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As if "theory" is the only form of thinking, and "social theory" the only form of critique: thoughts on an anthropology BST (beyond society and theory)

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Loss?

What is "social theory?" Since when is there such a thing as social theory? And what is the status of social theory in the contemporary human sciences?

I approach these questions by turning to a recent article by the American anthropologist Dominic Boyer (2010), "On the ethics and practice of contemporary social theory: from crisis talk to multi-attentional method." In this text, Boyer suggests that social theory is a child of the enlightenment, a project of cosmopolitan humanism that defines the various life forms as essentially "human" and "social." He also describes it is as a formation of intellectual artisanal culture—a sort of intellectual, pre-industrial arts and crafts movement with which he deeply identifies (Boyer, one could say, is a theory lover).[1]

[1] What does Boyer mean by the "social?" The "intersubjective and relational features of human experience." And by "theory?" In the narrow sense, a causal, explanatory schema; in the broader sense a set of highly specific analytical attentions. And by "social theory?" That is actually less clear. It could mean (1) that all theory is socially grounded. It could as well mean (2) the theorization of the social (which could still be socially grounded). Furthermore, it could refer (3) to theories of the social in the narrow sense, i.e., a more or less causal schema reducing the social to a particular set of principles (and usually these principles are themselves social). Or it could, finally, mean (4) a set of analytical—theoretical—attentions that are supposed to illuminate the social (while they are, of course, socially grounded). In Boyer's essay, social theory potentially means all of this. He does not (always) differentiate. But there is one thing that all four meanings share—they are socially grounded. The intersubjective and relation features of "human experience" are the (apparent?) ground of human action. Or at least of theory.

For Luap Lechim and Luap Leachim. And for Lawrence, Steve, Carlo, Nick, Janet, Miriam, Alberto, Irina, Allan, and Fiona. The below could not have been written without our exchanges.

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Today, Boyer further notes, social theory is said to be in crisis: there is a widespread sentiment in North American academia that social theory—this formation that has grown over more than 200 years—has arrived at an "impasse, awaiting renewal, or collapse." "There was so much energy in theory," a Cornell humanities Professor tells him, "but these days, theory is [pause]. Well, anyway, it feels like this moment is past."

Such "crisis talk" makes Boyer feel uneasy—and nostalgic. As he noted elsewhere (Boyer 2003): Where some are "happy" to diagnose the end of social theory he is left with a deep sense of loss; "loss and erosion of the legitimacy of artisanal knowledge-making." And it is this loss, this erosion of social theory as an artisanal practice against which Boyer wants to move. His article offers a program for how to rescue social theory (Boyer is also a (p)artisan of social theory).

The question at the core of this essay is, why? Why would one want to rescue social theory? Would it really be a "loss" if social theory was to drift into the margins of the human sciences? An "erosion," as Boyer writes? Why? What is of intrinsic value in social theory?

Asked in a different way, why are some scholars happily leaving both theory and society behind?[2] What is the alternative project? How could one envision, for example, an anthropology BST—beyond society and theory?

BST

The form of this article requires a word of explanation.

The following pages began as a brief comment (requested by this journal) on what I came to call Boyer's action plan for saving the arts and crafts movement of social theory. I began writing this comment by offering a playful, perhaps ironic counter monolog, in which I sought to explain how I think about the social (what is this?), about theory (not the only form of thinking!), about social theory (what a chimera!), and about the idea that this formation is undergoing a crisis (what a relief!). After a few pages, this approach seemed to me less desirable, simply because it does not seek to engage, because it excluded the communicative effort that Boyer's honest action plan demanded.

The alternative, for which I then opted, was to critically follow the logical steps of Boyer's essay; to carefully explain for each step why I disagree with his formulation of problems (e.g., I do not think that fieldwork is analytically exhausted); why I am uncomfortable with some of the (often implicit) distinctions

[2] To merely list a few authors: Important philosophical (yet empirical) alternatives to "social theory" have been advanced by Michel Foucault (see especially his elaborations in Foucault 1972 and his late reflections in 1984a, b, c) and Deleuze and Guattari (specifically their 1994 elaboration of philosophy). Today's perhaps most prominent critique of social theory was articulated within science studies, specifically in the work of Callon (e.g., 2004) and Latour (e.g., 1993). Haraway (1991, 2008) has likewise offered a powerful critique of social theory. See also the work of Mol (2002), and Keating and Cambrosio (2006). Daston (1994), Davidson (2004), and Rheinberger (2010a, b) have offered different versions of a historical epistemology that understands itself as a departure from theory, social or otherwise. Ian Hacking's historical ontology (2002) is likewise presented as an alternative to theory. Rabinow (1989, 2003, 2008) is arguably the most well-known anthropologist among those who have critiqued both society and theory.

and value judgments that inform his text (does an interest in the emergent really equal the embrace of a capitalist, neoliberal *Denkverbot*?); why I find conclusions he makes problematic, at times, perhaps troubling (like the implicit assumption that the human sciences, insofar as humans are social beings, are essentially sciences of society).

Amidst my efforts to critically engage Boyer's arguments, I then came to realize that my comment was growing into more than a mere comment: thinking through Boyer's suggestion for how to save social theory had become an opportunity, for me, to draw a sketch of a scholarly project that radically differs from the one his article seeks to rescue; a scholarly project that is defined precisely by the radical departure from the two key referents of social theory—society and theory.[3]

Such a sketch seemed attractive for (at least) two reasons. First, because it is offering glimpses of (in my understanding) a most fascinating human science endeavor that understands itself as an alternative to theory in general and to critical social theory in particular.[4] And second, because this alternative does not come in the abstract—here is an alternative to social theory—but in the form of a critical engagement of thoughtful arguments in favor of social theory, an engagement that documents at each step why one may find social theory delimiting and why one may be interested in moving beyond it.

(Insofar as the affection for social theory that informs Boyer's essay may also be said to be at the core of the widespread 'sense of loss' that he documents in his text, such a concrete exploration of what one could call the limits of social theory seems particularly useful.)

This, then, is what this article is about: a raw sketch, in the form of a thorough engagement of Boyer's thoughts, of the possibility of an anthropology that happily abandons the concept of "society" and the practice of "theory," that embarks on a radically different kind of scholarly undertaking, which I call anthropology BST.

It follows from these remarks that I have no investment in discrediting Boyer's thought-provoking effort to rescue social theory. I herewith concede that, at times, I have found the social a quite useful analytical concept, and that my understanding of theory has been significantly refined by Boyer's essay. The critical comments I offer in the following pages are not arguments against his project, but dialogic efforts to give contour to the altogether different kind of anthropology that I seek to bring into focus: they are, so to speak, opportunities for departures.

For the purpose of this paper, I have divided Boyer's action plan in three parts. I call them diagnosis (an assessment of the current state of social theory), etiology (an explanation of the origins of the contemporary crisis of social theory), and prescription (an effort to move beyond the crisis). I briefly summarize the argument of each one of these steps in order to then offer some critical reflections that prepare the ground for the final part of the paper. In this final part, I offer a (rather) different history of social theory and its crisis (in the form of a brief conceptual history of "society," "theory,"

[3] While there is quite a bit of critical thought when it comes to "society"—theory has rarely been criticized. See the brilliant reflections of Foucault (1982, 1984b, 1991). See also Deleuze and Guattari (1994). For a good overview on how literary critics and historians have criticized theory see Martin (1996) and the essays in Herron et al. (1996).

