Tavola rotonda
Teorie sociologiche

The Rise and Fall of Social Theory. The Innsbruck Debate

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One (Meta-)Theory After Another: Introducing the Debate

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> Though they go mad they shall be sane,
> Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
> Though lovers be lost love shall not;
> And death shall have no dominion.
> Dylan Thomas

Alvin Gouldner used to say in the 1970s that sociologists are in the business of creating concepts. Fifty years later, we can safely add that one of their favorite side hustles consists in eternally returning to a bunch of *vexatae quaestiones* whose answer defies an easy solution. Among others, the status of modernity, the issue of inequalities, the problem of social order, the multiple pathways to empirical research, and of course the crisis of sociology. A contested question in particular sums them all up: the current standing and the future of sociological (or, alternatively, social) theory – a perennial, multifarious, and especially thorny matter. Whether these disputations are *generative* or *degenerative*, is debatable. At least, though, the plenary discussion titled "Rise and Fall of Social Theory" (held in Innsbruck on July 3, 2025, in the context of the midterm conference of ISA RC16, indeed the Research Committee on 'sociological theory') ended up being *regenerative*. At first, the panel was organized following the venerable pattern of Hegelian dialectic: Frédéric Vandenberghe was supposed to provide the thesis (i.e., a defense of social theory), Giuseppe Sciortino the antithesis (i.e., a provocative attack against it), and Jayme Gomes a data-driven, informed and possibly broader historical synthesis; while we (Lorenzo Sabetta and Andrea Mubi Brighenti) were given license to roam freely across the debate through a series of opening remarks. However, the final result turned out to be more unorthodox (more chaotic, yet arguably more intriguing) than that. It is reproduced and collected here.

In a sweeping and impassioned vindication of social theory, Vandenberghe reclaims it not as passive contemplation, but a kind of existential journey – that is, as an act of intellectual *autopsy* in a time of disciplinary retreat. Tracing

the decline of "grand theory" across successive generations of scholars, he argues that the marginalization of reflexive (and integrative) theorizing has hollowed out sociology's own public critical relevance. Against the drift toward methodological reductionism and the fragmentation of topical "Studies" (gender studies, cultural studies, etc.), Vandenberghe presses for a renewed vision of theory as a site of conceptual articulation, where philosophy (including, notably, moral philosophy), the social sciences, and the humanities converge to diagnose the present, thus enabling meaningful action inside it. Evoking a "grand arc" of theory stretching from metatheory to public sociology, his plea for social theory is not just an elegy for things lost, but also an attempt at reconstructing the theoretical imagination within and beyond sociology.

In response, Sciortino bitingly asks us to consider whether, on the contrary, social theory has been finally revealed to be a zombie – an undead, frightening, unloved creature lurching forward only thank to ritualistic inertia. Reconstructing its troubled genealogy and unfulfilled interdisciplinary ambitions, he points out that social theory has failed both as a critique of sociology and as a positive contribution to it, being increasingly disconnected from empirical research and public relevance. Once heralded as a space of radical thought, it now risks turning into an echo chamber of normative overreach and jargonish self-references. From this diagnosis, Sciortino outlines three possible ways ahead: first, continue as if nothing happened (as if, in other words, social theory was still alive); second, "politicize" social theory, turning it into a kind of public sociology or public advocacy exercise; third, put it to rest, let it die with dignity, and allow scholars some peace of mind. A stimulating, catalytic, provocation for a (sub-)field at a crossroads.

Revisiting sociology's persistent anxiety about its theoretical foundations, Gomes retraces a century-long lineage of crisis narratives, from Parsons' canonical ambitions to today's fragmented "theory buffet". Rather than acerbically decry or, contrarily, merrily celebrate the pluralism of contemporary theory, the paper guides the reader toward an empirical diagnosis of its current state. Drawing on a large-scale, ongoing quantitative study of leading sociology journals, Gomes highlights a measurable decline of theory amongst the published articles, and explores the structural conditions behind such a trend. Mobilizing insights from the sociology of science, he reframes the "theory crisis", not as rhetorical fatigue, but as a researchable problem. We are confronted with a lingering interrogative: is sociology's theoretical core dissolving or, rather, is it transforming beyond recognition into something else?

In our understanding, the situation is *hopeless – but not serious!* For one thing, the proliferation of monsters by itself provides for an entertaining situa-

tion. Yes, ours is the time of the monsters (the past has withered away, but the future has failed to materialize…). But while these monsters may not be the cherished model of the healthy individual we long for, they still embody some of the possibilities that life, mostly unexpectedly, procures. After all, nobody lives always at the same level of vitality. Yet, this does not mean that something unforeseen and new cannot happen: we can't afford to wait until we are *dangerous healthy*. Miracles, after all, happen *by the day*.

Second, then, the problem we are dealing with is not only cognitive or epistemological, but also affective. In this sense, it could be interesting to have another look at the debate through the lenses of the sociology of health – notably, see under the heading: "Living with chronic conditions". Whenever we engage with such foundational debates (Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we go next?), emotions inevitably pour in from all sides. Now we notice that social theory is not feeling well, it has grown old badly, it is full of ailments, and needs to be taken care of. If we finally admit to ourselves, "Its frailty, is that of a zombie!", then what we have to ask next is: Aren't retirement homes full of such creatures? Although their expiry date has passed, there is persistence there, which engenders contempt, piety, and confusion. The believer prepares for resurrection, the non-believer thinks about inheritance, and disposal (ever heard about human composting?). This is what we mean by "an interesting situation": living conditions may be far from optimal, and yet there is still scope for dialogue and interaction – and for *misunderstanding*! If it's good, productive misunderstanding, then we dare to call it *a debate*.

