Theory, the Social and the Public – Reflections on the Fads and Foibles of Sociology

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Abstract

Responding to a recent Nexus article from Eduardo de la Fuente, this paper is concerned primarily with two underpinning questions. Firstly, what makes ‘theory that lasts’. In answering this I briefly examine some of the work of Riley (2010) in his discussion of the Durkheimians to analyse what influenced their collective fervour over the sacred. It is my proposition that one of the fundamental features of this was the overarching concern with the social, which the Année was importantly concerned with. It is clear that the concept of the ‘sacred’ represents ‘theory that lasts’. Secondly, the paper reflects further on the role of theory in the public sphere. Using Juliet Schor as an example, it suggests that sociology which concerns itself fundamentally with the social, can find a place in the public. However, whether this is too idealistic in our contemporary setting is worth considering.

Keywords: Theory, Public Sociology, the Social, Durkheimians, Juliet Schor

Introduction.

In a recent commentary from de la Fuente (2012) on the state of theory, he contends that an issue for sociology is the rise of what he terms ‘theoreticism’. By this, de la Fuente (2012: 2) means the ‘dizzying succession of theories and theorists who were popular for a short period of time’ but whom fail when a new theory arrives. Of course, as he confesses, social theory ‘fads’ are not new, nor are they inherently bad. Rather,

a central question facing intellectual fads is: once the dust has settled (metaphorically and – in the case of old sociology books – literally) how can we tell if any real conceptual innovation has taken place? (de la Fuente 2012: 3).
No doubt this is a fundamental query of any theoretical buzz that emerges. It maybe that we ought not to be questioning the ‘staying power’ of these innovations in theory, but whether they are innovative at all. As Turner (2003: 146) has eloquently argued, the mastery of certain foundational texts is the ticket to enter a mature social theory where ‘originality typically amounts to a reuse or extension of something that is already there’ (Turner 2003: 146). This appears to resonate with Beck’s (2004: 152) call to transcend the core concepts and foundations of social theory (which he labels ‘zombie concepts’). However, as I shall return to later, Turner (2009) is sceptical of the death of the ‘pre-disciplinary past of social theory’.

The purpose that underpins de la Fuente’s (2012) piece is to advocate for a generic ‘social science theory’. This overcomes discipline boundaries by incorporating the totality of social sciences. Sociology, he argues, ‘have many fellow-travellers’ which are silenced or ignored in the pursuit of innovative theory (de la Fuente 2012: 6). Yet we might propose that social theory is a distinct and separate discipline from sociology which already feeds a range of social sciences. However, his point is important and one that cannot be overlooked. If we take a cursory glance over theory historically, those that have ‘stood the test of time’ (de la Fuente 2012: 8) are well used consistently across a range of social science disciplines.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly and in response to de la Fuente’s (2012) piece, it seeks to understand reasons for ‘theory that lasts’. While de la Fuente (2012) turns to the Chicago school to demonstrate this, I turn to the Durkheimians to demonstrate that underpinning the significant concept of the ‘sacred’ is a collective concern towards the social amongst the Année group. The second part of the paper diverts from de la Fuente’s (2012) piece. Here I incorporate the question of public engagement with theory and ask, where are the theorists in the public sphere? Using Juliet Schor as an example, I propose following the words of Steven Turner (2009), that theoretical work which concentrates on the ‘big ticket’ items related to the social might well engage the public sphere more successfully.

**Theory that lasts?**

As mentioned above, the core ingredient of de la Fuente’s (2012: 8) recipe for good theory is the ‘opposite of a fad’ which is the ‘stuff that stands the test of time’ and ‘continue[s] to serve us well, to this day’. We might wonder what an exemplar of ‘good theory’ therefore is. de la
Fuente (2012) chooses the Chicago school not simply because it’s conceptual innovations remain steadfast in social science today, but due to the collaborative experience it encouraged amongst disciplines. I wish here to take a different tack. Theory that appears to last, in some respects, has often (not always) been associated with the changing nature of the social. Classical social theory attests to this as also does the more contemporary works such as Giddens, Beck, Baudrillard and Bauman to name a few. I wish to draw upon the Durkheimian experience to demonstrate this further and contend that it was their uncomfortableness with the transformation of the social which led to the collective energies that underpinned a theory that lasts still today.

I do not wish here to suggest we need to return back to a Durkheimian directive for sociology. Rather, their experience should lend to us something concrete about theory that ‘lasts’. Of course, the coming together of the Année group can be attributed to Durkheim’s own charisma (cf. Riley 2010). The promises of the new discipline of sociology were an influence too (see below). However, beyond Durkheim lay a deep concern with the social which was, for the Année group, challenged by rising individualism. Durkheim’s turn to religious sociology can be seen in some ways as a challenge to the Marxist reliance on materialism (see Alexander 2005). Yet, in more conventional thought, the work on religion existed predominantly for the Durkheimians in a quest to connect ‘the category of the sacred’ to the collective conscience (Riley 2010: 155).

