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LETTER FROM THE CHAIR
Theory - The Hydra-Matic™ Transmission to the Future
John R. Hall - University of California - Davis & Santa Cruz

Indulge me for giving Theory a Durkheimian pat on its collective back. What a great section! We are more than 800 members strong, with participants from most every wing of our rambling split-level (social and sociological) theory house, truly impressive scholars honored each year by the section’s awards and prizes, strong theory journals, and a healthy engagement on the part of young sociologists, most spectacularly in the Junior Theorists Symposium held each year around the ASA meetings (Nota bene: you don’t have to be very junior to attend, trust me). To see more about all of this, check out the section website, http://www.asatheory.org, where you also can learn how to make a (self or other) nomination for next summer’s prizes and awards. We can all take pride in how much commitment there is to theory and the section.

At the 2017 ASA meetings in Montréal, section chair Neil Gross organized terrific Theory section sessions on issues too rarely addressed – about the professional challenges of being a practicing theorist. For next year’s sessions, we will walk the other side of the street, by zeroing in on the scholarly stakes of theory. I am going to “back in” to previewing the 2018 sessions through a bit of stocktaking about theory’s prospects.

If we were to fully credit accounts about the 1970s “near-death” of sociology in general and theory in particular (e.g., Turner 2009:553), the commitment to the section and to theorizing that I have witnessed might seem a bit odd. After its heyday in the 1960s – with systems theory and structural-functionalism as “grand” theory and Merton’s program of middle-range theory, both connected to empirical research – in the ’70s and ’80s theory suffered what modern theorists might take as decline. The reasons were not only political (a major basis for dissing Talcott Parsons) but also intellectual: the rise and autocritique of structural marxism, the linguistic turn, broader epistemological dismissals of any “correspondence’ approach to concept formation (e.g., by Rorty 1979), successive waves of feminist theory, poststructural and deconstructionist developments, the cultural turn, the historical turn, increased significance given to reflexivity and emergence (foreshadowed by critical theory as the historicist critique of theory), the postmodern suspicion of grand metanarratives, and postcolonial critiques of the eurocentric biases of theory. These developments deeply enriched theoretical discourse and yielded much greater sophistication in sociological analysis but, in the bargain, they undermined the grand
modern theoretical project.

So, how has theory as a focused enterprise persisted in the face of these developments? Yeah, maybe there are some rational actors who seek to feather their nests with cultural capital and advance their professional positions in theory as a Bourdieusian field. But that assumes a vibrant and growing field, well past near death. My own admittedly anecdotal experience does not rule out rational-choice or Bourdieusian analysis, but it is different.

The commitments that I have witnessed mark a wide sentiment that the section and theory matter. Across diverse sociological projects, theorizing is an activity that contributes to the commonwealth – of the discipline, of sociologists and other scholars concerned with substantive research questions, and of reflexive, global, and public understandings about the social, its institutions and structurations, and possibilities.

Perhaps (heresy alert!) Parsons (1937) was correct to think that institutions persist, or change, partly because of the distinctive patterns by which individual actions and collectivities reinforce one another, or fail to. For theory, both the character of ideas and their deployments have shifted radically over the past half-century. The (perhaps obscure) title of this essay plays upon these “shifts” by invoking the automotive Hydra-Matic™ transmission that General Motors offered soon after Parsons completed his 1937 book. In its modern heyday, theory would move the sociological vehicle directly down the road to knowledge, shifting gears progressively. Today, the very character of transmission has shifted. The diverse and complex developments point to as-yet unfulfilled possibilities.

After Parsons, enterprises of “grand theory” – meant to chart the overall character and trajectory of society – did not grind to a halt, as the works of Habermas, Luhmann, Giddens, Schluchter, Foucault, Beck, and Bauman attest. Nor is it appropriate to casually dismiss aspirations toward “general theory” as a project describing social processes, structures, and dynamics, e.g., by proponents of rational-actor models, Bourdieusian field theory, and network analysis. On a different front, new or reinvigorated philosophically based stances toward sociological inquiry – pragmatism, the ontological project of critical realism, the new interpretivism, and semiotic analysis – all have inspired path-breaking research.

In short, neither grand nor general theory nor philosophically grounded sociology has died. However, rather than undergirding the overall sociological enterprise, such projects, vital in their own terms, have become balkanized regions within a highly variegated realm of theory, itself often disjoined from empirical sociological research (Camic and Gross 1998:468-69).

Since the 1990s, the heterogeneous developments have inspired efforts to account for theory under the new conditions, both intellectually and institutionally. From “hydraulics” as direct movement forward in a common body of knowledge, the transmission has become a “Hydra,” a monster lurking at the entrance to the sociological underworld that regenerates theory
two- or threefold with every attempt to slay it. This change is apparent in surveys of what theorists actually do. Thus, Charles Camic and Neil Gross (1998:470) laid the groundwork for future efforts to “problematize the form or forms appropriate to sociological theory under current conditions of possibility” by identifying eight different projects (including, e.g., “synthesis of multiple theoretical approaches,” “dialogue,” and “diagnosis of contemporary social conditions”). In a venture of “social epistemology,” I described four ideal-typical approaches to theoretical discourse based on their approaches to concept formation and meaning – each parsing social phenomena differently, thus moving inquiry in an alternative direction, but none logically primal or inadequate (Hall 1999: ch. 4). Cutting across theory on a different basis, and suggesting the need for epistemological and ontological modesty and pluralism, Gabriel Abend (2008) documented seven alternative meanings of the word “theory.” And Stephen Turner (2009, 2013, 2014), reflecting widely on the history and prospects of social theory and American sociology, argued that we have entered a “post-normal” phase in which knowledge is valued as “expertise,” for its bearing on political issues.

Turner’s wide-ranging discussions have spawned strong reactions, notably among sociologists committed to social justice in matters of gender and ethnicity (Albert 2015; Townsley 2015), who argue that his historical account of American sociology underplays feminist theoretical contributions and sociological analyses of privilege and inequality. And Peter Baehr (2015:50) rejects what he dubs “political partisanship posing as expertise” on the basis of his own preferred “norms of detachment and restraint and truthfulness” – a position that Turner (2015:63) finds “noble” as a “personal credo” but insufficient as a contemporary institutional basis of sociology.

“... the transmission has become a ‘Hydra,’ a monster lurking at the entrance to the sociological underworld that regenerates theory two- or threefold with every attempt to slay it”
Abend (2008), the differences among alternative meanings of “theory” and their associated projects suggest a “semantic predicament” that requires a practical political solution of communication or negotiation. And Peeter Selg (2013) proposes an “agonistic politics of theory.”

My point is not really to map these controversies, much less resolve them. Rather, I offer this rapid Cook’s tour (a eurocentric and orientalist metaphor!) both as a précis of the state of play concerning theory in our times, and, more practically, to introduce the 2018 ASA meetings Theory section sessions.

Let me stipulate theory as a domain of disparate and contentious projects positioned at the intersection of (1) philosophy, (2) substantive sociological scholarship, and (3) (today as much as ever) questions of political import about the world where we live. These intersections mark the 2018 Theory session themes identified by the planning committee with whom I worked – Isaac Reed of the University of Virginia, Anne Marie Champagne of Yale University, and Simeon Newman of the University of Michigan. Our hope is that each person who attends the Theory sessions in Philadelphia will be inspired to create something of a personal road map of how to proceed in relation to theory (in the face of the impossibility of proceeding without theory).

The first session, on Sunday morning, August 12, takes up “sociology and philosophy in conversation,” with Fuyuki Kurasawa, Luvell Anderson, Paige Sweet, Christopher Muller, and Christopher Winship as invited speakers. It aims to help recalibrate our most basic understandings of our discipline by asking what are the particular points of communication between philosophy and sociology today? How can philosophical concerns with epistemology and ontology inform social theory, and vice versa? How can sociologists and philosophers think together about definitions and conceptualizations, evidence and argument? And what might we say about the intersection of political philosophy and empirical sociology?

A second Sunday session, “social theory and political modernity in crisis: authority, power, violence,” with Julia Adams, Michael Rodríguez-Muñíz, Jeffrey Goldfarb, and Dylan Riley, engages contemporary politics, specifically, the rise of new nationalisms, the breakdown of governmental norms, and the reconfiguration of the post-1989 order. Engaging the widespread crisis of liberal politics, it asks whether the world now outruns theoretical schemas designed to comprehend modernity and neo-liberalism. How can we explain the social and political trends of our own era? How can theory help us comprehend the relationship between authority and authoritarianism, power and crisis, symbolic violence and bodily harm?

