

# Perspectives

*Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section*

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# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



## Crisis and the Medium Term

Simone Polillo  
*University of Virginia*

I can't imagine I have been alone in thinking about crisis over the past few, but seemingly interminable, months—and as I write, neither can I imagine that I am alone in my inability to shake off the feeling that, whatever crisis has been averted (there will be a peaceful transition of power in the United States; a vaccine is coming...), it is not only that long-standing crises are still festering—racial justice, social equality, expansive citizenship rights, environmental protection hardly seem within reach; it is also that new crises are likely developing under our very eyes, but, to paraphrase Roux-Doufort (in Schwarz, Seeger, and Auer 2016:28), the “signals” are too weak for us to properly understand what they entail for future developments.

Social theory should help us make sense of crisis. In fact, one could argue that this is

precisely what social theory was first assembled to do—insofar as social thought and modernity are tightly linked, and modernity entails experiencing the world as unstable, fast-moving, and always changing, theory and crisis go hand in hand. The link is useful to emphasize for the purposes of teaching theory: I offered Introduction to Social Theory at the undergraduate level this semester, and thanks to my colleague Krishan Kumar's wise advice, I used the running thread of crisis and social thought proposed by Robert Nisbet—beginning with Nisbet's reflections on the influence revolution and the rise of the market economy played on the development of sociology, and then expanding the argument to discuss authors Nisbet had not considered (e.g. in 1910, DuBois co-founded “The Crisis,” the NAACP official magazine, as he believed it was a “critical time in the

history of the advancement of men” [DuBois, 1910:10]). If the history of our discipline reveals a certain relationship between sociology and crisis, one potential outcome of this current crisis moment is fresh sociological theorizing—and many scholars near and far are already producing path-breaking work (work that in many cases, indeed, precedes this current crisis, picking up the “weak signals”): Robin Wagner-Pacifici, André Vereta-Nahoum, Xiaohong Xu, Greta Krippner, Ivan Ermakoff, Jack Goldstone, my University of Virginia colleagues Jeff Olick and Isaac Reed and many, many others.

Our sociological concepts, however, bear the mark of the time in which they are forged, and the networks of meaning to which they are linked. For instance, DuBois used the term crisis to characterize a historical watershed: to him, after the failure of Reconstruction, the choice was between “catholicity and tolerance, reason and forbearance” versus “bigotry and prejudice, emphasized race consciousness and force.” Invoking crisis meant preparing the grounds for renewed understanding and social mobilization around progressive causes. This intervention confirms one perspective on crisis: calling a state of affairs as a state of crisis means engaging in a kind of moral work, intended to uncover (and transform, or at least act upon) epochal forces through critique. But, thanks to Janet Roitman’s thought-provoking critique of the notion of crisis itself—based on a careful re-reading of Kosellek’s work—we now know that, in spite of the seemingly obvious affinity between crisis and critique, such moral work can also

serve, paradoxically, to reaffirm the status quo, under the guise of a normality to which we want to return once we overcome the crisis we denounce (Roitman 2013). And, as organizational scholars Marshall Meyer and Lynne Zucker demonstrated in a very different context, a state of crisis can become institutionalized, giving rise to organizations that “permanently fail” in meeting their goals and yet survive because of the loyalties and attachments they generate (Meyer and Zucker 1989).

A crisis is often associated with urgency: something needs to be done now to avoid total collapse. It is not a matter of decades, it is a matter of minutes, if not seconds. Weick’s discussion of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire disaster seems, to me, one of the most interesting exemplars of this genre (Weick 1993): he shows the collapse of role structures and sensemaking in a small “smoke-jumping” crew who gets fatally overwhelmed by a wildfire in Montana—a process that begins once the crew foreman notices how far the fire had already jumped and orders the crewmembers to drop their tools and help him light a fire to then shelter in the burned area. These commands, argues Weick, were fundamentally incomprehensible to the crew—their identity could not be suddenly separated from the tools they had, and the idea to start a fire in the middle of an existing one simply seemed nonsensical; as a result, the world stopped making sense to them.

