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Published in:
Contemporary Philosophy and Social Science

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Carleheden, M. (2019). How to theorize? On the changing role and meaning of theory in the social sciences. In M. Nagatsu, & A. Ruzzene (Eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy and Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (pp. 311-331). Bloomsbury Academic.

How to Theorize? On the Changing Role and Meaning of Theory in the Social Sciences

Mikael Carleheden

10.1 Introduction

In 1903, Charles Sanders Peirce held a lecture called “How to theorize?” He asked what role theory should have in scientific inquiry (Carleheden 2014; Swedberg 2014). Such a question is without doubt crucial also for the social sciences today. It concerns one of the most contested issues in the history of the social sciences. However, an investigation of the different positions in these debates makes it obvious that another contested issue always, more or less tacitly, is implicated; that is, the meaning of theory. An answer to Peirce’s question presupposes a conception of what theory is. The debates about the role of theory are not seldom confusing just because the opponents mistakenly take for granted that they are referring to the same meaning of theory. If one takes a step back, it is easy to see that the meaning of theory is not one but many (Abend 2008).

This chapter deals with different meanings of social theory, which form the basis of different answers to the question of the role of social theory. I will proceed historically. The dominating conception of social theory has shifted over time. My investigation is restricted to transformations during the twentieth century. It will not be conducted in the manner of a sociology of science. The focus will be on reasons rather than causes of change. The general idea is that a historical investigation of such reasons is also the best way to be able to answer the normative question about what role theory should have today. An answer must be situated in the ongoing history of the social sciences, which in turn is related to social change in general. I will, so to say, “follow the actors,” who in this case are social scientists debating theory of science. The focus will first and foremost be on the most recent development. My primary aim is to trace what I suspect to be an ongoing transformation of the conception of theory in contemporary social science. In the end, I will make a preliminary attempt to critically evaluate this ongoing transformation.¹

To be able to investigate the historical transformation of social theory, some shared meaning of that subject matter is needed—at least on a general level. The first problem is then the differentiation within the social sciences between sociological, political, economic theory and so on. However, I will try to circumvent this problem to make

the task manageable. I will simply take conceptions of theory in sociology as an example. Most often the terms social and sociological theory is treated synonymously. Sociologists have not seldom seen themselves as responsible for developing a general theory for the social sciences (e.g., Parsons and Mills). Further, sociology can be seen as an “extreme case” in a productive sense (Flyvbjerg 2006). While the dominating and subordinated positions have been more definite in other disciplines, the struggle has been fought on a more equal footing in sociology. Thus, one might suspect that this struggle has made the reasons behind different answers clearer.²

However, and as a consequence of what just has been claimed, the problem of finding a shared meaning of theory on some level turns up again within sociology. Sociology is a “hyperdifferentiated discipline” (Turner 2002: 6). Sociologists, “do not agree on what is real, what our core problems are, what our epistemology is, and what our theories should look like” (13). Nevertheless, it is possible to find a basic, common idea about what theory is. The theoretical must in some sense be understood in contrast to the empirical:

“Theory is a generalization separated from particulars, an abstraction separated from a concrete case.” (Alexander 1987a: 2)

“At a very basic level, the different theoretical schools and disciplines are at least in agreement that theories should be understood as generalizations.” (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 4)

In this basic sense it is easy to agree with Jeffrey Alexander that theory is “the heart of science” (1987a: 2). Most sociologists would actually also agree on taking a second step and claim that empirical generalization as such is not sufficient to qualify as theorizing. We need also to generalize in a certain way. However, this is as far as we get. As soon as we go hyperdifferentiation breaks out.

Surprisingly, there are rather few systematic overviews about what hyperdifferentiation means in the context of theorizing.³ I will take my point of departure in a classic article by Robert Merton. He distinguished between six “types of analysis” (Merton 1945: 462) that the term sociological theory has been used to refer to and which have “significantly different bearings upon empirical social research” (463). He names them “methodology, general orientations, conceptual analysis, post factum interpretations, empirical generalizations, and sociological theory.” Merton imagined that the struggle between these different types “has come to a well-deserved close” (1948: 164). The last type, that is, his own “theories of the middle range,” had finally won and was to be seen as the only one that truly deserved the title “sociological theory.” From the perspective of today it is easy to smile at such a statement, but in its historical context it was rather accurate. As we will see, he formulated the dominating understanding of how to theorize in that period.

I will use Merton’s types of theorizing, but in contrast to him historicize them. Some of his types are in a historic perspective more useful than others and most often we have to combine them in different ways.⁴ This approach presupposes the possibility of making divisions in the historical transformation of sociology. Such divisions unavoidably lead to simplifications and exclusions but can be defended as long as the

approach facilitates the purpose of clarifying the meaning and role of theory. I will take my point of departure in the following rough divisions:

- Classical sociology: the founding fathers (around 1900).
- First phase of postwar sociology: Scientization (from 1945 until the beginning of 1960s).
- Second phase of postwar sociology: Interpretive turn, normative turn, return of Grand theory (from 1968 until the 1989).
- Contemporary sociology: A downward shift. Turn toward immanence.

Hence, even in sociology, some understandings of the discipline tend to be dominating for a period.⁵ To be sure, such understandings might more or less influence what mainstream sociologists actually are doing, but in any case, my task is only to identify the conceptions of theorizing that are related to these dominating understandings.

