

Unplugged - Book Reviews Special Forum: About Doing Research

Hervé CORVELLEC (2013), *What is Theory? Answers from the Social and Cultural Sciences*, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.

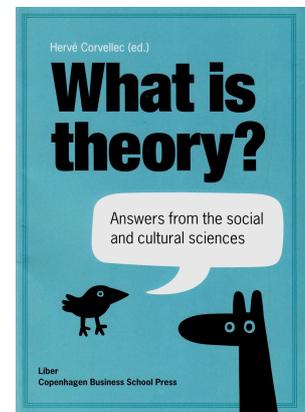
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The unplugged section edits some book reviews special forums dedicated to a topic, an author or a theoretical perspective. This first forum considers three very stimulating and rejuvenating volumes for academics in organization and management studies about research methods. They offer some new insights about problematizing, theorizing and academic writing which may contribute to regain scientific imagination.



WHAT IS THEORY? AND WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

Let me begin by saying that if you are looking for a straightforward answer to what theory is, *What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences* is not the book for you. For a simple answer to that question, the knowledge seeker should turn to other sources. Wikipedia, for example, often criticized for being unscientific, provides a basic definition: “a group of ideas meant to explain a certain topic, such as a single or collection of fact(s), event(s), or phenomenon(a) (on)”¹. With such an answer only a click away, it comes as no surprise that the question in the title of *What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences* merely serves the rhetorical function of initiating a discussion regarding the history and use of theory in the social and cultural sciences rather than providing a clear-cut definition.

In his introduction to the book, the editor, professor of business administration Hervé Corvellec, provides a personal account of what inspired him to edit a book about theory in the social and cultural sciences. A junior colleague was attributing the weaknesses of Bachelor’s theses to “a presumed authorial lack of understanding of what theory is about” (p. 9). Having heard the argument before, Corvellec nodded but kept to himself that he was not at all sure that there is a definite answer to the question of what theory is:

I went home dogged by a double feeling of cowardice and negligence, at not having admitted my ignorance and at not helping my students to better answer a question that is obviously so central to their studies. (ibid)

This personal narrative is a very interesting opening to the book, which could be interpreted as the editor's personal quest to investigate a question that arose in his mind through a conversation with his junior colleague, and one in which we, the readers, are invited to participate by contemplating the various contributions in the book. It also creates expectations regarding a possible answer as to how to deal with the pedagogical problem of explaining "theory" to undergraduate students, however.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences consists of 18 chapters, of which 16 are linked in pairs, written by one senior and one junior researcher from different areas of social science. The fields represented include the history of ideas, the theory of science, science and technology studies, management and organization theory, sociology, ethnology, economics, political science, and human geography. This results in eight pairs of chapters (Chapters 2-17), plus an introductory chapter written by Corvellec (Chapter 1) and a post-face chapter written by Professor of Rhetoric Mats Rosengren (Chapter 18).

The even chapters, written by senior researchers in the different fields, are followed by odd chapters written by junior researchers, who were asked by the editor to comment upon the text produced by their older peers. The editor explains in Chapter 1 that "senior" in this context means that the author was born prior to 1961, which was the random year chosen by the editor as the dividing line between "senior" and "junior."

The first three pairs of chapters after the introduction (Chapters 2-7) provide a general discussion regarding the history of the concept of theory, the relationship between the philosophy of science and theory of science, and the role of theory users (sic) in theory development. In Chapter 2, for example, Sven-Eric Liedman sketches the history of the concept of theory, demonstrating how the Ancient Greek view of theory as a form of contemplation has influenced both modern and postmodern views of theory, and in Chapter 4, Margareta Hallberg discusses how the emergence of theory differs in the philosophy of science and the theory of science.

The use of theory in the various fields of social science is most often discussed by the junior authors. Edda Magna, for example, elaborates in Chapter 3 on the status of theory in the discipline of the history of theory as a response to Sven-Eric Liedman, and Tommy Jensen argues in his chapter (7) for a theory that takes the pragmatist's perspective seriously, thereby partly criticizing Barbara Czarniawska's claim in the previous chapter that theorizing is carried out to construct a plot.

