

# PERSPECTIVES

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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Note from the Chair:<br>Big Data/Big Theory – Part II<br><i>John W. Mohr</i>   | 1  |
| Short Thoughts on Big Data:<br>Sociologists “Tweet” the Future of Theory<br><i>compiled by the Editors</i>                         | 11 |
| 2015 Award-Winner Conversation:<br>Can Sociological Theory Be Public Sociology?<br><i>Erin McDonnell and Jonah Stuart Brundage</i> | 17 |
| Book Review: <i>Quantum Mind and Social Science</i><br><i>Benjamin Lamb-Books</i>  | 24 |
| Dissertation Spotlight   | 28 |
| 2016 Junior Theorists’ Symposium Program   | 29 |
| Section Sessions at the 2016 Annual Meeting  | 30 |
| Member News and Notes  | 32 |

## NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

**Big Data/Big Theory – Part II***John W. Mohr, University of California, Santa Barbara*

In the first part of this essay (*Perspectives*, Fall 2015), I suggested things are looking pretty good for sociological theory, an optimism grounded in my appreciation of emergent sociological sub-fields where interesting theoretical work is being paired with innovative new measurement regimes to create different kinds of sociological insights. I pointed to the field of computational sociology (or Big Data social science) as an example. In this second part, I offer a few reasons why I think this area of research will continue to need more and better theory in the years ahead. I highlight three causes, what I call: (1) the paradigm effect, (2) the data effect, and (3) the culture effect.

**1. The Paradigm Effect**

“What were ducks in the scientist’s world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards” (Kuhn 1962, p. 111).

As described by Thomas Kuhn, paradigms do a lot of the heavy lifting for you. Many bigger issues have already been addressed, and one is left to tackle a more narrowly defined set of intellectual concerns. Kuhn explains, “...once the reception of a common paradigm has freed the scientific community from the need constantly to re-examine its first principles, the members of that community can concentrate exclusively upon the subtlest and most esoteric of the phenomena that concern it...increas[ing] both the effectiveness and the efficiency with which the group as a whole solves new problems” (p. 164). Sociologists don’t share a coherent theoretical paradigm of the sort that Kuhn described, and perhaps nobody does. But

sociology does sustain various paradigm-like *components* that operate unevenly across what is an otherwise fragmented and often contested disciplinary space. One of the most important components is the constellation of assumptions—and related practices/technologies—that serve to organize our thoughts and actions regarding the *measurement* of the social world. A number of different measurement projects have been put forward in sociology (from network science to conversation analysis).

Sociology’s dominant framework for social measurement dates back to the years around World War II when it first coalesced into something like a coherent methodological paradigm. Survey methods emerged as the dominant means of gathering social data in the postwar years, anchoring the core of what was essentially a new methodological field. Many of the relevant technologies, organizational forms, and intellectual developments of survey techniques had already been pioneered and refined in the decades before the war, but WWII was an important catalyst. Scholars from multiple disciplines were brought together in large, well resourced, practical project teams. For example, the U.S. War Department surveyed over a half million active duty American soldiers about their experiences in combat, unit morale, racial prejudice, and many more topics (Stouffer et al. 1949). Such efforts led to an accelerated articulation between the theory and the method of survey analysis, as well as an elevation in the legitimacy of the work. After the war, academics like Paul Lazarsfeld further theorized, formalized, and publicized these methods, facilitating their

rapid institutionalization (Converse 1987; Mohr and Rawlings 2010, 2015; Platt 1996). Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 248) argue that the institutionalization of fields depends upon the development of a common core institutional logic which they define as “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions which constitutes [the field’s] organizing principles and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate.” They emphasize that this is driven both through coherence within the logic and through its difference from other logics. In this case, I think we can trace the emergence of a dominant logic of social measurement that wove together a constellation of survey techniques, material technologies, and practices, along with a deep-level set of shared understandings about what it means to measure, collect, conceptualize, and analyze data about the social world (Knorr Cetina 2001; Latour 2005; MacKenzie 2009; Mirowski 2002; Mohr and Ghaziani 2014; Wagner-Pacifi, Mohr, and Breiger 2015).

This dominant measurement logic emerged out of and remains grounded in the theory and practice of survey analysis. Thus, it follows a trajectory of scientific investigation that begins from a statistically controlled sample of respondents, willingly answering a set of precisely worded questions to measure both subjective and objective characteristics about themselves. These responses are then statistically extrapolated to help us understand how those characteristics are distributed, inter-related, and (ideally) causally connected across the larger population. At its heart, and in its brilliance, this is a model of discovery that depends upon the ever more efficient leveraging of scarce information to learn about some larger unmeasured social whole.

Problems generated by this methodological paradigm led to new sub-specialties that have

consistently been both scientifically rigorous and deeply artful. Included here are technical arenas like probability theory, sampling theory, survey design, and scale analysis. But the field also includes many decades-old research traditions grounded in this socio-technological system—sub-fields like social stratification, social mobility, public opinion, and medical sociology. In such areas, the core project of survey analysis continues to be usefully updated. Two recent examples of updating are Steven Vaisey’s (2009) dual-process model (which seeks to distinguish between two levels of thought processes in survey answers, the practical and the discursive) and Amir Goldberg’s (2011) relational class analysis (RCA) methods for analyzing the relations among responses (rather than the responses themselves). Although both signal critical advances of theory and method—Vaisey for bringing the theory of the cognitive self into our understandings of survey respondents, Goldberg for developing a relational approach to interpreting survey data of cultural meanings—both ultimately remain anchored in the traditional goal of efficiently leveraging small amounts of information.

Elsewhere, Goldberg himself has complained about the intellectual limitations of working within the dominant paradigm. In a marvelous article on analyzing Big Data entitled, “In Defense of Forensic Social Science,” Goldberg (2015) links the embrace of hypothesis testing as a master trope in social scientific work back to the problem of informational scarcity in the post-war era. Goldberg writes, during this period “[t]wo methods of research became particularly prominent: surveys and laboratory experiments. Both are costly and time-consuming, and require a significant investment in infrastructure and personnel. Such an upfront investment makes exploratory research potentially wasteful and therefore high-

ly risky” (p. 2). Goldberg explains how this differs from his experience of working with Big Data. He writes, along “with the pain of drowning in an ocean of amorphous data also comes the liberation of unshackling oneself from the blinders of one’s limited imagination...the analytical focus shifts from thinking about the most cost-effective data that one needs to collect in order to support, or refute, a hypothesis, to figuring out how to structure a mountain of data into meaningful categories of knowledge” (p. 2).

Content analysis comes from this same place. Again, WWII served as crucible. Harold Lasswell led a team of social scientists at the U.S. Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications. Building on existing content analysis practices, Lasswell’s group developed and refined a new set of formal procedures for systematically extracting the core bits of information from a textual corpus. This produced quantitative datasets that could be reliably employed, in the formal sense of having a reliability metric, to map the distribution of information across the larger, unmeasured textual space. Using these content analysis techniques, Lasswell’s unit employed teams of human “coders” to read foreign—especially enemy—newspapers to gather war intelligence. After the war, Lasswell worked to help refine and institutionalize the wartime methodologies into the modern research program of formal content analysis (Lasswell and Leites 1949; Lasswell, Lerner, and Pool 1952). Notice, the underlying paradigm is the same. Content analysis, from its beginning, has sought to measure meaning by extrapolating from small bits of textual information that have been carefully selected so as to best represent a larger, more complex, unmeasured—in this case, discursive— whole (Mohr, Wagner-Pacifici and Breiger 2015).

As brilliant and scientifically accomplished as both of these research programs grew to become over the decades, the underlying measurement framework defining both is the careful and calculated leveraging of *scarce information*. As the contemporary era of Big Data so vividly illustrates, this is only one way to measure the social, and it is a measurement paradigm that has quickly proven inadequate for organizing the work of Big Data social scientists.

Some problems of applying quantitative practices predicated on data scarcity to the world of big data are simply practical. Sample sizes quickly become so large that traditional statistical measures of significance are rendered useless because everything becomes significant (McFarland and McFarland 2015). There are also systematic distortions of the social world that come embedded in Big Data formats (Adams and Brückner 2015; Diesner 2015; Lewis 2015; Shaw 2015). But more than this, as Monica Lee and John Levi Martin (2015) complain, our most basic conventions for measuring the social world become a drag on scientific productivity. For example, thinking through the lens of traditional causal modeling as we engage with Big Data has left us using “new tools to accomplish old tasks. In a word, we have been trying to make things insignificant. Like a neurologically impaired subject with dilated pupils, we are putting our hands over our eyes and hoping to peep through our fingers” (Lee and Martin 2015, p. 1). Lee and Martin give the example of outliers—data points far from the central tendency—which represents a classic technical concern of traditional linear modeling. With Big Data,

a group of outliers, though a very small percentage of the total population, may still consist of thousands of people—

many times more than the total respondents to the GSS. They should not be expunged as outliers but understood as a significant population in its own right...moving from one average man that poorly represents one big population to multiple average men that represent segments of the total population more accurately... (Lee and Martin 2015, p. 2)

Contrary to traditional measurement logics, Big Data social science regularly presents us with methodological conundrums about how to effectively carve into an overwhelming abundance of information in a theoretically meaningful way. Lee and Martin put it starkly, now “[l]ike a real scientist, our problem isn’t running out of information, but choosing which path to follow” (Lee and Martin 2015, p. 4). They propose a path that takes us away from the traditional measurement paradigm “... towards cartography—the construction of question-independent, though theoretically organized, reductions of information to make possible the answering of many questions” (p. 4). They envision a Blau-space-like multi-dimensional map that “allows us to scan our eyes up, down, left, and right, to draw both horizontal and vertical comparisons—how people in the population relate to each other in terms of demographics or any single surface (e.g. psychobilly concert attendance), as well as which factors contribute concert attendance for each subpopulation” (p. 3).