Then, on Monday morning, we continue with two open-submission sessions (deadline is January 11th, see http://www.asanet.org/annual-meeting-2018/2018-call-submissions-information). Instead of invoking the section’s conventional classic/contemporary theory divide, we seek submissions bearing a strong relationship to substantive research that thematize
“trespassing/ poaching/ raiding/ transcending: projects of integration in sociological theory.” Few sociologists today practice “grand” or “general” theory. Yet diverse projects of bounded theorizing thrive. These two sessions will focus on how sociologists can strongly engage theories in relation to research, through concrete exploration of substantive sociological questions about everything from the body and embodiments in social life to new economies of information and structural transformations of social orders.

Sunday afternoon’s Coser Salon lecture will be given by Gabriel Abend of NYU. Gabi reports that he is currently seeking to figure out under which of the meanings of “theory” (Abend 2008) he was tapped as a Coser-esque “theoretical agenda-setter” and what kind of “theory” he’ll be discussing. We can all look forward to hearing the resulting lecture, followed by wine, cheese, and conversation. And for other conversations, we have a series of Sunday morning roundtables, organized by Alison Gerber (Uppsala University), alison.gerber@soc.uu.se. Plus, another wonderful Junior Theorist Symposium, this year organized by Linsey Edwards (Princeton University), inedward@princeton.edu, and Allison Ford (University of Oregon), allisonf@uoregon.edu.

I hope to see you at our reception, joint with the section on Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity, to be held Sunday, 7.30-9.30pm, at the famous McGillan’s Olde Ale House, 1310 Drury St, Philadelphia. We have an exciting year ahead, capped by a great time in Philadelphia. Mark your calendar, and do join in!

REFERENCES
The following two essays were delivered at a session organized at the Social Science History Association’s Annual Meeting in Montreal. Professors Paul Lichterman and Lyn Spillman reflected on the contributions of SOCIAL THEORY NOW (Chicago, 2017), edited by Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac A. Reed.

I was going to preface my comments by saying I’m honored to have been asked to share them. After all, I don’t often identify as a theorist, even if my own work orients to questions sociologists consider theoretical. Then I realized that my modest disclaimer assumes a particular notion of what do when we communicate theory, and this book is inviting us to move beyond that. That will be my gambit then, a suggestion that taken as a whole, the book itself is communicating theory in a distinctive way. Given my own notion of what social theory itself is, that means the book offers a fresh vision of what it is to do social theorizing.

Early on, the editors tell us straightforwardly what communicating theory means to them. Theory is a conversation between conceptual responses to questions and themes the editors identify: the possibility of social order, the role of materiality, the role of meaning, the role of practice in social life; along with the question of how do we justify our knowledge claims and the question of what historical changes are most important in grasping our contemporary condition. That’s a fine docket of themes, and there are some remarkably fine essays in the collection. I do see some of these themes threading their way through a lot of the essays, but if I were describing the book to a prospective reader I would not say that a conversation on these themes is the book’s largest contribution. The introductory essay already cautions that one might have named the themes differently; maybe the editors will agree with me that something else is afoot.

So I have a different take on the book’s contribution and I’ll summarize with two points: One is that to communicate theory is to enter a sprawling conversation about the terms we use to articulate empirical research. Those terms themselves are “theoretical” or “conceptual.” So I’m defining social theory as sociology’s meta-conversation. In that way, I think there still is a place for “social theory” apart from theories that pertain to a subfield--
theories in social psychology or the sociology of education, for example. And, to communicate theory now, more than “before,” is to keep track of and facilitate that conversation, treating it as always in movement. Communicating theory now is a kind of conceptual temperature-taking. It means assessing where we are in the various sub-conversations, rather than a statement about which theories best reflect our historical era, or which theories are currently the best contenders for sociological immortality. To make this simple in so little time, let me overstate my case, with several dichotomous distinctions:

There’s an older version of communicating theory that the book gently nudges aside at the start, and it is what I’ll call theorizing as “transmission.” Transmissive theorizing starts with a large conceptual framework, and promotes it, applies it, passes it down with improvements or at least updates. I’m contrasting that with this book’s version of communicating theory -- which I will call “dialogue.” Dialogical theorizing propounds questions, and a few central concepts such as “culture” or “gender.” It sustains questions and central concepts, more than sustaining master theorists or distinct schools as ends in themselves. In transmissive theorizing, the theorist or school is exalted. In dialogical theorizing, the theorist or school is...consulted.

These are two tendencies in the world of communicating theory—both valuable, and not mutually exclusive. And of course, the essays in the book draw on master theorists and schools: Marx, Bourdieu, Butler and others. And several of the essays do mean to transmit a broad area. Claudio Benzecry and Daniel Winchester’s essay on microsociologies is a good example, and a useful one I will assign in my methods seminar. Yet it is striking to me that even this quite transmissive essay is written as a set of mental experiments that the reader can put in dialogue with one another. And I noticed that in a lot of the chapters, the focus is not so much on propounding and improving theorists, but on concepts. The concepts may represent only a part of a single theorist’s agenda, but they are enduring foci of conversations. Monica Krause’s chapter on fields is a great example: It can hardly miss Bourdieu and it brings him in very articulately but it is about fields, and it speaks to social scientists who want to know about what patterns mediate the everyday world of interaction on the one hand, and unfolding cultural and social history on the other. Krause’s chapter also notes that researchers who share this concern with mediation may want to ask questions that master field theorist Bourdieu really can’t handle with precision or interpretive depth, and that those are good questions too. In dialogical theory, this isn’t disloyalty, or distraction; this is minding the conversation, recognizing its limits, checking out the rest of the party.

This gets to something else about the dialogical version of communicating theory: I think it is more pluralistic than the transmissive enterprise. Social theory is an arena of relatively porous conversations, where participants invite new participants now and then, rather than a world of masters, and apprentices working their way in. This may sound dangerous. It makes social
theory quite a lot more profane. It opens the conversation to a wider combination of ideas and topics, and people. The dialogical view invites us to take, for example, postcolonial theory the way Julian Go’s chapter does, as its own locus of meta-conversation. We don’t have to say it is legitimate social theory because it extends Marx, or Foucault. We don’t necessarily have to work at valorizing it as transgressive theory that lets DuBois or Fanon into the canon. Dialogical theory is actually less about who is in the canon than who is in the meta-conversation right now. To me those do not sound like the same thing. They’re not the same understanding of knowledge in history, not the same self-understanding of social science’s project. Dialogical social theory is less heroic, and I suspect Hannah Arendt wouldn’t much like it, but to me it’s more humane, and therefore more appealing.

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The editors have some precursors for inspiration. Their own elective predecessor, Social Theory Today, was also a collection of conversations about where theory is and where it is or was going. But even so, I notice that the chapters of that older book take canonized schools as central objects, with chapters written by several of those schools’ masters of the day. I think Social Theory Now is more of an ambitious project of redefinition than its own editors may lead us to believe when they say we needed an update to the 1987 text.

This gets to my last point. I’ve been proposing that this book is quietly doing something remarkable, maybe even radical. I’ve offered a little Deweyan take on the book, imagining theory as communicative enterprise in which social theorists reflect now and then on what sociologists are doing with concepts. But I want to keep thinking about one of the distinct roles of theory in the transmission mode, and not only for teaching purposes, where I think it’s essential, if not enough. For some of us, communicating theory means transmitting the big normative questions that help us envision a society that is—more democratic (Habermas, or Dewey), more self-understanding (Shils), more radically democratic (Mouffe, Seidman), not to mention more solidary, more rational, or less alienating, to invoke the big three. Traditionally, sociologists find those questions packed into, or implicit in, some of the theorists’ oeuvres or schools that have been central to the transmissive enterprise. In the more dialogical view of theory, theorists would discuss those questions if, and maybe only if, researchers are themselves influenced by them as they conceptualize in subfields. Dorit Geva’s remarks on our panel make clear that she and gender theorists care about those questions. But they’re not necessarily part of what it means to communicate theory in the dialogical mode as I have sketched it. So are these questions purely up to practitioners in subfields? Are there any other
ways they might enter into the meta-conversation of social theory “now”? I’d like to figure out other ways that the communicative acts we call social theorizing could honor or be in contact with the vision questions, while honoring the dialogical, participatory spirit of theorizing that I think this book embodies.

So here’s a modest proposal. I’m just trying this out; it is not a finished statement, but an attempt to imagine a fresh division of conversational labor. Maybe it’s good for much of the meta-conversation to focus cleanly on concepts and questions that practitioners are using for research in particular subfields. And then we can also imagine some distinct, differentiated conversations that take up, transparently, the vision questions and their relation to concepts in subfields. Sometimes those questions come from existing master frameworks in sociology, sometimes from political or moral philosophy, sometimes from all of those. To reiterate for clarity’s sake: When I say much of sociology’s meta-conversation would focus on practitioners’ research concepts and questions, I’m not saying we should delete vision questions from social theory. I’m saying we could try differentiating them more cleanly than master frameworks or schools of theory tend to. We could be more explicit about them, in the spirit of welcoming the discipline to scrutinize them, instead of sneaking them in. Social theory can make some semi-autonomous, conversational room for explicit communication about vision questions and how they relate to concepts in subfields.

