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The End of Theory? A Reply to Susen

Michael Strand, Brandeis University, mstrand@brandeis.edu

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I thank Simon Susen for the opportunity for further engagement on his important contribution. If I can humbly claim to have at least partially inspired him to ask the immensely generative questions he offers in his rejoinder (Susen 2023), then that alone would make my entire wordy and perhaps misguided endeavor worth it. I will frame my reply with a few points of clarification and then an expanded framing and a message of hope, not on the end of “big” theory, but rather on the end of (social) theory *in toto*.

The Anatomy of Dismissal

Susen (67–68) quotes my original response to the effect that I am “dismissive” of Reckwitz and Rosa. Let me be clear: I am not dismissive of them, though my *disciplinary habitus* seems to be. To reconcile that difference is perhaps a fool’s errand at this point, a graduate school parlor trick, but I suppose I am enough of a Bourdieusean to understand the “clef”ness it implies, the sense of being pulled in multiple directions in a single perception.

When, in my original piece, I say that I suspect that my dismissiveness is a recapitulation of an “actual dismissal” from the US-American sociological field’s past of the kind of work that Reckwitz and Rosa’s most seems to resemble,¹ I mean this as a fully reflexive point: it comes as news to me, on adequate inquiry, that “I” am not doing this. Instead, something else has priority over my perceptions and actions, on behalf of whom I make such an evaluation (a “rector” perhaps, in Isaac Reed’s [2020] words). At least in this moment, this part of me can predict what will probably happen should I devote precious pre-tenure time to giving Reckwitz and Rosa the time they absolutely deserve.

If I can claim to have learned anything in my (perhaps ill-begotten and improper) years as a sociologist, it is that seemingly “automatic” responses to things constitute a large share of social life, probably the largest, and often these responses contain the best and worst of us—all we need to know about how we act on behalf of things (I use the word with all necessary ontological imprecision) that we could not, in the last analysis, ever call ourselves. Besides, if I can remember my pre-sociologist past with any degree of clarity, I would not, at one time, have been so dismissive. (I speak as one who, in those days, dedicated many hours to reading Herbert Marcuse in rapt fascination for no particular purpose, or understanding, that I can remember). What has happened to me?

Enough of that. Let me address a couple more of Susen’s points before moving onto what I believe is the most important of his questions.

The State of Sociology

Just as Susen (2023, 66) clarified my mangled English translation of “*Theoretische*,” allow me to offer a field-specific correction of my own. Contrary to what it might imply, to be a chaired professor in “social thought” or “social and political thought” in a US-American context hardly conveys the sponsorship or endorsement of social theory. My best guess is

¹ I adopt Susen’s geoepestemic moniker (“US-American”) throughout, which I find very apt.

that the names of these chairs are typically hammered out by committee thinking deep in the recesses of the hyper-bureaucratized university, and likely in collaboration with the wealthy donor giving the money. The language of “social and political thought” is arrived at ostensibly for its pseudo profundity and public palatability (not to mention for reasons to do with the lemming-like isomorphism that shapes US universities above all, from the top of the food chain on down), which actually raises an interesting point that I will return to in a moment.

Additionally, I agree that any such claim that US-American sociology is “most of what sociology is” *is* contentious (55). Please do not believe that I am *advocating* this, or saying it is a good thing: not at all. But as one who screens graduate applications to my department, as faulty a metric as that is, I can share that studying in the US-American field, even not in a “top ten” place, seems to be important for aspiring sociologists from all over the world. Is this an ideal situation? The upshot, if there is one, is that sociology is oddly (or perhaps *not* so oddly; see Steinmetz 2023) well-resourced in the heart of empire, at least comparatively speaking, and to help variegated national sociologies get off the ground by taking advantage of this seems to be a route worth taking for the time being.

As far as comparisons between the US-American field, Britain and western Europe, the metric would appear to differ in some way. As I alluded to in my original piece (and it seems Susen agrees) the sheer size of the US university system gives its sociological field, and we can say this strictly in morphological terms rather than as a sign of the inherent “worth” of US-American sociology (I make no claim about that), the effect of “vertical autonomy” (as Larissa Buchholz [2016] coined it) that sociological fields in these other, imperialist, sort-of-well-resourced places appear to lack. However, as Susen (55) says, figuring out measurements for vertical autonomy (of any field) is much needed in order to make sense of these confusing designations.

