

# Theorizing with the help of the classics

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## Abstract

This article addresses the issue of how to theorize with the help of the classics in sociology; and it is pointed out that the main difficulty involved is that Weber et al have told us next to nothing of how they actually produced their analyses. We are left with trying to search written statements for some clues; and there are not many of these. Furthermore, written statements represent a distinct universe of their own, meaning by this that some things can be said in a written form and others not. While the advantages of having something in a written form are clear, much of what goes into theorizing is of a nature that is hard to express in a written form. Several suggestions for how to theorize with the help of the classics can nevertheless also be found in the article.

## Keywords

Classics, essay, scientific article, theorizing, theory

I would like to begin by thanking Bryan Turner and Simon Susen for all the work they have done over the years to make *The Journal of Classical Sociology* into such a successful and interesting journal. *JCS* has clearly fulfilled what its mission statement from 2001 promised, namely to keep the classical sociological tradition alive and add to it. *Thank you!*

## Theory and theorizing

The purpose of this brief article is to suggest how one can improve the understanding of the classics, and also show how they can be taught in a productive way to students, by looking at them from the perspective of *theorizing*. By theorizing is meant the use of theory in the sociological research process.

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One can also say that theorizing describes what happens *before* a theory is formulated for publication. You start by locating a problem; you then focus on a phenomenon; and last, you try to explain it. This is by no means a linear process, as Robert Merton has emphasized; there are “opportunistic adaptations. . . intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that actually clutter up the inquiry” (Merton, 1968: 4; see also e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 220). Emotions are also part of this process, such as excitement, disappointment and frustration (e.g. Osbeck and Nersessian, 2011).

This way of describing the process of theorizing is helpful when you are investigating something that is new, where no theory exists but where one is needed. In reality, however, this is rarely the case; most topics have usually been researched for a long time, which means that there already exists a theory which may also have been added to. We are in other words most often in a situation where it is *the theory* that comes before theorizing, not the other way around.

This also means, I will argue, that you need to define theory differently from the way this is usually done in sociology (for its conventional use, see e.g. Abend, 2008; Merton, 1968: 39, 66). Instead of viewing theory exclusively as the written explanation (*explanans*) of a phenomenon (*explanandum*), all of the activities that go into the production of the text must be included. Theory, in other words, needs to be understood in a novel manner, in a way that includes the many types of actions that go into it: finding a problem, selecting a phenomenon to study, and eventually explaining it according to scientific standards.

The main focus in this view of theory is on *actions* (mental and otherwise), and not on its final existence as a written and printed formulation. For those who are knowledgeable in the philosophy of science, it is clear that it has some affinities with “the pragmatic view” (e.g. Winther, 2016). The reference to pragmatic, however, does not mean that it draws on the work of the pragmatists but simply that it is practical in nature.<sup>1</sup>

## The problem with theory as a written statement

If one difficulty with using theory in today’s sociology is that it is not defined in a helpful way, another has to do with the fact that it is traditionally only encountered in written form, as a statement in print. Especially students, who encounter theory in its written version over and over again during their education, may more or less consciously come to think that this as all there is to a theory. They are not taught you need to distinguish between theory as a written statement, and theory in a more realistic form, as a set of activities.

More generally, in modern academic culture what is written (and published) is highly valued, while much less attention is paid to its oral parts: what is said during seminars, lectures, in conversations, and the like. Most of this is simply left to vanish. The same goes for the know-how of how to handle theory in actual research.

A bit like the objects you find in glass-boxes in museums, the published texts are often all that remain of the academic activities of sociologists. And as Bourdieu points out, even these are not as final as they may appear:

In the case of myself there are perhaps fifteen versions between an oral text and its appearance as a book. And each time I think I am finished. . . Also, when I want it to really be the finished

version, I say, don't show it to me because I wouldn't be able to stop myself from making changes. And this isn't only when I write, because I constantly work and progress. (Bourdieu, 2002: 221)

Bourdieu also says that "there is something deceptive about the finished texts. . .where everything has been done to eliminate all the traces of hesitations, regrets, eliminated passages, in one word the draft" (Bourdieu, 2002: 193; see also Bourdieu, 1990).

