

A conversation with David Hess about “Neoliberalism and the History of STS Theory”
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Introduction

I begin this conversation with a rather extended caveat as it has some bearing on my reactions to David Hess’ [“Neoliberalism and the History of STS Theory: Toward a Reflexive Sociology.”](#) I am a Ph.D. student in Virginia Tech’s Science and Technology in Society (STS) program in the Washington DC metro area, or as we like to say, the National Capital Region. I purposefully chose STS as my personal foundation for a new knowledge and understanding about the world based not on the “S&T” component of STS, but for the “and Society” component. As such, I am also what is known as a non-traditional student: a working professional who had not seen the inside of a classroom in more decades than I care to admit.

When I did find my way back to the classroom though I brought with me over 30 years of experience imposing science and technology *on* society both as that entrepreneur Hess writes about as well as a senior executive in a Fortune 50 corporation. In these roles, I was both the victim and beneficiary of the social liberal and neoliberal constructions that are at the heart of Hess’ article. Therefore, I have a unique perspective in having been an actor in both the subordinate and dominant networks, and have been both invisible and visible to the “implicit assumptions” Hess refers to.

While I readily admit that neoliberal and social liberal categories are ideal types and that both categories (as well as their hybrids) continue to have vitality in many debates (Moore, Kleinman, Hess, and Frickel 2011), they are useful constructs in framing the boundaries of this discussion. Social liberalism can be broadly characterized by government intervention in markets and regulations with an emphasis on safety nets for individuals and small business (McMichael 2012). Neoliberalism can be broadly characterized by market liberalization, privatization, and global freedom of capital movement with no structural emphasis on social support. The former was the dominant political construction of politics in America from the New Deal of the 1930s through the Great Society of the 1960s. Subsequently, neoliberalism became the dominant political and financial response to the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey 2005). I offer these broad (and admittedly overly simplistic) definitions because they delineate the broad contours of the opposing social, political and cultural forces on a field of struggle that we now find ourselves in.

In coming to STS late in life, I do not have the advantage of having been a participant in the “epistemography” (Dear 2001) of STS theory as it played out in the criticism wars that evolved the theory from functionalism, through interest analysis, to agency-based frameworks, all the while not forgetting the marginalized feminist-multicultural frameworks that were relegated to an also-ran status. Oh, and does anyone in STS, or any other discipline, seriously still think in terms of a “Marxist unitary force.” For me, these are interesting mental exercises with little relevance to the current state of affairs in STS. What is relevant to me is “a more complex understanding of the role of coalitions among

justice-oriented social movements and between them and scientists” (Hess 2013, 191). In other words, what is the role for STS in a paradoxical world that is seemingly obsessed with the prosperity myth of neoliberalism, yet at the same time visibly suffering from neoliberalism’s unintended consequences, and apparently unable to articulate an authoritative counter voice for social liberalism.

I begin the answer to that question with a simple assertion, recognizing that it is fraught with as many minefields of criticism as Hess’ implied assertion that agency-based frameworks have unwittingly become the handmaiden of neoliberalist rationalization. I argue that the role of STS is to provide the authority of unassailable research in support of social liberalism theory.¹ In making this assertion, I further argue that STS needs a clarion call of purpose and meaning to move the discipline beyond the past 30 years of internal criticism, which Hess has so succinctly and cogently articulated. More importantly, these internal wars have left the STS discipline weakened with no unifying role or opposing voice to the neoliberal policies that increasingly define the limits and boundary struggles of social liberalism and neoliberalism theory, thought, and practice. Indeed, as Mirowski (2013) has observed, neoliberal thought has become so pervasive, the Theory of Everything, that even evidence to its failures only further solidifies its ultimate truth. Can we say that agency theory has anything as powerful to offer in terms of providing a similar revolutionary account of knowledge, society, and government? In fact, one might wonder if 30 years of theory struggles have left STS with the Theory of Nothing.

The Need for Totems

With this rather extended introduction, I would like to start where [Libby Schweber left off in her critical reply](#), “while Hess’ article makes a number of provocative claims and offers a promising path to follow, it also leaves a lot of work for the rest of us” (Schweber 2013, 11). I would like to begin that work by exploring more deeply two thoughts Hess offers. The first has to do with the need for a new totem that is large and powerful enough to elevate STS as a discipline beyond actor-centric agency theory that tends to both protect and hide the underlying effects of power and influence in neoliberalism. The second has to do with the need to more fully explore the relevance of field sociology in the development of that authoritative voice I discuss above. As Hess quite rightly observes, the problems of neoliberal science and technology and its attendant effect on scholarly research can neither be adequately addressed through the repackaging of Mertonian functionalism and its rebellious progeny, interest analysis, nor by agency theory, which has long since given up its right to speak authoritatively since it has been co-opted in the cause of so many neoliberal economic, political, and cultural rationalizations, both overtly and unwittingly.

¹ For an interesting dialogue that represents the view of many in the academy on this point of advocacy vs. scholarship see the Stanley Fish (2003; 2009) and Sophia McClennen (2008-2009) debates on neoliberalism in the university. Admittedly the notion of academics avoiding the role of advocacy is a politically charged discussion ... as it should be ... but I offer this response to Hess as an initial defense of the primacy of scholarship.

