

Perspectives

Newsletter of the ASA Theory Section

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Chair's Corner

Theorize More!

Richard Swedberg, *Cornell University*

Just as it can be argued that more public sociology is needed, one can argue that more public *theoretical* sociology is needed as well. Many important things are going on in society that are very hard to understand. What do they mean? What caused them? What should be done about them? They need to be given a name, to be interpreted, and more generally to be set on a course where normal science, the journalists and the political commentators can take over. They need, in brief, some creative theorizing.

One of these problems is the current financial crisis, which I shall use as my example. When the crisis began in August of 2007, few people noted that anything strange was happening. When Bear Stearns collapsed in the spring of 2008 many got worried that something big was underway. But the main realization that there was a crisis did not come until the fall of 2008 when Lehman Brothers, AIG and many banks went bankrupt.

The whole thing was very confusing – and still is, even if it seems that some kind of understanding has started to emerge. This understanding, to my mind, is more a result of the fact that things have settled down a bit, than that

what happened has been explained. And that represents a good reason why people with a talent for theorizing should get into the game.

How confusing this crisis has been is mirrored in the problem of finding a name for it. In the spring of 2009 one could read in *The New Yorker* that “the thing we’re in doesn’t yet have a name” (Paumgarten 2009:42). Various names have been suggested: depression, recession, the Great Recession – and “the financial crisis”. Many of the names that were initially used have by now been forgotten, but they do say something about what was going on: financial firestorm, economic meltdown, economic tsunami and so on.

What’s in a name? An explanation of sorts. And that is exactly the problem and where theorizing comes into the picture: how are we to understand what happened and caused this event? “Wall Street got drunk”, according to Bush (Mitchell 2008). But that is not much of an explanation.

The seriousness of the crisis is beyond doubt – and represents another reason to be concerned. According to a recent study of financial crises from a historical perspective, a modern financial crisis tends to have the following depressing results: unemployment rises by 7 % on the average and the tax deficit by 86 % (Reinhart and Rogoff 2010). While

bail out costs are important, according to the authors, what is particularly costly are losses in tax revenue.

Was it a Black Swan?

The current attempts to theorize the financial crisis are very thin. One of the most popular theories is that of the Black Swan – at least with people who want an explanation that sounds like science. The idea is mainly associated with Nassim Taleb and goes well with the Mandelbrotian type of thinking.

The key idea is that black swans are very, very unusual events. Neither you nor Karl Popper may ever have seen a black swan – but this does not mean that their existence can be ruled out in advance. What are, say, the chances that a meteorite will hit building X in the town of Y? The probability is extremely low - about the same as that a financial crisis of this type would happen.

Is this a good explanation? Is a financial crisis something that happens as naturally and rarely as a meteorite hits a special building in some special town? Anyone who has followed the literature on the financial crisis knows that these recur regularly in capitalist economies. Also, if there ever was a financial crisis that was predictable, this was it. Subprime mortgage firms, banks, buyers of CDOs, rating agencies – all were *systematically* digging themselves deeper and deeper into a hole. *continued on page 10*

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The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power

Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Yale University*

In my forthcoming book *The Performance of Power*¹, I examine the strategies and statements of those who planned, directed, and fought the 2008 Presidential campaign. While I pay close attention to the broader contexts that defined its social backdrop, I also enmesh myself in the day to day reports of print, television, and digital media, not simply to find out factual details but to gain access to the symbolic flows that are the actual determinates of victory and defeat. Meaningful texture dictates political power. What decides campaigns are the cultural frameworks that candidates lay down and work through and that journalists not only referee but help create. I investigate this textually mediated back and forth between Barack Obama and John McCain from June to November of 2008.

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My argument is that the democratic struggle for power is not much determined by demography or even substantive issues, and that it's not very rational either. Political struggle is about the meanings of social life². It's moral and emotional. Political struggle makes meaning in the civil sphere³, symbolically constructing candidates so they appear to be on the sunny, rather than the shadowy, side of the street. When they run for office, politicians are less public debaters, public servants, or policy wonks than they are performers⁴. They and their production teams work on their image, and political struggle is about projecting these cultural constructs to voters. Political journalism mediates these projections of image in extraordinarily powerful way.

Obama and McCain struggled mightily to become symbols of American democracy, each in his own way. Obama often succeeded. People saw him as real and authentic, if sometimes too earnest. McCain couldn't seem to make his political performances fly. He was such a bad actor that voters often felt he seemed to be acting, following a script rather than being himself. But there was another reason for McCain's difficulty to symbolize effectively. In 2008, concerns about terrorism were fading. McCain could be narrated as a hero pretty easily in a time of military crisis, but not so easily on the domestic scene. Obama was inexperienced in foreign affairs and had nothing to do with the military, but he could fill out the hero role in civil society, having formed his political identity and rhetoric in wake of the titanic black struggles for civil rights.

Political performances are not only carried in the air by mass media. They are also organized on the ground, as volunteers go door-to-door and communicate terminal-to-terminal. But are the ground game and air war really so different? Organizing, too, depends on emotional energy and image projection. One chapter of *The Performance of Politics* is devoted to an hour-by-hour ethnography of a training day for "Hispanics for Obama" in Denver, Colorado. I show that this day of organizing-the-organizers projected democratic symbols and organized emotional rituals around them. The result was an energy and solidarity that inspired volunteers to project political performances to their neighbors back home, with the hope of creating the same kind of fusion between themselves and the proverbial man on the street.

The moral and emotional framework that inspires American democracy has little room for ambiguity. For better and for worse, it is organized in simple, deeply believed in dichotomies that evaluate actions and paint motives in starkly contrasting shades of black and white. When candidates symbolize, they struggle to align themselves with the sacred side of these binaries and their opponents with the profane. Even in a democratic public sphere – so often idealized as rational and respectful – politics is about "working the binaries." It is

also about connecting these anchoring moral dichotomies to issues that are not really about governing at all, to gender and family values, to whether you are god-fearing and faithful, to whether you are of a respectable ethnicity and racial stripe. This is what I call "walking the boundaries." The 2008 campaign featured the first major non-white candidate, two female super-stars, rumors about Islamic affiliations, and continually returned to concerns about virility and strength. Binaries were worked and boundaries were walked in strenuous, disconcerting, and sometimes alarming ways.

Performance, heroes, ground games, binaries, and boundaries were nested in the backward and forward flows of momentum in summer and fall of 2008. There were three critical periods of flux for Obama and opportunity for McCain, crises whose outcome determined victory and defeat.

Obama's triumphal overseas trip in late July set off anxieties he was overreaching and arrogant. This opened the door for Republican image makers to sculpt him as a superficial, out-of-touch celebrity. This crisis of "Celebrity Metaphor" lasted five long weeks, during which Obama's fortunes fell and McCain's rose substantially. It subsided only with the ritual power of the Democratic convention in Denver, where Obama delivered a stem-winding, thoughtful, and hard-hitting speech to an enormous "all-American" crowd.

Yet, immediately after Obama's revitalizing speech, at the end of August, Sarah Palin exploded as a symbol on the political scene. The Alaskan governor presented herself not only as devoted mother but as a feisty and scrappy political reformer, and to many she seemed genuine, a new American hero on the domestic scene. Within a week, "The Palin Effect" allowed Republicans once again to take the lead. Palin's symbol deflated as quickly as it had inflated, however, as investigative journalists made discoveries that seemed to place her on the shadowy side of the street.

Just as Obama regained the lead in mid-September, the nation's financial institutions melted down. Analysts of the 2008 campaign typically describe the "Financial Crisis" as a kind of automatic game changer. Because Republicans presided over deregulation and the bubble economy, they reason, economic failure led voters to decide that they should not put a Republican back in the presidency. This reasoning is false. It assumes voters act in terms of rational interest and that image and symbolic performance are not central to campaigns. I demonstrate that there was actually a lot of wiggle room during the first two weeks of the Financial Crisis. McCain seemed awkward, impulsive, and bumbling; Obama presented himself as poised, calm, and rational. It was these sharply contrasting performances that sealed the campaign. Within two weeks, Obama gained a statistical advantage for the first time, and never gave up his lead.