Suppose that happens. Already there have been initiatives in that direction— the various versions of public sociology, and very recently, “civic sociology.” Well then, we might imagine the next editions of Social Theory Now to include a couple essays that take stock of how vision questions are interacting with other kinds of conceptualizing in our field. When we do that, the discipline might get even better at addressing the big vision question that Helen and Robert Lynd put bluntly to U.S. sociology 70 years ago: Knowledge for what?

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**RENEW YOUR SECTION MEMBERSHIP!**

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The ASA Section on Theory seeks your help to continue its efforts to support scholarship in social theory within sociology and related disciplines. Current members can help by renewing their section membership for 2018. We also are looking to reach out to graduate students who may have theoretical interests but have not yet joined the section. You can assist us in this effort by notifying Membership Committee Chair Stephen Ostertag (sosterta@tulane.edu) of any graduate students who would like to receive a free membership to the section. The ASA Theory Section is large, vibrant, and open to any and all forms of sociological theory.
Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important collection. I am really pleased to have had a good excuse to make reading all these essays my highest priority, and I learnt a lot. It’s great to feel a little bit closer up to date to than I can usually claim.

The goals of the collection are to introduce and map the field of major theoretical traditions currently in circulation, to offer reflection about limitations and directions to proceed from within each tradition, and hopefully to create a platform for dialog and debate (2). I am going to focus my remarks on the first and third of these goals, as more feasible to address in brief remarks. It is impossible to do justice to the particularities of each of the many excellent chapters: suffice it to say that they do indeed offer critical introductions and articulate new lines of inquiry within each of the perspectives they address, and they will be influential for that.

Here, I am going to ask, first, how well this collection does map social theory, and second, how it can work as a platform for dialog and debate. As the editors suggest, theory is more de-centered than it used to be, both ontologically and epistemologically. That means that not only do people do different things when they do theory, but they may not see the point in arguing about the different things they do. The editors do not aim to reconstitute a “lost central standpoint,” but to make dialogue over shared issues possible. The shared issues they suggest are questions associated with social order, with meaning, with materiality, and with practice– as well as shared underlying concerns with epistemology and with historicity (8-11). I am going to suggest here that historicity, especially, should be highlighted as a shared issue deserving more explicit reflection, because it provides a particularly fruitful theme for articulating similarities and differences among the chapters in Social Theory Now.

So what I want to do in these brief comments is to reflect on how Social Theory Now accomplishes its mapping and dialogue goals, and what remains to be done.

**MAPPING THE FIELD**

Let’s think first about our initiation into the “stakes of social theory” (11). I suggest that what usually happens is this. What initial immersion in theoretical perspectives does for us– ideally, and often in reality– is open up new ways of
seeing things, or perhaps, give us a systematic language for articulating things we’ve sort of vaguely thought, or we’re almost on the edge of thinking, based on various previous experiences—maybe bookish experience of big pictures of the world, maybe various forms of personal connection and disconnection. It gives a shape to incipient sociological imagination. That new conceptual language offers a broader intellectual mastery than had been available to us before. Not everyone is susceptible, but if you are, that opening up and systematic articulation is why theory’s wonderful—that’s why we love it, and want to be part of theoretical conversations. As the editors suggest, “students should go armed to the field with multiple possibilities of adjudicating what they have encountered” (12), and theory gives us all those resources.

On this criterion, I think Social Theory Now does a wonderful job. Even though I am probably not the ideal reader the editors might have had in mind, it certainly did enrich the conceptual languages with which I can think through empirical problems which confront me—and because of the range of contemporary approaches covered, it will be essential reading for anyone wishing to become better informed. These days, unlike during the years I taught theory earlier in my career, I encounter theory at several removes, so there is a lot here that I am acquainted with, but would like to know more about: I am not alone in this. There is something about the range of topics and the serious engagement in the voices of the authors that helps me see why people doing “social theory now” get excited about these ideas and perspectives, gives me a more precise idea of their contours, and leaves me thinking about new directions of inquiry.

That is probably an advantage of the editorial choice to invite authors actively engaged in developing the theoretical traditions they discuss. The essays are broad and serious but also fresh. You will find many new ideas here. Some are about meaning-making; how to understand the distinctiveness of cultural theory (Reed); how various micro theories are related (Benzecry and Winchester); how relational dynamics and belief formation inform rational choice (Ermakoff); how post-structuralism infuses sociology with a deeper grasp of the co-constitution of knowledge and power (Decoteau); how controversy, conventions, and testing are intrinsically linked (Potthast); and how norms and imagery, too, are intrinsically linked (Gross and Hyde).

Some approaches consider macro-social organization; how post-colonial and subaltern standpoints change our understanding of social order (Go); why finance is important for understanding the future of global capitalism (Hung); and how systems theory underwrites a perspective on “society” as a singular totality (Baecker). And some address meso-level social forms: what analysts of gender can learn by shedding a Northern focus (Geva); how understanding “field” as a conceptual variable opens new questions about relations within and between fields (Krause); how formal and relational
network analysis differ but may yet be reconciled (Erikson); and how we might think, not of “society” but of social aggregation and the sociology of “associations” (Lezaun). Every essay manages to serve as an introduction to core ideas (without talking down), while at the same time offering new openings for students and scholars newly attuned to doing theory.

As an illustration, I still recall an instructive exercise in a theory class I took as an undergraduate. We all had to read some rather ordinary study— an ethnography, or perhaps interviews, investigating some teen subculture in Australia. And each of us was assigned to present on what some theorist would say, how they would connect— Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and others such as Goffman, Althusser, and Foucault. I was assigned to think through a Marxist perspective on surfie subculture. As you know, Marx didn’t really write much about surfies, but I was quite pleased with the new view of the subject I thought he could offer: as I recall, it had something to do with the emergence of new age grades as the labor necessary for the capitalist mode of production changed. New generations of young sociologists would have a wonderful time doing the same sort of exercise with every chapter here. Just imagine— “Behavioral and Cognitive Uncertainty, Rational Choice, and the Big Wave;” “Global Surfing Circuits and Southern Theory;” “Pure Autonomy in the Surfing Field: What’s at Stake?” And so on.

So this collection certainly provisions us all afresh with important vocabularies and puzzles as we engage the social world. If students carry sociology forward with this toolkit, we will be in good shape. Inevitably, though, this map of “social theory now” also has systematic limits. I think the limits are justified and appropriate; nevertheless, I think it would be helpful to be more explicit about them, especially because mapping the boundaries of the perspective on theory represented in this volume helps to show better important grounds for dialogue among the theoretical voices so well-articulated in the collection. Taking this broader view, it’s easier to see what all these disparate essays share, and draw out grounds for better dialogue. There are two sorts of theoretical conversation in sociology that are mostly absent.

First, more formal theory of various sorts is actually a lot more lively, I believe, than anyone would guess from this collection. For example, exchange theory emerging from the work of sociologists like Homans, Blau, Emerson, Cook, and Molm is a live research tradition with a lot of participants, and simulations and experiments investigating the evolution of cooperation are thriving. Even Ivan Ermakoff’s chapter on rational choice is more historical and less formal. Emily
Erikson’s chapter is valuable for pointing out the consequential distinction between more formal and more relational network theory. I think these chapters are more valuable with their historical and relational emphasis, and would not ask them to change. But I do think it would be helpful to see more explicitly recognition and reflection from the editors about the fact that when quite a number of sociologists think “theory,” formal theory is what they are thinking of.

The other set of conversations that could be more explicitly acknowledged, I think, is the sort of mid-range theory that emerges in connection with specific empirical areas of sociology, like organizational and institutional theory, race and ethnicity, or even stratification. There is a somewhat oblique passage in the introduction which mentions a distinction between social theory –more interdisciplinary, less American–and sociological theory. The editors reject the distinction because they say sharply, “by sociologists who want to separate what is relevant to their research concerns from other scholarly work that they should not feel obliged to read” (6). I endorse the sort of theory in Social Theory Now, and I think it should be promoted, but I don’t think that makes a good argument for dismissing mid-range theory. I think sociologists who do institutional theory, or intersectionality, or other mid-range theory closely connected to specific empirical topics have valid reasons for doing so, and the more mid-range conversations are legitimate conversations (nor do they happen only in the United States.) This book doesn’t have to delve into them, but I think it would be helpful to be clearer about those other conversations, and how they might differ from the conversations included here.

**GROUNDS FOR DIALOGUE**

How could we do that? The introduction notes in passing that sociology is positioned between “two cultures” of arts and sciences– but the implications of that need to be understood better to see grounds for dialogue more clearly. In fact, I think sociology is constituted in the tensions between three orientations, not two. And recognizing that helps us see better how the theory discussed in Social Theory Now relates to more formal theory, on the one hand, and more mid-range theory, on the other.

