Do we in sociology know what we are doing when we do
‘theory’?

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Abstract

After revisiting the scene of a minor sociological accident, in which attempts to impose a
certain style of doing ‘theory’ undermine historical insights, I am prompted by a
suggestion from Stephen Turner – that ‘theorizing’ is a type of bricolage – to ask whether
we in sociology know what we are doing when we do theory. The terms of Turner’s
argument suggest that a yes answer is not a given and his Weberian way of dealing with
this harsh truth is uncomfortable.

Introduction

In a recent piece (Wickham 2012, forthcoming), I explore the way in which a number of
the contributors to the collection Sociological Objects: Reconfigurations of Social Theory
(Cooper, King, and Rettie 2009) effectively undermine their own historical insights when
they adopt aspects of the persona ‘the theorist’. I criticise them for doing this, with
considerable help from Paul du Gay’s essay in the same collection. I don’t now wish to
backtrack from the position I take in that piece. I think I was right when I wrote the piece
and, on that matter, I still think I’m right. But I have since been given pause for thought by reading Stephen Turner’s new essay ‘Theorizing as Bricolage and Bildung’ (2012, forthcoming).

After establishing a number of problems with the manner in which sociologists have, over the last fifty years, thought about ‘theorizing’, Turner suggests that a better way to think about this task is to treat it as a form of *bricolage*. This suggestion, especially as Turner expresses it, is enticing, but it is also somewhat discomforting, containing as it does the further suggestion that we in sociology cannot fully know what we are doing when we do theory. No less discomforting is Turner’s proposition that we can strengthen our approach to theorizing by facing up to the rigours of what’s actually involved in being a theorist, in just the way that Weber argued that scientists must face up to what’s involved in being a scientist.

In the first section I will briefly present my arguments about theory undermining historical insights, by way of setting the scene for my meeting with Turner’s account of theorizing as *bricolage*. In the second section I will attempt to capture not just the main points from his account but, more importantly, the unnerving dimension of his underlying suggestion that as sociologists we can never fully know what we are doing when we do theory (it certainly unnerves me). In the conclusion I will discuss the ‘cold shower’ Weberian option he prescribes for dealing with this situation (which I find only a little less unnerving).

**Theory undermining history**
In my piece that focuses on the *Sociological Objects* collection (Wickham 2012, forthcoming), I praise Geoff Cooper and a number of the other contributors for their important historical insights about sociology’s dealings with the notion of society. Here are two such insights, one from Cooper and one from another contributor:

- Cooper uses the historian Peter Wagner to discuss the ‘fortunes’ of the ‘concept of society … as a “scientific object” from its relatively recent emergence … to its possibly imminent passing away’. In doing so he highlights ‘Arendt’s apparently negative view of the social’, which she compared unfavourably to ‘the political’, particularly with regard to ‘the rise of “mass society”’, and Garfinkel’s commitment to the details of the operation of society, especially as it is exemplified in his ‘refusal of a sociological meta-language’ (Cooper 2009: 10-12).

- In her chapter on Durkheim’s complex dealings with the object society, Irene Rafanell (2009: 62) explores and extends his proposition that social facts need to be understood through the particular uses made of them.

I then argue that when they turn to knowledge they call theory, these same contributors exempt it from the historical investigation they use in dealing with other types of knowledge. More than this, they wrap it around themselves as the uniform of ‘the theorist’. For this persona, sociology is not to be conducted on the plane of historical facts, it is to be conducted on the much higher plane of theory. Here is just one example (there is room for no more) of how I demonstrate the ‘persona of the theorist’ in action:
• Rafanell (2009: 63) turns abruptly away from her historical insights and towards ‘two radical social constructionist accounts that I believe provide useful tools for grounding Durkheim’s notion of social objectivity’, one a ‘performative theory of sex and gender’, the other a ‘performative theory of social institution’. Her empirically grounded historical points about what Durkheim was doing as he put together his account of social facts quickly give way to these two ‘higher level’ theories – a theory that seeks to read the empirically grounded material through the lens of ‘the performative force of linguistic utterances’ and a theory that seeks to read it through the lens of ‘a process of self-referentiality within … referencing dynamics that denotes a clear social construction behind human knowledge and practices in general’.