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Why Social Networks are Overrated: Downsides of the Commensuration that Underlies Social Network Analysis¹

Ezra W. Zuckerman

MIT Sloan School of Management

While it is not fashionable among sociologists to say so loudly, I am a firm believer in the possibility of social scientific progress. In particular, I believe that through application and honing of our community's tools for disciplined inquiry, we can improve our understanding of the social world. Of course, that social scientific progress is possible does not mean most, or even many, changes in sociological thinking are for the better. But if I did not believe that our collective efforts do not generally improve our better grasp of social patterns, I could not continue my work. Fortunately, I have some evidence to back up this faith. In the space of my roughly twenty years as a social scientist, I have been very fortunate to witness (and play a minor role) in an intellectual revolution that has clearly improved our understanding of the world. I speak, in particular, of social network analysis.

I first encountered social network analysis as a Columbia undergraduate, in classes taught by Ron Burt (now at Chicago) and Mark Mizruchi (Michigan). It is hard to overstate the effect network thinking and tools had on me, especially for my emerging understanding of how organizations and markets worked. I remember very clearly the epiphany I experienced in 1991, as I was walking in front of my Columbia dormitory, Wien Hall. I had been reading Burt's (1982) *Towards a Structural Theory of Action* for a class taught by Mizruchi, and mulling his theory of structural autonomy, which he measured in social-network terms and applied to a market setting—in particular, the flow of exchange between sectors of the US economy, as captured in input-output tables. The Eureka moment was when Burt's point sunk in: this is all a market is—flows of exchange between actors! Whereas the market had once been something of a mysterious abstraction in my mind, it was now something “concrete” (a mantra for early network analysts, if there ever was one!). If one wanted to see and understand a market, all one needed to do was to find the actors/nodes and the trades. And if one wanted to understand which actors would be more successful in the market, one needed but to identify the actor's position in the network of exchange that constitutes a market². Moreover, the immense power of this perspective was that it could seemingly be used to understand and analyze a wide variety

of otherwise abstract features of social life. For instance, what is a social role if not a pattern of relationships between its incumbents and others? What is a group or organization if not just a set of nodes and a set of relations among such nodes? Where indeed does the identity of an individual person lie, if not in her relations to others? As Harrison White wrote in *Chains of Opportunity* (1970: 5): “Consider how an impostor is exposed.” (I used this as the epigraph of my 1999 *AJS* paper). The idea is that your identity is a function of how others relate to you. You can say you are the Messiah, but what matters is whether others agree, as reflected in their relationships with you. A real messiah has a very different network from a false one.

At the time of my first encounter with SNA, it was in the process of graduating from being a minor, brash subfield into a core set of concepts and tools for contemporary sociology. But none of us anticipated that it would soon go far from its home base to become a very popular mode of analysis, not only in the social sciences (spreading even to economics, which we used to caricature as “hopelessly atomistic”!) but even in the natural sciences and to the social and business world that we study. As the details of this movement are well-known, I will not rehearse them here. Suffice it to say that there has been an incredible boom of interest in and use of social networks. It is not far-fetched to describe a social networks boom, a mania, or even, dare I say, it a “bubble”—in the specific sense that it is now overvalued relative to what it can reasonably be expected to deliver (see Zuckerman 2010b).

Why would I suggest such heresy? Well, one of the features of social network analysis (SNA) that is at once a great strength and a great danger is that network diagrams are highly evocative. In teaching and presenting network material, I have found that if I put up a picture of a network and start spinning a story about it, even untutored audiences follow along easily and they tend to accept the network as an accurate characterization of the actors and the social structure they inhabit. This can be wonderful, but the problem is that any such presentation tends to bake in all kinds of assumptions that should always be questioned. Many of these issues are well-known among long-time SNA practitioners, though are often not appreciated by novices: (a) how to specify the

boundary of the network [i.e., which are the set of nodes that are at risk for having a tie?]; (b) how to deal with different perceptions of the presence or absence of a tie?; and (c) how to deal with the fact that there are infinite ways of defining a tie, each of which produces a different image of the network? I review these issues and some related ones in Zuckerman (2003), which also provides key references.

The aforementioned issues are daunting, though they can often be handled sufficiently well with a reasonably useful social network analysis. But there is an additional issue that, I contend, renders SNA rather impotent. And more generally, it points to the limits of what interaction through networks (as traditionally defined) can achieve.

The issue I have in mind is a version of the third problem listed above—i.e., how do we define what a link is? Note that this is not really a problem if we focus on dyads. As long as we are able to distinguish two entities from one another and say that they have some sort of relationship (i.e., durable orientation towards one another) with one another, we can mark a dyad. But the term “network” implies more than two actors. And as Simmel taught us, things get both much more interesting and more challenging when we go from dyads to triads (after that, the issues tend to be qualitatively the same, even if quantitatively different). Consider the following passage:

[On the one hand...] Points that cannot be contacted by the straight line are connected by the third element, which offers a different side to each of the other two, and yet *fuses these different sides in the unity* of its own personality. Discords between two parties which they themselves cannot remedy, are accommodated by the third or by *absorption in a comprehensive whole*. Yet [on the other hand...] the indirect relation does not only strengthen the direct one. It may disturb it. No matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on which two of the three members regard the third as an intruder. The reason may be the mere fact that he shares certain moods which can unfold in all their intensity and tenderness only when two can meet without distraction: the sensitive union of two is always irritated by the spectator. *It may also be noted how extraordinarily difficult it is for three people to attain a really uniform mood*—when visiting a museum, for instance, or looking at a landscape—and how much more easily such a mood emerges between two. A and B may stress and harmoniously feel their *m*, be-

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cause the n which A does not share with B, and the x which B does not share with A, are at once spontaneously conceded to be individual prerogatives located, as it were, on another plane. If, however, C joins the company, who shares n with A and x with B, the result is that (even under this scheme, which is most favorable to the unity of the whole) harmony of feeling is made completely impossible. Two may actually be *one* party, or may stand entirely beyond any question of party. But it is usual for just such finely tuned combinations of three at once to result in three parties of two persons each, and thus to destroy the unequivocal character of the relations between each two of them.

– pp. 135-6 from Kurt H. Wolff (trans., ed. and introduction). 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. The Free Press: Glencoe, IL (emphasis and bracketed notes added).

What an amazing summary of both the promise and limits of networks! On the one hand, adding a third to a dyad can serve as a source of balance and can, more generally, be the basis for a unified collectivity that is greater than the sum of its parts. But on the other hand, how do we get everyone “on the same page,” and when is it reasonable to assume that they are? To see the challenge here, let’s focus on the analytic problem that Simmel poses— i.e., that if you have three people— A, B, and C— you may have three different *types of relationships*— A-B is of type m ; A-C is of type n ; and B-C is of type x . If this is the situation, wherein lies the network? Rather than anything that can really be called a triad, what you have is a collection of three dyads. In order to call it a network, *we must be able to say that the links are of the same type throughout the network*³. Put differently, the drawing of a social network depends on an act of “commensuration” (Espeland and Stevens 1998) or standardization whereby particular or individual features of the dyads are eliminated and all links are rendered comparable.

From a certain standpoint, this commensuration requirement is relatively manageable and innocuous. After all, SNA is now a major industry and in order to be as successful as it has been, it must be succeeding at finding tie criteria that are meaningful across an entire network. I agree with this response to a point. And this is why I continue to be a SNA practitioner. Great insights about social structure and how it affects outcomes we care about can be learned by “commensurating” links and analyzing the networks constructed from such

links.

Yet note that in order to specify a common criterion to draw links throughout a population, the links cannot have “indexical” properties such that they mean something different depending on who is on either side of it⁴. Thus, if A and B have an AB-type relationship; B and C have a BC-type relationship and so on, we are back to Simmel’s problem. It must instead be the case that there is a common type, and this implies that anything particular to the parties involved is removed. And this in turn means that that some very important interactions do not occur through networks and cannot be captured by SNA. In the remainder of this essay, I’ll briefly discuss two examples: (a) gossip; and (b) common knowledge.

a. Gossip

Gossip is a critical element in any social system. We are constantly talking about one another behind one another’s backs. And this information is generally not “idle” but is used to make decisions how we will interact with that person. You would think that the analysis of the spread of gossip would be ideal for SNA. After all, how does gossip spread if not through networks?

