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## **Practicing Theorizing in Sociological Research, or, The Two Faces of Pragmatism**

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*The Art of Social Theory*, by **Richard Swedberg**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691168135.

*Thinking through Theory*, by **John Levi Martin**. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015. 254 pp. \$31.25 paper. ISBN: 9780393937688.

Sociological theorizing? We can't live without it, but we have a lot of trouble doing it. The vast majority of card-carrying sociologists probably would acknowledge “the importance of theory.” Even the most empirically rooted sociologists, from survey researchers to symbolic interactionists, typically regard their research as important for illuminating social processes that have some underlying (dare we say general?) significance. Nevertheless, as Neil Gross (2016) points out, few departments today have anyone on the faculty whose primary specialization is sociological theory. And ever since the cultural turn and the rise of historical/comparative sociology, roughly dating to the 1980s, even sociologists who teach “sociological theory” courses seem quick to embrace

a strong sense of irony about doing so and severe doubts about finding any “laws.” We may favor one or another methodology, but commitment to developing any *general* theorization of the social is rather rare and, to some, embarrassingly quaint. Yes, sociological theory is vital, we seem to think, but sociology is a multi-paradigm discipline populated by people who participate in sometimes barely overlapping universes of discourse. Under the circumstances, adjudicating among alternative theories, either in terms of their logics or on the basis of empirical research, is not a cornerstone of the discipline. Thus, sociologists tend to “fumble forward,” proceeding as though theory is important, even if we disagree about how. We can thereby invoke sociological theory in our own distinctive ways without coming to terms with the dilemmas and contradictions and still end up claiming possession of the ball.

With vitality undergirded by contradictions, sociologists interested in theory (and that should be all of us) might wonder how departments should teach emerging generations of sociologists about sociological theory. Both undergraduate and graduate students have a vexed relationship to it. Some of them love to study theory, in the formal sense and in its history. But in actual inquiry, things can go amiss. Often, students get very interested in a subject but never settle on a topic or problem and embark on research anyway. Sometimes only after they have gathered all their data does the (inadequately formulated) “What theory are you using?” question come in.

How do we honestly communicate with young sociologists about the play of theory today and how they might orient their practices toward it? Sociologists teaching undergraduate and graduate courses will occasionally encounter students possessed of a special genius, somehow ready-made, who almost intuitively know how to theorize in

relation to their research. To help them, we mostly just need to keep out of the way. But many students do not seem in touch with their inner theorists, so sociologists need to take seriously Georg Simmel's thesis about the “lowest common denominator,” the people who define the boundaries of the group by possessing only its most widely shared knowledge. For sociological training to be successful, we can understand from Simmel, it needs to connect with that broad audience, to facilitate practice for everyone, not just the gifted few.

Two recent books by distinguished sociologists offer opportunities to integrate sociological theorizing better into teaching, and they may be used as textbooks for that project. In keeping with contemporary sociological sensibilities about the social as *happening* rather than as *thing*, both are directed toward *theorizing*, the verb, the practice, the activity. Yet the two books, *Thinking through Theory* by John Levi Martin and *The Art of Social Theory* by Richard Swedberg, could not be more different. Yes, they both embrace philosophical pragmatism, but they take pragmatism in opposite directions.

Swedberg is most interested in helping readers to develop our capacities for theorizing as an activity fundamental to conducting research in any sociological approach other than radical empiricism. He writes about something that is very difficult to put into words—the creative process of theorizing. Following the pragmatist Charles Peirce, Swedberg treats this process as centrally one of abduction. Thus, he asserts, “Theory, as I broadly define it, is *a statement about the explanation of a phenomenon*. And theorizing, from this perspective, is *the process through which a theory is produced*” (p. 17, italics original). This point of departure yields a book less about theory per se and more about how to create sociological explanations. Swedberg’s pragmatic bent, with assists from

cognitive theory and a fascinating variety of other sources, suggests that if we can figure out how we think, we can theorize better. *The Art of Social Theory*, then, is not a normatively oriented book about theorizing (although it does provide a number of useful lists about what to do); it is an ambitious and brave exploration that launches out onto the great sea of cognitive creativity.

*The Art of Social Theory* focuses in Part One on “how to theorize.” Overall, the emphasis is on tacit knowledge, art, skills, craft abilities. Working in the context of discovery rather than that of justification, Swedberg proposes adding a stage to the research process as conventionally taught—the “prestudy.” It is here that the most creative aspects of theorizing come to the fore. Avoiding preconceptions, observing, conceptualizing, typologies, and classifications—all are important as bases for bringing social phenomena into view. The core chapter of Part One addresses “coming up with an explanation.” Swedberg recognizes multiple epistemologies, but he concentrates on how abduction might encourage good explanation in any approach. Whatever one's predispositions, insight, following hunches, guessing (and guessing right)—these are important elements in developing sociological theories as explanations of social phenomena.