The next five pairs of chapters (8-17) focus on the status of theory in the disciplines of each author. Depending on how one reads the chapters, however, this division is not entirely clear; it seems as if the authors are depicting the history of theory or the emergence of theory in the specific field that they represent, or discussing the use of theory in their field or in social science in general.

In Chapter 10, (senior) ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren provide a personal account of why, when, and how theory came to infuse the field of ethnology, and in Chapter 12, (senior) economist Lars Pålsson Syll not only provides "a critical realist perspective" on theory in the field of economics but also engages in a discussion on the shortcomings of current neoclassical economic theory and the failures of mainstream (macro-) economics. In the following

chapter (13), (junior) economist Fredrik Hansen nuances the discussion, and together, the two chapters provide a welcome and interesting contribution to the debate in the public media on the shortcomings of economic models.

In Chapter 14, (senior) political scientist Morten Ougaard describes the status of political theory versus theory in political science and later, in Chapter 17, (junior) cultural geographer Louise Fabian delineates “the spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences. Read as a whole, the book highlights a number of various traditions and views on the concept of theory, as well as of specific theories that have been influential in the various disciplines. The book ends with a reflection provided by Mats Rosengren, who traces the word “theory” back to its linguistic roots, highlighting the multilayered nature of the concept and remarking that it comes as no surprise that the book displays a bricolage of ideas and interpretations of the concept.

MERITS OF DIALOGICITY

It is easy to share Rosengren’s view. What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences is a rich book, and hence rather a difficult work to review. To provide a simple answer to the simple but frequently asked question “Is this a good book?” is just impossible. The volume is far too complex and slippery.

The multitude of perspectives is certainly a strength. By inviting junior scholars to engage in dialogue with senior colleagues, the richness of the theory of social and cultural science and the complexity of the question posed in the book’s title are highlighted and deepened. The Pålsson Syll-Hansen debate, as well as the Czarniawska-Jensen dialogue – to mention only two – may be understood as decentralizing and dis-unifying forces, whereas the attempts from (mostly senior) researchers to sketch the history of theory in their fields may be seen as attempts to unify and centralize the concept. The chapters thus constitute a dialogue in which centrifugal as well as centripetal utterances together create a heteroglossia (cf Bakhtin, 1934-35/1981) of a kind that proves Corvellec’s point: there is no definite answer to the question “What is theory?”. The breadth of disciplines represented by the contributors also makes the book rich and relevant to researchers interested in various fields of theory in social and cultural science in general, as well as in the specific sub-disciplines, since reading about how theory is viewed by scholars in other fields also sheds light on one’s own assumptions.

Particularly interesting is the pair of chapters written by ethnologists Billy Ehn, Orvar Löfgren and Fredrik Schoug. In their chapter (10: “Theory – a personal matter”), Ehn and Löfgren write the history of a field (ethnology) that for some time was “theory-less.” Ehn and Löfgren describe how theory emerged as a need among researchers to further the understanding of the research paradigm they were active in. By drawing on their own (empirical) practices as ethnologists they argue that theory is closely related to scientific practice, and hence very personal. Bringing up the difficulties involved in understanding this as a researcher, the chapter thus nicely illustrates how theory is part of the “glasses” one wears when doing research.

In response to Ehn and Löfgrens’ claim that theory is personal, Fredrik Schoug’s chapter (11: “Theory – a professional matter”) brings the student back into the narrative, arguing that theory is and should be important in undergraduate and graduate education, since understanding and working with theories develops a person’s intellectual ability, which is important regardless of the kind of post-BA or -MA degree one pursues. Together, this pair of chapters touches upon the question implicitly mooted in Corvellec’s introductory chapter of how and why theory should be dealt with as part of an undergraduate education.