[4] See footnote 3.

and "social theory"), one that leads me to articulate a different, research rather than theory-based understanding of *Wissenschaft*: anthropology BST.

I begin my critical comments by asking: is there really such a thing as "social theory?" A somewhat coherent field, spanning the centuries, that evolves around a theorization of "the intersubjective and relational features of human experience" (that is, how Boyer defines the social)? A trans-generational, international "social field" called "social theory" that is recognized to exist by those who Boyer says contribute(d) to it? Do the authors he lists—just think of Latour!—think of their work as continuing this tradition and as developing it further?

Diagnosis: Why is social theory exhausted?

Where does the "sense of the analytical exhaustion of social theory, classical, or contemporary" originate? For Boyer, this diagnostic question is crucial, for he wants to make "the crisis" accessible and transform it from a vague and abstract impression into a concrete problem that can be addressed. His way of achieving this "concreteness" is to socialize the crisis talk—to trace the contemporary sense of exhaustion back to its social origins, to the particular group of actors that initially spread the word, to the very specific social circumstances that resulted, for them, in a feeling of theoretical exhaustion—circumstances that can be thought through and, ideally, addressed (I note here—and I will come back to this—that along with the will to make the abstract concrete, goes a forceful rejection of the observation that all theories are contingent, and hence incapable to offer the a priori, more or less causal explanations that they claim/promise to offer).

The actors Boyer eventually identifies as the originators of the crisis talk are "those anthropologists researching and documenting other cultures of expertise." How come? He makes sense of this finding by turning to the work of the American anthropologists Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005). In their study of contemporary finance, these authors have discovered that today many managers and other modern professional experts are actually busy conducting a kind of ethnography—paraethnography, they call it—of their own fluid fields. Simply put, Holmes and Marcus state that in contemporary expert cultures ethnography (broadly understood as a method to survey a relational field and to learn from its various small lines of mutation) has become a somewhat ubiquitous technique. The conclusion Boyer draws from this observation is that this ubiquity has apparently resulted, among anthropologists of experts, in an anxiety-producing loss of professional distinction: When "both ethnographic and social-theoretical knowledge-making abound outside of the disciplinary nexus of anthropology," he asks, then isn't "anthropology becoming analytically superfluous?"[5]

[5] I am not sure about a link that, for Boyer, must be self-evident—the link between ethnography and the practice of social–theoretical knowledge making. Ethnography is, or so it seems to me, a method. Is this method always concerned with the social (the way Boyer defines it)? Is it always—in necessary or at least evident ways—linked to social theory? Both seem questionable to me.

In short, Boyer suggest that anthropologists, in their encounters with experts who already practice ethnography, experience their methodological and theoretical practice as insignificant—and that causes "the entire debate over the limits (…) of theory."[6]

I would like to offer two critical remarks:

My first remark concerns the concept of contingency and its significance for understanding what I would call the contemporary disrespect for (social) theory. Luhmann (1998: 61) gives a helpful definition of contingency; "what is assumed," he writes, "could be different." There is, in other words, no necessity to the assumed. Now, why is Boyer so quick in turning away from the possibility, which seems to me quite plausible, that one core reason for the disrespect of theory is that theories (social or other) lose much of their power if they are recognized as contingent? What is the point of a "social" theory when there is no intrinsic (or necessary) reason to assume that humans are above all "social" beings? Or that, "society" is the grounding principle of human reality? Do societies exist? If yes, are non-humans included?

One could further ask, isn't contingency precisely at the core of the writings of many of the scholars who have turned away from theory? Isn't it a central element of what Canguilhem (1967) has aptly described as Michel Foucault's historical a priori? Of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 1994) insistence that universals—the social, for example—explain nothing but need to be explained? Of Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991) refutation of Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology? Isn't contingency, then, an important philosophical argument against theories and their self-proclaimed capacity to offer (more or less causal) explanations?

There is the impression that, perhaps, Boyer turns away from contingency because it is difficult to come up with a counter argument. Where the question is contingency, this is to say, (social) theory is hard to save.

I turn to my second remark: it seems to me as if Boyer's effort to locate the social origins of the crisis of social theory is informed by a set of implicit, nowhere fully articulated, but often gestured to, oppositions and value judgments; value judgments that I find problematic.

Let me explain:

Boyer suggests that the contemporary sense of the "exhaustedness" of ethnography and/or social theory (what is the relation between the two?) originates among those anthropologists who work in and around "expert cultures." He further indicates that to some this sense of exhaustedness has presented an opportunity to bid their farewell to theory (e.g., Rabinow 1999, 2003). How does Boyer describe their alternative to social theory? As an interest in "the emergent" (at the end of his paper, e.g., he writes that the aim is, "to develop new strategies for theoretical

[6] Boyer further notes that some anthropologists (the reference here is largely to Rabinow 1999, 2003) have suggested that the way forward is to abandon theory and to replace it by the invention of concepts that help us understand the new fields in which we move; concepts that have themselves the capacity to "make something new happen" in our knowledge practices. Boyer finds this unfortunate. "The problem," he writes, "is that conceptual innovation is more likely to reproduce a sense of alienation from theory than to alleviate it." Of course, this "alienation" is exactly what Rabinow—silently gesturing to Foucault—is looking forward to.

practice that make use of the productive aspect of theoretical abundance and specialization without simply repressing it in favor of (…) an 'embrace of the emergent'.")

Now, if one carefully reads Boyer's work, it appears that his use of the category of the emergent is quite critical. In fact, he equals the "embrace of the emergent" to an uncritical, capitalist "embrace of the market". The logic that informs this equation, or so it seems to me, is derived from a classical Marxist sociology of knowledge, according to which the mode of production determines the mode of academic knowledge production; what has brought about the fascination for novelty and innovation are the managers and experts of the new economy, who are obsessed with the new, and who are constantly busy identifying emergent trends on which they hope to capitalize (Boyer 2003).

Boyer's text, then (although this is nowhere explicitly articulated), suggests that the anthropologists of experts cultures, or at least all those who focus on the emergent and call for conceptual innovation, have come (consciously or not) to embrace the logic of their counterpart others, i.e., the logic of the market. That is why they value novelty rather than social theory.[7]

If one were to make explicit the implicit, then it would follow that Boyer suggests that the current crisis of social theory is due to the threat of capitalism. To say that Boyer is critical of this capitalist undermining of social theory would be an understatement. In fact, he even goes as far as denying the (capitalist) anthropologists of the emergent the capacity to think (he equates their focus on novelty with a "neoliberal *Denkverbot*").

Though one wonders how far this value judgment carries. Why would a focus on things emergent inevitably imply a *Denkverbot*? Simply because it devalues theory? Is theory the only form of thinking? Or is the problem that "the neoliberal" (or capitalism) is opposed here to "the social?" The "social" of "social theory?" And that the interest in things emergent is ignoring the significance of "the social?" Wouldn't that imply—and that seems to me rather untenable—that "social" theory (simply because it is *social*?) is the only reservoir of critique that exists? Is critique always inevitably social? Or is the problem that "the neoliberal" is opposed here to "the artisanal?" So that the anthropologist interested in things emergent is inevitably turning away from craftsmanship?

