

PERSPECTIVES

NEWSLETTER OF THE ASA THEORY SECTION

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Theory & Movements for Social Justice

On May 16th, the theory section hosted a virtual, interdisciplinary panel that tackled the question of how theory might be useful for the purposes of political mobilization. Panelists included scholars and practitioners from around the United States:



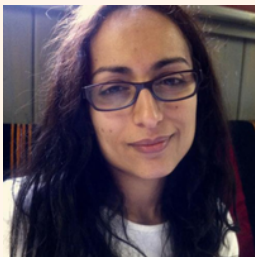
Andy Clarno, Associate Professor of Sociology and Black Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, whose research examines racism, capitalism, colonialism, and empire in the early 21st century with a focus on racialized policing and struggles for social justice.



Zophia Edwards, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University, whose research examines race, labor, colonialism, state building and comparative development in the Global South. Her forthcoming book *Fueling Development: How Black Radical Trade Unionism Transformed Trinidad and Tobago* is forthcoming with Duke University Press (2025).



Juliana Góes, Assistant Professor at Binghamton University, who is working on two book projects, *Decolonizing Cities: Black Movements and Territories of life in Brazil* charts Black movements and territories of life in Brazil, examining the intersections between Black movements in Latin America, self-determination, and urban politics, and *Du Bois on Latin America and the Caribbean* co-authored with Augustan Laumtas and Jorge Vasquez studies Black internationalism across the Americas.



Mabrouka M'Barek, PhD student in Sociology at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst had participated in writing the Constitution as a member of Tunisia's Constituent Assembly. Her research bridges sociology and political economy as it examines how colonization and imperialism have historically shaped and restricted human movement to serve capital accumulation, grounded in dialectical materialism and non-Western theory.



Woods Ervin, is an organizer at Critical Resistance and who has been working for more than 15 years for trans self-determination and prison industrial complex abolition. Woods has most recently worked with the TGI Justice Project in the Bay Area. They engaged in research on the PIC at Interrupting Criminalization, a recently launched abolitionist research project.

The panel emphasized theory's role as a "living, breathing tool"—a phrase that recurred through the event. Juliana Góes captured this sentiment powerfully: "theory is alive, organic, and comes from struggles of liberation." Panelists stressed that the theory's liberatory potential lies in its capacity to forge connections across geographies, time periods, and struggles—linking structures to lived experience. They pointed to intellectual traditions such as Black radicalism, Indigenous epistemologies, and ancestral spiritual practices as rich sources of insight for understanding and resisting oppression.

Panelists critiqued the academy's tendency to sever theory from praxis. Rather than emerging solely from institutional knowledge, real theory often grows from grassroots organizing and everyday resistance. Mabrouka M'Barek emphasized how insights from farmers in Tunisia resisting dependency through seed politics can offer deeper understandings of global capitalism than formal scholarship. These reflections set the stage for a broader critique: theory must not be reduced to an abstract framework divorced from its radical roots. It must remain grounded in the everyday acts of survival and struggle by those most affected. As the conversation unfolded, participants revisited this theme again and again, calling for a return to theory as something made in movement—an analytical and tactical tool sharpened by those fighting for liberation.

The symposium also tackled the uneasy dynamics of collaboration between academics and movements. Zophia Edwards warned of the danger that scholars may "take beautiful things and defang them and turn them so obscure it gets disconnected from the struggles." Several panelists pointed out that knowledge production can become extractive when academics translate movement strategies into theoretical frameworks without accountability to the communities involved, such as the linkage of conservative elites within the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) movement. Collaborations should remain principled, accountable, and movement-led. Ultimately, theory should remain grounded in the struggles of those navigating structural isolation and violence and pushing back against oppressive systems, guiding both critical analysis and concrete efforts toward liberation. For example, Woods Ervin mentioned Critical Resistance's goal to close 10 prisons in California. They mentioned research on the CA state budget, and resource allocation to reparations and indigenous communities on the land, which could be done through delicate and rigorous analysis. The point is to shift common sense ideologies.

“THEORY'S LIBERATORY POTENTIAL LIES IN ITS CAPACITY TO FORGE CONNECTIONS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES, TIME PERIODS, AND STRUGGLES—LINKING STRUCTURES TO LIVED EXPERIENCE.”