Part Two of *The Art of Social Theory* explores heuristics, tools, practical exercises, and what might be called cognitive stances toward the work of theorizing in research. Swedberg gives some attention to “the role of theory” in theorizing. However, formal logics are not so important. Instead, extant theory is available for the appropriation of concepts (for exemplars, Swedberg points to Max Weber's *Economy and Society*). But with the main focus on process, activities such as word play, reverie, and

poetic writing receive more attention than, well, theory. Swedberg advises us not to obsess overmuch. Dreamtime, taking a walk, cooking, and other activities may allow your subconscious to help you resolve puzzles (p. 198). And although Swedberg has never heard of “a social scientist who experimented with drugs or alcohol . . . in order to be more creative” (p. 206), he invokes Howard Becker's famous *Outsiders* essay about becoming a marijuana user as metaphor. Just as for the marijuana user, for the researcher learning to theorize, there is “the enjoyment and sense of satisfaction that comes at the end” (p. 217).

Swedberg is spot on in opening up the existential activity of theorizing. But he is rather circumspect on four important issues. First, centering his approach in abduction, he frames the questions of what to study and why largely in relation to observing the social world and identifying empirical puzzles and gives only glancing attention to the utility of exploring previous research findings or sociological theories and explanations as bases for formulating new research projects. Second, the discussion of how to connect a sociological puzzle to concepts, concepts to measurement, and measurement to hypotheses and methodology is pitched at a very general level. Third, there is little treatment of the role of logic in theorizing. And fourth, for a pragmatist work on theorizing as a practice, this book is surprisingly abstract. These features probably mostly derive from an interest in structuring a text that will work for all kinds of sociology instructors and students, using diverse methodologies in the actual conduct of research.

Swedberg rightly observes that the much-venerated classic sociological “theorists” generally were more interested in their research on capitalism, religion, the division of labor, and so on than in creating any abstract, general, or formal theories.

Personally, I enjoy thinking about the theories “behind” research, so I was initially frustrated by the circumspection about theory *qua* theory. However, I grew to like the book very much, and by the end I wondered whether what had frustrated me really was the consequence of a clever pragmatist strategy. In this light, *The Art of Social Theory* can be read as a bit of a Socratic exercise. By the very openness of his discussion, Swedberg pulls readers into a *narrative* and, like a novel, the book's text invites us to read along, filling in examples and wondering about puzzles of our own making.

*The Art of Social Theory* will serve well as a handbook for students conducting research, and it offers helpful comments to teachers working with such students. It will be especially useful for encouraging advanced undergraduate sociology majors, particularly those engaged in honors thesis projects, to really use theory in the course of their research. And this is a craft acquisition that many early graduate students (and unfortunately, some already well into their dissertations!) could benefit from as well. In effect, *The Art of Social Theory* is a reflection of its own proposals for practice. It launches its readers into activities of theorizing in the course of reading the book itself. The book is a performance of theorizing—theorizing about sociological theorizing. To read it is, in effect, to write one's own book on theorizing. To write that book, students probably will be best served by reading it in conjunction with a course on theorizing set up by an instructor who understands the author's agenda and uses it to provoke students.

What about John Levi Martin's book? Its title, *Thinking through Theory*, can be taken as a clever *double* (or perhaps *triple*) *entendre*: the book concerns thinking about the social *by way of* theory, but it also entails “thinking through” theory, that is, considering what the project of theory might involve; and finally, the book is, most

basically in my view, directed to “theorizing through thinking.” Whereas Swedberg portrays theorizing as an imaginative practice of explanation, Martin leads students and the rest of us on a “bluntly” written expedition of merciless theoretical critique, a practice that he dubs “orthologics,” or “the application of ‘right reason’ to our formulation of ideas and statements” (pp. viii, 10). He wants us to consider whether a given theory is plausible in its own terms. Which is not to say that orthological practice is only concerned with theory in the abstract and detached from empirical research on the social. Quite to the contrary; in its orthological practice, *Thinking through Theory* brings in a whole host of historical, contemporary, and imagined examples (including from non-human animal species). Toward the end, Martin riffs off his earlier and important book, *The Explanation of Social Action* (2011), to argue for a theory of action, “more in tune with pragmatism,” that is dialectically focused on actors’ unfolding and contingent relations to their environments.

