# CRITICAL REALISM, HISTORY, AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

# POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY

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# CRITICAL REALISM, HISTORY, AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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*Political Power and Social Theory* is a peer-reviewed journal committed to advancing the interdisciplinary understanding of the linkages between political power, social relations, and historical development. The journal welcomes both empirical and theoretical work and is willing to consider papers of substantial length. Publication decisions are made by the editor in consultation with members of the editorial board and anonymous reviewers. For information on submissions and a full list of volumes, please see the journal website at www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/tk/ppst

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# SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to present this special volume of Political Power and Social Theory, *Critical Realism, History, and Philosophy in the Social Sciences*. The chapters come from the "Symposium on the history and philosophy of social science" held at the University of Michigan, USA, and organized by George Steinmetz. I'm delighted to see them in print here. Thanks to the co-editors, Timothy Rutzou and George Steinmetz, for choosing PPST to publish the chapters and to the authors for their contributions.

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Julian Go
December 2017
Boston, MA

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# CRISIS!? WHAT CRISIS!? ON SOCIAL THEORY AND REFLEXIVITY

Timothy Rutzou

## ABSTRACT

*The article argues for the necessity of theory within sociology, in general, and metatheory, in particular. It explores how theoretical, metatheoretical, and philosophical background conditions affect sociological research. It makes the case for why attending to background conditions is important for both the sociologist as an individual and also sociology as a collective and a discipline. In this context, it makes the case for critical realism as a useful program of metatheoretical reflexivity that focuses upon the more philosophical dimensions of sociology including the place of ontology and even how theory itself should be understood.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual for a thinker or a movement to come along and suggest that there is a major challenge, a fundamental problem, or even a crisis within sociology, particularly when it comes to theory. This may sound needlessly melodramatic, or even, prima facie, ludicrous; and yet such "outrageous" accusations have been made time and time again (e.g., Adorno, 2002; Alexander, 1982; Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 2008, 2014; Collins, 2008; Connell, 2007; Gorski, 2013;

Gouldner, 1980; Harding, 1986, 1991; Latour, 1993; Little, 2016; Luhmann, 1995; Lyotard & Jameson, 1984; Merton, 1969; Mills & Gitlin, 2000; Mouzelis, 1995; Porpora, 2015; Said, 1979; Sayer, 2000; Shapiro, 2005; Smith, 2014; Steinmetz & Chae, 2002). What are we to make of this? Surely, we can do without such reckless *ex cathedra* pronouncements? Is there really a problem with, let alone a crisis in, sociology or social science? If there is, it seems the crisis of Western sociology is something we have been living with for some time, whether we have felt its effects or not.

When they appear, complains of crisis seem to follow a routine course. They explosively burst upon the academic stage and put forward their grand idea, drawing the attention of those intent on either denying the claim as overstated, ridiculous, or the ravings of a peripheral crowd and those who see merit in supporting or even exploiting the claim (Geertz, 1973, p. 3; c.f. Kuhn, 2012[1962]). Sometimes these ideas become integrated into the canon and repertoire and become part of the stock of sociological theory. They have their "excesses" "tempered" by popularity, practice, and use and become sedimented within our collective sociological imagination, in some form or another (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3−4). Whether the issues have actually been addressed and resolved or not, slowly over time the critique becomes familiar, becomes viewed as being of historical significance before becoming passé and losing the grandeur, charm, and urgency the critique once held. Sociological discussions move on, and the objects to which critique was directed pass out of existence. Ultimately, the appeal of the crisis wanes in the minds of the mainstream, even if a few overzealous supporters attempt to cling to the ongoing truth, value, and merit of the critique. Portraying themselves as in dismay and facing a hard battle on behalf of their cause, their perpetual attempts, to raise the same issues and same call to crisis over and over again and again, seem […] parochial at best (Geertz, 1973, p. 4; c.f. Camic & Gross, 1998, p. 468).

By way of a somewhat lengthy introduction, I want to defend the place and need for the kind of philosophical reflections contained in this volume by discussing the place of theory within sociology, the pervasiveness of background assumptions, the necessity for theoretical reflexivity, and the need for a metatheoretical stance much like what is provided by critical realism; by all rights, an outdated and passé philosophy supported by a few vocal, if not overzealous, adherents. In this introduction, it will be argued that the critical realist approach can be understood as being concerned with reflexivity at the level of metatheory and attempting to reinvigorate and repopulate the sociological imagination (or, if you prefer, tool kit) with philosophically sophisticated resources when it comes to our accounts of causation, social structures, etc., in order to avoid the unnecessary trappings that hide under the banner of the word "empirical" and periodically befall sociology as a discipline.

# GET REAL

Over the past 50 years, the "call of crisis" has often come from sociologists committed to the idea of realism, intent on moving beyond the twin evils of empiricism and idealism (social constructionism, postmodernism). Often intent on reclaiming a place for theory and a strong theoretical program, the realist narrative follows a relatively consistent line. Theory, is not in vogue and in its place stands a vaguely defined empirical pragmatism, driven by a desire for empirical and methodological rigor; else, a relativist-interpretivist and often a nihilistic-skeptical social constructionism. Irrealism is everywhere! Within this antediluvian landscape stands, the one hand, quantitative social science as the arch-exemplar of an *a* theoretical empiricism. Quantitative social science, while driven by the search for causal explanations, is cautious about making strong realist or theoretical claims and generally rests content with charting regularities and making vague generalizations. But, so claims the realist, these analyses all too often produce accounts that, while methodologically rigorous, result in context-less generalities with implicit universal characteristics that are presented as valid, explanatory, or at the very least useful in understanding the dynamics of a society or societies (economics being the guiltiest expression of this tendency, c.f. Lawson, 1997). It is claimed that these generalizations are often inattentive to issues of theory, context, time, and space, thereby resulting in problematic generalizations; linear accounts of reality and causation, crude forms of behaviorism (social or psychological), regularity determinisms, or explanations that are simply too thin, too trivial, or too reliant upon well-rehearsed tropes. The sociological imagination becomes directed by what Mills called abstract empiricism, a stance defined by attention to scientific methodology that tends to confuse "whatever is studied with the set of methods suggested for its study" (Mills & Gitlin, 2000, p. 51). In this context, abstract empiricism is defined by its focus upon methods, data obtained by the use of particular methods, and the questions asked and answered from that data, that tend to generate hypotheses that chart the regularities that emerge from the data producing relatively atheoretical, ahistorical forms of social investigation and explanation, entranced with and justified by recourse to "The Scientific Method" (Mills & Gitlin, 2000, pp. 55−57). Abstract empiricism paints the picture of a sociology driven by methods, rather than methods been driven by sociology.

