

The Junior Theorist Symposium After Panel: A Conversation about Theory

At the 2012 Junior Theorists' Symposium, four prominent junior scholars (and previous JTS presenters and organizers) presented their views on the state of the sociological theory field and the place of the JTS within it. Their comments have been reproduced in the newsletter for your reading pleasure.

What Young People Should Know about Theory and Theorizing

Omar Lizardo, *University of Notre Dame*

The state of the theoretical field today

Theorists, especially young theorists, live in a world of ideas. In that respect, theory is a subfield wherein the practitioners, especially the young practitioners, tend to be the most naïve about the objective conditions of production that make their work possible (or impossible). Therefore, I think it is prudent to start with a pragmatic “materialism” to grasp the real conditions of theoretical production today. Unfortunately, what I have to say is mostly bad news. The structure of the sociological field has changed, making it increasingly difficult to dedicate yourself to becoming proficient in most modes of doing “theory.”

We can adduce at least three broad reasons for this:

1. *The rapid de-institutionalization of teaching theory at the graduate level.* Though Lamont commented on this trend in 2004, (*Perspectives*), its impact is only now being felt. Most top graduate programs have cut back the theory curriculum to a single “omnibus” course that attempts the impossible task of going (*continued pg 7*)

Theory as an Anti-Subfield Subfield

Monika Krause, *Goldsmiths College, University of London*

In this discussion on the role of theory we build not just on a large published literature but also on earlier discussions within the section - for example, the one initiated by Michèle Lamont in 2004.¹ If I think it is worth carrying on these discussions, it is partly because some acts, such as “going to church” or saying “I love you” cannot be reduced to their content value - they serve a “preservation of concern”, which I think is an underappreciated aspect of academic work. The JTS is a good site for this discussion because these concerns might take generation-specific forms.

In my comments, I want to distinguish four different kinds of questions about the role of theory that are too often conflated and then offer some observation vis-à-vis one of these questions. I want to suggest that, in its institutional form, theory in American Sociology forms an anti-subfield subfield and that we may want to think about how we can best engage with this somewhat paradoxical space. (*continued pg 9*)

Making “Theorists” at the JTS: Reflections on the Institutional Cultivation of Identity

Robert S. Jansen, *University of Michigan*

The Junior Theorists Symposium is a remarkable institution. Although it *is* a lot of things, and it *does* a lot of things, I’d like to focus on one quality that I think is critical to the institution’s overall success: its ability to cultivate new intellectual identities. The JTS can take a young sociologist, who might not self-consciously identify as a “theorist” *per se*, and expose her or him to a field that’s actually quite a bit more open, varied, and inviting than its reputation sometimes has it. It can give this young sociologist permission to see herself or himself in a new light—as a theorist, or at least as someone doing theoretically relevant work. And it can give this sociologist permission to be invested in a field that might otherwise seem professionally off-limits to the uninitiated. To explore *how* the JTS does this, I’d like to follow the trajectory of a hypothetical young sociologist through four stages of participation in the institution.

Stage 1 (Pre-JTS). Let’s begin by imagining that you’re an advanced graduate student plugging away at your dissertation. Perhaps you enjoyed theory as an undergraduate. Maybe you even took a good theory seminar early on (*continued pg 8*)

What Is the JTS for?

Isaac Ariel Reed, *University of Colorado at Boulder*

The initial seeds planted by Neil Gross and Matthieu Deflem when they started the JTS in 2005 have flowered into something impressive. With extensive (3-page!) précis submitted by 63 people last year, it is clear that this pre-ASA conference is now part of the intellectual landscape of American sociology. Sponsored by the Theory Section, anxiously applied to by young scholars, attended by all sorts of folks, and featuring, each year, extensive commentary on the papers by various paterfamilias and materfamilias of sociology, the JTS has a certain stability and visibility. But what is it for? I want to argue that the JTS should involve risky and abstract theoretical discussion, *informed* by its participants’ various empirical projects, rather than a successful presentation of those projects, with, perhaps, their theoretical richness highlighted.