This is all to say, we have the elements of a theory of crisis: reflexive (describing some aspect of the world as in crisis is a form of

moral work, and it is therefore not neutral), attentive to scale, and attentive to temporal variation. And yet, important work remains to be done, it seems to me, especially with respect to time, to fill in that gap between the sudden, urgent, and undelayable; and the long-term, slow-moving, totalistic, and seemingly inexorable. That gap is the middle range, or the “medium term.” But is the medium term simply a time between the immediate and the long-term? When we talk about the medium term, are we just referring to a residual category, or is it a temporal category that needs to be theorized in its own terms? It may be a bit too early to theorize about the aspect of the ongoing pandemic, but the medium term strikes me as the most tragic point of failure in the global response to the crisis. The medium term is the time between the lockdown and the vaccine—or perhaps, it is the terrifying two weeks between the uptick in infections and the rise in deaths. I suspect that what makes the medium term so important but also so neglected is that it is the time when planning takes shape and the implementation of a plan has its results—and planning, in Western market societies at least, remains a politically weak proposition. The medium term is the gap between the reaction to a perceived emergency (the conjuncture), and the ideological construction of a shared future—a realm of pragmatic interventions that take time before they take full effect.

In this sense (if any of this is correct), we need to rethink sociology’s debt to Weber’s classic distinction between asceticism and mysticism (and it is indeed in a conversation

with my friend Erika Summers-Effler about whether mysticism can be rationalized that came the idea for this brief contribution). To Weber, the irrationality of salvation could be domesticated through daily, disciplined work—asceticism prevails because of its tight embracement of calculative tools. Under some circumstances, however, like the desperate firefighters at Mann Gulch, we need to drop those tools: and to Weber, this is the moment that the mystic is better positioned to navigate, because the mystic rejects the day-to-day and finds inspiration in the transcendental. Of course, this is a massive simplification of an unsettled debate, but a striking feature of Weber’s scheme is the contrast between the day-to-day focus of the inner-worldly ascetic to deal with a very long-term problem, and the day-to-day rejection of day-to-day problems by the mystic in order to bring to life the very long-term. What this temporal structure papers over is the medium-term—incidentally, the temporal unit that organizations have to master in order to survive.

The ASA program has gone fully virtual, and I hope we will have an opportunity to discuss these issues (and not only these issues, of course!) at the open-submission panel I am co-organizing with Robin Wagner-Pacifici. More generally, in *Theorizing Crisis*, we invite papers that focus on the conditions under which a state of affairs is declared to be in a crisis, which events are linked to the crisis—and which events are not—as well as the moral work entailed in constructing and managing a crisis.

The section's program will offer two additional, open panels: I could make a case that they are too, in some ways, connected to how we understand crisis, but their primary objective is different. Pragmatist Theorizing in Sociology: Emerging Directions, organized by Shai Dromi, focuses on recent developments in pragmatism, and invites papers reflecting on how American sociology can further capitalize on pragmatic resources and reflect on the different strands of pragmatism we have been using. Theorizing Liberation and Emancipation, organized by Gianpaolo Baiocchi, focuses on emancipatory theories, and the push and pull between emancipatory projects and social theory, welcoming papers from the sociology of utopian thought to the sociology of liberation, from a historical/intellectual perspective to the theoretical analysis of emancipatory movements (including decolonization, abolition, queer and trans liberation, and communism and socialism). Hannah Wohl and Emilio Lehoucq will organize the section's roundtables, and one session in the program will be, as usual, the Coser Salon.

I look forward to our future conversations, thank you for reading this editorial, and hope you will enjoy this new issue of Perspectives.

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# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## JUNIOR THEORIST SYMPOSIUM

AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup>, 2020 (Held over Zoom)

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE:**  
**Friday, February 19, 2021**

We invite submissions of précis for the 15<sup>th</sup> Junior Theorists Symposium ([JTS](#)). The symposium will be held over Zoom on August 6th (additional dates TBD) prior to the 2021 ASA Virtual Annual Meeting. The JTS is a conference featuring the work of up-and-coming sociologists, sponsored in part by the Theory Section of the ASA.