Paul DiMaggio describes experiencing a similar sort of methodological epiphany while working with colleagues in computer science. DiMaggio (2015, p. 2) writes,

[w]hereas social scientists customarily obsess over causality and rely on formal tests of statistical significance, computer scientists using supervised models focus

on results. The first topic-model presentation I attended used the method to identify public records particularly likely to require redaction, out of a set of records too immense for humans to screen by hand. The only measure that mattered was whether the models improved prediction (which they did).

DiMaggio traces the implications of machine learning models for organizing scientific thinking in the analysis of social data. He notes that computer scientists are “less concerned with causality and with model confirmation than are many social scientists. It is not that they care less about getting models right; rather they understand ‘getting it right’ in a different (and I am beginning to suspect more useful) way than do most social scientists, focusing on model plausibility, utility, and descriptive, as opposed to causal, validation” (p. 2). Optimistic about fusion, he proposes strategies linking sociological and computational perspectives together more effectively. DiMaggio writes, “the computer-science perspective is liberating, as it forces us to recognize real interpretive uncertainty and seek out appropriate and substantively relevant forms of validation fitted to specific research goals.”

In sum, sociologists’ dominant paradigm for measuring the social appears increasingly out of step with the methodological problems that come to the fore as we move from an era of data scarcity into an era of Big Data social science. Lacking an established measurement paradigm to do the conceptual heavy lifting, research scientists working with Big Data will need help in theorizing where to look, how to look, what to look for, and what to make of what they are looking at. Hence, my assertion: the old measurement paradigm is beginning to crack (or, rather, is cracking in some new

ways), and Big Data social scientists are going to need more and better theory—two kinds of theories, in fact. On the one hand, we need to re-theorize the practice of social measurement itself, toward more exploratory and less simple-mindedly hypothesis-testing approaches to the use of data. On the other, we need new (and reinvigorated) theories of the social world, theories which can now find a new and possibly more illuminating empirical footing in the plenitude of information which has begun to come our way.

## 2. The Data Effect

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1951).

The era of Big Data changes our relationship to social measurement in many ways. Not only does it include processing larger quantities of information, it also presents us with the opportunity to: 1) evaluate *different kinds of information* than we have been able to analyze before, and 2) use new *tools, technologies, and epistemologies* for engaging with data that we have had all along. Consider text analysis. The digital revolution of the last quarter-century created new *kinds* of textual information streams—texting, tweeting, posting, emailing, etc. (see Part 1 of this essay). But Big Data social science is also opening up new opportunities for investigating old-style scholarly data. For example, the analysis of archival materials, long a staple of historical sociology, is being revolutionized by Big Data technologies. Peter Bearman (2015, p. 1) writes, “historians have been quietly building massive archival data structures from the extant records of crucially important institutions and contexts and making those data structures available to the public. These include—and this is only an idiosyncratic sample drawn mainly from Britain—the

complete text record of the Old Bailey, the extant records of the Atlantic slave trade, and the British East India Company.”

The explosion in digital information has been accompanied by the emergence of an equally dynamic technical field focused on analyzing these data. Tech firms, in close collaboration with research universities, have created a range of new tools for reading this expanding universe of textual data (think Google). Consider topic modeling—a way of automatically coding the thematic content of large textual corpora—which is increasingly used by both social scientists and digital humanists to radically change the scale of data queried and the kinds of questions asked (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003; Mohr and Bogdanov 2013). Scholars have used these tools to explore a wide array of topics. Daniel McFarland and colleagues (2013) analyzed the ProQuest database—containing more than a million dissertation abstracts—to study the emergence of boundaries in scientific fields. Paul DiMaggio’s (2013) team studied some 8,000 articles concerning public funding of the arts in 5 major U.S. newspapers over the course of a decade. They showed how political events and political leanings of the newspapers affected the types of stories that were published. Ian Miller (2013) used topic models to study Qing Dynasty Veritable records containing thousands of reports of social unrest submitted to the Chinese emperor over the course of many decades. Miller used this to show how social constructions of crime changed in Chinese society. In short, these technologies are fundamentally changing the way that scholars read and interrogate textual data.

The Digital Humanities are far out ahead of social scientists on this. As entire libraries of classical literature have been digitized and made available for computational investigation,

literary scholars such as Alan Liu (2013), Charles Underwood (2015), Mathew Jockers (2013), and Franco Moretti have been radically reinventing traditional literary theory, adopting a perspective that Moretti (2013) has described as “distant reading” (to distinguish it from the traditional hermeneutic method of “close reading”). With his students and colleagues at the Stanford Literary Lab, Moretti has been a prolific innovator, turning out papers that have used network methods to analyze the plot structure of Shakespeare’s plays (Moretti 2011), and semantic structure analysis to unpack the changing logic of 70 years of “Bankspeak” (Moretti and Pestre 2015). They have measured literary style at the level of the sentence (Allison et al. 2013) and at the level of the paragraph (Algee-Hewitt et al. 2015) and used those metrics to empirically locate genre boundaries, genre splits, and various literary innovations.

These types of developments create the historical conditions for a new age of computational hermeneutics that builds productively on the proliferation of new text mining tools and datasets (Mohr et al. 2013, 2015). We argue this heralds the development of a style of content analysis that no longer (by technomethodological necessity) throws away the nuances of textual information, but which instead seeks to identify as much nuance as possible. Unfettered from the limitations of Lasswell’s human coders, this new analysis relies upon a vast array of algorithmic coding and measurement devices. But, as work in the Digital Humanities illustrates, what Big Data researchers really need is more and better theory: Theories of reading, semiotics, and narrativity; theories about how identity, agency, communication, discourse, and social institutions are meaningfully ordered and constituted. Once again, the old scarcity-based measurement paradigm of content analysis

provides few clues for helping contemporary text analysts to think about how to approach such a bewildering array of measurement options.

### 3. The Culture Effect

“The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is...to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (Geertz 1973, p. 24).

Births, deaths, marriages, incomes, occupational categories, and years of education—since sociologists started transforming social observations into measurable units, there has been a distinction between things that are more easily quantified and the wide range of cultural, cognitive, and hermeneutic qualities of social life, which have been far less easily translatable into reliable metrics (Jepperson and Swidler 1994; Mohr and Ghaziani 2014). The more data-intensive side of sociology has conventionally leaned heavily toward structural, resource, and demographic factors that seemed to be more easily quantifiable.

One of the most interesting things about the Big Data revolution is that it inverts this old imbalance. We are now inundated with textual data, visual data, audio data, and other kinds of *highly nuanced cultural data*, as the social world continues to digitize its subjective experience of selfness. Such data calls for ways to theorize language and speech, image and vision, hearing and sound. Moreover, because this information often comes through the “contextlessness” of digital space, scholars now have a comparatively harder time identifying the concrete measures of social relations, social structure, and social demography that have served as the mainstay of quantitative social

science over these last many decades. Christopher Bail is an example of someone who has taken on this challenge in a systematic fashion. Using new mega-datasets capturing micro measures of social exchange, Bail (2014, 2015) has been carefully crafting a new style of cultural science, building from the ground up (see also de Nooy 2015). In this work, and elsewhere, we find a range of basic ontological properties defining the parameters of our experience of social life—what counts as things, agents, context, causality, and even time itself—are being actively re-negotiated as scholars engage with the nitty-gritty demands and possibilities of Big Data (Wagner-Pacifici et al. 2015). Big Data social science thereby presents an opportunity for social scientists and humanists to re-invent the way we study culture and, simultaneously, reinvent the way that we measure the social world.

### Some Conclusions

It seems to me that for many years in sociology, theory tended to race ahead of our methods. Nowadays, that relation is reversed: our methods have raced ahead of our theory, begging for more effective engagement. A recent colloquium, “Assumptions of Sociality: A Colloquium of Social and Cultural Scientists,” in the online journal *Big Data and Society* that I edited along with Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Ronald Breiger, takes steps toward theoretical engagement with this new methodological juggernaut, with eighteen illuminating essays about Big Data and its impact on the social and human sciences. A variety of major issues are raised in these essays about the future of data analysis in our discipline.