In terms of analytical tools for social change, speakers drew heavily on Black radical, Indigenous, and decolonial feminist traditions. They emphasized the ability of theory to extend beyond the reduction of power systems like race, gender, and class in separate axes, and instead see them as historically intertwined totalities. Juliana Góes gave the example of how cisheteronormativity emerged through colonial processes, reshaping African and Indigenous societies, and how Hortense Spiller's work revealed how sex as a biological division was one of the major divisions imposed during the slave trade. Mabrouka M'barek mentioned the Du Boisian theory of the global color line, which would enable to understand migration as an outcome of overlapping, multiple crises, a larger structure of domination that causes displacement. Zophia Edwards reminded the audience that Black people in the colonies have long theorized fascism through the dual lenses of colonialism and authoritarianism. She also cited Kwame Ture to argue that "what we don't learn from history repeats under ever-changing material conditions." Seeing history as events rather than processes is an error, and theorizing processes helps scholars imagine alternatives.

The panel also turned its attention to contemporary crises, particularly the genocide in Gaza. Participants situated the violence within broader structures of empire, noting how surveillance technologies developed through U.S. military campaigns abroad are repurposed for domestic policing.

Activists have long connected criminalization and policing with the development of fascism and authoritarianism. Campaigns to end Urban Shield, the largest SWAT paramilitary training and global police exchanges, and reroute resources to disaster preparedness programs were examples of the ways activists used theory to articulate pathways towards freedom. Drawing on theorists like Gramsci and Cabral, Woods Ervin expressed interest in the ways the movement could strategize united fronts, contest techno-feudalism, and build transformative power to confront rising authoritarian threats.

“THE ABILITY OF THEORY TO EXTEND BEYOND THE REDUCTION OF POWER SYSTEMS LIKE RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN SEPARATE AXES, AND INSTEAD SEE THEM AS HISTORICALLY INTERTWINED TOTALITIES. “

Teaching was another recurring concern. Several panelists reflected on the limits of university spaces in the United States, which were described as “isolated citadels” disconnected from communities. Many agreed that it was crucial to teach theory not just in classrooms but through dialogue and engagement with social movements. Mabrouka M'barek argued that rather than treating theory as abstract, educators should focus on teaching methods such as dialectical thinking and the sociological imagination—tools that enable people to grasp transnational processes and broader systemic issues.

Decolonial feminists, particularly from Latin America, argue that transformative theorizing cannot be confined to universities, as theory must continually be remade through practice and struggle. In this spirit, Woods Ervin emphasized deepening connections between movements by reworking educational tools, such as abolitionist trainings, to show how systems like the prison-industrial complex permeate healthcare, housing, and education, especially amid a neoliberal state increasingly defined by repression and policing across all areas of society. Finally, Juliana Góes called for the importance of historicizing theory itself, recognizing how modern universities—linked to nation-states—have standardized knowledge and excluded other traditions, thereby necessitating critical reflection on whose knowledge is marginalized and how theory can better integrate insights emerging from social movements.

Theorists mentioned: Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Steve Biko, Ghassan Kanafani, Edward Said, Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Chandra Mohanty, Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood Garvey, Walter Rodney, Maria Filipa, Silvia Federici, Combahee River Collective, INCITE!, Stuart Hall, Nokuthula Hlabangane, Robin D.G. Kelley, Simone Browne, Barbara Ransby, Beth Ritchie, Hortense Spillers, Immanuel Ness, Ndongo Samba Sylla, Kwame Ture, Antonio Gramsci

Conceptualizing Authoritarianism

Interview with Ivan Ermakoff

1. What motivated this book chapter on authoritarianism?

Three considerations motivated the writing and design of this piece. The first relates to contemporary debates about political regimes and their evolution. While three decades ago political analysts could plausibly evoke an expansion of democratic modes of political regulations, the last fifteen years have witnessed a reversal of this trend. In numerous instances, democratic institutions have been either subverted from within or ideologically challenged. To describe this process, commentators have been using different terms. Authoritarianism is one of them. Notions that are used both as political and social scientific labels most of the time bathe in muddy waters because they serve purposes that are at odds with one another. While a political usage aims for emotional and normative resonance, the social scientific one needs to fulfill the criteria of descriptive accuracy. The first goal of this piece was, therefore, to clarify meaning as much as possible.

