin translation for the Greek term “hexis,” often rendered into English as “disposition,” and closely associated with the virtues in Aristotle’s ethics. Finally, consider John Dewey. His pragmatist ethics was far more deeply influenced by Aristotle than he probably cared to admit, as evidenced not only in his rehabilitation of the term “habit” but more generally in his concern with individual growth and radical democracy. For Dewey, too, ethics was finally about flourishing in community.

At least among card-carrying American social theorists – or so it seems to me – practice theory has won the argument and the old fact-value distinction has therefore lost its foundations. If so, then perhaps it is time to revive Durkheim’s vision of sociology as a “moral science” or Addam’s call for a “social ethics,” which focuses on the material and social preconditions of human flourishing. Or rather, it is time for sociology to join with cognate efforts in neighboring disciplines, such as “positive psychology,” “hedonic” economics, and the “capacities approach” to social justice.

Alexander, continued

analytical argument for universalism, speaking not of moral principles, virtues, or character but of *social* morality.

If there is a single take away message from Durkheim on morality, it is that morality is society writ large. If religion is a mirror in which the social is reflected, so is morality. Morality expresses social solidarity. It is composed of social values, organized around totemic symbolic figures like teachers and leaders, and energized by periodic social rituals.

The problem is that, while Durkheim follows Kant in his identification of moral principles with autonomy and rationality, he provides no way of distinguishing the kind of social morality organized around these principles from others. We can be moral and altruistic to one another when we share the same totem and participate in the same rituals, but these sociological processes can create horrific particularism, an insiders’ morality that allows and even compels people to act *immorally* to those outside the restricted circle of the we.

We are back to our earlier problem. To emphasize the centrality of morality, altruism, and solidarity is either not enough or too much. We need a macro-theory that differentiates between different kinds of morality and solidarity. Sociologists know all about how societies are stratified and fragmented along every conceivable line. Each of these fragments sees itself as moral and others as

Page 9 not. This is provincial morality. What we are looking for is cosmopolitanism.

(continued on page 10)

Alexander, continued

I have two propositions here: (1) A more universalizing and cosmopolitan morality depends on significance. The wider range of “others” that a society can make significant, the more stretched, universal, and inclusive our morality. (2) Significance is a function of signification: What is the nature of the symbolic discourse that circulates in society? How are moral signifiers extended to different classes of social signifieds?

All sorts of powerful symbolic discourses are primarily restrictive, inspiring rituals that simultaneously inflate solidarity while narrowing its scope. Think of racial and gender discourses, and civilizational and religious chauvinism. Think of Samuel Huntington’s anti-Hispanic and WASP-centric recipe for American democracy, or, on the left, celebrations of difference that have no place for over-arching norms of more universal kinds.

What makes such ritualistic narrowing of solidarity particularly difficult to understand is that it is almost always intermixed with more expansive moral forms.

- Think about the ante-bellum Southern states, whose elites practiced respectful democracy among themselves, and often included white yeomen, while bestializing and excluding non-whites.
- Think of apartheid South Africa, where whites treated one another in a universalistic way that exhibited democratic morality, even as they criminally subordinated blacks and Asians.
- Or supposedly modern Germans, whether conservative or socialist, and their horrendous treatment of the Jews. Or the very democratic and modern Swiss who pass laws against building mosques.
- Or the socialist French and British who propose laws to prevent Muslims from wearing religious clothing. Think of the racial othering in which some liberal Americans engage, despite their best moral principles, in what Elijah Anderson calls the “streetwise” life of the everyday.
- Think of the wars against one another that enlightened Western nations have waged and their colonization of non-Western peoples. The rationale has been: we are moral, they aren’t. It is our moral duty to dominate the other so that we can make them moral, which often involves killing them as a result.

Equating morality with solidarity and altruism is not correct. Morality must be complicated so that the stigmatized other can be brought back in; othering must be understood as intrinsic to morality as a cultural system.