Penultimately, I found Susen’s (56) observation that “arguably there is ‘not enough European social theory’ in the US because there is ‘not enough US’ in European social theory” fascinating, particularly in combination with his (67) discussion of comparative European university realignments either toward or away from Anglo-Saxon models. I should also add that the speculation (64) that “the wordy and demanding theory book is probably the only venue to truly work out conceptual claims” is not original to me, though I don’t necessarily disagree with it, but rather a partial quotation from Rosa and Reckwitz (2023).

Finally, and as a point of clarification, let me resolutely assert that I cast absolutely zero shade at those Susen (60) mentions who have done and are presently doing bridgework between postcolonial theory and sociology, many of whom I have the utmost respect for, whom I routinely teach, and who inform my own work. What I meant by “we get a postcolonial sociology but not a sociological postcolonial theory” is only that there does not appear to be a two-way exchange between sociology and postcolonial theory, but more a one-way importation from the latter to the former.

It does not seem that those who do postcolonial theory, among scholars of literature or historians that I know, have gotten any more sociological over the last decade or so since postcolonial sociology has become a recognized and named thing; though I can’t even say what it would mean if they did. This is not a criticism. I don’t think, in this sense, it was

simply chance word combinations that led Julian Go (2013) to entitle his seminal piece in the US-American field “For a Postcolonial Sociology” rather than “For a Sociological Postcolonial Theory.” That the former title simply *feels* more correct (and certainly less garbled) than the latter option seems a telling indication of, among other things, the present state of US-American sociology, the role that theory plays in it, what kind of work being a theorist tends to involve, and what purpose a service area like theory contributes to sociology as a whole, for many of the reasons I speculated upon in my original piece (and with which it seems Susen largely agrees).

But please allow me to insert an addendum to that comment, and one that will lead me to my next and final, extended point.

The Fate of Concepts

As I read over my original piece now in tandem with Susen’s carefully argued reply, I realize the deep tone of worry and vulnerability in it. Susen, graciously, translates that tone into a series of stock-taking, sociology of knowledge type questions in order to get to the bottom of things. But why do I worry? What part of me worries about social theory? One obvious answer is my internal careerist (or working class habitus) who has trouble seeing a financially viable path forward if this happens or if that does, and who often feels sort of like an occupational endangered species. Another answer might be that I worry on behalf of sociology—what future does it have in store if certain trends continue?

But then, this particular worry makes little sense in the following respect. Sociology, at least as measured in strict bibliometric terms, stopped being a “discipline” sometime in the 1980s. Diana Crane and Henry Small (1992) have shown that, around then, sociologists stopped citing *other* sociologists with enough frequency to constitute a co-citation cluster, and arguably a “coherent” knowledge endeavor, linked by some sort of shared project across the relentless specialization. At minimum, this would suggest that bridgework and one-way importation has been the rule, not the exception, for some time. Sociologists will continue to do this; though the existence of the field is really not at stake (if that is what I was worried about).

Perhaps, the worrying tone is charged by something much more different but not necessarily more personal. Perhaps Susen shares my biography in this specific respect: I found social theory first, and only later realized it was attached to sociology. Stephen Turner (2000) tells us this is not remarkable at all: social theory is actually a “mature” field of its own, far more mature than sociology. It preexists sociology, and in fact preexists the university itself, which is all to say that sociology and social theory are *different*—dramatically so if Turner is right.

Only since 1937, which saw the subsidized publication of Parsons’s *The Structure of Social Action*, have sociology and social theory been closely connected. The post-war US-American field of sociology secured a kind of domestication of theory in a way that still appears, in many respects, to hold up, even if essentially nobody in sociology (US-American or otherwise) today would ascribe to the science ideal pervasive at the time. Paul Lazarsfeld and Morris Rosenberg produced their edited volume *The Language of Social Research* in 1955 as a

kind of culmination to what Turner calls the “great instauration” (after Francis Bacon’s recommendation of a mass book burning enroute to the *Novum Organum*), which effectively meant, in this case, the subduing of social theory in order to allow it to have a role to play in sociology.² Looking over it now, Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg’s book seems shockingly contemporary (and perhaps even surprisingly useful) in how it deals with “concepts” (the book hardly engages with “theory” on its own) and even “imagination” by attaching them to indices and measurements, which are now signaled by the phrase “methods.” Concepts are simply the ingredients of models. This is all a prelude to our present and our future.