Another well-written chapter is Elena Esposito's contribution (Chapter 8) on theory in sociology and sociological theories, which contains an interesting reflection on how sociology seems to have become "the natural reference of all reflections on the meanings and forms of theory" (p. 130). This is certainly true for large parts of organization and management research. Esposito rhetorically asks what role theory can have today, after the "discovery of circularity," i.e. the idea that the world depends on the observer. If theory is the very foundation on the basis of which research is carried out, is it at all possible to move out of this or are we blind to – and thereby trapped by – the theoretical concepts that we use also when doing empirical studies? The chapter surely sketches a very different position of theory in sociology compared to the position of theory in ethnology as described by Ehn and Löfgren.

THE ARBITRARINESS OF "SENIOR" AND "JUNIOR"

Even though *What is theory?* Answers from the social and cultural sciences will (and should) turn up on several reading lists, the book does have its limitations. There are linguistic errors that should have been found and corrected. The layout of the cover is misplaced, depicting a bird which appears to be uttering the subtitle of the book to a giraffe. This is more reminiscent of children's literature than of a serious discussion on theory.

Besides such matters, however, the division of authors into "senior" and "junior" is somewhat strange. To establish the authors' age (whether they were born before or after 1961) as an arbitrary line of demarcation between "junior" and "senior" is, as Corvellec also confesses, rather arbitrary, especially since age does not necessarily indicate that an author is more or less senior or junior in a scientific field; this has more to do with how long one has been active as researcher. This arbitrary decision builds on the assumption that the researcher has followed a straight path from secondary school to university and on to PhD, postgraduate research and so on, an assumption that does not necessarily correspond to reality. This may seem trivial, but could in fact matter, since time outside of academia could affect a researcher's view on theory as well as on the relationship between theory and "reality."

MISSING: REFLECTION ON PERFORMATIVITY AND THE CRAFT OF THEORIZING

Somewhat more surprising is the lack of reflection in the book on the performative aspect of the book itself and on the craft of theorizing, i.e. the link between theory and methodology.

There have been many attempts at defining what theory is, as well as what theory is not. Some of the more widely cited pieces within the field of organization and management studies include articles by Whetten (1989) and Sutton and Staw (1995). Corvellec argues that it is "simply dangerous" to formulate a definite answer to the question of what theory is, since it "expresses a dogmatic stance that entails the risk of leading academia into a form of collegial or political control" (p. 15). This is a perfectly acceptable stance; many scholars within the social and cultural sciences today would agree with Corvellec.

However, through the (at least in parts) authoritative discourse in which many authors in the book engage, this volume does in fact work in the very same manner that Corvellec deems risky. The reason being, of course, that a book like *What is theory?* has a performative impact, leading theory to be defined regardless of the editor's good intentions.

The performativity of theory is, in fact, a perspective that is strangely missing from the book. Even though it is mentioned by several authors, for example by (junior) sociologist Tereza Stöckelová and (junior) economist Fredrik

Hansen, both of whom refer to the performative aspect of knowledge as developed in the traditions of science and technology studies (in sociology) and social studies of finance (in economics) (see, for example, Callon, 1998; Law, 2004; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2008), theory in its performative aspect is mentioned only briefly at the end of those contributors' respective chapters (5/13). This is a pity, since not only is the performativity of theory a perspective that could serve as a good (theoretical) answer to the question as to why theory may not be defined, but it also helps underscore the moral obligations of the researcher when theorizing. This is because from a performative perspective theory is not only a way of describing the world in abstract terms, but is also seen to act upon the world, and this, in turn, raises questions about the responsibility of theorists and the effects of theorizing.

The moral obligation of theorizing is an issue that has been debated recently in several sub-fields of social and cultural sciences. One example is literary theorist Terry Eagleton's "After theory," in which Eagleton argues that dimensions such as truth, objectivity, and morality should be included in, not excluded from, (cultural) theories (Eagleton, 2003). Another example is management scholar Sumantra Ghoshal's claims that by "propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility", blaming management scholars for ruining good management practice with bad (i.e. ethically unaware) theories (Ghoshal, 2005:76).