The second motivation was more methodological. As indicated in the introduction of this book chapter, authoritarianism is polymorphous and polysemic.



It is polymorphous in the sense that the notion presents itself under multiple guises depending on the class of referents to which it is affixed: attitudes, conceptions, institutions, or power practices. It is polysemic since, given this multiplicity of possible referents, it evokes multiple meanings. It plays its tune – so to speak – on multiple semantic scenes. To deal with notions that have this profile, the paper suggests a two-step approach, one which first restricts the focus to one class of referents and then, in a second step, investigates whether this referent is amenable to different types of understanding. In the paper, the referent adopted for this purpose is “regime.” The paper thus delineates five modes of conceptualization of authoritarian regimes, that is, five ways of objectifying meaning by coupling a type of understanding with an approach and a focus.

The third motivation was to examine the extent to which these modes of conceptualization help us draw the line between authoritarian and democratic regimes. Figuring out whether a line can be drawn has become more challenging in the last fifteen years as office holders have embarked on strategies of power monopolization while formally maintaining electoral contests.

The question that hovers over this exercise in meaning objectification is whether some modes of conceptualization are better fitted than others to draw the line. The claim advanced in the last section of the paper is that ultimately, we should be considering office holders' practice of state power. Do they practice their decisional capacity as if it were unconditional, unaccountable, and by way of consequence, temporally unbounded?

2. Your earlier research theorized collective abdications. You wrote popular articles about contingencies and exceptional cases. More recently you published papers on revolutions and the law. Your latest publication addresses the issue of authoritarianism. Is there an underlying agenda connecting all these pieces of work?

The work on collective abdications and the dynamics of crisis conjunctures has been the matrix of the analysis of decision making in critical times, the empirical specification of contingency, alignment processes, regime transitions, the temporalities of revolutionary conjunctures, the status of law in revolutions, and the epistemic status of exceptional cases. All these research foci can therefore be viewed as offsprings of the same empirical forays centered on the processes that lead collective actors to relinquish their capacity for self-defense. At the outset of this research program was a simple question. How shall we account for collective stances that at first glance appear remarkably self-defeating? What do such moments of political renouncement reveal about decision-making in a certain type of conjuncture marked by the experience of uncertainty?

It turns out that when we apprehend the phenomenon of political renunciations from a decisional perspective, the empirical significance of moments of indeterminacy and of processes of collective alignment comes to the fore. Interestingly enough, dramatic instances of collective alignment, that is to say, collective alignment when the stakes are high (e.g., choices about constitutional designs, policy decisions that everybody knows will have long-term consequences, and group stances in the face of persecution), help bring into relief the logic of processes emerging from situations loaded with lower stakes. "Stakes" in this framework designate the scope of the consequences that can be expected from the decision. High-stakes contexts are conducive to the emergence of critical decisions, defined as decisions that actors experience as highly risky and as binding their future capacity for action.

For most actors, critical decisions are infrequent. From a phenomenological standpoint, actors experience them as exceptional. This exceptional character notwithstanding, they shed light on more mundane processes of alignment. Herein lies their heuristic contribution. Further, processes of alignment undergird regime transitions that have a legal character. Hence, they also raise the question of the usage of law in revolutionary conjunctures. A law-centered problematic is key for understanding how challengers and office holders can successfully subvert democratic institutions from within.

3. This book chapter is a call for further analytic rigor. In addition, it provides tools to parse classifications. Why is sharpening our conceptual apparatus so urgent, and what is at stake if we fail to do so?

At issue is whether we should be content with fuzzy notions, that is, notions that have no clear-cut empirical content and, by extension, no clear-cut boundaries. Fuzzy notions have the seductive property of being adaptable and extensible. They can be invoked at low cost in various contexts. In addition, they are evocative enough so that at first glance, they make arguments plausible. Authoritarianism has this characteristic when we let it evoke indistinctively an ideology, a political project, a bundle of attitudes, institutions, or a certain practice of power. The notion looks handy because it seems capable of embracing all these dimensions or referents in one stroke.