One could further question Boyer's value judgments: Isn't neoliberalism a form of thinking? Isn't there a neoliberal concept of the social? Or are "the social" and "capitalism" mutually exclusive categories? And what actually does Boyer mean by neoliberalism? Ordoliberalism? The Chicago School? The reforms introduced by Reagan in the early 1980s? Or the reforms introduced by Yeltsin in the 1990s? Or perhaps the reforms initiated by Merkel after 2000? All the same? Neoliberalism as one single ugly blueprint for how to destroy the social (and theory)? Does that explain why capitalism is always already a negative category?[8]

[7] For a helpful analysis on the anthropology/ethnography of the emergent cf. Maurer (2004) and Fischer (2003). Rabinow (2008) has actually critiqued the current use of the term emergence and has moved away from it.

[8] For an exceptionally brilliant stroke of insight on neoliberalism I refer to the work of Collier (2011) and Ferguson (2010). The work of both has been considerably informed by Foucault (2008).

Boyer's effort to rescue social theory is informed by a set of distinctions that I find rather problematic. Here, all that is solid: the social, the artisanal, theory, and critique. There, the new economy, which melts all that is solid into air: the focus on the emergent, the turn away from theory, and the turn away from the concept of the social and from critique.

I think I understand the role of these distinctions for Boyer's argument; he aims to show that to give up social critique is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. But I am not sure if his distinctions are helpful for understanding the present or for bringing our times critically, and ethnographically, into view.

In fact, one could say that here one of the main problems of social theory become tangible; the binary oppositions built into it seem anything but useful for understanding the world we live in. Perhaps the world has outgrown some of the moral certainties that informed critical social theory? Perhaps that explains part of the "crisis?"

Furthermore, I do not think that the category of the social can be limited to humans. What about all the bacteria, viruses, and parasites that live in good social company with each one of us? Or is microbiology merely a "social" construction?[9]

Etiology: The social and the unity of human experience

Social theory, according to Boyer, is a rather recent phenomenon. It emerged, if gradually, in eighteenth century Europe. It is important to note here that, for Boyer, this does not mean that societies did not exist before. It merely means that the early forms of an explicit theoretical assessment of "the intersubjective and relational features of human experience" came into existence only in the 1770s. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, a social group emerged that was concerned with social reality, almost as if society became conscious of itself—through social theory (Boyer notes that what gave rise to this societal self-consciousness was the confrontation of Europeans with non-European societies; this encounter generated the insight that Europeans were, like all others, reducible to two variables—"human" and "society").

In the course of the nineteenth century, Boyer continues, the interest in "society" became considerably sustained, a process that eventually led to what he calls, "the golden age of social theory" (roughly the period from the revolutions of 1848 to the end of World War I, which brought the institutionalization and professionalization of the social sciences).

Boyer's etiology of the contemporary crisis is interested in the "golden age" precisely insofar as it was not universally experienced as "golden." For example, a majority of German thinkers (or so Boyer reports) reacted quite negatively to the institutionalization of social science disciplines. They experienced it as a

[9] My reference here is, on the one hand, to the work of authors like Latour (1988, 1993, 1999, 2004) and Haraway (1989, 1991, 1997, 2003, 2008), who problematized the anthropocentrism built-into the nature-culture or nature-society divide and, on the other hand, to those who have pushed this early work into what is currently referred to as multispecies ethnography: Helmreich (2009, 2011), Helmreich and Kirksey (2010), Kohn (2007), Paxson (2008, 2010), Raffles (2007, 2010), Tsing (2011).

specialization that would inevitably lead to a narrowing down of perspective, to fragmentation, to technicization, to a loss of the whole. And they saw specialization as a direct result, Boyer adds, of the differentiation and fragmentation of society under the negative influence of industrialization and modernization.

According to Boyer, it is precisely this nineteenth century German "anti-modern" reaction that provides a key for understanding the present sense of crisis. It provides a key because "the late nineteenth century" professionalization of the social sciences de facto "was the origin of" precisely the "epistemic vulnerability and situatedness" so prevalent and widespread in contemporary social theory. "If what we are experiencing today could properly be called a 'crisis in theory', then we should acknowledge that its origins lie in the transformation of intellectual culture in the nineteenth century."

Boyer's hope is that he can learn how to solve today's crisis by looking at how nineteenth century Germans sought to solve theirs. The heroic problem solver he turns to is Wilhelm Dilthey. In his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaft* (translated as, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*), Dilthey had maintained that the emergence of the *Einzelwissenschaften* (translated as, *Special Sciences*) poses an *erkenntnis-theoretisches* (epistemological) problem to the *Geisteswissenschaftler*.[10] As all special sciences deal with special aspects of reality, neither one of these sciences, with their ever more refined theoretical apparatuses, will ever be able to bring the whole of "human experience" into view. Given this inability, or so Boyer suggests (implicitly equating "special sciences" with "social theories"), Dilthey was "struggling to produce a manifesto for the human sciences that would provide a philosophical foundation and integrative purpose"—his *Introduction*. I.e., according to Boyer, Dilthey was trying to articulate an epistemological foundation that would allow the positive integration of the various special sciences in such a way that a knowledge of the whole of human life would be possible again. And that is exactly, Boyer writes, what we need today as well.

I offer two critical remarks on Boyer's etiology:

The first one concerns Boyer's depiction of German thinkers, specifically of Wilhelm Dilthey. In the text it is suggested that Dilthey, like many other nineteenth century Germans, was a social scientist; i.e., that his object of study was society and his analytical tool social theory. Boyer explicitly makes the point that Dilthey's project of "theoretical renewal" was de facto a social theory project, one meant to overcome the sense of "vulnerability" the emergence of special social sciences had given rise to.

But was this really the case?

As has often been noticed, German thinkers of the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century were concerned with *Geist* and *Kultur*, but not with *Gesellschaft* or *Zivilisation*. The reason for this absence, as Elias (1969) and others have suggested, might be seen in the fact that Germany, in contrast, for example, to France, was for most of the nineteenth century not a nation state but a heterogeneous set of little kingdoms and princedoms. This is to say, there was no society that

[10] Wilhelm Dilthey's *Einleitung* was first published in Berlin in 1883. The following quotations are from a later edition: Dilthey (1914). The English translation is Dilthey (1988).

entered the political scene through a revolution, no society that claimed to be constitutive of a state, no society that could be nationalized or administered. The way to imagine national unity was to evoke a common *Geistesart* or *Kultur*, one based essentially (but not exclusively) on the German language and its inherent—for many nineteenth century Germans, unparalleled—capacity for thought and poetry.[11] Whether one agrees with Elias or not, the very least one can say is that among the overwhelming majority of nineteenth century German intellectuals concern for society writ large was simply absent.[12] One could even argue that society was considered a French concept, one not applicable to humanity in general and to Germans in particular. Heinrich von Treitschke, for example, a famous German *Staatswissenschaftler*, wrote in 1851 (Treitschke 1927 [1851], pp. 54/5) that "it has not been proven that society is a particular element of human conviviality" (it comes as no surprise, then, that the first chair of sociology in Germany was founded only after World War I).