10.2 Classical Sociology

Even though classical sociologists were engaged in establishing sociology as an acknowledged discipline among the social sciences, they were without doubt, more or less tacitly, deeply influenced by practical philosophy, first and foremost Kant and Hegel (Merton 1968: 46; Levine 1981; Mills 2000; Gangas 2007). Thus, they were theoretical in most senses on Merton's list, but seldom in the most important sense, according to him (Alexander 1987b). Much of their work was about conceptualization and categorization on both a micro- and a macrolevel (types of interaction, action, general social order, social pathologies, etc.). They certainly produced "general orientations toward substantive materials" rather than "specific confirmed hypotheses" (Merton 1945: 464). They tried to interpret social facts with the help of conceptual schemes without the intermediate step of formulating hypotheses and test them.⁶ Because they tried to establish sociology as specific discipline, they spend much time on delimiting the subject matter of sociology: What is the social? What is modernity? Merton found all these kinds of analysis partly important but claimed that it was time to put them to the side and go on and produce "sociological theory."

However, in view of the influence of practical philosophy in the classical period, it is clear that theory in one important sense is missing in Merton's list, that is, normative or critical theory. In spite of the efforts that was made in order to make sociology an acknowledged value-neutral science, it is easy to see that some kind of normativity was a crucial, but more or less implicit, part of classical sociology. Donald Levine starts an article on Max Weber (and partly on Tönnies and Simmel) by quoting Hegel: "reason and freedom remain our principles" (1981: 5). C. W. Mills is quite explicit: "The role of reason in human affairs and the idea of the free individual as the seat of reason are the most important themes inherited by twentieth-century social scientists from the philosophers of the Enlightenment" (2000: 167). The conceptions of rationality and freedom in Weber's work were certainly not value neutral. His perhaps most well-known concept "the iron cage" must, for instance, be understood in relation to his

understanding of reason and freedom. Weber was “a liberal in despair” (Mommsen 1974). Émile Durkheim’s conception of the social pathologies of modernity must be understood in relation to a Kantian or even Hegelian understanding of freedom and reason (Gangas 2007). If we include Marx among the classic sociologists, this absence in Merton’s list becomes obvious. In fact, a rejection of normative theory as a legitimate form of sociological theory has never been so hegemonic in the history of sociology as during the first postwar phase (Alexander 2000: 272).

10.3 First Phase of Postwar Sociology

A new conception of sociology included a move of its center from Europe to the United States. To be sure, Talcott Parsons’s “Grand theory” was in many ways a continuation of classical sociology.⁷ A change in the dominating understanding of theory should rather be attributed to the conception of sociology that Paul Lazarsfeld and Merton in cooperation developed at Columbia. On the basis of the development of quantitative methods and theories of the middle range, sociology became an established academic discipline—and only then also in Europe, in this new American form (Wagner 2001, chapter 1).

The successful institutionalization of sociology after the Second World War must be understood in view of the role that the discipline acquired in the second epoch of modernity—“organized modernity”—as an instrument of social planning (Wagner 1994): “The two great bureaucracies in America—the Warfare and the Welfare bureaucracy—were behind the spectacular development of empirical sociology” (Bauman in Cantell and Pedersen 1992: 143). Sociology became an “assistant science in service of administrations” (Habermas 1971: 299).⁸

To talk about theory in the sense of empirical generalizations was criticized by Merton. His conception of “theories of the middle range” should not—to use the terminology later developed by Mills—be placed between “abstracted empiricism” and “Grand theory” in the sense of scale. Merton developed it rather in contrast to both of them also in the more basic sense of a “type of analysis.” Actually, in *Sociological theory* he did not even use the term middle range. Grand theory can be understood as a combination of what Merton called conceptual analysis, general orientations, and postfactual interpretation. The problem of empirical generalization, according to Merton, is that it is too descriptive. In a footnote he actually referred to John Dewey: Empirical generalization is “merely a set of uniform conjunctions of traits repeatedly observed to exist, without any understanding of why the conjunction occurs; without a theory which states its rationale” (Dewey in Merton 1945 :469). The decisive problem with both grand theory of the classical type and empirical generalization is that in neither of them are theoretical constructions of hypotheses seen as crucial. The task of a sociological theory is “to develop specific, interrelated hypotheses by re-formulating empirical generalizations in the light of these generic orientations”, that is, specifying “relationships between particular variables” (Merton 1945: 464) and thus “the term sociological theory refers to logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived” (Merton 1968: 39).

Hence, theorizing is primarily about the art of constructing hypotheses. However, according to Merton, this art must be strictly regulated, because the hypotheses are to be constructed in such a way that they can be tested through some kind of experimental procedures. Thus, theory of the classical type must be abandoned. This testing (i.e., the context of justification) should be modeled after the natural sciences. Merton tried, successfully, to liberate sociology from its classical origin in practical philosophy and put it on a solid “scientific” base (Alexander 1987b). The idea that theories should be of the middle range is only a consequence of this conception of testing.

In this form sociology would be given a chance of attaining a share in the general legitimacy of the natural sciences. However, the price tended to be a loss in the significance of the hypotheses, which Merton himself was aware of (Merton 1945: 462). The scientific restriction of the art of theorizing tended to lead to what critics later called “theoryless theories” (Gouldner 1970), that is, theories have to be rather simple to be testable. Merton also had to pay a second price, namely the price of a rather naive “methodological empiricism” (Merton 1945: 462). While all classical sociologists were well-educated Kantians, Merton simply seemed to take a dualistic relation between the theoretical and the empirical for granted. Reality was understood as something that exists “out there” in a “ready-made” form (Goodman 1978) independent of the theoretical. It is only possible to imagine that the theoretical and the empirical can be compared in clear-cut way under such a premise (Alexander 1987b).

This second conception of sociology was already challenged in the United States during the first phase of postwar sociology by outsiders and underdogs (Collins 1994: 262f, 266f). These alternative conceptions typically held on to the classical heritage of German idealism and did not accept the idea of a unified conception of science. The most important examples are symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology. Both had their origin in critical developments of Kant—by Peirce and Husserl—and were thus based on alternatives to empiricism already on a philosophical level. They both implicated a rejection of epistemological dualism by emphasizing the significance of meaning. These conceptions of sociology grew strong in the shadow of scientism and became eventually a part of the transformation to the next phase.