Disciplines are born out of debates that are historical, theoretical, practical, and emotional at the same time (think about the late-19th-century debate on crowds: it took place during the "first crisis of modernity", it concerned the ontological status of collective entities, and it came with an anxious sense of urgency to organize society on a new mass scale). Disciplines are meant to *stabilize* those debates, in a sense to solve them, through an array of new concepts and tools and protocols, and what more. But theory is bound to remain a *restless creature*. It haunts disciplines, it inherently resists disciplinary solutions. That is precisely why theory is the real space for debate: all genuine debates will turn theoretical at some point, even when they start as apparently technical trifles, or conversely, as entrenched ideological confrontations. Although it may not be the magnificent "grand arc" Vandenberghe has dreamed of, even if it turns out to be a pitiful architectural improbability kept up by a number of improvised, ad-hoc props, it is still *the place to be*. We are pretty sure we'll see you there next time.

The Grand Arc of Social Theory

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Like the ancient Greek *theôroi*, we have come from all over the world to see the spectacle of truth and witness a debate about what is at stake in the struggles for the legitimate definition of sociology, its relation to the neighbouring disciplines and its task in elucidating the signature of the present. Indeed, as Andrea Nightingale reminds us in her beautiful study of the wandering ambassadors who visited the religious festivals and Olympic games in ancient Greece, *theôria* was initially defined as a journey: «Theôria is generally defined as journey or pilgrimage to a destination away from one's own city undertaken for the purpose of seeing as an eye-witness certain events and spectacles» [Nightingale 2001, p. 29]. The pilgrimage involves an "autopsy": one has to see for oneself and be an eyewitness of the events at the religious festivals. Unlike those who stayed at home, the travellers are transformed by what they see. It is only later, with Plato and Aristotle, that theory is identified with an act of immobile seeing of eternal forms. The philosopher no longer travels through space. Rather s/he becomes an immobile "sight-seer" who discovers and discloses a metaphysical region of eternal truths that is not produced, but merely contemplated for its own sake. Unlike the philosophers, sociologists travel – though not to those distant places that anthropologists visit. They don't look up to the sky, but they look down to the real world. This world transpires in their theories, their concepts and their practices.

1. Social Theory as a Space of Articulation

I have come here to our "theory summit" to defend social theory as a legitimate practice. It has come under attack by sociologists and is slowly fading into oblivion. The theoretical "downshift" from high theory to bottom-up theorising started around the turn of the millennium. It has now taken on a ferocity that is reminiscent of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: «Oh my brothers, am I cruel? But I say: what falls should be pushed!» [Nietzsche 2002, p. 261].

No more footnotes. No more transcendence. No more speculation. All Platonisms, Kantianisms and Hegelianisms have to be eradicated and brought down to empirics. Sociology stands and falls with its data. The way forward does lead downwards, if we may believe our colleagues.

Going against the stream, I want to defend a large conception of social theory, not as a technique or a method, but as a reflexive practice that assures its conditions of possibility, transcends its own disciplinary limits and reassembles the fragments of knowledge in an encompassing view of society. Social theory thus understood is a space of articulation of knowledge about society, culture and history that reflects on its context of genesis, as well as its context of application, to understand society as a whole and the whole of society. Reflexivity is tricky, though, as everything sociology says about society also applies to itself [Esposito 2013]. The lack of reflexivity is even worse. Overwhelmed by the crises that surround it, sociology becomes unable to understand the societal developments that are undermining the ground on which it stands. Paradoxically, the science that thrives on crises can no longer explain its own demise.

The situation of social and sociological theory is critical. Whether one understands theory with Gabriel Abend [2008] as philosophical underlabouring (foundational work), hermeneutics (interpretation of classics), analytics (conceptual clarification), social-historical explanation (comparative history), cultural interpretation (making sense of events), *Weltanschauung* (totalising interpretation) or critique (diagnosis and therapy) – or all of this together, conceptually unified and philosophically justified as I do – in all cases the systematic reflection on society, of society and in society is challenged from within sociology as a useless, non-scientific form of speculation that should be excised and "exorcised". Against a more professional, departmental-disciplinary conception of sociology I want to plead for an open, generous and expansive conception of social theory as the magic round table where philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities meet to discuss together the great questions of the day – What is the role of theory? What is the place of science in society? Where is society going? Yes, I know it is going down the hill – so my question is a timely one: How can we reconstruct the social sciences to reconstruct societies?

2. *The Rise and Fall of Social Theory*

In the span of a generation, social theory as an integrative enterprise that seeks to maintain the dialogue between the various branches of philosophy on

the one hand and the various social and human sciences on the other, has simply disappeared. It is a generational thing. When Jeffrey Alexander was working on his Ph.D. in Berkeley, fifty years ago, Talcott Parsons was still alive, but Parsonianism was in terminal decline. In the US, Merton came out as the winner, as the king of the game: elegant, erudite and scientific, he advocated theories of the middle range and overtook Parsons from the Left, introducing a modicum of dialectics, anomie and conflict into functionalism. I think Jeffrey Alexander continues that tradition, though I acknowledge that he has never given in to the positivists and cultural sociology should be praised as a counterhegemonic force within American sociology. When I did my Ph.D. in Paris on theories of reification in German sociology in the 1990s, Habermas and Giddens were the epitomes of social theory. I studied with both. Tony Giddens himself abandoned social theory and went into politics – at the LSE and with Khadafi. Jürgen Habermas was more consistent and rounded up his theory of communicative action with a discourse ethics, a politics of deliberative democracy and a post-metaphysical concept of reason. Habermas is pure nostalgia. Not only because social democracy is gone, but because his grand theoretical system represents everything that is now being rejected as old European social theory. Nowadays, doctoral students are no longer attracted to social theory and if they are, they tend to pivot either towards French pragmatism and American cultural sociology if they want to work on empirical issues or towards other social theories and transversal themes like governmentality, intersectionality, recognition and post-coloniality if they want to join theory to politics [Rebughini and Colombo 2023]. Latour is perhaps the last grand theorist, but to deploy his conceptual system he had to move out of sociology and into philosophy, theology, anthropology, geochemistry and Earth system science.

