International Sociological Association

RC16 Sociological Theory

Theory RC16 Newsletter, Issue 2 (2025)

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Editors' Introduction

Frank Welz

2025 was a year marked by significant activity for the ISA community and for RC16 in particular. It began with the *RC16 Midterm Conference in Innsbruck*, which brought together 80 participants, and was followed shortly thereafter by the RC16 sessions at the *ISA Forum of Sociology in Rabat*, which brought together more than 30 paper presenters. While scholars from 18 countries travelled to Austria for the Midterm Conference, the Forum in Rabat hosted participants from 112 countries, with a total of 4,842 attendees. Approximately one quarter were students, and overall participation consisted of 57% women and 37% men. In both Innsbruck and Rabat, Italy, Germany, and the United States ranked among the four countries with the highest number of participants. The programs for both meetings are available for download here: RC16 Midterm Conference Innsbruck and ISA Forum Rabat.

This issue includes reflections on both conferences, as well as an interview with *John Levi Martin* (Chicago) on the future of sociological theory and an interview with *Harry F. Dahms* on the Center for Social Theory at the University of Tennessee. Both conversations address broader questions concerning the current development and institutionalization of sociological theory.

Beginning with this issue, we are introducing two new permanent features.

First, books will receive greater visibility in a dedicated section titled *Recent Books by Members*. In some neighboring disciplines, and with considerable variation across national academic systems, article-based cumulative dissertations have become more common in response to evolving research assessment frameworks. Sociology, by contrast, continues to rely on books as a central medium of theoretical reflection, particularly in areas such as sociological theory where the monograph remains well suited to the sustained development of theoretical arguments and broader conceptual frameworks—which both inform and are refined through empirical research. This section aims to highlight recent contributions by members of RC16.

Second, each issue will include a page devoted to centers for sociological theory—or, as they are often called in recognition of their interdisciplinary scope, *Centers for Social Theory*. These centers provide important institutional contexts for theoretical work and contribute to the ongoing development of sociological theory. In a rapidly changing world, sociological theory cannot remain entirely stable. At the same time, its institutional foundations may be broader and more firmly established than is often assumed. Our next interview, to appear in 2026, will introduce the Social Theory Center at Peking University.

Message from the Chairs

Dear Theorists,

May you live in interesting times!" It sounds like a blessing, but it is in fact a Chinese curse. What makes life difficult on a personal level can be intellectually fertile for sociology. Periods of upheaval (pandemics, wars, mass deportations) function as large-scale social experiments. When systems falter, their underlying structures become more visible. Moments of crisis test our deepest assumptions. When they come under attack, we learn which beliefs still matter, which are worth defending, and how collective commitments are forged or fractured.

While public attention is currently fixated on the "global village" of the United States, it is important to remember that even in periods of transition, much of ordinary social life continues. Continuity coexists with rupture. Yet this does not mean that sociology itself can proceed with business as usual.

On the contrary, one of the central tasks of social theory is diagnostic: to determine what is dead and what remains alive in our conceptual legacy, to critically sift inherited theories, discard their atavisms, and open space for new ways of thinking demanded by the present.

This is what happened at our mid-term conference in Innsbruck, Austria. It was wonderfully well organised by Frank Welz to encourage sustained engagement among participants. The opening plenary was the Distinguished Annual Theory Lecture by Ingolfur Blühdorn. Reflecting on "untenability", the unsustainability of sustainable development, amid a polycrisis, he pulled the rug from under critical theory. The plenary panels *The Rise and Fall of Social Theory* and *Classic Theory for the Future of Sociology* (with a lecture by Jeffrey Alexander) underlined the continuing creativity in the sociological tradition. This was carried through in panels ranging from *Sports, Wellness and the Contemporary Self*, to *AI, Future Studies, Civil Theory*, and *Post-colonial Theory*. Thank you again to Frank Welz and everyone in Innsbruck for making the meetings a success.

The caravan moved on to the *ISA World Forum* in Rabat where our RC also had some sessions running. While eight sessions were co-organized as joint sessions with other Research Committees, RC16 hosted five sessions comprising eighteen papers. Panel themes included *Sociology of Moralities and Sociological Theory*, *Contributions to Justice from Critical Sociology*, *Revival of the Sociology of Place*, and *The Arts, Sociological Theory, and the 'Crisis of the Future' in Face of the Anthropocene*. RC16 also held a business meeting.

Thinking forward, we encourage colleagues to propose names for our Distinguished Annual Lecture. We'll have a Theory Café on post-apocalyptic social theory in the Anthropocene, but welcome any other proposal. We'd also like to hear who and what you want to see in 2027 at the next World Conference in Korea.

We wish you all an auspicious start of the new year.

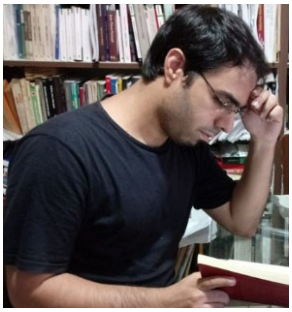
South Hadley/Rio de Janeiro, December 2025

Eleanor Townsley and Frédéric Vandenberghe

Empiricism, US Dominance and the Future of Sociological Theory. John Levi Martin in Conversation[1]

Alberto Luis Cordeiro de Farias[2]

John Levi Martin



Alberto Luis Cordeiro de Farias

Introduction

John Levi Martin, American sociologist and the Florence Borchert Bartling Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, is one of the most original and provocative voices in contemporary sociological theory. Known for his foundational works *Social Structures* (2009) and *The Explanation of Social Action* (2011), Levi Martin has long challenged conventional divisions between theory and empiricism, insisting on the rigor of interpretive approaches and the conceptual precision of social thought. His most recent book, *The True, the Good, and the Beautiful* (2024), returns to classical philosophical sources—particularly Kant's third *Critique*—to revisit longstanding questions about judgment, imagination, and the architecture of sociological action.

In the following conversation, Levi Martin offers a brief but candid and critical assessment of current trends in sociological theory and education. He emphasizes the need for methodological discipline and empirical responsibility, while lamenting the theoretical stagnation caused by conformity, weak historical literacy, and declining cognitive diversity in global sociology. At the same time, he reaffirms the value of "social thought" as a practice of conceptual clarification—drawing on figures such as Arendt and Bourdieu—and argues for a renewed engagement with aesthetic and philosophical traditions as a way of reinvigorating action theory beyond rigid causal models.

With striking intellectual honesty and a sharp eye for the institutional dynamics shaping academic life, Levi Martin also offers a sobering reflection on the future of sociological theory in light of the coming transformations brought about by artificial intelligence and the decline of the university as a site of critical thought. Rather than lamenting this shift, he provocatively suggests that theorizing might find new vitality once disentangled from academic careerism and disciplinary orthodoxy.

Chicago

(Question 1) I'd like to start by asking you about your immediate academic context, that of Chicago. How do you see yourself within the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago? Additionally, in social theory, what are the topics currently most discussed in Chicago?

Well, I came there with a deliberate intention to try to connect the department more firmly to the

[1] John Levi Martin holds the Florence Borchert Bartling Professorship of Sociology at the University of Chicago, USA.

[2] Postdoctoral Researcher in Sociology at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

mainstream of sociology; even though the things I personally love about Chicago are quite different, I thought that our graduate program needed to be more closely aligned with others. And so that meant pushing everyone to do rigorous empirical research, and to refuse to entertain interesting theoretical notions that can't be nailed down. For that reason, I have to admit, I might not know what theoretical topics are most discussed there, because students have learned to avoid bringing their theoretical ideas to me. I expect that it's not very different from top US sociology departments.

(Q2) How do you see the development of education and research in sociology in the US? Can you identify any trends or directions based on that?

The big thing we all acknowledge is, first, the ever-growing empiricism and a narrowing of the scope of claims that can be made. I think this is basically a good thing, and has gone along with a greater sense of responsibility and epistemic humility among sociologists. Despite this, we haven't gotten quite as fixated on the causal paradigm as has political science—overall, I think we're in a very good place. The bad part of this change, however, is that we are pulling all the other systems after us. Increasingly, other countries' academic systems are looking to the US to validate their own, and so our model is spreading, decreasing the cognitive diversity of the field greatly. Strangely, the Trumpian attack on the US system, which targets its soft underbelly, the reliance on foreign students, may be a great boon to the field as a whole, as it may reverse the brain drain to the US. Right now, leading scholars across the globe are trained (brainwashed) in the US and then returned where they spread the system. Perhaps we will now see multiple systems developing with their own strengths.

Social Theory

(Q3) Social theory has often been called upon to have an 'empirical orientation.' What do you think about that? And, more specifically, how do you see the relationship between theory and empirics in theoretical work in sociology?

Some would make a distinction between *sociological* theory (which by definition has to be connected to empirical research) and *social* theory (which doesn't). Since in mainstream US sociology a firm consensus has emerged that there is really no such thing as non-empirical sociology (reflexive critique, say, just isn't part of our professional field), we in effect jettison social theory entirely. There's some justification for this, for outside of sociology, "social theory" often means "ideas that are stronger than the research can support." If it was a worthwhile endeavor, we wouldn't need sociology. But there's another type of theory, which I'll call "social thought" to a sort of conceptual clarification *ala* Hannah Arendt, and I think we need more, not less, of this, as this helps us straighten our ideas. Overall, it might seem a bit close-minded to try to restrict sociology to empirical work, but it has a real advantage—in principle, we adjudicate our differences through gathering better data and analyzing it correctly, not insulting or bullying one another.

(Q4) Many authors point out the challenges of formulating syntheses with broader or more universal aspirations in sociological theory today. Do you still consider it possible to think of social theories as broad interpretations of social reality?

Well, I would say there are people who are going to do this, and I don't think it's always bad. If you have a vision of something at a large scale, and you want to try to communicate it to others, who is to say that's wrong? But these big theories of everything (or theories of "today's world") tend to succeed on the basis of writers' rhetorical skill, and the extent to which they stroke their readers in the way they want to be stroked (so much of supposed "Critical Theory" was simply telling readers, "You are right—you *are* better than everyone else!"). I'm pleasantly surprised that the field does pay attention at the highest level to writers who do seem to have something compelling to offer. But they're few and far between.

(Q5) How do you assess the current status of theoretical research not only in the US but also in Europe? Do you think there is a trend toward a shrinking space for theoretical research in sociology today, compared to the period immediately before?

I would have a hard time really pointing to anything I would consider theoretical research. On the one hand, most of what passes for theory in sociology these days is really just weak. Sadly, there is actually I think an increasing, not decreasing, space for theoretical production, because the bar to entry is quite low. Writing a work of "theory" today seems mostly just to entail saying what everyone else is thinking anyway, only louder. As a foretaste of the coming illiteracy, we have people all over getting their theoretical works published that are intensely flawed recapitulations of things that have been done earlier, and better, by others, but since these theorists don't read very much, and their reviewers don't either, no one knows. (This is a point Alan Sica has been making with glorious vituperation.) So following the progress of sociological theory in the U.S. is a bit like eavesdropping on conversations between amnesiacs at a nursing home. The good news is that the bad news (and we'll get to that later) is so bad that soon this won't matter, and we'll have no recourse but to start from scratch.

The True, the Good, and the Beautiful

(Q6) Could you start by giving us an idea of how The True, the Good, and the Beautiful came about? I mean, what led you, after years of research in sociological theory, to return to topics related to the historical development of sociology, in its Kantian sources, in order to rethink the broader framework of action theory?

It really was me still being fascinated by the idea of judgment, and my sense that Bourdieu had been really on the right track to try to engage with Kant's third Critique…which led me to wonder, why haven't others been doing this all along? Why did the reception of Kant in social science neglect this? What are the architectonic results?

(Q7) Two of your books published prior to "The True, the Good, and the Beautiful" (2024), namely "The Explanation of Social Action" (2011) and "Social Structures" (2009), are especially remembered for offering an in-depth treatment of central topics in sociological theory, but also for the particular perspective they bring to these topics. Could you tell us about the relationship between these three works and how they connect with your broader research interests, in the sense of a unity of concerns?

They certainly seem pretty different to me, but now that you mention it, strangely (Hegel to the rescue) perhaps they are thesis (structure) apparent negation (action) and realization of the common basis (action is something only grasped with certain structures). I also found recently, when asked to write pieces reflecting on Harrison White's work given his recent passing, that this was just the sort of thing that (or so I believe) always seemed obviously compatible to him.

(Q8) Looking ahead, what are your main projects? Do you intend to continue the work of "The True, the Good, and the Beautiful" by formulating, in your own terms, an aesthetically informed 'theory of action'?

No, I think we need more findings before we can do much in terms of positively constructing a theory of action. Now, we're best off using what we know to reject the many attractive theories of action that we should be able to recognize as obviously false, flawed, and contradictory. But within the set of not *obviously* false, flawed, and/or contradictory theories, I'm happy with most of them.

Critical Theory, Philosophy and Imagination

(Q9) I am familiar with some of your criticisms of Adorno and the first generation of Frankfurt critical theorists. But at the same time, your work maintains a constant reference to critical theory. I would like to hear your thoughts on this, that is, how do you assess the relevance of Critical Theory today?

Yes, I try to maintain my categorical opposition to critical theory, but it is a tradition I really do take quite seriously, and think we can't dismiss. It is to mainstream social science like the paid attendant to the Roman hero being given a triumph who whispers in his ear over and over, "remember, you are only a man." I wish there hadn't been so much phoniness, pettiness, and snobbery in Critical Theory, and I don't think we can be Critical Theorists in the way they were without bringing those flaws back in. Still, we must acknowledge the need for Critical Theory as a correlate to an unredeemed social science. And the reason I think we absolutely cannot dismiss Habermas's work is that he understood this and tried to bring the two sides together in a way deeper than anyone else I know of.

(Q10) You wrote an important work on the topic of imagination based on Max Horkheimer (Martin, 2021). You return to this question of imagination many times in "The Truth, the Good, and the Beautiful." What do you consider to be the relevance of imagination, such an unstable "object," even for philosophers, for social theory?