To return to Dilthey: I think it is fair to say that Wilhelm Dilthey stands in as exemplary for the nineteenth century German disinterest in—or indifference to—society. This is to say that, in my understanding, Dilthey's work had little to do with "society," with the "social sciences," or with "social theory."

For example, for Dilthey's Geisteswissenschaft humans are not "social beings," a category that arrived in Germany only after Dilthey had published his major works. Instead they are seen as endowed with *Geist* (spirit). Humans are *Geistwesen* (spiritual beings) and the challenge of the Geisteswissenschaftler is to narrate the epoch-specific historical manifestations of the Geist.

This can be applied directly to the nineteenth and twentieth century interest in society. The concept of society and the concern with society is, from the perspective of Dilthey, an epoch-specific manifestation of *geistige Prozesse* (spirit-specific processes). It is a historical, time- and place specific concept. The task of the Geisteswissenschaftler is to understand how the concept of society became a central organizing principle for the life of these two centuries (from painting and sculpture to scripture, architecture, thought, etc.). To assume that human reality is, at all times and places, social, and that social evolution or social struggle is the key to understanding history, would mean, from the perspective of the Geisteswissenschaft, to confuse the object that is to be explained (*explanandum*) with the concept that is providing the explanation (*explanans*).[13]

I think that Dilthey was not only not concerned with society but he was also—and this is my second remark—having no investment in bringing together the

[11] Hence *das Volk der Dichter und Denker*.

[12] This is not only true for the *Weimarer Klassik*, for *German Idealism* or the *Jenaer* and *Heidelberger Romantik*. It is as well true for the Prussian *Staatswissenschaften*, who have famously rejected the concept of society, see Wagner (2000).

[13] In fact, one could almost speak of Wilhelm Dilthey's antipathy towards the social. It could be said that Dilthey (like many German intellectuals before and after him) has actually written against the idea that humans are essentially societal beings, that the human sciences are essentially social sciences (just think of Hegel, Heidegger or Arendt, to name merely a few). When Dilthey used the phrase *geschichtlich-gesellschaftliche Welt*, then the *geschichtlich-gesellschaftliche Welt* is for him a *geistige Tatsache*. And a *geistige Tatsache* was neither a social nor a societal fact that could be measured by statistics or decoded by a sociological inquiry or administered by a national, society forming apparatus.

special sciences in a single, epistemologically coherent schema (e.g., the social). The *Einzelwissenschaften*, as Dilthey points out in his *Introduction*, can only exist through mutually exclusive specialization—there was no point in being against this. It follows, that epistemological vulnerability or situatedness was, I think, not what Dilthey struggled with. What was at stake in his sketch of a Geisteswissenschaft, instead, was an effort to render possible, in the modern age (which for him had just begun and which posed an immense philosophical challenge) what the ancients called *theoria*; a spiritual practice of bringing the whole of reality into view (a *geistige Zusammenschau des Ganzen*).[14] Modern, for Dilthey, was an epochal marker and an epistemological challenge. As an epochal marker, it referred to a post-metaphysical historical age characterized by increasing specialization and bureaucratization. As an epistemological challenge, it referred to the effort to develop a modern, i.e., post-metaphysical practice or *Wissenschaft* to bring the whole into view—something that the special sciences could not achieve (and were not asked to achieve). This practice/science was the Geisteswissenschaft (a term Dilthey used in the singular).

My two remarks amount to saying that I am not sure whether Dilthey can be adequately described as a "social theorist"—as either a theorist of the social, or as a theorist who provided epistemological foundations for the social sciences, or even as a theorist who claimed that all theory is always socially grounded. Dilthey, I think, was a Geisteswissenschaftler, and the Geisteswissenschaft was a practice that opened up a space significantly different from social science and social theory; it was concerned with what were for Dilthey life's basic categories: *Erlebnis*, *Ausdruck*, and *Verstehen* (impression, expression, and understanding).[15]

I am not—I wish to underline—offering such a lengthy elaboration on Dilthey in order to discredit Boyer's interpretation of his work. Boyer *uses* Dilthey to his own ends, and why shouldn't he? The reason, why I sought to bring into view how little of a social theorist Dilthey was, is that it allows me to highlight what I perceive of as a major problem of social theory—its violence.

Social theory reduces no matter what, in this case Dilthey's Geisteswissenschaft, to society, to societal relations, and to the assumption that social struggles are the key to everything, even to things that are not reducible to (and hence not comprehensible in terms of) the social. At least from the perspective of someone interested in the specific, in the singular quality of phenomena, in understanding

[14] More specifically, Dilthey's search for an epistemological foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaft* must be seen as a reaction to the nineteenth century rise of *Wissenschaftstheorie*—an effort, largely by natural scientists, to articulate a solid epistemological foundation for the sciences. Dilthey argued that the *Wissenschaftstheorien* the natural scientists had come up with were, in so far as they were focused on "Kraft, Atom, Molekül" ("force, atom, molecule"), not suited to epistemologically ground the project that he had come to call *Geisteswissenschaft*. The *Geisteswissenschaft*, so Dilthey, is of an altogether different quality. Cf my history of "theory" below.

[15] If Hegel's was a last attempt—at least in Germany—to order all knowledge in a ideal system then a considerable part of post-Hegelian nineteenth century Germany intellectual culture may be said to have celebrated "life" as a fragmentary totality that could not be reduced, ever, to an ideal system; in this respect Dilthey was an exemplary proponent of German *Lebensphilosophie*. On the intellectual milieu of post-Hegelian Germany in which Dilthey made his career see Schnädelbach (1984). On the distinction between life and science as a feature of German modernity cf. Rees (2010).

them on their own terms, this reductionism is inevitably a form of violence: the negation of the specificity of things, of their individuality, of the spaces of thought and existence they open up (things that were, one may argue, central to Dilthey’s approach).

One can only interpret Dilthey as a social scientist, as responding to social differentiation, offering an all encompassing social theory, if one ignores (and thereby declares as irrelevant) what, I think, Dilthey’s work, in its own aims, was seeking to articulate.

Perhaps this violence is another major cause for the “crisis” of social theory?

Prescription: Toust est social (on the impossibility of modal change)

In the third, the prescriptive part of his essay, Boyer tries to make his reading of Dilthey’s nineteenth-century solutions fruitful for solving twenty-first century problems. Dilthey’s great insight, according to Boyer, was that in contrast to the majority of his colleagues who, “were prone to consider the proliferation of special sciences as negative social phenomenon signaling ever further specialization of interests and atomization of knowledge and science,” he, “saw an internal relationship between the special sciences that, were it to be harnessed, would constitute an immense leap forward for the human sciences.” This internal relationship, or so I understand Boyer, is precisely that all the social sciences, at least implicitly, assume that society is the grounding principle of human reality (and presumably also that they are all socially grounded). The ethical challenge, consequently, would be to make the various special sciences appreciate their limits—and thus their complementarity (given that they all work on the “social” they must be complimentary to one another).[16] If interdependency, or complementarity, would be appreciated, social theories could come together and grasp what, on their own, they cannot grasp—the highly complex societies within which our lives unfold today.