This was certainly the assumption voiced by a prominent social network analyst who gave a seminar I attended a few years ago. At the seminar, he discussed how he had collected SN data by asking members of a community who their confidants are. He then showed us that the network was fully connected, and suggested rather smugly that the joke was on his respondents. They thought their secrets were safe with their friends; but those friends had other confidants, and so on. As a result, the confidences spread (becoming “gossip” in the process), until everyone knew.

But is this really how gossip works? No. The key thing about gossip is that it *encodes network information*. It is not simply sensitive information. It is sensitive information about the speaker’s relationship to a third party, and the utterance conveys something about the speaker’s relationship to her interlocutor. Put differently, gossip is an offer of conspiracy by the speaker to the interlocutor, where the conspiracy targets the third-party. And there are as many conspiracies as there are dyads in a network. The problem though is that while there are many such dyads, it is not clear that there are any triads, in Simmel’s sense. That is, A and B may gossip about C; A and C may gossip about B; and B and C may gossip

about A— and these conspiracies remain stable and separate. It is again like they are three types of relationships (type AB for talking about C; type AC for talking about B, etc.). I would urge the reader to introspect and see whether this is not how much of your social life is conducted. We are constantly talking with others about third-parties and saying different things in those conversations from what we say when the second -parties become third-parties, and so on. In short, to say that A confides in B and B confides in C does not imply that anything A tells B will end up in C’s ears. It might under some circumstances. But it often will not. And more generally, insofar as the links between actors are based on communications that refer to specific others (in the network), they are indeed “indexicals” and thus cannot be regarded as members of the same type. There is thus no triad, just a set of (AB, BC, and CA) dyads— in which the content of each tie involves the third party.

There is obviously a lot more one can say about this issue. But I will stop here at just giving a taste of the problem, and move on to the second one.

b. Common Knowledge

To see the second problem, assume for the moment that that the various members in a “gossip network” do in fact betray one another’s confidences. I tell you something confidential about myself, you then (turn it into gossip) by relating it to someone else, and so on, until everyone in the network knows it. (Of course, no one will tell it to *me*— and if they do, the nature of the gossip and its intent become radically transformed.) Let us make the example concrete and say that I told a colleague (with loose lips) that I made up the data in one of my studies. One might think that the cat is now out of the bag, and that I am now unmasked as a fraud. Scandal! My career is over!

Ah, but will there be a scandal? Ari Adut’s (2005, 2008) deeply insightful work on scandal indicates that the answer is often ‘no.’ While it is now widely known that I am a fraud, it is not *commonly known* in the specific sense that each member of the network only knows that their contacts know, but they do not know that everyone knows⁵. This is again a fundamental difference between the dyad and the triad. When A communicates with B in a dyad, we can say not only that a piece of information is now shared by both A and B, but that A and B know that they both know that piece of information. And the same is true when B communicates with C— any information that passes between them is common knowledge within the dyad. However, when A passes on

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something to B, who passes on something to C, A and C will not know (for sure) whether they have the same information as one another. And so on. Everyone can have the same knowledge but not know that they have the same knowledge. This is “pluralistic ignorance” (a term that is widely credited to Floyd Allport, with the earliest cite I have been able to find being from his 1924 book *Social Psychology*). Centola, Willer, and Macy (2005) show how the failure of networks to convey what everyone knows (conveying only local knowledge instead, and thus fostering pluralistic ignorance) can systematically lead people to act counter to their true beliefs. And Adut shows how widespread knowledge of an indiscretion can persist for a long time, with scandal erupting only when the information becomes publicized in such a way that it becomes common knowledge. The knowledge that I’m a fraud can become widely disseminated, but this knowledge has no effect on my fate unless it is publicized in such a way that it becomes common knowledge. (See also Canales [2008] for how the distinction between private and public beliefs is crucial for understanding how institutional entrepreneurs emerge and endogenous institutional change can happen even when there is apparent convergence on a set of beliefs that support the status quo).

In a recent essay on the financial crisis (Zuckerman 2010b), I discussed another example of networks failing to convey common knowledge—i.e., how knowledge that we were in a bubble was widely dispersed, but only became actionable knowledge with the emergence of the ABX indexes, which provided a vehicle that allowed private beliefs to be publicized and become common knowledge. Indeed, I now believe that my epiphany back in front of Wien Hall was based on a relatively impoverished view of markets. Markets cannot be fully captured in the pattern of exchanges in the system. Rather, a crucial part of market functioning is the system of communication that conveys the information in such exchanges (e.g., prices and other matters relevant to decision-making). It really matters whether there is an institution like the Walrasian auctioneer (who makes prices visible to all, and thus common knowledge) or whether prices and other terms are negotiated dyadically. Very different market dynamics can be expected depending on whether knowledge is local or common (or in between)⁶.

And in some of my current work (drawing on a joint project with Shelley Correll and Cecilia Ridge-

way, based in part on their 2006 *Social Forces* paper on consensus and the creation of status beliefs), I argue that such coordination through common knowledge is crucial to the production and reproduction of identity. In short, it is misleading to suggest (as have those of us who have described networks as “prisms”; see Podolny 2001) that an actor’s identity is a function of their position in network structure. For such relationships to convey identity to all parties who might coordinate on the basis of such an identity, there must be some system of communication that makes such network information publicly visible. What determines whether a messiah is real or false is not what each potential follower individually believes, but what most believe that most believe.

A review of the exciting line of research on the importance of common knowledge for facilitating coordination is outside the scope of this essay⁷. The key point for present purposes is that insofar as coordination requires common knowledge, networks built up on dyadic communication links are systematically unable to produce such coordination because they are poor at conveying common knowledge. If we are just interacting dyadically, we cannot know (for sure) what is transpiring in other interactions and so cannot know the distribution of knowledge. In this sense, it is again the case that each link has indexical properties. What is touted as a triad (or more) is often no more than a set of dyads⁸.

Conclusion

To be clear, I think that much happens through networks, as conventionally understood, and that SNA is a very useful framework. I do not propose to throw the baby out with the bath water. But I hope you can see now why I think SNA has some important limitations, and these limitations pertain to what SNA was supposed to be so good at—capturing social structure beyond the dyad. Put differently, while traditional objections to SNA charged it with being “too structural,” I am arguing that *it is limited as a tool for capturing key features of social structure*. The problem is that the drawing of a network requires a common criterion for a link, and such commensuration misses critical “links” — (a) gossip about third-parties; and (b) communications about what others know — unless additional structural infrastructure is assumed. Thus insofar as these links are implicated in the social processes we wish

to understand (especially those that involve coordination among 3 or more persons), we will need to look beyond SNA to understand such processes. The good news is that, if history is any guide, we can be optimistic that what comes next will constitute progress.

Notes

1 This is an edited version of an essay I first wrote as a guest-blogger for orgtheory.net. The original blog post can be accessed at <http://orgtheory.wordpress.com/2008/11/14/why-social-networks-are-overrated-a-3-when-they-are-at-best-a-2/>. I thank the orgtheory co-owners at the time of the blog (Teppo Felin, Kieran Healy, Brayden King, Omar Lizardo, and Fabio Rojas) for inviting me to blog with them, and I thank Omar Lizardo for asking me to adapt this essay for this newsletter.

2 It is worth noting that at the same time, other sociologists (e.g., Granovetter 1985; Powell 1990) were arguing that networks were a form of organization that was distinct from markets. I review these differences in approach in Zuckerman (2003).

3 One might object and say that early social network analysts (e.g., White et al. 1976) were fond of stacking different types of relations and analyzing the stacked matrix. That’s true to a point, but the only way one can justify this practice is through the assumption that the different types of relations could be all treated as realizations of a comparable type of tie. Otherwise, stacking cannot be justified.

