
WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THEORY AND THEORIZING TODAY

Omar Lizardo

September, 2012

1 THE STATE OF THE THEORETICAL FIELD TODAY

Theorists, especially young theorists, live in a world of ideas. In that respect, theory is a subfield wherein the practitioners, especially the young practitioners, tend to be the most naïve about the objective conditions of production that make their work possible (or impossible). Therefore, I think it is prudent to start with a pragmatic “materialism” to grasp the real conditions of theoretical production today. Unfortunately, what I have to say is mostly bad news. The structure of the sociological field has changed, making it increasingly difficult to dedicate yourself to becoming proficient in most modes of doing “theory.”

We can adduce at least three broad reasons for this:

- 1) *The rapid de-institutionalization of teaching -theory at the graduate level.* Though Lamont commented on this trend in 2004, (*Perspectives*), its impact is only now being felt. Most top graduate programs have cut back the theory curriculum to a single “omnibus” course that attempts the impossible task of going from Montesquieu to Judith Butler in one semester. This goes hand and in hand with the rapid displacement of the graduate seminar as the main place where learning happens in top sociology programs. This is part of the push to get students out of the seminar and in front of the word-processing program earlier in the grad school career, so that they can realistically finish in 5 to 6 years and have publications to show for it. We may call this: the “Princetonization of American sociology.” This dynamic creates a supply-side constraint on who can teach theory. Because graduate programs select top candidates based on publication records in top empirical journals, most people entrusted with the teaching of theory are not themselves theorists; absent a “genuine” theorist, and given that theory has become a low status, “hot potato” course that nobody who has any say wants to

teach, the teaching of theory comes to be increasingly entrusted to younger faculty (usually assistant professors or young associates) whose work is only *relatively* theoretical in comparison to other denizens of that department. For instance, said faculty might specialize in the study of culture, institutions, or historical and economic sociology, subfields that are recognized as relatively more “theoretical” than others.

2) *The rapid devaluation of theory within an increasingly heteronomous field.* With de-institutionalization, comes *devaluation*; a theory paper or even a series of papers dedicated to theory have come to be seen as much less valuable than empirically “applied” work (whether qualitative or quantitative). Administrators and high-level decision-makers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that tenure-track faculty members produce “useful” research, meaning: research that gets grants (which is generally oriented to the generation of reportable findings rather than conceptual issues). The fact that some modes of doing theory stand at the cross-roads of the humanities and the social sciences adds to its woes, given the increasingly brazen attack on and dismantling of the humanities across American universities (especially public universities) which is a *de facto* attack on theory. The emergence of increasingly “rationalized” and quantified measures of impact or worth of publications means that theory falls even further behind; impact factors of top theory journals in sociology (e.g. *Sociological Theory*, *Theory and Society*) are much lower than top empirical journals. If you are thinking: “but that’s just the evil journal and peer review system,” think again. The increasing heteronomy of university book publishers vis-à-vis the market is even more glaring than anything happening at the level of journals; theory books are long, wordy and demanding. They cannot be marketed, “Gladwellized” or sensationalized in the same way as empirically oriented books. So if you are planning on writing a book entitled: *Going Giddens: The extraordinary rise and increasing appeal of the structure/agency problematic*, you might just be out of luck.

3) *The rapid rise of multiple modes and genres of doing theory.* With the dissolution of the proper material conditions for the doing of theory, comes the partial deconstruction of any sort of “hierarchy” in modes of doing theory. In the good ol’ days the guidelines were simple, because the field had a coherent structure, and the sources of theoretical capital were clear. All the consecrated, incumbents in theoretical sociology’s strategic action field (e.g. Collins, or Alexander, or Turner, etc.) began their careers with some sort of serious engagement with the classics (as defined by Parsons). Then they went on to engage in their own tweaking of the classical tradition, possibly infused with a heavy dose of post-classical influences (e.g. structuralism, post-functionalist sociology, symbolic interactionism,

pragmatism, etc.). Today, things are not so simple. Even though we have better historiographic and exegetical sources on the classics, work on classical sociology by young theorists is very scarce. The theoretical capital that can be accrued by turning to so-called “contemporary theorists” across the human sciences is equally problematic from an evaluational point of view within sociology, because the contemporary theorists simply lack the consensual field-wide recognition enjoyed by the classics.

3 WHAT THEORY REALLY MEANS

Gabi Abend wrote a paper (presented at one of the first JTS conferences) in which he distinguished seven different meanings of the word ‘theory.’ I think seven is a lower bound, and we can spend the next forty years arguing about whether there are seven or twenty “meanings” of theory. The main point is that theory and theorizing is just not a single thing. Yet, the problem is that this is not just a definitional or “lexicographic” issue, or even an issue of the fundamental polysemy of all meanings; it is a *reality*, an objective fact that there are multiple modes of doing theory and that these modes entail a different set of initial dispositions, a different history of acquisition, and ultimately the mastery of distinct (and possibly conflicting) sets of skills. I think that the proper metaphor is that there exist different “genres” of theory, and that we can all become proficient (realistically) in one, two, or at most three of these genres. As theory becomes devalued, and the field becomes increasingly heteronomous, the basic danger is to rush into thinking that our salvation entails the privileging of any one of these genres (e.g. the one preferred by so-called “Analytical Sociologists”) to the denigration of all others (e.g. theory in the classical mode, or theory in the meta-methodological mode). This (essentially retrogressive) temptation must be fought at all costs.

Consider for instance, the book that won this year’s theory prize, John Martin’s *The Explanation of Social Action*. While I think that it would be a clear instance of sociological malpractice to ever advise any young (or old) theorist to imitate John, the point that I want to make is that this book is a multi-genre book; it combines at least five genres of doing theory: conceptual clarification, classical and contemporary theory, meta-theory, meta-methodology and analytical theory. The same can be said for Isaac Reed’s brilliant *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, which combines all of these genres with an ambitious attempt at trans-disciplinary unification. For me, this is the sort of theoretical work that deserves to get (and indeed does get) our highest praise. But the problem is that both John and Isaac are increasingly bizarre, even counter-institutional figures among (relatively) young theorists. So the question that I want to pose to both the young and the old theorists among you is: how can we set it up so that we can get more Isaacs and Johns?