My main point, for all of the reasons I have proposed here and more, social scientists working with Big Data are going to need lots of new theories, and a new generation of theorists

to accomplish the work that needs to be done (Venturini, Jensen, and Latour 2015). Make no mistake, *action is required*. When social scientists don’t step up, physicists and engineers have no incentive to wait. The early years of Big Data have suggested that when there is a vacuum of good social scientific theory, Big Data researchers are more than happy to ad hoc a problem and call it theory. As many papers in the *BD&S* issue testify, naive empiricism and large leaps of faith often result in bad social science because of the Big Gap that separates social life and the purported representation of that world with Big Data. As Breiger (2015, p. 2) puts it, “whereas many studies have been undertaken of massively large systems such as social networking sites, an under-researched question is the extent to which the behavioral findings of these studies ‘scale down,’ i.e. apply to human groups and organizations of moderate size (dozens or hundreds), where most human social life takes place and is likely to continue to do so.”

### Big Data/Big Theory/Big Panel

With all of this at stake, I think it is incumbent upon us, as the ASA Section responsible for managing the subject of theory in American sociology, to take this matter seriously and to do so posthaste. That is why I have set aside one of our sessions in Seattle to take up this very matter. Many of the authors I have cited here will join us for an author-meets-critics session. This will be a pretty *Big Panel*, just the kind of thing I should think that we are going to need if we are to take on a *Big Topic* like *Big Data/Big Theory*. I hope you will be able to join us in Seattle. We’re planning on having some *Big Fun*.

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## Short Thoughts on Big Data: Sociologists “Tweet” the Future

*compiled by the Editors*

In light of Theory Section Chair John Mohr’s focus this year on Big Data, we approached scholars from a variety of different subdisciplines to ask for their perspective on how Big Data might shape the future of theory and theorizing in their subdiscipline. In the spirit of Big Data, we asked them to “tweet”

their thoughts—though instead of 140 characters, we asked for around 140 words. Ten scholars were gracious enough to respond. Their takes range from celebratory and optimistic to wary and cautioning, but each draws attention to important features of Big Data and how they might interface with theory.

### #sociologyofknowledge



Julia Adams  
Yale University

Big Data is the new fad in the social sciences and the digital humanities. It’s great to finally catch up with the computer scientists, engineers, and marketers, right? But since irony is among the many things for which we have no workable algorithm, the latter sentence reveals just one of the enormous challenges for Big Data analysts. And one where theory comes in. Data such as that found on Wikipedia consists of complex texts embedded in human communicative strategies, including power plays, and fissured by systematic absences. To decipher the meaning of such data in a sociological sense, as we have found in our analyses of Wikipedia and academic knowledge production, we must theorize the underlying mechanisms (including algorithms, as it were) that simultaneously produce network structures and holes; signs and regimes; texts and absences. Only then is it possible to differentiate sense from nonsense.



Hannah Brückner  
NYU-Abu Dhabi

**#ethnography**

Gary Alan Fine  
Northwestern University

In 1995, an educational researcher, Gregory Cizek, penned a *cri de coeur* entitled, “Crunchy Granola and the Hegemony of the Narrative.” He noted that, in his field, “I’m actually an outcaste [sic] from the academy. I’m a quantitative methodologist. I use numbers.” Fieldworkers, themselves no strangers to disciplinary exclusion, took some wry amusement from his plight. But Cizek had a point. Just as participant-observers became “ethnographers” in an age of the perfect anecdote—the verity of being there—quantitative research needed rebranding. The examination of large data sets is now labeled “Big Data,” and includes measures of internet searches, consumer purchases, or measures of traffic. Because these data are not gathered from individual informants (as in the case of experimental or survey data), big data often involves unobtrusive measures, as pioneered by Donald Campbell. The digital footprints of millions are available to be sorted, measured and mined. These data, seemingly “objective markers”—but of what?—have become real. They are surely real in themselves, but without motive or motivation, how can we transform to generalization, to prediction, to theory? Despite the allure that bigger numbers are better numbers, Big Data sets aside motivation and motive (accounts of motivation). These studies emphasize the what, the where, and the when, and they leave the how and the why to the sharp vision of the ethnographer or to the big imagination of the data analyst. Because these different methods offer distinctive answers to different *types* of questions, “big data” and “deep data” need not compete and can, sometimes, jointly nourish. Big Data are not crunchy granola; the question is whether they will serve us as thick or thin gruel.

**#education**

Elizabeth Popp Berman  
SUNY-Albany

Big Data will teach us a lot about education—about how students learn, and about social mobility and reproduction. But it will also have two meta-consequences that deserve our attention. First, it will produce a new wave of overconfidence that we now know how to “fix” education. Second, it will create opportunities for new kinds of organizational actors—collectors and analyzers of data—that will reshape the educational ecosystem and further blur public/private boundaries. With regard to the first, theorists are well-positioned to provide reminders of the limits of social scientific knowledge as a guide to practical action (which is not to say that social science lacks value). The second will require theorists to think through what it means to be public or private, and how to understand educational organizations as outside actors become incorporated into their technical core.

**#organizations**  
**#inequality**



Adina Domonique Sterling  
Stanford University

In the field of organizations and inequality, big data may have a two-fold impact. First, the sheer data available on people and organizations can help scholars uncover new patterns of mobility that were previously obscured, informing our understanding of how opportunities are structured by organizations and society. Second, the use of big data by practitioners – an expanding field called “people analytics” – could shape what scholars find. The fact is the availability of big data varies across demographic groups. A New York Times blog reports there were more CEOs named John than all female CEOs combined in 2015. In analytical terms, this means that statistical models used to predict how a candidate for a CEO position named John will perform will have greater predictive power than for any female candidate. For this and other reasons, it’s important that scholars lead not just in consuming big data, but that we use what we know methodologically to advocate for its responsible use.

**#culture**



Robin Wagner-Pacifi  
New School for Social  
Research

Cultural sociology has always been pluralist in both its methods and theories, with one wing developing close readings of cultural objects in the hermeneutic tradition. Such virtuoso interpretations demand a deep knowledge of the objects under examination (be they textual, symbolic, imagistic, or gestural in nature)—a knowledge from the inside. They move from surface to depth and from text to context in order to ferret out meanings. Recent methodological innovations in computational analysis of texts (among them Named Entity Recognition, Syntactic Parsers, and Topic Models) have brought big data into the purview of cultural sociology. These methods identify such things as patterns, co-occurrences, and probabilistic “topics” extant in the data that can elude even the most talented of human close readers. As productive as such tools are, they are severely limited by their very ignorance of the cultural capacities and resonances of the objects under analysis. The challenge is to bridge the virtuoso close reading and the systematic distant reading with a language that incorporates both the hermeneutic insight, with its commitment to singularity, and the positivist findings associated with a more normal science model that aims for validity, reproducibility, and reliability.

#economicsociology  
#sciencestudies



Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra  
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Jorge Luis Borges' *Library of Babel* offers a cautionary tale for the promises and challenges of big data: "You who read me," wrote Borges about the infinite library containing everything that could possibly be said, "—are you certain you understand my language?" It is tempting to interpret big data as a profound discontinuity heralding the irrelevance of theory as a bridge across cases and between samples and populations. Yet, a closer reflection of its genealogies reveals a more humanistic imperative and the continued role for theoretical imaginations. Social theory remains relevant; theory is the only collective device able to make sense of the languages of big data. Big data invokes theory addressing how claims about the social world are concatenated across studies (how statistical associations and machine-learning models are chained into larger statements about households, gender, inequality, or cognition in organizational fields, for example). However, relevant theory also refers to a second-level evaluation of data itself. Big data is a particular organizational artifact, reflecting the imperative to capture, record, analyze, store and even commoditize the uncertainties and situations of modern organizations. Each element of a database thus reflects specific technical and organizational constraints and circumstances. Unlike traditional survey data, in much big data there is no codebook, only code and path-dependent histories: decisions of what matters and why, how things are rendered and inscribed, and how files are organized are mostly tacit. Claims based on big data are therefore indexical to the information infrastructures and organizational settings where it was fabricated; big data always requires contextualization. Therefore theories of big data should certainly concatenate claims. But to understand the language of abundant, seemingly infinite data, theories should also combine quasi-ethnographic sensibilities towards local forms and content with historical awareness of data as a mostly unplanned, contingent product of buildup and time.

**#comparativehistorical**

Mara Loveman  
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Berkeley

We might debate whether “Big Data” is the right label for some of the vast new data sources for historical research – things like the exponentially increased number of digitized archival collections around the world, or the release of complete count US Census datasets for multiple years. But there is little question that this transformed datascape dramatically expands both the scope and scale of plausible comparative historical research agendas going forward. New data sources combined with new automated record linkage methods and other innovative computer-assisted analytic techniques open up exciting opportunities to revisit classic problems in comparative historical sociology and to ask new theoretical questions about micro-macro linkages, embedded social processes, and multiple temporalities in explanations of historical continuity and change.

