**The Meanings of Theorizing**

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Richard Swedberg has done the social sciences a significant service by encouraging scholars to focus less on ‘theory’ as a thing and more on ‘theorizing’ as a practice. His point that ‘theorizing comes before theory’ can be read as a an empirical and as a normative argument: Swedberg makes the claim that theorizing comes before theory in the actual process involved in the production of social scientific works and he suggests that theorizing *should* come before theory, or that attention to theorizing should come before attention to theory. Swedberg's project is not least also a pedagogical project: He wants to change the way we teach theory and it is to his credit that he has sustained this project over a number of years (Swedberg 2012, 2014a) and has enrolled a significant number of colleagues (e.g. Swedberg 2014b).

Of course the call for a shift from theory to theorizing raises the question as to what exactly we mean by ‘theorizing’. It has been observed that 'theory' is a mutlivalent term, which means different things to different people (Abend 2008). Theory is also a judgemental term, which is used both to value and to devalue certain kinds of work. The shift in focus from 'theory' to 'theorizing' has advantages for this discussion but it does not by itself settle the issues raised by different meanings of these terms.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss different ways in which theorizing can be understood. This allows me to make the judgements and choices invoked in Swedberg's account explicit in a different way. Briefly, I will distinguish between theorizing as the interpretation of major figures, as the application of existing concepts, as linking observation to existential issues, as the development of new concepts and as the linking of concepts to testable hypothesis.

I will use this to discuss how different aspects of theorizing might relate to each other and to examine some of the obstacles to implementing Swedberg's agenda. I will also raise questions regarding the relationship between theorizing and explanation, an issue, which comes up in Swedberg's account but on which his position seems rather cautious. I will suggest that we should more explicitly challenge the widely-held assumption that theorizing needs to serve explanation, and needs to serve a very specific type of explanation.

*Some modes of theorizing*

a) Interpreting major figures

In one interpretation, the practice of theorizing consists in reading the work of scholars deemed to be theorists and trying to understand their work (see ‘theory 4’ in Abend 2008: 179). The question guiding such practice is: ‘what does theorist x really mean?’ The argument of the resulting theory paper might suggest that theorist x, contrary to common interpretation, has meant to emphasize a, not b; that he or she was really more influenced by y than previously recognised; that there is a tension between a and b in x's work or that we can only understand x if we understand the importance of this or that element of the historical context of his or her work.

b) Applying existing concepts to new observations

In a related but different version of theorizing, scholars relate an existing concept to an empirical phenomenon. This version of theorizing is related to the practice discussed above because existing concepts are often associated with one or several major figures. This form of theorizing is underlying arguments, such as ‘Discourses relating to fitness (or healthy eating, or education) are an example of governmentality’, ‘such and such instance of urban development is a case of primitive accumulation’, or ‘cultural representations surrounding 'terrorist' attacks are structured by an opposition between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' and can be understood as an expression of civil religion.’

c) Linking a new fact or observation to an existential issue or a historical trend

Gabriel Abend has noted that theory can also have the meaning of weltanschauung (Abend 2008: 179), which I would describe as a set of ideas relating to a fundamental way of seeing the world, its opportunities and challenges or a narrative about historical trends. This element of theorizing is part of the target in Merton's polemic against grand theorizing (Merton 1968). In this tradition, theorizing can be the linking of a new act to an existential issue or historical trend, to questions of progress, or decline, say, or freedom, or power. This practice sometimes shapes sociological commentary on public issues and is often present in what Michael Savage calls 'epochal sociology' (Savage 2009) and Fran Osrecki calls 'Zeitdiagnose' (Osrecki 2011).

d) Developing new concepts in dialogue with observations and previous concepts

In this view, theorizing consists in coining new concepts in relation to empirical observation of new phenomena. This is what Weber did when he distinguished between types of authority, or what Bourdieu did when he started writing about ‘cultural capital’. Swedberg highlights this aspect of theorizing when he advises to give a phenomenon ‘a new name’ (Swedberg 2016: 7) and he discusses a number of practical strategies that would help with this task and build on it, such as using analogies and playing with typologies. This practice presupposes rejecting both a position that believes in the complete determination of thought by facts, which would describe themselves, and a position, which would imagine concepts as entirely free-floating, thereby robbing theorizing of its objects.

e) Joining concepts to a testable hypothesis about a causal relationship between them

Lastly, theorizing is often equated with the practice of linking concepts to a testable hypothesis (Abend 2008: 178). As Abbott has pointed out, this relationship is often imagined as a linear one (Abbott 1998, 2005). The result of this practice of theorizing is familiar to us in the form of statements, such as: 'Protestantism causes (or does not cause) development', 'family breakdown causes (or does not cause) crime', 'parents income (or schools) cause educational success', and so on and so forth.

*The role of sacred texts and major figures*

In my interpretation, the shift from theory to theorizing encourages us to redistribute some value from a), b), and c) to d). In case this seems like an easy target, or an all-too obvious point, let us recall how central major figures and their legacy still are to the enterprise of theorizing, and with that also consider some of the institutional obstacles to the implementation of Swedberg's project.

Most syllabi and reading lists in sociological theory are still organized by 'big names' and foster theorizing as the art of interpretation of major texts. Swedberg is too polite to discuss this, but, in addition, entire research careers are still based on a defended authority of interpretation over *other* theorists. In a careful and insightful paper, Stefan Bagheer has traced the rise of a Weber industry - a transition from Weber's own attempt to understand the world to attempts to understand Weber (Bagheer 2010). Other authors' names have since been added to Weber as an object worthy of sociological study, and the list grows ever longer. This includes contemporary figures, with Bruno Latour and Luc Boltanski perhaps the latest figure to be summarized and have their meanings debated as an end in itself. There have been challenges to the theoretical canon in terms of who exactly should be part of it, with questions raised about the underrepresentation of women, theorists of colour and southern theorists (Seidman 1994, Connell 1997, 2007, Bhambra 2014). There has been much less sustained debate about the implications of having a canon of people (and texts) in a discipline supposedly focused on objects of another kind (see Guggenheim and Krause 2012).

