

Perspectives

Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section

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Farewell Essay from the Outgoing Chair

From Theory to Theorizing

Richard Swedberg, *Cornell University*

In this brief article I will make the argument that we may want to replace theory with theorizing, and to stop teaching theory and instead teach theorizing. The balanced view is that the two belong together and complement each other. But the natural balance between the two is badly off; and this justifies a strong advocacy of theorizing. It can also be argued that in teaching classical theory (and important modern works in theory), we may want to approach them from the perspective of theorizing.

The difference between theory and theorizing is crucial. Let me start with the former. *Theory* is something that the teacher typically knows and can pass on to the students. It takes a year or so to work your way through *Economy and Society* by Weber; and students lack the time for this as well as the experience to see what is essential. Post-classical or modern social theory is a jungle that no-one can make his/her way through without the help of an experienced guide.

Theorizing is very different from theory. Theorizing is something that the student does, not the teacher. Theorizing is something that you have to learn to do yourself, a bit like swimming, bicycling or speaking a new language. And no-one should begin to learn English by reading Shakespeare or to theorize by reading Durkheim.

Theorizing is democratic in a similar sense that thinking is democratic. In "What is Enlightenment?" (1784) Kant says that Enlightenment means that every human being must

think for himself/herself. Reading books, and deferring to these, he expressly states, means to hand oneself over to an authority. All have to think for themselves.

Theorizing is close to thinking; and one improves one's capacity to do both through *exercises*. Theorizing takes different expressions in the different sciences and the humanities. In philosophy you theorize exclusively in your mind; in sociology you theorize together with empirical data or what you are studying.

Two great challenges for the project of teaching theorizing rather than theory have to do with the role of the student and the role of the teacher. Both differ from when you teach theory, where the teacher is the enlightened and knowledgeable guide, and the student someone who is an open, curious and ready to receive (see Table 1).

Table 1. Teaching Theory versus Teaching Theorizing

<u>Teaching Theory</u>	<u>Teaching Theorizing</u>
students learn what theorists have said	students learn to theorize themselves
students read great texts by great theorists	students do exercises to learn to theorize
the teacher is an enlightened guide to the literature	the teacher gets the students to start theorizing

In theorizing the teacher essentially has to play the role of the Socratic midwife – helping the student to give birth to his or her child. The teacher does not want to be an authority, except in the sense of being good *continued on page 8*

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A letter to the ASA section on Sociological Theory about the Real Utopias theme of the 2012 ASA annual meeting

Erik Olin Wright, *University of Wisconsin*

(a full version of this memo can be found at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ASA/ASAsectionsMemo.pdf>)

The theme for the 2012 Annual meeting of the ASA is "Real Utopias: Emancipatory projects, institutional designs, possible futures." Here is how I described the core idea of this theme in the ASA newsletter, *Footnotes*:

"Real Utopias" seems like an oxymoron: Utopia means "nowhere" – a fantasy world of perfect harmony and social justice. To describe a proposal for social transformation as "utopian" is to dismiss it as an impractical dream outside the limits of possibility. Realists reject such fantasies as a distraction from the serious business of making practical improvements in existing institutions. The idea of real utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice: "utopia" implies developing clear-headed visions of alternatives to existing institutions that embody our *continued on next page*

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at helping people give birth. In *Theaetetus* Socrates says that only women who had given birth could be midwives.

For the student the key is exercises, autonomous exercises that the student will engage in to develop his/her own capacity to theorize.

One type of exercise could be for each student to carry out some small empirical work and learn to get a sense for what theorizing means in doing so. In working with some empirical material the student would learn to invent some concept to work with or use some existing concept, attempt a description and an explanation, perhaps in the form of a mechanism, and so on.

Another approach could be for the student to work on the canons of the discipline (or similar works), but approach them in a different way than what is usually done in teaching theory. The idea would be to approach them from a theorizing point of view and in this way open them up and not treat them as finished products.

This can be done in different ways. The student can, for example, be asked to write a diary as he or she reads and reflects on various works. One can also ask the student to single out one idea, one concept or one statement that especially appeals to him or her; and then try to deepen it or develop it in some new direction or use it as an inspiration for a new idea.

This last type of exercise can take different forms. It can, for example, be more analytical in nature than intuitive. But it is also possible to train the capacity to make informed guessing by engaging, say, in what Guy Debord calls *dérivée*, a concept that he applied to walks in the city. One wanders aimlessly through a neighborhood and tries to drift off on streets that one has never walked on before, in order to encounter something new and surprising. The goal is to increase one's capacity to guess right or what Peirce calls abduction. Peirce himself, it can be added, came to master this capacity to an astonishing degree. At one point, when he was robbed of an expensive object, he was able to determine who the

thief was and retrieve the stolen object, exclusively by relying on his intuitive skills (cf. the Seaboks's essay in *The Sign of Three*).