As a corollary to abstract empiricism stands what we might call abstract interpretivism.[1] Eschewing "Scientific" and causal explanations, these interpretive approaches tend toward the elucidation of systems of rules, beliefs, or behaviors and, in its more reductive moments, generate what we might call linguistic or ideational behaviorism. Causal explanations are largely avoided in favor of context-rich accounts that tend toward the idiographic and incommensurable, resisting any easy generalization beyond a particular group or event. However, for the realist, by bracketing causation and explanation in this

manner, little remains for understanding the relation between interpretative structures of meaning, or meaning making, and the historical, political, and social factors that weight upon systems of interpretation. Interpretation becomes contextless, dehistoricized, removed from the materiality of the social world (and for the radicalized realists depoliticized) in favor of abstract relations between linguistic and symbolic structures. So runs the realist apocalyptic narrative.

Beyond this often polarizing narrative and the two images of abstract empiricism and abstract interpretivism, most sociological accounts would identify that they operate somewhere in between these stark options, perhaps with a tendency to favor description over explanation, and a tendency to avoid strong theoretical accounts for perpetually retestable hypotheses, or the reconstruction of the logic or rules of performances, fields, and the like. Yet, realist explanations and strong theoretical programs, particularly those most directly theoretical, philosophical, or normative endeavors,[2] or accounts which attempt to move beyond empirical generalizations into unobservable or unmeasurable explanations (operating with reference to deep structures), are often seen to be unscientific or empirically ungrounded. Attempting to avoid all extremes, accounts become based upon interconnected series of hypotheses from which empirical uniformities can be derived, explained, and tested, what Merton called theories of the middle range. Theories of the middle range are empirical theories, akin to small domain discoveries in the natural sciences rather than the grand designs of philosophers and represent a weak rather than strong theoretical program, in which theory is largely denied any autonomy from empirical research. Of course, if one accepts this vision of the place of theory in sociology, there can never be a profound theoretical crisis in the discipline because sociology remains empirically driven and loosely committed to the accumulation of data and a crypto-program of falsifying, correcting, or slightly modifying past theories. Similarly, the idea of a problem or a crisis of the discipline of sociology as a whole becomes meaningless, because the discipline is characterized by differentiation and specialization along the lines of empirical projects and conducting empirical investigations into different domains.

In contrast to this weak program, the assumption of realist sociology is that social science faces a present-day dilemma that has remained unaddressed and is characterized by a retreat from reality, understood as a tacit withdrawal from a commitment to the existence of a knowable mind-independent reality in favor of empirical investigations that prize formalistic elegance while tending to produce monochromatic or reductive accounts (abstract empiricism), or interpretivist paradigms that brackets questions of reality and realism for social construction (abstract interpretivism). Against these twin perils, the realist suggests social science must venture into more explicit theoretical terrain and recover a much stronger tradition of theorizing that is willing to move beyond what is visible or observable in order to make bold theoretical claims about unobservable causal mechanisms, dynamics, and structures that are often not accessible

through empirical programs.[3] For realists, this takes on added weight; not only do we need more theory but we need to seriously consider the implications of ontology and philosophical questions concerning emergence and causation, in order to be able to venture beyond its epistemological and empirical limits and tentativeness grounded in what often amounts to a commitment to inductive or logico-deductive methodological rigor and not much else. The wager of this strong program of theory is that by more directly attending to theoretical issues, we are able to open up a wider variety of research agendas and programs, moving beyond the overwrought constrains of empirical analysis and justify and defend a broader and more polychromatic conception of what kinds of inferences and explanations we are warranted in making about the world, and the legitimate grounds of justification that moves beyond simple accounts of empirical verification to stronger ontological claims about the nature of reality. As such, it is interested in clearing away and undermining the a priori constraints and limiting conceptions of what social science is and does by attending to the question of reality, in all its inflections. Central to such a program is an attempt to systematically explore and translate insights and methods from philosophy, and other disciplines, into sociology without thereby losing the unique aspects of sociology as a discipline (c.f. Mouzelis, 1995, p. 6).

Many of the authors in this volume believe that a promising approach to such a program is critical realism, a long-standing attempt to do just this (see Archer, 1995; Gorski, 2013; Porpora, 2015; Sayer, 2000). Critical realism provides a standpoint and orientation based in strong philosophical explorations and commitments with major metatheoretical implications for the manner in which we go about theory construction, confirmation, application, and empirical investigations. It explicitly stages philosophical discussions at rather abstract levels, deliberating the relationship between ontology and epistemology as well as causation, structure, and agency, at a level that seems removed from all empirically generated analysis and case studies (and often is). This seemingly raises problems for a discipline committed to empirical research and analysis. How do we use such theory in sociological research? Why do we need to be engaging in philosophical discussions about the nature of "downward causation" in the literature on emergence or the benefit of a powers approach to causation against the language of mechanisms or regularities? Surely, we can do without the lengthy expositions and conceptual gymnastics of the structure−agency debate and avoid the fraught terrain about ethical normativity? Is there really anything gained by this? Does this obliterate the methodological specificity of sociology? Where does this focus on theory get us? While these debates might be of interest to those so inclined, why do we need the grandiose and even imperialist gesture that says all sociologist need to address this? Why do all sociologists need to stop and pay attention? Why can't the majority of sociology just continue doing empirical work without being shoehorned into theory and philosophy?