4 John Perry provides a useful overview of the philosophical literature on indexicals in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/indexicals/>.

5 As I’m sure is true for many of the readers of this essay, I can think of at least one prominent scholar who is widely regarded as a fraud. This has no discernible impact on their careers because this knowledge is not common.

6 Similarly, I no longer view formal organizations as reducible to social networks among members. Rather, the control of common knowledge is crucial to constituting the formal organization (see Zuckerman 2010a).

7 See especially Chwe 2001.

8 An objection is that in fact, networks often allow for one-to-many communications (this is apparently how Facebook and other social networking tools work), which creates common knowledge among all those who participate in such communications. This is correct, but then this implies a different definition of a social network from the traditional one. According to this definition, overlaid on

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Young Theorist Spotlight: Manjusha Nair

Manjusha Nair is a PhD Candidate at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Her primary research interests are in the areas of Political Economy, Political Sociology, Political and Social Identities and Asian societies.

Her current research underlines the need to regard citizenship, class and community as fluid, yet explainable identities. Her dissertation titled “Unsure Militants: Workers’ Identities and Politics in Two Central Indian Towns, 1977-2006,” re-thinks the meanings of class, community and citizenship from the context of a workers’ movement in contemporary India. Drawing on the theoretical work on relationality, social identities and boundary change, she argues that class-consciousness, community affiliations and good citizenship are *relational identities* that emerge from workers’ varied interactions within the social field comprising of the state, industrialists, rival unions, journalists, intellectuals and their own community. Her research thus challenges recent scholarship that has replaced the prototypical working class-consciousness with what are considered to be empirically more grounded categories such as citizenship, neighborhood networks and community.

Her dissertation research is based on interpretation of archival and ethnographic evidence collected from India in the summers of 2003 and 2004 and 2007, and the year of 2006. One important practical implication of her research is in showing how both class and community have been used at the service of effective politics. This finding has special relevance to India and other Asian societies, where community stands for the non-rational, religious domain of human practice, which when politicized, has the potential for the violent subversion of state and civil society.

For conducting the dissertation fieldwork, she has won prestigious fellowships such as the Social Science Research Council-International Dissertation Research Fellowship and the American Institute of Indian Studies-Junior Research Fellowship. Her research has also been funded by grants from Rutgers and Princeton Universities.

Her future research involves a theoretically informed comparison of the politics of poverty in India and China following the transition to a market dominated economy. Her interest is in understanding how the idea of “social citizenship” has undergone changes in these societies in the transition to neo-liberal governance. India has shifted from a mixed economy paradigm of economic organization to that of the market since the 1990s and China has shifted from a state-centric political and economic organization to that of market socialism since 1978. She hypothesizes that this transition has tilted the politics of the poor from making demands of social citizenship to appeals to a vague and moral idea of “justice” in India, and to a relatively more tangible “social inclusion” in China.

Her publications include articles “Social Gains of Union Activism,” forthcoming in the *International Labor and Working-Class History* journal and “Mixed Repertoire of an Indian Labor Movement, 1990-2006,” published in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*. Her article “Defining Indigeneity” has been published online by the *World Society Foundation*. Her work has also appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* and the journal of *Gender, Place and Culture*.



Ten Aphorisms by Georg Simmel¹

1. Art is our thanks to the world and to life. After both have created the sensuous and spiritual forms of cognition of our consciousness, we thank them by, once again with their help, creating a world and a life.
2. Man is in himself an inadequate, lost, restless being. As a being of reason he has too much nature, as a being of nature, too much reason – what could become of that?
3. Thinking hurts.
4. Perhaps the most horrible symptom of life are those things – forms of behaviour, joys, faiths – with which human beings make their lives bearable. Nothing shows so much the depth of human levels as what man uses in order to endure life.
5. The concept of consolation has a much broader, deeper meaning than we usually attribute to it. Man is a being who seeks to be consoled. Consolation is something else than help – even the animal seeks the latter; but consolation is the strange experience which lets suffering remain but so to speak abolishes the suffering from suffering. It does not concern the evil cause but its reflex in the deepest part of the soul. On the whole man cannot be helped. That is why he has invented the wonderful category of consolation – which comes to him not only through words spoken by others for this purpose, but also from hundreds of circumstances in the world.
6. It is inexpressible happiness to be at home somewhere abroad – because this is the synthesis of our two longings: for being on the road and being at home – a synthesis of becoming and being.
7. In the last hand all our roads are determined by whether they take us away from home or lead us there.
8. Education tends to be imperfect, because it has to serve two opposite tendencies with each of its acts: to liberate and to bind.
9. Happiness is the state in which the higher spheres of the soul are not disturbed by the lower ones. Comfort is the state in which the lower ones are not disturbed by the higher ones.
10. This is what is astonishing: everybody knows himself a thousand times better, knows a thousand times more of himself than of any other person, including his next. And yet the other never seems to us so fragmentary, so incomplete, so little a whole and united in itself, as we appear to ourselves.

Note

1 Simmel wrote some three hundred aphorisms. This sample comes from Richard Swedberg and Wendelin Reich, “Simmel’s Aphorisms”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 27,1(2010):24-51.

Kierkegaard and the Blind Spot of Sociology

Lambros Roubanis
University of Stockholm

In 1844 Karl Marx wrote his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and exactly the same year Søren Kierkegaard published his famous existential work *The Concept of Anxiety*. Each of the two thinkers addressed the basic situation of human beings – their freedom and alienation, and their difficult attempts to realize themselves and their relations to others. Most sociologists are familiar with Marx's theory of society, but very few have studied Kierkegaard and his work. It may be true that Marx deals with questions that are of much more obvious sociological relevance than those of Kierkegaard. But if one takes a broad view of what sociology should be about, and if one reads Kierkegaard carefully, his work suddenly becomes very important.

Marx was also mainly interested in macro issues and the collective dimension of people's lives, while Kierkegaard's "single individual" (*den Enkelte*) constitutes the heart of his existential philosophy. What mattered to Kierkegaard was not only how the single and unique individual made critical choices but also his or her inner sphere of faith, ethical responsibility and related emotions. Kierkegaard's writings are centered around the question of *authenticity*, that is, around her inner honesty and seriousness towards herself in the attempt to become a true human being. And this is perhaps not the kind of angle or problem that comes natural to a sociologist.

But even if all of this is true, is it still not peculiar that a thinker, who has so deeply influenced some of the most prominent thinkers of the 20th century – philosophers, psychologists, theologians and authors – has hardly at all been discussed by sociologists in their analyses of the individual and society? Could it possibly be that Kierkegaard touches on a sensitive spot when it comes to modern sociology? The answer is yes, as I see it, and the sensitive spot is the human being herself, whom sociologists after all are supposed to be analyzing (be it in the form of some concrete individual actor or in the form of a number on a computer screen).

And this individual carries an important secret in her innermost being, namely what should she do with her life – what is "the subjective truth" (*den subjektive Sandhed*) just for her? Kierkegaard's work represents a challenge to sociological theory and its attempt to account for problems such as agency-structure, life world-system and micro-macro. Let me give an example. Kierkegaard's investigation of the concept of anxiety has important consequences for theories about

meaning and action; and the reason for this is that he shows how anxiety is related to the inward and potential possibilities of the human being. Anxiety represents a kind of nothingness that the individual must confront and that is linked to her potential self-determination. Anxiety is the vertigo a human being feels when she confronts her inner abyss, "the possibility of possibilities". Human beings often try to escape this sense of vertigo without putting up a real fight and without making any sacrifices, something which means that they are living a lie, despite their freedom *not* to do this.

Only the individual can decide if what she does is authentic or not. The existential philosophy of Kierkegaard is from beginning to end a doctrine about the importance of choice and subjectivity. And neither of these, it should be noted, excludes the importance of history and nature.

One item that unites Marx and Kierkegaard is their opposition to Hegel's system of philosophy. Marx turned Hegel upside down and transformed his idealism into a materialistic doctrine about the ways in which socio-economic and material factors determine the life of human beings. He also saw culture and knowledge as part of the superstructure.

