

Whither Theory?



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Claudio Benzecry

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When I came to the US in the early 2000s I was surprised to find that most of the people I had read, taught, and learned to think of as sociologists of culture – people like Robert Darnton, E. P. Thompson, Carlo Ginzburg, Richard Hoggart, Paul Willis, and Michel de Certeau – were excluded from the US sociological conversations on culture, and of course from citations in the major journals.

You have to wonder why. These are all relational, agonistic, meaning-centered approaches; they look at practical and sensuous dimensions of social life, and at the role of contradiction and contingency in producing action. All of them give us clues; they provide explanations that, in unraveling how things happen, give way to the why. They are basically in line with what US sociology has come to expect of theoretical work. So what explains this exclusion, and how does it relate to the question posed by the Junior Theorists Symposium organizers about the boundaries of theory?

As we know, thanks to Wolf Lepenies, sociology emerged as a third term mediating the arts and sciences and is positioned within a disciplinary space between the so-called “two cultures.” To establish its relative autonomy and to justify its scholarly status, sociology was subjected to a double ordeal: it must pass the test of epistemological validity dictated by the empirical sciences while also undergoing the trial of aesthetic appeal typical of the arts and humanities. It has wavered between trying to be a natural science following the positivist model and trying to be a hermeneutic practice following the literary model.

It is this interstitial character of sociology, gabled

between literature and science, that has caused “friction” (as David Stark would define it) and that accounts for some of the *innovative* and *totalizing* work we tend to call theoretical. What the US has that separates it from my home country is a scientism so prevalent, at both higher-end and run-of-the-mill-places (and by that I mean the major generalist journals and most of our colleagues), that it impacts – and distorts – the theory subfield in particular ways. [1]

This has meant, for instance, that while debts from the scientific realm (currently neuroscience occupies this role) are acknowledged and highlighted even in subsidiary papers, debts to the humanities tend to be occluded, ignored or hidden. [2] The nature of sociological theoretical diffusion is such that even when the sociologist who appropriated a term makes the link to other disciplines explicit that link disappears in the citation process, making of the sociological author not the N + 1 in a long chain but rather the originator of a new series. So for every symbolic boundary that is cited there is a Frederick Barth who is forgotten; for every material turn that is announced, years of scholarship in cultural anthropology, archeology, and science and technology studies are occluded; for every discussion of embodiment, a Thomas Csordas is marginally rescued by ethnographers but goes without mention in theory treatises. The lack of interdisciplinary relationships with the humanities also means that Carlo Ginzburg spoke of following Peirce into an indexical evidentiary method around thirty years ago, long before our rediscovery of his work and how central it might be for producing explanations.

More worrisome even in the case of theoretically

interesting interventions – there are many, of course – is how – thanks to the journal format – they get lost in the shuffle of the form the argument has to adopt (hypotheses; the language of variables and distribution even if quantification is not possible; the language of demonstration, of findings; the claim of novelty). Sometimes the genre-like established relationship between theory and evidence overpowers whatever interesting – or liberating – the articles had to start with.

But our understanding of theory is also based on another exclusion: the exclusion of sociology that gets produced in other places –in both senses of the phrase.

This can be best seen in two parallel examples.

If you have ever opened up a British or continental journal (*British Journal of Sociology*, *European Journal of Sociology*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, to name those published in English) you were probably surprised to see what counts as central in theory compared to the things we are used to: Actor-Network Theory; post-ANT debates; mobility regimes; the role of materiality; affect theory; the politics of scale; virtuality and immaterial labor. [3]

But I am more interested in calling attention to the second meaning of “sociology in other parts:” whether work published in the US about other countries can be *generalizable independent of time and place*.

As part of a larger project I am working on, I looked at the *American Sociological Review* from 1960 to 1975 and then at issues from 1985, 1995, and 2005. The results are fascinating. The built-in assumption is that the de facto generalizable cases happen in the US. [4] The rest of the

world is limited by time and place, bounded by history; in fact the US is increasingly the only generalizable country (it was not uncommon in the 60s to be able to generalize from cases that happened in Italy, Australia or Argentina). A few preliminary observations from this study:

Cases that happen in other locations are treated as comparative pieces, as sites for analysis on diffusion, or framed as convergence studies.

Case studies on countries like Thailand, Russia or Hungary (to name three) are treated with vague reference to generalization and corralled into the realm of the particular.