# WHAT IS THEORY? AND WHERE
# DOES CRITICAL REALISM FIT?

One of the problems with any discussion concerning the place of theory in sociology is that while theory is often seen to be an inevitable part of sociology, it is notoriously difficult to define precisely what theory is, why it is necessary, what it contributes to the discipline, what constitutes a good theory, what constitutes a theoretical contribution, and how we integrate theory into our concrete "empirical" research. The term theory is often vaguely or pragmatically defined and used in different contexts to mean wildly different things, creating no shortage of confusion around the use of the term. However, what perhaps remains persistent is a tendency to define theory against empirical research and to separate out questions of method and theory.

As all forms of social inquiry ultimately rests on beliefs and assumptions about what counts as an appropriate or inappropriate investigations and explanation of social phenomena, social science has a theoretical base that requires scrutiny (Shapiro, 2005, p. 19). Yet, for better and worse, often social scientists avoid worrying about theoretical questions in favor of doing empirical research (and are often encouraged to do so). Theoretical questions are often seen to be too abstract, technical, inaccessible, and lack any benefit that substantially affects the quality of empirical research (Shapiro, 2005, p. 19). Indeed, even defining theory poses a perennial problem for sociological theory despite the fact, and perhaps because of the fact, that there are many models of what theory is and should be doing, all of which have normative aspects and implications; each attempt at defining theory brings with it images and narratives about the discipline as a whole.

In his classic text *On Theoretical Sociology*, originally published *in 1949*, Robert Merton laments that the word "theory" in sociology

> threatens to become meaningless. Because its referents are so diverse − including everything from minor working hypotheses, through comprehensive but vague and unordered speculations, to axiomatic systems of thought − use of the word often obscures rather than creates understanding. (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 39)

Defining the post-Parsonian mood, Merton was concerned with the tendency of theory to become all-encompassing speculations and totalizing systematic attempts to account for the nature of the social world in its entirety that were ultimately unanswerable to any empirical scrutiny. For Merton, too much theory is grounded in endless speculation and the systematic construction and reconstruction of concepts that contributes little to the development of knowledge, amounting to an unending commentary and debate about the speculations of others rather than being grounded in concrete research. The quest for an all-embracing unifying theory in which "observations about every aspect of human behavior, organization and change promptly find their preordained place," while exhilarating should be resisted (Merton, 1967, p. 5). But equally,

and importantly, Merton laments that there is also a tendency toward an empiricism that is not concerned with pursuing the implications of its findings but in the process of hunting for social facts seems at a loss to explain or relate them (Merton, 1967, p. 139). Indeed, for Merton sociological theory is comically caught between two problems:

> Tending to assess the significance of sociological work in terms of scope rather than the demonstrability of generalizations, they eschew the "triviality" of detailed, small-scale observation and seek the grandeur of global summaries. At the other extreme stands a hardy band who do not hunt too closely the implications of their research but who remain confident and assured that what they report is so. To be sure, their reports of facts are verifiable and often verified, but they are somewhat at a loss to relate these facts to one another or even to explain why these, rather than other, observations have been made. For the first group the identifying motto would at times seem to be: "We do not know whether what we say is true, but it is at least significant." And for the radical empiricist the motto may read: This is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance. (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 139)

For Merton, this only highlighted the immaturity of the discipline, and both the youthful bravado, on the one hand, and the shy timidity of sociologists, on the other, needed to be tamed and disciplined by working in "the middle range," developing logically interconnected but bounded sets of propositions and hypotheses from which empirical uniformities can be derived, explained, and tested (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 39). For Merton, true theory is a form of limited generalization − hypotheses summarizing observed uniformities or relationships between two or more variables while also encompassing the assumptions from which empirical generalizations have themselves been derived (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 41). These are theories that lie between minor working hypotheses and all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop unified theories that encompass all social behavior, organization, and social change (Merton, 1967 [1949], p. 39). Accordingly, the major task of sociological theory is the development and accumulation of these special theories − theories about the relationship between certain variables, particular social fields, social changes, social revolutions, deviant behavior, and institutions, all of which are limited in their scope and often are used for deriving hypotheses which can be empirically investigated, tested, corroborated, or falsified. Grand theories and grand theoreticians (no doubt enamored with their sense of self-importance) simply get in the way of good scientific work.[4] Rather than proceeding from the head of one person − or the dogmas of one school − sociology requires a "balkanization," each faction in principle governed by its own theoretical systems and thereby resisting the tyranny of a unified system (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 51).[5]

In aid of this weak program of theoretical sociology, Merton also offered a delineation of theory into various types. The purpose of which was to codify and "facilitate the co-development of viable sociological theory and pertinent empirical research" (Merton, 1945, p. 493). In addition to the (1) category methodology, Merton suggests theory is divided into questions of (2) general sociological orientations: theoretical outlooks often found in textbooks, that

provide the general context of inquiry and hypotheses formation. For Merton, this is exemplified by Durkheim's injunction that the "determining causation of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it," in which the social factor is "an institutional norm towards which behavior is oriented" (Merton, 1945, p. 464). These are, or should be treated, as springboards for the generation of empirical hypotheses. (3) Analysis of sociological concepts: a selected series of interrelated concepts (broadly construed) that defines, constitutes, and prescribes the nature of empirical inquiry and explanation (Merton, 1945, p. 465). The function of conceptual clarification is critical to middle-range theory and concerned "to make explicit the character of the data subsumed under a given concept" in an effort to "reduce the likelihood of spurious empirical findings couched in terms of the given concepts" (Merton, 1945, p. 465). (4) Post-factum sociological interpretations[6]: the procedure on which observations and interpretations are applied to data resulting in plausible that can derive further hypotheses and can be tested by further empirical investigations (Merton, 1945, p. 467f). (5) Empirical generalizations: isolated propositions summarizing the relation between two variables that may be of greater or lesser precision (Merton, 1945, p. 469). And (6) sociological theory: the so-called "scientific laws" which move from empirical to theoretical statements that are precise and determinate, from which predictions can be issued, the exemplic case given being Durkheim's account of suicide (Merton, 1945, p. 470).