That there exist some drawbacks to written texts was already noticed in ancient Greece, as we know from Socrates and Plato (1997a: 551–553/275–276, 1997b: 1658–1660/340–341). That you have read something in a text, Socrates says in *Phaedrus*, does not mean that you have the same kind of good command over the content that you would have had, if it was part of what you already know and remember. Furthermore, a text cannot answer your questions; it is mute. The reader is in the same position as someone who is looking at a painting. It is also very hard to give clear instructions in writing for how to do something. And finally, Socrates says, having read a text often gives you the illusion that you know more than you actually do.

The formulations in *Phaedrus* are richer than this summary of Socrates' views conveys. People who read, Socrates says, "will not practise using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external" (Plato, 1997a: 551–52/275a). To be able to think well, in contrast, you need to "try to remember from the inside, completely on [your own]." The goal should be "a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul."

Another important argument that highlights the differences between what is written and what is oral can be found in the important work of Olson (1977; see also 1994). He points out that when something is put in a written form it is decontextualized and tends to become a universe of its own. The link to the situation in which it originated is cut off; and the meaning shifts from something that takes place in the physical world, to what can only be expressed in the text. Words and categories may, for example, be related to each other in a written text, in ways that are logical but have no equivalence in reality.

Simmel has touched on similar issues to these in a small article called "Excursus on Written Communication." He notes that once you have written something down, the content is "fixed" and takes on "an objective form" (Simmel, 2009: 343). But this objectivity only goes so far; and if you take a close look, you will find that what has been written down is characterized by "a blending of precision and ambiguity" (Simmel, 2009: 344).

Yet another difficulty that comes with reading is discussed by Lave and March (1993) in *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences*. The very act of reading, they say, tends to block your thinking. When you read a text, you get drawn into it; and this makes it hard to think about what you are reading.

"We postulate a Gresham's Law of Study," Lave and March say: "faced with a choice of reading about something versus thinking about it, people will choose reading. Reading drives out thinking" (Lave and March, 1993: 43). The reason for this is that "reading is a well-defined technology at which most of us are relatively competent; it provides easily recognized benchmarks of progress and completion; and it can be accomplished with certainty in some easily predicted time."

Can the author of a text in theory do something to make it easier for the reader *to think* when she reads, rather than being passive? Lave and March have one suggestion, which they also use in their book. This is to write at strategic points in their arguments, on a separate line and with bold letters: **STOP AND THINK**. This helps the reader to snap out of the reading and start thinking (similarly see Arendt, 1977: 78).

There also exist other ways to counter the problems that come with reading a text. Noam Chomsky has described his own approach as follows:

reading a book doesn't just mean turning the pages. It means thinking about it, identifying parts that you want to go back to, asking how to place it in a broader context, pursuing the ideas. There's no point in reading a book if you let it pass before your eyes and then forget about it ten minutes later. Reading a book is an intellectual exercise, which stimulates thought, questions, imagination. . .when I read a book I care about, I [also] want to make comments in the margins, I want to underline things. I want to make notes on the flyleaf. Otherwise I don't even know what to go back to. (Chomsky, 2013: 104)

One question to ask when you read an article or a book is perhaps simply the following: what exactly do you want to remember? To try to answer this question focuses the mind; and this is important also when you read for theorizing purposes. There exists no easy answer to this question, but once you decide that theorizing is important, you tend to look for specific items in a book. This would include the various parts that make up a theory (such as *explanans*, *explanandum*, and concepts); how these are linked to one another; and how they are related to empirical facts.

## The centrality of exercises

It would have been good if the classical authors in sociology had told us how to theorize or at least how they themselves went about producing their own works, including their theories. But they do not. A close reading of the works of the classics gives a few hints, but that is all. This is also true for their lecture notes, letters and other material that have been unearthed over the years, most recently for Weber in the *Gesamtausgabe* (e.g. Bert, 2018).

It is true that both *Capital* and *Economy and Society* were long in gestation, and that there exist several early versions and drafts. Something can perhaps be discovered by comparing these; and by establishing how a certain explanation or concept has changed over time and why. Weber, for example, published an article in 1913 that he later rewrote and placed at the beginning of *Economy and Society* (Weber, 2012). And Marx gives a summary account in *Grundrisse* of the method he would later use in *Capital* ("The Method of Political Economy," Marx, 1971: 33–41).