The most important thing about the imagination is that it is imaginary—that is, it is a word we use, but as far as we know, it is like "dragon": its extension, the set of objects to which it refers—is empty. Yet it is often far more frightening and alluring than a dragon to us. It seems that it arises like an optical illusion in which we take negative, unmarked, ground for an object (like the space between two face-silhouettes that appears to be a vase). There is something about the way we think about ourselves, and our thinking, that has a hole in it, and that hole, when we stare closely at it, suddenly snaps into the form of the imagination. It is a great diagnostic point of entry to find out what we are working with when we try to think about thinking. In crudest form, it comes from a voluntarist notion that we (even if unconsciously) have to "put together" things from sense, it is that "putting together." The instabilities that arise when we focus on the imagination (why not put *anything* together? Why *not* see dragons?) point to something awry in our conceptions.

(Q11) Kant and Hegel continue to stand as two towering, yet in many ways divergent, reference points for social theory. While critical theory has tended to draw more heavily on Hegelian dialectics, classical sociology has often engaged Kantian thought indirectly, especially through neo-Kantianism (as seen in Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber). In "The True, the Good, and the Beautiful," you ground your approach primarily in Kantian philosophy. Could you talk a little about how you yourself think about this Kant-Hegel relationship in your work?

Up until recently, my feeling about Hegel was a pretty typical Marxist one—we pay tribute to him for his true grasp of and unapologetic resuscitation of dialectics, but we abhor his idealism and we mock his system-building instincts. And I think that's basically justified. To me, I feel about Hegel the way I feel about Bourdieu—what a shame that such great insights were smothered in so much vacuous system building and attempts to define all problems away. But in *TGB,* I was led to focus on Hegel's early work and his work on mentation (as well as his work on constitutional issues) where you can see him honestly struggling to figure out things that are tough, as opposed to the later works where he has an answer for everything, and it gave me a great deal of sympathy. At the end of the day, however, I stick with my basic feeling here—dialectics *is* correct as a critique of formal thinking, we *do* need to reject the principle of self-identity, but actually doing something with it is like riding a motorcycle up and around the inside of a large sphere (once a popular attraction at American fairs, called the "globe of death"—what's not to like?). Unless you're a pro, don't try it. You'll only hurt yourself and others around you.

Artificial Intelligence

(Q12) As someone who thinks about society, what do you think are the main impacts of the emergence of Artificial Intelligence on the reflection about society? In other words, how do you assess the impacts that AI will have on social theory in the coming decades?

Well, in the medium term, it's going to be a comet that produces mass extinctions. Let me return to Critical Theory for a moment. This was one of the many intellectual traditions that were entirely grown in the substrate of the University, and had all the scholastic weaknesses that come therefrom. It's a parasite on science that can't—and shouldn't—survive the death or fundamental restructuring of its host. The question is what sort of theories will live in this new environment? I think we have to imagine that universities as we think them now have only perhaps 25 years more to live—and the ones that survive the longest will only do so because they are delightful theme parks for the children of oligarchs who want an excuse to live with others their age and have intense, and irresponsible, lives for four years. The death of universities (and colleges) will probably be bad in many ways, but mostly because (or so I think most likely) it will be associated with a general reduction of the masses to more tractable biomass, reversing the great democratization process that sociologists rarely appreciated when it was happening. I think that the death of higher

education actually isn't obviously and necessarily bad for social theory. Universities are generally bastions of orthodoxy, conservatism, and, actually, anti-intellectual authoritarianism. There was a great push in the late nineteenth century away from this, but it took a while to gain momentum, was really only institutionalized after the great wars, and didn't last very long. Let's start thinking about social thought unmoored from the "production" of the universities, completely detached from career concerns…that's actually a pretty happy vision, isn't it? Further, since computers will write better than people, even the few that are actually literate, we'll probably return to a more oral culture. That will, of course, foster a kind of interpersonal pretense, and that's bad, but the likely disconnection of theorizing from anything related to power, status, or comfortable standard of living might keep the nasty types away in any case.

Social Theory at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century – Interview with Harry F. Dahms

Harry F. Dahms,[1] Lukas Engelberger[2]

Harry F. Dahms
© M. Cunningham, CAS, UTK

Lukas Engelberger

The Center[3]

(Question 1) Harry, thank you for taking the time to introduce your Center for Social Theory at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. To begin, could you share some key details: when was the center founded, how many faculty members teach there, and how many doctoral candidates are you currently advising?

Thank you for this opportunity. After two semesters of preparation, the center officially was inaugurated on April 30, 2025, with Mugambi Jouet giving a lecture to the university, entitled "Multidisciplinary Historiography of the West: An Exercise in Applied Social Theory". Mugambi Jouet is an associate professor at the University of Southern California's Gould School of Law and best known for his book, *Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other* (2017). The following day, he gave a presentation in a criminology class and to members of the center on abortion and American exceptionalism, comparing abortion laws and policies in different countries.

The center includes more than 70 members, divided into four tiers, plus one tier for graduate students: active members, affiliated members, external affiliates, and board members. Most importantly, the center currently has 28 active members. The main purpose of listing the internal "affiliates" is to identify and provide information about faculty members in the social sciences and humanities whose research is related to, relying on, or furthering social-theoretical work, but who have other responsibilities that prevent them from regular participation in center activities, such as directing or co-directing their own centers.

The center does not offer a degree program and members are not teaching in the center, but the center does house and manage the interdiscipli-

Guest speaker Mugambi Jouet, University of Southern California

[1] Harry F. Dahms (interviewee) is Professor of Sociology, director of the *Center for Social Theory* at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville, as well as editor of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* and director of the *International Social Theory Consortium* (http://socialtheory.org/index.html). - Nadya Vera and Anthony J. Knowles are gratefully acknowledged for their helpful comments and suggestions.

[2] Lukas Engelberger (interviewer) is a PhD student at the University of Innsbruck. He previously studied Sociology and Philology at the Universities of Innsbruck and Vienna, Austria.

[3] https://cst.utk.edu

University of Tennessee, Knoxville © H. Dahms

nary graduate social theory certificate, which enables students in the social sciences and humanities to deepen and/or widen their familiarity with social theory, beyond what typically is available in the context of the department in which they are pursuing a degree. In 2012, Allen Dunn and I co-founded the Committee on Social Theory to provide students with the opportunity to pursue the theory certificate. Since then, 15 students have completed the certificate, and currently seven students are pursuing it in the context of their specific doctoral degrees. The *Center for Social Theory* absorbed the Committee on Social Theory.

American Modernity and Further Themes

(Q2) What are the center's primary research areas, and what overarching mission guides your work?

The center's primary purpose is to support and facilitate interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary exchange, in the interest of supporting theoretically oriented and informed research that faculty and graduate students are conducting. The center's first emphasis area is *American society/modernity* – thematically, and in terms of members' interest, it is the primary area also. The other areas are *applied social theory; constellations of past, present, and future; film, television, literature; governance and law in the twenty-first century; mass media and social media; technology and society*; and *universities and higher education*. Each of these areas involves themes that have become increasingly "charged" as we have been moving further into the current century, but it would lead too far afield to elaborate on their relevance and how they are connected to the other areas. Moreover, several additional themes that cut across all of the emphasis areas, such as race, gender, class, capital, and environment, inevitably will be considered and enter into discussions and research in the center.

The Founding Process

(Q3) How did the idea for the center come about? Was founding it a challenging process— did you face funding constraints or other significant obstacles?

In summer 2024, the relevant deans of the Social Sciences division and the College of Arts & Sciences asked me to upgrade the Committee on Social Theory I mentioned earlier into a *Center for*

Social Theory with administrative support and funding. At this time, I had been involved for one-and-a-half decades in running a social-science center that closed in spring 2024, as well as in charge of the *International Social Theory Consortium (ISTC)* for a decade.

The deans were very explicit that the College wanted to take advantage of my administrative experience and organizing role in national and international social theory, and to provide me with the opportunity to set up the theory center as I saw fit. So, rather than facing obstacles, the College of Arts & Sciences offered support and funding at a time when trends at universities and colleges, and in science and education in general, were and still are pointing in directions that are becoming less conducive to social-theoretical research and exchange. The College and the University of Tennessee are actively promoting an entire array of innovative and exciting initiatives. How could I not accept?

My concept of the center is that what is most needed today consists of opportunities for members and graduate students to address issues in ways that take advantage of the combination of resources from several different disciplines (e.g., drawing on sociological, historical, cultural, and political theories, as well as on social philosophy). Ideally, the resulting synergy will translate into high-quality and relevant research and publications that also enhance pedagogy, enabling participants to be in a better position to achieve their goals, without experiencing their involvement as another responsibility and burden. Although this is difficult to achieve today, given that academia almost entirely operates on the basis of what German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling has referred to as the "entrepreneurial self," my personal criterion for success is to organize and facilitate events that members do not want to miss. Toward this end, the center provides different types of venues intended to enable faculty and graduate students to discuss issues, themes, and literatures in ways that rarely or never are happening in departments, even though this should be a regular aspect of disciplinary activities. Thus, the center will organize and host lectures by invited speakers, reports on research, sessions dedicated to work-in-progress, author-meets-critics sessions, symposia, workshops, and conferences. We are also planning to establish a book series edited through the center. The center also will actively collaborate with other units on campus, including centers and departments. In my experience, the most interesting and widely inspiring events typically involve participants from several departments.

Activities and Events

(Q4) Since its inception, what major developments or shifts have occurred? How has your thematic focus evolved over time?

Given that the center is quite new, it is still in the "experimentation phase." The first order of business was to determine how many colleagues at the university were doing theoretical work, interested in social theory, and fluent in various theoretical frames, paradigms, and traditions. As it turned out, the main departments involved are Sociology, Philosophy, English, History, Religious Studies, Political Science, Geography, and Anthropology. Economics and Psychology are not involved, though. Economics is part of the business school and primarily has a practical orientation, and Psychology was supposed to play a role in the center – one of the deans who suggested the creation of the center is a social psychologist who recently moved to another university – but the only psychologist who currently is affiliated with the center is not an active member.

The second task was to determine which topics were likely to attract the most interest and the largest audiences. The center has started scheduling different kinds of events, as I mentioned earlier, some of which are open to the university and wider public, and others that are limited to members of the center. Some of the events will be recorded and posted on YouTube. Beyond the inaugural events with Mugambi Jouet, we have organized, co-hosted, or co-sponsored numerous events, including:

Guest speaker Jenny Davis, Vanderbilt University

- a lecture by sociologist Jenny Davis at Vanderbilt University in Nashville whom I invited to speak in the context of the AI TENNessee Initiative about artificial intelligence and the issue of reparations; the title of her presentation was "After Algorithmic Fairness: The Myth of Neutrality and Power of Repair";
- a lecture and a workshop about Israeli film by Oded Nir, professor of Hebrew Studies at Queens College in New York, who is affiliated with the center; the title of the workshop was "Space and Capitalism in Contemporary Hebrew Film"; and
- an author-meets-critics session about a recent book by Martin Griffin (English) on espionage novels since World War I that was recorded and will be available on YouTube (the other participants were two historians from UTK and an English professor at the University of Auckland in New Zealand).

The center also cosponsored several events organized by a colleague in Jewish Studies, and a lecture in Philosophy. In addition, we also have a social theory reading group that is being run by R. D. Perry (English) and Allen Dunn (Philosophy). We currently are planning a symposium about artificial intelligence with two other centers (one in humanities and the other on social complexity), plus an annual conference focusing on themes selected from the emphasis areas, to be held in May, and a workshop on film and theory in the summer.

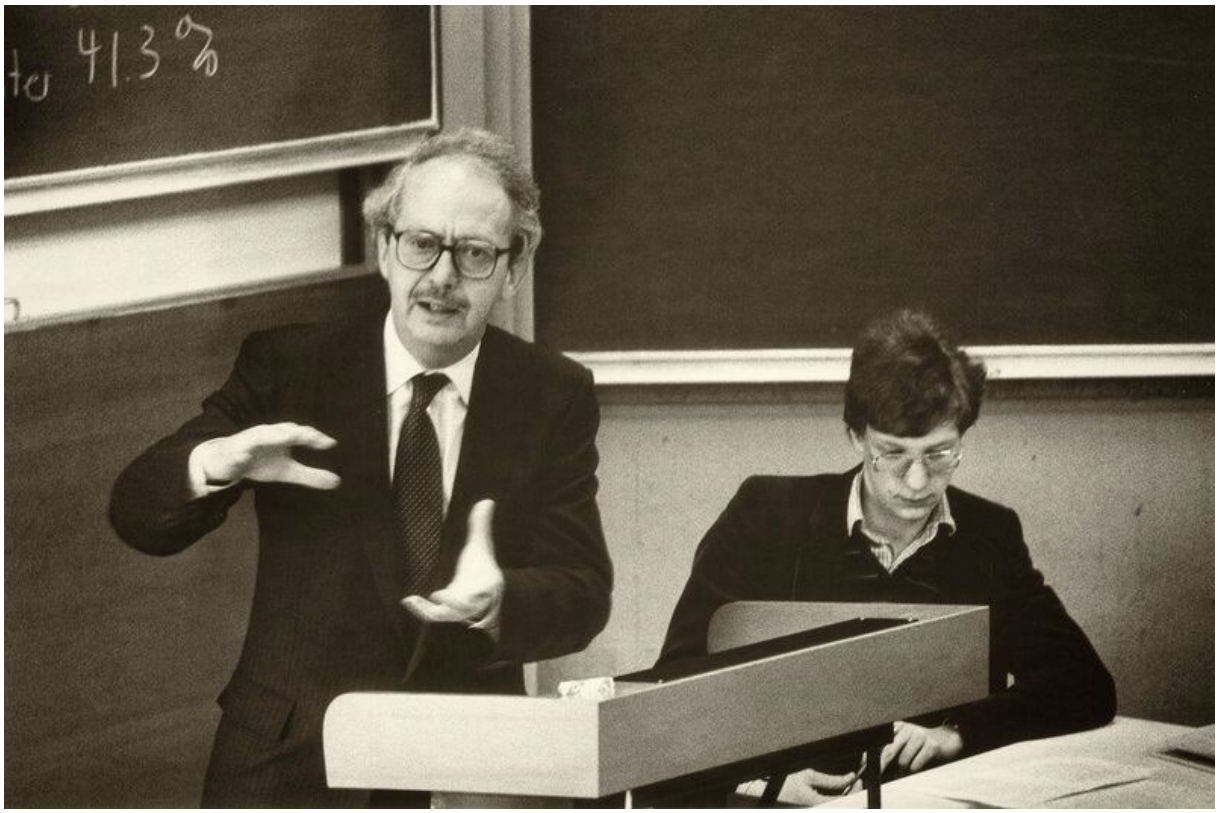
Decoupling of Theory and Empirical Research

(Q5) You studied economics and statistics in addition to sociology. As the founder, how do you balance theoretical and empirical research in your work and teaching at the center?