It must be acknowledged that the moral and ethical dimensions of theory are touched upon by several authors, primarily junior scholars, in the book, for example by Tommy Jensen in Chapter 7 and Sara Edenheim in Chapter 9. But the discussion is somewhat lost in their attempts to write clever comments to their senior peers, with Jensen expanding on theory as narrative and plot and Edenheim discussing the distinction between writers versus researchers. Both of these chapters contribute to the richness of the book, but rather than dealing with the (moral and ethical) effects of theory, they expand on the role of the theorist in a rather philosophical way.

Related to the performativity of theories, and also largely missing from the book, is the craft of theorizing. How theories are crafted was brought up already by Karl E. Weick, who argued that theorizing is important when aiming at understanding what theory is, as a response to Sutton and Staw's proposition of what theory is not (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995). Products of the theorizing process do not emerge as perfect theories, Weick argues, but as approximations. This means that the process of theorizing is as interesting as theory in itself (ibid).

How theories come into existence is an implicit theme in *What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences*. But how theory and methodology are interlinked and how theory is crafted in the daily practice of doing research and through the choice of particular methodologies, is not explicitly discussed (cf Llewelyn, 2003; Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007). This means that the "thick" performance of doing research (cf Sergi & Hallin, 2011) is largely missing from the book, with the exception of the chapter by ethnologists Ehn and Löfgren as described above (Chapter 12). To assume that the reader is aware of, how theory may be crafted through the use of analogies and metaphors, model building and the construction of typologies is however bold, and it is a pity that such a discussion is not present in the book since this would have provided a much needed contribution.

SO... "WHAT IS THEORY?" (ASKS THE STUDENT)

The task of reviewing a book entitled *What is theory? Answers from the social and cultural sciences* is to be approached with great humility. This is not only because the performativity of the question easily provokes the reader to

attempt to formulate an ostensive answer of her own (cf Latour, 1986) but also because it is apparent to anyone involved in the production of social science that this is a question with no definite answer. To review such a book in terms of its content is thus quite a difficult task. Who can say whether the answer provided in the book is right or wrong? Or what is missing? To a reviewer, the title of the book may seem a clever way of avoiding criticism – entitling the book with a question to which there is no apparent single answer will of course mean that all attempts at pointing to what is missing in the book could probably be easily accounted for.

This does not mean, however, that the question in the book's title is unimportant. It has been said that theory is "the currency of our scholarly realm," as Corvellec also points out when referring to a recent article (Corley & Gioia, 2011:12), and the value of this currency is steadily increasing, not least through the growing trend of publish or perish in combination with the requirement of providing a theoretical contribution when presenting one's research.

Even though Corvellec firmly establishes as early as in his introduction that there is no definite answer to the question, the episode of the junior colleague and the student illustrates the fact that there is a need for a book that deals with the question of theory, not least in relation to undergraduate (and graduate) students' thesis-writing.

It is not surprising that the answer to the question in the title of the book is provided not through one coherent answer but through a bulk of different and sometimes contradicting propositions; this is in fact typical of the social sciences rooted in the interpretative tradition. In the social and cultural sciences, theory is not "a single object or a single language" (Hunter, 2006:80).

Corvellec argues that students should "learn to orient themselves among the possible answers to the question" (p. 10). I am not sure that *What is theory?* Answers from social and cultural sciences is a book that would work for undergraduate or even graduate students, though, even though these, according to the text at the back of the book, are among the target audience. The book is probably too philosophical and requires a frame of reference that a student, certainly at the undergraduate level and probably also at the graduate level, does not have. And apart from the contributions by Ehn, Löfgren and Schoug, the book does not contain a coherent discussion of the pedagogical dilemma of how to explain "what theory is" to a student at the undergraduate level. This means that the burning question that inspired Corvellec to edit the book remains: how does one answer a student who wants to know what theory is?

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