Theorizing in the sense of b) - the application of concepts - is reinforced by the formation of theoretical schools that rewards the acquisition of internally valued language and discourages internal critique. Peer review can reward loyality to a specific tradition over novelty (both claimed and real).

Disciplinary boundaries, and the proliferation of subfields have can create separations between conversations that lead to publication opportunities for papers practicing theorizing in the style of a) and b), that is reinterpreting or summarizing a theorist for a specific audience or applying a concept to a specific setting: Papers might argue that scholars of education can benefit from reading Latour, or that criminologists can use Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'.

There is variation in these practices among national and disciplinary contexts, which we could examine in more detail. We might find, for example, that in the US, a higher degree of professionalization has largely marginalised theorizing that takes the form of linking facts to existential questions in the manner of weltanschauung. But american theorizing in sociology is probably as centred on major figures as elsewhere, partly because the boundaries around the profession are so well-defined. As it can seem entirely acceptable to assume that no one has read anything produced by people without positions in US sociology departments, there is a niche for work that summarizes, interprets and translates the writings of foreign sociologists and of scholars with jobs in other disciplines.

If a shift from theory to theorizing encourages us to distribute value away from theorizing a) and b) (and c)), reading major texts and authors is of course still important. Swedberg emphasizes this when he says sociological theorizing requires a trained sociological sensitivity, He also suggests students should and pick a master and learn from his (or her) work. In that sense, as Swedberg is well aware, theory *does* come before theorizin*g*. I would add to this suggestion to focus on one author that students of all levels also benefit from learning about the differences between major figures and approaches. Theoretical stakes - about the role of meaning in social life for example, or the problem of social order - are created in the contestation between approaches.

Major texts and old concepts are also an important raw material for new concepts. We can create new concepts from old when we ask, for example, how the relevance of specific (old) concepts varies historically and across cultural contexts, or when we explore the lines along which phenomena captured by an old concept are further differentiated.

*The ends of theorizing*

To say that theorizing comes before theory also encourages us to allocate some of the value accorded to e (theorizing as developing hypothesis that link concepts) onto d (developing new concepts). Indeed, if one major obstacle to the appreciation of theorizing as the practice is the focus on major authors and sacred texts, the other is the focus on theory as a set of testable hypothesis, which treats the development of concepts as a preliminary step for the real business of measurement and explanation.

This view that classification and conceptualization is only a preliminary step for measurement, and explanation, has a history in a version of the philosophy of science, which is heavily oriented by an idealised view of physics, as opposed to for example biology (Marradi 1990, Mayr 1980). The power of this view in the social sciences does not rest on philosophical underpinnings alone; it is also sustained by the practicalities of research that relies on data, which is already categorised and coded, such as that circulating in large data-sets.

Because the view that conceptualisation is only a preliminary step to a very specific type of explanation is so pervasive, I think we should be more explicit in challenging it. Swedberg seems to me to be quite cautious in this regard when he notes that explanation is the 'center piece of a theory' (Swedberg 2016: 10) and only alludes to the fact that there are different ways in which explanation is understood in different traditions. In order to create space for practices of theorizing, including d) - the development of new concepts - we should spell out the many different ways in which conceptualisation can contribute to explanation and point out that explanation is not the only end of conceptualization.

Ways of explanation might include, in addition to linear-causal explanation, narrative forms of explanation, functionalist explanation (see Pickvance 2001) and explanation via conditions of possibility (see Krause 2016). In this latter mode of investigation, a particular phenomenon is examined in comparison to other phenomena in order to specify its form. In dialogue with other observations, we can ask: ‘What would have to be different for this to be different from what it is?’ Naming conditions of possibility does not allow us to assess the relative impact of competing factors. But it gives us an overview of possible leverage points, analytically and perhaps practically. It can help us avoid the common tendency to neglect what is constant across cases and/ or focus on ever smaller and more narrowly conceived outcomes as objects of explanation.

I would also argue that theorising as conceptualization need not always be subordinated to explanation as an end goal. Theorizing can also improve the analytical description of specific social phenomena or social forms; and it can be the basis of sociological critique. By critique I do not necessarily mean 'denunciation' or 'judgement'. Sociological concepts often provide a new way of looking at what is and what is not necessary about the social world, an analytically specified way of saying: 'This could be otherwise'.

*Conclusion*

I have discussed some of the different possible meanings of theorizing, as a different way to get into the choices and stakes that Swedberg is invoking in his discussion. The practical emphasis on theorizing can encourage us to go beyond the focus on major figures on the one hand, and beyond the testing of hypothesis for causal relationships between variables found in pre-existing datasets on the other hand.

Theory, and the reproduction of theory, can rely on a number of routines, devices and institutions, included handed-down syllabi, dynamics of school-formation and discipleship, textbooks and handbooks, professional rewards in subfields, and ready-made categories circulating in datasets. Theorizing happens in the interstices: In Swedberg's classes I am sure, but also I would think in a good many methods and substantive classes, in workshops for discussing papers, and in libraries and coffee-shops.

In order to create intellectual space for practices of theorizing, including the development of new concepts, in order for practices of theorizing to be able to "go somewhere', we should spell out the many different ways in which conceptualisation can contribute to explanation and point out that explanation is not the only end of conceptualization and theorizing.

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