**#socialmovements**

Neal Caren  
University of North  
Carolina, Chapel Hill

Social movement scholars, although not necessarily sociologists, have been at the forefront of analyzing Big Data. Primarily, this is a result of 1) activists and others using Twitter for some visible political purposes, and 2) Twitter allowing researchers access to some data in ways that other social networking sites do not. This has nudged social movement scholars to focus more on contemporary movements and devote theoretical energies to the role of social media in shaping politics. This focus on current events will likely grow as advances in the automated extraction of newspaper data may soon enable a new wave of analyzing protest events. Despite these empirical shifts and their potential to influence new theoretical approaches, recent submission to the social movements journal *Mobilization* indicate that the dominant theoretical duo of opportunities and frames remains incredibly resilient.

**#sociologyofhealth**



Deborah Lupton  
University of Canberra

Sociologists are grappling with how to research the liveliness of the personal data that digital technologies are constantly generating. The world of digital data offers an exciting opportunity to reconceptualize our research methods and theories of social life and sociality. More applied research and theorizing are needed to address the impact of digital data on people's lives and how they interact with, understand and incorporate digital data. I use the term "data sense" to include these dimensions of the sociality of digital data. An interdisciplinary approach has never been more important: science and technology studies, anthropology, and cultural geography, for example, have much to offer sociological concepts of data sense and lively data. For example, sociomaterialist perspectives, as developed in actor-network theory, technoscience, and material anthropology, acknowledge and address the entanglements of humans and technologies. They therefore contribute an approach that goes beyond the discourse-centric position that has tended to pervade critical sociological theorizing in recent decades.

## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN 2015 ASA THEORY SECTION AWARD-WINNERS

# Can Sociological Theory Be Public Sociology?

*Erin Metz McDonnell, University of Notre Dame*

*Jonah Stuart Brundage, University of California, Berkeley*

**Erin Metz McDonnell:** Lately, I feel every time I turn around, another academic field is reinventing our wheel—discovering sociology, but not calling it sociology. For example, the controversy in psychology over failure to replicate findings (van Bavel 2016): New analysis finds that much of the failure to replicate is because (hold onto your hat now) people in x location now are not exactly the same as people in a completely different country 20 years earlier—that not all people are fungible instances of “participant.” Personal background characteristics, context, and culture matter! As other high-profile social sciences discover sociological mechanisms—without, it seems, discovering sociology—it seems worth revisiting the question of why?

Your award-winning student paper on elite pacification and my work on budgetary units both productively dialogue with the classics and advance contemporary sociological theory. Both are also interesting lenses to interrogate whether the aspects of theory valued within the discipline may contribute to the relative marginalization of sociology in the public sphere.

The relative marginalization of sociology in mainstream media and policy circles is a topic that has received attention recently. Orlando Patterson (2014) discusses “How Sociologists Made Themselves Irrelevant.” Elizabeth Popp Berman (2014) brings attention to ways that sociologists’ networks have marginalized the discipline, while economists more successfully “established organizational footholds in government” and “exported their ideas to law

and policy schools.” Jeremy Freese (2014) finds such “self-loathing” among sociologists “frankly tiresome,” but reflects on his experience of being surrounded by people participating in policy dialogues and confesses he rarely thinks in those terms.

What struck me was Freese's reflection: “I like that sociology allows one to think about big-picture questions that don’t always have to come back to policy—indeed, I think that is one of the great privileges of being in our field.” It speaks to the delights of a “life of the mind” that sometimes characterize passionate theorists. It also raises the suggestion that there may be something else contributing to sociology’s sidelined public position, that goes beyond our professional organizational network positions and whether we express policy prescriptions: the products of sociological research (articles, theories) are objects with particular qualities, and those same qualities that sociologists and theorists often love and prize may be some of the same qualities that make them intensely difficult for outsiders without a sociology Ph.D. to digest and appreciate.

**Jonah Stuart Brundage:** I think you raise a very interesting point, and one that, to be honest, I feel conflicted about. On the one hand, I would agree with Freese that one of the great privileges of being in sociology is precisely *not* feeling constrained to produce work with immediate “policy relevance,” to the extent that this allows us to pose big questions that may (I would say “ought to”) have practical implications for engaging with the

world, and yet need not yield direct policy applications. Indeed, I think there is an important distinction here, which you allude to, between work that is explicitly policy-oriented and work that aims to be practically relevant in broader and perhaps less direct ways. My hunch is that it's the latter position that characterizes much sociological theorizing, and not some aversion to public engagement in principle. So just because "theoretically-oriented" sociologists tend to eschew policy, this doesn't mean that they wouldn't ideally like to reach broader publics; I'm sure that many would love to. But for precisely this reason, I'm intrigued by your point that there may be something in the very products of sociological research (and perhaps especially self-described sociological theory) that makes it inaccessible to just those publics; and that, unfortunately, this may be connected to the very delights of the "life of the mind" shared by many sociologists. I'm curious to hear you elaborate a bit further as to what you were thinking here.

**EM:** Early in my career, I aspired to write so that it was interesting to my academic supervisor but intelligible to my mom (who never went to college). But practically speaking, that is incredibly difficult. I loved writing "Budgetary Units;" I would wake up early because ideas were in my head, and be typing before I even said "Hello" to my husband. But I cannot for the life of me explain it to my mother. Even if we eschew jargon, much of what passes as non-jargon among sociologists is still relatively unintelligible to non-sociologists. The subtleties and "nuances" (Healy forthcoming) that sociologists admire can likewise make it difficult for non-sociologists to even grasp the main point. Academics decry how our complex, nuanced work gets boiled down in the popular press, and yet it seems that if it cannot be boiled

down, distilled into relatively quickly consumable essences, it is exceedingly unlikely to ever *get* attention. Conversely, if I translate my work into language that non-sociologists can understand and quickly grasp the significance of, one veers close to sounding like a TedTalk...and I have the sense that sounding like a TedTalk is not particularly valued *within* the discipline, or at least evaluated as theory within sociology. "Ten simple rules for being a budgetary unit!" "Everything you've ever wanted to know about pacifying elites (you won't believe #5)!"

**JSB:** I think you're pointing to a built-in trade-off between being legible to external audiences and getting coded as serious—especially *theoretically* serious—scholarship by the disciplinary rewards system. This is to some extent in the nature of disciplinary specialization as such, since developing a technical and thus esoteric language is part of what makes a discipline a discipline. So I'm not suggesting that this dilemma is unique to sociology. But I'm especially intrigued by the role of theory in what you've identified.

Thinking about my paper, "The Pacification of Hunting," it's interesting because I actually don't have that much trouble explaining the empirical case to non-sociologists. That's not the hard part. What I have trouble explaining is precisely my "theoretical contribution." But this is really problematic because if my paper has anything novel to say with respect to sociology, it hinges unavoidably on that theoretical contribution.

**EM:** It is interesting that lay readers are drawn to your narrative but miss your theoretical contribution. In my article, non-sociologists love the narrative about Russian gangsters smuggling goods into a gulag, but miss entirely

the point about collectively organized consumption.

**JSB:** The empirical substance of my paper concerns the practice of hunting as performed by landed elites in early modern England. While hunting remained the preferred leisure activity of these elites for the entire period I study, elites came to hunt in new ways that radically distanced themselves from the violent aspects of the ritual—thus, a kind of “pacification” of elite lifestyles. Now, what’s interesting is that, even though all of this is totally foreign to our own lives, I find it relatively easy to describe to non-sociologists, and I think that people often find it interesting too (if in a quaint sort of way). But I have the hardest time talking about my paper’s *explanation* of these hunting changes, of this pacification process, without immediately boring non-sociologists. (In a nutshell, my explanation is that new structures for reproducing elite privilege opened up that had little to do with physical prowess and skills in violence.) At any rate, I think my difficulty in talking about this latter aspect of the paper has everything to do with the way my explanation is anchored in a set of “sociological theories” (of state formation, class conflict, elite conflict) that have a sort of insular, and thus alienating, quality to them. Which is ironic, because what I have to say about the development of states, or about elites and their reproduction strategies, ought to be much more relevant to our own lives than my interpretation of seventeenth-century English hunting.

**EM:** “Budgetary Units” likely won’t make the news either, even though people like stories about Russian gangsters, and even though it contains implications for the so-called “sharing economy” that is hot now. There are a number of ways that the qualities of what gets coded as high-status sociological theory may compro-

mise its public consumption: 1) It is not immediately obvious to a lay consumer *how the subjects are relevant* to their lives. 2) It is not immediately obvious to a lay consumer why this finding/argument/theory is *new and interesting*. 3) The *style of presentation* is not legible to a lay consumer.

