

## Preface

Richard Swedberg

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK IS TO START A DISCUSSION OF THE need for more creative theorizing in social science. We need better and bolder theory; and the key to producing it lies in the way that theory is being produced and how it is being taught to the next generation of social scientists. It primarily lies in the process of *theorizing*. In order to end up with better theory, in brief, we need to shift our main concern from theory to theorizing.

There is some reason to believe that the time is now ripe for this sea change from theory to theorizing. One important reason for this has to do with the emergence a few decades ago of cognitive science, especially cognitive psychology. Cognitive scientists have by now made good inroads into the mysteries of human thought processes; and the findings point in a very different direction from the kind of logical reasoning that for a long time has stood at the center of traditional theory in the social sciences. There exist many ways of thinking other than formal reasoning: with images, analogies, metaphors, and what in everyday language is called intuition.

In an earlier book a co-editor and I wanted to draw attention to the role of social mechanisms (Hedström and Swedberg 1997). We felt that much social science had become too focused on the analysis of variables and did not pay enough attention to the concrete ways in which social actions are linked together, via social mechanisms. In this volume the focus has been shifted to

the general process through which theory, including social mechanisms, is produced in the first place.

Before you have a theory, you need to theorize—so how do you go about theorizing in a creative way? The authors of the chapters in this book represent different social sciences; and they all offer different answers to this question. This diversity is healthy in itself. It also testifies to the experimental nature of this volume, which does not have as its goal to summarize the current state of theory in social science, but to point in novel directions by focusing on the process of theorizing.

What unites the authors is a deeply felt desire to break with the present situation: a virtual standstill of theory in social science. The standstill over the past few decades is evident at least in comparison with the powerful development of methods over the same time period, not to mention the explosive rate of innovations in fields such as cognitive science, neuroscience, and genetics.

To change the course of theory in social science—how you produce it and how you teach it—is a huge task and necessarily collective in nature. It is our hope that the reader will want to join this enterprise and help to move it along. The project of creating a new wave of bold and interesting theorizing in social science is large enough, and at the moment also open enough, for a large number of people to participate. What some would regard as drawbacks—the early, sketchy, and unfinished nature of this project—innovators will see as opportunities and what makes it exciting and inviting.

The book is organized in the following manner. The first chapter, “From Theory to Theorizing,” presents an overview of the project of theorizing. It discusses how theorizing differs from theory, what kind of theorizing is needed to innovate, and that one goes about theorizing (the different elements that make up the process of theorizing).

A somewhat longer version of this chapter was originally sent to all of the participants, who were asked to react to it in their own way (Swedberg 2012). The idea was not to comment on its content but to use its core argument as an inspiration to carry the project of theorizing forward, in the direction that each author thought best. The result is a plethora of ideas and suggestions, mixed with reflections on the authors’ own experiences of theorizing in their research.

At first the reader may get the impression that the chapters are very far apart. But as Neil Gross discusses in the Afterword (Chapter 10), this is not the case. More precisely, there are two broad themes that all of the authors

touch on. These are: what makes certain types of theorizing creative, and how to rein in and steer one's imagination in a creative direction when theorizing.

Several different factors can help to make theorizing creative. The general nature of human thought, especially as investigated by cognitive psychology and neuroscience, is one of these (see Chapters 1, 2). The reason for this is that the way human beings think comes much closer to what we have traditionally viewed as creative thought. We use, as earlier mentioned, analogies and metaphors, and we use intuition as a matter of course.

Opening up theorizing to the arts and to the general creativity of human beings is another way of making it more innovative (see Chapters 7, 9). Traditionally science and art have not been particularly close, but maybe the time has come to start pulling them closer together. Creative theorizing is furthermore a collective enterprise; and the focus should be on the community rather than on the talented but lonely individual. Creative theorizing fares best when many people theorize and when a creative attitude toward theorizing has become a public good (see Chapter 4).

The second major theme in this book is linked to the first, in the sense that it is concerned with creativity as well. The emphasis, however, is on the specific ways in which creative impulses can be turned into creative theorizing, and not just dissipate. You want to let loose the imagination but also steer it into interesting social science.