Against Hegel's giant system, in which individual and society come together in an elaborate synthesis, Kierkegaard set the unique and single individual. His most detailed and explicit critique of Hegel can be found in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* from 1846. Kierkegaard here argues that Hegel's system excludes all that is unknown and new in reality; that it has no place for paradoxes, what is absurd in life and the intense passions of the individual (which can never be totally expressed in objective reality but has to remain as an inner desire or a struggle for expression).

Kierkegaard also suggests that the faith of a human being is not something immediately given, in the way that Hegel's institutions are, but is instead *an internal effort* by the individual, a search for a deeper meaning in life that is in a transition from possibility to being that cannot easily be integrated into understanding, since it demands a qualitative "leap of faith". Already in his two very moving writings from 1843, *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard develops the idea that human beings, in crucial moments of truth, bear responsible for how they react; and that they have to make the right decision at the right moment or it can become too late. This creates a kind

of isolation in relation to other people as well as to history, a kind of instant micro vacuum. To Kierkegaard, the existential notion of "the single individual" denotes an ethical and religious standpoint in the universe that cannot be totally mediated or absorbed into social relations or history.

What has just been said hints at a much larger and more complex set of ideas in Kierkegaard that, in my view, can be transferred into sociological theory. In my dissertation *Kierkegaard and the Blind Spot of Sociology*, which I am currently in the process of completing and publishing (fall of 2010), I have tried to introduce the question of the existential predicament of human beings into sociology and discuss what it means for the ontological status of social reality. In my view, the message that can be found in Kierkegaard's writings represents both a reminder and a challenge to sociological thought. My project consists of critically discussing questions that are raised by Kierkegaard but which also touch upon and overlap the discussion in sociology of the individual *vis-a-vis* society, from the classics till today. It is clear that questions about freedom, self-identity, feelings and much more have been linked to ideas about socialization, culture, institutions and structures – but how and in what way?

In my dissertation I try to cover a broad range of sociological and social theoretical ideas and questions, such as classical sociological theory (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel), perspectives of everyday life (Schutz, Goffman) and more general sociological theories (e.g. Parsons, Berger and Luckmann, Bourdieu, Giddens and Habermas). I critically discuss the work of these people and try to show what they have failed to capture in the relationship of the individual to society. My main thesis is that even in those perspectives that do focus on choice and subjectivity – such as phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, structuration theory, rational choice sociology and so on – one often finds a failure to articulate the tension that Kierkegaard so wonderfully expresses.

This failure takes the expression, for example, in perspectives that lead to an oversocialized concept of man. They lead to conceptualizations of agency-structure, micro-macro and so on that reduce the individual human being into something that is totally mediated by the socially constructed reality. Sociologists often speak of individuals as if they had no reality outside the governing influence of social relations and phenomena. They assume that freedom and subjectivity is something that are created and limited by

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Theory Section Announcements

Theory and ... Knowledge

A special issue of *Qualitative Sociology* assembles papers from the 2009 Junior Theorists Symposium

Claudio E. Benzecry (*University of Connecticut*) and
Monika Krause (*University of Kent*)

In "The Circular Ruins," writer Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of how an experienced wizard retreats from the world to a location that possesses strong mystical powers: the circular ruins. There, the wizard has but one goal: to make another human being from his own dreams. Sleeping and dreaming longer and longer each day, the magician dreams of his young man becoming educated, and becoming wiser. Years pass and the wizard creates the boy piece by piece, in agonizing detail. The wizard calls upon the god Fire to bring his creation to life. Fire agrees, as long as the wizard accustoms his creation to the real world, and that only Fire and the wizard will be able to tell the creation from a real human. Before deciding to bring the young man into the world, the magician decides to abandon his hopes, and to sacrifice his life. As he ultimately walks into the flaming house of Fire, the wizard notices that his skin does not burn. "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another."

Much like the old wizard, sociologists have come to realize that they are "made," that the foundation of their discourse cannot be justified by something "out there" or by the retreat from the world; rather they've come to understand sociology is something dreamt by a particular set of wizards: sociologists themselves. The post-positivist (Alexander, 1987; Reed, 2010) and reflexive (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) moment of sociology has made of the discussion on the conventions of theorizing, on the thorough understanding of how we know what we know, a central trope in the task of producing sociological theory. Over the last 15 years or so, many scholars have asked about "the meaning of theory" in this given context. Some (Levine, 1997) have done it on the pages of this newsletter, some others have done so as editors of the main journal of the section (Calhoun, 1996), a few more have published their reflections on it on the main journals of the discipline (Seidman, 1991; Camic and Gross, 1998; Abend, 2008). All these contributions have drawn attention to the epistemic standards through which we achieve empirical adequacy, semantic precision, coherence, parsimony and explanatory power. Theories of knowledge have come to be central to defining what counts as sociological theory and the field of sociological theory has dedicated itself to understand how knowledge is produced more generally.

At the same time, we have seen a convergence of interest in knowledge and practice in various substantive areas of sociological inquiry. Scholars in the tradition of science and technology studies had first shown that science and technology, too, could be subject to sociological inquiry and then turned their attention to empirical sites beyond the natural sciences. In a separate movement, the influence of the work of Pierre Bourdieu has given new impetus to the efforts of scholars of other realms of social life to focus on the dimension of knowledge in their research. These intellectual movements added to the classical and ongoing contributions to the sociology of knowledge and culture and in the tradition of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism.

In this context it should come as no surprise that the first edited volume out of the official gathering of the ASA Theory section for the latest generation of sociological theorists –the Junior Theorist Symposium– has the theme "Practicing Knowledge in Comparative Perspective." The Junior Theorist Sym-

posium has been sponsored by the section yearly since 2005 and this first special issue, forthcoming in *Qualitative Sociology*, assembles papers from presenters at the JTS 2009 in San Francisco – and some "veterans" from previous events like Michal Pagis and Tom Medvetz).

In response to a very open call for papers about 'theory', knowledge emerged as a key theme among the submissions to the event in 2009, organized by the editors. While this is not a representative sample it gives some indication of the interests of young scholars who think of their work as 'theoretical'; as most of the presenters were drawing on their dissertation work, it gives some indication also as to one kind of PhD thesis written in U.S. sociology today.

The papers in the issue focus on knowledge practices in a variety of settings: we read about people practicing Buddhist meditation, art curators placing objects, state managers counting the beneficiaries of a project, doctors trying to explain cholera, think tank experts juggling to fulfill their many roles, financial enthusiasts playing board games in order to become responsible economic subjects, and native Canadians and scientists counting clams.

These papers ask how different claims to truth are adjudicated and what kind of social order is produced. They emphasize different factors and mechanisms: Sophia Accord highlights the role of objects, Owen Whooley the role of organizations, and Chantelle Marlor the role of the state. They also ask what we can learn from looking closely at objects and tools in different areas. Sophia Accord, for example, looks at the role objects play in the work of elite curators; Daniel Fridman looks at the board games where hopeful everyday people learn economic and financial tools.

All papers ask for new variations in the ways knowledge is practiced (and contested). Chantelle Marlor wants to draw attention to the property of "manufactured transparency", which links scientific knowledge and the neoliberal state in an elective affinity. Monika Krause discusses a new way in which the state imagines the people, namely as countable beneficiaries of policy interventions. Michal Pagis, drawing on her research on meditation, offers a framework for analyzing the different ways in which bodily and abstract knowledge are linked in practice. Lastly, some of the papers specifically examine the link between different forms of the state and different knowledge practices. Chantelle Marlor and Monika Krause re-examine some of the implications of what is sometimes referred to as the neoliberal state. In a research note, Tom Medvetz discusses some of the findings from his study of the new role of political think tanks.

Contributors to the special issue employ various theoretical orientations and narrative choices to make sense of the specific universes under investigation. Through multiple *problématiques*, objects, orientations, and writing styles, the following pages show the influence of the many streams that have inquired about the practical character of knowledge and their intersections. They also glance towards what it might look like to address some of the theoretical stakes in the debate about knowledge and society through an empirical comparison across settings.