Some might argue that practical applications are in tension with knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but this seems not to be the case in physics or engineering, for example. A number of advances in the physical sciences originated from the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which only afterwards were bent to practical application. It may be that some academic fields—whose specialized knowledges might otherwise fit some of the above conditions—contain actors with dual cultural competency. Such actors are capable of consuming the products of high-end scientific thought but also translating them for the public, e.g. the division between research and practicing psychologists. Such fields include professional rewards for those who produce practical implications from research.

**JSB:** Right, because it’s not like the type of theorizing that goes on in some of the higher status and/or more policy influential disciplines (physics, economics) is somehow *more* accessible to broader publics. If anything, it’s the opposite, given how mathematized those fields are. Yet those fields also seem to offer more rewards for practically-oriented applications of theory.

**EM:** I wonder whether the *theory* in those fields is mathematized. It seems rather that the methods and argumentative foundations are, but the theory itself is brief. For example, game theory can be hard to follow, but the generalized theoretical claim may be something more simple, like “corruption is high in

homogeneous or very fragmented countries” (Cerqueti, Coppier & Piga 2012).

**JSB:** Yes, it’s more the latter, at least for economics. Many of the most publicly influential theories to come out of economics are incredibly parsimonious. This might mean that even if such theories are developed in the most rarified of environments—knowledge for knowledge’s sake and all that—they may simply be easier to translate to a general audience. Most sociologists are understandably wary about the violence done to reality in attaining such a degree of parsimony, but the fact is that this makes it harder to translate a sociological theory without doing violence to the *theory itself*.

It’s also worth considering what we even mean by “theory” and “theorizing.” As Abend (2008) among others has pointed out, this isn’t always terribly clear in sociology. My guess, although I’m not positive about this, is that disciplines that have more successfully instituted the dual structure of “theoretical” and “applied” work that you alluded to, like economics and physics, are also less ambiguous about the meaning of theory: that by and large, they take theory to mean something akin to what Abend called “theory<sub>1</sub>” (general, law-like propositions), and also probably his “theory<sub>5</sub>” (basically meta-theory). But of course, and this is Abend’s point, sociologists use “theory” in these *and* several other ways as well.

**EM:** True. As far as the public knows, economics is encapsulated in a theory<sub>1</sub>: “people will act in their material self-interest.” Lay consumers armed with this theory<sub>1</sub> can then find it “surprising” (and therefore interesting, if not in an immediately policy-relevant way) that *any* women and children survive a sinking ship, because one would expect all strong men to self-interestedly toss weaklings aside in the

scramble to survive (Kenney & Chace 2012). The contrast is palpable, giving non-specialists a quick hit of excitement that, for me, is innate in encountering novel theory. I’m not sure sociology has anything close to a theory<sub>1</sub> or theory<sub>5</sub> position that can be so quickly distilled and consumed by lay users. Which, correspondingly, makes it harder for the public to experience the thrill of theoretical novelty.

**JSB:** That’s a really interesting point. And given that sociology uses “theory” in such a wide variety of ways, it’s also harder to develop the kind of division between theoretical and applied work that some of these other disciplines enjoy (and which may contribute to their influence). But this is where I start to wonder whether we should be taking economics (and, by extension, physics) as our reference points in the first place. Personally, I think one of the great merits of sociology is precisely how it interweaves empirical analysis and theorizing (whatever we mean by the latter). I know that this isn’t the same thing as a parsimony-accuracy trade-off, but in practice it’s hard to move too far toward the parsimonious end of the spectrum when you’ve always got one foot in empirical work as well.

I would argue this data-driven (which need not imply “empiricist”) quality of sociology is really what makes it legitimately scientific at all. If in physics, theorizing runs way out ahead of any sort of empirical testing, it seems that this is justified scientifically by the fact that as empirical tests do become possible, theoretical physics consistently fares pretty well (as far as I understand these things). In economics, too, theory development is often well in advance of data—although I think it is safe to say that its theories have a much poorer record of empirical confirmation. I guess I worry that, by following economics, sociologists would risk putting themselves in the same position and

thus sacrificing what I think is precisely our strong suit—the ability to rationally explain patterns of data *post hoc*. That’s why I think we are better off situating ourselves in reference to disciplines (from history to evolutionary biology) that are also more “data driven.” I wonder if the more historical sciences also offer lessons for the specific problem of reaching wider publics.

**EM:** Thinking on the fly, it seems if we look across disciplines at how they interface with public dialogue, we might say that there are two paths. One possibility is for a discipline to include translators with dual competence in the technical field and public sphere—either field insiders (such as the division between theoretical research psychologists and practicing psychologists) or outsiders like specialized journalists (e.g. *I F\*\*\*ing Love Science*<sup>1</sup>). Partnerships might also combine competencies in the technical field and public: a number of recent best-sellers have been produced by academic sociologists working with non-sociologists, like Aziz Ansari, the comedian, working with Eric Klinenberg on *Modern Romance*, or Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In* working with a team of sociologists to synthesize research on workplace gender discrimination (and per “life relevance,” Sandberg consistently ends with prescriptions—“and here’s what you should do about it”—which few sociological studies do).

Alternatively, the discipline might produce products that are already both legible to and “innately” interesting to the lay public. It is interesting to consider history. Phil Cohen (2015) looks at newspaper references to various social science disciplines, and what really jumps out is not the prominence of economics—which we’ve come to expect—but

the really noteworthy position of *historians*. From 1985 to 2005, there were actually more newspaper references to academic historians than to economists. The relative prominence of historians in newspapers is pretty telling. They would seem to fail the “immediate policy impacts” test, except in the general precept that if you don’t know history you risk repeating it.

**JSB:** This is interesting. When I think about it, the relative prominence of historians is understandable (despite them failing the “immediate policy impacts” test). It strikes me that precisely because history places more emphasis on narrative and writing well as ends in themselves, it has less of a disconnect between internal rewards and external legibility. And this also means that there’s an affinity between what the discipline values and what journalists themselves value (again, something along the lines of narrative) such that there are more lay translators out there for historians.

**EM:** Great point. My good friend is a historian of modern Africa who often laments that history has no theory; he says all they do is tell stories.

**JSB:** Right. The counter-argument from sociology is that historians are simply atheoretical, so while they may offer a model for public relevance (telling good stories), this is by definition a bad model for *theory* (let alone theory that is publicly relevant). But this also goes back to the question of what gets coded as theory. And I wonder if sociologists aren’t a little more comfortable than they realize with historians’ use of theory—and if many historians aren’t way more “theoretical” than they themselves acknowledge. To return to Abend, much of what historians do seems completely consistent with his theory<sub>2</sub> (causal

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iflscience.com>

explanations) and especially theory<sub>3</sub> (interpretation), both of which, if he's right, sociologists actually call "theory" all the time in practice.

**EM:** Although, within history, interpretation and explanation tend to be about a particular case. One of the big things differentiating history from historical sociology is a greater attentiveness within sociology to whether and how elements of the narrative may (or may not) generalize to other cases or times. If you array our sister sciences on a continuum from general to particular, on one end you have historians telling deeply detailed narratives of a particular case, time, and place. On the other end, you have economists and psychologists who broadly work from an assumption of high interpersonal generalizability (with some recent trends away from that). Swaths of psychology generalize experiments on college guinea pigs to all people. Economists theorize people will do *x* when confronted with *y* incentives, using a mathematical algorithm where "preferences" stand in for the messy reality of social beings. To grossly exaggerate, history is high on particularity with few efforts to abstract or generalize; psychology and economics are high on generalizing and low on particularity.

Much of the richness of sociology—but especially sociological *theory*—occupies precisely that middle zone. We seek generalizability, but insist on boundary conditions that are subject(able) to empirical verification. We attend to particularities but at a mid-range level corresponding to types or categories rather than purely individual "great men" or idiosyncratic cases. Thus you have Skocpol on revolutions: neither the particularistic narrative of a single revolution, nor every individual's generalizable response to bread shortages at any place or time. "Budgetary

Units" gains its theoretical leverage in finding similarities across seemingly disparate cases: Russian gangsters, Catholic nuns, low-income child support, and immigrant remittances. Similarly, my new work on interstitial bureaucracy in the Ghanaian state has had me theoretically synthesizing from the nineteenth-century American Coast Survey Department, early-twentieth-century Chinese Salt Inspectorate, mid-twentieth-century Kenyan Tea Development Agency, late-twentieth-century Brazilian National Development Bank, and twenty-first-century Nigerian Food and Drug Authority. For me, what is fascinating—what is the foundation of *theory*—is the remarkable consistency of some conditions in those cases across time, space, and state function.

But it may also be that the middle of that continuum is the least translatable and legible to non-sociologists. One seeks to abstract and generalize in a way that confounds a purely narrative unfolding, and yet one is tied to empirical data, in all its messiness, in a way that frequently confounds streamlined simplification.

I want to end by saying what a great pleasure it was to dialogue with you today, Jonah. Anyone who hasn't already read Jonah's excellent article on elite pacification should know that they are in for an intellectual treat.