The aversion to social theory is especially strong in the United States. It's not only Jonathan Turner who wants to Make Sociology Great Again. The purge of the editorial board of *Theory and Society*, the journal founded by Alvin Gouldner, was directed as much against theoretical speculation as it was against political agitation of the Left. In France, Bourdieu and his followers have always denigrated materialists without materials and idealists without ideas. Even in Germany, social theory is now slowly being phased out. It is only in Jena, Frankfurt, Berlin and Munich that social theory is still being practised as a niche. It is tolerated but not encouraged. Even if the books of Hartmut Rosa, Andreas Reckwitz and Armin Nassehi, to name the three stars of German social theory, sell well, it would not be a good career move to in-

vest in theory without empirical research. The diagnosis seems to be the same everywhere: Social theory can still be taught, after all, someone has to teach the classics to incoming students, but as a field of research, it has no future.

3. Critical Theory and the Studies

Theorising in the old style that combines metatheoretical reflection on the philosophical foundations and textual reconstruction of the classics (metatheory) with the construction of a system of integrated concepts that are valid for the whole gamut of social and human sciences (social theory) and that serves as the preamble to the analysis, diagnosis and critique of social formations that are going through major upheavals (theory of society) is no longer seen as being part of sociology. Nowadays, the practitioners of the discipline would rather outsource these conceptual issues to philosophers. Sociologists have abandoned the task of analysing society in its totality (as a whole) and normatively to Critical Theory and to the Studies, by which I mean to refer to a motley crew of post-structuralist, subaltern, de-colonial and trans-feminist critiques of knowledges, discourses and practices that are permeated by power.

The situation is paradoxical. Whereas the discipline as a whole has moved to the left as the world veered ever further to the right, sociology has turned inwards. To convince itself that it is a science, it turned away from the founders to the funders, if I may formulate it so bluntly, from the texts to the data, from ontological, epistemological and normative reflection to methodological rigour. In the process, social theory got eclipsed to the benefit of explanatory theories of the middle range. As general sociology was replaced by special and specialised sociologies –sociologies of this of that: culture, education, stratification- theorizing was repackaged as a transferable skill that could be taught. With all due respect to Richard Swedberg [2016], I think that the call to shift from theory as product to theorising as a process that tries to make sense of empirical observations is nothing but an attempt to add theoretical method to empirical methods, be they quanti or quali. The emphasis on diagrams and other graphic representations that transform conceptual connections into causal inferences are at best poor imitations of the diagrams of the natural sciences and at worst artifacts of Power Point presentations.

I have seen the same reduction of theory construction to development of explanatory framework when critical realism arrived in the US with generous funding by the Templeton Foundation. Together with Phil Gorski, Margaret Archer and Roy Bhaskar, later also with Doug Porpora, Georg Steinmetz and

Dan Little, I was personally involved in the summer courses at Yale, Chicago, Seattle and New York that were meant to produce a theoretical movement in American sociology. For the Americans, critical realism and its search for generative mechanisms was not the death knell of positivism. It became a substitute for positivism, while its insistence on causality became a justification of scientism. Explanation is not the only game in town, however. The social sciences should describe, interpret, explain and most emphatically also judge, evaluate and criticise reality [Caillé, Vandenberghe 2021]. To take my distance from scientism, I have drifted in the last years towards hermeneutics and the humanities – the *Geisteswissenschaften*, a German translation of Mills' moral sciences that conceived of the social sciences as the continuation of moral philosophy and the philosophy of history by its own means. From this perspective, sociology appears as a morally righteous, politically engaged, empirical philosophy of history without teleology or metaphysical guarantees. In case moral backing is needed, let me invoke Edgar Morin [2017] – *science avec conscience* – science as a conscientious investigation of society, as knowledge that comes from society and has to return to society.

4. The Grand Arc of Social Theory

To finish, I want to present to you the Grand Arc of Social Theory as I have practised it over the last thirty years. I do not want to impose it on anyone. I just ask you not to ex-communicate me from sociology. The Grand Arc of Social Theory comprises different, interdependent levels of abstraction that together form a loosely articulated theoretical system of sorts. I distinguish metatheory, social theory, theory of society, sociological theory and public sociology.

1) At the deepest level, we find metatheoretical investigations of the philosophical presuppositions of the social sciences and the humanities. At the world conference of the ISA in Melbourne, I presented sociology as the continuation of moral philosophy by different means. Having worked on the political hermeneutics of the early Karl Mannheim, I am now tempted to add that sociology continues the philosophy of history by its own means [Vandenberghe 2025]. Taking both together, I would now argue that sociology is an integral part of the historical humanities and situation in the tradition of post-Hegelian neo-Kantianism. It is Kantian because it investigates the conditions of possibility of knowledge of the social world. Replacing the transcendental subject by society, it analyses how social knowledge is reflexively

implicated in the constitution of society. And it is post-Hegelian, because the social knowledge is part of a historical evolving spirit or *Geist* that varies from epoch to epoch.

2) Since Giddens, we know that social theory is interdisciplinary and deals with the fundamental questions of the social sciences: What is action? How is the social order possible? and How can we change it? The different theoretical packages – from the synthetic theories of the 1980s (Giddens, Habermas, Luhmann and Bourdieu), the post-structuralisms of the 1990s (Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard), the turns of the noughties (from the "cultural turn" to the "practice turn") and the "new materialisms" of today – all offer more or less coherent responses to each of the questions – even if they dislocate the answer from agency to practice, from order to chaos and from social movements to social disintegration.