Economics and statistics were minor areas in the context of my sociology master's at the University of Konstanz. This was well before bachelor's degrees were introduced in what was still West Germany. Between 1983 and 1987, I took or sat in all the graduate seminars taught by the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf and the philosopher Albrecht Wellmer. The first graduate seminar Dahrendorf taught in Konstanz after his return from the London School of Economics in fall 1984 was about the work of Theodor Geiger. I wrote and presented a lengthy paper for the seminar in which I criticized Geiger's empirically oriented approach from the vantage point of Theodor W. Adorno's version of critical theory, after which Dahrendorf asked me to work for him as a student assistant (*Hilfswissenschaftler*). I had discovered Adorno on my own two years earlier, and was fortunate that Wellmer – who had studied with Adorno and Max Horkheimer and was Jürgen Habermas' assistant between 1966 and 1970 – taught a four-hour combination of "lecture and exercises" during the summer semester 1983 in which he traced the history of critical theory from its origins in Immanuel Kant to Jürgen Habermas. Even though I was still an undergraduate, the course was a life-changing experience.[1]

Given that back then I was most interested in social theory and in ways to combine sociology and economics, after I started working for Dahrendorf in 1985, he suggested that I familiarize myself with the work of Joseph Schumpeter, whose name barely was mentioned in other courses I had taken or was taking in Konstanz. Dahrendorf repeatedly cautioned me not to indulge my interest in theory, since the job prospects in the area were dire. Nevertheless, in many ways he treated me like an apprentice, supported my interest in

[1] Graduate students in the course who turned out to have noteworthy and productive careers included the sociologist Hubert Knoblauch, the philosopher Christoph Menke, the literary scholar Bettina Menke, and the communication theorist Angela Keppler.



Ralf Dahrendorf, Harry F. Dahms, Konstanz 1986 © Franzis von Stechow

theory, and encouraged me to keep up with Habermas' prolific output, and my master's thesis was about the question of whether and under what conditions a democratic society can experience a legitimation crisis, focusing on the so-called new contract theories, especially Nozick's version, as well as Habermas's related works. During this time, after both economic sociology and Schumpeter had been ignored or neglected for decades, in both sociology and economics, interest in both started to increase again, in Germany, the U.S., and elsewhere. After I entered the doctoral program in Konstanz in 1986, my plan was to work on Schumpeter.

In 1987-88, I spent what was supposed to be one year at the New School for Social Research in New York as an exchange student in sociology at the doctoral level. Initially, I studied mostly with the political economist Robert Heilbroner, who was well-known for his interest in and familiarity with Schumpeter's work. I also delved into economic sociology and connected with Richard Swedberg, who at the time was the main proponent of this re-emerging field, and also a Schumpeter expert. Before he became a professor at Cornell University, we met at least a couple of times while he was doing research at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, and we remained in regular contact for several years after that. During my first year at the New School, I signed up for as many seminars as I could, while continuing to deepen and broaden my interest in theory, but still planning to return to Konstanz. But at the end of the year, I decided to stay at the New School and began to pursue my doctoral degree there in sociology in earnest. In addition to Heilbroner, I took courses with Andrew Arato, Richard Bernstein, José Casanova, Agnes Heller, Eric Hobsbawm, Guy Oakes, and Claus Offe. As I was quite busy with theory and economic sociology, I dropped my earlier interest in quantitative research methods, and never picked it up again. In the end, my dissertation was about Schumpeter's theory of the entrepreneur, situated at the intersection of social theory and economic sociology, and supervised by Arthur Vidich, with whom I had a sort of "second apprenticeship" while at the New School.

To return to the question of how to balance theory and empirical research, by 1990 or so, "theory" in American sociology had become highly differentiated, intricate, and multifaceted, in part because it drew on debates in adjacent disciplines and in a growing number of other

countries and parts of the world. In some ways, this reflected the fact that American society is much less "ethnically homogenous" (to use one of Schumpeter's terms) than other modern societies, and the expansion of theoretical debates was an opportunity to acknowledge and consider this fact. American social theory not only included many traditions influenced by the classics, such as Marxist and Marxian theories, projects influenced by Durkheim and/or Weber, at least two major versions of systems theory, symbolic interactionism, so-called conflict theory, rational choice theory, actor-network theory, several versions of critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition, but also other versions of critical theory in a broader sense, such as feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and queer theories. If one was serious about social theory and not willing to limit oneself to familiarity with and expertise about one or two theorists or traditions, but determined to maintain a systematic interest in "theory" in its breadth, pursuing empirical research at the same time became increasingly difficult. Though numerous theorists continued to do empirical research, often relying on qualitative methods, their number was declining. Structural transformations in U.S. academia contributed to this, where the share of tenure-track faculty started to decline precipitously, being replaced by a growing number of courses being taught by lecturers, adjuncts, and graduate students. This meant that work on committees, advising students, self-government, etc., in addition to teaching and research, fell on a shrinking professoriate, while student numbers and professional responsibilities kept growing. Sociologists in charge of teaching and doing research in theory were not expected to do empirical research, not least because the number of sociologists who exclusively pursued empirical research was growing rapidly, often with theoretical objectives and aspirations playing a marginal role, if any. Under these conditions, most theorists either kept track of and distinguished the proliferating approaches and projects, or they interpreted and assimilated the latter in terms of their own specific preferences, proclivities, and inclinations.

Acknowledging any particular theory's specific purpose, objective, and contribution takes time, patience, a significant amount of care, and a willingness on the part of interpreters to take a step back, rather than imposing their own set of priorities. I am not suggesting that we should fetishize "authorial intent," but unless we are willing and able to try to do justice to a theory's purpose in terms of the research interest and agenda that guided its development, misinterpretations and misapplications will abound. Treating and applying theoretical projects or traditions with respect and consideration is a precondition for advancing our understanding of anything, especially phenomena in an exceedingly complex and contradictory social world.

Sociology or Sociologies?

(Q6) You are also the director of the International Social Theory Consortium (ISTC), which organizes annual conferences alternating between the US and Europe. Do you notice any differences in the debates within European sociology compared to those in American sociology? Or do you see contemporary sociology as fundamentally fragmented anyway, so that it is no longer possible to identify regional discourses and practices?

These questions pertain to several important aspects of social theory and sociology and their relationship today. Let me try to address and answer them one by one.

The ISTC has existed for just over a quarter of a century and is an informal network of degree and certificate programs in social theory around the world. Participants mostly include social theorists, philosophers, and political theorists, who all work with different assumptions and goals. For instance, as far as theoretical sociology is concerned, it is important to distinguish between three types of theorizing – social, sociological, and critical. The ISTC was created to provide a regular home for *social* theorists, specifically, not so much *sociological* theorists, nor necessarily *critical* theorists. Admittedly, there is more of an affinity between social and critical theory than between social and sociological theory, though there has been a growing number of efforts in recent years to combine systems theory – which is a prominent type of sociological theory – with critical theory, especially in Germany, but in other parts of the world as well.

A straightforward way to distinguish these types is that sociological theory as an ideal-type is purely formal, concerned with the identification, development, and provision of tools that can be applied to all socio-historical contexts. In terms of

sociological theorists' self-understanding – again, as an ideal-type, and regardless whether this is stated explicitly or not – this kind of theorizing is meant to be independent of time and space.

By contrast, social theorists are concerned with how to capture specific forms of societal life, including how to identify the dominant dimensions of specific socio-historical contexts that especially sociologists would be well-advised not to ignore in the process of identifying research agendas and in social research, regardless of their specific interest and focus. For example, as capitalist economies continue to undergo accelerating permutations, is it really a choice whether or not social scientists should consider the gravity the changing economies exert on social, political, and cultural life, as well as the environment? Thus, social *theory* very much is tied to specific contexts and challenges in time and space, although social *theorists* often are not concerned with contemplating the link between specific contexts and their impact on the process of research. That's where critical theory comes in, acknowledging explicitly and examining systematically the gravity concrete socio-historical conditions exert on the process of illuminating them.

As ideal-types, sociological and social theory typically maintain a neutral, non-normative stance vis-à-vis "society" as the context and object of social research. Yet, critical theory's interest in how actually existing societal conditions frame, prioritize, and fund (or not) social research, requires a stance informed and motivated by a willingness to engage in systematic and rigorous – albeit, profoundly *constructive* – "social critique." The latter draws a substantial amount of energy and motivation from manifest contradictions between how exactly each modern society describes itself to its members, how the latter are compelled to accept, buy into, and promote the society's self-description, how the self-description is in conflict with the society's reality, and how an array of intended and unintended – and potentially self-destructive – consequences result from this warped forcefield. We must keep in mind, of course, that any modern society's self-description is multifaceted, complex, and the subject of empirically oriented research, and that identifying the perimeter and parameters of the self-description in rigorous fashion is a daunting challenge.

While the theories of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were combinations of social, sociological, and critical theory (even though Marx was neither a sociologist, nor fond of it), the priorities were different for each of them: Durkheim was one of the founders of sociological theory, Weber of social theory, and Marx of critical theory, but each engaged in and made important contributions to the other types also.

In summary, as far as the mission of the ISTC is concerned, suffice it to say that on its own terms, sociological theory is not comparative, whereas social theory cannot avoid being comparative, at least implicitly, but often explicitly, and critical theory inevitably has or ought to have an explicitly comparative core. Among social scientists, only sociologists are in the position to recognize and study this aspect as part of our charge: how different formations of social life have influenced and shaped the history of the social sciences and the practices of social research. Most social scientists, political theorists, and social philosophers tacitly are aware of this link, but given their training, neither in the position to tackle it, nor necessarily interested in doing so. Focusing on the intricacies of studying concrete life-forms, or developing the needed tools, and then studying them, is not part of their disciplinary purview. It is important to keep in mind, though, the predictable exceptions to these observations, such as Rahel Jaeggi's book, *Critique of Forms of Life* (2018). On the other hand, in recent decades, social, sociological, and critical theory have become increasingly philosophical, and as far as ISTC is concerned, I have been trying to get social theorists, philosophers, and political theorists to pay more attention to what theoretical sociology has to offer, and to facilitate discussions that consider actual trends and circumstances, rather than examining social life in the abstract and at a distance.

European and American Sociology

As far as differences between European and American sociology are concerned, there are many angles from which to address them, especially if we include the issue of fragmentation. Sociology is definitely the most fragmented social science, with regard to the sheer range of phenomena being studied and in terms of the spectrum of theoretical and methodological approaches that are considered legitimate. This fact is regrettable in some ways, and inevitable in

others. Regrettable, because sociologists cannot speak with one voice on any issue, but always speak with many voices on many issues. This pluralism does come with costs, one of them being that sociologists exert little or no influence on public debates and policies, and even less on politics, including in societies with so-called democratic political systems. This pattern is inevitable because there really are no limits to what sociologists can study, because "society" in its specificity, i.e., concrete social structures and relations, etc., to some extent and in some form is imprinted on and reflected in everything that humans communicate about and do as social beings, from friendships and family relations, all the way to planetary civilization. If we are in the position to identify and address an issue, or a phenomenon or process, in ways that others can relate to, it deserves to be considered and examined as an instance of the "social."

Much more importantly from the vantage point of social theory, at the other extreme are examples of phenomena that we do not perceive as being social, even though they often have a transformative impact on how we live and coexist. This is precisely where social theory is called upon, precisely when trends and forces emanate from human practices in society that cannot be grasped in common-sense terms or the language of everyday life, and require efforts to render them communicatively accessible for them to be noticed, and understood as shaping and limiting social life.

As sociologists and social theorists know only too well, many individuals assume that "society" is an outgrowth and expression of our human nature, but in important regards, and far beyond the choices we make in our immediate life-worlds, the opposite applies: as modern societies evolve according to principles and on the basis of processes that have less and less to do with human categories, we are prone to interpret the results of those principles and processes in human terms.

Yet, as Durkheim aptly put with regard to the law, individuals are "functionaries of society." Today, this observation is true for many more dimensions of "social life," which begs the question: do we still live in a "society"? We should not take related notions for granted, especially without first acknowledging and paying attention to differences between modern societies in particular.

To be sure, the conceit that because everyone is a member of society, we also should be able to identify, discern, illuminate, and explain everything that is important in and to social life, including its contradictory nature, transformative potential, self-destructive tendencies, and myriad pathologies, on the basis of so-called common-sense and everyday-life assumptions, could not be more erroneous and misguided. Suggesting that we need this ability would be analogous to demanding that because each of us has a body, we all should have inherent knowledge of human anatomy and there should not be a need for professionalization and expertise even in the case of illness. Albeit, the key question is how exactly and in what regards social theory and sociology are "scientific" and how they have been contributing to a rigorous and systematic understanding of a specific type and set of social phenomena in the past, and how they should do so today. Even though we are not using expensive machines to study the nature of the social universe on planet Earth, we nevertheless must develop and apply deploy tools and concepts that are similarly removed from the life experiences of individuals. This fact alone should tell us quite a bit about modern existence!