**JSB:** Thank you, Erin. As I'm sure many readers are already aware, your article on budgetary units is a fantastic piece and a really major intervention.

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## BOOK REVIEW

## ***Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology, by Alexander Wendt***

*Benjamin Lamb-Books*

In his latest book, Alexander Wendt, the well-known political scientist and International Relations theorist, ventures across disciplinary borders to rethink social ontology through the counterintuitive principles of quantum physics. Wendt's proposal is radical, with radical implications for sociology. At stake is sociology's classically-inherited ontological commitment to Newtonianism, a commitment that manifests itself in beliefs that social causation should always be mechanical, local, and materialist. Newtonianism lurks everywhere in social science today. Most forms of conflict theory and political realism, whether in sociology or political science, are Newtonian, as is analytical sociology's theory of mechanisms, processes, and networks. For Wendt, these familiar features of the discipline rest on a flawed ontological foundation, one which does not adequately measure, interrogate, and wrestle with the quantum foundations of social life, such as the sentience, sociality, and spontaneity of human beings equipped with the faculties of consciousness that Wendt calls "quantum mind."

Wendt's book is a bold attempt at taking the quantum revolution in physics seriously. Until the early twentieth century, physicists subscribed to the Newtonian idea that all objects possess a mutually independent existence from one another, that each object is subject to the general causal laws of the material universe; and that, therefore, objects can only influence one another through direct contact mediated by material constraints. Quantum physics overturned these classic

Newtonian assumptions. Work by Planck and Einstein revealed that light is a "photon" which sometimes behaves like waves and sometimes like particles. But photons did not behave as normal particles of matter were supposed to. Instead, their behavior depended upon the state of the field of which they were "part." Stranger still, photons in the same field could be said to be in two contradictory positions at once, a phenomenon known as "superposition." Within a few years, the French scientist Louis de Broglie realized that Einstein's hypothesis had implications for matter too—that matter at the subatomic level of protons and electrons also acted with a similar wave-particle duality, and thus was prone to the same weird properties of superposition, nonseparability, and spontaneity. In short, quantum physics confounded the commonsense view of the basic building blocks of the universe—that brute matter is simple and separable "all the way down."

Another important ontological insight from quantum mechanics is the idea of entanglement. Entanglement is perhaps *the keyword* of quantum theory today. It refers to how particles continue to "influence" one another even after they have interacted with one another and moved apart. That non-local forms of connection exist and "travel" faster than the speed of light is one of the best-confirmed findings of modern physics. More vexing still, space and time appear not to exist inside the atom, raising the intriguing possibility of retroactive influence or correlation. For the past century, therefore, modern physics has

been grappling with the profound and disconcerting fact that the ontology of matter is far less obvious or lifeless than it once appeared to be.

While most physicists have been reticent to discuss the ontological implications of quantum mechanics, the philosophers among them have offered an exotic buffet of quantum ontologies competing to describe the nature of quantum reality. Wendt helpfully navigates this daunting philosophical labyrinth, but he is not primarily interested in re-hashing classical epistemological debates. Instead, he seeks to develop a systematic replacement, going to the roots of intentional phenomena and identifying the quantum foundations of social life. The chapters of *Quantum Mind* review advances in quantum theory and apply them to biology, the brain, consciousness, decision-making and rationality, experience and memory, free will and agency, language, vision and perception, sociability, interaction, and macro-social structures like the state. In each area, Wendt reviews longstanding theoretical deadlocks and exposes the classical Newtonian assumptions responsible for them. He then weaves together research from multiple disciplines that demonstrates how quantum mechanics helps to make sense of observed behavior within each domain. Perhaps most ambitiously, rather than adopting a “weak” epistemological stance—that quantum formalism should be restricted to prediction—he instead advocates for a “strong” realist interpretation of the quantum systems at work. That is to say, he argues that quantum wave-functions—along with their weird, non-local, and time-symmetric effects—actually exist and operate at the level of social structures.

Wendt’s quantum social ontology goes something like this: People are “walking wave-functions.” In other words, the human brain is a

quantum operating system, protected by organic boundaries and highly skilled in processes of quantum computing that we more commonly call memory and feeling (Experience), information-processing (Cognition), and agency/freedom (Will). Wendt’s three quantum faculties, Experience, Cognition, and Will, are the constitutive components of his theory of “quantum mind” as highlighted in the book’s title. These are also the properties of proto-subjectivity that go all the way down to the subatomic level in Wendt’s panpsychic universe. Human brains are capable of sustaining states of “quantum coherence,” wherein multiple contradictory possibilities exist within an irreducible wave-function whole. Quantum coherence describes the human unconscious par excellence: in the unconscious, various contradictory potential vectors of meaning and action are held in superposition. But other people, institutions, and objects who “measure” subjects in many different ways interfere with this quantum state of mind, thus effecting its wave-function collapse into everyday reality.

As crisscrossing wave-functions, individuals are not fully separable with respect to meanings, feelings, and identities. Interlocutors may be entangled through language at the level of semantic contexts, which also display several quantum properties. We take turns reading each other’s minds, gauging behavior, sizing each other up, thus continuously collapsing the shared wavy superposition of intentions into actual actions. We may also immediately impact one another thanks to the non-locality of light, direct perception, and our quantum-computational brain. Because consciousness and language operate in quantum fashion, social reality is essentially holographic: together we create mutual patterns of interference that are processed by our quantum brains to give meaning and matter to the situation, materializing social structures into

everyday practices. We are all shaped teleologically by social structures that are invisible, which we participate in making actual via their own wave-function collapse into concretely observable practices.

Quantum social ontology, outlined above, only works if you are willing to follow Wendt's controversial claim that quantum systems exist on the macroscopic plane in brains, language, and in social structures—that individual organisms, discourse, and social structures can all sustain states of quantum coherence. In Wendt's appropriation of the emerging field of quantum biology, to be quantum coherent is tantamount to being alive. Quantum coherence makes sense of both the existence of an internal perspective on the world and why that perspective-holding is inherently unobservable to outsiders. Wherever there is quantum coherence, there is therefore a corresponding place for phenomenology. Indeed, the most remarkable accomplishment of this book may be Wendt's tight reconciliation of naturalistic and interpretive approaches in social science. The wave-particle duality of quantum systems gives rise to a similar methodological duality in Wendt's vitalist sociology, a complementarity between both first-person phenomenology and third-person external observation. What enables this synthesis has something to do with the quantum nature of life itself. Wendt writes that his

...argument amounts to an epistemological double movement, taking what is known at each level—the third-person knowledge of quantum theory and the first-person knowledge of consciousness—and projecting it toward the other, scaling all the way up and all the way down respectively. The goal of this maneuver is not to reduce one kind of knowledge to the other but quite the op-

posite, to keep them separate until they are face to face across the micro-macro spectrum. There they can then be joined in the phenomenon of life... (2015:93)

A major concern for sociologists will be how to do quantum social science empirically. Wendt does not expect social scientists to learn the strange mathematics of quantum mechanics. There are no equations even in the book, thankfully. Nevertheless, it is not pleasant to imagine submitting quantum-theory inflected ideas through peer-review precisely on this point (“...the author does not specify the probability of his or her wave-function...”). Another practical difficulty would be in utilizing Wendt's sophisticated terminology: are more theory articles going to appear that now represent some social practice as a “wave-function collapse” that initiates “temporal symmetry breaking” as experienced in “entanglement” with others? Redescriptions could quickly multiply as to which components of a social sequence are “classical” versus “quantum,” “local” versus “non-local,” “deterministic” versus “emergent,” and so on. Some will surely cringe to imagine others appealing to the same quantum-theoretical framework as he for data analysis.

For others, the concern will be that quantum social ontology may just offer more fancy jargon and a mere re-labeling of common sociological objects of inquiry. As Wendt would be the first to acknowledge, there are some substantive similarities between his proposal and, for instance, actor-network theory and the new materialism, the feminist performative theory of Butler and others, as well as Bourdieusian theories of field and practice. Would Wendt's vitalist sociology have us theorize differently from these? Not necessarily. Quantum mind may simply grant such (heterodox) social-theorizing a surer

footing in reality—that is, another set of standards to check for naturalistic consistency. In fact, this critique probably misses the point by not taking Wendt’s scientific realism seriously enough. His main intervention, at least in this book, is at the level of social ontology wherein he focuses on neglected but foundational issues regarding the nature of life and consciousness as enablers of whatever social behavior is under inquiry. Quantum mind is more than mere re-description, he hopes, and rather a closer approximation of the basic ingredients of sentient social life, from which interactions, cultures, and social structures pour forth. While Wendt is clearly interested in developing a quantum theory of the nation-state as a sort of holographic social structure, there is additional empirical potential in the areas of cultural sociology, civil-society discourse, rhetoric, and collective emotions. Here, Wendt’s holistic social ontology may support new ways of understanding, for example, cultural autonomy, transformative events, the persistence of status structures, different modalities of communication, and perhaps even emotional contagion.

