

Theory:  
Check Your Privilege



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Theory: Check Your Privilege  
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The main issue of this panel is: What comprises sociological theory and what are the boundaries around that category “theory”? In other words, why are some areas considered theory while others are more marginal? Why do some perspectives or approaches or categorical schemes for understanding the social world attain the status of “theory” while others do not? One way to approach these very big questions is to consider a specific case. In particular, I’d like to ask: why have perspectives such as feminism, queer studies, and postcolonial theory been relatively marginalized in the world of “theory”?

I am going to assume for the purposes of my discussion that indeed, there is something called “sociological theory” and that there are schools of thought like feminist theory or postcolonial theory that are not considered by most sociologists as part of its canon or as proper theory. [1] This is an arguable contention, of course. But let us make these assumptions. If we do, we could easily come up with some answers for why certain perspectives are comparatively marginalized. For instance, we might hypothesize that it is because these marginalized perspectives come from other disciplines. Postcolonial theory, for instance, largely comes out of literary studies; much feminist theory comes from cultural studies or philosophy. But this explanation doesn’t quite sit well with me. We often turn to other disciplines and adopt or at least engage their theories. Economic sociology is almost entirely founded upon an engagement with economics. The cognitive turn in cultural sociology borrows almost completely from psychology. In many ways, cultural sociology first emerged in the North American scene by engaging with anthropologists, particularly Clifford Geertz.

What about the abstraction of the perspectives, the obscurity of the ideas, or the jargon-like character of the perspectives under question? Surely we need theory to make some sense. We also need it to generate testable research propositions. It is true, for instance, that postcolonial theory and gender theory is often highly abstract or written in prose that seems almost meaningless. Judith Butler's writings are indeed difficult. Or Homi Bhabha's work: highly inscrutable. But some of the most important works in sociological theory are hardly different. Whenever I teach Bourdieu, my students often stand aghast at passages like: "the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment produce habitus; systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures that is as the principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations." Yet Bourdieu is among the most renowned and known social theorists of our day, and his theories have generated an immense amount of empirical work.

A final possible answer is the institutional one. There is a path dependent process at work: that is, historically, sociology has been founded by straight white European males; they have come to dominate academic institutions; and so the theories they have expounded and treated as 'theory' get reproduced while other perspectives get marginalized. In other words, the occlusion of gender studies, queer or postcolonial studies from the status of theory is due to "the man." Or, more specifically, the "straight old white men."

What about this? As for myself, being a straight old man but not white, I am three-quarters offended by

this argument and one-quarter sympathetic. I do think there's something to this. But what I want to spend my few minutes on is instead a different way of thinking about it; and that is less about cross-disciplinary dynamics or institutional history and more about the *understandings or misunderstandings of what theory is; what both conventional "theory" is and what its alternatives are*. What is theory after all? If we peruse common understandings in sociology, [2] we would find that, at its base, theory involves (a) abstract generalizable statements about the social world, many of which specify relations between variables or social phenomenon, and (b) "objectivity," that is, it is value-neutral and distant.

Let us consider the first: abstraction and generalizability. This is absolutely crucial for social theory. If a statement isn't abstract it isn't generalizable, and if it isn't generalizable, it isn't theory. This is why typically the first thing we tell students when we try to get them to think about their own particular empirical research topic more theoretically is to ask: 'what is this a case of?', meaning, is this a case of some more abstract generalizable phenomenon. Is this a case of rationalization? Then you deal in Weberian theory. Is what you're looking at really about meaning-making? Then you turn to cultural theory, and so on. In fact, Stephen Turner argues against the idea that explanatory statements constitute 'theory' on these grounds exactly. Statistical models, he says, cannot be theory, even if they posit causal statements. He says "The problem comes only when sociologists begin to believe that such models are theory. They are not and cannot become theory, because they are tied to classes of observables in specific times and places. Theory must be more abstract, for it must transcend particular times and places." [3]

So how does this emphasis upon generalizability or abstractedness relate to say, postcolonial theory, gender theory or queer theory? Well, I'd say the problem is a basic misunderstanding of what this work is about, which is: these theories are typically taken to refer only to *particularities*, not generalities. For instance, when I discuss postcolonial theory with some sociologists, their typical reaction is that postcolonial theory is only about colonized societies or something that happened in the past. Or that it is about postcolonial economic development. In these cases, it is not generalizable. It is about "them" not "us." Now clearly this is based upon a certain misunderstanding, because for those of who do know what postcolonial theory is about, it is exactly that division between "us" and "them" - exactly that sort of bifurcation between colonialism "over there" and in the past on the one hand, and "us" here in the present on the others - which postcolonial theory problematizes. [4] But by this misunderstanding, postcolonial theory gets taken as referring only to particularities; hence it isn't really "theory."