But there is usually more to the works of the classics than what can be established in this manner; and one way for students to get a sense of this is through *theory-related exercises*. The role of exercises for theorizing is central. Mental exercises have a long and honorable history when it comes to theory, starting with philosophy. In fact, ancient Greek philosophy was not primarily focused on texts and their interpretation, as is modern philosophy, but on carrying out various types of exercises, in order to learn how to live a life in wisdom (e.g. Hadot, 2002). The point of philosophy was to change yourself

or “to form more than to inform,” to cite the main historian of philosophical exercises (Hadot, 2011: 88).

Christianity took over the tradition of exercises from Greek and Roman philosophy, and transformed them into spiritual and educational exercises, both for common people and religious elites such as the Jesuits and other orders. Some early scientists also used exercises, for example Descartes in *Meditations*. Universities and schools later developed their own secular version of educational exercises, often reflecting the dominant ideals of the time (e.g. Durkheim, 1977: 197, 248–249).

In some cases the exercises that have just been mentioned took place within institutions; in others they were developed and used by the individuals themselves (self-exercises). The variety of exercises is consequently large; and some are clearly better suited for learning how to theorize than others. We also know from the teaching of methods in sociology that exercises help the students to use these in an efficient manner in their own research.

One exercise in theorizing that, for example, James Coleman was asked to do in a theory class taught by Merton, was to read a book in a special way. The book in question was *The Social System* (1951) by Parsons which had just appeared. “He [Merton] asked us to go through the early chapters and to note each theoretical sentence, labelling it according to type: was it a *definition*, an *empirical generalization*, a *reconceptualization*, a *respecification* of a lower level generalization?” (Coleman, 1990: 29). By “respecification” Merton meant a special technique for how to improve the existing conceptualization of some phenomenon; and by “reconceptualization” a technique that had as its goal to improve an existing concept (Swedberg, 2019)

Merton was very interested in teaching students both how to theorize and in using exercises as part of this. In a seminar he taught in the 1950s he also tried to teach the students how to come up with new and interesting ideas with the help of the classics, in this case an essay by Simmel (Swedberg, forthcoming). Merton would start each seminar by reading out loud a few sentences from an essay by Simmel, then comment on these, trying both to formulate Simmel’s ideas in a clear way and to develop them further. Students were then asked to comment, and a general discussion followed. After this, Merton would mention some contemporary sociological studies that were relevant for what was being discussed; and also this was followed by a general discussion. During the second half of the seminar, the students were asked to select some idea from Simmel’s text that had been discussed in the seminar, and develop it in a paper.

From Merton’s perspective, the primary goal with proceeding in this way was to teach the students how to use the classics to develop ideas that they could use in their research. His name for how to go about this was *restatement*: you take a statement in the classics and try to improve it by restating it. This can be done in many different ways, such as trying to clarify a statement, specifying it, and more (see Table 1).

The students who took Merton’s classes in theorizing did not engage in empirical research as part of these. The reason for this was Merton’s conviction that it would take too much time to do so; empirical research is typically time-consuming. This is no doubt correct. One way to bypass this difficulty, however, would be to let the research be of a light and exploratory nature. The students could, for example, conduct exploratory studies and just collect a small amount of data (for exploratory studies, see Swedberg, 2020).

**Table 1.** The *restatement* or Merton's technique for how to come up with new research ideas with the help of the classics.

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Take an interesting theoretical statement from a classic and try to restate it together with the students by
Clarifying it
Specifying it
Generalizing from it
Rephrasing it
Rephrasing it, using modern sociological language
Providing concrete examples of the statement (particularize)
Spelling out its implications
Adding a concrete context
Confronting it with similar ideas in today's sociology
Pulling out a social structure from the statement
Deciding if anything in it constitutes a pattern
Trying to transform it into a social mechanism
Seeing if a process is involved
Exploring what an analogy would look like

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Source: Richard Swedberg, "Taking a Seminar with Merton" (forthcoming).

In 1955–1957 Merton conducted a seminar at Columbia University in which he taught the students how to come up with new ideas for their empirical research, with the help of the classics. He used an essay by Simmel, from which he selected single theoretical statements, each of which were explored in the seminar.