Cultural sociology, in particular, could have much to gain from a quantum theory of consciousness.

More generally, the big cliffhanger here is whether under the default influence of Newtonianism and classical materialism, we have in fact ended up with a sociology *sans* subjectivity, a life science without the life force of quantum mind, and without the weird properties of consciousness and feelings that animate, enliven, and entangle the real subjects of social science. It may be the case that we have all been too unconcerned with the nature of consciousness and that, overall, the social sciences have done quite admirably in removing humans of will and experience from the equation—an equation worse in explanatory power because of this vital omission, the omission of the vital.

*Benjamin Lamb-Books is author of Angry Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Slavery: Moral Emotions in Social Movements (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).*

## Dissertation Spotlight

**Jordan Fox Besek** (University of Oregon)

**Title:** “On the Logics of Investigating Social and Ecological Change: From the Asian Carp Invasion to the Reversal of the Chicago River”

**Committee:** Richard York (chair), John Bellamy Foster, James Elliott, Marsha Weisiger

While sociologists have developed robust theoretical frameworks for explicating how various social processes negatively impact the environment, few have incorporated how environmental change may create instability amongst social processes. Consequently, non-human processes often enter into sociological analysis as passive objects to be instrumentally acted upon, as opposed to active participants in social worlds. In this dissertation, I develop a theoretical framework geared toward examining the reciprocal complexity of socioenvironmental change, as opposed to how the social impacts the environmental. The foundation for this framework is Robert Park’s incorporation of the concept of succession from ecology, a concept built for investigating how interactions construct events that simultaneously change the processes in interaction while producing novel contexts. Highlighting succession’s potential for focusing on shifting multi-scalar, material interactions, I apply the succession framework to the introduction of Asian carp, a potentially destructive invasive species that threatens to enter into the Great Lakes through the Chicago River and has, as a result, set into motion considerable contestations across political, cultural, and scientific social processes. Throughout, I demonstrate how the successional interplay between the social and the environmental structure the processes through which the Asian carp invasion operates.

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**Matthew Kearney** (University of Wisconsin, Madison)

**Title:** “The Social Order of Collective Action: The Wisconsin Uprising of 2011”

**Committee:** Erik Olin Wright (chair), Ivan Ermakoff, Alice Goffman, Pamela Oliver

The Wisconsin Uprising of 2011 was one of the largest sustained collective actions in United States history. Drawing on insider participant-observation, extensive in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, and digital archiving, this project investigates how an unplanned collective action achieved a high degree of internal social order and strategic coherence. This dissertation in development makes at least three specific contributions to social theory. First, it introduces the concept of escalating moral obligation, a relational mechanism showing how commitment to collective action increases as others endure difficulties on behalf of the same cause. Second, it identifies non-hierarchical forms of organization that simultaneously provided a focal point for an initially disorganized crowd and incorporated normally marginalized people into meaningful leadership, notably youth. Third, as an unplanned assembly of many unaffiliated people that created a mutual moral community, this event illuminates the sources of collective effervescence in a way few other cases can, showing that pre-existing group affiliation is not a necessary condition for effervescence to emerge. The dissertation should be of interest to theorists, social movement scholars, political sociologists, cultural sociologists, youth scholars, and sociologists of emotion, among others.

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# 2016 Junior Theorists' Symposium

## Seattle University, August 19, 2016

### Conference Program

**8:30 – 9:00 | Coffee and Bagels**

**9:00 – 10:50 | Panel I**

- Dan Menchik (Michigan State University) – “The Dynamics of Professional Status Competitions”
- Linsey Edwards (Princeton University) – “Time and Efficacy: Temporal Patterns, Uncertainty, and ‘Neighborhood Effects’”
- Shai Dromi (Harvard University) and Sam Stabler (Yale University) – “Sociological Critique, Pragmatism, and Moral Practice”

*Discussant:* Ann Mische (University of Notre Dame)

**10:50 – 11:00 | Coffee Break**

**11:00 – 12:50 | Panel II**

- Abigail Sewell (Emory University) – “The Racism-Race Reification Process: A Meso-Level Framework for Understanding Racial Health Disparities”
- Katrina Quisumbing King (University of Wisconsin – Madison) – “A Return to Du Bois’ Color Line: Re-Centering Conquest, Exclusion, and Imperialism”
- Sunmin Kim (University of California – Berkeley) – “Contingent Racial Formation: Challenges to the Racial Ideology of the Dillingham Commission (1907-1911)”

*Discussant:* Tukufu Zuberi (University of Pennsylvania)

**12:50 – 2:00 | Lunch**

**2:00-2:45 | Junior Theorist Award**

**Claudio Benzecry (Northwestern University)**

**2:45 – 4:35 | Panel III**

- Anya Degenshein (Northwestern University) – “Beyond Risk: Entrapment, Surveillance, and the Creation of Criminal Biographies”
- Patrick Bergemann (Columbia University) – “From Local Advantage to Global Repression: A Theory of Denunciation”
- Chris Rea (University of California – Los Angeles/Max Planck Institute) – “Domination in 2D: Power and Institutional Change in an Era of Markets”

*Discussant:* Mounira M. Charrad (University of Texas – Austin)

**4:45 – 6:00 | After-panel: On Theory and Method**

Christopher A. Bail (Duke University)  
Tey Meadow (Columbia University)  
Ashley Mears (Boston University)  
Frederick F. Wherry (Yale University)

**6:00 – ? | Theory in the Wild: Beer, wine, and good conversation**

**Off-site: *The Garage*, 1130 Broadway, Seattle, WA 98122)**

JTS will take place in the [Wyckoff Auditorium \(Engineering 200\)](#). To facilitate planning, please RSVP by sending an email to [juniortheorists@gmail.com](mailto:juniortheorists@gmail.com) with the subject line “JTS RSVP.” JTS is a donation-based event, with a suggested donation of \$20 per faculty member and \$10 per graduate student. Donations may be made either directly at the event, or in advance through PayPal to the [juniortheorists@gmail.com](mailto:juniortheorists@gmail.com) email account. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact the organizers, Anna Skarpelis ([aks402@nyu.edu](mailto:aks402@nyu.edu)) or Clayton Childress ([cchildress@utsc.utoronto.ca](mailto:cchildress@utsc.utoronto.ca)).

# 2016 American Sociological Association Meetings

## Seattle, Washington, August 20-23, 2016

### Theory Section Sessions

#### **Theory Section Paper Session: Theorizing Perception**

**Monday, August 22, 8:30-10:10AM**

*Session Organizer:* Joseph Klett (University of California, Santa Cruz)

*Panelists*

Daniel A. Winchester (Purdue): "A Pedagogy in the Passions: The Effects of Embodiment on Discursive Consciousness and Abstract Knowledge Acquisition"

Dustin S. Stoltz and Marshall Allen Taylor (University of Notre Dame): "Affording Contention with Objects: Cognition, Materiality, and the Purposeful Enunciation of Material Culture"

Lindsey A. Freeman (SUNY-Buffalo): "Atomic Mnemonic Assemblages: Towards a Sociological Poetry"

Fiona Rose-Greenland (University of Chicago): "The Art of Destruction: Cultural Violence and Perception in the Islamic State"

#### **Theory Section Paper Session: Directions in Relational Sociology: Theory, Method, and Practice**

**Monday, August 22, 10:30AM-12:10PM**

*Session Organizer:* Emily Anne Erikson (Yale University)

*Presider:* Vanina Leschziner (Toronto)

*Panelists*

Jacob Habinek (University of California, Berkeley): "How Organizational Fields Evolve: The Case of Subprime Mortgage Finance, 1998-2008"

Nina Bandelj (University of California, Irvine): "Rethinking Relationality in Economic Sociology: Relational Work in Circuits of Commerce"

Marc Garcelon (University of Missouri, Kansas City): "Signs of the Body: What Language Tells Us about Institutions"

Bernd Würpts (University of Washington): "Testing Simmel's Theory of Group Persistence: Elite Networks and Institutional Development in the Medieval Hansa, 1356-1516"

Carolin Fischer (University of Neuchâtel): "Who Acts for What Change? A Relational Approach to Transnational Engagements of Afghan Diaspora Groups"

#### **Theory Section Paper Session: Abduction and the Craft of Theorizing**

**Monday, August 22, 2:30-4:10PM**

*Session Organizer and Presider:* Iddo Tavory (New York University)

*Panelists*

Anna S. Mueller (University of Chicago) and Seth Abrutyn (University of Memphis):

"Abduction and the Reimagining of Durkheim's *Suicide*: A Case Study of a Suicide-Prone Cohesive Community"

Stefan Timmermans (University of California, Los Angeles): "The Everyday Work of Abduction: Modes of Generality and Symbolic Power"

Judith Gerson (Rutgers): "Narratives of Displacement and Loss: An Abductive Rereading of Holocaust Memoirs"