The flip side of conceptual fuzziness is its elusive character. A notion that proves able to show up on multiple scenes at once also maximizes the likelihood of debates that run in circles from one dimension or one referent to another. Without a fixed point – an empirical core – that we can engage, we run the risk of talking past one another. If so, we let the project of a cumulative research agenda slip away. It is such a project that is at stake when we seek to “sharpen our conceptual apparatuses,” to use the wording of your question. Ultimately, this means making the notions we use empirically traceable, delimited, and thus refutable. Once these requirements are fulfilled, we can claim to have an empirical concept in hand in lieu of a notion.

4. You identify five distinct ways of conceptualizing authoritarianism. Could these induce divergent regime classifications?

The question is well taken. In a significant number of cases, electoral procedures now coexist with authoritarian practices of state power, i.e., office holders’ efforts to evade accountability and time limits. Analysts often have a hard time pronouncing definite judgements about the nature of the political regimes emerging from this coexistence. They label these cases intermediate, mixed or ambiguous. In other words, authoritarian bids in contemporary democracies have made categorical regime distinctions more difficult to establish. It is therefore worth reflecting whether, and to what extent the conceptual choices we make affect how we characterize political regimes.

A plausible claim is that the more abstract a conception is, the more it leaves the door open to preconceptions or considerations that have a normative character. In the same way definitions can differently configure the empirical contours of an object of investigation and make them more or less distinct, modes of conceptualization make their referent more or less amenable to empirical assessments.

The *a priori* mode, for instance, which approaches the reality of authoritarian regimes in terms of a problematic centered on servitude and the deprivation of autonomy, faces the challenge of how to approach empirically autonomy and its deprivation in systematic terms. This is not to say that it cannot be done. Rather, this is to say that the task may prove quite demanding and that, as a result, analysts may be led to draw on their own synthetic judgements, or criteria extraneous to an ethical conceptualization, to produce an assessment of specific cases. By contrast, scale-based approaches, taxonomies, and dimensional analyses start right away with measurable indicators.

Yet, it does not follow that when the empirics of regimes are at the forefront of conceptual considerations, classification becomes straightforward. Scale-based approaches exemplify this point. For one thing, scale designers have to decide which phenomenal realities have to be considered. Then, they have to decide which aggregation rule will be implemented if they decide to craft a composite index. Finally, if they want to use the scale thus constructed as the basis for categorical distinctions, determining the cutoff point distinguishing authoritarian from democratic regimes involves another intervention on their part. All these operational choices can be sources of variation in classification outcomes.

5. Might some conceptual modes enjoy greater legitimacy or authority over others? For example, do more powerful states tend to invoke the *a priori* mode to sidestep the authoritarian label? Can power dynamics shape which mode becomes the dominant reference point?

We can safely assume that state actors making claims about the political regime that they have implemented are primarily interested in eliciting people's ideological endorsement. To this end, abstractions are best adapted, all the more so if, thanks to diffuse cultural representations, they are value-laden. Hence, abstract characterizations can be expected among authoritarian office holders seeking to portray themselves as the embodiment, or the emanation, of the people. Suffice to mention the leadership of Eastern European Communist parties, labelling their one-party dictatorships "popular democracies."

However, this point is not about legitimacy as it relates to sovereign power. To suggest that a concept is "legitimate" is to suggest that a specific group endorses it as a valid description of what is or what should be. The notion of "popular democracy" as invoked by Communist party leaders in Eastern Europe after the Second World War may have been credible – and thus legitimate – in the eyes of devoted Communists, believing that the Communist party's exclusive control of the state apparatus meant the realization of the people's sovereignty. For all those exposed to harassment, exclusion, discriminatory measures, and repression, the claim could only be a grandiose and tragic mystification.

One implication of this observation is that authoritarian leaders who are the most inclined to mystify their audience can also be expected to be the most adverse to empirical claims, fact-checking, and critical, factually based assessments. Abstractions can be ideologically manipulated. This endeavor is less easy when statements have an empirical character, and when the focus is on their factual content. This focus, of course, supposes that office holders have not yet managed to shape the public sphere so that voices that could contradict them have been suppressed or made inaudible.

6. Terms such as “fascism” and “populism” often surface alongside “authoritarianism” especially these days. How does the analytic treatment of this specific substantive compare to these other related phenomena?

“Fascism” has multiple possible referents. The term can denote a movement, an ideology, and a regime. “Populism” evokes a style of politics, a set of representations and attitudes, and a practice of state power. Both terms, thus, are polymorphic. In this respect, they are not different from “authoritarianism.” The ambiguities surrounding them are characteristic of the class of substantives to which they belong – those that end in “ism.”

