Social Theory Now

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Introduction:
Social Theory Now

In 1987, Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner published *Social Theory Today*, an edited collection of original essays by scholars from different theoretical traditions. The book assembled a group of authors who were prominent then and whose reputation has only grown since—Immanuel Wallerstein, Axel Honneth, Ralph Miliband, Jeffrey Alexander, and Hans Joas among them. However, we would argue that it was not just the caliber of its contributors that have made the book stand out among "theory books."

Social Theory Today set itself a quite distinctive and ambitious task and was very different from a number of well-established publishing formats in this area. Because it assembled original essays by scholars engaged in research in different theoretical traditions, *Social Theory Today* was not a *textbook*, and it was not a *handbook*. Theory *textbooks* provide a coherent and often creative and original overview of theorizing in a range of traditions, but almost by definition, the author of a textbook can't be actively engaged in her or his own research within all of these traditions. A *handbook*, on the other hand, assembles authors who are very well versed in a specific approach but often encourages accessible summaries rather than original papers and rarely provides much of a sense of an overarching narrative. *Social Theory Today* also distinguished itself from another kind of influential volumes at the time. Jeffrey Alexander et al. (1987) and Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron Cicourel (1981), for example, assembled an equally impressive range of authors at around the same time, but they approached their volumes differently. They set authors to work on a specific problem, the problem of the micro-macro link, which was then the frontier of theory development.

Giddens and Turner were in a way less focused but more ambitious. Rather than address a particular issue, they took on theory itself, and this is arguably one of the reasons why their book is perhaps of more interest today than these other volumes, as debates and problems have shifted. *Social Theory Today* was published thirty years ago, and no text has come to the fore to replace it. We believe we need a text like *Social Theory Today* because while the intellectual and institutional landscape of social theory has changed, theory is still being taught, and textbooks and handbooks are still being produced. Social theory and sociological theory remain a nexus of teaching, research, and debate—an intellectual reference point important to many working academics.

In this context, *Social Theory Now* seeks to translate the ambition of the kind of dialogue staged in *Social Theory Today* for the present moment. We can't compare ourselves in stature to Giddens and Turner, of course, but like those editors, we, too, asked authors from different theoretical traditions to write a chapter that would introduce the conceptual landscape that provides the backdrop for their own research and make an argument for where work in their tradition should go next conceptually.

Social Theory Now presents a new list of theoretical traditions, which we think are relevant to the conversations in social theory in the current era. *Social Theory Now* hopes to provide an examination of what is going on in the classical theoretical traditions, with the understanding that the post–World War II era is now, itself, "classic." It also includes a chapter on feminism, which was odd to be missing already in 1987, as well as new areas of exploration for social theory, such as postcolonial theory, actor-network theory, and the sociology of conventions.

The fragmented nature of social theory raises questions as to what, if anything, holds social theory together today, which means we felt we had to go beyond the mere updating of chapter titles. In this context, we argue that social theory is not held together by any agreement on content or a shared institutional context but that it shows some coherence around some second-order assumptions on what it might be worth disagreeing about.

Giddens and Turner were in their introduction heavily focused on epistemology and on whether sociology can or should be a science. We have identified a broader set of themes. We try out the proposition that social theory is a dialogue about four central questions and two concerns: social theorists ask how social order is possible, and they debate the role of materiality in social life, the role of meaning, and the role of practice. Cutting across these questions are two sets of concerns: theorists tend to take a position on epistemics (how knowledge of the social world is possible) and history (how major his-

torical shifts in the structure of social life occur and develop, and affect our knowledge of the world). These questions and themes guided our selection of traditions of thought for inclusion in this volume; we were looking for traditions of thought that we felt offered very distinctive answers to these questions.