For example, keeping in mind the danger of overgeneralization and oversimplification, especially considering how fragmented sociology has become, sociologists have spent an inordinate amount of time and energy on analyses, observations, and diagnoses of aspects – including extremely minute and detailed aspects – of American society, from profoundly unequal social structures to microaggressions, while also being astonishingly reluctant to examine or address American society as a whole, as a totality, along with its peculiar version of modernity. The number of books that have addressed and studied American society as a totality is very small, and even Talcott Parsons's unfinished related effort was published posthumously more than a quarter century after his passing, by an Italian sociologist (*American Society: A Theory of the Societal Community*, edited by Giuseppe Sciortino; 2007). Many studies have in common that they never explicitly confront or explicitly acknowledge the unusual – indeed, the *exceptional*, distinctive – character of this societal totality, compared to other modern societies. Ironies abound in this regard, especially given the expansive literature on American

exceptionalism, which keeps expanding, just not in sociology. Paradoxically, this unusual character often is not being acknowledged explicitly, or only touched upon in passing. Instead, sociologists keep focusing on details, while sidelining how the U.S. is an outlier in many regards among modern societies, including when compared to so-called settler societies like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. There are a few exceptions to neglecting American exceptionalism in sociology, including Seymour Martin Lipset's *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1996) and Frank Lechner's two volumes, *The American Exception* (2017). Incidentally, Lechner is from the Netherlands.

There are many reasons for the reluctance among many sociologists and social theorists to face American society as a whole, but the lack of intimate familiarity with at least one other society is probably first and foremost among them. American sociologists generally know very little about the rest of the world, unless they happen to be from or claim expertise about other regions or countries. Familiarity with at least one other "case" would appear to be necessary for awareness and critical analysis of peculiarities of American social, political, economic, and social life, except at the level of pure abstraction. Instead, even social scientists often normalize and naturalize fractured and warped social structures, ties, and relations in American society, as if they were no different from those in other countries. It is telling that such key sociological concepts as alienation and estrangement, anomie, and disenchantment, had to be imported from European social theory into the English-language sociological lexicon, which did not have any comparable equivalents for capturing such phenomena, and still does not.

To overstate my point just slightly, if American social theorists would not have imported these and similar concepts, it potentially still would neither be possible for social scientists to discern the dimensions of social life these concepts make visible and draw attention to, nor for the society itself, in the public sphere. These dimensions simply would be treated as "normal" aspects of modern social life, inevitable in quality and quantity. Practically, from everyday life to politics, alienation is a relatively familiar and ubiquitous phenomenon and term, but not an actual concept, and assumed to apply only at the individual level, but anomie and disenchantment are largely absent categories. What they would and should illuminate in politics and everyday life is not perceived as relevant or a matter of concern. Individuals are expected to figure out their own strategies for managing related experiences. Phenomena such as high levels of drug abuse, gun ownership and mass shootings, mass incarceration, anti-intellectualism, etc., are all indicators for how "real" the dimensions these concepts refer to actually are.

American Society

In certain regards, the U.S. is arguably the modern society with the highest and internally least recognized levels of alienation, anomie, and disenchantment, a fact whose severity many sociologists in the U.S. and elsewhere (including in Europe) may not be explicitly aware of. If they suspect that the severity is unsual, their attempts to verbalize it tends to remain tied to the level of conspicuous surface appearances, rather than the fraught and fractured nature and fabric of social, political, and cultural life, of which polarization is the most visible symptom. In either case, depending on their training, many probably are ill-prepared to think through its implications for the overall mission, specific tasks, and concrete practice of sociology. For instance, I do not know of any sustained efforts to develop a genuine social theory of American society in U.S. sociology, nor of a program to examine and assess the suitability of methodological or theoretical innovations produced in American sociology and social theory for other modern societies (including, oddly, American society). To use a familiar figure of speech, pointing out these interlinkages (e.g., at conferences) runs the risk of poking the proverbial hornet's nest, and is likely to produce awkward silence.

Needless to say, this nexus of issues is much more intricate, multifaceted, complex, and profoundly contradictory. I discovered as much in the process of writing a paper that uses David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) as the anchor. The absence of a social theory designed to illuminate society and/or modernity in America is astonishing, given the extent of above-mentioned literature on American exceptionalism outside of sociology. If sociologists or social theorists would address this issue, they would have to ask whether and how "society" and "modernity" still apply today,

including especially in the United States, whose origins were and history are too distinctive to exemplify the principles that are characteristic of the genus of modern society overall.

Planetary Sociology

This answer is much longer than I intended it to be, but let me just mention that I have been advocating a paradigm I call "planetary sociology." Planetary sociology is intended to highlight the need to examine the increasingly problematic links between national societies and individual processes of ego formation. Specific societies typically maintain order by imprinting characteristics onto individual identities that compel individuals to replicate patterns which enable a society to manage an array of problems and challenges without having to undergo qualitative transformations. This process involves many forms and a high level of regression that comes with tremendous socio-emotional and socio-psychological costs (see, e.g., Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*; 2024). The process also keeps aggravating and intensifying societal pathologies and contradictions that directly are responsible for what Alexandra Schauer has referred to as "loss of world" and, more importantly, as "loss of future" (in *Mensch ohne Welt*; 2023; "Human Without World: A Sociology of Late-Modern Sociation"). I need to leave it at that. But yes, there are significant differences between national and regional sociologies that must and deserve to be examined, and which are not at all irrelevant or minor aspects of sociology and social theory. To conclude my far too expansive answer, yes, there are many differences between American sociology and European sociology.

If we focus on the German case, for instance, there still is a sort of consensus that if Luhmann's version of systems theory is not an important foundation, it is at least an essential reference frame for rigorous and "systematic" research that is theoretically informed and oriented, and most sociologists should be familiar with his work and its main categories and presuppositions. Not only is Luhmann's work almost entirely unknown in and irrelevant to American sociology; beyond a vague sense that Marx, Durkheim, and Weber provided an important foundation, and there is no consensus, there are no recent or contemporary theorists who would provide some sort of common basis. As far as theory is concerned, it is difficult to imagine how American sociology could be more fragmented.

International Sociology

(Q7) What do American sociologists think about European sociology? What do they think about the International Sociological Association?

In many ways, America is a world unto itself. I have spent almost 40 years in the U.S., pursued my PhD degree at the New School, which is a private university, and the rest as faculty member at two flagship-level universities (at Florida State University in Tallahassee from 1993 until 2004; and since at the University of Tennessee). I also taught as a visiting professor in Göttingen in Germany in 1999 and 2000, and in Innsbruck in summer 2011 and 2012 (and as an "external" between 2010 and 2019); and for one year as an instructor at NYU. At the New School, with its many personal, institutional, and historical ties to Europe, and especially to Germany, sociologists had a lot of respect especially for European theorists and social scientists, and were much more aware of European sociology than at both state universities. While in graduate school in New York for six years, I was able to attend more lectures by European speakers than in the 32 years that followed in Florida and Tennessee, and I was (and am still) the only sociologist from Europe in both departments.

In my experience, American sociologists generally have knowledge about European sociology if they either are experts on specific countries or comparative-historical sociologists, or both, have personal connections to collaborators in Europe, or if European social theory is part of their area of expertise. During my time at Florida State University, several colleagues were working on the welfare state, and at one point invited Gøsta Esping-Anderson for an extended stay. But as far as I recall, for the other colleagues, aside from Lawrence Hazelrigg (author of the trilogy, *Social Science and the Challenge of Relativism,* 1989-1995), who had been teaching theory prior to my arrival for a dozen years, European sociology did not play a role in their work. At the University of Tennessee, several colleagues in criminology (one of the four main areas in the department, in addition to critical race and ethnic studies, environmental sociology, and political economy/globalization) have connections to universities in the U.K. and

in Scandinavia. At least two of these colleagues have conducted research for extended periods of time in Scotland, Norway, and Finland, and two other colleagues have taught in Germany and Austria. One relatively new colleague is American but obtained his PhD in the U.K.; a senior colleague is from Ethiopia; another colleague has done extensive research in Indonesia; a junior colleague spent part of his youth in South Korea; and several other colleagues have done research abroad, including in Africa, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Venezuela. So, as often is the case, the picture is rather complicated.

To answer your question about what American sociologists think about European sociology, I also would have to paint a multifaceted and intricate picture. Part of the problem is that Americans generally don't think of Europe as a whole, but rather of individual countries. Also, there is a major imbalance as far as relations and perceptions across the Atlantic are concerned: it is quite easy to get an impression of America from Europe (including of American sociology from the vantage point of European sociology), partly because of the geopolitical and military roles the U.S. has been playing since the end of World War II, and because American society is rather monolithic – culturally, socially, politically, economically, etc. Developments and circumstances in the U.S. consistently receive a lot of attention in the European press and often are "front-page news." By contrast, developments in Europe generally have a similar status as news about Latin America or Asia, meaning that "it depends" on whether journalists pay attention to Europe or not. For example, when I arrived in the US during the late 1980s, one of the first things that struck me was that, for example in news reporting, the importance of America to Europe was obvious and undeniable; but from the American vantage point, it was much more difficult, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to decide which other countries and parts of the world mattered the most, or at all. This has only become more extreme since then, and most Americans who do not have personal or professional connections to other parts of the world are not especially interested in, cannot relate to, and often have strange notions about other countries. The lack of basic knowledge and the large number of misconceptions about the European Union are often stunning. It may be a relevant indicator of the relative lack of interest in Europe that I can probably count the number of students I have had throughout my career who had a serious and lasting interest in Europe on the fingers of one hand, perhaps on both hands.

Finally, as far as ISA is concerned, none of my colleagues at either state university was actively involved, though some occasionally have participated in conferences, and I know several sociologists and social scientists at other universities who have been very active in the organization. Personally, I have to admit that I attended only one ISA conference, in Bielefeld, Germany, at the very beginning of my career, and have been much more focused on professional sociology conferences in the U.S., occasional critical theory conferences (e.g., in Prague), and the ISTC, of course, mostly for three reasons. First, having been involved in conference organizing since graduate school, I have come to regard the usual setup with several 15-minute presentations per session with very little time for "discussion" as increasingly problematic and even counterproductive, they are not conducive to the kind of sustained exchange that has become ever more important and necessary. Secondly, my impression in Bielefeld and since was that ISA mostly serves and is attractive to sociologists who work (almost) exclusively in their countries of origin – which does not apply in my case. Thirdly and most importantly, since I prefer to cultivate and build networks especially of social theorists (but also in my other areas of emphasis, such as planetary sociology and sociology of film and science fiction, as well as sociological perspectives on artificial intelligence), the ISTC has been providing me with an excellent opportunity to experiment with different formats that are conducive to fostering a certain amount of sustained exchange and engagement.

On Culture, Cultural Critique, and Critical Theory

(Q8) The strong presence of the English Department at your center is remarkable. Is this due to Allen R. Dunn's influence? Does this lead to a stronger focus on cultural theory or even cultural critique at your research center?

Since the creation of the graduate social theory certificate, Allen Dunn was department head twice, first in the English department and then in Philosophy, and had too many administrative responsibilities to play a central role in the management of the certificate program or the creation of the new center, although he has been in support of both. Dunn started the above-mentioned theory reading group several decades ago, which had to be put on hold due to his headships; several other regulars also took on administrative duties, such as Amy Elias, who has invested a lot of time and energy in setting up the Denbo Center of the Humanities and the Arts. Amy also is an affiliate of the theory center.

The English department is by far the largest department in the College of Arts & Sciences, and several colleagues have been working in cultural theory, as well as critical theory in the sense of literary criticism. The English department was involved from the start in the social theory certificate and Committee on Social Theory, and now is playing an important role in the *Center for Social Theory*, which must include and provide a space for socially-oriented cultural theory. When I was asked to set up the new theory center, it was important for the university to have a home for cross-disciplinary exchange and collaboration that primarily is concerned with analyzing the *social* dimension of current conditions and transformations, an agenda I could not endorse more strongly, not least as a counterweight to the trend in social and critical theory to become increasingly philosophical and abstract.

(Q9) Critical theory is a source of inspiration for the work at the Center. Is Critical Theory well anchored in contemporary American sociology, or has it been pushed into the field of cultural studies?

It is true that critical theory is one of several sources of inspiration for work that is being pursued at the center, but neither is it predominant, nor must it be allowed to overshadow the emphasis on social theory. Although a few members and affiliates of the center are inclined to refer to and conceive of it as a center for critical theory, this designation simply is false. A few colleagues on campus and in the center are familiar with and have been engaging with the works of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin (including Allen Dunn), yet their number is small. For instance, to my knowledge, I am the only faculty and center member who is sufficiently familiar with Habermas's work to claim a certain amount of expertise, and aside from some of my own current students, recent proponents of the tradition like Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi, or Hartmut Rosa may be known by name, but less so for their specific contributions. The situation is similar for Luhmann's systems theory, although a couple of junior colleagues in as many departments know his work well enough to have published about it. We also are dealing with issues having to do with theory generally. When I started teaching in Florida, I was told that neither Talcott Parsons, nor Weber, had been taught in recent years. I am not a Parsonian, but in American sociology, Parsons – as well as Weber – must be part of the curriculum.

Is There Any Critical Theory in American Sociology?