The Junior Theorist Symposium is beginning to be the site of dialogue not just between junior theorists and senior commentators but also among different generations of presenters. In this spirit, the editors are pleased that the organizers of the very first Symposium, Marion Fourcade and Neil Gross, have agreed to contribute an afterword to this special issue and that one of the organizers of the second version, Isaac Reed, has contributed a review essay.

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Theory Section Announcements

Junior Theorists Symposium: August 13, 2010

Sponsor: Theory Section of the American Sociological Association

Location: Emory University, Candler School of Theology, Rom 102; 1531 Dickey Drive, Atlanta GA, 30322

Organizers: Claire Laurier Decoteau (*University of Illinois, Chicago*) and Robert Jansen (*University of Michigan*)

8:30—9:00 **Coffee and Bagels**

9:00—10:50 **The Practice of Theory**

Stefan Bargheer (*University of Chicago*), "The Invention of Theory: The Changing Status of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* Throughout the 20th Century"

Mucahit Bilici (*CUNY*), "Hammer and Habitus: Bourdieu's Debt to Heidegger"

Michael Strand (*Notre Dame*), "Scaffolding Theory"

Discussant: Neil Gross (*University of British Columbia*)

10:50—11:00 **Coffee**

11:00—12:50 **Culture and Action**

Hiroki Igarashi and Hiro Saito (*University of Hawaii*), "Cosmopolitanism as Habitus: Probing the Intersection of Globalization, Education, and Stratification"

Erik Schneiderhan (*University of Toronto*), "Genocide Reconsidered: A Pragmatist Approach"

Kimberly Spring (*New School for Social Research*), "The Moral Performance: Reconceptualizing the Sociological Approach to Morality"

Iddo Tavory (*UCLA*), "The Question of Moral Action: A Structuralist Position"

Discussant: Michèle Lamont (*Harvard*)

12:50—2:00 **Lunch**

2:00—3:50 **State, Politics, and Society**

Elizabeth Holzer (*University of Wisconsin*), "Governmentality and Blame Games"

Josh Pacewicz (*University of Chicago*), "Political Identification as Total Exchange: The Linkage Between Civic Engagement and the Rise of Political Independents Revisited"

Silvia Pasquetti (*Berkeley*), "Group Formation, Values, and Politics Among the Urban Poor: Lessons from an Overly Ethnicized Case"

Besnik Pula (*University of Michigan*), "Making State by Law: Legal Transformations and the Glaring Absence of Law in State-Centric Theory"

Discussant: Andreas Wimmer (*UCLA*)

Please email Claire (decoteau@uic.edu) or Robert (rsjansen@umich.edu) to request a registration form.

ASA Theory Section award winners announced

The 2010 **Lewis A. Coser Award for Theoretical Agenda-Setting** has been awarded to Rogers Brubaker (*UCLA*). The award is given annually to a mid-career sociologist whose work sets the agenda in the field of sociology. Four people were nominated. Award Committee members were unanimous in their decision that Rogers Brubaker was the nominee who best fulfilled the criterion of agenda setting, as evidenced by such seminal and inspiring works as *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (1992), *Nationalism Reframed* (1996), *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004) and *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (2006). To cite one of the nomination letters, "Brubaker has quietly produced one of the most fertile, original and influential bodies of sociological work of the past decade, one that is fully deserving of the Lewis Coser Award". The Award Committee members were Richard Swedberg (Chair), Karin Knorr Cetina, Evelyn Nkano Glenn, JoAnn Miller and Loïc Wacquant (2009 Coser Award winner).

The 2010 **Edward Shils-James Coleman Memorial Award** of the ASA Theory Section for Best Graduate Student Paper has been given to Jeremy Schulz (*UC Berkeley*) for "The Social and Cultural Construction of the Work-Private Life Boundary in Three Countries: A Comparative Study of the Evening Hours in the Lives of French, Norwegian and American Business Professionals". A Honorable Mention was accorded to Thomas Buschman, Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, Michael Strand and Brandon Vaidyanathan (*University of Notre Dame*) for Their Paper "Causality in Contemporary American Sociology."

Qualitative Sociology, continued

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Swedberg, continued

So why did so few predict the whole thing? As Greenspan has said, “everybody missed it [the financial crisis] - academia, the Federal Reserve, all regulators” (Miller and Zumbun 2010). That is part of the problem. Some strange kind of consensus developed that prevented also very sophisticated people from seeing what was going on. Exactly how to describe and explain this consensus needs to be theorized.

How about Animal Spirits?

Besides the notion of a black swan, there exists one more theory that has its origin in the theoretical zoo of the economists: that of animal spirits. The term “animal spirits” comes from *General Theory* (1936) by Keynes, who used it *ironically* to argue that a new and sophisticated type of social theory was needed to explain part of what had caused the Great Depression. In the meantime, and before we have such a theory, he added mockingly (following Tristram Shandy), the theory of “animal spirits” will have to do³.

It would surely have shocked Keynes if he had known that by the time that a new great depression shook the world, some eighty years later, his fellow economists were still as ignorant about social behavior as they were in the 1930s. Not only that; some of these economists also proposed to return to his notion of animal spirits, and now they used it without irony.

Animal Spirits is the title of one of the most popular books on the financial crisis, already in its second edition (Akerlof and Shiller 2009). Its key argument is that irrational forces, coming from “human nature”, caused the crisis. Since economists have not studied irrational behavior, this must be put on the agenda.

Now, referring to “human nature” does not provide much theoretical leverage when you analyze sophisticated social structures, such as modern investment banks and rating agencies. Neither does psychology help you very much, since it specializes in understanding the human mind. Why then the appeal of this approach? The answer probably has to do with the great popularity in our time of cognitive psychology and neuroscience as ways of explaining and understanding pretty much everything.

A much admired proponent for this type of *Zeitgeist* thinking is Malcolm Gladwell – who in an article on the financial crisis has pinpointed *overconfidence* as a key explanatory variable (Gladwell 2009). Bear Stearns went down because of the *overconfidence* of its management. Not because of bad investments, high leverage, hidden losses, vulnerability to the repo market and the like. All this from the author of *Blink*, a best-selling book with the comforting subtitle: “the power

of thinking without thinking”.

What about Greed?

According to *The Protestant Ethic*, it belongs to the kindergarten of social theory to know that greed has always existed and cannot be used to explain the way that modern capitalism operates. So greed in general cannot be the cause of the financial crisis.

But how about a channeled version of greed, that is, the idea that greed can be channeled through social structure, and this way take different expressions? Quite a few analysts of the financial crisis believe in a popular version of this theory, namely incentive theory. “The incentives were wrong”, the argument goes. Michael Lewis, the author of a truly brilliant book on the crisis – *The Big Short* – is one of those who emphasizes the role of the incentives (Lewis 2010).

The incentive argument naturally appeals to the economists, especially those who work with agency theory. This type of theory argues that it is crucial to align the interests of a person who works for someone else (the so-called agent), with the interests of the person for whom he or she works (the so-called principal). When there is no such alignment, there will be trouble. Michael Jensen, one of the key proponents of agency theory, has argued that the way that the incentives were misaligned in companies like Enron and WorldCom, made their managers literally go crazy of greed (“*managerial heroin*” – Jensen 2004).

While agency theorists can explain some of what went wrong, much remains. There are, for example, aggregate effects, and also what goes on at the political level. And without the creation of a truly international, unregulated and extremely dangerous international capital market that came into being in the 1980s, there would not have been a financial crisis in the first place. Add to this the emergence of a shadow banking system and a number of new strange new financial instruments; and you have a few more topics that need to be theorized, if the financial crisis is to be explained.

And Where Does This Lead Us?

It takes us straight back to where we started. Sociological theorists need to let loose and theorize more. They have for decades been told by colleagues, who do not like “theory” and “theoreticians”, that if they do not have a great data set with which to back up their theories, they are not real sociologists. Theory, one gets the impression, is something that went out of fashion with Parsons – or at least something that should have gone out of fashion with Parsons. By now many good sociologists have also convinced themselves that this is true.