*Discussant:* Richard Swedberg (Cornell University)

**Theory Section Reception****Monday, August 22, 6:30-8:30PM****Theory Section Invited Session:****Visualization and Social Theory****Tuesday, August 23, 8:30-10:10AM**

*Session Organizers:* Raka Ray and Marion Fourcade (University of California, Berkeley)

*Session Presider:* Raka Ray (University of California, Berkeley)

*Panelists*

Kieran Healy and James Moody (Duke University): "Visual Thinking in the Social Sciences"

Janet Vertesi (Princeton University): "Picturing Space, Picturing Teams: Visualization and Social Practice at NASA"

Etienne Ollion (Université de Strasbourg): "How to (Quantitatively) Represent the Social World? Geometric Data Analysis Meets the Machine Learning Revolution"

Marion Fourcade and Thomas Krendl Gilbert (University of California, Berkeley): "Visualizing Concepts"

Daniel Silver (University of Toronto): "Visual Social Thought"

**Theory Section Invited Session: Lewis A. Coser Memorial Lecture and Salon****Tuesday, August 23, 10:30AM-12:10PM**

*Session Organizer and Presider:* Neil Gross (Colby College)

*Panelist:* Isaac Ariail Reed (University of Virginia)

**Theory Section Roundtables****Tuesday, August 23, 12:30-1:30PM**

*Organizer:* Achim Edelmann (University of Bern)

**Theory Section Business Meeting****Tuesday, August 23, 1:30-2:10PM****Theory Section Author Meets Critics****Session: Big Data/Big Theory****Tuesday, August 23, 2:30-4:10PM**

*Session Organizer:* John W. Mohr (University of California, Santa Barbara)

*Presiders:* John W. Mohr (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Robin E. Wagner-Pacifici (New School for Social Research)

*Authors*

Julia Potter Adams (Yale University)  
Hannah Brueckner (New York University, Abu Dhabi)

Amir Goldberg (Stanford University)  
Timothy Hannigan (University of Alberta)  
Monica Lee (Facebook, Inc.)

Kevin Lewis (University of California, San Diego)

Daniel A. McFarland (Stanford University)

John Levi Martin (University of Chicago)

*Critics*

Bart Bonikowski (Harvard University)  
Jacob Gates Foster (University of California, Los Angeles)

Laura K. Nelson (Northwestern University)

## Member News and Notes

### Spring 2016

#### BOOKS

Elias, Sean, and Joe Feagin. 2016. [\*Racial Theories in Social Science: A Systemic Racism Critique\*](#). New York: Routledge.

Emigh, Rebecca Jean, Dylan Riley, and Patricia Ahmed. 2016. [\*Antecedents of Censuses from Medieval to Nation States: How Societies and States Count\*](#). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Emigh, Rebecca Jean, Dylan Riley, and Patricia Ahmed. 2016. [\*Changes in Censuses from Imperialist to Welfare States: How Societies and States Count\*](#). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Lawler, Edward J., Shane R. Thye, and Jeongkoo Yoon. 2015. [\*Order on the Edge of Chaos: Social Psychology and the Problem of Social Order\*](#). New York: Cambridge University Press.

#### ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS

Angelo, Hillary. 2016. "From the City Lens toward Urbanisation as a Way of Seeing: Country/Cities Binaries on an Urbanising Planet." [\*Urban Studies\*](#), DOI: [10.1177/0042098016629312](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016629312).

Gill, Timothy M. 2016. "The Venezuelan Government and the Global Field: The Legislative Battle over Foreign Funding for Nongovernmental Organizations." [\*Sociological Forum\* 31\(1\): 29-52](#).

Hechter, Michael, Steven Pfaff, and Patrick Underwood. 2016. "Grievances and the Genesis of Rebellion: Mutiny in the Royal Navy, 1740-1820." [\*American Sociological Review\* 81\(1\): 165-89](#).

Mayrl, Damon, and Sarah Quinn. 2016. "Defining the State from within: Boundaries, Schemas, and Associational Policymaking." [\*Sociological Theory\* 34\(1\): 1-26](#).

Olen, Peter, and Stephen Turner. 2015. "Durkheim, Sellars, and the Origins of Collective Intentionality." [\*British Journal for the History of Philosophy\* 23\(5\): 954-75](#).

Rosenberg, M. Michael. 2016. "The Conceptual Articulation of the Reality of Life: Max Weber's Theoretical Constitution of Sociological Ideal Types." [\*Journal of Classical Sociology\* 16\(1\): 84-101](#).

Schulz, Markus S., ed. 2015. Special Issue: Future Moves in Culture, Society, and Technology. [\*Current Sociology\* 63\(2\)](#).

Skvoretz, John, and Thomas J. Fararo. 2016. "Status and Interaction: A Stochastic Model for the Measurement of Macro-Status Value and the Determination of Micro-Status Ranking in Task Group Interaction." [\*Socius\* 2: 1-16](#).

Turner, Stephen. 2015. "Not So Radical Historicism." [\*Philosophy of the Social Sciences\* 45\(2\): 246-57](#).

Turner, Stephen. 2015. "Functionalism, Field Theories, and Unintended Consequences." Pp. 229-51 in *Paradoxes, Mechanisms, Consequences: Essays in Honor of Mohamed Cherkaoui*, edited by G. Manzo. Oxford: Bardwell Press.

## CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

**The ISA Forum of Sociology**, July 10-14, 2016 in Vienna, Austria has many sessions related to sociological theory in general as well as to the Forum's focus theme "The Futures We Want: Global Sociology and the Struggles for a Better World: <http://www.isa-sociology.org/forum-2016/>

### **The Eighth Annual Meeting on "Psychodynamics of Self & Society"**

ASA Mini-Conference, Friday, August 19, 2016, Cedar Room A & B, Second Floor, Sheraton Seattle Hotel (1400 6th Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98101). The conference will feature a Keynote Panel with Neil McLaughlin on "The Authoritarian

Personality." Other speakers include Lynn Chancer, Lauren Langman, Michael Thompson, Roger Salerno, Hans Bakker, Marty Prosono, Joel Crombez, Dan Krier, Mark Worrell, Brian Sullivan, Kevin Amidon, and Bill Swartz. Topics include Marxism, Critical Theory, Psychoanalysis (Freud, Reich, Fromm to Lacan) and more! Openings are still available for paper presentations. Please contact Lynn Chancer ([lchancer@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:lchancer@hunter.cuny.edu)) or Lauren Langman ([llang944@aol.com](mailto:llang944@aol.com)).

## BOOK SERIES ANNOUNCEMENTS

We invite book proposals from this community for the new book series **Decolonial Options for the Social Sciences**, edited by Alexander I. Stingl (IAM FAU Erlangen – Nürnberg), Oyeronke Oyewumi (Stony Brook), Nicholas Rowland (Penn State), and Sabrina M. Weiss (RIT). More than being just an 'emerging paradigm', decoloniality is a troubling and troubled conversation that does more than just cross the boundaries of disciplines, geo-polities, time frames, cultures, and identities. Interrogating the acts and gestures of crossing borders as events that simultaneously also make borders, decolonial perspectives have opened the possibility for border thinking and border existences that challenge the social sciences at their core. The book series seeks proposals that consider in all aspects the gesture of sociological delinking from the coloniality of power,

being, knowledge and life itself. All contributions should aim to consider themselves as interventions to answer this challenge: "Projects aimed at 'decoloniality,' understood as the simultaneous and continuous processes of transformation and creation, the construction of radically distinct social imaginaries, conditions, and relations of power, knowledge." Our main aim with series is to consider, discuss, and develop ideas and questions that represent an epistemic delinking that challenges sociology. Alexander Stingl serves as corresponding editor and can be reached at [nomadicscholarship@gmail.com](mailto:nomadicscholarship@gmail.com). Further information about the series and additional content can be found at: <https://decolonialsocialscience.wordpress.com/>

The **ASA Rose Series in Sociology**, a book series published by the Russell Sage Foundation, is seeking book proposals. The Rose Series publishes cutting-edge, highly visible, and accessible books that offer synthetic analyses of existing fields, challenge prevailing paradigms, and/or offer fresh views on enduring controversies. Books published in the Series reach a broad audience of sociologists, other social scientists, and policymakers. Please submit a 1-page summary and CV to: Lee Clarke, [rose.series@sociology.rutgers.edu](mailto:rose.series@sociology.rutgers.edu) For more information, visit <http://www.asanet.org/research-publications/rose-series-sociology>.

## **OTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**The WebForum on “The Futures We Want: Global Sociology and the Struggles for a Better World”** presents essays by Gary Alan Fine, Gurminder Bhmabra, Sari Hanafi, Hans Joas, Peter Kivisto, Wolfgang Knoebl, Saskia Sassen, Markus S. Schulz, Goran Therborn, McKenzie Wark, Michel Wieviorka and many more to come at: <http://futureswewant.net>