While in our view it is indeed the case that social theory is a dialogue about these questions and themes across different institutional and geographical locations, we are also aware and indeed hope that there is something performative to our claim; we hope that *Social Theory Now* to some limited extent contributes to bringing into being such a dialogue, although we also realize it will not be a dialogue of full mutual understanding and transparency, resembling more the "trading zone" for heterogeneous objects observed by Peter Galison (1997) for the case of physics. We were not very prescriptive when we approached authors, but we did offer an account of our themes as a point of orientation for our authors when arranging for their chapters to be written, and we now offer a discussion of these themes as a specific frame for reading the contributions that follow.

We are aware that there might be disagreement with the themes we have selected as central to social theory today. There is certainly disagreement, also among the editors of the volume, about the relative *weight* and *importance* of these themes, and we will return to some of these debates later on. But for all the discussions we have had among ourselves and with others and that we might have in the future about the list of themes and about the list of chapters, we would remind readers also of some of the dangers that lie in the other direction, the direction of not trying to identify shared questions, and the direction of not producing a conversation among distinctive traditions, however selected and justified.

We would argue that without shared questions and dialogue in an area called social theory, we would see more theory-less research, more fragmentation into topical areas of expertise, and more of the kind of theory that celebrates niche expertise in famous authors. We would also see (even) more papers that attach data to "a theory" without an awareness of the existence of other theories and perspectives and (even) more claims to novelty that appear as novelty only within traditions, and only because traditions are cultivated in a parochial way.

In what follows, we will first briefly discuss some the institutional and epistemic context of social theory today, and we will discuss the relationship between "social theory," on the one hand, and "sociological theory," on the other hand. We will then discuss the questions and themes we have identified. We discuss the volume's relationship to teaching and provide a brief

summary of the individual chapters. Each of the chapters both introduces and presents a tradition and develops an argument for an agenda for further theoretical development within this tradition.

CHANGING CONTEXTS AND PREMISES

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to attempt to provide a full map of the field of social theory. However, it is helpful to note two specific changes in the field that make the activity of theorizing today different than it was when Giddens and Turner published their volume. First, new institutional locations from which to "theorize sociologically" have emerged, leading to increased intellectual complexity—and fragmentation as well. Second, social theory has been transformed because of what we would like to call the recognition of the existence of a decentered standpoint, which has changed what counts as knowledge about the social world.

Regarding the first point, impulses from the humanities (postcolonial and feminist theories are of key importance here) and science and technology studies inflect theory development in sociology while at the same time, sociologists occupy jobs in business, communications, and medical schools. Compared to a world in which the social sciences were more easily divided into their nineteenth-century-derived disciplines of economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology (a world that in many ways lived on into the 1980s), it should be clear that the space from which to theorize today is to a large extent more conflicted, ambiguous, and thus productive of massive ambivalence about what the project of social theory itself is. With this fragmentation, there is no lack of creativity; new connections and possibilities are clearly on the horizon for theoretical work in sociology. On the other hand, each of these contexts and settings adds their own inflections, constraints, and incentives. Simultaneously, a generational shift (as the baby boomers retire and are replaced by younger cohorts) also seems to have spurred changes in both theoretical work and the more informal sentiments and sensibilities that accompany it.

Regarding the second point, the epistemic contours of debate that characterized the Giddens/Turner era—an opposition between scientism, on the one hand, and ideas-focused approaches, on the other hand—have given way to an understanding of sociology as a nuanced production of knowledge both by and about humans, and thus subject to a variety of social, material, and intellectual forces, rhetorics, and ways of combining evidence and argu-

ment. Broadly speaking, a combined effect of the postpositivist program (Alexander 1987), a range of approaches in the sociology of scientific knowledge and in science and technology studies (Bloor 1991 [1976]; Haraway 1988; Latour 1988) and the reflexive (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Calhoun 1995; Smith 1987) moment of sociology has been to make a consideration of the conventions of theorizing in various overlapping communities of inquiry central to the task of producing sociology.