This idea is not mine. Here, I want to introduce – and honor– a lovely essay by Neil Smelser, who recently passed away. I’d like to pass on from him to you a way of thinking that represents something of the breadth of balanced and inclusive judgement he brought to his assessment of sociology. That judgment is evident in his short essay “Sociology as Science, Humanism, and Art” (by “art,” he means both aesthetic orientation and applications to problems). He points out that “all three orientations not only constitute the significant moral/intellectual environments of sociology but also are simultaneously parts of the sociological enterprise itself” (Smelser 2014, 150) –that is, that sociology is actually constituted in the three-fold tension– the tension is where sociology as a discipline lies. (I find this idea of sociology as constituted through tensions very reassuring.
and inspiring). He traces this overall picture of sociology through familiar differentiations like American vs. European sociology, as well as all the familiar methodological divides we don’t have to repeat here—between positivism and phenomenology, and so on.

I suggest that the full mapping of social theory would recognize conversations about theory in a more formal register, conversations about theory in the register represented in Social Theory Now—essentially a humanities register—and conversations about theory in a more mid-range register as emergent in different parts of the sociological enterprise: science, humanism, and art (as application), respectively. We can’t participate in all those conversations, but that mapping helps identify better what all the theory represented in Social Theory Now shares, and it opens up clearer lines of dialogue within the conversation represented here.

As theory more influenced by sociology’s inspirations in the humanities, all the chapters in this collection share a substantive concern with historicity and temporal process. That is something formal theory doesn’t do a lot—because it is premised on universal claims—and something more mid-range theory tends to bracket, because it focuses on contemporary concerns.

So I suggest that productive grounds for more dialogue among the authors and positions in Social Theory Now could be found by developing more explicitly and centrally consideration of temporality and historicity. As the editors note, “the more formal sociological theorizing becomes, the more it tends to forget its historical presuppositions” (10). The theory conducted in the register of the humanities here does not forget, but it remembers in different ways. What are the different rates of change involved in the processes that are theorized? Obviously, they are quite different in micro-social processes and world systems theory, for instance. What is the view of what’s important in temporal processes encompassed in each theoretical perspective? What historical range do the main theoretical proposals encompass? Do different perspectives clash or nest in their understanding of temporality? That’s the dialogue I’d like to see happen next, among all the theoretical perspectives here.

REFERENCES
Omar Lizardo has recently addressed the question of what a theory paper should look like in order to be published in ASR (“Publishing Theory at ASR”, Perspectives Spring 2017). This note intends to complement Lizardo’s article by raising a related question, namely how are we to look at and evaluate the way that theory is handled in the average empirical research paper?

There exists a tendency today to ignore the theory part in sociological studies, not only its value but its very existence. This is in my experience often the case during seminars, when a paper is being discussed; in the comments you get when your paper is being reviewed; and also at faculty meetings, when decisions are made to hire someone or suggest someone for tenure. There is often plenty of discussion of the data and the methods that have been used in some research, but not of the theory part.

In an attempt to counter this trend I have put together a check list of what to my mind constitutes theoretical contributions. It contains items that can be mentioned and should count when some study or a person’s work is being discussed or evaluated. The hope is that the list will inspire sociologists to take a close look not only at the methods and the data that have been used in a study, but also at the theory part.

I have not commented on the various items on the list. One reason is to keep this note brief. Another is to keep the attention on what is at issue here, namely the current neglect of the theoretical dimension of sociological research.

The list should be viewed as one person’s suggestion for what kind of theory-related concerns that should be raised when a study is being discussed and evaluated.

Note also that the list is for the average research paper, not for papers on theory per se (for which somewhat different criteria are relevant)

### CHECKLIST OF POSSIBLE THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>YES NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new theory has been introduced or an addition made to an existing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new concept has been introduced or an addition made to an existing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A close link has been forged between theory, method and data</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a skillful integration of the research results into existing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theory part has the potential to redirect empirical research</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theory part exemplifies sociological imagination</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is clearly shown that the research has a necessary theory part</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new phenomenon or concept has been named</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study includes an interesting speculative theoretical part</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new metaphor or analogy has been introduced or an existing one</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An effort has been made to add to the theory part, not exclusively to</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>verify existing theory</td>
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Tracing the temporality of interaction is an uncomfortable project. Beyond the minute passage of interactional time or the social careers ethnographers can sometimes trace, lies the larger realm of “culture.” This is where imagined social trajectories play out, and where largely naturalized temporal landscapes seem to await. Looming above interaction are also the ways in which situations recur, the pulsating rhythms of social life. Yet, interactionism is usually suspicious of facile evocations of social structure and of culture writ large. For one thing, it is often unclear what we are talking about. But, for another, the problem of talking of broader structures of meanings is that we may lose precisely where the action is—in the back and forth of interaction, and in the ways actors constantly remake their worlds.

Still, there is something alluring about this problem. This is, partly, rooted in my biography. I came into American sociology steeped in the study of meaning. Like many products of Israeli academia, I read more Bourdieu and Foucault than was probably good for me. I also arrived committed to ethnography, and to a study of interaction and experience. This was a matter of intellectual conviction, but probably more so of aesthetics. I conducted an ethnography of New Age in Israel and realized that I felt most alive when I try to make sense of the fleeting, reconstructing social worlds from the minutiae of interaction. I was thus lucky to get into UCLA for graduate studies (it was also the only program where I was accepted). Working with Jack Katz, Stefan Timmermans and Mel Pollner, I got a healthy dose of interactionism and ethnomethodology. More importantly, they helped me transform a philosophical proclivity for pragmatism and phenomenology into the tools of a working sociologist.

At the same time, through luck and some pushiness, I also got to work with theorists such as Ann Swidler and Nina Eliasoph—two sociologists of culture whom I admired and who have made some of the most important contributions for our understanding of how situational dynamics stand in relation to wider available patterns of meaning. Both in the theoretical paper Nina and I began to develop, and in the empirical paper Ann and I wrote in Malawi, we found ourselves gravitating towards expectations and anticipations—towards the ways in which futures were fleshed out in action.

This was not by chance. Thinking about anticipations in action and interaction is one way in
which we are afforded a way to think productively about the relationship between “culture” and interaction—a way that focuses on the processes through which taken-for-granted futures structure interaction, as well as the way larger landscapes of meaning are built up. This, then, showed up in most of my work—from my attempt to define moral action as a movement across situations, to my ongoing affair with the pragmatism of C.S Peirce, for whom the movement forward in time is a crucial feature of semiotic theory.

Thinking in terms of anticipations, however, may still assume something linear about time. This captures an element of our experience. We do, indeed, move irrevocably forward. And yet time, as sociologists from Durkheim through Henri LeFebvre and Eviatar Zerubavel remind us, has its “wave form.” To go back to the basics, a key part of Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* is built on the imagined rhythms of Australian peoples, a rhythm that is translated into the division between the sacred and the profane, and finally to the human category of time. Social life pulsates in rhythms, in patterned ways. Indeed, as LeFebvre developed the notion, life can be usefully defined as a host of rhythms—sometimes working together, at times overlapping, often clashing.

This was an insight that I found theoretically compelling (even beautiful), but also something that emerged as a powerful aspect of the ethnographic work I was conducting. There, in tracing the ways in which Orthodox life flowed in a Los Angeles neighborhood, I found myself constantly needing to track multiple rhythms—of schools, of holy days, of prayers, of synagogue life. And then, I also found that to understand Orthodox life, I needed to pay attention to how the secular social worlds my interlocutors participated in were effectively erased—how identifications and relations were both invoked and expunged. In both cases, it brought the question of rhythm into sharp focus. It was rhythms all the way down. Drawing on LeFebvre, and on ethnographers such as Ben Snyder, I came to see social worlds as rhythmic constructions.

And so, when I received the Coser award, and needed to have an agenda to set, I decided to write about futures, and especially the rhythms of futures. But what can I say? Talking about futures, in itself, is far from original. Saying that time is a key element of social life is about as trite as saying that space is important, or that all of social action is somehow embodied—the kind of insight that sociologists periodically remind themselves of, and that allows them to reinvent the wheel. It is also not particularly groundbreaking to argue that we must hold on to both interaction and larger cultural constructs. The intellectual project Gary Alan Fine has developed over the years as well as Eliasoph and Lichterman’s “Culture in Interaction” are powerful ways to think in those terms.

But as I was working through my paper, I realized that the theoretical question that I am increasingly obsessed with is somewhat different. If futures are constantly haunting interaction, then people do not only live “in” situations, but also “between” them. There is a background of anticipations about the temporal rhythms and unfolding of social
worlds that is a crucial part of any interaction. This intersection between the specific situation and these wider-reaching meaning structures, in turn, allows us to think anew about some of the core categories we use, both in the sociology of culture, and in studies of interaction. Taking this track I could also avoid facile ways to square the circle—e.g. by arguing that these are different levels of analysis, perspectives, or foci. If people live between situations rather than simply “in” them, that should have repercussions to the way we go about theorizing social life.