We should pause to remember that Durkheim (1995[1912]) concludes that the nature of religion is society worshipping itself. What then is the connection of this to the direction of the social in modernity? Riley (2010: 157) answers this;

If the true sacred object of religion was the social, and if a secular morality had to teach an adherence to social solidarity as its central objective, there could be no better educational program for the inculcation of this new sacred practice than the teaching of sociology.

In other words, sociology itself was to become the saviour of collective solidarity. It would teach persons how ‘society lives and acts within him (sic), how it is the best part of [their] nature’ (Durkheim in Riley 2010: 157). From this perspective, sociology was to replace the struggling philosophical and Christian traditions as the new moraliser in the quest for a strong social.
Riley (2010) also relates that in the Année group’s research of the sacred, the younger generation embraced it both as an intellectual and personal pursuit. Hertz and Mauss in particular both appear to have sought for a deeper content and meaning to life, especially the former in his service in the French army (see Riley 2010). Even more dramatic however was the group’s belief in the collective work that they would bring forth, and the power behind it. This is highlighted in an excerpt from a letter from Hubert to Mauss (cited in Riley 2010: 189 italics added);

Don’t forget that we are called, or at least I hope so, to have an influence, that we must stimulate work around us, that we will be influential less by the perfection of our own work than by the activity of our thought, than by the need, the desire, the sacred fire of organised work that will emanate from us.

This quote is somewhat telling, as is the entire course of work that the Durkheimians undertook. Much of their work had a twofold purpose – to create knowledge and also to create pathways for a stronger social. We need only examine the closing passages of Mauss’ (1967: 66) The Gift to witness his belief in the ‘ancient’ morality of gift giving as a potential influence on ‘professional morality and corporate law’ as an example.

The point I wish to make in this very messy and brief discussion of the Durkheimians is that (1) they demonstrated an uncanny and perhaps unrivalled (except for potentially the Frankfurt school) belief that their work could alter the direction of the social, (2) their belief in this work led to a collective fervour amongst the theorists and (3) the intellectual charisma of their theory has since captured the imaginations of theorists generations on. On the point of the latter, we only need trace the history of the ‘sacred’ to recognise its influence. From the Année scholars themselves through to the second generation Durkheimians in the likes of Callois, Bataille, Davy and Halbswachs; through to the structuralist anthropologists in Douglas and Levi-Strauss; into the poststructuralists (contentious as it may seem) such as Derrida, Baudrillard and Foucault (cf. Riley 2010) and finally with the contemporary cultural sociologists such as Alexander and Smith. What we have witnessed is the continual rejuvenation of the concept of the sacred in a quest to understand the social – without the deeper quest to alter it as the Durkheimians first attempted to engineer.

Theory for a Public.
What has this got to do with the fundamental premise of the paper? Some may say not much. The Durkheimians were notorious for their almost zealous pursuit of sociology as the pre-eminent discipline of the time, often marginalizing others in their path (cf. Riley 2010; see also Turner 2003 for a similar discussion of Parsons and Merton). However, what is astounding is the level of commitment displayed towards a concept/idea that concentrated so heavily on the social. This, I argue, provides the impetus for collaborative energy to produce ‘theory that lasts’ – an extension on de la Fuente’s (2012) argument. However, in relation to the social, there is more that theory might accomplish. Here I wish to digress slightly from the theme of de la Fuente’s (2012) paper.

In forthcoming piece from Turner, the question of sociology’s relationship with the public (from this position of contemplating the social) provides us with pause to reflect on theory’s role. In response to Burawoy’s (2005) ‘public sociology’, Turner writes;

The kind of public approbation and interest that sociology had in the 1950s, when David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) was a best seller, had to do with its intellectual content, not its affinity with specific social movements. The reading of the most influential ‘public sociologists’ of the present has everything to do with this affinity. Burawoy’s colleague Arlie Hochschild’s writings, such as *The Managed Heart* (1983) and *The Second Shift* (1989), in contrast, are specifically allied with feminism. This is the model Burawoy’s idea of public sociology celebrates…Reisman’s book had specific ideological content: it was an attack on American individualism. This kind of attack had been associated with sociology in the United States from its founding. But it was not written or read as the supporting act for a movement. Hochschild’s writings (for example, *Managed Heart*) can only be read that way.