The challenge, unfortunately, is considerable. For traditionally, social theories are rather narrow minded and dogmatic in their—usually mutually exclusive—explanatory claims. After all, each theory purports to have the exclusive key to understanding reality.

In order to help contemporary theorists overcome their dogmatism, Boyer suggests a rethinking of what we understand by the term theory. A theory, according to Boyer, should not be understood as a causal explanatory schema, but instead as a highly specific set of complementary analytical attentions.

In order to illustrate his suggestions, Boyer offers an example. Reviewing Marx’s work, he explains that his impressive oeuvre offers some very powerful insights, but also has some, from today’s perspective very apparent limits. Some of these limits could be addressed, he further explains, with the help of Freud’s psychoanalysis (so

[16] “If an ethical postulate is to be found in Dilthey’s analysis of the state of social theory in his era,” Boyer writes, “it comes in the form of a recommendation that special scientists need to be more self-reflective as to the interdependency of their instruments, methods, and concepts of knowing historic-social reality.”

Freud was a social scientist?). Of course, psychoanalysis also has its particular blind spots; blind spots which in turn can be illuminated by further theories, and so on.

The way forward, according to Boyer, is, on the one hand, the recognition of limits, and, on the other hand, the recognition of complimentarity. Once one recognizes that every social theory, no matter how useful, has its limits, one is obliged to let go of the dogmatic claims that are traditionally built into social theories. Metaphorically put, one has to give up being a confessional speaker of one language only and become multilingual. Were such a multilingualism achieved, it would "help to dampen down the sense that we have exhausted the theoretical resources at our disposal."[17] And social theory would be saved—at least insofar as it is caused by the exhaustion of single theories in the face of a world that has become more "complex" than anyone of these social theories.

I withdraw from further commenting on Boyer's use of Dilthey (from emphasizing again that Dilthey was not a social scientists and has never suggested that human reality is grounded at all times and everywhere in societal conditions) and instead focus on Boyer's reform suggestion.

My first comment—a clarification, really—concerns Boyer's suggestion to give up the narrow sense of theory as a causal explanatory schema and to understand social theories instead as mere providers of specific, in their scope, limited analytical attentions. This suggestion may sound as if Boyer is transforming social theories into a mere box of tools from which one can take whatever one wants (without any respect for the logical integrity of the theory as such). But I think that this type of reading would be misleading. Boyer's goal is not to do away with social theory, but to preserve it.

In order to make explicit the key intellectual operation with which he tries to achieve this preservation, I would like to introduce a distinction between "theory" and "theoretical." By "theory," I mean what Boyer calls the "narrow sense" of theory, a more or less causal, explanatory schema. By "theoretical," I mean "theory" transformed in such a way that it is still a more or less causal schema, but now without the dogmatic claim that it is the only key for understanding (social) reality.

I came away from Boyer's text with the impression that he turns away from theory, though only in order to preserve it in the form of the theoretical. The analytical attentions a theory offers are for him by no means conceptual tools one can use without respect for the causal schema of the theory as such. On the contrary, one still has to acknowledge (respect) the causal schema and pay attention (tribute) to it. But now one has to learn and know several of such schemas and use them all at the same time. Hence, Boyer's insistence that a multi-attentional analysis demands "a conscientious and difficult commitment toward multiple analytical specializa-

[17] That may sound easy, but requires, as Boyer emphasizes, profound technical and ethical work. It requires technical work because it demands "a conscientious and difficult commitment toward multiple analytical," i.e., theoretical "specializations." It requires ethical work because a multi-attentional "mode of analysis" demands "an ethical orientation toward not allowing one set of analytical concerns to harden into a conceptual dogma that overshadows (…) other analytical concerns."

tions and an ethical orientation toward not allowing one set of analytical concerns to harden into a conceptual dogma that overshadows (…) other analytical concerns."[18]

In short, the only transformation Boyer really suggests is the peaceful coexistence of several theories. This peaceful coexistence is possible because they all maintain their autonomous status, and because they all deal with society.

I stress this here because it allows me to point out—and this leads me to my second remark—what I perceive of as perhaps 'the' major problem of social theory: the somewhat closed conception of the human that is built into it.

Here is an example of what I mean: the way in which Boyer implicitly conceptualizes "human experience" (in the singular). This conceptualization is manifest in many parts of the paper, but particularly striking when he explains the limits of the established social theories. One recalls the argument: Marx is said to be an immensely helpful author, but if one wants to bring the social groundings of contemporary "human experience" into view, one needs to combine him with other authors, say Freud, who in turn needs to be combined with, etc. Why? Because in the face of the contemporary "complexity" of social life, Marx's theory appears to bring into view only part of the social grounds of human experience.

What I would like to draw attention to is the way in which Boyer frames the problem. He is not saying: the world has changed and now Marx's social theory is no longer helpful for understanding the world. Instead, he says: society has become more "complex," and therefore Marx alone can no longer do justice to it. We now need to compile our existing social theories in such a way that they reach a level of complexity that does justice to the complexity of contemporary society.

In order for this argument to make sense, Boyer needs to assume, if implicitly, that there is one unchanging ontological truth—being human is being social, is living in society. Whatever humans do, create, think of, it was, is, and will be inseparably linked to social circumstances and relations. It may happen at times that the social world gets more complex, that some of our classical social theories seem too simple—but then we can "renew" them by way of compilation, creatively combining them until we reach the right level of complexity, so that we can bring human experience into focus again.

Only insofar as Boyer's action plan is informed by such a social ontology can he afford speaking about human experience in the singular, as if it is everywhere at all times the same. Whatever humans experience in each concrete case, it will always be social, and it will always be socially grounded. *Tout est social*.

It is not that this position is unreasonable. It certainly has its advantages. Those who hold onto it have, no matter how much the world changes, no matter if they travel east or west, into the past or the future, a key to understanding human experience—it will ground in things social. But I think that this position is also problematic, as it advances a somewhat *closed* conception of human experience. It literally locks humans into the concept of society.

[18] Would one ignore, simply out of disinterest (or simply because one is rather interested in research than in theory), the causal schema, one would not have to worry about these ethical concerns at all (what would matter would be to be true to one's research, not to a theory).

Perhaps, this imprisonment of *anthropos* is yet a further reason for the contemporary crisis of social theory?

What, for example, if the "social" were only one historically peculiar form of (human) experience? One that not all people at all times have had? Simply because it is a time- and place-specific way of thinking about humans and their experiences? What if new forms of "being human" of "making experiences" would come into existence? New, precisely, in the sense that they escape the established description of humans as "social beings?" And what if this in fact happens all the time, ceaselessly? Then, one could compile as many social theories as one wants, but to no avail. For then the problem is not that the social got more "complex," rather the problem is that social theory offers the wrong tools for a fascinating job, one it cannot even bring into adequate focus.