Any number of theoretical sacred cows (at least sacred to some of us) may find themselves swooning. Indeed, many sociologists—across the range of quantitative, qualitative, and historical/comparative methodologies and the most diverse theoretical commitments—probably will sleep better if they ignore this book. However, sociology will be a far more fruitful enterprise if we seriously engage with Martin. Honing his practice at the outset on Talcott Parsons—the former *bête noir* whom few sociologists any longer bother to defend or decimate—Martin then moves to a consideration of what it might mean for “culture” to have causal significance in social life (spoiler alert: he finds a lot of fuzzy thinking about culture constraining and enabling people). In this and similar discussions, Martin goes deep. What does it mean for something to “cause” something

else? (Shades of Robert MacIver's [1942] book, *Social Causation*.) What might an explanation entail? How might we avoid empty general formulations or silly comparative logics that open the door to true statements like, "If a unicorn had gored me this morning, I would *not* be writing" that are inadequate as explanations of how it is that I *am* writing? How to come to terms with tautologies? With the problem of non-disprovability that haunts both Freudian psychoanalytics and rational-choice theory? And what about critical realism: is it really a coherent ontology, or is it simply a convenient tent under which diverse sociologists can congregate in order to avoid some post-positivist devolution into social science as mere opinion?

Martin's alternative to critical realism (of which he is deeply critical) is not idealism or some anti-realist version of social constructionism; it is (an implicitly Habermasian) pragmatism, where truth is not pristine superhuman "absolute knowledge" awaiting discovery but results from "the collective efforts of a human community" (p. 115). In more sectarian districts, such a position might open the door to multiple truths and an irreversible slide into the relativism of alternative self-contained sociological communities. But Martin doggedly seeks to forge a common conversation meant to encompass all of sociology. He is not shy about bringing reason to bear on the most disparate of sociological ideas, and the most disparate of sociologists owe it to the discipline to participate in Martin's discussions, which might take place in something like the "salon" described by Richard Rorty, where "hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices," and "disagreements are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation" (1979:317).

Proponents of approaches that Martin critiques will have many questions to raise in the salon. Critical realists may wonder why he chooses an easy target like Roy Bhaskar, who gave such naïve consideration to the social sciences, while giving such glancing attention to George Steinmetz (p. 103) and none to Philip S. Gorski, both of whom have worked to reconstruct critical realism in a way more sophisticated about the challenges. Martin has two answers to this question. First, in general, given the critical character of *Thinking through Theory*, he suggests, “you should thank your God that I *don’t* cite you” (p. viii, n. 2). Second, specifically for critical realism (though his position on this front is more general), in an assertion that begs for demonstration, he submits, “the problems come from what is at the core of realism” (p. 95).

Elsewhere in the salon, sociologists like me (and here I tip my hand), convinced of the analytic utility of *verstehende Soziologie*, hermeneutics, and social phenomenology, will wonder whether Martin’s discussion of motives as *ex post facto* explanations (inspired by C. Wright Mills’s important discussion) and his pragmatist theory of action could be enriched by Alfred Schutz’s considerations of cognition, meaning, and action in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967) and *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (1970). And qualitative and comparative/historical sociologists will want to ask whether Martin’s extensive discussions of truth and facts do justice to the interpretive conditions under which multiple formulations of truth can be made concerning “the same” set of empirical events. I suspect that all sociologists at the salon would have liked to have found a more conjoined discussion of non-disprovability (bad) versus clarification of a theory’s boundaries of explanation by acknowledging

scope conditions (OK) or James Coleman's "sometimes true" theories (cited by Swedberg, p. 120)—topics that tend to get raised at separate junctures.

Even the sharpest among us may find reading *Thinking through Theory* a challenge (leavened by some zingers, quite humorous so long as you aren't the target!). The challenge will be all the greater for any but the most intelligent and motivated undergraduates—even if Martin laces his narrative with characteristically hip language and zany formulations to make his points. For a graduate student, tackling *Thinking through Theory* should provide a sense of real accomplishment, of having *arrived* as a sociologist who can participate in sometimes complex sociological discourses at the very highest level. Seminar discussions, I predict, will be animated.

What can students (and all of us, as students of the social) learn from Professors Swedberg and Martin's books? First, neither has as its purpose to explore all the promising theoretical approaches that various sociologists today find engaging. Although Swedberg does mention many sources of concepts, neither he nor Martin gives attention, for example, to Foucault or feminist theory; and Martin simply draws on Bourdieu for his own action-theory purposes rather than submitting him to orthological analysis (lucky Bourdieu!). So, if you want to read or teach a book about contemporary sociological theories—and their appropriations of the classics—move on.

