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Every year, as I ready for the next semester of undergraduate or graduate social theory, I face the same nagging temptation. Is this going to be the year when I finally throw it all out of the window? In my wildest fantasies, I commit sociological parricide, slash through the syllabus with a sharp pen, and replace venerated authors with unfamiliar names (some of whom are not even known as sociologists).

But soon I start backtracking. It would be an irresponsible move, I reason—a disservice to my students, who are expected to know this stuff. Any new choices would be just as arbitrary as the old ones, and after teaching them for so many these years I have grown fond of these writers. And so, I tone down my radical fancies. I make some additions on account of personal curiosity, student
interest, intellectual fad, or the urgency of events. But making room for incoming authors by dropping syllabus fixtures is a painful process. I have trouble letting go of my past infatuations, even as I embrace new ones.

The social theory syllabus is a remarkable object, especially when seen in comparative perspective. Different social sciences have different ways of anchoring their disciplinary cultures. Economists have “principles,” simple rules that guide their view of how the allocation of scarce resources takes place. The apparent timelessness of these rules, the translation of core economic theories (e.g., “the theory of the consumer”, the “theory of the producer”) into a set of simple mathematical equations, the general assumption of a unity of motive (self-interest), means that the whole apparatus is easily appropriated and disseminated throughout the field. The authors of these rules, in fact, have long been forgotten. We, on the other hand, have no native method and no specific field of action, since for us everything is amenable to a sociological analysis, and every kind of analysis is legitimate—as long as we deem it rigorous enough. The result is that we mostly know one another as sociologists because of a shared set of texts. There is, in fact, little else that unites us. Most important among these are the books and articles written by the so-called “social theorists.” We are familiar with their works, but also with their persons: we read biographies about them, take pleasure in our intimate knowledge of their quirks, judge their character and their politics, relate their social theories to their social position.

The paradox indeed is that the persisting “centrality” (Alexander 1987) of these canonical texts often makes us feel uncomfortable—another key difference with economics. Economists believe in a world where power does not matter, even though in its organization and everyday life their own field is all about hierarchy and deference to the authority of a small elite. (Fourcade, Ollion and Algan 2015) Sociologists, by contrast, believe in a world where power is everywhere, and they actively look for it in their own professional lives. The social theory syllabus, inevitably, is one of these sites of struggle, always in search for insiders and outsiders. And rightly so: any candid sociology of sociology will soon reveal that it has often served the interests of Western colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism (Connell 1989, Go 2016) and repeatedly failed to adequately represent the diverse history and interests of the discipline. (Morris 2014, Romero 2017) Every social theory instructor has had to tread cautiously around certain phrases that smell foul by present-day moral and political standards, or admit, with embarrassment, that many core texts ignore or gloss over essential historical facts.

As the contingent product of history and of the whims and legitimate arbitrariness of individual taste, the teaching of social theory is eminently unsatisfactory and contestable. But for all practical purposes it remains the glue—all at once malleable and rigid—that keeps us talking to one another (even if it is to fight about theory!). It is a fixture, a social structure in our field—mostly because we treat it that way: Theory provides the language and metaphors which organize our approach to substantive questions, our political imagination, and our scholarly strivings.

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My own attachment to social theory straddles these two contradictory positions. It is both tenuous and profound. Tenuous, because I am painfully aware of the contingent and contentious nature of its construction. The field’s intellectualist dispositions, which sometimes veer into pointless displays of erudition, also frustrate me. I came to sociology out of a dissatisfaction with the abstraction of philosophical discourse and I have remained suspicious of theory for theory’s sake. But profound, also. The fact is that—for better or for worse—these texts have become inextricably bound with who I am as a sociologist. They connect me to previous and future generations. Sometimes in spite of myself, they invite me to play intellectual games and send me on wild goose chases of an etymological or conceptual nature. They are a source of inspiration for my own work, even when their analytical or empirical purpose seems far removed from mine.

Why do we need theory after all? I once wrote a short piece for this very newsletter, lamenting the stifling division between “theory” and “research” that is so central to the way we think about the training of the next generation of sociologists in the United States (Fourcade 2004). The fact is that much of what we call “theory” is simply compelling research. Most of the books and articles in our present-day pantheon, from Weber’s Protestant Ethic to Goffman’s Presentation of Self, from Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction to Bourdieu’s Distinction were not explicitly designed as theoretical contributions. Rather, each is an empirically-grounded analysis of some specific historical moment or slice of present social life, but one where the author is also willing to speak to some broader theme as they make their way. Many of the other classics in our canon were influential pamphlets or works of journalism, some dashed off almost in passing. As Bargheer (2014) adroitly put it, “theory is not an intrinsic quality of a text—it is a product of the way a text is used.” The more it is used, and the more diverse the range of use contexts, the more the text will “come to be referred to as theory. [...] The only necessary requirement for empirical research to be relabeled as sociological theory is the passing of time.” It is the boundary nature of these objects, the multivocality of understanding and the layers of sedimented practice, that crystallizes their epistemological status within the field.

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There are many reasons why some texts end up being more useful than others, but no hard and fast rule. Mostly, you know a good theory when you see it. Sometimes it is about the author’s ability to throw away details to highlight one big intuition (Healy 2017). Sometimes it is the result of a sustained effort to make one’s way against the grain of common sense (Durkheim 2014).