3) The third category is the theory of society – *Gesellschaftstheorie* in the words of Andreas Reckwitz [Reckwitz 2023]. If social theory deals with categories of action, order and social change as such (*an sich*, to speak like Kant), the theory of society is more historical and investigates the structural and cultural transformations of existing societies over longer stretches of time. This is where the reflections on the different stages of modernity take place – from classical modernity via organised modernity to late modernity. Because of the major challenges of today – the Anthropocene, neo-liberalism, populism, artificial intelligence and war which are internally related and form a syndrome– I think late modernity has now arrived at its term. We are on our way towards "another modernity", as Ingolfur Blühdorn [2024], yesterday's keynote, phrases it. To get a grasp of what is coming and what is going, we need a good analysis, diagnosis and critique of the present. We need an empirical philosophy of history "after progress" – even when and especially when the philosophy of history has broken down, we need a science of transitions to orient ourselves through the maze.

4) To work out a theory of the major societal transitions of today into another modernity, we also need sociological theories of the middle range. They are saturated with empirical materials and provide the building blocks that one has to carefully reassemble into a moving picture of the present. I just finished a book on the political situation in Brazil under Jair Messias Bolsonaro. To make sense of what was going on, I had to go through 10 kilos of newspaper clippings I had brought from Rio de Janeiro to Hamburg and read widely texts from sociology, anthropology, political science, communication, etc. on populism, social movements, social media, etc. Meanwhile, I also

started doing fieldwork in India on farmers' suicide. I did interviews with activists, journalists, politicians, farmers and widows and had to go through the literature on agrarian transition, rural sociology and suicide. I was particularly impressed by the work of investigative journalists. They are generalists who do not bury the dead under an avalanche of statistics of mortality.

5) Public sociology. On the side, occasionally, I write op-eds for French, English and Portuguese newspapers and also do some activism with the convivialist movement in France, the Multiconvergence of Global Networks in Brazil and the Tapestry of Global Alternatives in India. The *praxis* informs my theorising as much as my theorising informs my practice.

So, as you can see I have become a full spectrum sociologist. Even Bourdieusians would have to acknowledge that I am not a philosopher or an armchair social theorist. What we need to understand is the present conjuncture/disjuncture. The task of understanding the present is rather tantalising. It presupposes that one transcends the perspective of one's own discipline, extrapolates research from neighbouring disciplines, and reassembles the data in a slightly speculative narrative of the present that is intended both as an interpretation of, and an intervention in, the present situation.

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Is Social Theory a Zombie?

Giuseppe Sciortino

Social Theorists like ghosts. They used to hunt Europe. They trigger nostalgic longings for something that could have been but was not. Charles Lemert has written a whole book on Durkheim's ghosts [Lemert 2006]. Theorists described their relationship with classic authors as conversations with their ghosts (undoubtedly helped by the fact that they could not reply). Social Theorists also like vampires [Blackbourn 1990; Rouse 2002]. Besides their erotic allure, they are seen as a perfect symbol of capitalism and colonialism. On the contrary, social theorists do not particularly like zombies. They are uncouth, smelly, and dangerous, thus offending their refined tastes[1]. They do not arise from nostalgia, but from dread of the future. Zombies are dead who walk among the living, preying on them. Their etiology is unclear, most popular explanations are unconvincing. The most likely explanation of their existence is the sociological one: dead that cannot rest in peace because the people around them, their dearest ones, refuse the reality of their death and keep treating them as living. As long as people consider them alive, they are alive in their consequences.

We ignore zombies only at our peril: they can be very dangerous [Munz, Hudea et al. 2009]. As Keynes concluded, 'practical men', believing themselves to be exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. The same applies to 'theoretical men' (and women).

In the following pages, I will explore the *possibility* that contemporary social theory is a zombie, a living dead, kept alive, very much against its will, by our affections and rituals.

Three introductory clarifications are in order. First, when I refer to « contemporary social theory», I do not refer to what Gianfranco Poggi used to call the non-cumulative dimension of sociology [Poggi 1996]. This has accompa-

1. According to Google Scholar, there are only 8,740 items employing in the same text «social theory» and «zombies» (against more than 57,600 where «social theory» is matched by «ghosts»). Unsurprisingly, economists have been much quicker to understand the importance of zombies. See [Krugman 2020; Peters and Nagel 2020]. For a sociological exception, see [Mueller et al. 2017].

nied sociology since its origin and, very likely, will still be there after its demise. I refer (see par. 1) to the (geographical and historical bounded) attempt to define a non-disciplinary (or post-disciplinary?) field of analysis and debate broader – and independent from – the strictures of academic social science (particularly concerning the duty to test our ideas on reality). Second, I do not claim that Contemporary social theory *is* a zombie. I claim we have reached a point where this possibility should be taken seriously and explored in detail. Third, I am not talking about crisis. Social sciences have seen even more «crises» than «turns» [Luhmann 1984]. «Crisis», by definition, contains the possibility of transformation and the usefulness of critique. I claim we should be more radical and thus more precise. We must ask ourselves: *is there still life in social theory*? If we keep doing it, are we fulfilling a noble task or performing an overzealous treatment?

1. A Biography of the Ghoul

Like any respectable supernatural entity, social theory has had several lives. The first, spanning around two centuries, was defined by the best minds of old Europe – starting with Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. They tried to reconcile agency and causality, particular and universal, and, of course, action and order. They left us a wonderful legacy of riches, of which we still live on. They failed, however, in what was, *from their point of view*, the most important and pressing goal: to establish how ethical arguments could be grounded in secular knowledge [Hawthorn 1987]. Their failure was so spectacular that classical social theory had to spend decades in purgatory, interpreted as a mere forerunner to the new, 'scientific', sociological theory [Antoni 1959].

Zombies, however, teach us that nothing dies forever. Nearly half century ago, a new life started to be infused into the body of 'social theory'. Lacking a reliable history, it is difficult to establish precisely when. For our purposes, the publication of Anthony Giddens's *Central Problems in Social Theory* [1979] can be considered a convenient terminus a quo.