I have tried to teach the capacity of guessing well or abduction in a seminar on Simmel that I conducted a few years ago at Cornell. The classes consisted of myself describing my own theoretical *dérive*, inspired by some idea in Simmel, and then the students would describe theirs. Each class the students came with about a page or so with notes about their theorizing (which took place at home). At the end of the course they were asked to reflect on how their theorizing had developed in a small "paper".

I put the word paper within quote marks to indicate that not only does the move from theory to theorizing demand a change in the teacher-student relationship, the same is also true for the style of the writing. Sociology is currently limited to standard articles and monographs, typically written in a drab and stylized manner that has as its purpose to convey to the reader that the analysis is objective. The author's voice, which literary people are so keen on discovering and developing, must be silenced since it signals subjectivity, which is the opposite of objectivity.

In theorizing, the subjective element is organically part of the process as well as the presentation; and the person who theorizes is deeply aware of this. While theory products are understood as end products that present definitive results, the person who theorizes knows that definitive solutions do not exist, just repeated attempts to approach difficult problems with a combination of thinking and facts. While theory stands still and comes from a world that is gone forever, theorizing tries to deal with a world that is ever new. In writing in a theorizing mode, the author also needs to think about using forms of expression that invite the reader to think and theorize, not just present the results.

A few more points. It should be emphasized that *repetition* is a crucial element in learning to theorize. Just like some people like to take walks

every day or do yoga in the morning, repeated exercises in thinking and theorizing do pay off. After some time one is able to run/think/theorize longer, faster and better. People theorize in different ways. I myself prefer to theorize and to think by sitting absolutely still for one hour. This is and it is not armchair sociology. I do sit in a chair - but you need facts in order to think sociologically. I try to do this type of exercise every day, when it comes to thinking in general, and the same amount of time when I am at the right stage of some research project.

A second point is about art. Inspired by conversations with Hans Zetterberg I have come to believe that art should be part of *everything* in society. The reason for this is that it spreads the spirit of creativity to whatever is around it. Art should, for example, be part of architecture, law, administration - and theorizing. There are many ways in which this can be accomplished. Some questions: Should sociologists be able to write well? Is there any relationship between what Umberto Eco calls an "open work" and theorizing; and is theorizing a form of open theory? Can one speak of *catharsis* (Aristotle) being linked to the teaching of theory, and *critical distance* (Brecht) to the teaching of theorizing - or is it rather the other way around? How about old-style objectivity versus new-style reflexivity (Weber versus Bourdieu)?

The last point I want to mention has to do with *methods*. Just as it has been realized that every method is at a deeper level based on theory, it can be said that theorizing is ultimately based on method. Or rather, that a set of methods is needed in order to theorize. This also means that if we want to seriously engage in theorizing, some of the methods used today may need to be reevaluated. Parts of what is called qualitative methods are, for example, very close to the kind of methods that make up theorizing. Theorizing and methods overlap to some extent - even if the main purpose of using methods, as opposed to theorizing, is to verify/prove what theorizing has come up with.

During the fall of 2010 I will teach a small course in theorizing at Copenhagen University for graduate students ("The Craft of Theorizing: Learning How to Theorize in *continued on next page*

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Sociology and Social Science"). It is the first course exclusively devoted to theorizing that I have taught, and I expect to learn much from it. I will proceed in the following way. The students will read a small number of texts and select some element in each of these to theorize from, along the lines described above when I discussed the *dérive*. The readings include Simmel's "Sociology of the Senses", Mauss' "Body Techniques", Abbott's "Lyrical Sociology", Tocqueville's "France before the Revolution" and the first 35 pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The lectures will consist of me speaking the first hour, followed by break, followed by one hour with the students presenting and discussing their attempts to theorize. For their final examination, the students have been asked to produce a small writing in which they reflect on their progress in learning to theorize.

When I lecture, I will try to outline different aspects of what can be called *the craft of theorizing* (which was the theme for the Mini Conference of the Theory Section at the annual meeting of ASA in 2010 in Atlanta). I plan to speak about how to develop your own concepts, how to make a description, how to open yourself up for intuition-abduction, how to approach the canons in sociology from a theorizing perspective, as opposed to from a theory perspective; and also how to approach non-sociological works from the viewpoint of theorizing (literature, art - especially art). The organic necessity of using empirical material in theorizing will be emphasized; and that one should not approach one's topic in order to use or confirm some theory. The Owl of Minerva is the product of theory, not theorizing. The full force of theorizing must not come into the picture until one knows quite a lot about some topic (and then the movement goes forth and back, between theorizing, gathering more material, theorizing again - until the whole thing is ready).