Deleuze (1989) has once expressed his disregard for philosophers interested in "the possible." The possible, he explained, is only what is already inherent in the given. Real change, in contrast, would lead beyond the merely possible. It would mutate the mode of (human) existence.[19] Deleuze called such change *actualité*, and with Rabinow (2003), one may dream of an anthropology that would focus on precisely such changes, the anthropology of the actual.[20]

From the perspective of social theory, however, such an anthropology of the actual is inconceivable, because social theory excludes the possibility of modal change (and precisely such modal change, as topic of inquiry or as the result of inquiry, is what is constitutive of the anthropology of the actual).[21] Things may get more complex, infinitely more complex. But complexity is not modal change. Complexity stays within the given.

The anthropology of the actual is one form of an anthropology BST.

Rereading my comments, I realize that I am quite critical of social theory—of social theory as we knew it as well as of social theory transformed by Boyer. I think I can understand Boyer's effort. He wants to render possible, ideally vital, the analytical power of social theory. He seeks to preserve the vitality of the art of social theory by reconfiguring it in such a way that he establishes a correspondence between social theory and the present without giving up what those interested in the emergent appear (from his perspective) to have given up—the artisanal, critical competence that social theory has assured. Even though I can follow Boyer's argument, and despite the fact that I have found the social an at times useful analytical category, I also think there are good reasons for a radical departure from the social as well as from theory. At least some of these reasons, as well as the alternative scholarly ethos that informs them, I explore in the final two parts of my essay.

[19] Foucault has offered similar arguments, e.g., Foucault (1982, p. 34). For Foucault's use of the term *actualité* see especially Foucault (1984a).

[20] Rabinow's (2003) formulation of an anthropology of the actual has been largely based on Deleuze.

[21] Modal change, the reference here is to Foucault (1982, pp. 33/34).

A brief history of “society,” of “theory,” and of “social theory.”

In order to make comprehensible my alternative way of approaching the contemporary—of how to relate differently to the (from my perspective rather welcome) crisis of social theory—I briefly offer a history of the very idea that “societies” exist and of how this existence became coupled with “theory.” I do so in order to show that there is nothing universal about either “society” or “theory.” They are historically dated, contingent concepts, and as such, they have lost much of their analytical significance and force (and of their capacity to generate powerful, novel insights). Hence the crisis.

Society

Before the nineteenth century, an entity called “society,” as a philosophical or empirical object of study, was not known to exist. If one spoke from a functional perspective, one could say that neither the concept nor the entity existed because it was quite simply not needed. At least up until the late eighteenth century, the moral and political sciences could think and describe their world with the old distinction between free individuals who engaged in politics and those who were not free, and hence excluded from politics, who were “owned” and lived in the shadow of the (Feudal) household.

The term society was of course utilized, but it either referred to legally defined groups of free men who had some interest in common or, especially in British liberal thought, to the totality of free men that was identical with the polity (the terms society and state were therefore used interchangeably).

Only with the onset of industrialization and urbanization did the old classificatory schema become inadequate to capture political reality. New categories were needed, and it is here that the term society assumed its modern meaning.

There are various ways to tell the story.[22] Put in somewhat general (and Franco-centric) terms, it roughly goes like this: With the becoming mundane of the *historia civilis*, the end of providentially legitimized rule, the maintenance of power became a major issue for moral and political philosophers. How does one successfully govern a state? An Empire? What does a ruler have to take into account in order to maintain his power? Questions like these were addressed in a new genre, in historical studies of the fate of nations and their empires. It was in these histories, written by Montesquieu, Turgot, and Voltaire, that the term “society” began to gain new meaning. What did this look like in concrete terms? First, a distinction between state (*état politique*) and society (*états civil*) was introduced. And second, it was discussed how a ruler had to deal with the various “societies” that were constitutive of the state, but not identical with it (say the court society, the society of the nobles, of the military, of the citizens).[23]

[22] Depending on if one recounts it from a French or a Scottish perspective, depending on if one wants to highlight the significance of the French Revolution or of industrialization and urbanization.

[23] See Wagner (2000), Riedel (1970, 1975), Ritter (1969), Heilbron (1995).

This shift in meaning, on the one hand away from the identity of state and society, and, on the other, a pluralization of the term, was a first and most significant step in the development of the modern concept of "society;" it introduced "society" as a new political force that was identical neither with the state nor with an individual's household, and it was precisely that which made it apt to capture the new political force that, with the onset of industrialization and urbanization, was soon to enter political life. Simply put, with industrialization, the needy, who hitherto existed (almost exclusively) in the realm of the household of the wealthy, began to enter the city. They arrived in such large numbers that they soon became a major concern for political philosophers of the late eighteenth century, and, with the French Revolution, they also became a major factor in political life.[24] It was in this new, thoroughly reconfigured political situation that the old distinction between polity and household or, in the modern liberal form, between polity and individual, seemed exhausted and that the term "society" assumed its modern meaning. In the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath, the poor—the *plèbes*—became *les peuples* (before a category reserved to the free citizens exclusively), and with this transformation, the idea emerged that the poor masses (and not the court society, not nobility, not the citizens) are the one society constitutive of the French nation. From then on, it was the task of the nation to serve the needs of its society.[25]

Summarily, it was from the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century that our modern concept of "society" (understood as an entity/object) came into existence, and along with it the question of how to construct and maintain its order. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the *question social* became the major political issue of the day, and now grounds were prepared for the rise of what Boyer called, "the golden age" of the social sciences. Villermé could declare that "death is a social disease;" Quetelet would be able to invent the *homme moyen*; Comte could create his social physics. At the same time, Rodin began to sculpt *Les Bourgeois de Calais*; Manet and Baudelaire discovered the beauty of smokestacks; and authors as diverse as Balzac, the brothers Goncourt, Flaubert or Zola offered descriptions of the new, "social" reality of the city.

Looking across the Rhine, Robert von Mohl, a German *Staatswissenschaftler*, wrote in 1851: with the Revolution "something entirely new" had come "into being (…)—society." From now on, he concluded, the task of the day was to study this new political entity, which existed between "the individual" and "the entirety," and to make *Staatswissenschaft* the science of society. And from now on, we could conclude, the social sciences begin to gain a major significance for national politics, until, roughly, the 1970s.

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[24] "Need and work had left the household," Wagner (2000: 137) summarizes these developments, "to which they were formerly confined and had been exposed to the public light." Wagner draws here on Arendt (1958).

[25] On the Begriffsgeschichte of plèbe and peuples see Conze (1954).

On the rise of the state cf. the very helpful history of Reinhardt (1999). On how "society" became constitutive of the French state see Foucault (2003).

Theory

A (far too) short, and rather German-centric, version of the (not so short) history of theory could be told as a succession of three major events.[26] The first event occurred in the early modern period. Up until then, the term "theory" referred largely to the ancient concept of *theoria*, meaning the contemplation of the God-given cosmic order of things. Theoria was concerned with first principles. It was deductive, and it was opposed to the merely practical, which dealt with concrete circumstances and with the specific. At the turn of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, with the rise of what we later came to call the "scientific revolution," the meaning of theoria was profoundly altered.[27] In the writings of authors like Bacon, Galileo, Hooke, Newton, or Boyle, theoria became theory; a hypothetical explanation that needs to be proven by the practical investigation of concrete empirical reality. In the seventeenth century, then, theory was subordinated to practice. Theoria, in the singular, gave rise to theories, in the plural, and what was once merely empirical became the judge of what was now (somewhat condescendingly) called speculation.