After suggesting that the term ‘social construction’ is used here as a marker of the priestly theorist who is qualified to take readers where they would not be capable of going were they to remain trapped in the empirical realm, and after outlining Ian Hunter’s (2006) basic proposition that knowledge which is called theory is in fact knowledge in exactly the same way as is other knowledge – produced at a particular time and place, with the usual constraints and foibles of any down-to-earth human endeavour, including the usual scramble for status and prestige – I call, as noted earlier, on du Gay’s chapter in the book. Drawing on some of the burgeoning literature that deals with the history of theory as a practice and the theorist a persona (see esp.: Hunter 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2009), du Gay argues that ‘[T]he power of theory … is proportional to the allure of the persona it allows one to occupy. Its prestige and reach should not be underestimated’ (2009: 179).
He goes on (2009: 180) to explore various ‘sociological consequences of “the moment of theory”’, particularly that by which ‘social constructionism … has often ended up akin to an all purpose, across the board formula, and, as such, has frequently evacuated that which it purports to analyse of any of its positivity’. In particular, he asks three rhetorical questions:

First, do we actually learn anything positive about that which is subject to this theoretical exercise? Or is it the case that the social constructionist move is precisely designed to take away self-evidence from that which forms its object? Second, given that the same moves can be made on anything – robots, death, corporations, fish – what exactly is the status of the critical claim being made? Thirdly, why does deployment of the mantra “socially constructed” … give the theorist any sort of advantage in the practice of revising something, compared with those who do not buy into the social constructionist programme, those who maintain a belief in “objectivity”, for example (du Gay 2009: 180)?

This short account of what I try to do in the piece in question captures pretty well the way I was feeling as I finished it: aware of the dangers of theory but also confident these dangers could be overcome with a good dose of history. Then I bumped into Turner’s essay. Suddenly I was not at all sure that I knew what is involved in doing theory in sociology.

**Turner’s bricolage account of theory in sociology and its capacity to unnerve**
In leading into his account of theorizing as a type of ‘bricolage’, Turner first acknowledges the many attempts over the past fifty years to define theory for sociology, but he does so only to express dissatisfaction with them: ‘They say something about the form of “theory” in sociology, and provide a kind of reconstruction of the logic of theorizing at a low level, but they do little to help anyone understand what and how theorists think when they theorize’ (Turner 2012, forthcoming). He is dissatisfied for a very particular reason:

The conventional and endlessly repeated terminology of “theory” in sociology, that a theory is a set of logically interrelated propositions, is seriously misleading. The “propositions” are actually assertions about correlations. Correlations do not “logically interrelate” in the sense of deductive logic. At best they provide relatively weak warrants for claims about the correlations that “relate” to them. Sociology editors have traditionally claimed that they welcome “theory” in this sense. Not surprisingly, they don’t get any. There is little to be had, even in this diminished sense of vaguely connected inventories of correlations, and even less of it has any intellectual interest, plausibility, or significance … “Theories” of the sort envisioned by Merton, few if any of which were actually produced, would have a claim, but a very weak one, to remedy problems about spuriousness. The best methods for solving them do not involve theory in this sense (Turner 2012, forthcoming).

Turner adds a salutary and somewhat frustrated footnote to this argument: ‘I have written extensively on this topic, to little avail, at least with sociologists, who seem curiously
immune to the logical issues with this notion of theory’ (Turner 2012, forthcoming). He has good reason to be frustrated, for it is, in my experience at least, an unusual sociologist who uses theory in anything approaching a logical manner (for a discussion of the more common ways in which sociologists use theory, see esp.: Harley 2005; 2008; see also: Isaac 2010; 2012).

In building his ‘bricolage’ account, Turner heads in an unconventional direction (unconventional for most of us anyway; he has been down this path before: see esp. Turner 1994; 2001):

The capturing of ideas and thoughts from the fleeting mass of associations that the mind makes is mysterious. Everything of importance operates on the tacit level. Insights may come from thinking that goes on while one sleeps. It is a commonplace experience to face a series of unsolved problems, or simply to get stuck in writing, and to find in the morning, or even to awake to find, that there is a solution to them or a path around them. Michael Polanyi wrote about these processes as they figure in scientific discovery … and the lessons apply to “theorizing” of all kinds. People often report coming to a new insight while lecturing on a topic (Turner 2012, forthcoming).