In many ways, Merton's program still defines the field, setting the trend for how theory is understood and writing the rules of the game. While middle-range theory has an important place in sociology, it is not difficult to see the normative prescriptions and implications Merton brings to both sociological theory and sociology as a whole. Many definitions of theory since, but not all, have echoed the middle-range sensibilities of a Mertonian sociological theory. While, unquestionably, there have been attempts at grand metaphysical systems or systematic and unifying programs *à la* Parsons, the tendency has been toward the reduction of theory to the analysis of empirical facts, the identification of particular "mechanisms," or the emptying out of strong theory to heuristic devices, lenses, or sensitizing concepts. Indeed, it seems a vast array of theoretical writing about theory seems committed to an ironic antitheoretical stance, providing a justification for conducting empirical research rather than theoretical explorations, seeking a form of epistemic security in logical and methodological rigor, with a soft pragmatic criterion when it comes to theory.

## CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS

How then should we go about defining the place of theory within sociology? In his important work *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, Jeffrey Alexander provides a helpful orienting, and encompassing, account of the place of theory in

sociology that provides an alternative and broader account than Merton. Alexander draws a continuum in science and social science between empirical and metaphysical environments − with methodology and empirical observations, at one end, and metaphysics and general presuppositions, at the other. The more empirical environment is influenced by specificity and "the criterion of precisely describing observation" while statements from the other end of the spectrum are considered more "theoretical" because their form is less concerned with the character of the observations that inform them (Alexander, 1982, p. 2). The theory−data split is therefore a relative formulation rather than an absolute division; indeed, theory is a designation of convenience, somewhat arbitrarily made out of an implicit consensus (Alexander, 1982, p. 2). More properly, theory and the various points on the spectrum are more of an analytical distinction, a way to "facilitate communication" rather than to establish ontological definitions about the *nature* of theory (Alexander, 1982, p. 4). In reality, each of these moments is interdependent, containing implicit and explicit references to other points and modes of theory and empirical investigation, reflecting the emphasis upon a particular type of investigation or claim. Famously, data is theory-laden. Our general theoretical presuppositions affect the manner in which we create models, what we choose to investigate, how we go about our investigations, and even the things we look for in the field. The relationship between theory and empirics are often asymmetrical and generally resolved in favor of empirical research rather than theoretical explanations (Alexander, 1982, p. 4). This asymmetry is not universally given but depends on a host of assumptions about the nature of the social world, the purpose of theory, epistemological preliminaries, and existential commitment to the banner of scientific knowledge (Fig. 1).



| Metaphysics | Models | Methodology | Empirical Observation |

*Fig. 1.* The Metaphysical−Empirical Continuum of Alexander.

Taking a more empirically directed approach rather than the more philosophical approach of Alexander, in their 1998 article Camic and Gross take stock of sociological theory's attempt at self-understanding and highlight that while there is no prevailing sentiment or mood, there are eight discernable and distinctive, but not mutually exclusive, projects they see taking place within sociological theory. Project I: The Construction of General Tools for use in Empirical Analysis, notably encompassing Bourdieu's account of the field. Project II: The Synthesis of Multiple Theoretical Approaches, assimilating contending theoretical proposals into more comprehensive approaches (notably concerned with the macro/micro, action/structure, subjectivity/objectivity, agency/structure problematics). Project III: Refinement of Theoretical Research Programs, suggestive of Project II but largely consisting of attempts to

incorporate different models or approaches within an existing research tradition (such as the incorporation of rational choice models into Marxism producing Analytic Marxism). Project IV. Dialogue Among Multiple Theoretical Approaches, concerning with the attempt to overcome the fragmentation and differentiation of the discipline by working toward establishing a common language or framework. Project V: Enlargement/Reconstruction of Current Theoretical Approaches, consisting of attempts to "identify and fill one or more conceptual, methodological, social, moral, or political lacunae in the theoretical perspectives available to them and then to work out the reconstructive implications of the resulting enlargement of sociological theory" (Camic & Gross, 1998, p. 462). Project VI: Engagement with Past Theoretical Ideas: representing the cycles of rediscovering, researching, and/or reinterpreting major classical theorists or discovering and drawing attention to neglected and overlooked theorists. Project VII: Diagnosis of Contemporary Social Conditions: notably, the analysis of the trends, nature, and dynamics of modernity, late modernity, postmodernity, globalization, and the many varied social forces shaping and affecting human life in the current period. And finally, the somewhat misleadingly named Project VIII: Dissolution of Sociological Theory, encompassing the critique of the generalizing, universalist ambitions of sociological theory from the quarters of feminist theory, postcolonial studies, queer theory, deconstruction, and postmodernism. While largely an empirical survey of the field, Camic and Gross note, in a particularly Mertonian register,[7] that there is a tendency for these different projects to lack awareness of the broader field that they share and to offer an overreaching vision of the preeminence of their program. Indeed, Camic and Gross propose these theoretical projects tend to be sociologically unaware of the organizational conditions that confront them as they lump together rival programs into an undifferentiated and unrefined mass, and in so doing, foster the view that their one project is "contemporary sociological theory as such" (Camic & Gross, 1998, p. 468). But more than this, Camic and Gross make the bold assertion that

> Historical evidence suggests […] the impact of sociological theory on sociological research has long been tenuous, with theory an unwanted presence in many of the ever-changing specialty areas of the discipline" and that "theorists have been slow to think through the implications of this and to fashion suitable roles for themselves under these conditions. (Camic & Gross, 1998, p. 468)

The task before sociological theory then seems to be a problematization, examination, and intellectual reconstruction of the field itself by attending to various historical legacies, social dynamics, and institutional structures that structure the conditions of possibility of sociological theory presumably to preventing the lack of reflexivity that gives rise to the a-sociological theorizing that characterizes the pursuit of theoretical panaceas.

