

Theorizing Theory

Dmitry Kurakin, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

Theory and Culture

Sociological theory still keeps the enchantment of the sacred grove at the heart of the discipline, at least in the eyes of the 'theory people'. However, it is less and less clear, what exactly is a theory today, what does it promise to sociology, what is the duty and the life of a theorist, and how have these things changed since the times when today's 'contemporary sociological theories' (which are not that contemporary, as Omar Lizardo once aptly noticed) were created. An obvious tendency in the discipline is the shifting of the center of gravity toward empirical research. Thus, one of the ways to trace these changes is to focus on relations between sociological theory and central thematic concepts, which, designating spheres of concrete research, simultaneously hold crucial stakes in theory, shaping vanguards of theoretical inquiry in empirical studies. This is ever more important since purely abstract theory nowadays effectively vanished, giving way to theoretically-driven empirical research. If this is really the case, connections between theory and particular concepts represent the state of the arts in theory as it exists in our times. That motivated us to launch the current section. In the following several issues we will examine the most important concepts, which obtain theoretical capacity. In this issue, we begin with the notion of culture. Many of leading theorists, both well-established major figures and rising stars, have a pronounced interest in culture, and remarkable theory-driven debates are taking place at the realm of culture. To address this connection, I discuss culture with Philip Smith from Yale University, who is well known both as a cultural sociologist and as a theorist.

Interview with Philip Smith, Yale University, USA

Dmitry Kurakin: It seems to me truly intriguing, that, in the contemporary sociology, 'theory' becomes more and more associated with 'culture'. It is manifest in many forms; for a mere formal one, the majority of RC16 'Theory' sections at the congress, and many of members' personal profiles thematically focused on culture. A somewhat unexpected affinity or even, in some cases, convergence for the whole discipline's theoretical base, and this one particular concept, seems to be a particular 'sign of the times', and, hence, might shed light on the big picture of the contemporary sociology. Do you think this convergence does exist and sociological theory nowadays leans toward culture, and if so, what are the main reasons for that?

Philip Smith: Hey Dmitry. Did you look at the news today? One reason culture is moving to the fore is that pretty much every 'big issue' or controversy today is understood in terms of meanings or has its origins in a meaning system: Brexit, the Kavanaugh nomination, Trump's rise to power, climate change, refugees and migration..... It is not just cultural sociologists employed in academia saying this. So are leading commentators, analysts and critics. Sociological theory is being responsive in tracking this reality and by trying to generate better cultural theory. At the root of all this, of course, are wider and deeper shifts in social organization towards a knowledge society, semiotic society, late-modernity or whatever we want to call it wherein technological shifts, societal complexity, semiotic circulation and mediatization are ramping up. Another reason is that all the Messianic paradigms that have promised to reformulate social theory from the bottom up have run out of gas or been shown to have limited utility: rational choice, structural Marxism, ethnomethodology and so forth. There was a time not so long ago when these were on the rise. Of course in RC16 we are just part of the wider picture in the ISA. There is a lot of theory going on in other RCs of the ISA that is far less receptive to meaning – comparative and historical sociology, for example, is moving away from culture towards the study of networks, military power, or rational choice style models of authority and obedience. But really in

RC16 we keep an open mind. A few years ago, for example, the RC16 Junior Theorist runner up prize went to someone engaged in a justification of formal theory of a 'nuts and bolts' kind who was arguing that cultural theory was plagued by (the usual suspect) problems of causal imprecision, tautology and so forth.

Dmitry Kurakin: Thank you, Phil, you've quite set the scene! So, we live in more culture-driven and meaning-oriented world than ever before. However, do we? Are you saying, the issues people dealt with a couple of decades ago have been less about culture and more about, say, institutions, domination, and power? One apparent thing, admittedly, is we are facing more diversity in all the spheres of our lives nowadays. But does it necessarily have to be conceptualized with appeal to culture? Maybe that is just the old good globalization, and we should have been rather more concerned with changing economies and institutional landscapes than with culture?