It is our honor to announce that **Jean Beaman** (University of California, Santa Barbara), **Gil Eyal** (Columbia University), and **Frederick Wherry** (Princeton University) will serve as discussants for this year's symposium. **Kyle Green** (SUNY Brockport) and **Daniel Winchester** (Purdue), winners of the 2019 Junior Theorist Award, and **Neil Gong** (University of Michigan and University of California, San Diego), winner of the 2020 Junior Theorist Award will deliver keynote addresses. Finally, the symposium will include an after-panel titled "Theorizing for Troubled Times," with panelists **Javier Auyero** (University of Texas, Austin), **Jennifer Carlson** (University of Arizona), **Harvey Molotch** (New York University), **Christina Simko**

(Williams), and **Howard Winant** (University of California, Santa Barbara).

We invite all ABD graduate students, recent PhDs, postdocs, and assistant professors who received their PhDs from 2017 onwards to submit up to a three-page précis (800-1000 words). The précis should include the key theoretical contribution of the paper and a general outline of the argument. Successful précis from last year's symposium can be viewed [here](#). Please note that the précis must be for a paper that is *not* under review or forthcoming at a journal.

Please remove all identifying information from your précis and submit it via [this Google form](#). **Sarah Brothers** (Yale) and **Laura Halcomb** (University of California, Santa Barbara) will review the anonymized submissions. You can also contact them at [juniortheorists@gmail.com](mailto:juniortheorists@gmail.com) with any questions. The deadline is Friday, February 19th. By mid-March, we will extend up to 12 invitations to present at JTS 2021. Please plan to share a full paper by July 6, 2021. Presenters will be asked to attend the symposium in its entirety in order to hear fellow scholars' work. Please plan accordingly.



# TEACHING THEORY

## Should We Cancel the Core?

Rebecca Jean Emigh

Johanna Hernández

Corey O'Malley

*UCLA*

Graduate students in our department (UCLA, Sociology) are only required to take one theory class, and the course is not required to focus on classical or contemporary theory per se. Rather, the topic is open, which allows us a great amount of freedom, clearly not open to others in which departments' curricula demand particular content. As such, we wanted to experiment with the so-called "core" texts, trying to explore what is essential, useful, irrelevant, or biased.

The downside of only having one quarter of required theory is that there is only a short time to cover a huge body of literature, whether classical or contemporary. Emigh, in particular, was inspired by students from the "Introduction to Sociology" for our graduate students that she co-taught for two years. One of the constant questions in this class was "why are we reading this material?" This question occurred across a very wide range of material, some of which might be considered "core," but in other

cases, it was just a general question about how some readings fit together with other readings, some candidates for "core," some clearly not. Emigh wasn't always sure how to answer these questions. At one level, the knowledge of heavily cited readings, used for many years, is crucial to being able to publish in sociology. On the other hand, why continue to use readings that are highly problematic? At the same time, a history, even a problematic one, should never be erased, as this simply perpetuates bias. How to answer these questions?

We decided that we could jointly explore these themes. Emigh wanted to discuss, collectively with the participants in a classroom, whether there is a sociological canon of classical theoretical works with ongoing relevance to sociology or not. To this end, we selected sections from Marx and Weber discussing concepts that are widely taught in classical theory courses, such as accumulation, capital, exploitation, legitimacy, social closure, bureaucracy, as

well as a few other theorists, such as DuBois, Habermas, and Foucault. Thus, we selected a number of “classic readings” that certainly might be part of a canon (if one exists). Then, we tried to find “current” (though some are not so temporally current) updates of these readings. We used, along the way, some other well-read theorists, such as Bourdieu. We wanted to go further, too, and selected, as much as possible, some of the many subaltern positions that are more than often excluded from the canon, like BIPOC, women, and global South authors, such as Squires, hooks, Mbembe. Our objective was not to essentialize topics to identities, but to acknowledge the multiplicity of standpoints in the discipline that update, challenge, or extend the original concepts that sociologists work with. Instead of providing a fixed syllabus, we also let the students choose the topics that they wanted, and ordered the selected readings in the most coherent way.