There is always the temptation to avoid confronting the issues raised by these analyses. One answer has been to view the challenge of understanding as a purely technical one, simply retreating into naïve empiricism, aiming to reconstruct knowledge as a generalization-generating enterprise, although in some cases moving away from variable-centered approaches into mechanisms and processes. This strategy works to reclaim a "tarnished" standpoint from which to reconstruct valid sociological knowledge, dismissing some of the criticisms as not belonging to sociology. A second answer has denounced the struggle for understanding as a struggle for power and by announcing the impossibility of knowledge, making it hard for sociologists to build bridges across subdisciplinary and transdisciplinary claims.

However, the way forward appears, instead, to be one that dispenses with the nostalgia for a lost central standpoint (often simply reproduced, in reverse, by loudly announcing its absolute impossibility). The gains in knowledge we present here (and they are *gains*—an enhancement or increase over what came before) are not offered as a transcendent philosophical horizon but rather, the reconstruction of the theories presented in the chapters as constitutively limited by both the social context of their intellectual production and the empirical scope of their application. Second, and in consequence, each school of thought or tradition included herein came to the table with the recognition of being one among many other possibilities for thinking about the social character of our reality. It is that reflexivity that lends itself to a key part of this book: an invitation extended by the editors to the authors to explore what are the issues each theory aims to tackle, how they do it, what are the taken-for-granted ideas about social reality behind each and every one of them; to summarize, how is it that issues of methods, questions, and ontologies are "packaged" together.

Thus, we would propose herein less a normative manifesto for where social theory should now be, making tabula rasa of the past, or prioritizing one definitive answer about the nature of the social over others, and more a way of reclaiming, reconfiguring, recomposing the legacy of what scholars who state they do social theory do. That is why we have chosen to frame this book

not as a series of "great names" chapters—though this is of course a collection of outstanding scholars—but rather as a conversation among creative users and researchers.

SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

As we know, thanks to Wolf Lepenies (1988), sociology is positioned within a disciplinary space between the so-called "two cultures" of the arts and the sciences. To establish its relative autonomy and to justify its scholarly status, sociology has been 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 the humanities and the sciences, that has caused "friction" to exist, and that accounts for some of the innovative defamiliarizing and totalizing work we tend to call theoretical.

The editors of the book and most of its authors are sociologists by training, and this of course does shape the conception of the volume. However, we ourselves do not wish to draw a boundary between sociological theory and social theory. A brief empirical look at how this boundary is drawn would quickly reveal that it is primarily drawn, and used, by sociologists, and in particular by sociologists who want to separate what is relevant to their research concerns from other scholarly work that they should not feel obliged to read. It is also a division that is emphasized more in some countries than in others, and particularly strongly in the United States where sociology is very strongly professionalized. This professionalization has had many salutary effects, especially in the form of a dense engagement among scholars in the same field; it has also meant, perhaps unfortunately, that with very few exceptions recruitment to positions within sociology departments is largely from among graduates in a set number of other sociology departments.

American sociology might also be set apart by its stronger leanings toward *and* defensiveness against scientism, which impacts and distorts the pursuit of theory in the US academy in particular ways. As Mayer Zald (1995) signaled some twenty years ago, US sociologists in the post–World War II era and beyond collectively embarked on the project of "becoming a science." Zald identified many of the problems and tensions this opened up, especially

with respect to sociology's relationship to the humanities. For years, theory was also tied to a badge of honor and prestige, which excluded particular traditions (and sometimes particular social groups; *Social Theory Today*, for instance, did not have any female author in it).

Nonetheless, even in the United States, sociological theory is the place where impulses from the most ambitious work in other disciplines and work from the broader intellectual space of the human sciences can enter the disciplined, empirically oriented, methods-conscious social sciences. Bourdieu is now well-known and well-received in US sociology, yet his own work was conducted in direct dialogue, albeit critical, with Kant and Sartre. Postcolonial theory is clearly of profound relevance to sociology, but it has its origins in history and in literary criticism and has been brought into sociology by tremendous bridgework of a primarily conceptual or theoretical nature. The analysis of gender in sociology owes much to analyses by historians and scholars in literature and cultural studies.