It is my sense that the transition in sociology from theory to theorizing will take time and experience to be successful. Much of what I have said in this short article will no doubt be pushed to the side in the process. To get thousands of ASA members to collectively engage in a theoretical *dérive* in the next city where the ASA meets may, for example, never take place. Still, it is my strong sense that the move from theory to theorizing is the right one and would make sociology stronger.

Decoteau, continued

Holzer (University of Wisconsin) who suggested that her work in a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana forced a reconsideration of theories of governmentality. Caregiving, according to her analysis, can operate as a form of coercion and serves as one mechanism through which refugee populations are disciplined. Comparing civic engagement in two different cities, Josh Pacewicz (Stanford University) argued that a shift in civic institutional configurations helps explain the movement from political participation to disengagement in party politics. In the 'old' model, civic engagement based on reciprocal obligations leads to a factional community structure and identification with political parties, whereas in the 'new' style, un-binding partnerships creates inclusive community structures and a subsequent disengagement with national politics. Drawing on both Bourdieusian and Gramscian perspectives, Silvia Pasquetti (University of California, Berkeley) suggested that group formation and penal policy theories need to be expanded upon in order to make sense of the differential responses to state power exhibited by a Palestinian Arab community on the Israeli side of the Green Line and a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank. Finally, Besnik Pula (University of Michigan) argued that focusing on the role law plays in states' transitions to modernity allows for a corrective to the binarizing theoretical tendency within the comparative historical literature on societal transformations which tends to focus on either the 'state' or 'society' as opposed to attending to their causal co-determination. Combining a neo-institutionalist approach with theories of the law, Pula analyzes the differential trajectory of nationalization in Albania and Turkey, illustrating how the adoption of Western legal traditions and institutions radically reconstituted state-society relations. Andreas Wimmer (UCLA) provided tremendously detailed feedback and advice to each of the participants on how to improve their papers. In particular, he suggested alternative theoretical perspectives within which they could couch their interventions, thereby challenging each of them to either defend their theoretical choices or consider the ways in which a different theoretical frame might lend itself toward a different analysis of their empirical puzzles.

Throughout the day, several themes emerged again and again: the 'return' to pragmatism, what it means to *practice* social theory, and how to newly (re)conceptualize social action, state power and institutional formations in the age of neoliberalism and globalization. There was quite a bit of diversity regarding the professional status and university affiliation of those attending, and a large number of theoretical perspectives were also represented; however, there were quite a number of discussions both during the conference and afterwards about the overrepresentation of men and the racial/ethnic homogeneity of the theory section as a whole. The pool of submissions received for the conference reflected these biases. Perhaps the problem is partially related to a lack of clarity about how social theory is defined and practiced within sociology as a whole, not to mention theory's complicated relationship to empirical research. Distributing the call for papers more broadly and encouraging sociologists who engage in global studies, race/ethnicity scholarship, and feminist studies to submit abstracts may be a possible solution. It is clear that demographic and intellectual diversification should be a primary goal of the section, for, if achieved, our understanding of what it means to practice theory, and the conceptual capacities of theory itself, would be expanded and augmented.

The JTS will be held again next year in Chicago, so please do encourage your students and colleagues to submit abstracts and register to attend the event and join in the stimulating theoretical conversations. Next year's organizers will be Michal Pagis of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tom Medvetz of University of California, San Diego.

Perspectives

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Chair's Corner

The Craft of Theorizing

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Since a few years back the incoming Chair of our section suggests the theme for the mini-conference at the next annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. The theme I have chosen is *the craft of theorizing*, and I hope it will suit most of the members of our section. Next year, in Atlanta, there will be one invited session on this theme and three open sessions, including one for junior theorists. My hope is that this is a worthwhile topic, and that it will work as an inspiration, not only to reflect on theorizing but also to theorize.

So – what exactly does it mean, *the craft of theorizing*? One good thing with this project is that it is a bit vague and open to many and different answers. One would, for example, expect the craft of theorizing to demand different skills, depending on what type of sociological theory is involved. Theorizing in, say, a historical and comparative study may differ from how you go about theory in network analysis or in rational choice.

At the heart of the notion of a craft of theorizing is that theorizing represents a distinct skill or rather, a distinct set of skills. It is not the same as doing empirical work or using a method, even if theorizing usually goes together with these two activities.