Meaning cannot, according to Herbert Blumer, simply be attributed to the object of study: “A tree will be a different object to a botanist, a lumberman, a poet, and a home gardener” (Blumer 1986: 11). Empiricists “regard meaning as intrinsic to the thing that has it” while idealists “regard meaning as a psychological accretion brought to thing by the person for whom the thing has meaning” (3–4). Symbolic interactionists, however, see “meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people” (4).

Alfred Schutz similarly saw reality as dependent on the social construction of meaning. He significantly developed Weber’s subjective conception of the ideal type with the help of Husserl in order to clarify not only what sociologists should do when they theorize but also what goes on in everyday interaction (Schutz 1972). Schutz’s version became under the third phase of sociology known as “double hermeneutics” (Giddens 1993), that is, social scientists have to—in contrast to natural scientists—construct typifications in order to understand the typifications of everyday life. Thus, Schutz reintroduced the need for conceptual analysis as a crucial form of theorizing. Further, because of the special demands on social science, general discussions about the

subject matter of sociology must restart and new methods of meaning interpretation must be developed.

It should be added that Mills, just as Merton, tried to find a third position between “abstracted empiricism” and “Grand theory.” However, his suggestion was certainly not “theories of the middle range.” Rather, he argued for a sociology that was able to relate “personal troubles” and “structural transformations” (Mills 2000). Further, his sociological alternative was based on a critique of society that partly was inspired by both Marx and the Frankfurt school. Thus, in the works of Blumer, Schutz, and Mills we already find reasons behind both the interpretive and the normative turn of sociology.

10.4 Second Phase of Postwar Sociology

The rise of a third phase is often understood in terms of a crisis of sociology (Carleheden 1998). It is to be linked to the surge of academic Marxism, which in turn, had its social background in the 1968 movement and the crisis of the welfare state (Wagner 1994; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, chapter 3). However, it was only a crisis for the conception of sociology that was hegemonic in the preceding phase. It opened up for other conceptions, not least for a reconnection to the classics. In 1982, Alexander claimed that there had been a “rehabilitation of the theoretical” (Alexander 1982: 30), and some years later Quentin Skinner edited a volume named *The Return of Grand Theory in Human Sciences* (Skinner 1985). In this book we find chapters about many of the most influential social theorists of the time (Gadamer, Kuhn, Derrida, Habermas, Rawls, Foucault, Althusser, Lévi-Strauss). In retrospect Patrick Baert and Filipe da Silva write about the significance of such scholars (adding Bourdieu, Giddens, and Luhmann) and call this period “the age of the golden generation of twentieth-century European social theory” (Baert and Silva 2010). This generation played a significant role for the social sciences toward the end of the twentieth century and set “the agenda for what is to be studied” (Baert and Silva 2010).⁹ However, to talk about social theory in the singular is, as we have seen, wrong. What happened was rather a rehabilitation of the classical kind of theorizing and the ascendance of the outsiders in the preceding phase to the forefront. Habermas, for instance, developed his theory of communicative action in conversation not only with Marx, Weber, and Durkheim but also with Mead and Schutz.

So why did this transformation of the theoretical occur and why did it become such an influential answer to the crisis of the first phase of postwar sociology?¹⁰ How did the social theorists at the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century managed to break the earlier empiricist hegemony? As far as I know, this transformation has not systematically been studied by sociologists of social science. However, lacking studies from such an external perspective, I will try to explicate the rise of a third conception of theorizing from the internal perspective of theory of science.¹¹ From that perspective it is quite easy to explain why it occurred.

The two most influential twentieth-century theories of science—that is, the logical positivism of the Vienna circle and the critical rationalism of Karl Popper—understood

science as an endeavor that aimed at liberating science from theory in the classical, “speculative” sense. They were both based on the empiricist notion that theories could be directly compared with the world and argued for a unified conception of science modeled after natural science. The logical positivism of the Vienna circle implied that sooner or later science would be able to grasp the whole complexity of the world using the methods of natural science. Even in everyday life prejudices and metaphysics would eventually be conquered and replaced by conceptions based on science in this sense.¹²

Popper was not a revolutionary thinker in this way, but a reformist (“piecemeal social engineering,” as he put it). However, also he, in the last instance, took for granted that we are able to test theories by comparing them with a “ready-made” world out there (Goodman 1978).¹³ Also his theory of science implicates that the theoretical component of our understanding of the world—the hypothesis—must be formulated in such a way that it can be tested against the empirical. The sharp distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification is then fundamental. The theoretical constructions that take place in the former context must be subordinated to the demands of the latter context:

It is irrelevant from the point of view of science whether we have obtained our theories by jumping to unwarranted conclusions or merely by stumbling over them (that is, by “intuition”), or else by some inductive procedure. The question, “How did you first find your theory?” relates, as it were, to an entirely private matter, as opposed to the question, “How did you test your theory” which alone is scientifically relevant. (Popper 1957: 135)

Such a conception of science makes it possible to defend research from theoretical critique in other senses than Merton’s by claiming that “what you are suggesting is just another theory.”¹⁴ Theoretical discussions in other senses are then seen almost as a waste of time. All we can do with theories is to prepare them for testing. A meaningful scientific discussion is only possible in the context of justification.