The new proponents of 'social theory' were very clear on the necessity of this new field. The collective effervescence of post-parsonian sociological theory had exhausted its potential. They feared that sociological theory was on the verge of becoming drab hairsplitting or even, what a horror, a collection of empirical generalizations. Unsurprisingly, ambitious theorists wanted an escape route. However, as any student of migration knows, push factors are never enough; you also need something to be attracted to. Social theory's pull

factors were the growing popularity of theorétical approaches (far sexier, if not even kinkier) developing in the 'new humanities' and in what Vandenberghe called, very aptly, 'the studies' (French theory was a main favorite). Another important attraction was the possibility of giving new life and legitimacy to critical theory, with its astonishing love for judgement and its surprising poverty of analysis. It was a project designed to carve out

> a broad, critical, and interdisciplinary field concerned with understanding the foundations, structures, and dynamics of social life. Unlike sociological theory, which is rooted specifically within the discipline of sociology and often oriented toward empirical research, social theory draws from philosophy, history, political theory, and other humanities to explore fundamental questions about power, agency, identity, and social change (Courtesy of ChatGPT, v. 4, interrogated 28.06.2025).

It sounded like fun. It was difficult not to fall in love with it. As in most love stories, it even seemed to be working. For a while. With time and use, however, some troubling features started to be increasingly visible.

The first is that the interdisciplinarity claimed by social theory remained, since its beginning, largely aspirational. Organizationally and culturally, social theory remained largely contained within sociology's infrastructure. A brief comparison of three key social theory texts may prove this point. *Social Theory Today*, edited by Anthony Giddens in 1987, has greatly contributed to the establishment of 'social theory' [Giddens 1987]. No more than two chapters out of thirteen deals with approaches located outside of sociological tradition. *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*, by Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knobl, published in 2009 (German edition 2004), is the most ambitious attempt to present social theory as an established field with specific features [Joas and Knobl 2009]. It covers the usual sociological suspects, adding to them (as Giddens had already done) only critical theory, structuralist, and poststructuralist approaches (the welcome addition is pragmatism). Albeit Joas and Knobl insist repeatedly on social theory as unitary conversation, the truth is that the chapters covering the latter approaches, pragmatism aside, do not dialogue at all with the others. *Social Theory Now*, edited by Claudio Benzecry, Monika Krause and Isaac Ariail Reed in 2017, is an ambitious attempt to provide an updated survey of the field. Nearly all the space is allocated to fully-fledged sociological approaches. Several chapters wear proudly «sociology» in their titles [Benzecry *et al.* 2017]. The same applies to their suggested definition of «social theory»:

> Social theory is a dialogue about four central questions and two concerns: social theorists ask how social order is possible, and they debate the role of materiality in social life, the role of meaning and the role of practice. Cutting across these questions are two sets of concerns: theorists tend to take positions on epistemics (how knowledge of the social world is possible) and history (how major historical shifts in the structure of social life occur and develop, and affect our knowledge of the world) (Benzecry et al. 2017, pp. 2-3).

Most contemporary graduate students would easily mistake it for a definition of sociological theory[2].

We must conclude that the differentiation of 'sociological' and 'social theory' had never really happened, either intellectually or organizationally. The main reason is that the prediction of 'sociological' theory transforming itself into a universe of middle-range generalizations has always been delusional. The feared hegemony of rational choice approaches has never ever come close, no matter how much RC people would have loved it. Sociological theory has remained the traditional hodgepodge of very disparate approaches: some old, many new; all having independent, specific connections with other disciplines and fields. If any, wide swaths of the discipline are currently dominated by various brands of public sociology and outright activism, becoming increasingly similar to the models of cultural and gender studies.

In the other direction, social theory resembles more a wholesale importer than an autonomous field. Social theory has provided (so far) a negligible contribution to the 'new humanities' it admires so much. If social theory is in love with philosophy and the new humanities, such love is hardly reciprocated. Just to provide an example, the extraordinary funerary eulogy of French Theory delivered recently by Fredric Jameson does not pay any attention to sociology, except a five-lines dismissal of Pierre Bourdieu [Jameson 2024, p. 447]. Far from making the new humanities more sociologically accurate, social theory has only contributed to endowing some sociologists with the *épater le bourgeois* feeling of the new humanities.

Social theory, in other words, has become another example of what Stephen Vaisey has once observed: unable to engage in real interdisciplinary dia-

2. More recently, Frédéric Vandenberghe has declared (with some good reasons) the definitive crisis of sociology [Vandenberghe, Fuchs 2019]. It has subsequently launched, with Alain Caillé – an ambitious attempt to re-unify moral philosophy, new humanities (the 'studies'), sociology, and social theory. Their project, which conveniently forgets empirical research and methodology, proposes a 'neo-classical sociology' (although not many classic authors would approve such a band of brothers) that would occupy – in fact – the previous conceptual space of 'social theory' [Caillé, Vandenberghe 2020].

logues, sociologists create virtual avatars of other disciplines within sociology [Vaisey 2021]. Avatars created by sociologists for sociological consumption, but unable to circulate outside of the discipline [Lizardo 2014].

The outcome is what we see every day in our work. Social theory production is well into the final stages of the law of diminishing returns: more and more effort is necessary for less and less innovation. Jabberwockish jargon is spiraling out of control. Besides a few students and the most backwards sectors of the media, nobody cares about its goods (when they do, the mere title of the book or a funky quote is all the knowledge they ask for).

2. The Genetic Defects of the 'Contemporary Social Theory'.

When confronted with the above-mentioned failures of 'social theory', many theorists explain it as caused by historical contingency, by the power of the neoliberal regime (the vampires, again). There is room, however, to argue that the problem lies rather in its genetic makeup.