Thus, rather than draw a boundary by a label or by an assumed disciplinary consensus, we start with a set of questions and concerns. We both posit and perform social theory as the discussion of these concerns. We hope that in redescribing the work of social theory in this way, we are also able to generate an agenda for where we see social theory going. With reference to the important work done analyzing the different meanings of theory (cf. Abend 2008), our aim is not to settle on one definition but rather to create some clarity as to what version of theory is being presented, advanced, and discussed by different schools.

What we have in mind is that these questions and themes establish the contours of a sociological "trading zone." According to Peter Galison's (1997, 783) memorable analysis, in an intellectual trading zone,

> two groups can agree on rules of exchange even if they ascribe utterly different significance to the objects being exchanged; they may even disagree on the meaning of the exchange process itself. Nonetheless, the trading partners can hammer out a local coordination, despite vast global differences. In an even more sophisticated way, cultures in interaction frequently establish contact languages, systems of discourse that can vary from the most function-specific jargons, through semi specific pidgins, to full-fledged creoles rich enough to support activities as complex as poetry and metalinguistic reflection.

Our hope is that these questions help establish a creole that can support the activity of theorizing.

THE QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS OF SOCIAL THEORY

Questions

"HOW IS SOCIAL ORDER POSSIBLE?"

This question brings several different concerns together. Harold Garfinkel posed the problem in the theoretically most rigorous way: how does order arise beyond the "here and now"? Including and going beyond the microsociological agenda, the question of order asks about patterns and regularities in social life. And while this question has often been asked with a concern for social order as a necessary good, it can also be asked critically: How and in what ways is the world stratified into an order that is an established hierarchy? If domination plays a role in maintaining order, what forms of it tend to matter most? How does transformation (or its opposite, reproduction), happen?

Disorder, can of course, have orders of its own. Asking about order is also asking about patterns in apparent disorder—and patterns underlying apparent radical change. We can also ask: What is the "structure of the conjuncture"? Is there a pattern to how revolutions proceed when overturning the social order?

"WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MATERIALITY IN THE WORLD?"

The relationship of social theory to the question of materiality or materialism is long-standing and finds one of its origin points in the classic texts of Karl Marx. This influence is represented today by research on the new international division of labor, globalization, and debates about space, ownership, and dispossession in social theory. Simultaneously, however, debates about the body (in feminism and elsewhere) and about materiality and technology (activated by actor-network theory) radically reconceptualize the role of the material in human life.

Throughout all of these debates and lines of research, we find a deep friction between four locations for thought—the fundamental *needs* of human beings, defined biologically and biosocially; the subjection of many arenas of social life to *economic* pressures, in particular given the way in which the distribution of goods that meet needs are bound up with systems of capital; the rapid escalation of technological *extensions* of human processes; and finally, the way in which human *bodies*, in particular, continue to exceed any given schematic understanding in how they become part of action and are experienced by those who use and abuse them.

"WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MEANING IN THE WORLD?"

The question of meaning has echoed throughout the history of social theory, with attention to both meaning-making in situated interactions and broader patterns of cultural representations. Again, a key origin point is found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought—in Marx's responses to Hegel, on the one hand, and Max Weber's responses to Marx and Marxism, on the other hand. However, in the contemporary era, consideration of meaning in social life includes the rich arena of cultural sociology (whose contemporary, American version dates almost exactly to the publication of *Social Theory Today*), Latour's semiotic materialism, and Luhmann's systems theory, focused as it is on communication.