Dewey—one of the classical thinkers who was rehabilitated in the second phase of postwar sociology—argued that such empiricist notions of science are based on a “spectator theory of knowledge” (Dewey 1984: 163), and Jürgen Habermas talked about a “copy theory of truth” (Habermas 1971: 69). Further, it was against the background of such a notion of theory that Theodor W. Adorno ironically concluded “thinking is unscientific” (Adorno 2005: 124). When Habermas later claimed, “That we disavow reflection is positivism,” he was saying the same thing, but without the irony (Habermas 1971: vii).

The crisis of the first phase of postwar sociology meant that sociological theory in Merton’s sense lost its dominating role. The struggle between different conceptions of theorizing was opened up. Most of these conceptions were based on some kind of “post-empiricism” or “post-positivism.” This transformation of sociology was by then, as we have seen, already prepared on a philosophical level by Peirce and Husserl and, which should be added, by post-*Tractatus* Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Let me just quickly mention some of the most important post-empiricist names: In Germany, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Adorno and Habermas were all firmly based on

German idealism and used in the first case Heidegger and in the latter cases Marx to reconstruct this heritage (Adorno et al. 1976; Gadamer 1989).¹⁵ Niklas Luhmann radicalized Talcott Parsons by emphasizing Husserl's concept of meaning. He claimed that the introduction of empirical methods had led to a "Theoriesaster" (Luhmann 1992: 410). In the UK, Peter Winch (Winch 1958) made the later Wittgenstein relevant for the social sciences, and Anthony Giddens further developed not only Winch's work but used also phenomenological and hermeneutical thinkers in order to formulate his *New rules of sociological method* (Giddens 1993). Thomas Kuhn's critique of Popper was crucial, but in the United States not only Blumer but also Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein rediscovered—as Karl-Otto Apel and Habermas had done in Germany—the American pragmatist tradition (Bernstein 1976; Rorty 1979). Further, Alexander rehabilitated Parsons' Grand theory approach—as Habermas and Luhmann had done in Germany. Schutz became influential through Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's work and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (Collins 1994). In France, Michel Foucault's (ironic) statement of being a "happy positivist" did not stop him from joking about scientific methods that seem to presuppose that "things murmur meanings our language merely has to extract" (Foucault 1972: 228), and Pierre Bourdieu dismissed what he called the "the illusion of immediate knowledge" (Bourdieu, Passeron, and Chamboredon 1991: 250).

This massive critique of empiricism was so uncompromising that it seemed to reaffirm Max Horkheimer and Adorno's dark thesis of a dialectic of the Enlightenment. What once was understood as a revolutionary scientific struggle against prejudice and metaphysics had become a new kind of metaphysics; a kind which later was to be called "metaphysical realism" (Putnam 1983). Furthermore, on the ground of the epistemological criticism of methodological empiricism, science itself became not only an object for social theory but also a target for normative criticism. The scientists, the heroes of the Vienna circle, were now pictured not only as equipped with their own particular interests and habits but also as a kind of colonizers of nature, societies, and souls, carrying "instrumental reason" as a destructive weapon in their hands. In seeing themselves as neutral observers of society, social scientists had historically not been able to acknowledge that science itself had become a major force in producing the kind of society that already Weber had called an "iron cage." Such normative and political implications of empiricist theories of science must not be underestimated in the attempts to explain the transformation of the theoretical. Critique of the political consequences of mainstream science became a significant part of the general critique of society at the end of the 1960s and became a part in the transformation of both society and social science.

Thus, the epistemological and normative critique of empiricism should be seen as the intellectual base for the transformation of social theory in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The general implication of post-empiricism can be caught by the last part of the old Kantian dictum, "Thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant 1998)¹⁶ or, with the more recent dictum that facts (or observations or data) are always already theory-laden (Kuhn 1962).¹⁷ We cannot, according to this view, even see the world without concepts, theories or paradigms. Thus we should, using the recent terminology of Luc Boltanski (2011), make a distinction

between reality and world. The world is infinitely complex. In real life (including both everyday activities and research) we can never do without generalizations, abstractions, selections, interpretations, constructs, typifications, categorizations, classifications, paradigms, languages, perceptual habits, and institutions. As a consequence, there is no way of making any sharp distinction between theories and facts, and further, it seems impossible to compare such entities. We will always lack a theory-neutral language of observation. As soon as this post-empiricist view was formulated with enough precision and persuasive force by “the golden generation” (Baert and Da Salvia 2010: 286), the door opened up for a transformation of our understanding of theorizing. Conceptual analysis, general orientation, and postfactual interpretation became rehabilitated.

As long as we believe that it is possible to differentiate between and compare theories and facts in a clear-cut way, testing will be in the center of our conception of being scientific. It is then first and foremost a matter of using empirical methods in the right way. But this empiricist conception of science was shaken when a new generation of social scientists was successful in showing that such a conception of science has been impossible to realize in practice, was based on an unconvincing theory of science and had problematic political consequences. Facts, they claimed, are always already situated in a (common sense or reflexive) theoretical context. Theories are necessarily related to world views, normative reasoning, and everyday knowledge, which make it practically impossible to find empirical criteria, which in an unambiguous way would count as verification or falsification. We must give up the idea of some kind of crucial experiment, “that will make the decision for us”—as Joas and Knöbl (2009: 16) put it. They end their introduction to the twentieth-century social theory with a statement that might very well be interpreted as the “the golden generation’s” basic understanding of theory:

Theoretical issues thus range from empirical generalizations to comprehensive interpretive systems which link basic philosophical, metaphysical, political and moral attitudes to the world. Anyone wishing to be part of the social scientific world cannot, therefore, avoid engaging in critical debate on all these levels. Those hoping to stick with purely empirical theories will be disappointed. (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 17–18)