Yet if such a focus changes the very theoretical categories that we think through, how does it do so? To flesh out the possibilities this theoretical move engenders, I take two problems that I have been struggling with for the past few years. First is the relationship between boundaries and distinctions—two popular terms that sociological use when they talk about how groups do difference. As I show in my talk (and, I hope more clearly, in my paper), talking about distinctions and boundaries we implicitly make different assumptions about difference, assumptions. These assumptions—e.g. boundaries are largely binary whereas distinctions are distributed around a center—partially break down when we try to use them to understand a particular situation. And yet, these very distinctions are often very real to our interlocutors. Taking an inter-situational approach, and thinking in terms of anticipations and rhythms helps us understand both the how these ways of marking difference differ, and the instability that may turn a distinction into a boundary and vice versa.

The second problem, which Gary Fine and myself have been thinking through for a while, lies squarely in the theory of interaction. Since interactional theory mainly thinks about the temporality of the situation, much of the intellectual effort had been in explaining how actors work together to sustain a successful interaction—one that is “smooth” in the sense that actors’ lines of action and meaning need to constantly align. Less appreciated in their own right are moments of disruption, when aspects of the interaction, or the relationship which the interaction is part of, are being destabilized. As we argue, disruption is a key part of the interaction order, and a way to connect the interaction order to larger patterns of relations and meaning. And, important for our argument is the question of temporality. It is precisely because we anticipate the futures of interaction that smoothness, in itself, can be a misleading (are at the very least insufficient) focus of attention. Any theory of the interaction order needs to take into account, to take one example, that a disruption in the specific interaction can be important for the ongoing relationship. There are not only disruptions of interaction, but also for interaction, and for the relationship it is part of.

The above is, of course, but a sketch. What I hope it shows, however, is that thinking in terms of anticipations and rhythms can be a productive way forward, a way of thinking that can both help us think about new questions and empirical problems, as well as lead us to evaluate the theoretical apparatus we use to think of culture, action and interaction.
In the early 1980s, a young photographer named Donna Ferrato was beginning a project on polyamorous couples in New York City. Ferrato was photographing a couple in their home one evening when the husband became angry with his wife and began to scream at her, holding her up against the bathroom sink and striking her multiple times. Ferrato began snapping photos, believing it would stop him. It did not. In a Time Magazine piece in 2012, Ferrato notes, “I took the picture because without it I knew no one would ever believe it happened” (Sun 2012). For Ferrato, this set of images would become the first of thousands in which she documented the lives of domestic violence victims and perpetrators. In these photos, Ferrato is very clearly in a situation. Ferrato is visible in the mirror, both in the center and background of the scene. In the second photograph, she appears between the violent scene and the reflection of the violent scene, her own image spliced by the corner of the mirror.

To observe and document this social phenomenon – hidden beneath ideological layers of masculinity and the private family – Ferrato unavoidably finds herself between the reality and its representation, literally at the nexus between the subjects and their mirror images. Ferrato is located multiply in this encounter – she is an observer of the events, she is commanding the method of documentation (the camera), she is intervening in the situation by documenting it, and in so doing she finds herself permanently placed in the center of her representational project. Like any photograph, these tell us both more and less than what is there. We cannot see the context of this man’s violence, for example, or the vulnerabilities in the woman’s social situation, or her negotiation tactics and options for escape. Even Ferrato’s exit plan is unclear to us. What we can see, though, is something typically invisible to us: the place of the analyst in the representation.

That Ferrato can photograph the violence and not be victim to it is important to the story. That she uses a visual image to document physical abuse is important for the analysis of domestic violence given to us. It is also important that Ferrato thinks

*An earlier version of this essay appeared on http://criticalrealismnetwork.org/blog and the article version is forthcoming in Sociological Theory
to snap these photos at all, because she finds domestic violence both abnormal and urgent. Ferrato tells us a story that centers physical violence, the reality of which is buried behind the mundane setting of (eerily reflective) suburban bathrooms. This story could be told many otherways—psychological abuse documented with trauma checklists, hospital intake forms documenting pregnancy coercion, narrative accounts of women escaping abusive homes. Ferrato's instrument of story-telling (the camera) and her place in the image (centered in the terrifying scene, but not immediately subject to harm) are important for the story that ends up being told. It also matters that domestic violence survivors have historically been robbed of credible witness status and so this indisputable, photographic evidence is the only kind deemed worthy. We need Ferrato present to make this a legitimate story at all, since domestic violence must be filtered through various kinds of 'experts' in order to be 'real.' The clear cleavages here between the knower, the context, and the subjects provide insights into the violent social structures that underlie our social inquiries.

Most researchers are not as directly involved in an encounter as Ferrato is here. But most of us do enter into some sort of situation when we conduct research. The nature of this encounter informs our practices of interpretation and makes accessible the operations of social forces we seek to analyze. Critical realism offers resources for understanding the layers of social forces that could be involved in producing such an event, with its insistence on complex causal accounts, for example. However, critical realism provides fewer resources for theorizing the research encounter as part of the event or its representation—both of which may be full of disorienting mirrors. Feminist standpoint theory has long been interested in this type of theorizing. There are readings of standpoint theory which cast it as subjectivist, as reducing questions of knowledge/power to the subject herself, essentializing women as a group. However, a closer reading of standpoint theory indicates that epistemic privilege goes to social locations, not subjects (Haraway 1988). A standpoint is not the same as the “spontaneous consciousness” of a particular group (Collins 2000; Sprague 2006). Standpoints are developed rather than inborn, achieved through strategies of boundary crossing (Sprague 2006), of tacking back and forth between marked categories and the unmarked universal. Epistemic privilege comes from being able to identify the points at which social differences are cleaved (Pitts-Taylor 2016). The analyst must be able to root out the way categories of knowledge slice up the world into incommensurable chunks, and use those as a resource for understanding social ontology (Decoteau 2017). By making bodies and boundaries visible and by making them count, standpoint epistemology exploits difference for its explanatory resources instead of trying to theorize around or beneath them.

Feminist standpoint theory, then, allows us to exploit the disjunctures inherent in the research situation in order to develop a fuller ontological account, forcing us to acknowledge what is not immediately present but there nonetheless (Harding 1998). This means that we must consider
Ferrato’s place within the scene, her methods of documentation, and the representation rendered. Is it possible that new aspects of social structure become visible to us when we follow Ferrato’s fractured and doubled image? Indeed, what the photograph captures so profoundly is the silencing power of male violence and the necessity of expert translation to make violence against women real and legitimate. While Ferrato uses her camera to bring something hidden into view, she cannot get herself out of the scene. It is her presence in the photographs that makes the images so jarring. The mirror – the quintessential technology of reflexivity – is embedded into the photo itself, capturing the observer. Here, Ferrato’s image forces us to acknowledge the power of the expert witness in the structure of male violence. Ferrato’s image animates the scene by intruding and reminding us that she usually is not there. Still, she must be there if we are to believe this happened, because victims are non-credible witnesses. This structural reality – the silencing power of male violence – can only be grasped by reading the photo and Ferrato’s spliced image alongside the flesh and blood referents of the violent scene.

Ferrato captures a disturbing, visceral moment of violence – she takes a picture of patriarchy. But it is not the violence itself that makes patriarchy so patriarchal – it is the construction of women as irrational, non-credible witnesses to their experiences. The photograph itself lends visual “proof,” authority, a translation from private to public. Social actors had to seize this representation, the disjuncture between the ideology of hetero-masculinity and its violent reality, and use it to enact structural change. Ferrato’s photos circulated in popular magazines, newspapers, even Congress. This representational project acted on the object, but only when its terms were activated in a collective way. The contradictions that Ferrato’s photo brings into view gives us insight to some of the mechanisms of male violence, which depend for their success on epistemic inequalities.

Linking feminist theory’s epistemological project with a critical realist commitment to strong ontological claims brings us closer to a realist mode of explanation that attends to epistemic power. Our research objects may be shrouded in a way that shapes both our own efforts and the efforts of our subjects, such that an analysis of contradiction and epistemic violence are part of understanding both ontology and the process of knowledge production. In many projects of inquiry, the investigator must pull a social phenomenon out of its existing “landscape of meaning” (Reed 2011) and transform its terms in the social sphere in order to make us “see” it at all. These projects of epistemic transformation do not simply shift our knowledge communities, but they also transform the phenomena themselves.
The 11th annual Junior Theorists’ Symposium met a day before the ASA Annual Meeting. Composed of work presented by graduate students and recent PhDs, JTS brought to light some of the most exciting theoretical work currently underway. The Junior Theorists’ Symposium is sponsored by the Theory Section, as part of the section’s mission to support scholarship in social theory within the discipline. This year, we were generously hosted by the Université du Québec à Montréal.

For the past eleven years, JTS has provided an opportunity for early career sociologists to share their creative works-in-progress. Junior scholars receive feedback from and enter into conversation with both established theorists and an engaged audience. Through this one-day symposium, scholars sharpen their contributions and refine their works-in-progress.