More recently, continuing the effort to pursue that ever-elusive definition of theory, Gabriel Abend (2008) distinguishes between what he sees as seven uses

of the word "theory." Taking a "semantic" approach, Abend reports on what different sociologists seem to mean when they use the words "theory," "theoretical," and "theorize" in an effort of semantic therapy: clarifying our terms of reference (Abend, 2008, p. 173). Theory$_1$ general propositions; theory$_2$ explanation of particular social phenomena; theory$_3$ making hermeneutical sense of the empirical world; theory$_4$ the examination of the work of particular and canonical authors; theory$_5$ world views; theory$_6$ normative projects (such as critical theory); and theory$_7$ "philosophical" problems raised by sociological analysis (such as the structure−agency debate) (Abend, 2008, pp. 177−181). Within this context, Abend advocates a "principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism" (Abend, 2008, p. 195), which avoids the tyranny of any one ontology that comes with the acceptance of certain pictures of the world and the explanatory prerequisites, obligations, and exclusionary devices when it comes to theory. Indeed, Abend defines the problem of theory as largely a semantic riddle. Not wishing to argue for or against a particular metaphysics,[8] Abend notes that while we tend toward certain ontological conceptions about the social world (implicitly or explicitly), sociology or sociological theory in general should not entertain strong kinds of commitments, and ontological commitments certainly should not be built into the meaning of the word "theory" and its place within sociology (Abend, 2008, p. 195).

Finally, in delineating modes of theory, John Levi-Martin (2014) offers his own distinctions about the different uses of the word. These broadly include that which concerns itself with canonical and important propositions, namely, doing whatever it is that particular theorists or schools were actually doing and working within an already defined and demarcated tradition; theory as generalization aimed at formulating general propositions or a series of propositions; theory as vocabulary, an accepted discourse for telling nice stories and narratives adopting a particular language by using particular terms or concepts or lenses; theory as critique, an exploration of the internal consistency or inconsistent or terms, ideas, arguments, etc. dissecting and deconstructing particular claims, their premises and prejudices; and acts of synthesizing. Perhaps, worst of all is what Martin calls theory-ology: the study of the work of the theorists. Much like Peter Winch (2007[1958]), Martin argues for a problem-solving and orthological approach to theory in order to prevent the bewitching of sociology by our language and conceptual schemes (Martin, 2014, p. 40). Moving away from wild, sweeping, and overgeneralizing theoretical claims, Martin argues in favor of a more restrained, precise, scholasticism that breeds bold arguments from rigor and clarity rather than careless poetic license (Martin, 2014, p. 40). Philosophical issues turn on the correct use of certain linguistic expressions and the elucidation of concepts − critique and clearing up logical confusion becomes the main task of the theorist (2015, p. 11). For Martin, the goal of the theorist is to see the concepts themselves, preventing the reification of our words into reality and the shackling of the theorist to a commitment to a particular social reality, in favor of an appropriately pragmatic approach which

understands how people think and act and acts critically to correct biases and distortions. We might suggest, following the classic work of Peter Winch (2007[1958]), such an approach concerns the question of knowledge and the relationship between thought and reality only from the hermeneutic perspective of what our concepts are doing rather than the truth of theoretical statements. Indeed, theoretical progress is made by moving away from error, rather than toward truth (c.f. Kuhn, 2012; Popper, 2002; Martin, 2014, p. 41). Accordingly, echoing the title of the book, theory is ultimately concerned with how we pragmatically think through theory.

Throughout many of these attempts to provide a definition or to outline the place of theory in sociology, we find a notable attempt to delimit theory into particular forms and molds, some more open, others more restricted. While this is useful in directing our attention to different modes of theorizing, often these many varied efforts are also accompanied by a quasi-normative program. Defining theory becomes a means of retraining and preventing the deformative and ambitious expressions of theory that have characterized past endeavors and express the epistemic caution of a theoretical generation living in the wake of the collective trauma that was Parsons and the post-Parsonian consensus (embodied by Merton). Defining theory becomes a means of saving theory by distinguishing "good theory" from "bad theory," in which bad theory equals strong theory, theory decoupled from empirical investigation, and beyond the middle range, while good theory is presented in service of, or as a waypoint to empirical accounts, moving away from strong ontological programs, such as realism, in favor of weaker programs such as interpretation.

Whatever merit or value there is in defining different aspects or proffering different indexes of theory (and there are many), it seems, as Alexander noted, we are dealing with boundaries that are porous and divisible in different ways, operating according to different logics, in concert with different interests. At best, these definitions represent attempts to reconstruct theory according to different interests, preferences, or practices while often simultaneously attempting to avoid normative or ontological definitions and describe a broad consensus. Yet, somewhat ironically, the more theory is defined, the more meanings and differentiations seem to proliferate, presenting different angles on the different currents in sociological theory. Boundaries not only seem to be difficult to draw, they appear as ambiguous, fuzzy, messy, and overlapping such that every definition both finds and misses its mark. Moreover, radicalizing Alexander's linear and gradated schema, we might further note the manner in which different types of theory inevitably bleed together: observations are not only theory-laden, they are dependent upon classifications, concepts, models, and general presuppositions that readily or easily be disentangled or presented in a linear chart of that which is more theoretical and more empirical. Theory is simultaneously taking place at multiple levels and operating across multiple boundaries.

# DEFINING THE LOGIC OF THEORY, METATHEORY, AND ONTOLOGY

If we consider theory in all its forms and definitions, we might notice a certain logic that underlies these accounts[9] (c.f. Althusser, 2012; Mouzelis, 1995). This logic can be divided into three interrelated moments which represent an underlying logic of theory: theory$_a$, consisting of the stock of raw materials, inherited explanations, case studies, paradigms, and empirical data, including assumptions we bring to our accounts, that we build upon, transform, and reproduce; theory$_b$ the methods, tools, empirical data, and various means we use to create, construct, clarify, and transform theory$_a$ with the aim of producing theory$_c$, the final end product of our endeavor which attempts to account for social phenomena and social life in multiplicitous and varied ways to different degrees and extents. These final products in turn become incorporated into the stock of raw materials, case studies, etc., becoming theory$_a$ and starting the whole cycle over again. Yet, even with this logic there is a slippage between these moments insofar as the theoretical schemas we draw upon would necessarily include everything from Bourdieu's account of capital, Bourdieu's specific explanation of the academic habitus, the nature of Marx's theory of "the tendency of the rate of capital to fall," Coleman's boat, concepts of emergence and causation, resolutions of the structure–agency debates, and rational choice theory, which are often not only our theoretical inheritances and what we work upon (theory$_a$) but the tools (theory$_b$) and even the forms of our final products (theory$_c$). Rather than being distinct, all three moments are always continuous operating side by side in an almost seamless flow. Nevertheless, these distinctions help to break up the continuous flows into intervals that are critical to understanding a process taking place over time. This logic can also be understood to extend backwards and forwards, connecting up with other similar cycles taking place simultaneously at an individual and a collective level across sociology as a whole. Thinking through this begins to provide us with an orientation that moves *behind* definitions to unpack the logic of theory and theory construction itself.