10.5 Contemporary Sociology

Almost thirty years after his proclamation of the rehabilitation of the theoretical, Alexander—together with Isaac Reed—describe contemporary social science as “post-theoretical” (Reed and Alexander 2009: 24). They claim that we have seen an “abandonment of theoretical discourse” and date the beginning of this end to the “late 1980s” (23):

In social scientific practice—and in Anglophone sociology in particular—there has been a return to empirical studies of social life, a letting go of theoretical

concerns. This is a broad trend, with many exceptions, but one which nonetheless can be felt in the bones of any young sociologist entering graduate school with the hopes of “writing theory.” (Reed and Alexander 2009: 21f)

They are here using the term theory in the sense that was dominating during the second phase of postwar sociology. We find support for their claim in some innovative recent discussions. These discussions—in contrast to the quote above—generally focus on the opening rather than the end of something. They are conducted under labels such as “return to the empirical” (Adkins and Lury 2009: 6), “descriptive turn” (Savage 2009), “new empiricism” (Latour 2005; Gane 2009; Lash 2009), and “reconstruction” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Honneth 2011). These discussions are interesting because they are directed against what is seen as problematic consequences of the way theorizing most often were pursued during the previous phase. Under these labels opponents to the “golden generation” are gathered. To be sure, it is difficult to say how much influence this new understanding of theory have had on research practices, but many have pointed toward the fact that some kind of “downward shift” (Reed and Alexander 2009: 24) seems to be occurring.

In a similar way as in the previous section, I will only investigate the internal arguments that might motivate a “downward shift.” These arguments cannot be understood as a plea for a return to the empirical in the sense of the “theoryless theories” and the “abstracted empiricism” of the first phase of postwar sociology, but rather, and more interestingly, a plea for a second transformation of our understanding of the theoretical and its role in empirical research. I will take my point of departure in three different diagnoses of problems that can be seen as consequences of second-phase postwar sociology.

The first diagnosis is formulated by Stephen Turner and is based on the following claim:

Social theory is not only a field but a mature one, one that is essentially complete and self-sufficient as a coherent and valuable form of intellectual activity, a voice in the conversation of mankind, with its own internal conversation of considerable complexity and depth. (Turner 2004: 141)

Turner even talks about “the mutual irrelevance of empirical sociology and social theory” (Turner 2004: 146) and goes on,

Theory Culture and Society and the *American Sociological Review* are journals, that for all practical purposes are not only in different disciplines, but in disciplines that are more widely separated than, say, sociology and economics.” (2004: 147)

In line with the “golden generation” he understands social theory as historicizing and situating concepts. “Commentary is the basic method of social theory” (156), he claims. Thus, theorizing is always conducted in conversation with other social theorists. This conception does not implicate—of course—that social theory in some sense could replace empirical sociology. Rather, social theory must be saved from “the dead hand of

sociology” (146). The problem for social theory today, according to this first diagnosis, is the problem of a subfield, institutionalized as a part of sociology. Today social theory suffocates by being subsumed under empirical sociology. Thus, Turner’s article seems to be a defense of the “classic” and “golden” conceptions of social theory, which today are being threatened by the downward turn. He does not really identify any internal problems within this kind of theorizing. The problem lies outside of social theory and the only solution seems to be to reclaim its status as an acknowledged subfield. Turner’s sharp distinction between social theory and empirical sociology seems to implicate that his diagnosis is caught by the struggles that went on during the transformation from the first to the second postwar phase of sociology.

However, Turner’s diagnosis of the current state of sociology seems to stand in contradiction to the self-understanding of both classical and, at least partly, second-phase postwar social theory. The classical sociologists did not make such a sharp distinction between theoretical and empirical sociology and the interpretative turn in the second phase of postwar sociology was intended, as we have seen, to change empirical sociology. This intention leads to the second diagnosis:

The modern social sciences are characterized ... by an extremely damaging division between theoretical and empirical knowledge. Something of a division of labour, as it were, has arisen between those who see themselves as theoreticians and those who view themselves as empiricists or empirical social researchers. As a result of this strict division of labour, these two groupings scarcely register each other’s findings anymore. (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 3)

Joas and Knöbl confirm Turner’s statement about a *de facto* mutual irrelevance of empirical social science and social theory in contemporary sociology, but unlike Turner they see this division as a major problem. The diagnosis implies that during the last quarter of the twentieth century social theory was transformed in such a way that the tight connection between the theoretical and the empirical, which Merton’s conception allowed for, was broken:

Just as some intellectuals and theorists deride the seemingly myopic and ‘pedestrian’ concerns of empirical researchers—particularly those of the empiricist variety who believe that the facts speak for themselves—the force of anti-theoretical sentiments deriving from other sources cannot be underestimated. (Layder 1998: 8)

This picture of the contemporary state of social theory has been reaffirmed over and again; “social theory increasingly has become a separate academic field” (Baert and Silva 2010: 2) and “the precise role of theory in empirical research has become increasingly uncertain” (285). Reed and Alexander (2009: 25) and Savage (2013) claim something similar. According to all of them the solution to the problem is to “reassess” their relation (Baert and Silva 2010: 285). Such reassessment seems to exclude both the solution implied by the first diagnosis and the empiricism of first-phase postwar sociology. Social theory and empirical research are interdependent, but the significance of theorizing cannot be reduced to the construction of middle-range hypotheses.