Is this what we sociologists do when we are doing theory? Sleeping? Lecturing? Doing the washing? Doing things that we can’t really know are theory at the time we are doing them? Doing things that we will probably never know are theory, for we will never be in a
position to know how, when, to what extent, or even if they contribute to the activities that are more likely to be acknowledged by us as theory – reading, writing, teaching, presenting papers at conferences, etc.? I suspect it is. This is taking Hunter’s point – about theory being knowledge in exactly the same way as is other knowledge – to a whole new level. I’m not sure why it unnerves me, but it does. I suppose I have to confront the possibility that even as I finished writing a piece which explicitly acknowledges that the persona of the theorist is, among other things, a route to academic prestige, I was not as ready as I thought I was to ditch that prestige. Now I’m wondering whether Turner is telling me that doing theory is no more prestigious than doing the dishes. I think he is, and I think he’s right. It’s unnerving, but it’s good for me (good like an enema, perhaps).

In pushing on with his account, Turner provides more detail about just how theories produced as *bricolage* can help produce clearer pictures of objects:

Here we see the beginnings of what Levi-Strauss called *bricolage*, which I always associate with the opening of V. S. Naipaul’s novel *Miguel Street*, ‘I making the thing without a name’ … Perhaps the authors of … [these type of theories] made them with a general picture in mind, which they filled out. But the thing they made was to some extent dictated by the materials themselves. And the materials were the ideas and ‘theories,’ perspectives, and whatnot that they had lying around the workshop, or, as the case may be, the office or seminar discussion, or the results of undirected reading around. They may have had an outcome in mind, or been driven by some sort of dissatisfaction with the available pictures. The task
is to make something, something coherent enough to present as a picture, and to make a better picture than the one you were dissatisfied with (Turner 2012, forthcoming).

This quote from Turner is not so disconcerting. Here the theorist is at least doing something like what we might think of as doing theory – reading, writing, teaching, presenting papers at conferences, etc. – albeit with whatever he or she finds lying around. But while it is closer to a conventional account of doing theory/ being a theorist, the overall effect of Turner’s argument is still, to me at least, unnerving. Not only will one never be able to know for sure when one is doing theory, one will also never know what one will be using in doing theory. Again, I can see that this is not a dreadful outcome. But it still leaves open the question of who can be a theorist. Is it anyone who does the dishes or the washing? Surely not.

**Conclusion: the rigours of being a theorist**

Turner uses Weber’s ‘Calling’s’ essays to build a picture of the sort of person one must be if one is to be a theorist, in the *bricolage* sense of the term. He invites his readers to follow the spirit of Weber’s investigation of what is needed if one is to be a scientist: ‘Who might be suited [to be a theorist]? Only a very odd person, a person with very special passions and mental qualities’.

So far, this not a flattering job description. When we are doing theory in sociology, it seems, we will only do it well if we are odd, with very special passions and mental
qualities. More than this, Turner continues, we will only do it well if we are prepared to put ourselves through some hoops. He sets out just what sort of hoops when he offers us a passage from Weber and invites us to substitute the word ‘theorizing’ for the word ‘science’:

“whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science. He will never have what one may call the ‘personal experience’ of science. Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider; without this passion, this ‘thousands of years must pass before you enter into life and thousands more wait in silence’ – according to whether or not you succeed in making this conjecture; without this, you have no calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion” (Turner 2012, forthcoming, quoting Weber, emphasis in original).

How many of us in sociology can put our hand up and say ‘This is me’? How many would want to? I don’t think I’ve earned the right to put my hand up. And I don’t think I’d want to. But I do think the points Turner makes are worthy of serious debate, if for no other reason than that he has made it so difficult to confidently answer yes to the question, Do we in sociology know what we are doing when we do ‘theory’?
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References