With these in hand, we are hoping to discuss whether the “classic” reading is relevant today, given the “current” updates. We tried to understand relevance in multiple ways. One, does the reading have analytic power, that is, does it continue to have explanatory/descriptive power for understanding contemporary (as opposed to historical) social life? Second, is it adaptable, that is, is it sufficiently flexible that current scholars can update/build off it? Third, does it deal with current topics, that is, does it address issues that sociologists and actors in everyday life regard as important/salient? Finally, is it sufficiently influential that

regardless of its analytic power, adaptability, or topicality it needs to be understood and contextualized? We shall see! Of course, this class is not a “survey” of the canon in the broad sense of that term. Given the shortness of our quarter and the attempt to link the “classic” reading to “current” readings, we cannot conduct such a survey. We focus mostly on Marxian and Weberian concepts and a few others that are well linked to them. (We ignore Durkheimian concepts, etc.) Nevertheless, the readings do follow a sequence and build on each other, so there is coherence. In particular, in class, we have a discussion of what we should do with the “classic”: a) “cancel” it—it is too old, biased (or worse), and no longer useful, b) keep it, but with specified revisions as needed, c) continue to use it more or less as is. Emigh has been surprised that we often have to “keep” the classic, as despite many of its drawbacks, it had inspired new work in creative ways. However, it was also clear that the more recent work dramatically expanded the classic ideas, in fact, so dramatically that the classic also made relatively little sense without the current updates. Also, with the different perspectives and current updates, we found the concepts more apt to understand social reality, apart from having more engaging and interesting discussions. This course will hopefully encourage students to critically reflect on the field as it has been historically constituted as well as consider how to build a more reflexive and less reified sociology, one that does not assume but rather continually questions the existence, composition, and even desirability, of “canon.”



# An Excerpt from the Syllabus of “Topics in Sociological Theorizing”

## Topics and Readings:

### 1. Oppression

- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. (1932) 1977. *The German Ideology: Part One*, edited by C. J. Arthur, 39–57. New York: International Publishers.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1984. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *boundary 2* 12/13:333–58.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, 307–320. New York: Routledge.
- Zutlevics, T. L. 2002. “Towards a Theory of Oppression.” *Ratio* XV (1): 80–102.

### 2. Civil Society

- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. (1932) 1977. *The German Ideology: Part One*, edited by C.J. Arthur, 57–95. New York: International Publishers.
- Meeks, Chet. 2001. “Civil Society and Sexual Politics of Difference.” *Sociological Theory* 19 (3): 325–43.
- Hammer, Ricarda. 2020. “Decolonizing the Civil Sphere: The Politics of Difference, Imperial Erasures, and Theorizing from History.” *Sociological Theory* 38 (2): 101–21.
- Coletta, Michela, and Malayna Raftopoulos. 2020. “Latin American Readings of Gramsci and the Bolivian Indigenous Nationalist State.” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2020.1805845>

### 3. Capital

- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 247–57. London: Penguin Classics.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, 170–225. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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- Scott, Michael. 2017. “Cultural Sociology: ‘Hipster Capitalism’ in the Age of Austerity? Polanyi Meets Bourdieu’s New Petite Bourgeoisie.” *Cultural Sociology* 11 (1): 60–76.

#### 4. Technology

- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 307–19. London: Penguins Classics.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1935) 1969. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217–51. New York: Schocken Books.
- Latour, Bruno. 1991. “Technology Is Society Made Durable.” In *A Society of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, edited by John Law, 103–31. London: The Sociological Review.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 1991. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, 149–81. New York: Routledge.

#### 5. Accumulation

- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 873–76. London: Penguin Classics.
- Harvey, David. 2003. “Accumulation by Dispossession.” In *The New Imperialism*, 137–82. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Federici, Silvia. 2004. “The Accumulation of Labor and the Degradation of Women: Constructing ‘Difference’ in the ‘Transition to Capitalism.’” In *Caliban and the Witch*, 61–131. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- Byrd, Jodi A., Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy. 2018. “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities.” *Social Text* 36 (2): 1–18.

#### 6. Colonialism

- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 931–40. London: Penguin Classics.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1952) 2008. *Black Skin White Masks*, 61–81. London: Pluto Press.
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- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Reflecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Indigenous Americas, 1–24. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 725–34. London: Penguin Classics.
- Hebdige, Dick. (1979) 1986. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 100–112. London: Methuen.
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Johnson, E. Patrick. 2003. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, 48–75. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

## 8. Exploitation

Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 320–32. London: Penguin Classics.