Hess argues that field sociology needs a totem. I would agree with that proposition but take it one step further. STS needs a totem, a symbol of such unassailable authority that we can ascribe Porter's notion of "totemic significance" (1995) to the symbol. Even Latour understood the need for totems in his mediation of Durkheim to actor network theory, "without a totem it would be difficult for a tribe to recognize that they are members of the same clan" (Latour 2005, 37). For their part Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) have argued neoliberals should consider the [Mount Pelerin Society](#) as their totem. With founding members that included Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, George Stigler, Karl Popper, Michael Polanyi, and Luigi Einaudi this is a formidable totem challenge to STS.

Therefore, in all deference to Hess' nomination of Antoine Béchamp (189) to be our totem in lieu of either Merton's Darwin or Latour's Pasteur, I would offer we elevate our thinking beyond the individual and consider *Katrina* as the STS totem of authority, or if we want to expand beyond our Western-centric perspectives and think in terms of neoliberal globalization, let's nominate *Fukushima* as our totem of authority. Both represent powerful unifying symbols of neoliberal policies that produced massive social and environmental disruption resulting from previously thought independent but as it turned out, interconnected large-scale social and technology system failures. Both had good science at their core, geology, which was ultimately perverted by neoliberal economic policies. Such policies drove the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and TEPCO to build a faulty levee system and nuclear utility complex, respectively, at the lowest possible social and economic cost.

Note that I have not used the terms "hurricane," "levee," "Ninth Ward," "flood," "tsunami," "earthquake," "evacuation zone," "nuclear power plant," or any other modifiers commonly associated with my totem nominations. These modifiers are only ways of making these totems smaller, less authoritative. Lévi-Strauss (1962) argued that totems are chosen for their ability to make the physical world coherent, or gods that we can rally around to make sense of a physical environment that is in direct conflict with society. As such, neither Katrina nor Fukushima need modifying. They exist as singular events (recognizing that all disasters exist along a continuum of the past, present, and future and as such are always messy ongoing processes) of totemic significance that encompass every dimension of STS as an authoritative discipline in defense of social liberalism. But if we vest these totems with the authority to speak for STS, what is the methodology that is broad enough to extend our understanding to the science, technology, and social struggles, boundaries, compromises, and decisions that produced not only these events but all the unintended consequences of neoliberalism? And, it is here that I come to the defense of Hess in his nomination of field sociology as a starting point.

But first it is important to be honest and address the elephant in the room. STS is not, and should never be, above being reflexive about itself as a discipline that currently exists primarily in the academy. If we accept Slaughter and Rhoades' assertion that, "[p]ublic colleges and universities are exemplars of neoliberalism" (2000, 73) — and much has been written to support this assertion (McClennen 2006, 2008-2009; Giroux 2007; Giroux 2005; Giroux and Searls 2004; Aronowitz 2000; Miyoshi 2002; Williams 2006; Bauman 1999) — then we should be at least sensitive to the fact that STS is not

above being tainted by neoliberalism and its possible effects on both the predominant STS methodologies and also the subjects of inquiry. For example, STS departments are not immune to the neoliberal currents sweeping universities, such as continually increasing tuition rates in which students become consumers and debtors, an increasing emphasis on research partnerships with industry, and the hiring of a growing community of part-time transient adjuncts. In response, some fortunate faculty members with tenure have tended towards a retrenchment to their increasingly specialized scholarship that lacks any clear connection to social liberalism, have favored professionalism over social responsibility, and have refused to take positions on controversial issues. In other words, these faculty members have become “models of moral indifference and civic spectatorship” (Giroux and Searls Giroux 2004, 278). In doing so, they have by default furthered the goals of neoliberalism, and by extension contributed to the weakened role of STS that I referred to at the top of this essay.

Acts of Resistance

So, to return to my question in a slightly different form, what is the methodology that is large enough to dispatch the elephant from the room? It is here that I think it is important to go to the source. In his political manifesto, *Acts of Resistance*, Bourdieu urges intellectuals, especially social scientists (in which category I would also include STS for this conversation) to commit themselves to combating neoliberalism. As he says, “we are dealing with opponents who are armed with theories, they need to be fought with intellectual and cultural weapons” (1998, 54). If we accept my assertion that the role of STS is to provide the authority of unassailable research in support of social liberalism, then I offer *Acts of Resistance* as the new manifesto for STS. Some might take issue with my nomination for methodology in light of my initial assertion on the role of STS. And, while yes Bourdieu makes no effort to appear disinterested, there is also nothing in the book to imply the slightest compromise of professional objectivity in the pursuit of combating neoliberalism.

The methodology at the heart of Bourdieu’s struggle against the numbing effects, or “economics of happiness” (1998, 40), of neoliberalism on society is field sociology, which Hess has proposed as an alternative to the dominance of agency-based theories in STS. While I wholeheartedly endorse this methodology for the reasons Hess discusses here as well as in earlier works (Hess 2011), I do so for an additional reason. Field sociology is anti-neoliberal at its foundation. It was conceived by Bourdieu as a methodology that could be used to both frame a reflexive, holistic analysis as well as define the basis for advocacy against all manner of economic, political, and cultural inequities and fields of struggle. In doing so, it provides a methodology for STS scholars that avoids false binaries of pro/anti (pick a noun or cause) that so many intellectuals-advocates have fallen victim to, and provides a legitimate space for scholarship that is “capable of mobilizing people’s will.” (Bourdieu 1998, 9)

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