The craft of theorizing is also something that has to be learned. You essentially learn theorizing by theorizing. Some of the things that one does

when theorizing are easy to describe, while others are hard to be explicit about. The overall goal is good sociological workmanship, of which theorizing is an independent and necessary part.

For those who are interested in exploring the historical side of the craft of theorizing, there are a few obvious references. One is the appendix to *The Sociological Imagination*, called “On Intellectual Craftmanship”. Mills describes how he does sociology, including theory, in vivid and personal detail. For the notion of craftmanship, see also Richard Sennet’s recent book, *The Craftsman* (2008).

The classics and earlier sociologists should also be part of the discussion. Durkheim created his own little sociological guild around *l'Année sociologique*, with himself as the grandmaster and Marcel Mauss and others as the apprentices. And what about Weber and Simmel? Weber crammed his mind full of history ever since he was a child and was, throughout his life, very methodical in his intellectual pursuits. But he also knew that ideas do not come when you want them to come. They arrive, as it were, “when smoking a cigar on the sofa” (“Science as a Vocation”).

And Simmel? We have his answer to a student who asked what qualifications Simmel wanted his students to have, in order to join his seminar in philosophy: “You have to be able to philosophize about everything in this room”. In sum: knowing a lot of history, being methodical, being flexible (and smoking cigars on the sofa) may all be of help in theorizing well.

While I do think that it is meaningful to speak about theorizing as a craft, I do not know exactly how to define the craft of theorizing. But I feel confident that this is something that we can solve collectively; and remember, there are more than 800 members in the Theory Section! So, I hope that each of you will send in your ideas and thoughts on the craft of theorizing to the Newsletter, and also submit papers to the three open sessions in Atlanta.

To start the discussion off, let me suggest some quick thoughts on topics that are closely and loosely related to the craft of theorizing:

Context of Discovery & Context of Presentation.

Sociologists need to be competent in presenting their ideas and in testing them, according to generally accepted criteria. But the context of presentation seems to have overtaken the context of discovery in mainstream sociology, not least in terms of energy and time. We may therefore at the present stage want to spend more time on the context of discovery. While much of what these days is called theory belongs to the context of presentation, theorizing belongs to the context of discovery.

Reason, Abduction, Intuition, Introspection

Reason is essential! The process of thinking can be characterized as a conversation with oneself (e.g. Mead) – and it is a conversation in which Reason has to be the judge. There is no way around this; everyone is his or her own judge – and also his or her own theoretician.

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Renew your ASA membership today!

Current ASA memberships will expire at the end of December. To ensure that you maintain continuous access to ASA journals, newsletters, and ASA services (such as access to the ASA job bank and online membership directories), renew your membership today. Renewal is a simple and quick online process. Access the membership form from the ASA website: http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/join_or_renew/join. When you renew your ASA membership, you will also have the opportunity to renew your membership in the Theory section. Strong membership numbers allow the section to offer multiple opportunities for interesting theory presentations at annual meetings (see p. 8 for a preview of next summer's Theory section mini-conference events). We appreciate your continued support.

Swedberg, continued

But there is also the fact that good ideas cannot be produced when we so desire. They just pop up (or not), in a process that the great Charles Pierce calls abduction. To this we must add intuition, which involves more search and sensitivity than abduction. Intuition is sometimes there when you need it and sometimes not. Is it a gift or a skill that can be taught and improved? The answer is important.

And when we talk about different ways of giving birth to theory, why not also take a new look at introspection, as a potentially useful technique within the context of discovery? From Durkheim and onwards, sociologists have regarded introspection with hostility, mainly because it often replaced serious empirical research among the early social scientists. Today however, when most sociologists agree that empirical research must be an integral part of sociology, we are in a position to reconsider the issue of introspection.

Muses, Friends and Other Sources of Theoretical Inspiration

Once you speak about intuition, the figure of the muse is not far away - the person whose presence and being inspires us to theorize extra well. A muse can be described as a form of interaction where inspiration only goes one way. In this sense the process can be described as a form of asymmetric social action (Weber). But social science is also full of examples where inspiration goes both ways in the interaction. Here are some: Beaumont and Tocqueville, Marx and Engels, Sartre and de Beauvoir, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. Should this be a topic for sociologists: Who becomes a muse and when...?

Resources: A Room of One's Own - and More!

Where exactly do we do our theorizing - in our studies, in our offices or somewhere else? What does the architecture of places where one can do good theorizing look like? Like Wittgenstein's hut in Norway or the scriptorium of the past? Does theorizing also have its own interior design? Where, for example, do you find those arm-chairs that old-style theorists loved so much? And how about a desk like the one that C. Wright Mills let build, with a separate box for each chapter in the book he was writing?