The difference between them relates to their phenomenal scopes. “Fascism” implies “authoritarianism.” That is, regimes, movements, and ideologies characterized as “fascist” constitute a subset of authoritarian regimes, movements, and ideologies. “Populism” on the other hand, only intersects with “authoritarianism.” If, for instance, we pay attention to power practices as a relevant empirical gradient, some populist forms are authoritarian in nature. Others are not.

More broadly – and this point is in line with the methodological guideline stated in the introduction of the book chapter - in order to clarify how “fascism,” “populism,” and “authoritarianism” relate to one another, it would be appropriate to start by distinguishing their respective referents. In the case of fascism, it makes sense to empirically distinguish movements from regimes and ideologies as I have suggested. In the case of populism, one way to go would be to differentiate attitudes and representations from styles of political management. These two sets of referents point to distinct empirical universes. By way of consequence, the modes of conceptualization that might emerge from these foci for either “fascism” or “populism” may well significantly differ from the taxonomy spelled out in the book chapter.

“ABSTRACTIONS CAN BE IDEOLOGICALLY MANIPULATED. THIS ENDEAVOR IS LESS EASY WHEN STATEMENTS HAVE AN EMPIRICAL CHARACTER, AND WHEN THE FOCUS IS ON THEIR FACTUAL CONTENT. ”

7. As a scholar of democratic breakdowns in Europe who has been living in the United States for quite some time, could you tell us how you appraise contemporary political developments in the Western Hemisphere? In your view, are there parallels between the rise of far-right politics today and the political situation in Germany in the 1930s?

Several parallels can be drawn. Let me emphasize three that are highly consequential from a political standpoint: the use of language, the legalist framing of power bids that undermine or hollow out the rule of law, and processes of collective alignment.

1. The systematic use of language to belittle, castigate, misrepresent, and emotionally arouse is very reminiscent of the rhetorical postures adopted by party leaders eager to dismantle democratic institutions in Germany in the 1930s. Politics from their standpoint was a matter of life and death. In this vision and practice of politics, opponents could not but be enemies, and given the threats they posed, it was absolutely crucial to identify internal enemies. In order to undercut their pernicious influence, opponents thus had to be denounced as not only dangerous but also despicable. How, given their corrosive influence, could they pretend to be members of the polity? Hence, authoritarian politicians constantly relied on a rhetoric of denunciation and exclusion.

In this ideological ambiance structured by the vision of uncompromising fights, misrepresentations, lies, and falsehoods appeared as perfectly legitimate tools to achieve support, convictions, and endorsements. The antidemocratic Right for instance, never stopped rehearsing the myth that the armistice requested by the German government in October 1918 was the result, not of a desperate military situation, but of the nefarious propaganda of Jews and Socialists who, through their strikes and agitation, had been demoralizing soldiers. According to this narrative, concocted by politicians and actively propagated by publicists, Jews and Socialists had stabbed the army in the back.

Large segments of the German electorate believed in the veracity of this myth, which in effect was one of the factors structuring political cleavages throughout the Weimar Republic. To underscore the prevalence of the same use of language nowadays, suffice to mention the repeated claim that Joe Biden's election to the presidency in November 2020 was stolen against all the evidence demonstrating the integrity of the election results.

***“AUTHORITARIAN POLITICIANS
CONSTANTLY RELIED ON A RHETORIC
OF DENUNCIATION AND EXCLUSION.”***

2. Also reminiscent of the political transitions that took place in the 1930s is the resort to intimidation, coercive pressures, and power bids wrapped in legalist language. The leaders of far-right parties in Germany never disguised their intention to radically change the power structure in an authoritarian fashion by using all the means provided by the formal setting of democracy. They were after a national revolution. In effect, once Hitler was appointed chancellor (i.e., prime minister) at the end of January 1933, Nazi and reactionary leaders embarked on a revolution of this kind through a host of emergency decrees endorsed by the president of the Republic, Hindenburg. Lo and behold, these emergency decrees destroyed the rule of law. Individual and civil rights were no longer protected. Nazi potentates evaded accountability. The acme of this legalist takeover was the passing of an enabling bill on March 23, 1933, sanctioning the constitutional abdication of the German parliament. Hitler now had a blank check to remodel institutions as he saw fit.