That Burawoy’s (2005) public sociology leans towards leftist social movements is clear. Despite suggesting that public sociology can cross political divides, he comments ‘[i]f sociology actually supports more liberal or critical public sociologies that is a consequence of the evolving ethos of the sociological community’ (Burawoy 2005: 9) No doubt this is true. Yet can conservative sociology exist without being potentially marginalised in the professional sociological community (Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* case in point)? I am not so convinced. As Burawoy (2005: 14) argues, public sociology is ‘often an avenue for the marginalized, locked out of the policy arena and ostracized in the academy’. Often these are the stomping grounds of leftist groups, rather than conservatives.
However, it this association of sociology to the fringes that Turner (forthcoming) finds concerning;

This allergy to the big questions continued in the era described by Burawoy and exemplified by Hochschild, and for good reasons, associated with the purposes of public sociology: an organic intellectual writing in support of a social cause or movement is not going to have much concern with the problem of ‘the social’ in an abstract sense.

In other words, a public sociology which concentrates on the ‘edges’, is not going to locate its work in the larger issues of the ‘social’ and its direction. In another publication, Turner (2009: 562) questions the sociology’s connection to a ‘resistance paradigm’ which binds theory to ‘anti-liberal’ sentiments. Of course, there is nothing fundamentally improper about providing voice to the ‘voiceless’ or being associated with certain social movements. It is quite apparent that the Durkheimians, most significantly Mauss and Hertz, were involved with socialist parties. However, Turner’s (2009: 562) impression is that those ‘big ticket’ items that once permeated public sociology have been lost in the wash.

What has this got to do with the public? As Turner (forthcoming) mentions, books like Riesman’s (1950) were once found in local bookstores and not just in academic libraries. They were instrumental in developing discussions amongst the public about the relationship of the social and the individual. There is limited evidence that the Durkheimians ever did the same – but the whole premise of their work was to engage fundamentally with the public, an idea that was never perhaps realised. However, others, including Simmel and Weber, were active participants in the discussion and debate of various ‘grand’ issues related to the social. Who does today?

The answer to this latter question is one that has frustrated sociologists across the country, including this author. In recent times we have seen the rise of the lay social commentator, treated as if their opinions were invaluable, and often spruiking their consultancy service through the media. It is not my intention here to question the ethics of this process, merely to question where the theorists are. If we took a cursory glance at those intellectuals who have gathered a public presence, we find those who have written on ‘big ticket’ items that fundamentally impact the ‘social’ in the public. For instance, Clive Hamilton’s work on the individualisation of ‘economic growth’ and ‘progress’ in *Growth Fetish* delivered him a platform to become a ‘public’ intellectual on issues beyond economics including climate
change. Similar could be said of philosopher Alain de Botton, psychologist Martin Seligman and Herald economist Ross Gittins.

Do we have any examples of sociologists/theorists entering the public fray successfully? One could argue that this has been a feature of Giddens’ success, particular in his quest for the Third Way. However, I take as a contemporary example (amongst others) the works of Juliet Schor. Arguably not a theorist in the textbook sense, her works The Overworked American and The Overspent American were stark criticisms of hyper-consumerism and its impact on the social. In a more recent book, Born to Buy, she extends her thesis to include the ‘commercialization of childhood’. While she is associated now with movements including the ‘New American Dream’, this particular book centred on fundamental concern of the social;

> As marketers strive to capture the hearts and minds of America’s children, evidence of their success is everywhere…After nearly two decades of intensive targeting of kids, there’s no doubt that industry has devised a profitable formula. It’s equally clear the corporations are not meeting children’s needs (Schor 2004: 189 italics added).

While certainly not replete with high theory from sociology (but which are founded in them) the works of Schor in publicly disseminated books such as these demonstrate a fundamental concern which is comparable to the Durkheimians – the impact of economic change on the social; the ‘big ticket’ items. Her success now as a public intellectual is not hinged on any significant link to ‘fringe issues’, but in her ability to capture the zeitgeist of discomfort within the public. We could contend that rarely in contemporary sociology/theory do we see evidence of these types of publications arising.

**Conclusion.**

When de la Fuente (2012) calls for theory that ‘lasts’, I imagine that he did not also mean for us to consider pushing further into the public. However, as Turner (forthcoming) contests building on work from Wickham, the relationship of good theory that questions the primary concern of sociology, the social, has historically led to good public engagement. Interestingly, Turner (2009: 563) proposes that even today, classical theorists like Weber, continue to be ‘invoked’ in public commentary such as those found in the ‘Financial Times’ – so much for being ‘Zombies’. Yet, as Burawoy (2005) contests, the need for sociology to be heard more
frequently in the public is paramount. How we answer this is a real dilemma. What I have proposed above is that theory which is embedded in a concern for the social, or the changing relationships of the social to other key macro issues such as the economy, firstly ‘lasts’ and secondly provides a platform for entry into the public sphere. These are the objects for discussion for a number of lay social and political commentators – we ought to be amongst them.

References.