For the next (roughly) 200 years, the relation between theory and practice had a somewhat stable form. Gentleman scientists investigated nature, and philosophers sought to either work out theoretical foundations of the possibility of knowing—from Hume to Leibniz, Wolff, or Kant—or endeavored to formulate theoretical systems that could explain natural phenomena.

In the nineteenth century, we arrive at the second event, this somewhat stable liaison between philosophers and scientists fell apart. With the rise and institutionalization of the experimental sciences, the results of the natural sciences could not easily be grasped by non-practitioners, with the consequence that the theories offered by philosophers seemed increasingly irrelevant to the scientists themselves (Kant's *Erkenntnistheorie*, for example, could not capture non-Euclidean geometry, electromagnetism, or atomic chemistry). In the mid-nineteenth century, the relation between philosophy and scientists became so unsatisfactory that some scientists launched a new discipline, which they called *Wissenschaftstheorie* (names associated with the new field are Ernst Mach, Pierre Duhem, Henri Poincaré, John Herschel, Helmut von Helmholtz). The aim of the new discipline, which was almost exclusively practiced by scientists themselves, was to find adequate theoretical foundations for modern science, and it was assumed that such foundations could only be developed from within the sciences and their discoveries.

The nineteenth century emergence of *Wissenschaftstheorie* gave rise to the third event of my brief history of theory, the split, on the level of epistemological foundations and orientations, between *Naturwissenschaft* (science of nature) and *Geisteswissenschaft* (science of the spirit). The most prominent figure of this split, at least in Germany, was Wilhelm Dilthey. It was through his altercation with *Wissenschaftstheorie*, more specifically through his discussions with his Berlin colleague Helmut von Helmholtz, that Dilthey came to argue that the

[26] My account is informed by Gadamer (1960), by the article Theorie in *Ritters Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, by Horkheimer (1968 [1937]), and Ritter (1969).

[27] On the concept of the scientific revolution, and on the problems of this concept see Shapin (1996).

Geisteswissenschaft needs a theoretical foundation that is altogether different from that of the science of nature.

The effect of the friendly conflict between von Helmholtz and Dilthey was, in the long run, that the epistemological foundation and orientation of the natural sciences and the human sciences began to separate and to follow very different paths. And it was only in the aftermath of this split, or so I would like to argue, that something like social theory came into existence. At least in Germany, this is to say, it was only after the split of the *Geistes*- from the *Naturwissenschaft*, one could say: in response to it, that *Nationalökonomen* (economists) concerned with "society" began to work out a conceptual armamentarium and epistemological foundations for their work.[28] Most famous here are Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Toennies, and, the only philosopher of the group, Georg Simmel.

Social theory

So when did the paths of "society" and "theory" cross? It follows from my rough historical sketches that such an encounter was not possible before the late nineteenth century. Any more detailed answer depends on if one favors a broad or a narrow comprehension of "social theory."

Understood in a broad sense, social theory may be said to be concerned with the theorization of this roughly 200-year-old thing called society. What is a society? What do societies consist of? Are they organized differently across time and space? If taken in such a broad sense, social theory came into existence in the mid- to late nineteenth century, with the work of authors like Comte, Pareto, or Spencer (who were still much more historically inclined philosophers of society), maybe also in the work of Marx and Engels (perhaps because Marx, especially, was much more of a historical materialist than a theorist of society), and later then in the work of authors like Simmel, Mead, Weber, Toennies, Durkheim and Mauss (or Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Meyer Fortes).[29]

Social theory in the more narrow sense is, in my understanding, a post-Marxian invention. It refers to the assumption that all reality is socially grounded—and that, therefore, only social theory is able to illuminate, decode, and understand reality. It can make this grounding explicit, and thereby serve as a critical tool for understanding ideological tendencies that hegemonically control each one of us (except the social theorist, of course).

The rise of Galileo's observations and calculations? A result of the rise of manufacturing that favored mechanical thinking.[30] The rise of an anthropology of the emergent? A consequence of the rise of the neoliberal new economy.

[28] Economists—because in Germany, largely due to Hegel's conceptualization of the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in his *Rechtsphilosophie*, society was initially a topic of the economic sciences (Hennis 1999, 2000).

[29] It is interesting to note here that the British social anthropologists, insofar as they were studying societies without state, occupy a distinct post-French revolutionary space. The history of British anthropology and its interest in societies without state,—after Hobbes, after the French Revolution, and after Kropotkin—still needs to be written. Though see Stocking (1991, 1998) and Kucklick (1991).

[30] Horkheimer (1968 [1937], p. 18). There the reference is to Großmann (1935).

(One could further say that this narrow sense of social theory holds that social *theory*—offered by social groups—is essentially a social (and often socialist) *practice* conducted in the name of social struggles or justice).

In this second, narrower sense, social theory came into existence—or so it seems to me—only in early twentieth century. The most famous, if perhaps not the first formulation, is arguably Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay on, "Traditional and Critical Theory" (where he states that critical theory of society escapes the established logic of theory, according to which a theory is a hypothesis tested by facts—for that would mean to accept society as it is, where the goal must be to change society).

But even though the narrow sense of social theory, which in many ways understands society not only as object of study but as well as a category of knowledge, came into existence in the early twentieth century, it only became a dominant academic approach in the 1960s and 1970s. The political movements of the first post-World War II generation made Horkheimer, Adorno, Gramsci, and Sartre world famous; they rediscovered Marx (and creatively misread him as a social theorist in the narrow sense of the term); they debated Lowenthal, Lukács, and Marcuse; and soon they discussed the writings of a new generation of social theorists, notably the works of Althusser, Bourdieu, and Habermas. For about 20 years, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, social theory ruled the human sciences. The aim was to identify the manifestation of ideology and hegemony in everyday life, to show that the organizing principles of social reality were of hegemonic quality.

In the 1980s, social theory, and this brings me back to the contemporary crisis, became the object of massive critique (in the broad as well as in the narrow sense). I cannot go into the details of this critique here and review Foucault's splendid dissection of the naïve anthropocentrism inherent in the concept of society; the almost frivolous irony with which Latour undermined precisely this anthropocentrism in the name of Pasteur's microbes; Donna Haraway's futurological exposure of the poverty of the society concept in the face of simians, cyborgs, women, dogs, and other naturecultures; Boltanski and Thevenot's subtle critique of the social in terms of the social—I could go on.

But perhaps such a review is not necessary. It may suffice here to indicate that what these critiques share (despite the partly significant differences that separate them) is that they find neither society nor social theory to be very helpful for thinking through the world we humans have come to live in. Society, once the name for a new, revolutionary reality, is seen by these authors to be a rather exhausted category of knowledge and analysis, a rather anachronistic object that has become more or less insignificant in the face of the kind of new questions that the humans we are in the process of becoming are facing since (at least) the 1970s.[31]

What matters here most to me is that society, and with it social theory, has become visible as contingent precisely to the degree that it lost touch with the

[31] While the "social" of social theory has become a rather outdated concept, the category of the "social" as such has flourished in fascinating ways, for example in the social neurosciences, in the neoliberal social, in animal sociology, etc.

evolving world we inhabit. If this is true, then the crisis of social theory, as far as I can see, has little to do with managers and other experts conducting "para-ethnography." Rather, society, theory, and especially social theory have become dated (insofar as the world has outgrown them). This "becoming dated" gives rise to a fascinating challenge: how to relate to the present if the present is defined (if not exclusively) as a period that escapes our established categories of knowledge/ concepts of thinking (for example, society)?