To proceed in this manner would make the exercise come considerably closer to what happens in reality, when you theorize as part of empirical research.

The students could also be told to follow the basic principles in the work of the classics that describe how to conduct sociological research. These are: Ch. 1 in *Economy and Society* (especially Section 1) and *The Rules of Sociological Method* by Durkheim. Exercises centered around the basic units of sociology that are discussed in these works—*social action* for Weber and *social fact* for Durkheim—would help the students to develop a solid foundation for their future research.

One example of how this type of exercises could be structured would be to let the students research some social phenomenon quickly, and then try to analyze it with the help of these basic concepts. This type of exercise would also teach the students something else, namely the importance of breaking with everyday terms when you theorize in sociology, what Durkheim calls preconceptions (*prénotions*). The students also need to realize that the object of study in sociology always has to be created, as in any science.

By theorizing with the classics in this manner, students can lay a solid foundation for their future work. The focus on social action and social facts will in addition help them to avoid constructing their analyses on the shifty foundation of what is "social," somehow related to "society," and so on.

## Theorizing and public writing

One difficulty with learning how to theorize has to do with the demands that come with writing up the research and present it for publication. To do so one has to engage in a

form of public writing, as opposed to private writing. This means that you have to transform your research experience and what you have come up with into something that can be expressed in the type of written form that is approved by the profession.

For sociologists this form is increasingly the so-called scientific article, which presents distinct difficulties for those who are interested in capturing how you work with theory. The empirical part and the methods part are usually given plenty of place in a sociological article these days. Very little place is, on the other hand, reserved for theory, not to speak of theorizing.

What has just been said about the scientific article can be illustrated with the following instructions for “how to read a (quantitative) article,” issued by the American Sociological Association:

The first thing to realize is that quantitative articles follow a formula. They all have more or less the same structure: an introductory section in which the problem is introduced and the objectives of the paper are previewed; a theoretical section in which the literature that relates to the problem addressed in the paper is described; a data section where the data sources for the analysis are described; the analysis or results section, where the various statistical tests performed are explained and the findings presented; and finally, a discussion or conclusion section in which the main findings are linked back to the theoretical literature. (Krippner, 2000)

The article that is used as an example to illustrate this statement comes from *American Sociological Review*; and it describes the relationship between birth-order and social attitudes (Freese et al., 1999). The reader is given careful instructions by the ASA writer for how to work through the tables, while “the theoretical section” (which is devoted to something called to “birth-order theory”) is quickly passed over. References to basic sociological theory are sketchy, and no references are made to the classics, including Durkheim whose ideas about integration would have been helpful. We are in the presence, in other words, of another Gresham’s Law: Efforts to understand the methods part, have driven out concerns with the theory part.

But there also exist alternatives to the scientific article; and the most important of these is the essay. As a quick look at sociological journals from a few decades ago will show, the essay was once considered a legitimate way of writing an article. This, however, is not the case any longer. And with its removal from the sociological journals, a form of expression that is considerably more flexible and open-ended than the scientific article has been lost.

At the time when the classics were active, the essay was a fully accepted form of expression in sociological journals, and this lasted for a few decades more. When it disappeared from the major journals, it can be added, it was in silence and without any protests. Few seem to have missed the essay, even if there are a few exceptions. When, for example, Merton towards the end of his life summed up his research, he touched on this issue. He said that his “preferred style of exposition” had always been the essay, not the scientific article (Merton, 1996: 357). He explained why this was the case as follows:

Designed to instruct fellow scientists about a potential new contribution to a field of knowledge, the stylized scientific paper presents an immaculate appearance that tells little or nothing of the intuitive leaps, false starts, loose ends, opportunistic adaptations, and happy accidents that



actually cluttered up the inquiry. . . In contrast, the essay provides scope for asides and correlatives of a kind that interest historians and sociologists of science and is, in any case, better suited to my ungovernable preference for linking humanistic and scientific aspects of social knowledge. (Merton, 1996: 357)

Merton was also of the opinion that what he called “the scientific essay” differs on some points from the ordinary essay (Merton, 1968: 14–15). While the author of, say, a literary essay is not supposed to use the same word twice, unless it is absolutely necessary, “the language rules of science, on the other hand, require that the writer always use the same word for the same idea” (Merton, 1963).