Hardt, Michael, and Toni Negri. 2018. “The Powers of the Exploited and the Social Ontology of Praxis.” *tripleC* 16 (2): 415–423.

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Wright, Erik Olin. 1985. *Classes*, 64–104. London: Verso.

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Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes, 154–177. London: Penguin Classics.

Evangelista, John Andrew G. 2013. “On Queer and Capital: Borrowing Key Marxist Concepts to Enrich Queer Theorizing.” *Philippine Sociological Review* 61 (2): 349–69.

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## 10. Legitimacy

Weber, Max. (1922) 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 212–16. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Johnson, Cathryn, Timothy J. Dowd, and Cecilia L. Ridgeway. 2006. “Legitimacy as a Social Process.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 32:53–78.

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Gianola, Diana. 2020. “City and Democracy in Max Weber.” *Topoi* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09687-w>.

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Weber, Max. (1922) 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 217–45. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pitcher, Anne, Mary H. Moran, and Michael Johnston. 2009. “Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa.” *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 125–56.

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Weber, Max. (1922) 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 956–63. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Acker, Joan. 1990. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender and Society* 4 (2): 139–58.

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Weber, Max. (1922) 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 43–46. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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## 14. Subjective Orientation

Weber, Max. 1968. "The Interpretive Understanding of Social Action." In *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, edited by May Brodbeck, 19–33. New York: The Macmillan Company.

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Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) 2004. *The Location of Culture*, 94–120. London: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 9–20. Boston: South End Press.

## 15. Double consciousness

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903) 2007. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited by Brent Hayes Edwards, 7–14. New York: Oxford University Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2002. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 21–43. New York: Routledge.

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## 16. Hegemony

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Hamilton, Laura T., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, J. Lotus Seeley, and Elizabeth M. Armstrong. 2019. "Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination." *Sociological Theory* 37 (4): 315–341.

## 17. Biopower

Foucault, Michel. (1977) 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 195–228. New York: Vintage Books.

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.

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Repo, Jemima. 2015. *The Biopolitics of Gender*, 1–23, 49–74. Oxford: University of Oxford Press.

## 18. Public Sphere

Habermas, Jürgen. (1962) 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger, 27–56, 159–175, 181–195. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Adut, Ari. 2012. "A Theory of the Public Sphere." *Sociological Theory* 30 (4): 238–262.

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# On Teaching Theory in a New Department

## An Interview with Adia Harvey Wingfield

*In July 2020, Harvard Business Review published [an article](#) by Adia Harvey Wingfield reflecting on building the Washington University Sociology department from the ground up, resulting in one of the most diverse academic departments in the country only five years after its conception. We followed up with Professor Wingfield, who teaches the primary theory courses in the department, to ask how WashU Sociology's approach to a new, diverse, department affects the way they teach theory.*

*What is the social theory curriculum in your department, for graduate students and undergrads?*

We require one graduate theory course that covers both contemporary and classical theory. Undergraduate majors have the same requirement. These classes cover the well-known classical theorists who are widely considered to comprise the sociological canon (e.g., Marx, Durkheim, and Weber) along with other scholars who are frequently overlooked but also articulated early sociological theories (DuBois, Martineau, Cooper, Wells-Barnett). Social theory courses also cover contemporary theories ranging from functionalism to intersectionality.

*How has the intentional diversity of the Washington University Sociology department influenced the way that you teach social theory?*

Like our departmental makeup, our theory courses also reflect the racial and gender diversity of our department and of the field of sociology at large. Students cover a wide variety of theoretical approaches and paradigms, and are encouraged to be reflexive and critical of how the sociological canon is formed in the first place, and what

that can tell us about questions of power, dominance, and epistemology.

*Who are three theorists that every grad student should be exposed to, that you feel are currently under-assigned?*

DuBois would have been in this category ten years ago, but fortunately that is starting to change. I enjoy having students read Harriet Martineau and juxtaposing her work with other early theorists such as Weber and Durkheim, and am looking forward to having my graduate students read Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett to see how their work is in dialogue with DuBois, but is also an early frontrunner to intersectional theory.