Since its beginning, the mission of 'social theory' has been highly ambiguous. It presented itself as an open, ecumenical field, interested in general questions about action, order, and change. There was, however, also a not-so-hidden substantive agenda. 'Social Theory' was not for anybody: it was reserved only to those whose ways of thinking «assailed 'individualism' or which aspired to transcend it» [Joas and Knobl 2009, p. X]. Economics (even behavioral economics) was never meant to be invited to the party. The same applied to the cognitive sciences and evolutionary anthropology. Analytic sociologists were considered little more than fifth columns. The new social theory was tribe disguised as a field.

The consequences of this semi-hidden agenda are evident. The few interesting ideas on social action and social order that have emerged in recent decades from neuroscience, evolutionary theory, cognitive anthropology, and artificial intelligence have emerged fully independently from, and even despite of, social theory. The most effective critiques of self-interested individualism have not been carried out by social theorists, but rather by behavioral economists (Bowles and Gintis 2011). The most radical critique of Western *cognitive* universalism has originated in evolutionary anthropology [Henrich, Heine *et al.* 2010]. A convincing critique of global inequality has appeared from rather classical political economy [Piketty 2014]. In all these cases, and many more, social theory has played the role of the old, not particularly lively, uncle. The guy who ruins family meals with incomprehensible speeches and endemic

complaints about the decadence of the times[3]. Is there anything more depressing than witnessing colleagues who have pestered us for decades with the collective nature of discourses that talks through us, suddenly adopting the language of individuality, intentionality, and authenticity to oppose Large Language Models[4]?

The second genetic defect, strictly intertwined with the first, has to do with the role of normative judgement in social theory. There has been since the beginning a broad – and undiscussed – assumption that the 'new' social theory, precisely because it was «running counter to key premises of economic, political and psychological thought» [Joas and Knobl 2009, p. X, again], was by definition a progressive project, unmasking oppression and taking naturally the side of the insulted and the injured, the humiliated and the oppressed. Mesmerized by the unabashedly normative projects of the new humanities, the 'new' social theory has utterly ignored the previous failures of critical theory in this regard. Contrary to classical social theory, it took for granted the possibility of deriving ethical arguments (if not even injunction for action) from secular knowledge. It simply assumed that social theory *should* have an emancipatory knowledge interest. What emancipation meant, who had to be emancipated and from what, were, however, never clear[5].

Two intertwined strategies, both originating in the new humanities and in critical theory, have been frequently adopted. The first is the continuous adoption of *external*, and often implicit, criteria for evaluating social actions and orders. The second is the disregard of empirical evidence as a necessary constraint on the kind of normative expectations that can be explored and validated within social theory[6]. Unsurprisingly, the criteria adopted quick-

3. In comparison, sociology (cultural sociology, and the 'culture and cognition' program) have been much more open.

4. See https://critinq.wordpress.com/2023/06/26/again-theory-a-forum-on-language-meaning-and-intent-in-the-time-of-stochastic-parrots/.

5. The diffusion of such mistake is evident in the shock caused by the 'discovery' that Michel Foucault had been quite positive on neoliberal theory. Theoretically, there was not much to be shocked about: the 'neoliberal' market is the only mode of social coordination that does not require the imposition of a normative model on the participants. It is, in other word, fully consistent with Foucault's approach. A bit less with the expectations of its readers. Being Foucault one of the Patron Saints of Social Theory and having social theory identified neoliberalism as its existential enemy, the 'discovery' required an extraordinary amount of repair work. See [Zamora, Behrent 2016].

6. Within some boundaries – those of conceptually disciplined thought experiments – both such strategies may be quite useful theoretically. Practiced outside of these boundaries, definitely less.

ly inflated, generating absurdly rigid criteria of «justice», disregarding most other social exigencies. The whole field has proudly entered what Caillè and Vandenberghe have called «hypercritique» [Caillé and Vandenberghe 2020]. Theory has been substituted by the constant recital of the eternal mantra that 'power' is anywhere, everywhere, always.

Judging by the extent to which militancy, moralism, and cynicism (the trinity of intellectual microbes spreading when intellectual antibodies are gone) have diffuse in the social theory body, it is consequently difficult to deny that social theory is a zombie.

Another consequence is less acknowledged but equally fateful. Far from providing the emancipatory language (supposedly) needed by egalitarian social movements, the old mole of social theory has burrowed in unexpected fields. Contextualism has been merrily employed (and deployed) by anti-vaxers. 'Intersectionality' has been the rallying cry of Cambridge Analytica[7], Gramsci is read (or at least cited) mostly by Italian post-fascists. Thiel and Vance pastures on René Girard. Vladimir Putin has fully appropriated the language of post-colonial resistance. Social theory had the delusion of being heroically fighting an all-powerful neoliberal order. Will we discover it was working *pour le roi de Prusse* instead?

3. Conclusion: What has to be done?

Given the content of the previous pages, it may appear obvious that the capacity to provide prescriptive guidance is simply outside the author's capabilities. I will consequently outline some possibilities, and each theorist will have to make her choice, just hoping it is the right one.

The first is keeping the zombie alive as long as it lasts. It would be wrong to deride those who choose such a path. Endless generations of invisible monks were necessary for (the real) classical knowledge to flourish again in the Renaissance. Even in the social sciences, there are some examples. For many decades, the flame of free market economy was kept alive by a small group of theorists

7. Talking about Steve Bannon, Wylie (the data scientists writing the codes of Cambridge Analytica) claim that Bannon is "Smart. Interesting. Really interested in ideas. He's the only straight man I've ever talked to about intersectional feminist theory. He saw its relevance straightaway to the oppressions that conservative, young white men feel." See https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump?CMP=share_btn_fb.

and learned societies, ignored by all, derided by many [Slobodian 2018]. It's a path that requires faith. *Watchman, what is left of the night?* [Isaiah 21:11].