3. The pace at which this institutional transformation was conducted is a striking feature of the political transition that ushered in a full-fledged authoritarian regime in the spring of 1933 in Germany. Within a few weeks, the game was over. We cannot understand how quickly Nazi leaders were able to remodel and transform the power structure unless we consider the extent to which processes of collective alignment geared to the prospect of a generalized acquiescence to Nazi diktats took hold in organizations, institutions, and groups throughout Germany. Groups and parties that had an interest in the preservation of democratic institutions resigned themselves to the perception that there would be no collective resistance.

Ermakoff, Ivan. 2025, "Conceptualizing Authoritarianism," Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics, edited by Anne Wolf. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

“THE SYSTEMATIC USE OF LANGUAGE TO BELITTLE, CASTIGATE, MISREPRESENT AND EMOTIONALLY AROUSE IS VERY REMINISCENT OF THE RHETORICAL POSTURES ADOPTED BY PARTY LEADERS EAGER TO DISMANTLE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN GERMANY IN THE 1930S. POLITICS FROM THEIR STANDPOINT WAS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH”.

What Sociology Is for Me

Jeffrey C. Alexander

This essay constitutes the text of a speech that Alexander presented to the social science faculty at the University of Veracruz, on May 28, 2025, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate. It was prepared at the request of José Alfredo Zavaleta Betancourt, Professor of Sociology at Universidad Veracruzana's Institute of Historical and Social Research. Zavaleta was concerned about the declining support for sociology in Mexico and Latin America, which has translated into the closure of some programs, decline in financing, and demands from government authorities that sociology "be useful."

I would like to say a few words on behalf of sociology, a framework for understanding to which I have committed my intellectual life.

For the everyday person making their way through the miasma of social life, society is experienced as "thing-like"—as something external, something given, a product of history, a set of structures outside of our control. "This IS a modern society," we say. "This IS what capitalism looks like," we marvel or despair. "This IS what a city looks like," we tell our children. "This IS our country Mexico or the United States." The everyday person experiences "society" as comprised of established positions, with our fate being to occupy them ... To become doctors, dentists, or engineers, blue-collar workers, students, professors, administrators, secretaries, presidents or kings.



**SOCIOLOGY IS A
CRITICAL AND
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HOPE FOR A
BETTER SOCIAL
LIFE.**

Sociology allows us to see that this “thinginess” of society is an illusion. We experience our roles, institutions, cities, countries as having the solidity of THINGS– but this is actually not the case. The stuff that make up social life may feel object-like – because they are outside of us – but they are not objects! Rather, they objectify our subjectivity – our own and the subjectivities of those who came before us. In other words: What is outside was once inside. Everything in our societies has been created by human beings, by their efforts and actions – by social movements, charismatic leaders, movement intellectuals, organizations trying to maintain their legitimacy, mass migrations, wars and conquest.

This, then, is the first and most fundamental quality of Sociology: It allows us to de-reify -- to stand outside established actions, roles, and institutions in such a manner that we can see their insides: We see that they are constructed, that they have been human-made.

Sociology is humanism by another name. If sociology could speak, it would paraphrase the famous statement of Publius Terence, the former Roman slave. It would say: “Society is human-made, and nothing that is human is alien to me.”

So Proposition #1: Sociology examines, theorizes, interprets, and explains the meaning-motivated human processes that create social roles and institutions.

This first quality of sociology leads us directly to a second:

Proposition #2: Sociology is critical and reflexive.

What is human can be unmade, can be made better, and can be made worse. Sociology is an intellectual resource for criticizing what currently exists, a constant reminder that to understand how societies are made ... is to understand how they can be changed. The thing-like stuff of society can be changed -- if we change our subjectivities. We can shift our roles and institutions, our cities, our organizations, our nations ... If we exercise our imaginations, our creativity, our reason – And succeed in gaining control of the resources to make our new ideas material.

This is what the Renaissance Humanist Erasmus meant when he observed: “There are some people who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.” Sociologists are the modern-day alchemists. While their interpretations and explanations of social life try to be realistic, they are also aimed at turning dreams into reality. Frida Kahlo once said: "Feet, what do I need them for if I have wings to fly?" Sociologists understand that we are bound to walk, but that we never give up on the dream of flying, and that we draw on that dream to walk farther.