This year, as in past, admission to JTS was highly competitive. We received 107 précis for only 9 slots. We were surprised by the diversity of interpretations of what it means to ‘do’ theory. Not only that, we received many methodologically innovative papers. As it is the mission of JTS to provide a space for critical engagement, we chose papers that were not only theoretically informed, but explicitly aimed to extend, critique, or add precision to how we understand the social world.

Our chosen presenters grappled with phenomena that existing theory does not seem to cover.

Not only were we impressed by the diversity of approaches and topics, we also were pleased by the affiliations of those submitting. This sheds light on the current map of junior theorizing. We were happy to have received a number of submissions from the University of Oregon, the University of Illinois-Chicago, the University of Notre Dame, alongside submissions from Princeton, NYU, UCLA, the University of California-Berkeley, Yale, and the University of Wisconsin- Madison. We also received 12 abstracts from non-U.S. universities. While department size and our own institutional affiliations likely impacted submission patterns, we also think that this points to increased institutional diversity in interest in theory.

As with previous years, we did not set a predetermined theme, but chose discussants to set a general tone for the symposium. One of our main criteria for discussants was breadth of theoretical and research interests, in order to allow for a wide range of submissions to fit JTS. At the same time, we recruited discussants who have pushed the boundaries of what has classically been considered ‘theory.’ The considerable experience each of our discussants has had on the editorial board of various journals provided additional
value to their conversation with the presenters. Richard Biernacki (UC San Diego) works on culture and labor, on ethnicity, and on research methods in sociology, as well as on classical and contemporary theory. He is on the boards of the European Journal of Sociology and the American Journal of Sociology. Raewyn Connell (The University of Sydney) covers a broad range of topics in the sociology of knowledge, gender, social movements, education, and global north-south relations. She has served as Senior Editor at Theory & Society and as editorial board member of numerous other journals. Julian Go (Boston University) conducts empirical and theoretical work on colonialism and post-colonialism, and has contributed to theorizing global fields and their effects on politics and culture. He edits the journal Political Power and Social Theory and sits on the boards of several others. Together, our discussants offered a broad umbrella for different types of theoretical papers.

After a breakfast of Montreal bagels from the famous St-Viateur, Pablo Gaston (UC Berkeley) started us off with a paper called “Conflict and the Moral Economy: The Moral Dilemmas of Economic Conflict in California Hospitals, 1946-1974.” Gaston examined how moral orders influence contentious practices, using historical data on nurses strikes, demonstrating how moral order constrains contentious practices and how practices can, in turn, rework moral constraints. Till Hilmar (Yale University) continued the discussion of morality with his paper, “Knowing what it’s like: Theorizing Moral-Economic Reasoning and Notions of Deservingness in Newly Capitalist Societies.” Hilmar used theory in social memory to add a temporal dimension to the notion of moral economy, thereby helping to account for the ways actors perceive economic agency and answer questions like who is responsible for economic success or decline, how should one conduct oneself economically, and what lessons should be drawn from past experience. Allison Ford (University of Oregon) then presented her paper “Self-sufficiency: Emotional-Cultural-Material Trajectories of Environmental Practices,” in which she theorized the emotional and cultural underpinnings of environmental practices. Using theory in the sociology of risk and cultural sociological theory, she pointed to the central role of strong feelings and their cultural interpretation in support of certain environmental practices over others, resulting in material changes to individual and household practice. Richard Biernacki provided elaborate comments on these three papers, noting that all three authors aimed their theorizing at naming mechanisms that existing literature has missed.

On our second panel, Paige Sweet (UIC), in her paper “Ideology, Bodies, and Trespass between Feminist Theory and Critical Realism,” argued for a confrontation between feminist theory and critical realism. She suggested that both paradigms would be improved by theorizing ideology as part of social ontology by considering the interactions between social context and social ontology. Eric Royal Lybeck (University of Exeter) traced the historical origins of the social sciences in German legal science in his paper “Ajuridstiction and the Fragmentation of Academic Sociology.” Lybeck offered that ajuridstiction explains sociology’s status as a “remainder discipline.” Finally,
Michael Roll (University of Wisconsin-Madison) presented his paper “Movement Emergence in Weak-State Contexts: Peripheral Spaces and Vigilante Movements in the Global South.” Roll used interviews and anthropological accounts from Peru and Nigeria to argue that analysis of yet-underexplored vigilante movements can offer analytical insights for the study of mobilization. Raewyn Connell approached each presenter and paper as an advising session, asking them critical questions on their empirical claim and providing suggestions for sharpening their theoretical contributions moving forward.

Following lunch, Ricarda Hammer (Brown University) opened the third panel with her paper “Decolonizing the Civil Sphere: History, Colonial Difference and the Promise for Inclusion.” Through analysis of Algerian petition for French citizenship, Hammer argued for the decolonization of theories of the civil sphere. Amanda Shriwise (University of Oxford) continued the consideration of transnationalism in her paper “Field Theory and Welfare State Regimes: Moving Beyond the Domestic.” Using foreign aid for welfare as an example, Shriwise illustrated how national welfare state regimes contribute to the emergence of global fields of aid. Finally, Ben Merriman (University of Kansas) closed by asking how fields emerge. In his paper, “The Violence of Party: On the Role of Honor Culture in the Genesis of Political Fields,” Merriman used the case of duels to argue for the extension of field theory. Julian Go encouraged the analytical shifts made by each presenter and also asked generative questions intended to sharpen the contributions of each critique.

We followed the tradition of organizing an after-panel, which we called “Theory, the Good Society, and Positionality.” We invited Gabriel Abend (NYU), Seth Abrutyn (UBC), Hae Yeon Choo (Univ. of Toronto), and Claire Decoteau (UI-Chicago) to explore how researchers’ social and academic positions shape their views about the good society, and how those views might be reflected in their theoretical assumptions and claims. Even though explicit theorizing about the good society has been left, by and large, to philosophers, sociologists do harbor ideas about the social good that are often left implicit in their work. Our aim with this panel was to bring to light these implicit assumptions and their relationship to theorists’ own identities (see After Panel discussion below).

Next year’s JTS will be organized by by Allison Ford and Linsey Edwards. JTS will be held on Friday, August 10 at the University of Pennsylvania (see the official call in this issue). Advance donations, which will greatly help in organization efforts, can be made to the juniortheorists@gmail account on paypal. We would like to thank the community of Junior Theorists--past, present, and future--and the Theory Section for continued support. We hope to see you in Philadelphia!
How does our academic and social position relate to theorizing the ‘good society?’ This is a notably broad and nearly limitless question, hence the four very different and interesting responses posed by the panel. Several months later, I have had time to reflect on the variation in interpretation and response and thus prefer to use this space to not simply reiterate what I said at the symposium, but to offer further thoughts on the question. I begin with my initial response.

As a graduate student at the University of California-Riverside, I was trained as a social scientist and, dare I say, a positivist. I realize the word positivist has numerous connotations, but the way I was trained was that there is an ‘out there’ of which we can rigorously design analytic strategies to comprehend this social world. Furthermore, while the motives underlying the problems we are interested in and the decisions we make regarding the dissemination of our findings are often shaped by our past and present positionality, our methodological strategies should be valid, reliable, and, when possible, replicable. Finally, while the effort to improve the world or work towards some notion of the good society is encouraged, it is a differentiated set of skills from that of the social scientific set of skills.

Since my graduate school training, I have embarked on the sociological study of suicide in which my role as a researcher and my role as a human being are forever in tension; it is in this tension that I attempted to present a moderated version of my graduate training. The first step in this research has been to rigorously examine how suicides spread from one person to the next and why they cluster in some communities. Despite the humanist goal of prevention and, after a cluster, postvention, it is imperative that we (cautiously) develop value-neutral—in so far as we can—measures to empirically observe suicide clusters and, then, build more robust and comprehensive theoretical models that can potentially generalize to other cases of clustering; not just suicide, but other negative, self-harm, self-destructive, or pathological attitudes and behaviors. Without these tools public sociology is hopelessly spinning its wheels. And, if our methods are shaped
primarily by my definition or some other definition of the ‘good society,’ then we risk missing important aspects of the problem that may prove fruitful later when we disseminate our results. Thus, research should try to be value-neutral in its measures and open and reflexive about choices we make throughout the research process. These goals do not conflict with a public-orientation towards the ‘good society,’ or something along those lines.

This tension is clear in an example from my own experience. The study of suicide from a sociological perspective raises a host of difficult questions. For instance, if I find that a community has a serious suicide problem, in part because people believe the underlying reasons are social—e.g., ‘adolescents in Community X die by suicide because of the extreme academic, athletic, and social pressure’—what are my responsibilities in disseminating this information? I should present the findings as is, but should I practice some form of social engineering? That is precisely what one could call my intervention into the collective framing of a set of behaviors. Is it right, then, to tell the community that I also found that people who lost a significant other to suicide and framed it as caused by individualistic mental illness, were able to better distance themselves from suicidality? What if in the process of intervening, this reframing intensifies mental illness stigma and causes more harm than good? In short, we did provide an intervention, convincing community organizers to end massive mourning rituals; there was predictable blowback from the community.