A second possibility is to fully embrace the normative/activist agenda of the new humanities, fully accepting to act as the marketing department of the various grievances. To follow the path of other disciplines, such as comparative literature and pedagogy, that embraced it decades ago. It is a popular path, that bring – at least in certain periods – popularity, students and even some reader buying critical books. Those who choose this path, however, have to deal with two pressing issues. The first, theoretical, is simple. While most social scientists do acknowledge that the exercise of some judgement is unavoidable, it is not immediate that judgement should be the final goal of analysis, nor the more important task for a scholar. As Zhuangzi wrote more than 2,000 years ago, *When the Dao was lost, judgments appeared.* The second issue is rather tactical: are social theorists really useful for the fight (whatever the fight is)? Are not public sociologists much better suited to such tasks?

The third path is quietly placing the zombie to rest. To go back to the reality of being full-time members of just one discipline, sociology. Of being specialized in its non-cumulative dimension, one possible specialization among many. To accept the constraining role of empirical evidence (no matter how defined). To keep our human desire to judge (and usually to condemn) at bay. Keeping in mind the difference between ethical injunctions and secular knowledge. Pursuing analytical projects directed to (admittedly often boring) academic audiences. As Erving Goffman said long ago, *to lurch along, seriously kidding ourselves that our rut has a forward direction* [Goffman 1983, p. 2].

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Three Crises in Sociological Theory

Jayme Gomes

> «There has been of late a strong current of pessimism in the thought of students of the social sciences, especially those who call themselves sociologists. We are told that there are as many systems of sociological theory as there are sociologists, that there is no common basis, that all is arbitrary and subjective. To the present writer this current of sentiment has two equally unfortunate implications. On the one hand, it encourages the view that the only sound work in the social field is detailed factual study, without benefit of theory. On the other hand, for those who refuse to be satisfied with this, it encourages a dangerous irrationalism which let go of scientific standards altogether. We are told sociology is an art, that what is valuable in it is to be measured by the standards of intuition and inspiration, that it is not subject to the canons of rigorous logic and empirical verification. It is to be hoped that this study may contribute to the combating of both these dangerous tendencies»

This might well have been a conclusion of a study from a few years ago, but it comes from a book published the 1937 – indeed, one of the most influential in the sociological history. I chose to start with this quotation because when we talk about the crisis of sociological theory, it's important to remember that this conversation has been with us from the very beginning. In fact, if we look back, the sense of crisis has accompanied sociology almost since birth. Each generation has, in its own way, revisited this anxiety – sometimes trying to overcome it, sometimes redefining it. And the early attempts to consolidate a sociological canon or a fundamental core of lineages – think of Sorokin in 1928 or Parsons in 1937, from whom I got the quotation – were already motivated by this need to give the discipline a clearer theoretical identity, to stabilize it in the face of a perceived theoretical disarray. In the chronology I am advancing here, this might count as a first fundamental crisis in theory discourse.

For a while, the effort to alleviate such theoretical indiscipline seemed to succeed. As we all know, Parsons and the first generation of structural functionalists managed to establish a kind of theoretical hegemony that shaped the field, at least for some time, during the 1950s and early 1960s. That was the moment when sociology witnessed, maybe for the first time, what we

later came to call "grand theory." But this hegemony, as we also know, didn't last. It wasn't long before the new generation began to push back in a sort of "revolt against Parsons". Many sociological theory books – think of Jonathan Turner, Jeffrey Alexander, Richar Münch, and, more recently, Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl – made it clear that much of the innovation of that period emerged precisely as a reaction against structural functionalism and its overarching theoretical system. What followed, though, wasn't a new synthesis but rather a proliferation of new schools or paradigms – exchange theory, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology – each moving in its own direction, but none achieving real dominance. And that's when a second wave of crisis began to take shape.

Now, if we place ourselves in those same 1960s, many empiricist voices would have seen this fragmentation as a temporary problem. I think here about classical accounts on sociology in that period, from people like Hans Zetterberg, George Homans, or even Walter Wallace. The idea was more or less the following: once we refine our methods and accumulate more empirical data, theory will naturally find its order again. Yet as methodological sophistication grew and fragmentation persisted, the mood shifted. By the late 1960s, the talk of crisis returned in full force. Gouldner's apotheotic title *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* captured some of that atmosphere. And we start seeing the rise of works like Stinchcombe's *Theoretical Methods in Social Science*, Friedrichs' call for a "sociology of sociology", and Ritzer's paradigm analysis – all efforts to take theory itself as an object of inquiry so as to make sense of the fragmentation of that moment.

Then, by the 1970s, a new generation once again set out to repair the fractures – to recover something of the unity that seemed lost. As we all know, Jeffrey Alexander later described this intellectual turn as the "New Theoretical Movement," pointing to Bourdieu, Giddens, and Habermas as arguably its main champions. Their ambition was, in many ways, to overcome the great dualisms that haunted sociological thought for a long time: objectivism versus subjectivism, agency versus structure, systems versus lifeworld.

In a way, it seems clear nowadays that these authors gained a kind of neo-classical status. Yet, the question is: despite their status, have those synthesizing efforts of the 1980s and 1990s truly fulfilled their promise? Have they created, after all, the shared framework they aspired to? Many would argue that they did not – and this is where a third narrative of crisis begins to take hold, one that in my view informs the discussions on the social theory crisis until the present.

From the 2000s onwards, the sense of crisis seems to have returned, maybe even stronger than before. It is hard to find any consensus even in the way sociology tells its own story after that period. A brief look into contemporary textbooks might suffice to make the point clear. The standard story that goes until the 1980s and 1990s, which I basically reproduced here, gives place to a kind theory buffet after the 2000s, in which the reader might mix the most variate flavors at will in a big bowl of theoretical salad. In this sense, what one can see, despite ambitious synthesis from the past, is the image of field that have once again fractured. As if the old prophecy about the "death of grand narratives" have been finally realized and sociology has been left with a mosaic of middle-range programs marching without a shared horizon.