From these first two dimensions of sociology, a third ineluctably follows:

Proposition #3: Sociology has a utopian reference.

Looking at how social things are constructed -- and thinking about how they can be changed -- requires (implicitly but often explicitly) an “ideal” to which present arrangements can be compared. For sociologists, these ideals are sacred; they form a secular sociological faith. The utopia of equality: Hidden in the background of sociological studies of class, race, gender, indigeneity, and ethnicity is the animating idea of social equality.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton -- the pioneering American feminist -- had it just right: “The history of the past is but one long struggle for equality” Sociologists believe in the secular religion of equality whether they are radicals or liberals, moderates or revolutionaries. It is within the framework of this invisible faith that they assiduously examine the obvious limitations of actually existing social life. The utopia of liberty: Sociology also exhibits a powerful faith in the ideal of liberty. They agree with Martin Luther King: “No man is free until all men are free.”

The faith in liberty is shared by sociologists across various political persuasions: Tocqueville, with his critical account of the “tyranny of the majority” Weber with his theory of the alienating “iron cage” Foucault, with his searing description of panoptic modernity. The utopia of community: Finally, there is the utopia of community, an ideal that emerges more from Romanticism than Enlightenment. Paulo Freire once said: “Hope is rooted in men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others.” The ideal of community translates into the sociological concept of solidarity.

Durkheim believed that modernity undermines solidarity. Without solidarity, there is isolation, individualism, and anomie, pathologies that lead to self-destruction. Only movements that increase solidarity, he believed, whether secular rituals or socialism -- offer a way out. Marx believed that communal ties are shredded by capitalism; only socialist forms of economic organization could restore them. Weber believed that lonely individualism is the result of rationalized social life. Unlike Durkheim and Marx, however, he viewed efforts to overcome this modern condition -- through love, religious fundamentalism, or revolution -- as dangerous illusions.

Let me conclude: Sociology is a critical and reflexive intellectual orientation. De-naturalizing existant forms of social organization, it provides theoretical and empirical tools that inspire hope for a better social life.

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Kurakin, Dmitry. 2025. "Narratives we live by: sequentiality and timeliness in temporal structuring of action." *Theory and Society*. Online first.

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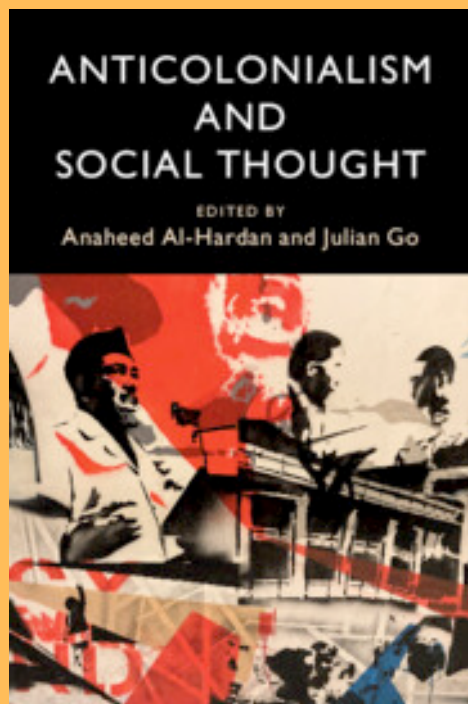
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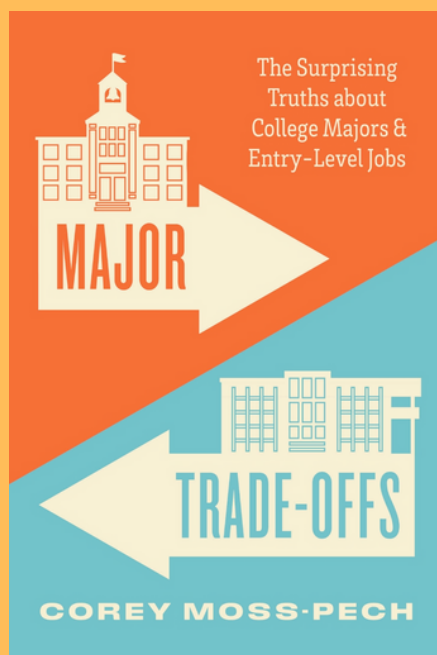


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