The idea that a stringent regiment of *thinking* is needed to do theory well

has been much neglected in modern sociology, as has the craft of theorizing more generally. One way that you can develop ideas, Weber said, is through *sustained contemplation*. Another is through *intuition*. The former can to some extent be controlled, while the latter cannot. We just have to focus on what there is to explain, Weber said, and hope that this is one of those occasions when our ideas will come – when “*everything flows*.”⁴

Still, the point is that theoretical skill is an independent skill and should not be confused with skill in methods and working with data. It is a skill that needs to be singled out and carefully cultivated, if it is to amount to something. For the last fifty years sociologists have seriously upset the balance between theory and methods by overemphasizing the role of methods. The result is increasingly that lots of data is around that no one knows what to do with. What is lacking are usually ideas. And theory is precisely that: good ideas hammered into handsome shape, drawing on the craft of theorizing.

Notes

1 These figures are based on what happened in the eighteen bank-centered financial crisis that have taken place in advanced economic countries after 1945. Equity prices have typically dipped deeply, but bounced back after a few years (56% - 3 ½ years). Housing prices have gone down less, but lasted longer (35% - 6 years).

2 The modern reader can enjoy the experience of seeing plenty of black swans, by typing in “black swan” on Google Images.

3 The term animal spirits is used in the following key passage in *Tristram Shandy* (1759): “you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c. &c.--and a great deal to that purpose:--Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a half-penny matter,--away they go clattering like hey-go mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it” (Stern 1948:1).

4 On April 30, 1919 Weber wrote in a key letter to Else von Richthofen, “For, when I ‘receive’ ideas or contemplatively allow them to form *inside* me, everything flows – no matter whether it is a lot or a little, valuable or valueless – it flows in abundance” (cited in Radkau 2010:98, 527). In “Science as a Vocation” we read, “ideas occur to us when they please, not when it pleases us” (Weber 1946:136).

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A Case for Peirce and Social Science?

Thora Margareta Bertilsson

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Among the classic pragmatist philosophers, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), is often regarded as a most difficult and tricky thinker. His writings are seen as catering more to ‘aficionados’, attracted to either speculative cosmology or else to logic and mathematics. However, on the basis of recent archive findings, Peirce’s philosophy is now being regarded as remarkably ‘modern’; indeed, more than a century ago, he struggled with what he at the time called ‘speculative grammar’ which modern Peirce-scholars now view as the forerunner of speech act theory in searching for ‘sequential ordering’ of speech (PEP; Gumperz, 1996; Kevelsen, 1988; Midtgarden, 2000, 2002). Any conversation, or for that matter text, contains an information content followed by a ‘blank’ spot to be filled in as a matter of sequence. In sociology, the ‘hearing/seeing rules’ developed by the legendary Harvey Sachs in the late 60’ies, and cultivated by the ethnomethodological tradition at the time when I was a student, well illustrate the ‘spirit’ of Peirce’s original project: ‘The baby cried – The mommy picked it up’. As was remarked by Sachs himself, the blank spot is the ‘seeing’ inference that it was the ‘mommy’ and not a kidnapper who picked the baby up. From Peirce’s perspective, we are dealing with a ‘first order clarification of meaning’, an abductive inference based on mere ‘familiarity’. (CP 4.389).

Peirce himself took pain to insist that pragmatism was ‘nothing else than the question of the logic of abduction’. (CP 5.196). Logic, in his view, was an exercise in self-control (CP 5.130), and hence, pragmatism was to foster such control. When we move on the level of restricted formal-logical thinking, it is not hard to accept a link between logic and self-control; either we are skilled in the art of drawing logical implications from given premises or we are not. The link between logic (knowledge) and self-control (ethics) is more problematic in the case of the non-formal (synthetic) inferences of induction and abduction. Especially problematic ‘from a logical point of view’ is that of abduction. The inference ‘the mommy picked it up’ appears self-evident at a first glance; the question is if ‘what we see’ here and now will stand up for scrutiny in the long run.

Abduction is not new in the history of philosophy: already Aristotle had contemplated a form of statement called *apagoge* (CP 1. 65; 68). As the smooth operation of both deduction and induction in fact hangs on the ‘substance’ nourished by abduction, abduction becomes a key inference. It informs us as to ‘why something is the way it is’. Often the ‘abductive judgment comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight.’ (CP 5.181). Peirce’s entire project aimed at infusing self-control in the cognitive process epitomised in the act of seeing: ‘To act intelligently and to see intelligently become at bottom one.’ (CP 7.562). His theory of inquiry is to be seen in this wider perspective of fostering a habit of seeing and acting so that a ‘community of interpretation without definite limits’ could arise among men. The German philosophers K O Apel and Jürgen Habermas ceased on the normative and universal spirit of Peirce’s interpretive project several decades ago and saw in it a surprisingly modern semiotic-pragmatic transformation of Kant’s transcendental philosophy (Apel, 1973; Habermas, 1970).

Also among sociologists, primarily those on the margin of the discipline like for instance Harvey Sachs, abduction has been in focus although under different labels. We need to recall C. W. Mill’s vivid plea to the promise of the sociological

discipline: to foster ‘the sociological imagination’ so as to link private troubles with public issues (1959). Abduction has (also by Peirce) often been used as equivalent to ‘hypothesis’. But when logical positivism was in its height, then hypothesis-making was regarded as something merely empirical, possibly of interest for psychology and sociology, but hardly for logic and philosophy (Popper, 1972). As abduction by contamination could be seen as a flirtation with irrational *Verstehen*-approaches, its cultivation as a ‘context of discovery’ was not deemed relevant. In a seminal article in *AJS*, typical for its epoch, Theodor Abel ceased on the occasion to severely criticise his European émigré colleague, Florian Znaniecki, for daring to suggest the notion of a *human coefficient* as a ground of validation in the social sciences (Abel, 1948: 211–218).

The rise of post-positivism in the social sciences has done much to revive the interest in European hermeneutics, but largely without exploiting the link to the ‘logic of abduction’ in classic pragmatism. A rare exception is the Australian sociologist Norman Blaikie’s methodological writings on ‘social enquiry’ (2007). Among contemporary philosophers, on both sides of the Atlantic, abduction is becoming intensively discussed, but then primarily from the vantage point of an advanced formal analytical logic not easily accessible to many social scientists lacking training in mathematics and logic (Hintikka, 1997). But the real promising undertaking from the point of view of the social and the human sciences in the new archive readings on Peirce is to explore the relevance of ‘sequencing of thought/speech’ in the ‘speculative grammar’ now seen as prior to both logic and mathematics (Midtgarden, op.cit.).

The multiple approaches under the label of ‘critical realism’ have had considerable appeal in the last couple of decades among primarily European social theorists (Archer et al., 1998). One declared intention behind these approaches has been to restore the ‘scientific’ ground of contemporary social theory. The inference of abduction is now seen as a necessary and vital ingredient in ‘post-empiricist’ social science. Sociology, as a science of great complexity, is especially targeted as imbued with ‘abductive logic’ (Danermark et al., 2002: 88). When we see such events as ‘men and women communicating’, we quickly infer ‘gender structures in operation’; when we see ‘pupils and teachers interacting’, we easily infer (‘see’) the institution of schooling; a text with a content is by us quickly translated into ‘ideological content’; in a funeral or a greeting we ‘see’ rituals binding emotions.

What is at stake here, well illustrated by the sociological mind to see patterns/structures in individual events, is precisely a form of ‘imaginary inferences’. Depending upon our imaginary faculties, whether we are theorists or empiricists, such inferences occur on many levels; some of us claim to be closer to that which we ‘see’, while others develop a taste for theoretically induced inferences. Critical realists are for the most quite theoretical, and view it as their special aim to discover the necessary logical relations holding fuzzy events together. For that purpose, they distinguish between abduction and retroduction (Danermark et al., 2002: 80;110). Peirce himself employed both terms indiscriminately. (CP 1, 65; 68). The preference for distinguishing between abduction and retroduction seems to relate to the need of critical realists to prove a third reality-level of laws, or of generative mechanisms to be theoretically deduced. As a lead in inquiry, abduction then appears as a first creative phase in the ‘imagining’ of such patterns, while retroduction is a logical and transfactual operation securing the ‘validation’ of that which we merely imagined earlier (Bhaskar, 1978: 227).