Moreover, we tacitly accepted the idea that ‘suicide is bad,’ even though we deal with people who have been suicidal, are suicidal, or have lost someone to suicide. By labeling it in this way, we implicitly stigmatize it despite the traumatic and human side that we experience every time we enter the field. We’ve had to interrogate every aspect of our assumptions, consequently, and still wrestle with how we publically present our findings, the audiences that we talk to and their interpretation of our framing, and the complex way in which our biases, their biases, and the theoretical assumptions intersect.

“I sat on the fence between recognizing my role in developing value-neutral instruments... and the importance of public sociology in disseminating these findings”

In the end, my response was ambivalent at the panel. I sat on a fence between recognizing my role in developing value-neutral instruments to understand and explain suicide clustering and the importance of public sociology in disseminating these findings. With a few months of reflection, I am less equivocal. I do not think the role of the sociological theorist or researcher is one of criticism. This is not to say that social theory, or
what I would probably refer to as social or moral philosophy as it was understood in Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or Emile Durkheim’s days, does not have a place in sociology. Comte as well as Marx were concerned with the betterment of the human condition. But, I reject the idea that sociological theorists and sociological research should always (or primarily) be critical. This does not mean, again, that one’s own racial, gender, socioeconomic, or any other number of status characteristics are unable to influence the choices we make as researchers; they do, and we should be reflexive and honest with ourselves.

Conversely, there is no doubt that one can devise quantitative, qualitative, historical, or experimental methods that are rigorous, valid, reliable, and value-neutral. If one were to criticize this position, then one would be arguing that there is no way to study suicide and therefore no way to provide sociological tools to contribute to prevention. This seems a rather dangerous position to take, as it means sociology has really nothing to contribute besides pointing out the flaws in the system, or highlighting both obvious and unobvious inequality, or positing imaginary societies or systems in which everyone somehow is equal and happy but which are not based on any empirical reality. Rather, sociological theory should be able to produce good theories that generate good hypotheses for testing suicide contagion and clustering; our methods should be sound such that any sociologist studying suicide contagion and clustering can interrogate a sample and contribute to the accumulation of knowledge of suicidality; and, ultimately, the facts and data we collect should be explained by the extant theoretical frame or we need to either rethink parts of the theory in light of the new facts. I do not think one’s position should affect this project besides providing unique perspectives that may create new instruments, expand on old ones, and help develop the theory rather than declare the theory false on premises other than empirical testing, or simply throw up our hands and say sociology can’t, isn’t, and shouldn’t be a science.

Thus, forget the good society. As a discipline, we need to build bridges that amount to accentuating what we know, identifying the type of theoretical and empirical questions that remain open and would contribute to society if they were vigorously interrogated, and working to develop models and principles that are sound and, ultimately, useful to making change in the world. If we do not know why or how things work, we risk running in place or bumping up against a wall and expending resources better spent on making the type of change that is possible.
It was six years ago at the ASA in Las Vegas that I was waiting for my takeout noodles in front of a Chinese restaurant at the conference hotel, while being surrounded by more than 3000 sociologists. Since it was my first ASA as a brand-new faculty, I was very excited, and dressed more formally and fashionably than usual, with the big ASA badge. It was then when I saw four sociologists wearing the same badge--white men and women probably in their 50s or 60s--were coming towards me. For a moment, I got anxious, thinking perhaps I didn’t recognize someone I met before. Until one of them said to me, “table for four.”

As a sociologist, it is not surprising how easily people disregard very visible markers such as the ASA badge and business suits, when they go against their cognitive framework, which doesn’t associate Asian women as a fellow sociologist, but as someone serving them. This is not surprising also, since we understand the long and continuing legacy of legal and institutional mechanisms in America to exclude Asians as equal member of the polity, while not hesitating to use our bodies and labor.

Episodes like this doesn’t happen often, but it happens repeatedly, when I am about to forget that I don’t easily belong, on campus and on the streets. Experiences of denied belonging are so routine, yet still they are hurtful and draining.

Now, it is not a coincidence that I have been drawn to critical race theory, postcolonialism, and feminist theory, especially multiracial feminism and intersectionality. It is also probably not a coincidence that I became an ethnographer, listening to migrants’ stories and witnessing their struggles for rights and citizenship, in my country of origin, South Korea. My research has highlighted the paradox of the global system of temporary migration—that of using the bodies and labor of people without offering them full rights and membership, questioning its implications for the polity and democracy. At the heart of a vision of the good society for me is the pursuit of equality and dignity, and I don’t hide the fact that my work has normative underpinnings.

I do not believe that anyone’s social position determines their research and theory choice, but I don’t think we can deny its power to shape our work as much as it shapes our daily lives. Especially given how appealing and comfortable it is to presume the position of a neutral, universal subject, I am not sure anyone would want to give it up easily, unless the reality forces them. Like Roxane Gay, I feel like I am a “bad feminist,” when I see myself fall into the allure of liberal universal ideas again and again, such as deliberative democracy and the public sphere, until I come to a cold realization that they weren’t supposed to include people like me.
I wonder if someone can afford to live in the fantasy of the universal subject, with the luxury of being gender-blind and color-blind, whether they’d be drawn to these critical theories in the same way. I also wonder to what extent they would be able to empathize with the marginalized group, in a way that grants the people full complexity that they grant themselves, such as being self-contradictory, silly, good and bad. Acknowledging our social positions shouldn’t be about mentioning the usual identity markers, which often is an empty gesture, but asking hard questions about our motivations, capacities, and blind spots as researchers and people in society.

To address a question asked of the panel today, no, I don’t believe in value-neutrality and don’t think it’s possible. I think we can only pretend that we are neutral, and that it is dangerous to do so, because then we don’t know what is guiding what we see and understand, rather than cultivating a critical awareness of it. Acknowledging our normative orientation doesn’t have to “bias” our findings or analysis, as medical science with the goal of eradicating cancer doesn’t bias their research.

I think more helpful questions would be: how we can acknowledge plural versions of the good society, and avoid forcing our version of the good society upon others in a moralistic and judgemental way, in our analysis and on the people we study? And as intersectionality teaches us, how can we recognize the contingency of our social positions, that are heterogeneous and shifting, without reifying or dismissing them? How can we productively reconcile a utopian version of the good society with the complex reality of its endless failures? How do we, as sociologists, account for the reality that, in a deeply unequal world, people have to make compromises in their utopian visions, and, for example, have to choose between rights and dignity? These are the questions that I think we should grapple with, and the answers wouldn’t be easy. But they force us to dwell in a state of uncertainty and partial answers, and in the process, teach us humility, something our profession doesn’t always offer us but probably should in the better pursuit of knowledge and theory.

... I feel like a ‘bad feminist,’ when I see myself fall into the allure of liberal universal ideas again and again, such as deliberative democracy and the public sphere...
Genealogy allows us to challenge accepted truths and question who gets to define the ‘good’ society. Part of this entails uncovering subjugated knowledges by learning to see ‘otherwise.’ Seeing otherwise entails recognizing that people’s ontologies (of the body, of the social world, of occult and supernatural powers) are perspectival in nature, and the task of any good ethnographer is to get inside the worlds of those we study to understand the social forces that operate in their lives.

When I began conducting research on the health-seeking behaviors of people living with HIV/AIDS in post-apartheid South Africa (Decoteau, 2013), I had to learn to perceive the social world as acted upon and shaped by ancestors, muthi (medicinal herbs) witches, and other occult forces that occupy the worlds of those I was studying. The people I worked with felt the presence of their ancestors engaging in their everyday lives, but they equally felt the structural inequality of neoliberal capitalism, believed in the powerful force of antiretroviral medication, and engaged in practices which both sustained and transformed gender norms and systems. In other words, ‘witches’ and ancestors were one social force, among many, acting upon and being acted upon by them. But more than this, occupying, as they do, an indigenous ontological position simply allows them to see the world slightly differently than the way I do. Indeed, it was part of my ethnographic task to learn, then, to see otherwise.

I am currently writing a book on the high rates of autism within the Somali diaspora. A group of Somali-Canadian parents of children with autism have begun to subscribe to the belief that gut bacteria are one of the primary causal factors for the development of autism. This group of parents has become convinced that it is the diet and medical environment in North America (including the use of preservatives, genetically-modified processing, and antibiotics in both health care and food production) that explains the high rates of autism within the Somali population. Among this ethnographic community, then, ‘gut bugs’ serve as hidden and silent causal factors, within an alternative scientific episteme, which dramatically affect the livelihoods and bodies of the community.