No one can quite agree on what theory is or is for in sociology these days, Gabriel Abend’s efforts notwithstanding.¹ At the 2011 JTS, Andrew Abbott railed against things that masqueraded as theory, including “applying existing labels to life-world phenomena” and (*continued pg 10*)

Lizardo, continued

Consider for instance, the book that won this year's theory prize, John Martin's *The Explanation of Social Action*. While I think that it would be a clear instance of sociological malpractice to ever advise any young (or old) theorist to imitate John, the point that I want to make is that this book is a multi-genre book; it combines at least five genres of doing theory: conceptual clarification, classical and contemporary theory, meta-theory, meta-methodology and analytical theory. The same can be said for Isaac Reed's brilliant *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, which combines all of these genres with an ambitious attempt at trans-disciplinary unification. For me, this is the sort of theoretical work that deserves to get (and indeed does get) our highest praise. But the problem is that both John and Isaac are increasingly bizarre, even counter-institutional figures among (relatively) young theorists. So the question that I want to pose to both the young and the old theorists among you is: how can we set it up so that we can get more Isaacs and Johns?

Jansen, continued

in grad school and wrote a paper that you considered submitting to a journal. But by this point in your training, you've been thoroughly disabused of your theoretical aspirations. You may have been told that your seminar paper was too exegetical for *ASR*. Or maybe you took a look at the ASA job bank and didn't see quite as many ads for a Hegel specialist as you had expected. Or perhaps you just got caught up in doing some good empirical work that was rewarding in itself. At any rate, "theorist" is no longer how you describe yourself at dinner parties.

But then the JTS call for abstracts appears in your inbox; and this gets you thinking about your work in new ways. "If I were to present something from my dissertation to a room full of theorists, what would I present?" Of course, if you think like this for more than a few minutes, it becomes clear that you should just submit an abstract. After all, you'd spend more time considering it than you would just writing 800 words. So you do it. And then you get back to your dissertation.

The hypothetical paths diverge here. If your abstract is accepted, then you actually have to write something; and you must confront the sometimes vexing question of what it means to write a "theory" paper. But you muddle through. If your abstract is not accepted, you're of course disappointed. But once this feeling has shaded into relief at not having to produce a paper, you remember that the JTS will still be taking place and that you're welcome to attend. So you book your flights a day early. Thus, the very *existence* of the JTS incentivizes young sociologists to consider whether their work might be interesting to a theory audience.

Stage 2 (At the JTS). Whether you're presenting or not, then, you show up—and you're pleasantly surprised! Rather than the intimidating crowd you'd been imagining, you encounter a diverse group of peers who are actually interesting (*and interested!*). You see good theoretical work being supported by a vibrant intellectual community. You respond to other people's work; you think more about your own work; and you find yourself thinking theoretical thoughts. You have great conversations and make friends with others thinking along similar lines. You meet senior scholars—who are there precisely to see what the young theorists are up to—and they encourage you to press on. And if you're lucky enough to have presented a paper, you're

happy to find that most people actually liked it, gave you good feedback, and encouraged you to send it out. In short, whether you present or not, interactions at the JTS provide positive reinforcement to the theorist identity formation process: they lead you to reconsider your opinions of theory and "theorists"; and they help you to see your work from the perspective of others in the field.

Stage 3 (Post-JTS). If you didn't present, you think seriously about trying again next year. If you did present, this means that you somehow ended up with a drafted paper. So with a headful of helpful comments, you set to revising. And rather than targeting that specialty journal that you originally had your eyes on, you start thinking of your paper as something suitable for publication in *Sociological Theory* or *Theory and Society*. You send out the paper, and, eventually, it's accepted! *Contra* your previous sense of self, you've somehow ended up publishing in a theory journal. And so it starts.

Stage 4 (Going Forward). Of course, now that you're in love with the JTS, you keep coming back for more—and dragging your friends along with you. And now that you've published in a theory journal, you start receiving theory manuscripts to review. You start having *opinions* about the work you're reviewing—you become *invested*. You join the Theory Section and start attending section business meetings. You develop friends and networks. And before you know it, *other* people start to think of *you* as a "theorist."

Why does all this matter? First, it matters for institutional reasons. As more people come to appreciate the field and to identify as theorists: the JTS will stay vibrant, the Theory Section will thrive, and the profile of theoretical work will increase. But second, my hunch is that the sort of identification that the JTS cultivates leads not just to more theory, but to *better* theory. That is: identity has *consequences* for intellectual practice. Identifying as a theorist leads to reflexivity about the practice of theorizing and about the role of theory in one's own work. And wrestling with such issues implicates you in a community of others who are doing the same. This means more conversation, more critique, and more innovation. The JTS, in its very short lifetime, has played a powerful role in advancing this process.