Second, both books strongly invoke pragmatism, suggesting either that this is a polysemic and multivalent philosophy or that it smuggles in the sort of non-falsifiable grounding of sociological theory that Martin rails against. Either way, pragmatism serves as a touchstone for vastly different projects. *The Art of Social Theory* encourages a pragmatic approach to theorizing as a creative project of explanation in the course of

research, and Swedberg largely abjures theorizing as a logical exercise. Concepts, in his vein of pragmatism, are tools, sometimes newly formulated ones, sometimes taken off the cultural shelf of pre-mades, perhaps even ripped away from the kits with which they were packaged, all entered into a *bricolage* to advance some particular analysis. Whereas Swedberg wants researchers to engage in theorizing in what he calls the prestudy, Martin argues quite strongly for exercising theoretical logic in what might be called the “trans-prestudy”: separate from but not independent of research, we ought to be concerned with whether a given theoretical approach holds up as a set of linked propositions. If not, take it out of inventory!

The charitable conclusion: pragmatism is many-splendored. It offers an approach for theorizing about the social (Martin), and it can serve as heuristic inspiration for engaging in theorizing in the course of research (Swedberg). Perhaps it might also serve as an integrative theoretical basis for explaining social phenomena, though neither of these books attempts such a synthesis.

Given the two authors’ hopes of addressing an emerging generation of sociologists, what messages do their books convey about sociological theorizing as an enterprise? Both Swedberg and Martin want all sociologists to become good at theorizing, which they regard as a crucial sociological activity. But, ironically, neither yields much optimism about sociological theory as a general project. Swedberg wants to foster creativity and imagination, and he offers important suggestions that researchers might incorporate in order to dare to theorize and theorize better. But early on, he dismisses “so-called grand theory” as having “next to no connection to empirical reality” (p. 15) and alludes to “many problems with [Robert K.] Merton’s approach to theory,”

which Merton defined as “logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived” (p. 17; Merton quote, p. 16)—an approach for which Martin (p. 4) also has criticisms. For Swedberg, theory is that which holds up as explanation, and, even within his preferred frame of abduction, he has little to say about how parallel explanations might be aggregated or used to yield more general explanations. Martin, for his part, is so devastating in his orthologic critique and, aside from several interesting discussions of topics such as social action, so restrained in developing his own theories that sociologists, old and young alike, may come to regard theorizing in a constructive as opposed to deconstructive mode with trepidation. Theory as a relatively autonomous activity—middle-range, general, or grand—does not emerge from these books with any strong mandate.

I much appreciate the pragmatisms of these two books, which seem mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. However, it strikes me that there is room for more optimism, or at least agnosticism, about the prospects for general theorizing. As the editors of *Remaking Modernity*, Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Orloff (2005) observed (and their contributors documented) more than a decade ago, social analysts have made real and significant progress in *local* theorizing. Theoretically oriented substantive analysis in all kinds of research—quantitative, qualitative, historical/comparative—has brought new answers, for example, to questions about action, culture, nationalism, citizenship, power, the public sphere, social movements, and social and organizational networks. In the lacunae created by the diminution of general theory and simple positivism—and perhaps *because* of those lacunae—the abduction that Swedberg endorses has produced a great deal of sociological knowledge.

Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* (using the gendered language of their day), “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” Sociologists, like everyone else, face our own historical moment, one in which science, even so-called hard science, confronts skepticism, doubt, and “alternative facts.” Under prevailing conditions that can be called postmodern (even if the term has become anathema), and given our own sensibilities about historicity and the complexities of culture and meaning, we have not been well positioned to formulate more general conceptual frameworks and theories of the social. Adams, Clemens, and Orloff were perhaps more prophetic than empirical when they argued that “meta-narrative and synoptic grand theory are making a comeback” (2005:60–61). Yet their prophecy raises an important possibility. With smart thinking through theory of the sort that Martin displays and a license for imagination and creativity that Swedberg encourages, our decades of wandering in the theoretical wilderness may yet yield a new mutual engagement and reconstruction among competing approaches, and even theoretical syntheses that will take forms we are as yet unable to anticipate. Certainly our times cry out for novel sociological ways of theorizing. Richard Swedberg and John Levi Martin, individually and together, reestablish the centrality of theorizing as an anchoring project of sociology. We, our discipline, and hopefully our societies will all benefit if we do as they recommend: don’t “learn” theory, theorize!

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