The study of meaning is in a particularly fraught place at the moment. On the one hand, the contemporary academy has been, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, deeply infused by the study of signs. Rare is the arena in the human sciences that has not been touched by semiotics in some form or another, and within sociology, many key subfields simply have—as a de facto feature—the study of the "cultural" or "meaningful" dimension of their particular object (be it sex and gender, the corporation, or voting, for example). At the same time, a deep tension exists between the broad success of the "cultural turn" and its humanist presuppositions, as debates about word counts, big data, and network analysis also inform the study of culture. It will be for social theory to find a language in which to have, and perhaps successfully mediate, these wildly intellectually dispersed arguments.

"WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PRACTICE IN THE WORLD?"

Few theorists have been more influential in sociology, over the last twenty-five years, than Pierre Bourdieu. While reflecting this, this collection also broadens the question of "practice," to take up earlier concerns with "agency" and newer concerns about the material aspects of practice. We include questions such as: How is it that people find patterns of innovation while reproducing old practices? How is it that creativity can flourish when confronted with new situations? What role does the body play in cementing our sense of self and our place in the world we experience? How is it that people learn about the world by "doing" in it? How is practice distributed across people and technology?

We also note that an important aspect of the "practice turn" in social theory, developed in particular by the science studies tradition, is the insistence that social researchers examine knowledge in its various spaces of produc-

tion and use. From Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* to Bruno Latour and Karin Knorr-Cetina's laboratory studies, the arguments in this arena insist on a shift to the concrete when considering even the most abstract or philosophical issues. It is an open question where this leaves epistemology, one that is addressed in several chapters herein, and makes up part of our first "thematic" concern for social theory.

Underlying Concerns

"HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?"

In 1987, Giddens and Turner posed the question "what is the nature of social science?" and delineated the volume's contributions in terms of their relationship to the logical empiricist philosophy associated with the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the interpretivist counterposition, on the other. Epistemological questions have developed a great deal since then, with new understandings of interpretivism, realism analytical sociology, and standpoint theory now central to debates about knowledge. Moreover, qualitative and historical-comparative scholarships have both recently entered into a period of debate about conceptualization, its relationship to evidence, the link between level of analysis, and the justification of claims. Theoretical programs have, too, become more self-reflexive about the limits of their claims and as such, open to competing perspectives. The abandonment of our a priori ontological underpinning of what the world is made out of (networks, interactions, structures, actions, etc.) has led us into something like epistemological agnosticism and in consequence, into the theoretical pluralism we espouse in this volume—which is perhaps also reflected in the rejuvenation of interest in pragmatist philosophy in American sociology. As a consequence, the sociology of knowledge also looks entirely different. These shifts are reflected in most of the essays herein.

"WHAT HISTORICAL CHANGES ARE THEORETICALLY SIGNIFICANT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD?"

Too often, the more "ambitiously abstract"—that is, the more formal, sociological theorizing becomes—the more it tends to forget its historical presuppositions. Thus a constant countertendency in *Social Theory Now* is a historically driven questioning not only of the intellectual origins of certain key concepts or sets of terms but also of the basic shifts in social life that are important to grasp, describe, and explain, and how to characterize them (e.g., "multiple modernities," "globalization," "the postcolonial era"). We have picked as chapters genres of theoretical work that propose answers to these

questions in a way that includes internal differences and dialogue (and re-
search programs if appropriate).

Teaching is not the only concern we have in putting this volume together,
but it is one important concern. The volume has certainly been shaped by
the editors' experience in teaching sociological theory.[1] As part of preparing
this book, we solicited contemporary theory syllabi from colleagues in our
cohort. The resulting collection was dizzying and confusing. Some scholars
still tried to construct a chronological order of theoretical research prob-
lems; some taught theory as a list of greatest hits, centering on charismatic
authors or stars; others tended toward an eclectic selection of different cur-
rent concerns.