*And finally, what is the role of social theory in times of political unrest?*

Social theory can help us understand how and why we see political unrest happening. But it can also help to explain myriad other social phenomena, ranging from economic inequality to climate change. In my view, it has nearly unlimited explanatory potential—it is just a matter of considering which theoretical approach best fits the situation at hand.

# DECOLONIZING THEORY:



## AN INTERVIEW WITH RICARDA HAMMER, *Brown University*

*Can you tell us a little about your current project?*

My work tells a story of modern citizenship, but from the perspective of the edges of empire. We usually think about modern citizenship as beginning with the French Revolution, as bounded by the nation state. We see it as the result of struggles of working classes, of women, seeking inclusion in the polity—and all these struggles take place within the nation. But the two cases I study, England and France, were not nation states but empires at the time.

And the struggles over who has rights and who does not had to be negotiated in the colonies as well: the enslaved in the British and French Caribbean colonies demanded

that these freedoms and rights apply to them also. They revolted against enslavement and they claimed these rights, and that of course produced a big problem for colonial rule. I argue that we have to look at this question of modern citizenship rights as one that plays out between metropole and colony, and once we do, we can make visible the enormous amount of work colonizers actually put in to produce the colonial population as different, as not human, as lagging behind, as uncivilized, as not ready to hold rights. So, the struggle over modern citizenship and the production of colonial difference really occur as one and the same process.



*What does the phrase “decolonizing the canon” look like in your research and in your teaching?*

In my research I do two things: one, I make the case for overcoming the separation between metropole and colony, what Julian Go has called “analytic bifurcation.” I argue that it is historically inaccurate to tell the story of rights as bounded by the nation when we are in fact dealing with empires. What we have done is that we have largely written the struggles of the enslaved and the colonized out of our history of political modernity: we analytically separated democratization “over here,” and racialization “over there,” but these two processes are historically linked. The second thing I do is really think from the perspective of the Caribbean, and suggest that “the subaltern lens” tells us something important about Europe, about modern citizenship at large. In my research I try to show how we can get a different perspective of modern processes by taking the subjectivities of the subaltern seriously, not just as lived experience, or as data, but really as starting points for theorizing modernity at large.

With regards to teaching, I would say that it’s not just a question of singling out one theorist and adding them to the curriculum while leaving everything else unchanged. Instead, I like to do two things: one, is to parochialize the writers that write from the metropole by filling in the larger global and colonial context in which they write. The other point to keep in mind is that the anticolonial/postcolonial tradition is actually quite varied. These writers speak to one

another; they write in community; they offer diverse perspectives about how to think about colonialism and its impact on the social world, and they differ in how they theorize the relationship to capitalism, colonialism, racial formation, patriarchy, etc., and so my plea would be to honor this diversity in our syllabi.

*Are there theorists outside of mainstream sociology whose work’s been particularly important to your project?*

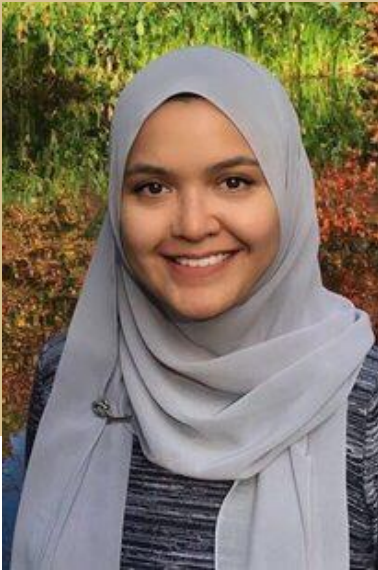
Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, C.L.R. James, Claudia Jones, of course W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others. Now, with the exception of Du Bois, the writers that I tend to think with begin from their positionality in the Caribbean, but they’re not “Caribbean theorists;” they’re really theorists about the modern world! If I had to pick one, I would say that Stuart Hall has perhaps left the biggest impression on how I approach the study of the social world. For example, after he travels from Jamaica to England, he says, “I’ve always been the sugar of the bottom of the English cup of tea.” So, this is not a claim for inclusion, assimilation, anything of that sort; it’s also not a claim to address racial discrimination within an otherwise liberal nation state; it’s a claim that suggests that it is, in fact, the empire, the “mother country,” that has forgotten, or rather that has silenced and erased how the Caribbean has always been part of its formation. We have to take seriously these experiences of colonized subjects as epistemic starting points, as saying something very important about the metropole as well.