How to do this can be very difficult in practice. It is, for example, important to aim at the right level of theorizing (see Chapter 6). It is similarly crucial to choose the right topic and to deal with the empirical material in a special way (Chapters 5, 8). It is also important to understand the craft of theorizing: how to handle analogies, create an explanation, and the like (Chapters 1, 3). While it may not be possible to develop specific rules for how to theorize well, there nonetheless are certain steps that need to be taken, and these can be learned as well as taught.

But even if there do exist a few themes that tie the individual chapters together, each of them also brings something special to the project of creative theorizing. In the rest of this Preface I therefore say something about each chapter, so that the reader is able to easily find what he or she might be looking for or something that looks interesting.

In the first chapter—"From Theory to Theorizing," I outline and present the basic ideas behind the project of creative theorizing in social science. For example, I make an argument for why it is necessary to focus on what happens

at the stage *before* the final formulation of theory, since this is where the key idea is conceived and then hammered out.

I also attempt to show how one goes about theorizing, what steps need to be taken before formulating a theory. I suggest that one should begin by observing, then name the phenomenon and create one or several concepts that capture it. After this, the theory needs to be built out, with the help of analogies, metaphors, typologies, and more. The final stage is when a tentative explanation is produced.

At the heart of Chapter 2—“Intuitionist Theorizing” by Karin Knorr Cetina—is the important shift that has taken place in our view of how thinking should be understood, thanks to cognitive psychology and neuroscience, and how this affects the view of what theorizing is. While we have previously looked mainly at and valued the logical and clear type of reasoning, we are today moving in a different direction. This different direction is still not set, but in the meantime Knorr Cetina suggests that we may want to look at the role of what she calls the inner processor in theorizing. This processor draws on long-term memory rather than the working memory, which has a much more limited capacity and only handles what we can recall consciously. The processor is implicit rather than explicit and intuitive rather than reflexive. It operates extremely quickly once it gets going—but it also pretty much comes and goes as it likes. To better understand theorizing in social science, the author concludes, we need to better understand our inner intuitive processor.

While Chapter 2 is mainly theoretical, Chapter 3—“Analogy, Cases, and Comparative Social Organization” by Diane Vaughan—is more practical in nature. Many of the other authors in this volume advocate the use of some special technique or tool when theorizing. According to Vaughan, analogies are especially useful for this purpose. They can be used, she says, not only to come up with an explanation, but also to choose a topic in the first place and to describe the topic.

To illustrate the usefulness of what she calls analogical theorizing, Vaughan uses her own well-known study of seemingly disparate topics, from how people end a relationship to the fate of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986 (Vaughan 1986, 1996). Vaughan’s approach to the use of analogies, it should also be noted, is reminiscent of that of James Clerk Maxwell, who was an avid fan of analogies (Maxwell 1884). Like Maxwell, Vaughan does not advocate the simple use of analogies: comparing the phenomenon you are studying to some analogous phenomenon and theorizing the result. Instead

she suggests that analogies should be seen as a tool for approaching a solution step by step.

Implicit in the arguments in the first three chapters is that the theorizer is an individual. The idea in Chapter 4, “The Unsettling of Communities of Inquiry” by Isaac Ariail Reed and Mayer N. Zald, is different. These two authors emphasize that there is a necessary collective dimension to creative theorizing. Without acknowledging this collective dimension, they say, the theorizing project will fail, or it will surely be much less successful than it could have been.

It is particularly when a human community is going through important changes that the theorizing of social scientists can flourish, according to the authors. The community of scholars must as a consequence not be isolated from the larger community. It is only when the two are organically linked to each other that the full potential of theorizing in social science can be realized.

Although all of the contributors to this volume are deeply interested in how to raise the level of theorizing in social science, some are also very critical of the current attitude toward theory. Chapter 5—“Three Frank Questions to Discipline Your Theorizing” by Daniel B. Klein—is a case in point, with its critique of how theory is sometimes handled in economics.

According to Klein, theorizing does not mean that you can theorize in just about any way you want. Theorizing in social science will only be successful if it fulfills three conditions. First, theorizing has to deal with a real-world problem of some consequence (“*Theory of what?*”). Second, it has to provide a better explanation than the existing one (“*Why should we care?*”). And third, a good argument has to be presented why the new explanation is better than the existing one (“*What merit in your explanation?*”).