Canada (and especially Toronto) is part of the US when it comes to how generalizable its results are.

Finally, the US South is still a historical anomaly impossible to generalize, which has to be always signaled and made explicit, which of course implicitly reinforces the idea of the rest of the US as the *de facto* generalizable case.

So is there any way out of the combination of scientism and US taken-for-grantedness?

Provincialize the United States

We must simultaneously de-provincialize the histories of peripheral societies (some of what we learn from them can be generalized, as Rob Jansen discussed recently on the role of Latin America as co-constitutive of modernity and in the production and diffusion of early state

formation techniques in an article published in *Political Power and Social Theory*) while in turn provincializing the US historical experience. It might be time to think of the US as a limited socio-historical formation. Despite the fact that US comparative historical sociologists have shown how the US differs from other Western countries when it comes to the role of religion, culture, biopolitics, class, and politics, those conceptualizations seem curiously to have not been absorbed by the discipline at large.

Reopen the literary window of the sociological explanation

The general US tendency towards scientism remains strong and has distorted subfields like the sociology of culture which might have been expected to bring forth more literary, interpretative, and even lyrical contributions, and to relate more strongly to interdisciplinary cultural research.

A way out of this resides in learning to appreciate the role of evocation in presenting our data. We need to learn how to carve on the page poignant moments, paradoxes without reconciliation, puzzles that invite counterfactuals, shadow cases and analogies, and potentialities that are never actualized. We need more showing and less telling! Better literary writing, allusions, metaphors, analogies, and figures of speech.
[5]

And so I thought of a whole catalogue full of explorations by historically sensitive and qualitative scholars. Claire Decoteau's paper in *Sociological Theory* on Testimonial Activism in the Aftermath of the AIDS Epidemic is a close example that comes to mind. Its beautiful opening

scene haunts the reader throughout the whole article and serves as a catalyst to present the kernel of her argument about what happens to HIV signification in the public sphere. Isaac Reed's paper on the Salem Witch Trial is masterful in how it weaves historical evidence with theoretical nuance to provide a thorough account of what from culture matters in explaining how the trials came to be. Genevieve Zubrzycki's explorations of the Polish sensorium and the life and afterlife of Icons are both notable exemplars, as she patiently develops the intersection of political, religious and personal trajectories with materiality and uncovers how the discussed objects work less as totems and more as the site where controversies and disputes happen. Owen Whooley's valiant exploration of the medical profession during the cholera epidemic reads like a gripping historical novel, forcing the reader to always read the next chapter as to fully understand the complexity of the phenomena; the book is plotted as if by Penelope, with each chapter leaving a puzzling thread that invites the reader to keep on reading. Marion Fourcade's quest for not only elegance and parsimony but also for the best Jane Austen title is a model for how to write an article for a high status journal. And of course we can't forget the original Junior Theorist: Gabi Abend's philosophical explorations in the land of sociology.

But these relatively young folks are not alone. In a series of recent reviews, Andrew Abbott has dedicated himself, via the *nom de plume* Barbara Celerant, to archeologically explore the totalizing and lyrical character of proto-sociologists like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Euclides Da Cunha, and foreign sociologists like Gino Germani.

I want to conclude going back to my home country via

Abbott, who in reviewing *Facundo* by Sarmiento, invites us to rediscover the friction of sociological theory with literature. He writes:

"Whatever else Facundo is, some piece of it is great social science. The work is centrally important for us precisely because that social science is inextricably bound up with fiction, history, travelogue, polemic."

I only wish the major US journals would listen to him.

[1] As Mayer Zald signaled some twenty years ago, US sociologists collectively embarked on the project of “becoming a science.” He also signaled the problems and tensions this opened up, especially with respect to its relationship to the humanities.

[2] Part of the issue has also to do with the competition we silently have with anthropologists, especially cultural ones, over the ownership of these topics and issues now that they have to study the natives back home.

[3] For those interested in the differences among other non-US sociologies, the differences between French and British sociology in tone, content, and form are also striking.

[4] Of course this does not mean that all US cases are generalized, but that US cases are generalizable.

[5] A devil’s advocate might say that the counterpart to avoiding the literary and transatlantic theory friendly approach I espouse here has been the development of really good middle range sociology in the US. Even in that case, in which what is generalizable is not the sample, but rather processes and mechanisms, I find that processes and mechanisms that happen in other places do not seem to carry the same weight.

*This essay is drawn from remarks delivered at
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