As Richard Swedberg (2019) perceptively suggests, “concepts” have essentially disappeared from mainstream US-American sociological discourse, at least in any extensive consideration; “variables” still largely hold in their place despite the onslaught against “variables sociology” in late 20th century (see Abbott 2001). This is even true for qualitative research, and the most successful of concepts in sociology (like race or culture) are those that become anything else *but* concepts: variables capable of being broadly replicated in research on seemingly any domain (e.g. “the autonomy of culture”), easy to ask questions that can be broadly replicated across various consequential professional settings (“have you considered what role race might play in your analysis?”), and rearrangements of the organization of sociology itself, at least in its US-American version, in the form of ASA sections, job markets, seminars, and classes.

For Swedberg, this is not necessarily a problem for sociology (and I would agree), but it would seem to indicate that, and here I reflect back on Gabriel Abend’s (2008) theory types mentioned in my original piece, there is arguably far more homogeneity in the uses of theory than Abend’s fractured picture might imply. At least in what Swedberg calls “mainstream sociology” (e.g. publications in the top US-American journals), it is essentially all Theory₁, or statements about significant variables and variable relationships. This includes all new qualitative and quantitative measurements of variables, examining new local contexts for a variable, even if this all becomes highly encoded within specifically qualitative research.

There is, again, nothing particularly wrong with this, and in fact Swedberg himself, in his (2014) effort to draw attention to “theorizing,” proposes a kind of adaptation to the circumstance by, in a sense, resurrecting the moribund practice of concept-formation from late 1960s “theory construction” (Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans [2014] gesture in a similar direction). But perhaps sociologists will be caught flat-footed in the effort. If the critique of variables in the 1990s did not really supplant the 1950s “language of social research,” data science finally might, not by envisioning a new empirical sociology (e.g. Abbott 2001) but by beating empirical sociology at its own game.

The role of massive data sets appears, to some, capable of finally realizing the fever dream of “social physics” that emissaries from the land of AI and machine learning can never quite lose their infatuation with (see Glymour 1987; Wilson 2005; Pentland 2014). Even variables,

² There might still be a point of disconnect, lasting from this moment onward (and right through the “positivist dispute in German sociology” [Adorno et al 1969/1977], between US-American sociology and the German sociology that Rosa and Reckwitz represent. Consider Adorno’s insight, drawing from his own observation of Lazarsfeld’s approach at Columbia University in the 1940s: “I was disturbed ... by a basic methodological problem—understanding the word ‘method’ in its more European sense of epistemology than in its American sense, in which methodology virtually signifies practical techniques for research” (Adorno 1969, 343).

as the remnants of concepts, seem quaint for the purposes of finding models, or in newer language “algorithms,” that can fit or “learn” structures with a seemingly infinite number of parameters—and data that appears to break the mold of what conventionally passes as sociological data, as it typically consists of fine-grained traces, accumulating on immensely large scales, without need for sampling (or IRB approval). While some of the initial boosters of data science proudly forecast the “end of theory” (Anderson 2008) and were widely ridiculed for it, sociologists might actually be the ones most likely to concur. After all, it is not a stretch to imagine that, if Lazarsfeld were alive today, his robust appetite for turning concepts into indices would lead him to engage in similar advocacy as the sociologist cum Microsoft researcher (and back again) Duncan Watts (2014) and argue for a data-centric overhaul of sociology, remaking it as computational social science.

None of this really matters, perhaps, as collecting data through interviews, surveys, and observations still remains mostly unthreatened by these developments—one day, maybe; perhaps using a sleeker version of today’s clunky AR headsets. More importantly for our purposes is that none of this will *ever* threaten social theory, as vulnerable as that endeavor might be to it, which brings me back to what I think is the most important question that Susen (68) poses: “What, if any, are the ‘ideal’ social conditions of production for social theory and social theorists? Or is this the wrong question?”