Not everyone sees this as a problem, of course. Some might understand these changes as opening some new opportunities for theoretical work to develop in distinct directions. Yet, among the theorists, many take it as evidence that sociology's theoretical core has weakened – that our frameworks have become too scattered, our conversations too disconnected. And there might be good reasons for that perception. On a side note, I remember of Simon Susen (2015) account, in which at least eighteen turns in social sciences are meticulously catalogued in recent years with proper bibliographical references for each:

> "the 'interpretive turn', the 'linguistic turn', the 'relativist turn', the 'deconstructive turn', the 'contingent turn', the 'liquid turn', the 'cultural turn', the 'autonomous turn', the 'identitarian turn', the 'reflexive turn', the 'empirical turn', the 'spatial turn', the 'performative turn', the 'pragmatic turn', the 'existentialist turn', the 'vitalist turn', the 'affective turn', the 'postsecular turn', and – more recently – the 'digital turn'" (Susen 2015, p. 34).

We may not forget also that in this overall conversation there are also those who retrace the crisis to foundational biases and blind spots calling for the deconstruction – if not the very dissolution! – of traditional sociological discourse. I think here about the wave of criticisms pointing to what would be the fundamentally the "colonial", "white", "male", and "heteronormative" character of the classical and modern sociological theories.

In recent years, however, I have seen some constructive – rather than deconstructive – efforts to respond to what I have here referred as the third crisis. In France, Caillé and Vandenberghe [2021] called for a kind of "neo-classical" synthesis. In the English-speaking world, Leroux, Martin, and Turner [2022] edited a volume calling for a renewed, more scientific orientation in sociology

in general but also in its theoretical work. In Germany, Rosa and Reckwitz [2023] have recently defended the relevance of social theory and argued for a historically grounded, systematic reconstruction of late-modern societies. Different projects, yes, but all rooted in the same perception: that sociology theory needs to rebuild some sense of coherence. I don't know if we are facing the entrance of sociological discourse in a new moment or this is simply a series of interesting but short-lived initiatives. Time will tell us!

In any case, after tracing this succession of crisis narratives, we are left with a central question: where do we stand now, and how might we make sense of these developments? In this brief intervention, my aim not to take sides in this long-standing debate – whether by lamenting the decline of theory, celebrating its deconstruction, or calling for yet another synthesis. Rather, I propose something more modest: to pause, at least for a moment, and look at the matter empirically. I believe both the timing and the conditions are right for doing so.

In fact, some empirical works in sociology of (social) science, have already started to provide valuable insights on, say, the status of sociological theory in reference to other fields, the variations of theory interest in sociology departments and professional associations, or even the use of theoretical narratives in sociology textbooks [e.g., Elder, Kozlowski 2023; Bloom 2024; Guzman *et al.* 2023] As far as I can see, works like these seems to indicate, for the purposes of the present discussion, at least two trends unfolding side by side: a growing empiricist vocabulary in research, and a more plural, contextualist yet not systematic or cumulative orientation in teaching theories. One could summarize this as follows: positivism for researchers, relativism for theorists! But to be fair, this might be an oversimplification.

This leads me to a final point, in which I bring my own take in all this discussion. I would like to briefly mention a research I am currently conducting at Free University of Berlin, with prof. Sebastian Kohl [Gomes, Kohl 2026] in which we address the problem of the theory crisis, from an empirical perspective, drawing on sociology of science and computational analysis. For the sake of brevity, I will not deal here with the technical aspects of the research. The full presentation of the data set, the methodology, the coding process, and the findings will be available when the research is published. My intention here is simply to point out some steps of our work, to anticipate some findings that might be of interest, and indicate a research direction that might be helpful in making sense of the present situation.

Our first step focused on assessing the supposed decline of theoretical discourse. To that end, we manually coded a sample of approximately 2,300 articles from four top-tier English-language journals published between 1955 and 2016. Each article was classified along four binary dimensions: (a) whether it pursued an explicitly theoretical aim; (b) whether it employed systematic data; (c) whether it focus on the history of sociology; and (d) whether it relied on generalized theoretical frameworks. Although our work is still in progress, preliminary findings suggest indeed a decline in theoretical discourse, particularly after the 1990s.

In a second step, we sought to contextualize these results by examining several explanatory dimensions, each corresponding to hypotheses or arguments found in debates advanced within the theory circles: the decline of theory in teaching [Lizardo 2014; Godwin *et al.* 2020]; the devaluation of the theorist's role within the professional hierarchy [Lizardo 2014; Godwin *et al.* 2020]; the absence of shared frames of references (anomie) in the field [Susen 2015; Caillé, Vandenberghe 2021; Susen, Turner 2021]; and the rise of an anti-theoretical culture within parts of sociology [Rosa, Reckwitz 2023].

On a side note – to full the circle with my first quotation – if we think about the process of theoretical production as a system in itself, we could even see these arguments as related to the fundamental problems of systems reproduction in the old Parsonian style: the availability or lack of intellectual resources by the researchers in the field (A-function), the motivational structure and goal-attainment paths available in the field to those same researchers (G-function); the problem of the integration/anomie of the field (I-function), and changes in ultimate-values and symbolic patterns that make the culture in the field (L-function). But we don't need to go so far. Yet, with these hypotheses in mind we began collecting additional data – both from secondary sources and our own analyses – to illuminate each of them.

By examining these dimensions empirically our hope is to shed some light on what this "crisis" actually consists of. Whether it's a matter of decline, transformation, or simply differentiation, we believe understanding its internal elements and their variations along the time can tell us something essential about where sociology stands today, and perhaps where it might be headed next.

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