*What do you feel is the role of social theory in times of political unrest?*

Perhaps “political mobilization” is a better word given that “unrest” implies that there are peaceful periods otherwise (and peaceful for whom?). I think social theory helps us make sense of the world; it gives us a perspective through which we understand how events connect to one another, how we think society functions and so on, and in that sense social theory can influence social life - I, for one, hope that my work proves useful to movements and communities and activists. But, it’s important to note that this is not a one-way directionality: social theory usually does not come out of the study of the lone intellectual, but also arises through movements and people’s agency and experiences. And in fact all social theory emerges from experience, which is important to remember, particularly with theory that comes about in the metropole,

which we tend to universalize. Now think, for example, about this term, “decolonization.” It’s a theory, in the sense that it provides a perspective that argues that colonialism has been a central structure in the modern world, and it offers suggestions as to how to struggle against it, but it’s not the brainchild of one individual thinker; it arises through people’s agency: when Haitian revolutionaries stand up and demand their freedom from enslavement, when anti-colonial movements request their right for self-determination, or when protesters this year topple statues and shift the narrative of how this country came to be and who it’s for, these are experiences and practices from which we theorize. I think it makes sense to break down this somewhat artificial boundary between theory and experience or practice, and make sure that the insights from movements actually make it into the classroom.

# EMERGING SOCIAL THEORISTS SPOTLIGHT



**Hanisah Binte Abdullah Sani**  
*National University of  
Singapore &  
University of Michigan*

I am working on my book project, *Sacred States and Subjects: Law, Religion and State-Building in Colonial Malaya*, which examines how the colonial administration harnessed law and religion to share political power with native elites so as to govern effectively in late empire. I compare this process across four Malay states so as to refine a sociological framework for how cultural and moral systems divide and distribute power and bind – or fail to bind – state servants and subjects to their sovereign.

Several key theorists feature in my work. The **cultural** and **moral** dimensions of my work are foremostly influenced by Mary Douglas' cognitive schema of belief and

action. Based on boundaries of purity and danger, her work provides a framework for group cohesion and exclusion. What is generative for me is the cognitive tension that binary schemas present for highly diverse societies.

This theoretical tension proves immensely useful for clarifying and helping to explain the political processes at the core of empire and colonial state formation. So, my theoretical work articulates historical sociology with political theory so as to understand intergroup competition. I do this in two ways. First, I theorize principle and agent relationships in the colonial administration, and second, I study agency relations in the mixed legal systems that

developed out of the colonial state and are retained as legacies in contemporary Malaysia. Here, I find inspiration in theorists of culture and power including Sally Engle Merry and Lawrence Rosen.

The **comparative** and **historical** dimensions of my work are keenly Weberian but with a twist: I see in the arc of history patterns identified in Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory of social change. In the rise and fall of civilizations lies the reckoning for our collective hubris in the telos of progress. Writing during a time in Muslim history when

scholarship was endemically chained to power, Ibn Khaldun set an agenda for historiography that sets truth – empirical not metaphysical – apart from error in the careful account of the chains in the transmission of knowledge.

When assembled, these thinkers provide a new vision for social theory that guides my work. It is a vision that systematically connects mental schemas to a framework of action – that binds chains of power to chains of knowledge – to apprehend and encounter alterity in modernity.

***Hanisah Binte Abdullah Sani** is a comparative-historical and political sociologist of empire and state formation, modernization and development. She studies how law and religion organize elites and build states, and specializes in the colonial and modern histories of Southeast Asia. She received her doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago in 2019. Currently, she is a visiting associate at the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies at the University of Michigan, and a National University of Singapore overseas postdoctoral fellow.*

# EMERGING SOCIAL THEORISTS SPOTLIGHT - 2



**Alexander C. Sutton**  
*University of Virginia*

My current research theorizes aesthetics. This pursuit of an aesthetic sociology reconstitutes how we think about the relationship between judgment, self-curation, and everyday action. Examining the creative and professional lives of contemporary American “classical” music composers, I ask: What does it mean to be an American composer in the 21st century? And, how do composer’s creative practices shape the aesthetic and professional landscape of contemporary art music in the U.S.?