Sometimes it is about identifying meaningful empirical regularities or simply naming a phenomenon one has observed in the world. Sometimes, it is about predicting a future that may or may not realize itself, of seeing the right thing at the right time. Sometimes it is about performing a kind of intellectual sacrifice, like offering oneself relentlessly as a straw man, wreaking havoc onto previous theories or constantly hammering out a properly counter-intuitive argument. And sometimes it is about sheer volume and repetition, as when an author uses the same conceptual language to identify similar mechanisms across a wide range of empirical domains—in other words, performs the usefulness of their own theory.

Social theory is most useful, perhaps, when it provides a vocabulary to make sense of a generically conceived present, not only on its own terms, but also in relation to the past, and to other possible
presents elsewhere. After all, social theory as we know it was born out of a will to diagnose—and transcend—the unfolding ills of industrial modernity. It was about “prophecy and progress”, as Krishan Kumar (1986) put it, and it combined a definite gloom about the future with a certain hopefulness about the promise of sociology to guide its course. Those we now recognize as the “classical social theorists” warned us about alienation, exploitation, disenchantment, rationalization, and anomie. But they also engaged and confronted new kinds of politics (socialism, liberalism), moral and cultural ideals (individualism, solidarity, freedom, equality), and their age’s rising faith in expertise and administration. They and their contemporaries also sought to collect facts—huge quantities of them. They carefully documented the economic, religious, and demographic conditions of their time. They assembled mountains of evidence to describe the vast range and heterogeneity of social practices across societies and throughout history. And they vividly depicted the experience of modern life in the West.

And so, as we struggle to make sense of another set of transformational changes in the course of human and technological development, as our political aspirations fluctuate, and as new kinds of information about people’s lives and their interactions with their environment are now available to us, where are interesting and useful insights going to come from? What new ideals will their authors endorse and inspire? How will they work? What will they foresee?

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These are, broadly speaking, the core themes that the topical panels at the 2019 annual conference of the ASA hope to probe and debate. Rather than taking actually existing (or self-appointed) theories and theorists as their starting point, the ASA 2019 sessions will begin instead from the same kind of ambitious questions that inspired earlier waves of social theory development and look for emerging trends and exciting ideas...

“Social Theory and Social Progress: Freedom, Solidarity, Democracy, Equality,” an invited session organized by Chris Muller (UC Berkeley), will be devoted to the past and present uses of social and political theory for crafting putatively hopeful futures. Panelists in this session will explore—and critique—the role of the social sciences in promoting (and fighting over) progressive values and social designs. They will also discuss how social scientists are inserting themselves in today’s political debates, or how they might profitably do so.

“Social Theory and Social Decay: Illiberalism, Autocracy, Violence” is the counterpart invited session, organized by yours truly. It will analyze the transformation of social and political bodies as illiberalism, autocracy and violence take root. This session will reflect upon the challenge that old and new waves of exclusion, destruction and democratic decline throughout the world pose both to existing social theories and to the practices and policies these theories might have inspired. Panelists are invited to take seriously Hannah Arendt’s dark warning that “everything is possible.”

“Social Theory and Social Data,” organized by Kieran Healy (Duke University), will explore social
theory’s productive but uneasy relationship with the data sources of its time. Theorists often of necessity go “beyond the data” as they make their arguments, but fruitful periods of theoretical innovation tend to coincide with the development of new tools for collecting and analyzing data. This session will explore the practical relationship between theory and data, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities facing social theory in an era often characterized by the scale, scope, and social character of empirical data in its many forms.

Finally, "Social Theory for Our Grandchildren: Humanity’s Future in Theoretical Perspective," organized by Rebecca Elliott (London School of Economics) and myself, invites panelists to speculate on what the social, economic and political world of our grandchildren might look like. How do climate change, the advent of bio-genetic technologies, or the rise of civil and military artificial intelligence (among others) change the way we live our lives, our culture, and our relationships with other living species? This session shamelessly exploits sociology’s anticipatory disposition and encourages wild conjectures and projections about the future of human civilization. This is no time to hold back.

I realize now that these panels, the latter one especially, may have been an unconscious attempt to realize, in a muted fashion, some of the destructive fantasies I mentioned at the onset of this note. But I am confident I am not the only one who harbors these urges deep in my bones. So please, join me!

It is perhaps especially auspicious, given the central themes in these panels, that the much anticipated 2019 Lewis Coser award lecture and salon will celebrate Julian Go! A Professor of sociology at Boston University, Go is the author of two books on the culture and politics of empire (American Empire and the Politics of Meaning, Duke University Press 2008; and Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present, Cambridge University Press 2011), as well as the recent Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory (Oxford University Press 2016). Go will speak, fittingly, on “The Empire of Social Theory.” (This is a tentative title)

The theory roundtables this year will be organized by the wonderful Jordanna Matlon (American University).

Having disrupted the intellectual landscape in the sessions and the business meeting, you will be free to relax, connect with colleagues, and ransack tasty appetizers and drinks in a NYC bistro, steps from the hotel. (Wine/beer open bar). The ASA 2019 Reception, ably organized by Alissa Boguslaw (New School), will be co-hosted by the Culture and Theory Sections on Monday, August 12, 2019, 6:30pm - 8:30pm at Papillon Bistro & Bar – 22 E 54th St, New York, NY 10022.

References


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You are such smart and hardworking woman for you have been making all efforts to know more information about dark ages. I am telling you, that's a really hard topic to study, but you are still eager to finish your study. I am not really smart to dig too much information on a matter that is complicated, that's why I have so much respect for you that you are working so hard to dig into this. I must say that you are doing a great job and I hope that you will get a result from it.

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