Chapter 6, “Mundane Theorizing, *Bricolage*, and *Bildung*” by Stephen Turner, approaches the topic of how to theorize well in a different way from Klein. In Turner’s view, there exist a few different ways of theorizing, depending on the ambition and skill of the social scientist. The first is what he calls mundane theorizing. This method, for example, might extend an existing theory to something that it did not originally cover. This may seem simple, but it can be hard to do.

The next level of difficulty occurs when one tries to bring two or more theories to bear on each other, in an effort to produce some kind of new synthesis. But creating a synthesis or *bricolage* of this type does not constitute

the most creative and advanced type of theorizing, according to Turner. This is instead so-called high theory, or *Bildung*, which is characterized by three features. First, the theorizer must be able to look at other theories from the viewpoint of their producers. Second, he or she must be sensitive to the weaknesses of a theory. And third, a first-class theorizer must be ruthlessly honest when evaluating a theory.

People who engage in high theory derive a great deal of pleasure from what they do, says Turner. They also feel a distinct sense of community with other high theorizers, whether they agree with them or not. And they are absolutely passionate about what they do.

Chapter 7, “The Counterfactual Imagination” by Roland Paulsen, is written by a sociologist who shares the concern of many of the contributors to this book, namely that the current way of theorizing in the social sciences is often conducted in the wrong way. He is, however, alone in being interested primarily in counterfactuals and the creative role that these can play in theorizing.

The core of Paulsen’s argument is that social scientists need to train their counterfactual imagination. If they do this, he says, they will be able to handle some important social science topics in a much better way than they currently do. We cannot, for example, fully understand power, if we do not understand the counterreaction—or counterfactual reaction—that power produces. Similarly, it is through the use of the counterfactual imagination that power can be transcended.

Chapter 8 is called “The Work of Theorizing,” and its author, Karl E. Weick, is one of the few social scientists who has been intensely interested in theorizing throughout his career. More than twenty-five years ago he suggested the following: “Theory cannot be improved until we improve the theorizing process, and we cannot improve the theorizing process until we describe it more explicitly, operate it more self-consciously, and de-couple it from validation more deliberately” (Weick 1989: 516).

The part of the theorizing process that Weick discusses in this book has to do with how one makes the transition from the stage of observation to the formulation of concepts and a theory—or more precisely, how one goes from social reality to a really live kind of theory without producing the narrow knowledge-in-hindsight that social science so often seems to end up with.

Weick’s answer is that we have to realize that the transition from observation to a theory is best understood as the result of a very delicate and

tension-filled process in several steps. Weick also provides the potential theorizer with a useful list of fourteen items to keep in mind when theorizing.

James G. March, the author of the next chapter, “Susan Sontag and Heteroscedasticity,” has also been concerned with theorizing for much of his career. And like Karl Weick, he shares the conviction that art can be of help in producing good social theory. In Chapter 9 he notes that while we today can produce students who are skilled in methods, we have failed to teach them how to handle the aspects that especially concern artists, authors, and poets. Both social science methods and artistic qualities, however, are needed to produce a truly creative social science. We therefore need to get a handle on the kind of techniques that artists use and adapt them for the purpose of social scientists.

Is this a realistic project? And if so, how can it be accomplished? March hesitates, but not when it comes to the urgency of these ideas. What he finds difficult is instead to outline what these new techniques should look like and how to teach them. In the meantime, however, he says there are some themes and focal points that are important for students of social science to understand. These include *ambiguity*, *contradiction*, *context* in meaning, and the role of *affirmation* in construction (or the quality of beauty).

This volume ends with an Afterword by Neil Gross, who raises some additional critical issues. He notes that the ideas of pragmatism, especially the work of Charles Peirce, have influenced many of the chapter authors. He also issues three warnings to those who want to get involved in the project of creative theorizing, and says that unless these are heeded the whole project may be endangered. These are as follows: you should focus on the way that social scientists have *actually* behaved when theorizing; you should not divert your energy to interdisciplinary efforts; and it is important to face the fact that so far theorizing has mainly been a male enterprise.

Finally, let me draw attention to the fact that one of the contributors to this book departed this world just after submitting his chapter. Mayer Zald (1931–2012), co-author of Chapter 4, will be sorely missed. Mayer was a brilliant social scientist, a beloved colleague, and extremely generous to his colleagues and students with praise as well as time and concern. It is fully in character, we think, that his last work contains a plea that, when we discuss theorizing, we should realize that true and humane theorizing in social science always has its roots in the larger community.

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