While much of the cultural production literature centers relations of class, social hierarchy, and the construction of charismatic genius, my work highlights the ways individual self-concept and collective identity, new technology, and tensions between high/low culture ideology and American multiculturalism organize contemporary art music practice.

My research draws influence from pragmatist and hermeneutic approaches developed by John Levi Martin, Georgina Born, and Isaac Ariail Reed. Martin’s pragmatist revision of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory emphasizes the qualities of social experience that provide an aesthetic model for the cognitive components of social action. By contrast, Born’s theory of music’s mediation calls for a sociological hermeneutic designed to divulge what Reed refers to as “landscapes of meaning.” Martin and Born both conceptualize “social aesthetics” as a framework to explain social action, albeit in starkly different ways. Synthesizing elements from each approach, however, suggests new possibilities for theorizing the relationship between social action and meaning-making.

I hope to invigorate sociological interest in the role of the aesthetic in analyses of social action and experience. The field of art music

provides a rich empirical case through which the aesthetic is seen as active in the ways actors traverse the boundaries between the instrumental-rational, and the sensuous organic activity of artmaking. Beyond this case, however, questions of judgment, perception, and action, how individuals and groups make sense of who they are and

what they do are all fundamentally aesthetic concerns that yield potential for a broad spectrum of scholarly inquiry. I would like to see the aesthetic implicated in scholarship beyond art worlds, given that action across most social domains involves actors striving to creatively cultivate a self, organize pleasure, and manage constraint.

**Alexander C. Sutton** is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of sociology at the University of Virginia. His research focuses on aesthetics, cultural production, creativity, and artistic identity formation. His dissertation, “Composing the Creative Self: Constructing Meaning, Identity, and Aesthetic Imaginaries in Contemporary Art Music,” examines the creative and professional lives of contemporary American composers. His work has been published in *Qualitative Sociology*, and *The American Journal of Cultural Sociology*.

# ANNOUNCING A NEW ASA SECTION:

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND NATIVE NATIONS

The Sociology of Indigenous Peoples and Native Nations is the first section in the 115 years of the American Sociological Association that provides an official space for scholarship on Indigenous sociology. The purpose of this section is to advance scholarship to address the erasure of Indigenous Peoples within the discipline and resist the settler-colonialist foundations of sociology. In doing so, we challenge the illusion that "colonialism happens elsewhere," while still attending to decolonial struggles of Indigenous Peoples globally.

The Section encourages and promotes research and teaching with, by, and for Indigenous Peoples and Native Nations. Any member of the American Sociological Association, regardless of rank or institutional affiliation, who shares these research or teaching interests is encouraged to join.

For information about the section, or ways to become involved, please contact any of the section officers.

### SECTION LEADERSHIP

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# RECENT MEMBER PUBLICATIONS

## Books

**Anderson, Kevin B.** 2020. *Dialectics of Revolution: Hegel, Marxism, and its critics through a lens of race, class, gender, and colonialism.* Daraja Press.

**Hage, Jerald.** 2020. *Knowledge Evolution and Societal Transformations: Action theory to solve adaptive problems.* Anthem Press.

**Porter, Jack Nusan.** 2020. *The Radical Writings of Jack Nusan Porter.* Cherry Orchard Books.

## Articles

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192. [http://www.rethinkingmarxism.org/Dossier2020/19\\_MuellerCollumSchmidt.pdf](http://www.rethinkingmarxism.org/Dossier2020/19_MuellerCollumSchmidt.pdf)

**Mueller, Jason C.** 2020. "Political, Economic, and Ideological Warfare in Somalia." *Peace Review* 31(3): 372-280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2019.1735174>

**Schmidt, Steven, and Jason C. Mueller.** 2020. "The Emergence of Participatory Budgeting in Mexico City." Pp. 286-298 in *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Megacities in the Global South*, edited by Deden Rukmana. London: Routledge  
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781003038160/chapters/10.4324/9781003038160-21>

**Zhang, Yueran.** 2020. "Political Competition and Two Modes of Taxing Private Homeownership: A Bourdieusian Analysis of the Contemporary Chinese State." *Theory and Society* 49(4): 669-707.  
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