This, however, raises a further distinction or moment not yet covered or incorporated within the various definitions offered: metatheory. We can understand metatheory as the exploration of the interconnection between these elements, that is, reflection upon theory and the theory of theory, and how the propositions and postulations, the schemas, types, categories, paradigms, logics, and accounts that we "draw" upon in our research or that inform our research, fit together, and allow us to develop explanations and accounts (Diagram 1.1). It is a second-order reflection about our understanding of theory itself and explores the status, foundations, and scope what theory itself is and does. While this may sound like a rival definition or normative project about theory, I want to instead suggest that this is tied to the idea of reflexivity (Fig. 2).
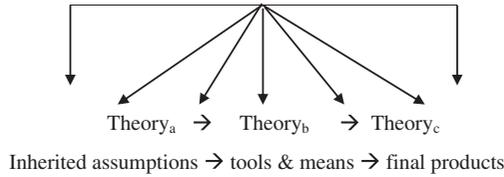
Theory_a  →  Theory_b  →  Theory_c

Inherited assumptions → tools & means → final products

*Fig. 2.*   Metatheory.

As a mode of inquiry, metatheory has often been tied to what have been called background theories or background assumptions (see, e.g., Bhaskar, 2014 [1979], Boyd, 1989). Background assumptions operate alongside, underneath, and in the shadows of their more explicit counterparts and influence how various concepts and logics are interrelated, understood, used, justified, or even, how and why particular explanations are seen as plausible. As such, they are both philosophical, sociological, and psychological. They are "silent partners" that − from start to finish − influence our theoretical and empirical endeavors including how we define theory and metatheory (Gouldner, 1980, p. 29).

Whether we like it or not, much of our theoretical work and empirical research (to reproduce that artificial distinction) is dictated, organized, and entwined with our, often unconscious, background assumptions. As background assumptions pervade and inform the character and characteristics of our sociological inquiry, a reflexive sociology initiates a theoretical vigilance as to our philosophical, sociological, and psychological situation and compels us to identify and foreground these assumptions throughout our work so that they can be interrogated and so that we can come to a better and more realistic understanding of what it is we think we are doing when we are doing empirical research, theory, sociology, and the social world we investigate. This has been the terrain critical realism as a form of metatheoretical reflexivity has operated within and made its mark.

As has been mentioned above, background assumptions are not simply limited to particular domains or particular theoretical modes but represent the interrelation of the different definitions we might wish to give to what constitutes theoretical explorations and what constitutes empirical research. Inherently, background conditions come in a few different interrelated varieties, sizes, and scales operating at different levels and with different intensities or magnitudes, with different levels and ranges of influence and application. These assumptions are pervasive that are not limited to a particular domain or subfield but apply to the social as a whole and can be applied to almost any subject matter without restriction. They may be conceptual, but they may also be logical, broadly construed, and nonlinguistic. They may encompass explicit normative agendas but may also encompass narratives, habitus, images, symbols, and rituals of who the theorist is and what they do. At different levels, these are inherited and

provide the contours by which information is assimilated, made meaningful and justified: our most precious, primitive, and pervasive "beliefs." At the highest level of abstraction, these encompass a general orientation about the nature of order and chaos, multiplicity, heterogeneity, homogeneity, integration, process, regularity, and cohesion — all of which affects our explanations and research programs, and idea of sociology itself; at the lowest level most concrete and personal level, what it means for you to be, or identify with being, "a sociologist."

While these may sound like issues to be resolved empirically rather than philosophically, these categories organize how we even approach empirical studies — what we define as an empirical study or even a worthwhile and justifiable sociological endeavor. As Hanson famously noted, observation and empirical data are theory-laden (Hanson, 1958), but as Bhaskar further observed, the entire category of observation and "the empirical," what counts or doesn't count as empirical or observed, is also informed by our background assumptions such that the distinction between empirical and theoretical is itself a metatheoretical distinction and often contains a barely concealed normative agenda (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 151f). As a result, this is the site at which we draw upon certain orienting images and metaphors including that of fields, laws, mechanisms, actors, to provide an paradigm (tacit or explicit) that influences our existential commitments to general frameworks or particular theories that spills across the entirety of our sociological thought and empirical investigations (at both an individual and collective level).

## THE PLACE OF ONTOLOGY

In the broad context of these discussions, critical realism has focused on revindicating questions of ontology about the nature of structure, agency, and causation as a rejoinder to the collapse of theory into discussions about empirics. Whether we tend to consider people as rational agents, structure bearers, emotional beings, or some unholy combination of these things, how we understand or define a person, and what we consider to be more or less relevant factors in understanding human behavior, inevitably guides both our research and our explanation and vice versa. Are social structures primarily based in attitudes and practices? experience? material distributions? fields? structuration? and so on. How we conceptualize structure influences our understanding of, for example, racism, our empirical investigations into racism, and how we understand the reality of racism at an individual and collective level. We might be interested in understanding people's attitudes in corporate workplaces to minority colleagues and decide to undertake a series of interviews and observations designed to highlight the subtle racist attitudes and behaviors of white employees — and this is no doubt valuable. But, collectively, if the question is not asked and everyone

undertakes such research, scaling up or generalizing from such accounts, racism becomes primarily a problem of accumulated and aggregated individual attitudes − bringing with it certain ethical and political implications. This is not something that can be resolved empirically or by a focus on middle-range theory alone. These assumptions (whether made explicit or not) or committed to lightly or with conviction inform the relationship of a particular study to the broader social situation, linking our empirical or theoretical work to history and society at large, and require broader metatheoretical inquiries that don't define terms like racism in advance or tell us what we are going to find but orient our investigations into the nature of things we are going to find, that is, our ontology, our account not only of what exists and behave but *how* things exist (Morton, 2017).