   We asked ourselves: Why exactly do we read previous theoretical work
that is not on our research topic? Why do we ask students to read it? In a
recent contribution, Richard Swedberg (2015) has suggested we pick a mas-
ter and learn from how he or she does theory or theoretical research. We
think this is an important aspect of the answer but we think it is very impor-
tant to complement "picking one master" by learning through observing dif-
ferences among traditions. The stakes of social theory are brought into being
by the dialogue between competing approaches, and certain techniques of
argument become crystal clear when careful reading of a single master or
tradition is placed into a space of dialogue and, indeed, fierce critique.

   A certain investment into these stakes—rather than any specific kind of
knowledge—marks the initiation of students into social scientific inquiry,
usually well before students are able to conduct original research. We all
have learnt from experience that even very smart and knowledgeable stu-
dents do not naturally care about the difference between a Marxian and a
Durkheimian approach to homelessness, for example, but once they do, they
can begin to think about how different kinds of evidence would relate to dif-
ferent propositions, how they relate to change, how these and other theoreti-
cal approaches can generate new perspectives on other kinds of phenomena.

   If the stakes of social theory are central to the initiation of outsiders, they
are also important to the frontier of innovation in social theory: new con-
tributions and innovations are contributions in relationship to these stakes,
and we were encouraged, upon receiving initial drafts of the chapters to be
found herein, at the way in which they turned towards the future as well
as the past. Each of the chapters in this volume stands on the shoulder of

giants; precisely because this is not a handbook or a textbook we do not think that these texts can in any way replace older texts, which are foundational to certain traditions of theorizing. Who reads Lezaun must also read Latour, who reads Go, should also read Bhabha, who reads Geva should also read Dorothy Smith, and so on and so forth. We have held our authors' feet to the fire in terms of providing citations for gestures within their writing to 'obvious' aspects of sociological thought. This has resulted in bibliographies and footnotes that we feel will be especially useful for students.

Learning about theory is reading original texts; but the contributions in this volume are also original texts. All our contributors are engaged in research which is in dialogue with the theoretical work they write about; all authors present a view on where work in the tradition is currently at and some proposals for what they think will and should happen next. We do not think these texts can replace the reading of the classics. We do imagine, however, that a pairing of a classic text and a chapter from this book might work well as a teaching tool: We hope in such a pairing, the chapters of this book can deepen the understanding of the original, open up interpretative debates, provide an orientation towards current research, and suggest creative pathways forward for theory in the future.

We recognize that this is in some ways a more conservative approach to teaching theory than a radical focus on practicing theory through research (Swedberg 2015), or focusing on a specific problem, such as historicity, on structure/agency, or materiality. However, it is one that is true to the heritage of social scientific inquiry and has value in preserving what is good about disciplinary inquiry.

We also think that learning theory as a multiplicity-in-dialogue has interesting consequences for learning to see theory as intimately involved in the research course. It allows students to refine, punctuate, and clarify through a process of slow reconstruction what kind of phenomena they encounter in their research process. Students should go armed to the field with multiple possibilities for adjudicating what they have encountered, rather than get married early on to one theoretical approach or other. We see this as a dialectical activity in which certain occurrences in the field point us to their potential conceptualization or classification as a particular kind of phenomena, even if not in the realm of our "favorite theory," still within alternative options other traditions have mobilized.

THE CHAPTERS

Building on our claim that theory is a conversation between approaches that in some way or another provide answers to the central questions and themes above, we sought to identify traditions that provided a very distinctive answer to the questions and themes we discussed above. "Distinctiveness" offers a criterion that is not based entirely on a judgment of formal quality or substantive truth value.

In discussing different candidates, we found ourselves invoking the distinction between "theory" and "topic"; while "topics" play a central role in organizing scholarly conversations and research, theories can be applied to any topic. Theorizing in that sense is the performance of reading research in a way that cuts across topics with a view to implications for questions of order, practice, meaning, and materiality.