Baert and da Silva (2010: 291) describe a “representational” view on theory, which can be seen as an instructive example of a failed attempt to connect theory, in the post-empiricist sense, and empirical research. In this case empirical researchers do not test theories, but apply them on specific cases. They might, for instance, investigate whether Bourdieu’s distinction between economic and cultural capital is not only applicable in Paris in the 1970s, but also in the Danish city of Aalborg today. This way of using theory is the opposite of the empiricist model. Grand theories almost become bibles, and concepts are given a kind of fetishist status. Empirical researchers choose a grand theory or an influential concept and apply it on a subject matter that has not been investigated before—at least not recently and at this or that particular place. Application of ready-made theory might then become a kind of theoretical colonization of the empirical. On the other hand, post-empiricist theorizing might also be instrumentalized by the empirical researcher. If a ready-made theory does not fit to the empirical data, the empirical researcher simply throws it overboard and looks for another ready-made theory to apply. In both cases theory and data remain external to one another and the theory-fact dualism is not overcome.

The first two diagnoses are basically positive to the way “the golden generation” theorized. Baert and da Silva, in spite of their statements quoted above, open their concluding chapter *Social Theory for the Twenty-First Century* by claiming: “Social theory is an increasingly important intellectual endeavor in the social sciences today” (2010: 285). Neither of the two first diagnoses are really implying any need for any radical change of the way social theory has been conducted in the previous phase. The problems they identify are related to the relation to empirical research. The third diagnosis, however, attributes the problem of contemporary sociology to the way of theorizing that characterized late twentieth-century social theory. I will use two different versions of French pragmatism as my main witnesses.

Bruno Latour, just like Reed and Alexander, implies that we should see the late 1980s as a turning point for social theory. 1989 was not only the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall but also the year of the first conferences about the state of the planet (Latour 1993: 8). These events symbolize for him both the failure and the end of the two central modern projects; in the first case, the emancipation from exploitation, and, in the second case, the human domination over nature. In both cases science has played a crucial role—including academic Marxism, which was instrumental for the second transformation of the theoretical in sociology. French pragmatists tend to see this transformation as reifying and paternalistic in both an epistemological and a normative sense. We should

avoid both the arrogance of the expert adviser to the Prince and pontificator, and the irresponsibility of armchair revolutionaries ... basing their power on a dual, “scientific” and “political” legitimacy—something which ... has led to unprecedented forms of intellectual terrorism. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: xiv)

The remedy of this diagnosis of sociology, is to “follow the actors themselves” (Latour 2005: 12; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 12). Ordinary actors are perfectly capable to formulate their own “theories” or “metaphysics” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 145).

Latour names such an approach “empirical metaphysics” (Latour 2005: 51). French pragmatists direct their critique of paternalism first and foremost against Bourdieu’s critical sociology (Celikates 2006). They seem sometimes almost to equate Bourdieu’s sociology with sociological “method” in general—or what Latour calls “sociology of the social,” in contrast to his own method, which he calls “sociology of associations” (2005: 159–60). Master concepts like “social” and “society” must be put to the side. They have

remained stranded like a whale, yes a leviathan, beached on a seashore where Lilliputian social scientists tried to dig a suitable abode. Of late, the smell of this decaying monster has become unbearable. There is no way to succeed in reviewing social theory as long as the beach has not been cleared and the ill-fated notion of society entirely dissolved. (Latour, 2005: 163–4)

Latour seems in this respect to be partly critical of his own early sociology of science and distances himself from social constructivism: “The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (Latour 2004: 231). Thus, from this perspective, late twentieth-century social theory has been too Kantian. This way of theorizing actually prevents us from seeing the world.

Latour and his followers explicitly argue for a downward shift in terms of “a return to the empirical” and “a descriptive turn.” However, this is not to be understood as a step back to methodological empiricism of the first phase of postwar sociology, but rather as a step forward toward “second empiricism” (Latour 2004: 232) or “new empiricism” (Gane 2009). Second empiricism is not based on a conception of “things-in-themselves” (Latour 1993: 5). The objectifying gaze—*Das Tatsachenblick* (Bonß 1982)—of abstracted empiricism does as much violence to the empirical as the “apriorism” (Lash 2009) of the armchair social theorist. Hence, Latour does not argue that we should conceive the world as matters of facts but rather as “matters of concern.” To see the world as “matters of fact are totally implausible, unrealistic, unjustified definitions of what it is to deal with things” (2004: 244). Thus, the question of the meaning of the theoretical is closely connected to the question “what is the empirical?” (Adkins and Lury 2009).

All the three diagnoses implicate that the post-empiricist critique of scientism was correct, but also that the transformation of the theoretical in the second postwar period actually never led to an abandonment of the fact-theory dualism—at least not in practice. According to the third diagnosis, we must acknowledge this failure and see that there are two different ways to theoretically reify the world. The first way is mainstream methodological empiricism, which involves a reduction of the empirical to matters of facts. The second one subordinates the empirical under some intellectual conceptual scheme. Instead, Latour calls for “a new respectful realism” (Latour 2004: 244): “If the sociology of the social works fine with what has been already assembled, it does not work so well to collect anew the participants in what is not—not yet—a sort of social realm” (Latour 2005: 12).

How should we then, according to Latour, “collect anew”? It is not easy to say, because he avoids to reflect on his own role as an actor. It is even unclear if Latour accepts the common point of departure that theory basically is to be understood as some kind of generalization (Albertsen 2008). Boltanski and Chiapello are more decided on this crucial point. Together with Thévenot, Boltanski developed a sociology of critique in order to come closer to the actors of everyday life. However, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, we cannot stay on “the plane of immanence.” Everyday actors do not stay on “the plane of immanence” nor can social scientists. At some point we have to “reconstruct” and “recategorize,” which presupposes a conception of reality as a “two-tier space” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006: 107, 320, xxxiiiiff.). One could understand Boltanski and Chiapello’s distinction between “a regime of displacement” and “a regime of categorization” as an implicit critique of Latour.¹⁸ A regime of categorization is about generalization (321ff.). By means of recategorization and reconstruction they aim to overcome the antagonism between critical sociology and sociology of critique. They seem to be heading in the direction of a “critical sociology of critique” (Albertsen 2008: 76), which includes both epistemological and normative reconstructions. However, they are rather ambivalent and have not explained this idea in any systematic way.