The answer depends on the exact meaning of "critical theory." In the American sense, as I mentioned earlier, this includes all sorts of traditions and projects, from the Frankfurt School to critical race theory and queer theory and beyond. Critical theory in the broader sense is quite widespread, although many of its proponents do not know much about the concept's origin, nor are they familiar with Max Horkheimer's famous 1937 essay. Critical theory in the Frankfurt School's sense is playing almost no role in American sociology. In the Sociology department, aside from me, one colleague who is a former student of mine and who spent several months in Bielefeld doing dissertation research, is working in or with this tradition, mostly focusing on the continuing relevance of Moishe Postone's version of critical theory, and one or two students have related interests, and one colleague used to work with Adorno and Benjamin. Given that the number of critical theorists in Sociology departments in the U.S. is so small, I probably personally am acquainted with all critical theorists in American sociology, aside from a few younger scholars. Critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition, all the way to the current "generation," is more prominent in American philosophy departments (though not in

ours, aside from Allen Dunn) and in political theory than in sociology. This is why referring to the center in terms of critical theory would be entirely incorrect and misleading: it is about *social* theory in the sense I explained above, dedicated to identifying and studying specific incarnations and forms of modern social life in time and space, geographically and historically.

(Q10) Is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School still relevant to the problems of contemporary society?

From an entire array of angles, Frankfurt School critical theory has never been more relevant, especially if we are referring to the first generation. This is not just a matter of interpretation and personal preference. Generally speaking, given the increasing and intensifying complexities, contradictions, and contingencies of modern social life, most – if not all – social theories and theories of "the social" that were relevant or useful at some point, are likely to continue to be so today, and probably even more so in the future, including the classics. Habermas suggested as much when he referred to the peculiar status and role of paradigms in sociology and social theory (in *The Theory of Communicative Action*). Rather than social researchers, social philosophers, and critical theorists, etc., ever agreeing on or arriving at one dominant paradigm, a growing number of paradigms coexist and continue to be useful, depending on the issue(s) a particular researcher or research program is trying to illuminate. After all, under what circumstances would a theory or a paradigm that at one time was seen as important, become truly obsolete? This probably only would be the case if a society in key regards started to operate and maintain order according to a truncated set of principles, e.g., under one specific type of political regime. It is extremely unlikely that this would happen on its own, unless the very existence of society were to be threatened, which may not be that far off.

A more likely scenario would be that such an alignment at least in part would result from intentional and coordinated efforts by one or several powerful or influential groups to *gleichschalten* a society, to "align" it, presumably according to a specific *Weltanschauung*, a worldview or an ideology, as during National Socialism in Germany or during Soviet communism. Presumably, such an alignment would be pursued in the context or interest of a specific regime of power, and be grounded in politics, economics, religion, or technology, or a combination of any or all of those. It is undeniable that efforts in this direction currently are underway in many parts of the world.

Scenarios of this sort are a well-known trope in science fiction, usually intended as a warning. For example, in movies like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) or *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970), an alien power and a supercomputer, respectively, force humanity to choose between persistently indulging in its violent and destructive inclinations, or reliably committing to a higher level of rationality and self-control. If real, these instances would make unnecessary certain theoretical paradigms conceived to explain a relatively high level of individual autonomy or (powerful) humans' proclivity toward war as a means of "solving" problems, while necessitating the development of a set of newly suitable paradigms. But short of such extreme scenarios, most paradigms presumably continue to have something to offer, depending on the research task or challenge at hand.

Frankfurt School

To return to the question of whether especially the early critical theory of the Frankfurt School still is relevant to the problems of contemporary society, the unequivocal and unfortunate one-word answer must be: absolutely! Most of their works and contributions are not only "still" relevant, but in certain regards, the relevance of their modes of analysis literally continues to increase every single day. I understand that there is a desire to hope that works from the 1930s and 1940s at the very least are becoming less relevant, if not irrelevant and obsolete – since this would mean either that overall, things are getting better, and that there is less of a need to apply rigorous scrutiny to the analysis of societal trends and an array of phenomena, or that we should abandon the expectation that things to get ought to get better entirely. However, considering that what we want to see as real typically *does not have much to do with what we need to pay attention to and recognize as real*, the notion that the early critical theory could or should become irrelevant probably results from a perspective on modern society as either non-problematic, not so problematic, or at least as becoming less problematic over time. Yet, in some form, this notion seems to imply a link between the "popularity" of a theory or paradigm, and its relevance, and it probably is based on a categorical

misunderstanding of all societies, including modern societies. Let me explain.

In general, and probably at least in part due to the direct and indirect (i.e., mediated) influence of social media, there are two closely related inclinations today that are too strong, and in the process of strengthening further. One inclination is to assume that one's own perspective is inherently sound, fitting, and productive, in a manner that is reinforced by a deficit of willingness to critically examine one's own position, preferences, and priorities, compared to those of others. The other inclination is to accept – really to buy into – ingrained notions about the nature of modern societies.

One prominent version of accepted and ingrained notions that many individuals are inclined towards is linked to the idea that if progress is not inevitable, then modern societies at least are uniquely conducive *overall* to continuous improvements, and that the further we move into the future, the less concerned we ought to be about the potential for derailment or catastrophe. From this perspective, the ability of "democratic societies" – to be precise, societies with more-or-less democratic forms of governance – to meet challenges and to (re)solve problems will continue to grow. The other prominent version of accepted and ingrained notions about modern societies, which has been intensifying and becoming increasingly popular since the beginning of the current century, questions the idea of progress and views modern society with skepticism, if not contempt. Both inclinations, which connect individuals who are certain about their views and convictions to partial collectivities that individuals experience as "communities," produce a double-layered subversion of critical self-reflexivity that we should expect to be detrimental to the future of both democracy and modern societies. The early critical theorists were willing to acknowledge that destructive potential was not unique to National Socialism, but a function of unresolved internal contradictions at the heart of modern societies whose containment has been attainable in concert with favorable historical and political contingencies, even for extended periods of time. But the hope that this potential for destruction will disappear or be overcome ignores the Janus-faced nature of the modern world.

As Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) insisted and exemplified, this does not mean that efforts to prevent the collapse of modern societies are futile; rather, what is called for is a type of education about the modern condition that enables individuals as members of larger groups not only to prevent the contradictions at the core of modern society from destroying it, but also to alleviate this destructive potential as we move further into the future. Effectively, for modern societies to persist and succeed, individuals' capacity to cope with contradictions, complexity, and uncertainty will have to increase, a process that requires a kind of pedagogy which fosters such an outcome. Put differently, the early critical theorists saw the combination of individual identities grounded in tradition and authoritarian patterns, and modern social forms, including democracy, as an explosive mix that could not possibly be sustained in the long run.

What is needed, therefore, to employ an overused expression, is the ability on the part of sociologists and social theorists to take a hard look at the state of society, the species, the world, etc., on their own terms, respectively, and how their accelerating changes are impacting on our own practices – the more so, the less we are so inclined. In this regard, as well as in many others, I find Alexandra Schauer's above-mentioned, monumental work, *Mensch ohne Welt* (2023), not just impressive, but also spot-on. Sociologists and social theorists must resist the temptation to assess social life according to criteria that lead us to perceive disconcerting trends as much less troubling than they really are. In retrospect, the second and third generations of "Frankfurt critical theory," especially Habermas and Honneth, who left their mark in part by having less and less to do with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, and even rejecting the contributions of the early Frankfurt School, spent far too much time on issues of normative justification, within a socio-historical context in which scholars' ability to legitimate and advocate their positions has been eroding and losing relevance, at an accelerating pace. To be sure, referring to Habermas, Honneth, and others, such as Rainer Forst, we know and have to keep in mind that philosophers' primary audience are other philosophers, not other academics or people in the "real world." Still, almost obsessively pursuing questions of justification while politicians and decision-makers are less and less

willing to be accountable to many of their constituents, is a bit otherworldly, especially when efforts to confront, diagnose, and scrutinize real-world developments and changes are being sacrificed in the process.

There also continues to be a need for critical theory today because many individuals, including many social scientists, lack the historically informed perspective, critical circumspection, and evaluative criteria with which to interpret, assess, and judge the potential implications resulting from various trends or policies, and to extrapolate from them into the foreseeable future. As Adorno insisted, one of the main tasks of theorists is pedagogical in nature, not in a manner that aspires to "indoctrinate," but to immunize individuals against being indoctrinated. Specifically in this context, indoctrination is an eminently political and ideological category that is goal-oriented in nature and directed at pushing goals and agendas that usually favor the interests of the few over the interests of the many, and to subvert or pervert what Adam Smith called the "general interest of society" in the process.

On Politics

(Q11) Adorno famously said that those who think are not enraged in all their critique. Are you currently feeling rage about political events in the U.S.?

"Rage" usually implies a sort of furious and uncontrolled anger bordering on insanity; at the very least, it denotes a strong emotion that threatens an individual's ability to engage in self-control and critical self-reflection. I assume that what often precipitates rage is the shocking discovery of something entirely unexpected, combined with a fear of the unknown in response to an event or a trend that was unimaginable to the individual who is experiencing rage. If we stick to this understanding of what is causing rage, then current political events and developments in the U.S. would have had to have been shockingly unexpected and unpredictable. However, the proverbial writing has been on the wall for many years, even before the 2016 presidential election. I could enumerate many examples, but let me limit myself to three that were published around the same time, twenty years ago, and received a substantial amount of attention. Conservative political commentator Kevin Phillips's *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (2006); Stanley B. Greenberg *The Two Americas: Our Current Political Deadlock and How to Break It* (2004); and Charlie Savage's *Takeover: The Return of the Imperial Presidency and the Subversion of American Democracy* (2007). Note that none of these was written by a sociologist. There are countless other studies and publications that examined and warned about the dangers of polarization and the tensions between two large groups with very different ideas about whether the U.S. is or ought to be a democracy or a republic, and whether it should be similar to or profoundly different from Europe, as Jouet pointed out. These works go back many decades, not just to Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) or David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), but also works by the writer Lewis Sinclair, or by Seymour Martin Lipset, as far back as his 1962 book, *The Politics of Unreason*.

So, realistically, the split dividing American society into two large parts with conflicting values, aspirations, and especially views about government and the country's future that has become conspicuously apparent and undeniable during the last decade should not have come as a surprise to anyone, especially sociologists and social theorists. I would not say that I am feeling rage, but I am surprised by the speed and scope of politically implemented changes. In many ways, they are putting to the test the strength and meaning of Americans' commitment to the values that Lipset summed up as the basis of the "American creed", in his book on *American Exceptionalism*: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. They also force social scientists to examine and question assumptions about the fragility of highly complex societies that used to inform and guide much social research. I cannot prevent myself from being curious about how older Americans whose identities were tied to pride in American liberal democracy and its position as a globally recognized and respected superpower are coping with the current reconfigurations. We also need to keep in mind that as far as sociology is concerned, politics is most important in terms of what it says about society, rather than a dimension that can be understood on its own terms.

(Q12) How has the Trump administration impacted your research, and what is the current mood among you and your colleagues?

Contrary to many colleagues whose research depends on federal funding, and who have had to

deal with a lot of uncertainty or entirely cancelled grants, my research and the center are supported by the College of Arts & Sciences.

Ethic of Responsibility

As far as my own research is concerned, as well as priorities I have identified for the center, I am both aware of the larger situation and making choices and decisions in ways that consider and reflect this reality. At the same time, I am trying to make sure that my choices and decisions about research and teaching also are informed by an "ethic of responsibility." How to decide what warrants attention, what the center ought to offer, and what kinds of issues are important in the twenty-first century should follow an immanent logic pertaining to dimensions of the social that call for illumination and the nature of the challenges at hand, rather than political expedience or concern about the changing political landscape. It would be naïve and careless not to be cognizant of the larger context, but this is not anything qualitatively new, and mostly a matter of degree. It never occurred to me to base my choices as an academic, theorist, and researcher on the assumption that social scientists are or should feel free to be oblivious to the larger societal, historical, and – in purportedly democratic societies – political context in which we labor and identify research agendas. In my understanding, studying the social world and then going ahead and pursuing an arcane or dubious interest that disregards what we learned about the social world would be a contradiction in terms, the manifestation of a profoundly "post-social" attitude and stance that is indicative of a scholar *de facto* having given up on "society." I am not worried that or to what extent this may indeed apply in some instances; but personally, I would view this as a betrayal of sociology and social theory as a vocation.

Regarding the mood among my colleagues, *DER SPIEGEL* recently published an interview with a German scientist who accepted a research position at an American university and who was asked to respond to similar questions. Her answer was that she would prefer it if her colleagues would spend less time discussing the current political situation and focus more on their work. My experience is quite different, as most colleagues are exceedingly reluctant to bring up political events and trends or specific politicians, except in very general terms – both in private, and even more so in the context of public events. Initially, one of my plans for the center was to record, post, and make accessible on YouTube all lectures and presentations organized or co-sponsored by the center, but several speakers requested that I refrain from doing so.

Also, the state of Tennessee a few years ago identified a catalog of "divisive concepts" that university teachers have been instructed to avoid or to use only under very specific circumstances, contingent on related expertise, and students are encouraged to file complaints if they are feeling uncomfortable with how a particular issue is being introduced, described, or discussed. In my experience, the entire university operates at a heightened level of caution. University administrators have been reassuring employees about free speech rights, etc., but most colleagues seem to act on the assumption that much could "change on a dime," depending on the particulars of a situation or occurrence and how they are being interpreted, or new federal or state laws, or executive orders, that might even apply retroactively.

Theory and Society

(Q13) To what extent has the political climate hindered academic discourse? Is it still viable to pursue theoretical work under these circumstances?

Answering this question depends on the inferred meaning of "academic discourse." If it refers to active exchange among academics in the context of specific institutions, then I would describe the way of discussing issues that could be perceived to be critical of or incongruous with current federal policies as restrained. Academics live in the real world, too, and the world is very real right now. If academic discourse refers to participation in the larger national, international, or global context, and the kind of issues that have a track record of having been addressed and discussed from a variety of angles, including at conferences, my impression is not that there is a general pattern of holding back. This also applies to theoretical work. A related issue that numerous, especially older theorists, have expressed to me is that they are not particularly confident that work they are presently doing, or work they have done in the past, is or was worth the investment and expenditure of time and energy. In many countries, society is moving along trajectories that do not reflect or has little or nothing to do with the contributions many scientists, social scientists, social

theorists, academics, and researchers in general have been trying to make, in the interest of improving living conditions on Earth, or to slow or prevent their continued deterioration, or for the species to be in a better to position to meet looming challenges. Instead, the current socio-historical trajectories in many countries would appear to be driven mostly by political, economic, and power considerations.