Regardless of this issue, what Merton and many other social scientists have appreciated with the essay is its great flexibility (e.g. Adorno, 1991; Lukacs, 2010; see also Woolf, 2002). It not only provides a place for logical arguments but also for plenty of things that are not allowed in a scientific article, such as tentative insights, personal reflections, and various asides. And it is precisely this that makes the essay so useful when you e.g. want to discuss a topic such as theorizing.

## Concluding remarks

Those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naïve.

—Socrates in *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1997a: 552/375c)

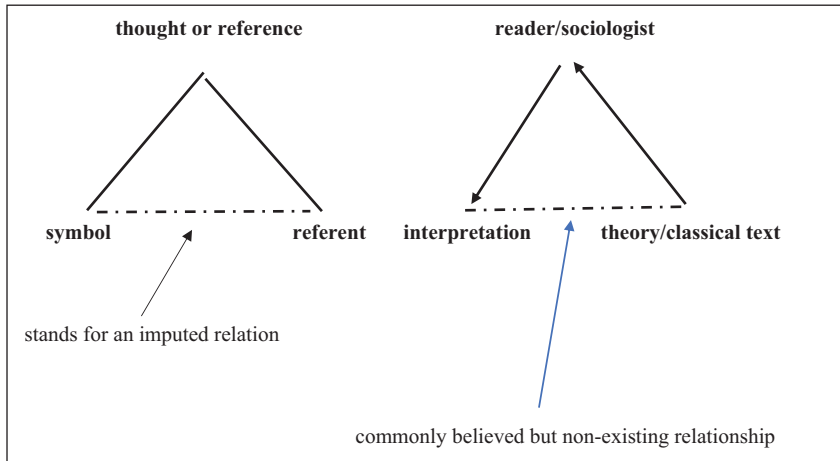
Theory is not a set of propositions, nor a set of models, nor anything of that. It is. . . a rich set of interlocking practices.

—Nancy Cartwright, “Middle-Range Theory” (2020: 278)

In order to be good in theorizing you need to have a good knowledge of theory; and what has been said in this article about theorizing with the help of the classics should not be seen as an argument for stopping to teach the classics in a traditional way. The issue, as I see it, is rather how to find a good way to mix traditional theory-teaching with the teaching of theorizing: Should one, for example, start with a course in classical theory, followed by one in theorizing, or should one perhaps reverse the order? One could also try to mix the two in the same course; and maybe have a course that stretches over a full year, in which the students alternate between reading theory and doing theory?

Regardless of how this issue is resolved, it should be made clear to the students that all interpretations or “readings” of a text, be it a classic or not, must pass through the mind of the reader, and that the reader in this sense “awakens” the text and creates its interpretation. This may seem like a trivial remark, but as already Ogden and Richards notes in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), it is commonly believed that there exists a direct link between *the text* and its interpretation. But as they note: “words ‘mean’ nothing by themselves. It is only when a thinker makes use of them that they stand for anything, or, in one sense, have ‘meaning’” (Ogden and Richards, 1989: 9–10; see Figure 1).





**Figure 1.** A common mistake in exploring the meaning of a text (Ogden and Richards).

Source: The figure to the left is from *The Meaning of Meaning* by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards (p. 11); while the one to the right is the same but applied to the topic of this article. “The *practical* problem, since we must use words in a discussion, is: *How far is our discussion itself distorted by habitual attitudes towards words, and lingering assumptions due to theories no longer openly held but still allowed to guide our practice?* The chief of these assumptions derives from the magical theory of the name as part of the thing, the theory of an inherent connection between symbols and referents. This legacy leads in practice to the search for *the* meaning of words” (Ogden and Richards, p. 244).

Ogden and Richard show in this way that there exist no “true” or “correct” interpretation of a text, something that many of us already know but often tend to forget. They also point out that the reader has to recreate the text in working it through. The capacity to do so is closely related to another remarkable human capacity that is central to the sociological enterprise, namely *the capacity to theorize or to come up with explanations for what exists*.

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1. For somewhat similar approaches, see e.g. Brubaker (1993) and Cartwright (2020). The approach of Brubaker is in my view too much centred around Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, while that of Cartwright does not mention the mistakes, ups and downs, etc, which are an organic part of the theorizing process.

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