Not at all. This is by far the *right* question to ask, in my view, at the present moment. Let us return to Turner (2000) for a moment. By calling social theory “mature,” Turner means that social theory not only has an extensive and mostly non-academic history, it also has a tried-and-true method (“commentary”), in addition to a host of its own problems and vocabularies, which have accumulated over its history, which are essentially impossible to deviate from, and which have no need for sociology. What exactly does the mature field of social theory do?

In Turner’s view it does something that has been, still is and presumably always will be appealing to publics of various kinds. It interrogates those concepts that have become “constitutive” of society or social phenomena broadly speaking. Turner does not really specify what “constitutive” means. Any such idealist conundrums the term might provoke among the empirically minded passes unnoticed by those with primary orientation to this field. Aside from becoming a kind of commentary on theory itself, solving a problem like that is entirely beside the point. Social theory, rather, emerges and responds to “an existential situation, the situation in which concepts that individuals in society use to understand one another and to understand their social world cease to apply as they once did” (Turner 2000: 17).³

What such a situation inspires (among individuals, among groups) is “commentary”—or scrutinizing texts and theorists somehow recognized as part of the mature field of social

³ Perhaps Turner was drawn to this definition by Alvin Gouldner (1965: 171): “all social theories ... embody the traces of social diagnosis and social therapy ... One way in which social theories can be understood, then, is as analysis, clear or cryptic, of the cause and possible cures of the ills of the society to which the theorist has been subjected.”

theory specifically as a way to scrutinize certain concepts, not primarily for academic reasons, but because they are widely suspected to be consequential for a present rupture or crisis felt directly by the theorist in society. For Turner:

... [C]ommentary mixes a consideration of the concepts themselves and the circumstances in which their application is under threat or stable ... Some emphasize the changes in circumstance, others the deeper significance and therefore relevance of concepts that superficially seem to be no longer relevant; some emphasize the second order difficulties of concepts whose problems of application are ignored by the naive (2000, 17).

At least within this mature field, doing any of this can appear to change what a concept helps to constitute. Those are the stakes.⁴

Social theory in this mold was a thriving enterprise in the US prior to Parsons,⁵ whose efforts were as successful as they were, according to Turner,⁶ largely because they happened to coincide with the reformation of the university system as we presently know it (in the US and elsewhere), which meant, particularly in the US context, the creation of a rigid departmental structure, the need for in-house training of students in sociology for the singular purpose of becoming professors in the discipline, and thus a strict policing of knowledge to ensure this disciplinary social reproduction, which in this case entailed defining and then maintaining a restricted “sociological” content of whoever and whatever was being read and published.

All of this unfolded within what, in retrospect and according to first-hand accounts from those who lived it (e.g. my late colleague and friend Gordie Fellman), appears as a shockingly “easy” labor market; tenure-track jobs handed out, at least to those who most closely matched the highly exclusive image of the professor common in movies from the time, with

⁴ I suppose this would suggest that some concepts can circulate widely in popular use but as more than “scholarly-cum-policy myths” (Wacquant 2023, 80).

⁵ Among the artifacts of this pre-Parsonian world, Turner points us toward books of social theory that were bestsellers (e.g. Charles Ellwood’s *History of Social Philosophy*). We could also read Du Bois’ influential commentaries in *The Crisis* from the late 1910s through the 1920s. Du Bois had to leave sociology to write those commentaries, and when he returned in the early 1930s he wrote mostly on Marxism, without any particular concern with what the rest of sociology was doing (it wasn’t doing that). Then, a couple years before Parsons’s *Structure*, Du Bois published his opus, *Black Reconstruction*, a book that, miraculously given several immense hurdles particularly early on, has remained in print and whose sales have, on the whole, only increased with age (Parfait 2009). The book was panned in a review in *AJS* shortly after its publication as expressing Du Bois’ own personal “bitterness at the injustice of slavery and racial prejudice,” with the argument consisting only of a “half-baked Marxian interpretation of the labor side of Reconstruction and a badly distorted picture of [Black people’s] part in southern life” (Craven 1936). While the two are almost never talked about in common, despite their similar age, it might seem indicative and worth consideration with the benefit of hindsight, and particularly in relation to the far diminished sense at present that “sociological theory” has any momentum of its own, that Parsons’s text has been mostly retired to the dusty shelves of university libraries and uncopyrighted entombment in the [Internet Archive](#).