Unless theoretical work is actively prohibited, pursuing it in any discipline is viable regardless of whether it has the desired impact or not, especially in the short term. The purpose of social-theoretical work is primarily diagnostic and analytical in nature, pertaining to understanding a specific pattern, phenomenon, or process, especially if it cuts across or results from interaction between micro, meso, and macro levels. In the social sciences, the primary purpose of theory must not be predictive or solution-oriented. At the same time, there is nothing wrong with extrapolations from identifiable trends into the future, or an interest in grasping the nature of a particular problem and how it is tied to other problems and society's structural features, informing theoretical endeavors. For instance, a good theory should enable researchers or policy-makers to outline and anticipate potential scenarios, and to conceive of strategies that might tackle persistent problems. But theorists do not have the power to predict the future or to come up with solutions, and they should not be expected to have this power, or to be judged accordingly.

As I indicated earlier, I find it prudent for social theorists to position themselves vis-à-vis any specific society or the genus of modern society as the preliminary end-product of complex, contradictory, and contingent features, patterns, and processes that conflict in certain respects, while they may converge or complement each other in other respects, or they may not be commensurable at all, making it impossible to capture their nature in an internally consistent manner. As we move further into the future, especially in the absence of visions of the latter that would motivate individuals to work together across society in ways that promote or increase solidarity and reconciliation, traversing deepening social divides is becoming more and more difficult. Clearly, non-negligible segments of the population in many countries reject such collaboration and corresponding efforts and perceive the – or any – future mostly as a threat, especially futures that depart from those they idealize as the past. Under such circumstances, theoretical work is especially important. It is quite conceivable that only explicit and determined efforts to acknowledge the powerful gravity of socio-historical contexts, and how they tend to impose limits on the human imagination, along with the willingness to experiment with intellectual constructs that may prevent the horizon of the future from closing, that the horizon may open again. We certainly should not preclude the possibility that a theorist or – more likely – a group of theorists who see the pursuit of theorizing itself as a social practice – stumble upon insights or categories, intentionally or not, that "objectively" allow for much better ways to confront both imminent and emerging challenges, even though we may not be able to see them yet – perhaps less so, the more we try. It is also possible, after all, that far more effective approaches to meeting objectives in terms of stated goals in fact are conceivable.

Sociological Critique: Theoretical Interventions and Political Activism

(Q14) Media studies occupy a significant role at your center. Do you view contemporary U.S. politics primarily as a media-driven phenomenon, or does your personal background in economics lead you to see the economy as the foundational base? To what extent does your center explore the structural entanglement between media and the economy?

Let me respond to this question as expeditiously as possible. Studying contemporary society without paying close attention to the role the mass media and social media are playing would lead to such hypothetical representations of the world today that they would have to be regarded as futile endeavors and obsolete from the outset. In my work, I treat the concept of "artifice" as a possible substitute for "society" that ought to enable sociologists to discern more clearly the processes that have come to determine the nature of our reality, at least in societies that heavily rely on electronically mediated forms of communication, with the vast majority of the population having the means to own the devices that are necessary for participation in this digital age. Not only can we no longer work with the assumption that society is an extension and a manifestation of our nature as human and social beings; the opposite assumption probably will take us much further, if the goal

is to explain why and how what is happening is in fact happening as it is.

What we still may prefer to call "social forms" probably are in fact the result of processes and machinations that are so thoroughly mediated, manipulated, and manufactured that to refer to them as "social" is akin to an intellectual atrocity. In many ways, mass media and economics in the register of capital are two sides of the same coin. Jonathan Beller's related works are eminently instructive in this regard, from *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006) to *The World Computer* (2021). Twenty years ago, using the frame of the attention economy, he contended that the global economy could not possibly function, maintain itself, and generate rapidly growing profits, without individual consumers voluntarily doing the (exploitable) work of spending inordinate amounts of time in front of screens.

A social theory center evidently will need to consider this nexus of issues, which has immediate implications for how we assess and study the role of social groups, forms of interaction, social relations, structural inequalities, power structures, the role of bureaucracy, and array of additional aspects of modern societies in the early twenty-first century. Personally, I also have been trying to identify alternative means and modes of communicating sociological and social-theoretical insights and knowledge to interested audiences outside of the established contexts for addressing such matters at universities and colleges. For instance, I am planning to set up a workshop during the summer, about how movies and television shows parallel and illustrate themes that social theorists have tackled rather successfully, since the beginning of the modern era during the second half of the eighteenth century. It is too early to predict if and how social-theoretical concepts, tools, and ideas can be relayed to audiences that transcend the established division of labor in educational systems, but the potential of some kind of success would appear to justify related efforts.

(Q15) In an era of fake news, positivist claims to truth seem to be faltering — some argue rightly so. What is your perspective on today's truth debates since Trump? Is arguing with facts still meaningful?

Sociologists and social theorists should not take their cues from current events, temporary power constellations, or thrilling fads, even when they promise or threaten to last longer than expected. Instead, respecting facts should be par for the course, not least because we are not in the position to predict how – and for how long – specific conditions will persist. Being honest with oneself is as important as being honest with others, especially in a culture and an era in which mendacity is seen as a perfectly legitimate and desirable approach to advancing one's own interest. The matrix of vocation/profession and politics/science Weber proposed little more than a century ago still applies, perhaps more so than it did then. If social theorists drop the commitment to our efforts following the principles of vocation, and instead adhere to those of a socio-historically situated and shaped profession, they may be able to advance narrow personal, bureaucratic, or business interests, but they should not expect to come across anything intriguing or unexpected. Pursuing social theory ought to be akin to engaging in a social practice, collaboratively. It also should involve an aesthetic dimension, and not just as far as the production of texts is concerned.

(Q16) Ultimately, the scholar's main tool is critique, provided they remain within their academic domain. How do you and your colleagues maintain a critical stance in these times?

This is a very important question, especially in the United States, whose creation was precipitated by an exercise in critical exchanges that lasted a few years, between the Federalists who favored a republic and strong federal government, and the Antifederalists who favored democracy. Possibly in part as a reaction to this conflict, after the creation of the republic, critique came to be viewed with suspicion; the persistent need today to promote what is called "critical thinking" is symptomatic of the absence of a practice that needs to be reaffirmed time and again, because it must not be treated as given. Education is charged to a high degree with providing students with related skills, because the larger society in many ways tends to subvert it, even when "critical thinking" is purely formal. The detached observer might suppose that "critique" applies equally and is equally present in all modern societies, but a comparative perspective quickly would dispel such a notion. In fact, just as (following Durkheim) no society can last and maintain order without something fulfilling the function that religion fulfilled in "primitive" societies, so, too, the prevailing form of critique and modes of criticism in a society reliably are a function of specific societal circumstances

and history, and not separate from those. Put simply, in the U.S., to the extent that it is present in society, "critique" tends to be suffused with power, economic interest, and ego. It is not accidental that Horkheimer and Adorno coined the concept of "instrumental reason" after having lived in American society for several years, nor that Parsons stressed that American values are based on the principle of "instrumental activism." In the age of social media, these features have become truly extreme. The trope that one does not learn if one is afraid to make mistakes frequently is repeated, but to date, it has not translated into greater appreciation of constructive critique or criticism, quite the opposite. In fact, the notion that critique ought to be constructive rather than destructive, especially as far as modes of coexistence and social and political practices are concerned, is almost alien, not just in the public sphere, but also in academia. Academics in the social sciences and humanities often put forth a critical stance with regard to this or that issue, phenomenon, or policy, but when pressed to explicate the inferred meaning of "critical" or "critique," many tend to be offended or confused. This lack of clarity takes many different forms, and draws attention to the absence of established traditions of critique, aside from literary or art criticism or critical thinking, none of which are assumed to pertain to or have a bearing on the larger societal reference frame.

Deliberative Democracy?

(Q17) Is there a need for more political activism in sociology?

Before I would be willing or ready to answer this question, we would have to determine how responsive established political systems are to human or social values or principles. As far as I am concerned, societies with so-called democratic political systems – really, republics with democratic elements – have hardened to too great an extent to be considered responsive to the needs of the *populus*, not to mention activists or activism, or even action, and have at their disposal an entire spectrum of well-worn strategies and tools to manage, subvert, or hold off real participation. Forty years ago, Dahrendorf used to lament what he called the "pillarization" (*Versäulung*) or hardening of democratic institutions and processes, and how they successfully had knocked the vitality out of what should be a living process. For his part, Habermas – for example in his 1985 essay, "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies" – made very similar observations, a few years before he started working on and promoting his concept of deliberative democracy. Today, the tangible pillarization and exhaustion far exceed what they were referring to then, and Habermas's effort to foster deliberative democracy must be viewed as a failed project, at least for the foreseeable future. Let me put it this way: as long *pillarization* (a combination of rationalization and bureaucratization that translates into management of the people) remains unaddressed and is allowed to intensify, *polarization* is an increasingly likely consequence. In retrospect, political systems that draw – or rather, drew – their legitimacy from calling themselves democratic, and from being perceived as such by substantial segments of the population in many countries, paradoxically prevented citizens' efforts to further democratize systems of governance and political structures (not to mention other areas of modern society), and immunized themselves against future-oriented forms of activism, and were able to transfigure such forms into further pillarization and exhaustion – engendering what Habermas had referred to as a looming motivation crisis in the early 1970s (in *Legitimation Crisis*, 1975).

It is not for me to object to anyone engaging in political activism, but if asked, I would see it as my responsibility as a sociologist and social theorist to remind those who "want to make a difference" or "save the world" that evidence in the social sciences of obstacles that make success at best a remote possibility is extensive. Unless there are indications that the tide of public sentiment is moving in a direction that resonates with the reasons that motivate those who are inclined to be or become politically active, even incremental success – if it is supposed to last -- is difficult to achieve. Moreover, we should keep in mind that from the outset, sociology emerged as a discipline concerned with the foundations, patterns, and practices upon which societies maintain order and function, not with how to bring about qualitative transformations. At the same time, being cognizant of those foundations, patterns, and practices is an indispensable precondition for efforts to bring about such transformations, for them to occur and be successful. Finally, as sociologists and social theorists, we also must be careful not to buy

into one of the key ingredients of the ideology of modern societies, that they are uniquely conducive to progress. They may be conducive to some forms of progress, but they also always suffer from and foster myriad regressions. They did so in the nineteenth century, and they would appear to do so even more today.

Thank you very much, Harry, for your time and insights!

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Meaningful Sociology and the Disciplinary Attic:

Some Reflections on Kurt H. Wolff and the RC16 Midterm Conference, Innsbruck, July 2025

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Firstly, some context: the two authors have individually held a long-term interest in social theories and cultural sociologies that see a positive role for aesthetic frameworks. This interest, in turn, had lead both authors to toy with the idea that, rather than being some Romanticist indulgence, a 'sociological aesthetics' – especially one coupled with an existential phenomenology – should be able to address what might be called 'weighty' issues. We include amongst such weighty issues: addressing civilizational turmoil (including war and violence); and confronting issues sociologists often put into the 'too hard basket' (e.g., embodiment, nonhuman sources of meaning, the role of pre-cognitive processes in social life, etc). Once we started collaborating, we realised our converging interests merited the label of either an 'aesthetics that matters' or an 'existential aesthetics'.

We also quickly realised that a number of the intellectual figures who interested us had either never been fully appreciated or were no longer read – at least not in Anglophone social science and social theory that seems to dominate global production and reception of sociological knowledge. We are thinking of figures such as – inter alia – Helmut Plessner, Roman Ingarden and Kurt H. Wolff. Even seemingly known classic authors such as Alfred Schutz are rarely read and discussed and applied today. There exist what we might called congealed stark inequalities of recognition. For example, whereas Hannah Arendt has been constantly cited from when she was writing through to today, her one-time husband, phenomenologist Gunter Anders, who devoted a lifetime of scholarship to reflection on war, violence and technology, has hardly ever been mentioned by sociologists.

Rather than try to co-opt such forgotten figures through a 'presentist' lens (i.e., seek to identify how Plessner, Anders, Ingarden or Wolff had anticipated say 'more-than-human', 'relational' or 'new vitalist' themes – a common strategy in revivals of past authors) we started thinking of such authors and their texts as ideas that existed in a liminal space. We might term the intellectual space in question: social theory's 'disciplinary attic'. Rummaging around in such an attic is about more than rediscovering forgotten authors. There is, of course, space and need for such a research, as has been shown in history of ideas (e.g. McLaughlin 1998), feminist historical sociology (e.g. Luo, Adams, Brueckner 2018) and in decolonial studies (e.g. Bhambra and Holmwood 2021). But looking around in our metaphorical attic is also about relearning how to ask and discuss questions that perhaps the contemporary social sciences either have forbidden themselves to ask or have forgotten how to ask, to use Tom Kemple's (2018) formulation. Put differently: we wanted to explore whether re-examining the

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aforementioned neglected figures of phenomenology, might help to restore some sense of social theory as a 'way of life' in Pierre Hadot's (2002) sense – i.e., a practice designed to make acts of contemplation existentially relatable to anyone interested in living the examined life.

Our talk at the Innsbruck RC16 mid-term conference was a first step in this direction. We chose Wolff as our exemplar of neglected figures from the disciplinary attic because we both quickly came to appreciate his writing style and the depth of insight provided. We began the talk with the following passage from the beginning of *Surrender and Catch*:

Perhaps this book on surrender-and-catch begins thus (or even: thus begins).