It is here that I most significantly diverge from Boyer. From the perspective of Boyer's essay, the present comes into view as a negative space—a space of loss, of exhaustion, and of crisis. But how can one bring the present into view in more positive terms? How to bring the present into analytical focus as a moment of historical change? Of movement? Of mutation? Of metamorphosis? The most promising way of embracing this challenge (for me) is one that social theorists never really need to mention—inquiry.

Anthropology BST/Anthropology of the actual

Imagine that events are taking place, right now, which escape our already established ways of thinking; events that set the world as we know it in motion. Not only would such events make our ways of knowing/thinking visible as historically dated; not only would they expose their limitations and undermine the self-evidence with which we use them. They would also open up new, hitherto unknown ways of thinking and knowing, new ways of existence, and different possibilities for being in (and belonging to) the world.

How to bring such *events of movement* into analytical focus? How to conduct a study of precisely these moments of "escape," of "outgrowth" of "opening up?" How can one design research in such a way that the yet unknown is not framed in terms of the already known (which would exclude the possibility of modal change)?

As an anthropologist, I am inclined to think that fieldwork is a particularly promising form of research for bringing the present in its *actualité* into focus.[32] Of course, fieldwork can take many forms. The one I would like to stress here defines anthropology as a field science, and by the term field science I do not merely mean that knowledge production happens in the field. Rather, I mean a knowledge-producing practice (a science) at the core of which is the field's particular potential to lead astray; to profoundly derail the fieldwork scenarios one has laid out before one entered the field; to lead into yet uncharted, not thought through terrains of marvel and surprise; with the intellectual challenge to embark on an essentially uncertain journey, a journey in part defined by the goal of reporting back from "there" the unforeseeable discoveries one has made, a goal that entails the challenge of finding adequate means of depicting the singularities one has become part of.

Fieldwork, from this derailment perspective, is a knowledge-producing practice that leads beyond the horizon of the already known, and beyond theory (social or

[32] See footnotes 17 and 18.

otherwise).[33] Perhaps one can see now why, from the perspective of an anthropology interested in the actuality of the present, social theory (just like any other theory) is rather problematic. (Social) Theory excludes what is (for me) most significant—the very possibility of learning new things, new in the sense that they outgrow or escape the already known. It excludes the possibility of modal change (Boyer’s renewed conception of social theory is, I think, no exception here).

Indeed, one could say that anthropology, or at least the anthropology of the actual that I (with grateful reference to Paul Rabinow) outline here, is an ethical practice that is informed by a profound disregard for (social) theory. Theories aspire to be timeless, where the anthropology of the actual is interested in precisely the timeliness of things (even a theory of history, which allows for historical change, aspires to be true at all times, and thereby locates itself outside history). Theories are interested in the general, seek to describe the specific in general terms, where the kind of fieldwork described above is interested in precisely those aspects of the present, which cannot be subsumed under the general. Theories provide causal schemas, with first principles like “the social,” where the anthropologist of the actual is interested in developments that escape these first principles, that set them in motion, that undermine them, that lead to new, yet unexplored ways of explaining. Theories (social or other) determine analytical attentions (or sensibilities), where a fieldwork interested in the actual attempts to find out if new forms of attention/new kinds of sensibilities are coming into existence. Theories provide scripts, where the challenge posed by the actual is to find concepts or forms of depiction that are suited to bring things into view in their singularity.

George Marcus (1998, p. 13) has made the disrespect of theory the quality sign of exciting ethnographic research. “Indeed, my problem with much contemporary (…) ethnography is that its arguments and significance are not produced or given *within the frame of ethnographic work itself,* but by the contextualizing discourse and narratives in which the ethnography comes to be embedded.” Translated into our current context this could mean: What some contemporary ethnography suffers from is the dominance of theory. What is unfortunately absent is research/inquiry.

Couldn’t one say that it is precisely this absence of genuine research, which immerses itself in the present, which attempts to find out things not yet known, that has caused the crisis of some contemporary ethnography? Or the other way around: Couldn’t one say that works BST have proven to be simply much more fascinating, interesting, and compelling than social theory-based works?[34]

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[33] For a related assessment of fieldwork/the field cf. Strathern (1999).

Fieldwork, from this derailment perspective, is a research ethics that requires of the researcher, as part of the knowledge production, to hand herself over to the many chance encounters and unforeseeable observations that make up “a field”; to be carried away by them, while staying alert to the unpredictable, unforeseeable discoveries they give gradually rise to; to learn how to bring these discoveries as such, in their singularity, into view; to explore if, and if then how, they escape the established ways of thinking and knowing.

[34] In addition to the works listed in footnote 3, I want to list at least some anthropology works that fall, in different ways and for different reasons, in this genre.

Caduff (2010), Cohen (1998), Collier (2005), Collier (2011), Collier and Lakoff (2005), Kelty (2008), Lakoff (2007, 2008), Landecker (2007), Langlitz (2009), Rabinow (1999), Roitman (2004), Ticktin (2011), Young (1997).

Sure enough someone will read my essay and say, “Ah, this is theory as well. One cannot divorce ‘inquiry’ from ‘theory’ and pretend that inquiry is void of theory. For theory informs every form of practice.”

Two brief responses at the end of a long essay:

First, what I have outlined is a research ethics. At the core of this research ethics is the suggestion to not frame one’s research in such a way that one excludes the possibility of modal change. Furthermore, it suggests proceeding by derailment, insofar as derailment is an experimental practice that may give rise to unforeseeable questions, which engender un-thought of curiosities, which may lead to new ways of thinking and knowing (and critiquing). Any form of theory here? Hardly. The suggested research ethics, articulated as an alternative way of relating to the present, is not formulated into a general explanatory schema that can be falsified. It does not advance explanatory first principles. It does not claim that modal change happens, does not advance an ontology of “the emergent,”[35] and does not offer a philosophy of history. No systems, no explanations, no first principles, no theories (one may certainly strive for general truths—but less by postulating them and rather by finding them through research).

Second, I do not at all think that “theory” is built into every form of practice. Perhaps one could say that there is “always a little bit of thought even in the silliest institutions, always some thought even in mute habits.”[36] One may further claim that the challenge is “to drive this thought out of hiding,” to make it visible and to thereby either document modal change or try to provoke it. But thought, as an implicit assumption or as a technology of transforming something into an object of thought, has little to do with theory. Theory, fortunately, is not the only form of thinking. Just as social theory is not the only form of critique.

At least for some, the becoming marginal of social theory—of society and theory—is less a loss than a liberation. Perhaps it is time for an anthropology BST?

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[35] As, for example, DeLanda (2002, 2006) does very elegantly, thereby transforming Deleuze into a system.

[36] Foucault (1982).

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