The same could be probably said of feminist theory or queer studies, which sometimes gets taken to mean that they are theories only about women or the LGBT community - as if Marx's theory is only about workers and hence is not generalizable and therefore not theory. The point is that "theory" is defined as involving abstract and generalizable concepts and certain theoretical approaches get misread as not generalizable enough. This may be part of the reason for their exclusion. The problem here is that these other marginalized perspectives are simply misunderstood.

Let us now consider the other aspect of what we

think constitutes “theory”. This is related to the first but analytically distinct. That is, that theory must be “objective.” It must be value-neutral and scientific; hence detached and distant. The word “theory” is usually traced back to the Greek word *theōria* which connotes a visually-based contemplation of the world from afar. Accordingly, as Martin Jay notes, “theory” is taken refer to “visual distantiating, to that cold, disembodied eye producing the modern subject in what can be called the scopic regime of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’”. Theory must be “universal” in the Cartesian sense, offering a “God’s eye view above the fray”. [5] Theory must come from and offer a detached view free from norms or values. [6]

With this in mind, it is easy to see how feminist, queer or postcolonial theory might be marginalized. They tend to be seen as normative projects. And rather than adopting a view from nowhere, a God’s eye, they are situated and partial. Basing theory upon the “woman’s standpoint” or upon the experiences of subjugated peoples in the Global South offer theories from the ground up rather than the top down. [7]

The issue here for understanding the marginality of these perspectives does not lie in a misunderstanding of them. It is the case that postcolonial, feminist, and queer theory are situated and partial. The issue is rather a misunderstanding of canonical or dominant sociological theory. For what this boundary assumes is that canonical or dominant sociological theory really does come from nowhere; that it really is detached and distant; that it really can be anything but partial. This the other key point of postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and queer theory: that is, that all theory is

situated, and all “knowledge” is partial. At least this is the critique given by postcolonial theory, which reminds us that our mainstream sociological concerns and categories and theories emerge from a particular place – i.e. Anglo-European modernity – and are oriented towards the particular problems or concerns of that place. These so-called detached and objective theories about the transition from feudalism to capitalism, about rationalization, about the state, about “deviance” and the broken windows theory of deviance, about the abstract citizen and this weird thing called ‘civil society’ that somehow exists and is separate from the household: these are all very specific, peculiar if not parochial concerns and theories, developed in the very particular context of Anglo-European metropolises and their governmentalities, but which are masquerading as universal – as if they can be applied to the rest of the world without trouble – because they are somehow detached, objective, or universal. Postcolonial theory reminds us about the geopolitical provinciality of our theories, and so perhaps even of our very definition of theory. And it is not hard to recognize how situated and partial all of our knowledge and theory is. As even sociologists of science recognize, and as philosophers of knowledge highlight, *what we know and what we see depends upon where we stand*. The same goes for our canonical theories and their provincial origins. They are “Northern”, in Connell’s terminology. [8]

In this sense, the problem is not with our misunderstanding of theories but with our very definition of theory: our notion that theory – in order to be theory – has to be detached and universal, completely somehow not situated. This is exactly the notion, exactly the very foundation of canonical theory work, that postcolonial



theory, feminist theory, and queer theory challenge, unsettle, and question. And this is probably why those critical perspectives have not, and might never be, truly part of the canon. After all, these and other critical perspectives are arguably the very perspectives that the dominant canon needs to exist and define as Other in order to be.

[1] See for example, Gurminder Bhambra's "Sociology and Postcolonialism: Another 'Missing' Revolution?"; Raka Ray's "Is the Revolution Missing or Are We Looking in the Wrong Places?"; and Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer's "'I Can't Even Think Straight': 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology."

[2] See for example Gabriel Abend's "The Meaning of 'Theory'".

[3] This is from Turner 1979, quoted in Abend, above.

[4] See for example Gurminder Bhambra's *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*; Julian Go's "For a Postcolonial Sociology"; and Go's "Introduction: Entangling Postcoloniality and Sociological Thought."

[5] From Martin Jay's "For Theory."

[6] See again Abend's "The Meaning of 'Theory'."

[7] See for example Sandra Harding's *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* and Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory*.

[8] See Connell's "Northern Theory: the Political Geography of General Social Theory."

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