⁶ Camic (1989, 41–42) highlights that even before the post-war period, it matters that “*Structure* took shape during the seedtime of the modern academic landscape,” which featured, among other things, “fierce interdisciplinary struggles for the academy’s finite material and ideal rewards.” Of particular importance (then as now it seems) was the conflict between sociology and the biophysical sciences, on the one hand, and economics, on the other. Parsons, for biographical reasons, was particularly sensitive to both.

a kind of nonchalance that boggles the mind, and sense of justice, of those of us who've come of age in the present era of deferred dreams and unmerited fates—scarred by endless scarcity, casualized labor, perpetual adjunthood, utter hopelessness, hyper-competition, disappearingly small margins, no room for error.

Those days are over Turner contends; specifically, the “power of the disciplines” is over (keep in mind Turner writes this in the year 2000), as it was always a kind of historical anomaly, particularly for sociology. This does not mean a return to the “undisciplined” past that finds proto-sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel, Weber and Du Bois cycling between multiple disciplines, and migrating to and from academia, nor does it mean a return to the halcyon days of 1945-1970—halcyon at least in the structural sense of the US academic labor market, the sheer number of academic jobs combined with the apparent ease of tenurability. What I think it does mean might be contained in three trends that have appeared in the years since Turner published his article.

Three Trends Since 2000

First, the diminution of whatever distinction sociology claimed for itself during the post-war period. If this is evidenced by Crane and Small's (1992) finding of the lack of a co-citation cluster (which, we could reasonably speculate, is far more the case now than it was then), then further evidence comes in the trend, which appears here to stay at all but the upper tier of US-American departments, of “dual appointment” hiring—i.e. when a sociologist is hired in a sociology department and in another department, or perhaps more typically, in an entirely different unit, frequently in the more specialized and topical “studies” programs found at US universities. This could further narrow that remaining part of the Venn diagram that all sociologists have in common, aside from a nominal allegiance to each other, shared office space, and division of bureaucratic labor.

Second, what I briefly mentioned at the end of my original piece and crudely designated as the “space of theory.” In many respects, this space would seem to prove Turner's turn-of-the-century hypotheses stunningly correct. What we see in this space are not precarious academics jockeying for tenure-track positions (at least not to me), but *commentary*—enormous quantities of it. Commentary for no purpose other than its own. Commentary entirely disrespectful of disciplinary boundaries and specialties. If Turner is right, this is not the only place to find commentary today (far from it), and social theory does not require the particular conditions that allow this space to exist—it long preceded the technological affordances and mass overeducated unemployment. What we can read from this space, however, is arguably (and to use still more Bourdieusean language) social theory in the most “autonomous” form it has available at the moment, or at least as far removed as possible from the academic tethers it has accumulated over the last century.

Third and not unrelated to the first two, and perhaps the most indicative, is the rising appeal of “autotheory,” as work that is marked by social theory but also by the removal of the concept and its mediation in favor, not of empiricism, but of *im-mediate* presentation and documentation. Often the results are autobiographical (e.g. “autotheory” being, according to some, a combination of autobiography and theory [Wiegman 2020]), though not always.

Regarding Autotheory

Anna Kornbluh (2024, 83), who compares autotheory to the pop-cultural logic of “manifesting” and the global-capitalist logic of “immediation,” summarizes its key tenets as follows: “Do not speak for others. Do not represent anything. Do not proffer concepts. Quick-sanding all acts of knowing into immanent blur and charismatic presence, this immediate-ization of theory ... advances fluidity, immersion, expanse, and keepin’ it real as footloose virtues.”