After this walk. After this… initiatory walk. For it is to walk, between the stones and the walls between which the walking goes, to communicate with the gates and the houses, the ochre paint, or the outrageous red, on the walls around the olive gardens, to greet the forbidding fort, whose walls preclude the view of our copula, our campanile, our civic tower. And the cypresses: black brush slips in the towering sky – for the weather is not good. The olive trees shimmer, shivering in their own colour of greygreen against the dark-grey lumpiness of a sky. And yet: nothing can happen because one returns home, out of the wind… So went the walking and writing many years ago. (Wolff, 1976: 3)

Note the cautionary and somewhat self-effacing first word: 'Perhaps'. Not your standard opening to a sociological text; and, given the literary style on display, it is not surprising to learn that, in addition to sociology, Wolff also tried his hand at poetry, writing fiction and painting (one of his paintings adorns the cover of Backhaus and Psathas, 2005).

Surrender and Catch combines the personal voice with the academic one; the latter involving a wealth of scholarship that draws on Greek thinkers, the views of religious mystics, classical sociologists, research on embodiment and Central European philosophies including phenomenology and existentialism. Despite the emphasis on concrete subjective experience, the author insists that he doesn't 'think of [his sociology] as autobiography'. It is rather the effort to regain meaning for all who are convinced that meaning has been lost' (Wolff, 1976: 3). He went on to define surrender as a 'total experience' or type of 'cognitive love' of the sort required to grasp "what happens when we see a street for the first time, when we meet a new person, see a new part of the city, enter a house not entered before" (Wolff, 1974: 13). Whereas the catch was the 'cognitive or existential result, yield, harvest… of surrender… [the] new beginning or new conceptualizing' (Wolff, 1976: 20). One of Wolff's major disciples frames it this way: surrender refers to a 'highly unusual and intense form of experience', that one 'befalls' to rather than 'will[s]' into existence; and the catch is the 'creative existential insight' or attempt to communicate that experience, by the surrenderer (Backhaus, 2005: 182). The fact that surrenders are unusual is underlined by the fact that *Surrender and Catch* refers repeatedly to Wolff having experienced, throughout an entire lifetime, some six or so paradigmatic instances of surrender. In other words, naturally-occurring surrender experiences could well be very rare. However, as we discuss later on, Wolff seemed to also think it was possible to learn surrender techniques 'under the careful guidance of the teacher' (Gherardi, 2015: 118).

Given Wolff's interest in the poetics and uniqueness of experience, we were somewhat surprised to find that Wolffian sociology sees its fundamental raison d'être as civilizational developments and commonly felt sensations of turmoil. The following poignant passages from *Sociology and Survival* attest to the author's commitment to macro-societal diagnosis and finding critical humanist alternatives:

Traditionally sociology has sought to understand how society ticks but can this still be its aim today, when we do not know whether the ticking is perhaps a countdown? … Today when everybody willy-nilly contributes to that chimera of a national security, that we take it for granted that the news of famine is interrupted by a commercial break, and when so-called elected representatives fall for science-fiction weapons and approve plans to divert revenue previously allocated for school luncheons and other nourishment? If we trust our senses rather than the received notions that blind them, and thus us, to reality, the only way we can come to terms with our 'paramount reality' is to say 'No' to it. (Wolff, 1991: 7-8)

Our crisis makes me distrust the received, 'precedented' conception of reasonableness and

rationality, in the same way as it makes me distrust our traditions, which, after all, have brought us to where we are. (Wolff, 1991: 5)

In such passages, Wolff is very much our contemporary. And yet not only is his voice not recalled now; hardly any sociological theorist speaks in this register. Like Gunter Anders, Wolff's phenomenological sensitivity made him denounce grave problems lurking just beneath the surface of the spectacle. This sensitivity is sorely missed. Today we seem to be living through a moment where civilization and politics are a total mess, a moment when it is hard not to ask how we have ended up here despite all the 'checks and balances' and the progressive social scientific canon at our disposal? Democracy and free speech are in serious trouble (many believing it is now effectively an oligarchy); neoliberal corporate capitalism is not only strong but triumphant and it dominates not only the economy but also the society in ways that could make even Weber and Marx stunned; we see obscene levels of inequalities approaching an 'imperial feudal kind' (Mike Savage's apt phrase); tragically, instead of solidarity and civil repair we witness waves of apocalyptic destruction and massacres accompanied by apathy and/or fear of distant spectators; there is significant polarization that makes reasonable debate difficult, if not impossible; and war criminals act with impunity and go unpunished, and war crimes often go undiscussed in both academic and everyday discourses, even if they are on everybody's screens and denounced by major human rights organizations.

When Wolff claims the state of the world makes him 'distrust' the intellectual 'traditions' that have got us to this point, he includes sociology and social theory. This is not necessarily because sociology possesses the wrong motives. Rather, it is because in thinking the role of 'sociology is to lay bare the circumstances … which have led us to our crisis', the discipline partakes of the epistemological and ontological assumptions 'which have led us to where we are or has not prevented us from arriving here' (Wolff, 1993: 288). In one-and-a-half succinct pages in *Surrender and Catch*, which catalogue civilizational problems that stretch from 'China's [rising] military strength' and 'tensions between Israel and Arab states' to 'the relation between the USA and Latin America' and 'the possibility of destroying mankind itself' (it is hard to believe these sentences were written in 1976 rather than in 2025), Wolff (1976: 18) offers an additional diagnostic frame. He suggests contemporary civilization suffers from the problem that it is both 'too literal' and 'not literal enough' (Wolff, 1976: 18-19). On some topics like whether 'state and nation [are] the most comprehensive political unit[s]', or whether our lives are at the mercy of 'national and private interests', contemporary humans are possibly 'tool literal' (Wolff, 1976: 18). By contrast, when it comes to all the suffering around us, and 'people's desires for life, including health, housing and food', we tend to suffer from the opposing problem of not taking 'expressions of discontent, malaise, protest, confusion, despair, destructiveness' literally enough (Wolff, 1976: 18-19). We would suggest that this task of wading through the contemporary situation with an eye to what requires a greater feel for metaphor and what needs a greater sense of 'the literal' brings us into the orbit of cultural sociology. Developing a feel for what is too literal and not literal enough encourages us to develop a feeling for what Florian Znaniecki (1934) – another marginalized and now seldom discussed classic who spoke explicitly about importance of culture – called the 'humanistic coefficient'; and Wolff (1976: 44) referred to as the human condition of being 'a mixed phenomenon'.

Interestingly, Wolff identified primarily as a sociologist of knowledge. However, we feel that his discussion of aesthetic, religious, bodily, political and even fieldwork models of surrender meets the criteria of a cultural sociology in that the reflections are primarily concerned with how meaning-making operates in these domains. It is also important to recall what Wolff (1983: 422) himself wrote about not understanding the 'sociology of knowledge' (*Wissenssoziologie*) in terms of an empirical or literal understanding of knowledge:

From the beginning of its career - which by now is some sixty years old - the term ‚sociology of knowledge' has been a misnomer. In the first place, 'sociology of knowledge' is a bad translation of the German *Wissenssoziologie*, the dictionary to the contrary notwithstanding: both terms are narrower in English than in German. 'Sociology', at least at the time the term *Wissenssoziologie* was coined, was less far removed from philosophy than it is in the Anglo-Saxon world and has since become to some extent in German sociology as well; it is, or was, not so sharply distinguished

from 'social philosophy'. But more important, and also more clearcut, is the difference between 'knowledge' and *Wissen*. For 'knowledge' refers predominantly if not exclusively to positive or scientific knowledge, whereas the German term also covers such kinds of knowledge as philosophical, metaphysical, theological, artistic, or religious. The term 'sociology of knowledge' thus means or connotes something other than its original [meaning]. (Wolff, 1983: 422)

A few years before our collaboration started one of us (Eduardo) reviewed, a book entitled *Matters of Revolution* (Bartmanski, 2022), written by the other (Dominik). The review, published in *Theory, Culture and Society* (de la Fuente, 2022), picked out a particular formulation for special highlighting: 'what sociology needs less of [is] "passionate involvement" with established ideologies and binary modes of thinking, and more of … fine-grained cultural empathy rooted in spatio-material awareness; less of the incessant "reconstructions" of discursive formations and more engagement with "sensory formations" and life conditions that affect us all as humans' (Bartmanski, 2022: 6-7). The reviewer (Eduardo) felt this was a compelling argument for what a cultural sociology can offer analyses of worldly affairs. Arguably, such an ethos was on display at the RC16 mid-term conference when, at the closing panel, Jeff Alexander (2003; 2006) analysed political parties as central to democracy through their fusion of symbolic and other totemic objects; a cultural sociological move that gets at the symbolic textures of political life in ways reminiscent of the author's earlier writings on evil, the Holocaust, the civil sphere and cultural trauma. We would suggest that a cultural sociology necessarily brings a 'light touch' and 'non-reductionism' to the problems and passions of worldly affairs.

The trick remains, however, how to speak meaningfully and insightfully about worldly issues without leaning too heavily on those 'ideologies and binary modes of thinking' Bartmanski seems to be suggesting are *strictures* as much as *structures*. In Wolff's case, we feel that the phenomenology of experiential meaning is not overwhelmed by the scholastic concerns driving the analyses; and also that, unlike some of his Frankfurt School fellow-travellers, Wolff neither courted the role of 'critical sociologist-as-public-celebrity (as did his colleague and close friend Marcuse) nor did he end up in the unenviable position of 'critical theoretician calling the police due to demonstrators disrupting his class' (as Adorno [1978] did in the late-1960s – which then required self-justification in the form of an essay entitled 'Resignation'). Taking stands and discussing difficult topics remains a fraught activity. But it is unavoidable. Not voicing a stance is a form of taking a stance. In an interview with Peter Ludes, Wolff commented directly on the tightrope involved. He says that his 'whole work' has been more or less explicitly about a 'diagnosis of the time in which we live, which is one of unprecedented crisis'; but he adds that pretending the 'solution of political problems depends on an act of surrender' would constitute a 'case… of bad faith, of hypocrisy' (Wolff and Ludes, 2005: 174-175).

There are many other admirable qualities to Kurt H. Wolff the person and to Wolffian sociology that in a longer essay we would expand on. However, given our interest in sociology as way of life it would be remiss of us not to mention the importance Wolff attached to teaching. No less than 176 pages or some 45% of *Surrender and Catch* is devoted to what the author terms 'Trying with Others'. The 'trying' Wolff is speaking of relates to 'teaching surrender'; and the 'others' in question were the students who inhabited his various classes between 1961 and 1971. He kept assiduous records of student assignments and classroom discussions. At times, Wolff's classes were urged to write to sociological authors they were reading and the responses – if they came – were then disseminated to the whole class (Stehr, 2005: 46). Feminist organizational theorist Silvia Gherardi (2015: 118) says of the classroom practices documented in the 'Trying with Others' section of *Surrender and Catch* that they point to Wolff's commitment to 'the principle of artisanal teaching and learning' in which the tools of the sociological craft were to be "learned through demonstrating and watching, through sensible knowledge". Instead of the current mainstream 'solutionist' fantasies of the sociologist as special policy influencer or cultural consultant, a Wolffian sensibility we recall here is both less narcissistic and more profound, in that it recognizes the limits of an individual authorial voice, however great, and the transformative potential, however small, of joint existential didactic exercises in Hadot's sense. This acquiring of an ethos via 'sensible knowledge' extended to non-classroom activities. In a memorial framed as a letter to the recently

deceased Kurt Wolff (he lived to the ripe old age of 89 and died in 2003), one of his former students writes:

An advantage of being one of your graduate students was that I was sometimes invited to your home for dinner… I also met other members of your 'circle' of colleagues, friends, past and present students that you collected around you. Kurt, you introduced me to this world and said: 'Here you are—see. Look around you and take note, it won't be here for much longer!'… Kurt, over the nearly twenty-five years I have known you, I came to see sociology was a way of life, not a just a job. For you sociology was not (and should not) be put into a box… once you closed your office door at night. (Smith, 2005: 16)

Arguably, this memorial note gets at one of the best reasons for dipping into the disciplinary attic – namely, to encounter different conceptions of sociology as a way of life. The contrast with mainstream social theory is palpable. Much of traditional social theorizing is often decoupled from our existential and environmental concerns, from our deeply affective embeddedness in lifeworld, and therefore deprived of axiological gravitas and everyday resonance. Often it feels as though social theory remains rather 'thin' and scholastically formulaic when it comes to capturing our deeply human concerns and our alternating sense of meaningfulness or meaninglessness of social life that many of us experience on a daily basis. While the body is no more than one dimension of this embeddedness in lifeworlds – interestingly, Wolff devotes only one (admittedly long) chapter to 'Surrender and the Body' – we do feel that a disembodied conception of human action, is likely to increase the likelihood of a sociological *logos* which is not – and is not even expected to be – resonant with an embodied *bios*, to use the late Foucault's formulation. Furthermore, meanings are not merely linguistically and metaphorically constructed; they are nested in and practiced within complex human-lifeworld relations, in embodied emplaced field experiences. That emplacement is why experiences are resistant to analysis and predictive explanation. Wolff knew it and taught it because he was well-versed in Merleau-Ponty's magisterial treatment of this set of problems which sociology today seems to be oblivious of or reluctant to relearn. 'Meaning is invisible but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible … metaphor is too much or too little: too much if the invisible is really invisible, too little if it lends itself to transposition' (1968: 215, 222). Wolff's own proposition was to emphasize a type of meaning that highlights what is 'ineluctable' or irreducible about human experience. He thought chances of obtaining meaning increased if we relaxed our civilization's obsession with mastery and control and measurement; and if we were open to unexpected fusions with the world around us. He labelled what was required the 'surrender experience'.

We enjoyed giving our first presentation on Wolff at the Innsbruck RC16 mid-term and were delighted with the comments, questions, and suggestions for further reading colleagues made. Thank you to everyone who interacted with us and our work-in-progress. We also enjoyed the curated experiences that our hosts at the Research Centre Social Theory provided including the convivial meals and the breathtaking mountain cable car ride. However, if we were to identify one joyous moment above all others, it might be Professor Andrea Brighenti's quip at the closing panel of the conference: 'Why be a mortalist when you can be a vitalist?'. Why indeed! Although Kurt H. Wolff was more of an existentialist-cum-phenomenologist (with strong influences from Georg Simmel and Karl Mannheim) rather than a vitalist per se, we think he would agree that it is worth preserving the vitality inherent to the 'contemplative life'. And what better place to find unexpected vitality than in the hidden recesses of the disciplinary attic?