The indigenous knowledge system of South Africans or the epistemic community formed through a shared definition of illness and its etiology among Somali-Canadians both serve as historically contingent and yet enduring epistemic orders that underlie, but also explain, social action within the African communities of South Africa and the Somali diaspora of Canada. South Africans were born into the epistemic order they use to navigate their contemporary world, whereas the Somalis have forged a new discursive order because the prevailing options did not provide sufficient explanations of their experiences, and
yet their positionality as outsiders in Canada also informs the epistemic order they have created. For both of these populations, the social, economic, political, biological (and occult) forces that help them explain their everyday realities challenge hegemonic scientific explanations of the social, environmental and biological world. For the Somalis, the contestation against mainstream science is deliberate and combative – their experiences as racial, religious and national others informs their positionalities and their epistemic beliefs about autism and its causes. For South Africans, it is their indigenous ontologies and their postcolonial positionalities that keep them straddling the world of ancestors and that of antiretrovirals, traversing scientific and ideological boundaries put up by the political and scientific powers that be.

For me, then, part of what it means to engage in a public sociology that promotes a radical critique of existing power systems is to learn to see otherwise. We have to step within the complex epistemic order of our research participants to render visible the forces (whether structural, discursive, or material) that shape their actions. But more than this, we have a responsibility to take seriously knowledge systems and positionalities that have been erased, debased and debunked by hegemonic science, in the name of truth and progress. We need to excavate the subjugated knowledges that challenge dominant ways of knowing and styles of reasoning. Following Foucault, I think that such genealogical efforts are radical critique. As he explained:

“Genealogies are ... antisciences ... They are about the insurrection of knowledge ... an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours ... Genealogy has to fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific” (Society must be defended, p. 9).

But I want to end with a note of caution. Some of this work entails questioning accepted truths, even when they are in the service of political righteousness. In the age of ‘fake news’ and challenges to scientific evidence (of global warming, for example), we must be nonetheless cautious about unquestionably championing Science (with a capital S). Such a political move props up one homogenous, unbending, dehistoricized Truth (with a capital T) against another. Rather, we have to do the harder and more complicated work of trying to understand why it is that Trump’s ideologies and discourses have so powerfully interpellated a certain fraction of the American public. How is this particular will to power operating?

My current work on autism has brought me into contact with many people who believe their children’s autism was caused by vaccine injury. This has not always been easy work for me politically, but I always seek to understand how people’s experiences and positionalities inform their explanations of the causal forces at work in their lives. This does not mean that as a sociologist I have to take every claim to knowledge or explanation of the social world as equally valid.
Learning to see otherwise is not an exercise in radical relativism. People’s perspectives and claims to truth must always be situated in a broader structural context to understand how the power systems within which they are positioned explain their beliefs and ontologies. But it also means understanding how power operates in and through both hegemonic and unorthodox knowledge systems. Some subordinated truth claims nonetheless buttress powerful institutions or oppressive discourses. Learning to see otherwise entails recognizing power and inequality in the distribution of knowledge and navigating the politics of truth – it is a genealogical process, an ‘anti-science’ – an uncovering of hidden knowledges that undermine and disrupt accepted ideologies, in all of their complexity. And it necessitates calling into question or at least second-guessing any claim to truth with a capital T.

REFERENCES
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA
AUGUST 10, 2018

We invite submissions of extended abstracts for the 12th Junior Theorists Symposium (JTS), to be held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 10th, 2018, the day before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA). The JTS is a one-day conference featuring the work of up-and-coming sociologists, sponsored in part by the Theory Section of the ASA. Since 2005, the conference has brought together early career-stage sociologists who engage in theoretical work, broadly defined. We especially welcome submissions that broaden the practice of theory beyond its traditional themes, topics, and disciplinary function.

We invite all ABD graduate students, postdocs, and assistant professors who received their PhDs from 2014 onwards to submit up to a three-page précis (800-1000 words).

Submission details can be found at [www.asatheory.org/junior-theorist-symposium.html](http://www.asatheory.org/junior-theorist-symposium.html)

Questions can be directed to juniortheorists@gmail.com

SUBMISSION DEADLINE:
FEBRUARY 8, 2018 BY 11:39PM PST
I am a comparative and historical sociologist in the subfields of economic and political sociology. My research deals with the economic history of American households, tracing how changes in property and mortgage law since the late 19th century created households as economic actors and delineated the privileges, dependencies, and risk they experienced in relation to labor and financial markets. I am particularly interested in how elaborating the intersection between social, legal, and democratic theory can re-energize our understandings of social and economic power. I received BA degrees in History and Political Economy at UC Berkeley and grew up in the Southeastern corner of California, where the Colorado River meets the southern border wall.

**LUIS FLORES**

How is U.S. business evolving and what does that mean for people’s wellbeing and careers? How can we better represent the different sources of corporate power? Using administrative data on the U.S. economy over the past thirty years, my dissertation weaves together three corporate transformations: in governance and ownership, in the spatial distribution of industries and firms, and in the re-drawing of organizational boundaries. Along the way, I analyze how the occupational structure refracts these shifts. I hold a BA in Musicology from Brown University, an MSc from the London School of Economics, and an MA in Applied Statistics from the University of Michigan. My other projects focus on estate taxation, the global cooperative movement, and the relationship between U.S. high-tech policy and the rise of venture capital.

**DYLAN NELSON**

I am a graduate student in Social Work and Sociology. My research interests include social theories of time, and the temporalities of social service provision. I am currently developing a project about the proliferation of mental health knowledge into communities, and the mobilization of lay expertise. Before coming to Michigan, I received a BA in Sociology (Bogazici University) and an MA in Cultural Studies (Sabanci University) in Turkey. I also have an MSW degree from the University of Michigan.

**PINAR USTEL**
MEMBER NEWS
Announcements and Recent Publications

AWARDS
CONTESTED EMBRACE: TRANSBORDER MEMBERSHIP POLITICS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY KOREA (STANFORD 2016)
JAEUN KIM, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
Winner of the Allan Sharlin Memorial Book Award from the Social Science History Association

NEW MEMBER BOOKS
FRANCESCO DUNIA
BROKE AND PATRIOTIC: WHY POOR AMERICANS LOVE THEIR COUNTRY (STANFORD 2018)

DEVEREAUX KENNEDY
EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL THEORY AND INQUIRY: MAKING SENSE OF SOCIAL LIFE (COGNELLA 2018)

JEFFREY HALLEY & SAGLIND SONOLET, EDs.
BOURDIEU IN QUESTION: NEW DIRECTIONS IN FRENCH SOCIOLOGY OF ART (BRILL 2017)

ROBERT JANSEN
REVOLUTIONIZING REPERTORIES: THE RISE OF POPULIST MOBILIZATION IN PERU (CHICAGO 2017)

BECKY YANG HSU
BORROWING TOGETHER: MICROFINANCE AND CULTIVATING SOCIAL TIES (CAMBRIDGE 2017)

MARIO LUIS SMALL
SOMEONE TO TALK TO (OXFORD 2017)
New Member Articles & Chapters


**Dodd, Nigel, Michèle Lamont, and Mike Savage, eds.** 2017. Special Issue: The Trump/Brexit Moment: Causes and Consequences. *British Journal of Sociology* 68.


**Joosse, Paul.** 2017 “Expanding Moral Panic Theory to Include the Agency of Charismatic Entrepreneurs.” *British Journal of Criminology*.


Ethnography (Special issue on innovations in ethnographic research), published online first.


Within the field of sociology, scholars have advanced various approaches to the interpretation of social life. While these approaches share a drive to uncover the deep meanings underlying human actions, events, and experiences, they often diverge in their core assumptions, methods, theoretical vocabularies, and levels of analysis. They also draw on different theoretical traditions, from the reflexive social psychology inspired by George Herbert Mead and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, to the thick description of Clifford Geertz, the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, the cultural anthropology of Mary Douglas, and the psychoanalytic thought of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, among other influences. Moreover, scholars working in these various traditions have developed different programs to grasp the rich layers of meaning behind human experiences. Some of these programs – including the strong program in cultural sociology/cultural theory, symbolic interaction/pragmatism, and psychoanalytic sociology/psychosocial theory – have made significant contributions in their own right.

We envision this conference as providing a unique space where scholars from cultural sociology, symbolic interaction/pragmatism, and psychoanalytic sociology can come together to discuss different approaches to common themes.

Proposals for paper presentations and panels are welcome. To submit a proposal for presentation, please email a title and abstract of no more than 250 words, along with your name institutional affiliation and contact information. To submit a proposal for a panel (fully constituted or open), please provide a brief description of the panel (the names and affiliations of participants is optional). Panels that create an opportunity for dialogue among scholars taking different perspectives will be given priority.

Please send all proposals to the Program Committee Co-Chairs, Thomas DeGloma (tdegloma@hunter.cuny.edu) and Julie Wiest (jwiest@gmail.com) by March 1, 2018.