Just as in the French case, we find theoretical moves toward immanence in American and German social theory. Alexander (2000) discusses such moves by analyzing, on the one hand, the “liberal-communitarian debate” and, on the other, Axel Honneth’s criticism of Habermas. Alexander also points at the same tendency toward immanence in the development of Rawls and Habermas’s own thinking. However, I cannot here discuss these transformations. Rather, I will end with a short analysis of the method Honneth uses to develop a normative social theory of freedom. Also he uses the terms “reconstruction” and “immanent analysis” in contrast to “construction” (Honneth 2011).

Honneth’s method should be understood as an alternative to the Kantian way (e.g., early Rawls) of establishing the meaning of justice purely philosophically and, so to say, from above. His point of departure is simply to assert that freedom is the fundamental normative ideal of Western modernity. A theory of justice must, according to him, be based on that immanent ideal. However, Honneth does not support this claim inductively as an empirical researcher would do (e.g., in way of the “world value studies”). Rather, he analyzes the meaning of freedom. His method of normative reconstruction is built on a kind of quasi-transcendental logic.¹⁹ This logic of inquiry—to use Peirce terminology—is primarily neither inductive nor deductive, but abductive or retroductive. It is an “inference a posteriori” (Carleheden 2014). It is, using Merton’s term, a postfactual interpretation. It goes backward and aims to explain the conditions of the possibility of a known fact—in this case, the hegemony of the ideal of freedom. Because his analysis is immanent, Honneth has to proceed historically and sociologically. His analysis of the meaning of freedom must in some way be in contact with the historic development of Western modernity. The major part of Honneth’s book is dedicated to that task. This method certainly needs to be explicated and developed further also in Honneth’s case.²⁰ However, the idea of epistemological and normative reconstruction points

to a way of overcoming the problems of post-empiricist theorizing that the three diagnoses have identified.

This is how far I will go with my historical investigation. I will now end with an attempt—based on this investigation—to indicate in what direction we should go in order to answer Peirce’s question that opened this chapter.

10.6 Conclusion

My investigation indicates that it is possible to see a reasonable historical development of conceptions of theorizing in twentieth-century sociology. Merton’s conception was directed against both pure empirical generalization and general theory detached from the empirical world, but presupposed a rather naïve epistemology, tended to trivialize social theory and clear the way for a bureaucratization of the discipline. A normative and interpretive turn and a return to Grand theory seemed to be necessary. However, in spite of the general acknowledgment of the notion that facts are unavoidably “theory-laden,” the dualistic distinction between the theoretical and the empirical has commonly remained in place. This dualism points toward a less reasonable development. In some sociological quarters, the conception of theory-ladenness tended to become an excuse for focusing exclusively on the theory-side. Thus, the risk of theoretical paternalism and of holding on to “zombie-categories” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) increased. In the meantime, an unquestioned scientific conception of the empirical could thrive in other quarters of the discipline. It might be that the kind of liberation of social theory from empirical research, which Turner asks for, has been a part of the problem rather than its solution. It might have reinforced an abstracted understanding of the empirical that in the next round struck back on social theory in just the way that Turner wanted to avoid.

The notion of the theory-ladenness of facts suggests that theorizing in a post-empiricist sense must be a significant part of doing empirical research. Hence, theorizing might also be seen as a special kind of empirical method. Overcoming the fact-theory dualism cannot only be about a theorization of the empirical but also be about an empiricalization of the theoretical. Social theory must also be understood as a method of interpreting the world.

In order to explicate this claim, it might be helpful to turn to Michael Oakeshott’s concept “mode of experience” (Oakeshott 1933). We can then understand mainstream empirical methods as certain ways of seeing the world among others. They are attached to certain “knowledge interests” (Habermas 1971a). Accordingly, such empirical methods cannot be given a privileged ability to connect to the world, but are to be seen as particular modes of experiencing it. Thus, these empirical methods need to be disenchanting and cannot simply be understood as neutral tools of knowledge production (Law 2009; Savage 2013; Gobo 2016). They are based on specific cognitive and normative assumptions. Or, to use Latour’s terminology, methods predetermine the way the world is assembled. From this point of view we can take another look at social theory. Not only do methods always already include particular theoretical conceptions, but theories always already include certain methods of experiencing the

world. Theorizing must be understood as a certain way of making the world real; that is, making sense of the world.

In Turner's version, social theory might look like a kind of history of ideas, "exegesis" (Blumer 1986: 141) or *Bildung* (Savage 2013: 13). But this would be a misconception of both the golden and the classical generation. Their primary aim was not to develop theories about theories, but to use and develop them in order to understand modern society. They did that on the shoulders of other theorists or in oppositions to them. In either case, they used already developed ideas, concepts, and theories as partners in discussions of how to understand the world.

Thus, also post-empiricist social theorists study the world "out there" in order to understand it. But in contrast to ordinary empirical researchers, these social theorists have been skeptical about so-called scientific methods.²¹ This disbelief goes back to the abovementioned critique of the social role of empirical research that accompanied the second transformation of social theory. The general suspicion was that methods instrumentalize and reify the world (Carleheden 1998). Post-empiricist theorizing, on the other hand, opens for another kind of knowledge as compared to quantitative or qualitative methods. The possibility of a theoretical kind of method might be explained by the simple fact that social theorists actually do not spend their lives in armchairs. They are situated in the world as every other human being. Let me just mention the background of Habermas's social theory as an illustration. His theory of communicative action is without doubt related to his own experiences of growing up in Nazi Germany with a physical handicap (Habermas 2005, chapter 1; Müller-Doohm 2014, Part 1). This example indicates that being an innovative social theorist presupposes the ability of somehow being in contact with deep personal and emotional experiences. Mainstream methods might stand in the way for such a contact.²²

From the above perspective, it is possible to reconsider Turner's claim. The fact that today it is accepted that quantitative and qualitative methods produce different kinds of knowledge, might also be used to support Turner's claim that social theory in some sense is "self-sufficient." The kind of knowledge that late twentieth-century social theory produced is knowledge, but a different kind as compared to the kind that mainstream empirical methods produce. Post-empiricist theory is related to the world in another way. None of these modes of experience (or methods) need to be seen as better or truer than the other ones, but simply as different in kind.