Of course, the resulting list of chapters is only one among many possible ones, and any other set of editors would have produced a different list even using the criteria we tried to use consistently. Even this set of editors could have gone different ways on different chapters. Some of us, for example, felt strongly that ethnomethodology should have been its own chapter based on the criterion of distinctiveness. We recognize that different variants of Marxism are important today, that field theory is only one part of the Bourdieusian heritage, and that critical race theory brings questions and concerns that are not subsumed entirely by postcolonial theory. We would look forward to a debate on what we should or could have chosen and what could be included ten years from now.

We expect a consistency of dissent with our list but would predict a dissent inconsistent with regard to what should have been left out and what should have been included. This is the fate of any text that tries, and inevitably fails, to comprehend some sort of unity in the fragmented world of social theory now. The goal is, however, to fail in an interesting and useful way.

Rather than approach "founding figures" who, if they had agreed to contribute at all, would have had to summarize themselves or try very hard not to, we chose authors who are all in some way or another "second generation," if not third, fourth, or even fifth. Given the long history of social theory, second-generation authors are of course always also at the same time seventh, eighth generation, and so on. Some of our authors are very well known; others are comparatively more junior. All of our authors are actively engaged in empirical research that has a close relationship to the theoretical approaches under discussion.

We approached authors with the task to discuss a certain approach—thus

the responsibility for the selection and list of topics lies entirely with the editors. Imagining these texts as the one text we would assign next to a classical reading in an intellectually serious and ambitious theory course, we asked authors to both introduce a certain approach and make an argument as to where they see the next steps for theory development in their traditions.

Even though chapters vary in the relative weight, which they give to breadth and subtlety of exposition on the one hand and theoretical agenda setting on the other hand, each chapter does a bit of both, as we highlight in the following summaries.

Isaac Ariail Reed begins from the cacophony of voices in contemporary sociology that argue over the definition of, methods to study, and theoretical models of "culture." What, amid all of this, can we say it means to study culture or have a cultural sociology? Reed considers what, in theoretical discourse in sociology, is *contrasted* with culture. Culture, he proposes, is taken as opposed to economy, on the one hand, and to persons or actors, on the other hand. This leads to a series of considerations of why sociologists consider these contrasts meaningful, and what they are willing to attribute to culture in their explanations.

Claudio E. Benzecry and Dan Winchester uncover the variegated landscape of microsociology. Central to all microtheoretical programs is a claim that the social order is morally sustained, organized, and accomplished at the microsocial level. Yet there are also important differences in how this work of ordering is conceptualized. This chapter explores how each perspective (symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and dramaturgy) reveals, in and through the close analysis of everyday scenes, the constitution of micro-ontologies. The chapter then shows how those programs have been recombined in a number of more contemporary approaches (e.g., institutional ethnography, interaction ritual chains, laboratory studies) that increasingly include the theorization of its integration with meso- or macroorders as a key part of their agenda.

Dorit Geva asks, first, about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and modernity in sociology and, second, about how a more global sociology would itself change how we think about this relationship. This leads to several careful reconstructions and critiques of important interventions in feminist theory. Geva argues that a historicization of "Northern feminist sociological theory" is required to understand the genealogy of its conceptualization of body, sexuality, and the social order. A more global account of modernity, she argues, will lead to a rebuilding of sociological theories of "doing gender" and sociological accounts of gender and the self.

Ho-Fung Hung extends, de- and recenters world-systems theory in order

to explain the current crisis in the world hegemonic order. The chapter makes the case for how in order to explain the new hegemonic order the tools developed to understand the first two hegemonic transitions are not enough. Focusing instead on the consequences of decolonization, the transformation of the world money system, and the dynamic of economies that are labor instead of capital intensive, Hung shows how the economic and military power of the United States is being paradoxically both upheld and challenged by new contenders.