Ontological background assumptions are continually made and reinforced as we go about research. For the most part, they remain just that: background assumptions. We are largely unaware of them, and they are generally intuitive and tacit and, unless there is a crisis, we don't tend to cast our eye upon them. Because of this, we may find that we are drawn (subconsciously) to particular ontologies and not others; we tend toward offering certain kinds of explanations which appear perfectly obvious and natural to us, whether because of culture, socialization, education, or idiosyncratic experience (Gouldner, 1980, p. 30f). The background conditions not only "sensitize" us to certain phenomena in the social world, they draw us to certain types of explanation (Gouldner, 1980, p. 30f). At an individual and collective level, we tend to see certain things that we find intuitive and tend to corroborate and resonate with our background assumptions. While Durkheim and Bourdieu are attentive to social and cultural beliefs that require awareness, reflexivity, and a scientific break, critical realism takes this a step further into the realms of ontology, philosophy, and metatheory. Our philosophical and ontological background assumptions necessarily act to both conceal and manifest different features of the social world. If we think of background assumptions and ontologies as maps, they provide us orientation in the social world. Maps may not represent everything, let alone accurately, but enough to highlight particular features in particular ways. Different maps pick out different features of the world, to different degrees of accuracy, for different purposes, even when attempting to chart the same area. They may be more or less detailed, contain more or less redundancy, and even gloss over certain features − but they are all constrained by the reality they are trying to represent, the conceptual schemas they use, the interpretation they give, and the practices they are trying to guide. Where one of these features is out of balance, the others can be used to correct the excesses, lacks, and/or defects. When a map is inaccurate, it is unhelpful or misleading in the way that it interprets the landscape and ceases to guide, direct, or explain a terrain; these other elements can then be brought in to investigate where things have gone wrong. They provide different sights and insights but at the cost of oversights and blindness. Our background assumptions are never simply lenses that we can pick up and discard like a magnifying glass − they form our sight, and this

sight defines, confines, and inhibits our empirical explanations and our theoretical development. And these maps are not equal − some are better than others.

Echoing Foucault, Bourdieu and Wacquant suggest this form of metatheory entails a systematic exploration of the "unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought" that calls for analysis of "scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems, and categories of judgment" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40) perhaps above all the situation of the analyst and the taken for granted norms associated with the academic field and the various institutions we inhabit. Such a reflexive project unquestionably extends from and moves between the sociology of sociology and the philosophy of sociology. Indeed, the two are inexorably intertwined. Ontology, philosophy, and background assumptions are always entangled with personal, historical, cultural, and social aspects. Philosophical and ontological commitments are reinforced at each level by what work is valued and rewarded within the academy, what kind of work is published in the top journals, who gets the top jobs, how the sociological community to a particular work, whose work, and what type of work is valued, valorized, and fetishized and whose work is marginalized. This is in some part due to the background assumptions imbedded in sociology as a profession and always raises questions about norms and strategic deliberation. As a result, ontologies and theoretical signaling imbedded in our research will either resonate with compatible background assumptions or generate a painful dissonance within the community (c.f. Gouldner, 1980, p. 29). Accordingly, these background assumptions provide the basis of various choices and decisions we make about our research and research objects and provide the invisible cement that links together what would otherwise be disconnected in the discipline.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Insofar as much empirical research takes place at the individual level, the recognition of these background assumptions places a reflexive imperative upon the sociologist as an individual researcher to, as Gouldner so beautifully expresses, "penetrate deeply into their daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and to raise the sociologist's self-awareness" (Gouldner, 1980, p. 489). The process of education is therefore always a transformation of the educated, as students learn new habits and practices, are provided with transfixing images and narratives, and as knowledges and practices are instilled in them. For the sociologist, this extends further into a cultural analysis of sociology itself and therefore also an analysis of the sociologist. In this sense, reflexivity often begins with the socially situated individual. Social reality is contingent upon this reflexivity about the position and standpoint of the knower and her encounter with the world, and it is incumbent for the sociologist to be equipped

with the means to enact this kind of reflexivity about their standpoint. The empirical investigation into social phenomena is contingent upon the knower's disciplinary awareness and self-awareness. This includes an openness to bad news and self-critique, identifying the points of resistance, the artificial boundaries that are established, and the navigation of those points, an awareness of what is allowed and what is prohibited (Gouldner, 1980, p. 494). This is to say, a reflexive sociology, or the sociology of sociology, informs the sociologist about her own background assumptions and the boundaries of acceptability within the field (through an examination of the background assumptions and the power games within the discipline, particularly when it comes to theory) in order for the sociologist to orient herself. In this history of calls to reflexivity, for Gouldner this plays out at the level of values. For Mills, the level of the individual. For Durkheim and Bourdieu, reflexivity lies in the construction of the theoretical in the face of the distorting influences of the social origins and coordinates (notably our position within various fields). For Sandra Harding and Feminist Standpoint Theory, the categories of gender and knowledge. In critical realism, the focus is firmly upon the philosophical and the affect this has upon our practical logics and empirical and theoretical explorations.

In short, the critical realist gesture embodied in this volume is simple; we need to make these tacit, implicit, unconscious background assumptions and the various distinctions, delineations, implications, and norms visible, conscious, and, where possible, deliberate, bringing to light the deep metatheoretical, philosophical, and ontological structures that inform so much of what we do − and we need to be less hesitant to do so. Yet, rather than reifying particular conceptions and accounts of reality that always threatens any "realist" project, reflexivity at the level of metatheory also recognizes that such a project is always bounded by individual, historical, political, and sociological factors that requires more than a degree of epistemic humility and relativism. This tension should not be collapsed. The critical realist wager is that by holding these things together, in becoming more reflexive about philosophy and ontology, we are able to develop a better, more self-aware discipline. In short, insofar as our philosophical and ontological assumptions are already in the background and already informing us, we are doing philosophy and ontology anyway, so we might as well do it more consciously and deliberately. Such an activity will always drive sociology, and the sociologist, into an existential crisis.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The articles in this volume represent an attempt at metatheoretical reflexivity under the banner of critical realism. They arose from a symposium hosted at the University of Michigan on the "History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences" and a symposium on "Values and Flourishing in the Humanities and

Social Sciences Conference 2017" hosted at Yale University. These events were interdisciplinary, and, while hosted by people who identify with critical realism, contained a much broader spectrum of people committed to post-positivist social science.[10] The papers included in this volume can be broken down into two distinct types: metatheoretical reflexivity about ontology (notably causation) and metaethical reflexivity concerning the place of values and ethics in social science.