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Sociology of Moralities and Sociological Theory

RC16 Session Reports from the 5th ISA Forum of Sociology, Rabat, Morocco, 6-11 July 2025

In Rabat, Kathya Araujo and Steven Hitlin organized two sessions on *Sociology of Moralities and Sociological Theory*. They and contributors Sabina Pultz, Magnus Paulsen Hansen, and Roland Zarzycki offer reflections on these sessions in the reports below.

Kathya Araujo

Steven Hitlin

Sociology of Moralities and Sociological Theory

Kathya Araujo[9] & Steven Hitlin[10]

Morality has long been a concern of sociological theory. It figured centrally in the classics—most notably Durkheim—but for a long time it receded from the discipline's core. Over the past few decades, moral questions have returned to prominence. Scholarship has focused variously on issues of social integration versus conflict, on the normative dimension of sociology itself (Vandenberghe, 2017), and on how moralities are actually enacted in everyday life (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013).

This session assembled papers that critically examine social moralities in contemporary societies, with the explicit aim of mapping the scope of a sociology of moralities and advancing sociological theory on the fundamental problem of social life and coexistence in diverse societies.

We received an excellent response to our call. Because of the high quality and number of proposals, we created a second part of the session and ultimately presented nine compelling papers.

Several contributions focused on conceptual and theoretical debates—engaging authors such as Latour or placing morality within the framework of cultural sociology. Other papers tackled definitional questions, exploring what we mean by dignity and respect, offering new readings of sacrifice and moral outrage, and examining how normative and customary dimensions of morality shape theoretical approaches. Some studies looked at social moralities in relation to concrete phenomena, such as the pandemic. Many of the papers

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[10] University of Iowa, USA

combined empirical evidence with theoretical reflection, creating a productive dialogue between data and theory. As a result, the session successfully brought together perspectives from diverse societies and enriched our collective debate.

Interest in the sociology of moralities was evident not only in the number of submissions but also in the strong attendance at each session. This robust participation generated lively exchanges between presenters and the audience, deepening the discussion and pushing the research further.

A third sign of momentum was the initiative by several participants to join a collaborative network on the sociology of moralities. It should help coordinate plans for a future meeting in Seoul at the ISA Congress and provide an ongoing forum for sharing work in sociologies of moralities and sociological theory.

If you are interested, we warmly invite you to join the *Social Studies of Ethics, Morality, and Values Network*. The newly formed network draws together scholars across disciplines whose work is concerned (in some form) with ethics, morality, and values. In addition to traditional strongholds in philosophy, interest in ethics, morality, and values (broadly construed) is growing across the social sciences. This includes growing literatures focusing specifically on these topics, and also a wider body of research that pertains to these topics without being the primary focus of study (e.g., studies of personal lives, religion, AI, etc.). While there is lots of amazing work being done in this area, it is diffuse across different disciplines and topic areas. The intention of this network is therefore to provide a means to share publications, ideas, findings, and resources.

The network shares news and publications via a (minimal) jiscmail list. The website hosts a bank of readings and resources (still a work in progress). It also hosts several talks/discussion events per year.

To join the network, sign up to the jiscmail following this link and clicking Subscribe or Unsubscribe or feel free to contact the organisers Owen Abbott (abbotto1@cardiff.ac.uk) or Anna Strhan (anna.strhan@york.ac.uk).

Sabina Pultz

Magnus Paulsen Hansen

Reflection on "(In)dignity at the Margins"

Sabina Pultz[11] and Magnus Paulsen Hansen[12]

We presented *(In)dignity at the Margins* at the ISA Forum, exploring the many ways dignity is woven into everyday life. Our project investigates the profound tension: dignity as something *innate*, granted to every human being, and dignity as something *earned*, bound up with recognition, social standing, and work,

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[12] Roskilde University, Denmark

and put to the test in the welfare system and society.

INDIGMA explores these questions through in-depth ethnographic studies where we follow unemployed citizens over time. The project compares experiences of (un)dignity in three marginal areas in Denmark, France, and the USA, thus contributing to current and urgent debates about dynamics of ignorability and how they can be mitigated.

What stood out most in our fieldwork were the intimate, and personal practices through which people nurture their dignity in contexts of marginalization. Lasse, in Denmark, showed us how a morning cup of coffee was more than just a habit—it was a ritual that gave him energy and optimism on days when life felt heavy. Virginie, in France, invited us into her story of transformation, where years of single motherhood, political ideals, therapy, and the pandemic reshaped how she understands what it means to live with dignity. Sheila, in the United States, reminded us that dignity is not confined to the labor market. Though she worked jobs she did not care for, she located dignity in her art and in her garden, treating both as creative expressions of care.

Based on the analysis, we show how dignity is not a static quality but something *actively composed* in everyday practices. It is embodied, affective, and relational—sometimes fragile, sometimes resilient, always negotiated. Our approach, working *with* participants rather than *on* them, reinforced for us that dignity also lies in research relationships themselves.

Discussing our work at RC16 was very fruitful as we met new colleagues also engaged in the sociology of morality and the particular ways that people negotiate their worth with others and within societies, using creative qualitative methods. We hope to be back next time and develop our thoughts and work further. We develop our understanding of dignity from deep ethnographic work, anchored in the study of everyday life, and developing apt concepts to address this micropolitical and often, very subtle dynamics, is key to contribute to the sociology of morality.

Beyond Hypocrisy: Sacrifice and Outrage As Tools for Building Moral Capital

Roland Zarzycki[13]

Roland Zarzycki

In the social sciences, the significance of how free will is perceived and attributed has been established in various ways as fundamental to the very possibility of conceptualising moral games. In everyday practice, this manifests as responsibility—potentially resulting in blame—and as agency, being a prerequisite of praise. It is in this context that a dichotomising narrative emerges in colloquial language practices, dividing reality into good and evil. These concepts are complex and multifaceted, making them compelling subjects of analysis. We reinterpret *sacrifice* and *moral outrage* as standard techniques within the economics of morality. The former constitutes a kind of *potlatch*-like act, in which an exercise of dominance occurs along with a conversion—using P. Bourdieu's terms—of certain forms of capital into moral capital. Similarly, moral outrage enables the use of symbolic superiority in the field of moral capital not only to discipline subordinate players, but also to further accumulate capital through a spectacular display of moral supremacy. Both techniques are

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employed by actors aspiring to succeed in moral games in a manner that abuses their dominant position—i.e. winning beyond the rules of the given game.

Our analysis is based on two empirical studies. The first, a large-scale survey examining public perceptions of brand responsibility, identifies three dominant attitudes among respondents: (a) committed activists, (b) passive observers, and (c) conformists. Interestingly, each of these corresponds to typical responses to cognitive and emotional dissonance. The second study, composed of case analyses, assesses the practical efforts invested in demonstrating moral goodness and avoiding blame, particularly in relation to three morally disruptive global events of recent years: the Covid-19 pandemic, the failure to realise the Millennium Development Goals, and the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. Across all these cases, the spectrum of reactions may be structurally broken down into acceptance/permissiveness, dissent/rejection, and pragmatic exploitation of opportunities made possible by moral detachment. Once again—!—Interestingly, one can observe a convergence with the three typical patterns of response to cognitive and emotional dissonance. In this and other ways, our findings contribute to an understanding of how sacrifice and outrage function as intentional strategies for the construction and defence of moral capital.

During the ISA Conference in Rabat, as part of the session *Sociology of Moralities and Sociological Theory*, the themes addressed in the presentation *Beyond Hypocrisy: Sacrifice and Outrage as Tools for Building Moral Capital* resonated with several highly engaging talks by other researchers. These explored the perception of moral phenomena in diverse ways, particularly focusing on respect, subjectivity, moral paradigms of responsibility in the context of Covid-19, and the non-reducibility of morality to a utilitarian calculus. The ensuing discussion revealed not only important divides in perception stemming from differing methodological and epistemological perspectives and the geographical location of empirical data sources, but also pointed to considerable research potential. This could be unlocked through deeper exploration and discussion of the structural conditions underlying these diverse approaches, along with their conceptual and epistemic consequences.

Community Communications

Award for Junior Theorist 2025

This year, the RC16 Junior Theorist Award goes to Romulo Lelis for his paper, *The great transformation: The Durkheimian sociology of religion from Émile Durkheim to Henri Hubert. Anthropological Theory* 25(1): 97-117, 2025.

We are thankful to Sage, which has agreed to grant free access to the article in recognition of this achievement. The paper can be read here.

We are also thankful to Professor Philip Smith of the Department of Sociology at Yale University for nominating Lelis's article.

The committee found Lelis's paper to be truly pathbreaking despite dealing with a topic that has been at the center of sustained theoretical attention for decades; namely, trying to discover the origins of Durkheim's later religious/symbollic/sacred sociology. Despite the field being picked over by so many specialists and leading scholars, Romulo has something new to say—and for this reason, this work will surely be of lasting significance.

Lelis argues in the paper that the prevailing, highly influential account about Durkheim's reading experience of Robertson Smith is wrong. He offers a completely new way of looking at things. This lines up with much recent scholarship that sees Durkheim as part of a creative team rather than as a lone genius. Lelis goes further in connecting the dots in an evidentiary way than anyone before.

Romulo starts by noting what we have long known, which was that Durkheim always had a religious sociology. But in the early years, it was a sociology of religion preoccupied with duty, responsibility, morality, and obligation. This was switched out, in the Elementary Forms, for one that looked to temporality, expressive action, signification, myth, the body, collective effervescence, and ritual drama. Looking in a meticulous way to various under-explored original sources, Lelis shows that it was in fact Henri Hubert (1872-1927) who built the foundations for the Elementary Forms – especially in the period from about 1902-1905. With this key concepts and

Romulo Lelis and Paul Joosse at the award ceremony in Innsbruck

lines of vision, Hubert opened the doors for Durkheim's magisterial synthesis, which was published a decade later. Importantly, Lelis argues that Hubert foreshadowed not only Durkheim's familiar religious sociology but also an aesthetic turn that is buried within it. Only recently has this been identified and pitched as a viable, highly creative extension of Durkheim's theory. But Lelis shows we should maybe think the other way round: this aesthetic sensibility was there right from the start, as one of the building blocks. In a sense, the religious sociology of Durkheim emerged from Hubert's earlier socio-aesthetic sensibility.

In sum, this is an exemplary study that illustrates the continuing necessity for sociological theory to
(1) Revisit familiar issues rather than complacently accepting received wisdom;
(2) Engage in close readings of forgotten texts rather than looking only to the classics and old masters; and to
(3) Pay attention to interactions between scholars as a source of creativity. But perhaps above all else, there is a discovery here. The committee

thought it was eminently worthy of the prize. *Congratulations Romulo!*

Committee members:
Paul Joosse (University of Hong Kong)
Ilaria Riccioni (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy)
Daniel Silver (University of Toronto, Canada)

Publications by Members

New Articles by Members

Roudometof, Victor. 2025. On globalization in a post-globalization era: Reflections on the debate. *Dialogues in Sociology* https://doi.org/10.1177/29768667241312024

Roudometof, Victor. 2024. How should we think about globalization in a post-globalization era? *Dialogues in Sociology* DOI: 10.1177/29768667241293053

Roudometof, Victor. 2024. In search of global sociology: a critical overview of competing research agendas. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11: 889 https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03191-2

Roudometof, Victor. 2024. Global sociology and its discontents. *Diogenes* 65(2): 235-250 doi:10.1017/S0392192123000305

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Recent Books by Members

Staubmann, Helmut. 2025. *Reading Talcott Parsons. A Re-Assessment of his Legacy*. London: Routledge.

Vandenberghe, Frédéric; Papilloud, Christian (eds.). 2025. New Directions in Relational Sociology. Vol. 1: Relations All the Way Up. Vol. 2: Relations All the Way Down. New York: Palgrave.

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Gökbörü Sarp Tanyildiz. 2024. *Grounding Critique: Marxism, Concept Formation, and Embodied Social Relations*. Leiden: Brill.

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Susen, Simon. 2020. *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Opportunities

Coming Conferences

2027, July 4-10 **XXI ISA World Congress of Sociology**
Gwangju, Korea

Further ISA Conferences

2029	VI Forum of Sociology	tba

Call for Contributions

Theory needs your contribution! Please send your ideas for a short essay, a reply, an interview, a reference to your new (published) book or recent dissertation, or any other information of interest to RC16 members to the newsletter editor

Frank Welz (Innsbruck), frank.welz (at) uibk.ac.at

until **May 15th** to be considered for issue 1, **November 15th** for issue 2.
Currently, we are particularly interested in receiving short (one page or a short essay) contributions to our planned series on

- Theorising in Troubled Times
- Theory & War
- Trajectories into Theory
- What is Critical Sociology?
- Teaching Theory: How to (successfully) teach Sociological Theory?

Social Theory Centers Worldwide: Interview Series

Social Theory Centers Worldwide: Interview Series

This ongoing interview series presents Social Theory Centers across the world, highlighting their institutional settings and intellectual orientations. The series documents the global landscape in which theoretical reflection is cultivated and fosters international exchange within the field of sociological theory.

Location	*Interview*	*Theory*
Innsbruck, Austria	Social Theory Today: An Interview with Frank Welz	2024/1
Brighton, UK	Social Theory at the University of Sussex: An Interview with Gordon Finlayson	2024/2
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Objectives

Following the RC16 statutes, the goal of the Research Committee in Sociological Theory is

- to organize open interrelationships among its various schools of thought,
- helping resolve its recurring crises and define its future prospects and
- to create an international community among scholars

[1] Past Co-Chairs are ex-officio members of the board.