The question then arises how theoretical claims of knowledge can be seen as more or less valid. We can answer by referring to American pragmatism or phenomenological sociology. Theory—both in a scientific and in a common sense—is about generalizations and typifications and they can of course be better or worse. The answer of the question of specific forms of theoretical validity is actually not very different from the question how mainstream empirical methods can be seen as more or less valid. The post-empiricist social theoretical way of reducing the subjectivity of individual experiences and of common sense is to communicate with other theories and other theorists. It is "the community of inquiry" that allows social theorists to generalize their findings (Carleheden 2014: 439; Tavory and Timmermans 2014, chapter 7). In this community the danger of ready-made theories and frozen concepts can be counteracted.

The question of the relation between the theoretical and the empirical can now be reformulated in a more fruitful way: How should we understand the relation between reconstructive, quantitative, and qualitative methods? These methods allow us to see different dimensions of the world. They include their special ways of making the world real and use different means of justification. They can, on the other hand, all reify the world in their own way if they do not acknowledge their own limits and the value of other modes of experience. If one of the modes dominates over the others our knowledge of the world declines.

This suggestion of how to interpret, evaluate, and develop the ongoing turn to immanence is of course highly tentative. It implicates distinctions between different, equally legitimate modes of experiencing the world, but also a close interdependency between them, that is, between theorizing and qualitative and quantitative methods. Theorizing is also a kind of experience and a kind of method, but a specific one. It might be understood as quasi-transcendental reconstruction or—with Peirce—abduction/retroduction. Theorizing in this sense of postfactual interpretation have reconceptualization as its aim. Its postfactuality shows that it is dependent on the results of other methods, but the theory-ladenness of facts shows, on the other hand, that these other methods also are dependent on conceptualizations.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Nikolaj Schultz, Bjørn Schiermer, Margareta Bertilsson, and Emma Engdahl and also to the participants in seminars in Copenhagen, Gothenburg, and Helsinki in which earlier versions of this chapter have been discussed.

Notes

- 1 This “immanent” method anticipates in a way, as the reader in the end will see, the conclusion.
- 2 On the productive role of nonviolent conflicts in clarifying justifications in nonacademic life, see Boltanski and Thévenot (2006).
- 3 There is of course an overwhelming amount of overviews regarding the content of different social theories, but not regarding different approaches to the question of how to theorize.
- 4 Merton was using the first five types only as contrasts in order to clarify the sixth. He did not make much effort to explicate the merits of the other conceptions. I will however, as we go along, give some more substance also to the other types.
- 5 However, the claim that we are entering a fourth period is very tentative.
- 6 Georg Simmel’s article “How is society possible?” would be a good example of a postfactual interpretation.
- 7 However, see Turner (2004) who argues that also Parsons’s social theory should be seen as a part of the scientization of sociology after 1945.
- 8 “Hilfswissenschaft im Dienste von Verwaltungen.”

- 9 Thus, the center of sociology seemed to have returned to Europe but again in a new form.
- 10 The development of “qualitative methods” was another answer, which I cannot discuss here.
- 11 With “external” I refer to explanations that focus on interest, power, politics of higher education and research, and institutional and general social structures. With “internal” I refer to an investigation of the rational arguments that might have supported the change. In opposition to a pure sociology of science perspective I simply take for granted that reasoning must be given some explanatory force.
- 12 Compare the American sociologist George Lundberg’s book “Can science save us?” (1947).
- 13 This is why also Popper’s theory of science should be understood as a kind of empiricism (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 8ff).
- 14 This answer was once given to me by a rational choice sociologist. I was arguing that it is strange that rational choice theory takes “the prisoner’s dilemma” as its basic point of departure because in ordinary life people are most often able to communicate with one another. Therefore, I continued, we should rather take communication as our basic point of departure.
- 15 Positivist debates, similar to the German one, went on in both Norway and Sweden under this period (Heidegren, 2016).
- 16 I am puzzled over the fact that “Anschauungen” is translated to “intuitions” and not “observations”; “Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind” (Kritik der reinen Vernunft [KrV B75, A51]).
- 17 Popper acknowledged that in a later German version (1968) of *Logic of Scientific Discovery*; “There are no pure observations: they are pervaded by theories and guided by both problems and theories” (Translated in Joas and Knöbl 2009: 11).
- 18 Explicitly they are rather criticizing Deleuze’s “ontology of force” (xxv). Compare Latour’s critique of Boltanski as being “half-Kantian” (2005: 232).
- 19 In his critique of Habermas as a constructivist Kantian, Honneth surprisingly does not mention that Habermas already in the beginning of the 1970 discussed his own method in terms of “rational reconstruction.”
- 20 There is a problematic tension between the immanent method and what seems to be a kind of a priori developmental logic that Honneth inherits from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.
- 21 Compare Gadamer’s distinction between “truth” and “method” (1989). His work could have been used in order to make a similar point as I have made with the help of Oakeshott.
- 22 Compare the appendix in Mills (2000) on “intellectual craftsmanship.”

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