We need to be able to see, and to study, how acting badly can be morally compulsive, how people can, in everyday language, be moral and immoral at the same time. In order to be able to conceptualize this possibility, we must make the semiotic shift. Morality cannot be essentialized. From the sociological point of view, it is only not a normative order but a

cultural system. Cultural systems are semiotic languages. Like every other meaningful sign system, moral principles are defined relationally. Moral meanings are binary: the good is defined by the bad, and vice-versa. Evilness is part of morality every bit as much as the good. Yes, morality and solidarity are symbiotically connected. Understanding that morality is a binary, however, allows us to see that social rituals gain energy by polluting others as profane, not only by identifying the ‘we’ of the sacred.

This is why in my own work I have spoken about civil and uncivil solidarities. Since the beginning of the early modern nation-state, the history of the civil sphere has been a long and winding road. From religion, from the Enlightenment, from socialist and democratic movements, even from the idea of the nation itself, there emerged the utopian idea that everybody, no matter who or what they were, could be members of a broad, encompassing, and universalizing “civil” sphere. The hope was that a sphere of solidarity could be sustained that would be relatively independent of the restrictive solidarities and moralities that flourished alongside it, such as class arrogance, religious restriction, ethnic prejudice, regional antagonism.

Yet, while the civil spheres of modernizing Western nations did have significant democratic effects, they also supported incredibly inhumane restrictions and exclusions. The moral discourse of civil society is binary. It is just as concerned with defining anti-civil evil as civil good. It defines the virtues required for civil participation and the qualities that disqualify groups from civil membership. It excludes the latter on the moral grounds of protecting civil society itself.

For centuries, it was inconceivable—on moral grounds—that putatively intemperate, uneducated workers could become active citizens. The same held true for supposedly irrational and diffident women and, of course, even more harshly, for non-whites, who were thought to border on the animalistic. If you were not Christian, you were also out of luck. It’s critical to understand that these suppressions were carried out in the name of morality and solidarity. Think, for example of Kant’s remarks on the putative moral and emotional incapacities of Blacks and “Orientals” in his essay on *The Origins of the Beautiful and Sublime*. It is depressing to see a thinker who represented the highest values of Enlightenment moral philosophy drawing a line between civilization and barbarism. At the same time, one must acknowledge that Kant’s essay on cosmopolitanism represented the first great challenge to the idea that civil morality could be restricted to the boundaries of the nation state.

Let me conclude by noting that the expansive reach of civil morality not only marks democratic boundaries of institutions but inspires radical social movements. In a democratic uprising, civil solidarity moves from abstract discourse to concrete enactment. I document exactly this kind of civil performance in my book, *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power* (Bloomsbury Academic 2011). The winter uprising was able to challenge Mubarak (continued on page 11)

Alexander, continued

not because of material resources but because of its moral power. It gained this civil leverage by drawing into its ranks the widest possible gender, ethnic, religious, political, and religious representation. Civil solidarity became a symbolic reality, and the pulsating performances in Tahrir Square presented a democratic utopia in microcosm.

Exactly the same can be said for the “protest camps” that were set up throughout Israel during the later weeks of the summer of 2011. Young and old, women and men, settlers and peaceniks, secular and religious, and people from every social class – they gathered together in the hundreds of thousands, organizing themselves democratically, to protest against the destructive inequality that is undermining civil solidarity in Israel. This movement is not more moral or more altruistic than other movements. The settlers and the religious right are deeply moral, and altruistic to their own kind. What distinguishes the protest camps is the civil nature of their morality and their utopian hopes for expanding solidarity.

There is, however, another, more ominous moral element shared by these radical social movements in Egypt and Israel. While calling for more altruism and civil solidarity inside of their nations, each has had much more ambiguous orientations to external national solidarities. Democratizing Egypt has already given clear signs of pushing its foreign policy in a decidedly anti-Israel direction. For its part, Israel’s protest camp movement has conspicuously failed to cite slogans from the peace movement. To maximize internal solidarity, it has included groups who support settlements and oppose trading land for Palestinian peace. Even the most expansive efforts to establish a more civil solidarity cannot escape from the binaries that define morality as a cultural system.

1. Presented at the ASA meetings in Las Vegas, 23 August 2011, at a Special Session inaugurating the new section on “Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity.” The session and the section were organized by Vincent Jeffries.

Members’ News and Notes

New Publications

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Members' News and Notes

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Awards

Scott R. Harris received the 2011 Cooley Award from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, for his book *What Is Constructionism?* (Lynne Rienner, 2010).