The Columbia University law professor and director of the Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, Bernard Harcourt makes a similar point more squarely align with social theory, and should it provoke opposition, would likely signal to someone which academic generation they are in: “We do not write in universal form either, as Marx or Hegel did before that. Neither do we hide behind the passive tense ... The solution to the problem of speaking for others is not to silence anyone, but the opposite: to collaborate and cultivate spaces where all can be heard, especially those who are most affected by our crises today” (Harcourt 2020, 17).

Such virtues are embraced broadly across the US-American humanities, not to mention by the US-American reading class elite, with works that fit a kind of prototype of autotheory enjoying rhapsodic praise: Andrea Long Chu’s book reviews, for example, or Maggie Nelson’s 2015 theoretical memoir *The Argonauts*, Kathryn Yusoff’s (2019) *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* (2008), or even Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980). Not surprisingly, autotheory makes its primary home in literature departments as one epicenter of the US-American university’s further reformation into various kinds of distributed (“between fields”) agency (see Eyal 2012), and its reimagination of graduate education as a venue for acquiring flexible skills, on the acknowledgement that tenure-track academic jobs will now and forever be the exception rather than the rule.

Autotheory, under which we can include even apparently distant work that embraces its virtues, appears most able to loop into the extra-academic spaces and revenue streams, sometimes quite directly on the model of STEM/private industry collaborations, that fires the imaginations of tenured professors and particularly university administrators as the most successful and powerful creatures in today’s multiversity. For the untenurable and casualized academic youth, autotheory offers dexterity in the form of risk-averse cultural capital; it can promise some degree of predictable control over both (or either) an academic *and* non-academic future. To commit fully to the former alone would be to engage in mimicry of the highly disciplinary days of 1945-1970, acquiring *that* cultural capital in *that* way; this appears very risky indeed.

What does this mean for social theory? For some, autotheory marks the synthetic culmination of a fraught dialectical history that unfolded when social theory, understood more or less on Turner’s definition of it, began to march “through the institutions” (Clare 2020). To others, autotheory seems to present the antithesis of the “big theory” thesis (as I rather *im-mediate*ly called it) apparently still more common across the Atlantic, if Rosa and

Reckwitz are indicative of anything.⁷ Kornbluh's (2024) call for a renewed emphasis on mediation as a way of engaging again with concepts and the "constraints on ideas imposed by the material order of things" attempts a reorientation. But in what kind of social space would that, whatever it specifically means, be possible?

Perhaps autotheory, or whatever we want to call it, is so contemporary because it does just that: deals with the present constraints imposed on ideas by material orders within the US-American academic space that don't look like they'll be changing anytime soon (perhaps they shouldn't). This presents us with a choice: either embrace this reality for good reason *or* find escape in the "space of theory" and its small self-organizing autonomy, and like Benedictine monks in the cloisters, aspire to emerge once again in a different world, one that may never come. If it doesn't, all that will remain is to cast off the aspirations of *bios theoretikos* entirely by making "commentary" in Turner's sense of the word more completely into the side-hustle or spare-time hobby it has, in a sense, already become, unsaddling social theory of the expectation that it could have *ever* achieved emancipatory (or really any other) "human interests" (e.g. Habermas 1968).

To recall Susen's (68) question, then: "what are the ideal conditions for the production of social theory and social theorists?" My answer would be: those conditions cannot be found in US-American sociology at present nor seemingly at any time in its history.⁸ Autotheory, and the work found within its large and apparently growing milieu, might present a kind of haven, a reason to still read social theory, but if this tendency culminates in anti-theory, as Kornbluh suggests, then nowhere in US-American academia at present can we find a model for those ideal conditions. Paradoxically, however, this means we should probably *not* expect the "end of theory" to come anytime soon.⁹

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⁷ For his part, Turner (2000) would probably say "been there done that": the mature field of social theory has seen this before. (If he is right, it has seen it *all* before; we only repeat, recapitulate, pick up the pieces). Maybe that is true; who knows.

⁸ It bears mentioning that the recent hostile editorial takeover of *Theory & Society*, a venerable venue for social theory if there ever was one (especially in its early days), would seem to augur in exactly this direction.

⁹ Here I echo Turner's (2000, 21) conclusion: "Today, when one opens a textbook in social theory, one is as likely as not to find no American sociologist in it, and increasingly, no sociologists at all. Social theory thrives, but not in American sociology."

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