Philip Gorski in his article "After positivism: critical realism and historical sociology" explores the epistemological crisis within comparative-historical sociology. Gorski outlines and defends a critical realist approach against positivism and efforts at statistical inductive, the Millian approach of Theta Skocpol, middle-range theory, methodological individualism, and the language of causal mechanism. Instead, Gorski argues for a reconstructive theory of explanation grounded in a realist account of structures, powers, and processes, what he provocatively calls neo-critical realism.

In "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," reproduced in this volume with the generous permission of *Hypatia*, Elizabeth Anderson makes the case for not only the need but the necessity of value commitments in social science. Unpacking the flawed logic and confused arguments for value-neutrality, Anderson reveals the fundamental criterion of illegitimate guidance: when value judgments operate to drive inquiry to a predetermined conclusion. Instead, Anderson makes the case that values, and political values, can guide science without violating this criterion. Using divorce as a case study, Anderson shows how feminist approaches have not only been more generative but also more objective precisely because of their value and political commitments.

In "Conjunctures and Assemblages" Claire Decoteau analyzes causation in the context of assemblage theories, providing a thorough overview of accounts of overdetermination and assembly from the work of Louis Althusser to Manuel DeLanda, Decoteau argues for a realist and conjunctural account of causation taking serious realist explanation but situated within an account of the social world as an open system that requires us to take heterogeneity and multicausality seriously. The social world is comprised of a series of complex wholes that hold together disparate multiplicities of social forms. Drawing upon her work exploring the health-seeking behaviors members of the Sundanese diaspora community attempting to come to terms with the "autism epidemic," Decoteau constructs a multivaried and stratified account and heuristic of causal explanation.

Moving into questions of ethics, politics, and the good life, in "Principles of Reconstructive Social Theory" Frédéric Vandenberghe explores accounts of freedom, reflexivity, disinterestedness, and alterity. This intervention is not only theoretical, but Vandenberghe stresses, politically salient in light of the contemporary political conjuncture in the USA, Russia, Turkey, Syria, Brazil, India, and the EU. Vandenberghe argues for the necessity of reconnecting moral

philosophy and moral sociology to critical theory and realism, uncovering the real structures of injustice that generate social pathologies and highlight the dangers of authoritarian attempts to impose visions of the good life.

Finally, in his paper "Strange bedfellows? Ontology, normativity, critical realism and queer theory," Timothy Rutzou explores the relationship between queer theory and ontology. Defending the place of ontology within queer theory, Rutzou critiques the ontological programs, while outlining and clarifying the underlying ontological assumptions within queer theory. Building upon the important work of Judith Butler, Rutzou casts queer theory not only as deconstructive, linguistic, and performative but as constructive, entailing broader ontological and normative implications of queer theory. Most provocatively, against other realist attempts to develop social ontologies of personhood which are critical of queer theory, Rutzou argues that queer theory can be understood as a uniquely realist enterprise founded upon a commitment to open systems and conjunctural causation.

# NOTES

1. A phrase not used by Mills.

2. One might think here of the early Frankfurt school, Zygmunt Bauman, or Jurgen Habermas whose status as sociologists might be questioned for their often lack of empirical research in favor of broader cultural analysis.

3. One might think here of the various discussion about the nature of modernity and postmodernity that occupied Horkheimer and Adorno (2007), Habermas (1990), Bauman (2000), Lyotard (1984), Jameson (1984), and others and sits uneasily between philosophy, social theory, sociology, and cultural studies.

4. A somewhat overlooked curiosity in his account of theories of the middle range, Merton notes: "Some sociologists still write as though they expect, here and now, formulation of *the* general sociological theory broad enough to encompass the vast ranges of precisely observed details of social behavior, organization, and change and fruitful enough to direct the attention of research workers to a flow of problems for empirical research" but before launching into a historical contextualization of the birth of sociology amidst an intellectual context of grand philosophical systems whose influence "are still too much with us," somewhat coyly notes "This I take to be a premature and apocalyptic belief. We are not ready. Not enough preparatory work has been done" (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 45). In which case, if the program Merton outlines is indeed a preliminary necessity at which point does the self-imposed tutelage of the middle range end and efforts of an enlightened program of theory building beyond the middle range begin? Or is the proliferation of middle-range theories expected to organically produce the messianic whole at some point in the future? Or do we live in hope of something that will never arrive? While Merton indicates that this is not likely in the *near* future, it ambiguously seems the hope of moving beyond a "multitude of different parts and pieces that do not fit together well" and arriving at a grand unifying theory is not entirely off the table for Merton (Merton, 1967[1949], p. 48).

5. Arguably, this balkanization has now resulted in a contemporary specialization and pluralism into subdisciplines that requires a process of dedifferentiation (Mouzelis, 1995, p. 153).

6. More or less equivalent to certain Peircian definitions of abduction.

7. As Merton suggested, and cited by Camic and Gross "it is not so much the plurality of paradigms as the collective acceptance by practicing sociologists of a single paradigm proposed as a panacea that would constitute a deep crisis with ensuing stasis (Merton, 1975, p. 29; cf Eisenstadt with Curelaru, 1976; Rorty, 1981)" (Camic & Gross, 1998, p. 460).

8. Abend does give this qualification addendum "For example, consider a worldview which believes in occult witches who have causal powers over social processes, and which sees the examination of witchcraft substance as the only path to knowledge. We may agree that a sensible rule of the sociological language would be something like this: the application of the word 'theory' is restricted to objects that do not involve this type of ontology and epistemology" (Abend, 2008, p. 196).

9. To give enumerating the term theory a break.

10. Which, for different reasons namely publishing commitments, is unfortunately not represented in this volume.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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