Julian Go advances postcolonial social theory as a program. Taking as its starting point the criticism of forms of knowledge affiliated with colonial domination, this chapter shows first the intimate relationship between our received sociological knowledge, modernity, and patterns of empire and then proceeds to present postcolonial social theory as a particular kind of worldview to interpret the world. Moving beyond the critique of social science as embedded in hierarchical global relationships, Go proposes to reconstruct theory about the social world by focusing on two strategies he calls *postcolonial relationalism* and the *subaltern standpoint.*

Ivan Ermakoff's essay is a consideration of rational choice theory that is simultaneously orthodox and heterodox in its ambitions. Beginning with a discussion of both the original rational choice program and the various, modified versions of the program that emerged in the wake of initial criticisms, Ermakoff then moves toward a view of rational choice theory as grounded in an understanding of action as optimizing. He then turns to three areas of interest for social theory that rational choice would *seem* to be ill-equipped to model and explain: (1) instances wherein agents endorse or adopt self-limiting norms, (2) disruption and crisis, and (3) the process of belief formation (including self-deception). By forcing rational choice to confront these classic problems of social theory, he maps the frontier of research in the field from a distinctively theoretical perspective.

Dirk Baecker discusses sociological systems theory as an attempt to take seriously the complexity of social systems, such as interactions, organizations, or functional subsystems like art or science. Social systems are complex because their elements are heterogeneous, multiple, and only selectively interconnected; their relationship to the observer is itself social. He discusses criticism as a specific version of the observation of social systems, which can itself be observed.

Monika Krause examines field theoretical research in the context of classic work on the differentiation of spheres, such as art, science, or religion. She reports that scholars are now examining how fields relate to other fields and suggests that research can also ask how field patterns relate to patterns,

which have historically been emphasized by other theoretical traditions, such as interactions, organizations, or broader cultural dynamics.

Claire Decoteau interrogates what from poststructuralism has and can be imported into sociology. She posits that the immanence of poststructuralism helps those attempting to break free from some core disciplinary antinomies, that between objectivity and subjectivity, between idealism and materialism, but more importantly, a new way to think relations of power and agency. Both power and agency are presented as immanent, produced yet productive and decentered. As a consequence, she suggests how some of its central tenets can be a resource for sociologists theorizing about the production of subjects and knowledge.

Emily Erikson critiques the tendency in the field of sociology to see work in social networks as unmotivated by grand theoretical visions, insisting that despite professed preferences for Mertonian middle-range theory, overarching theoretical perspectives have been essential to the development of the most exciting empirical research in networks. The lack of theoretical self-consciousness, she explains, is due to the fact that there are *conflicting* theoretical visions, sometimes unrecognized in their conflict: formalism and relationalism. Erikson makes clear that both relationalism and formalism take many different forms. Nonetheless, it is the relationship between the two that is important to examine in order to move research on social networks forward.

Javier Lezaun observes the travels of actor-network theory from its origins in the social studies of science through its forays into studies of markets and the law. He notes that over the course of the last decades, scholars in this tradition have become increasingly engaged in explicitly normative debates about different kinds of political questions and about the very nature of the political, and he suggests that the way future work handles this normative dimension will shape the direction of the theory and the associated research program.

Jörg Potthast explores the insights afforded by an explicit focus on the role of normative accounts and justifications in everyday life, championed most prominently by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in their book *On Justification*. He suggests that we miss what is original about this work when we equate "justification" with "legitimation" and subsume research in this tradition within the sociology of culture. He argues that the originality of the approach can only be realized by asking about justifications at the same time as asking about sociomaterial practices of testing.

Neil Gross and Zachary Hyde turn back to pragmatism to explore the fundamental aesthetic component of norms and the role of imagines in pro-

ducing adherence to approved conduct. Moving away from the idea of norm following as propositionally stated, socially sanctioned rules, the chapter sketches an alternative understanding. Building of recent appropriations of corporeal and aesthetic processes in contemporary sociology, Gross and Hyde see in images a key place for self-imagination; it is through images that salient features of the world stand out to us as actionable.

NOTES

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