We know, from Virginia Woolf, that a room of one's own ("with a lock on the door") is needed for someone to produce good fiction. Is this also true for theorizing in sociology? For theorizing by graduate students? One more thing: Virginia Woolf did not only mention a room of one's own. She also said that you need *some money* - money for food, rent, books, peace of mind...

Paper, Pens, Desks, Computers

Some people theorize while sitting absolutely still and doing nothing. Others prefer to write - with or without special pens, in special note books or on plain sheets of paper. Do you use the computer or do you like to write on those slanted writing desks that the medieval monks had? Maybe we need an anthropology of theorizing, that looks at the materiality of theorizing as well as its cultural side.

Skills and A Few Tricks of Theorizing

Theory construction has its own important literature, by Stinchcombe and others, which needs to be carefully studied. There also exist some quick tricks of theorizing or warm-up exercises before the main Act of Theorizing can begin. Here are a few:

1. *Pluralize!*

You don't have to work out your own theory of Love, Trust or Capitalism - just add an "s" and you are on the way! There are different kinds of love, different kinds of trust and varieties of capitalism.

2. *Generalize!*

The analysis of some topic often invites to a theoretical insight that has a natural fit with the data. A good theory, however, also covers situations that one intuitively would not apply it to. Simmel liked to speak about "forms"; and it is a good term in this context. Stripping the theoretical statement down to its bare bones is also a good exercise, which makes it possible to judge its generality and usefulness.

3. *Turn what you study into a social relationship!*

According to one of the great theorists in our discipline, capital is not an object but a social relationship; and according to another, the stranger is not a person but a relationship. This trick also works elsewhere: many things can be conceptualized as social relationships. But how about theory itself - is that a relationship as well? Or is it rather a language game - one that by definition encompasses *both* what is being said *and* what is being done?

4. *Change nouns into verbs!*

Weber tried to avoid nouns in his theoretical sociology and made an effort to replace them with verbs (Ch. 1, *Economy and Society*). Gurwitsch and Giddens say that we should speak of "structuration", not of "structures". Do we similarly want to speak of theorizing or of theory - of the process of doing theory or just the end product?

Descriptions, Concepts, Explanations (Small and Big)

Description can be seen as a kind of theory and vice versa. Being able to extract a concept from a mass of empirical material also represents a very useful skill for a theorist. Sociologists

do not read Kierkegaard, which is a pity because he is the most nimble and light-footed theoretician I have ever come across. Consider some of his most handsome concepts: *existence, dread, repetition*. With a little effort, all of them can also be turned into sociology.

Sociologists not only describe and construct concepts, they also explain; and a classic rule is that social facts are explained through other social facts. Or more precisely, social facts are basically explained through "the constitution of the internal social milieu" (Durkheim, *Rules*). Explanations can be small or big, and they sometimes involve a distinct social mechanism. While it is easy to get caught up in a discussion of what is distinctive about a social mechanism, what is really hard is to suggest a new one.

Theorizing, from this perspective essentially consists of three parts: it begins with a description (1), proceeds with the creation of concepts (2), and ends with the explanation (3). Each of the three tasks demands its own set of skills and also represents a fine accomplishment in its own right, when executed well. Theorists who excel in all three of these tasks are, like Keynes' "good economists", few and far between. Good theoreticians are "the rarest of birds" (Keynes, *Essays in Biography*).

Teaching the Craft of Theorizing

One can learn the craft of theorizing, but can one also teach it? If the answer is "yes" - and this is a question that needs discussion - why not take some advice from the most famous teacher of all times? According to Socrates, the teacher should act as a mid-wife and as a stingray; and this may also be true for the teaching of the craft of theorizing. Your task is to help the students give birth, not clone yourself. You are only to assist, and see to it that all goes well - that the child is delivered healthy, kicking and screaming!

You are also to act as a stingray - to stop the students from thinking what is being thought by everybody else, and to start thinking for themselves. So-called normal science is, from this perspective, norm-based science or repetitive science.

And what about the teacher? The teacher is sterile, according to Socrates - something that is worth figuring out what it means. He or she is also supposed to be a gadfly. A gadfly is the fly that buzzes in the ear of the big ox called Power. A lazy whack of the tail of the ox is enough to send the little insect flying - but it always returns. And it keeps buzzing.

Theorizing Never Ends!

There is no special end to this short article - theorizing never ends! There is no true or final theory. We will theorize to the end because the task of theorizing never ends. Because we love to theorize and because good theorizing is thinking in ever new ways.