Another thing, which comes to my mind, driven by your answer, is we are definitely dealing with a larger scope of information. But does it necessarily have to do with culture? Quite possibly, it might be in opposite: Google and Amazon know better than anybody about what is happening in social life, because they rest on networks of digital behavior instead of understanding meanings. We, ourselves, follow the pattern, for example, when we are skimming through books and articles using Ctrl+F instead of reading them closely, in fact, imitating data analysis's formal mechanisms. So, does a great intensification of semantic exchanges in contemporary life carry water for culture?

Philip Smith: Of course there was 'culture' a couple of decades ago. However there was far less reflexivity and awareness about cultural process and signaling among practitioners and consumers. As you point out there have also been increases in volume and speed associated with sub-sphere differentiation. I'm reminded of the Anthony Giddens line that sociology is shooting at a moving target. Social theory is continually adapting so as to track those movements. For example, as soon as we get a handle on broadcast TV along comes cable and CNN. Then the internet as a source of news and opinion. But alongside these we have extra layers of interpretative awareness. For example, after Presidential candidate debates in the United States the discussion is first and foremost on "How did X perform?", not "Did X have sensible policies?". This is then followed by commentary from figures who are experts in body language or political semantics. We didn't have this back in the days of Nixon-Kennedy. So, to sum up, there is not only more information but also more hermeneutic complexity due to reflexivity and circulation. Of course we need to be aware that

cultural systems have always been incredibly complex, as figures like Levi-Strauss or Marcel Mauss have taught us. As for those “larger scopes of information” the important thing to notice is that these shifts have themselves generated discourses, notably those concerning the issues of reduced attention spans, dumbing down, the death of the novel and so forth. Every technological shift generates anxieties and reflexive activity. Rather than swamping culture things like Google or Facebook become what Levi-Strauss might call “things to think with” for social theory or the civil sphere alike.

Dmitry Kurakin: Phil, I think, you touched on a very intriguing point. So, even though we see growing complexity in both technological or even ‘informational’ spheres and their organizational incarnations on the one hand, and in cultural meanings and their patterns, layers and interconnections, on the other hand, we might want to focus on the latter – in opposite to how earlier thinkers about technology-driven changes, such as philosophers of technology, approached to the same puzzle. To see culture, along with its complicating forms, as a figure, and technology and organization as a background. I think, you perfectly shown ‘referential’ (and then even ‘self-referential’) reasons to focus on culture. But do you think there are also internal reasons for this move toward culture in sociological theory, which have to do rather with development of particular theories and debates?

Philip Smith: I don't think that's exactly right Dmitry. Technologies do have affordances and objective properties, right, but we need to study these as they intersect with cultural systems. Freud has a line somewhere near the start of Civilization and its Discontents about how with the advent of the telegram we become anxious if a friend sets off to cross the Atlantic on a steamer and we don't hear anything from them within a week. In that case the speed and simultaneity of the telegram had itself changed expectations from those of the mail packet era. But generally of course as cultural sociologists we study the meanings of technologies, how they are narrated or take on symbolic valence and how this impacts their uptake and legitimacy. I did that myself a few years ago in my book on punishment. Returning to your argument, I think we were lucky to have a golden generation of theorists from the 1950s through to the 1970s – not so much in sociology but rather the cultural turn more widely. Figuring out how to make their ideas sociologically tractable – to our own audiences, methodological conventions, debates, theoretical traditions – took some time. Only by the end of the 1990s did we have a sense how to do this that was routinized. So there was a lag effect. Lags build up pressure, rather like water cumulating behind a dam wall. Once the flood gates are opened there's going to be a long period of flow. The flow was

sufficiently intense to generate a kind of autocatalysis wherein cultural sociology was able to cumulate on the basis of its own internal debates – say semiotics versus pragmatism to give an obvious example – and subfields. That would be my answer to your question. We passed an evolutionary tipping point and became a stand alone field powered from within like a perpetual motion machine. I guess the counterfactual here would be that if cultural theory had drip fed into social theory it would have been progressively assimilated and hence, not crossing some tipping point of flow and energy, less visible or significant.