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Bertilsson, continued

I have previously criticised the sharp division between the empirical and the logical/transcendental, a division that Peirce (and all pragmatists) tried so hard to refute (Bertilsson, 2007; 2009). Here, it suffices to call attention to one of the central texts in Peirce's 'pragmatist' phase: *How To Make Our Ideas Clear* (CP 5.389 - 410) where he distinguishes between levels of meaning-clarification: familiarity (as in Sach's inference), logical, and pragmatist levels of clearing up concepts.

The recurring fascination and interest in the logic of abduction resides in the fact that it deals with 'primitive classification': why we see events the way we do. Like Emile Durkheim, Peirce claimed that there were social factors operating in perceptual processes. Contrary to Durkheim (and to Kant), Peirce did not conceive of such social factors as operating blindly behind our backs, but as potentialities of a future state of 'scientific citizens' (Elam & Bertilsson, 2003). In his view, logic assumed 'the social principle'. He nourished a hope that logic and science could teach us to see 'particulars' from the point of view of a universal community of observers/interpreters. To us moderns, such a majestic hope seems perhaps ridiculous, if not even downright dangerous (Latour, 1993). But we need be reminded of the *contra-factuality* of Peirce's philosophy. It is not about being as such, but about the (infinite) conditions under which a common view would be possible (if inquiry continued long enough). His semiotic pragmatism grounded in the triadic structure of signs (icon as vague experiences, index as observing relations, and symbol or interpretant as inference-making) was constructed for that great purpose to imbue in us a sense of humility when we 'see' that which we are most certain of; while remembering that what we see may be wholly different when seen from a community of speech and interpretation, without definite limits. To the very end, there will always be a blank spot/a question to be filled in – was it really the mommy who picked the baby up, perhaps it was a male kidnapper, dressed in woman's cloth? Their mystery and charm of world-interpretation can thus continue forever.

Roumbanis, continued

intersubjectivity and social interaction. Man thus is seen as an entirely *social being*, and the deeper conflict between man and the world is thereby reduced.

In my view there exists a crack in the very foundation of sociology, a blind spot, that many sociologists pretend not to see or which they do not want to deal with or hear about. All sociologists seem to be in agreement that human beings are social beings, but it is important not to let this social constructivist perspective extend to every aspect of their being - or it will eliminate all those explosive existential and ethical issues that Kierkegaard analyzes in his writings.

For this reason I also investigate, in my dissertation, the attempt by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to create a new type of social ontology by drawing on the contradiction between, on the one hand, the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard and, on the other, the philosophies of history that one can find in the works of Hegel and Marx. But even if Sartre is successful in his attempt to introduce Kierkegaard's ideas into a social theoretical context, the central problem remains. I argue that each sociologist and social theoretician who tries to create a solid theory of the individual and society also has to confront the question of authenticity, as raised by Kierkegaard in his well-known sentence "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards".

Perhaps one can say that the sociologist Gillian Rose understood what Kierkegaard's thinking means for sociology when she counterposed the Danish philosopher to Hegel in her book *The Broken Middle* (1992). And perhaps she also realized that sociologists have been unwilling so far to deal with the unique and single individual.

– Trans. Richard Swedberg

Swedberg, continued

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Alexander, continued

Notes

- 1 It will be published by Oxford University Press this September.
- 2 Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*, New York: Oxford, 2003.
- 3 Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, New York: Oxford, 2006.
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Members' News and Notes

New Publications

Books

- Anderson, Kevin.** 2010. *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies.* (Chicago).
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- Blute, Marion.** 2010. *Darwinian Sociocultural Evolution: Solutions to Dilemmas in Cultural and Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press).
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Members' News and Notes

New Publications

Chapters

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New Translations

Georg Simmel. *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Chapters*, A translation of *Lebensanschauung: Vier Metaphysische Kapitel* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1918), by **John A. Y. Andrews** and Donald N. Levine, with an Introduction by **Donald N. Levine** and **Daniel Silver**, and an Appendix, "Fragments from the Last Journal" Edited, translated, and with an Introduction by John A. Y. Andrews (University of Chicago Press, December 2010).

Having spent much of his career as an advocate for the work of Elias, **Stephen Mennell** is now working with UCD Press, Dublin, as General Editor of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias (see www.ucdpress.ie); ten volumes of 18 have now been published, with an eleventh, Mozart and Other Essays on Courtly Art at proof stage. The series, which includes many texts by Elias never before published in English, will be completed in 2013.

New Websites

- Explaining the Normative Blog (Stephen P. Turner). <http://www.polity.co.uk/blog/post.aspx?id=52>.
- Critical Theory of Religion (Warren S. Goldstein). <http://criticaltheoryofreligion.org>.

Special Journal Issue

American Behavioral Scientist Special Issue: "Prosumption and Social Media." This issue will explore prosumption (the convergence of consumption and production) with specific (though not exclusive) emphasis on the Internet and social media. The issue aims to include both theoretical and empirical submissions from a number of fields. Relevant book reviews will also be considered. Submission deadline: June 1, 2010. For more information, visit http://www.bsos.umd.edu/socy/prosumer/ABS_CFP.html.

Social Theory Conference

The Social Theory Research Network of the European Sociological Association invites you to its midterm conference, "Controversies in Context", September 9 - 11, 2010, Villa Lanna, Prague, Czech Republic. More information is available from www.social-theory.eu

Members' News and Notes

Awards and Announcements

James Burk received the *Morris Janowitz Career Achievement Award*, sponsored by the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, at its biennial meetings on October 23, 2009 in Chicago. The seminar is an international and interdisciplinary association of scholars who study civil-military relations. It was founded by Morris Janowitz in 1960.

Leslie Gates's article "Theorizing Business Power in the Semiperiphery: Mexico 1970-2000" received the *2009 award for best article in the field of global, or comparative international sociology* from the Political Economy of the World-System (PEWS) Section of the ASA. The article previously appeared in *Theory and Society* (Vol 38(1), Pp. 57-95).

Scott Harris received the 2010 *Early Career Scholarship Award* from the Midwest Sociological Society. The MSS gives the award every other year to recognize an early-career scholar who has produced a body of work that is "particularly meritorious, creative, or enlightening."

Peter Baehr was recently elected the new *President of the History of Sociology Research Committee, ISA*.

Stephen Mennell retired in September 2009 from his professorial chair at University College Dublin – retirement at 65 is still obligatory in Ireland – and has been succeeded by two people: Chris Whelan and Robert van Krieken, Robert having moved to Dublin from Sydney, Australia. Mennell and Van Krieken, together with Andrew Linklater organised a conference at the Royal Irish Academy, 9–10 April 2010, on 'Globalisation and Civilisation.'

George Steinmetz was awarded the *Charles Tilly Collegiate Professorship* at the University of Michigan.

Zuckerman, continued

top of the dyadic relations is an additional structure that marks the three parties as privy to the same communications. It is perfectly reasonable to call this a network but it is critical that we recognize that not all social networks have this additional overlay, and those that do not will encounter the described gap between dyadic knowledge and common knowledge. That this distinction has not been sufficiently appreciated may be seen in the fact that traditionally [see especially Breiger's 1974 classic "The Duality of Persons and Groups"] network analysts have taken co-presence data [as in the classic dataset from Davis et al. 1941 study *Deep South*] and transformed it into conventional network data, thus eliminating the eliminating the possibility of knowing who shares knowledge about what others know. For instance, such a transformation sees two events with A, B, and C attending as equivalent to three events with A-B, B-C, and A-C attending. But those are very different sets of events, at least when it comes to the production of common knowledge. Note however, that analyzing co-presence data with Galois Lattices retains this distinction, and would seem to have more promise for modeling the production of common knowledge (see Freeman 1996).

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