

## PROPOSAL TO EDIT *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*

Neil Gross  
University of British Columbia

I became an avid reader of *Sociological Theory* when I started graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1995 and have remained one ever since. As someone who entered the discipline with strong theoretical interests but who found himself in a graduate school environment where such interests were nonnormative, *Sociological Theory* was to me always more than an academic journal. It was also a meeting point for scholars of diverse theoretical persuasion who sought, each in her or his own way, to move beyond theories of the middle range and develop more general and abstract forms of knowledge about the social universe. To read *Sociological Theory* was to become acquainted with the thought of the major figures in the theory area as well with the many other sociologists across the country and world who take theoretical concerns seriously. When my advisor, Charles Camic, encouraged me to publish material from my masters thesis, it was naturally to *Sociological Theory*, then edited by Craig Calhoun, that I turned. First-rate comments by reviewers, and by Calhoun, helped me sharpen my manuscript, while the experience of being published in an ASA journal gave me the feeling that my contributions to the discipline would be welcomed and valued.

In the years since, as the editorial baton has passed to Jonathan Turner and then to the team of Julia Adams, Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, and Phil Gorski, I have encountered many other young, theoretically-inclined sociologists who have told me of having had similar experiences with the journal, as well as mid-career and senior scholars who view it as the natural and appropriate home for their theory papers. Judged by the standard of whether *Sociological Theory* serves as an outlet for the publication of high quality theory pieces – in so doing helping to sustain the ASA Theory Section and the broader theory community – the journal is surely a success, and the most recent editors are to be commended for continuing the tradition and running a tight editorial ship.

Continuity is an underappreciated value in academic publishing, and if I were to become editor of *Sociological Theory* my primary goal would be to build on the success of the journal's recent editors. As I see it, however, the field of sociological theory presently faces some daunting challenges, and only if the journal steps up to meet those challenges head-on will it continue to thrive in the years to come.

In a 1998 *Annual Review* article on the state of contemporary sociological theory, Camic and I identified a number of distinctive intellectual projects – visions of what theory is and what its aims should be – that underlay and organized the diverse landscape that was sociological theory at the time. At the end of the piece we sounded an optimistic note. Although theorists often fret about the health of their enterprise, worrying about dangers like fragmentation or too little integration with sociology's empirical base, our conclusion was that the presence on the intellectual scene of so many different views of theory, each

linked to a variety of substantive theoretical programs, revealed instead remarkable vitality.

In the decade since that article appeared, I must confess that I have entered the ranks of the fretters. To be sure, certain aspects of our diagnosis have been borne out. Interesting theoretical work continues to appear, in *Sociological Theory* and elsewhere. University presses, under financial pressure, publish less “pure” sociological theory than they once did, but excellent manuscripts continue to find their way into print. Membership in the Theory Section remains high. Training in classical and contemporary theory is still required of most graduate students and undergraduates, and jobs for theorists, while never plentiful, are advertised regularly on the pages of the ASA Employment Bulletin.

And yet, it is hard to avoid the sense that there is simply less excitement associated with sociological theory these days and less radical innovation taking place at its center. The main reason for this, I think, is that the extraordinary intellectual productivity associated with the 1960s and 1970s has finally petered out. The intellectual movements in the social sciences and humanities whose roots can be traced back to that period – postmodernism, poststructuralism, neopragmatism, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and so on – were always at some remove from the bulk of the work being done by American sociological theorists. But these movements nevertheless enlivened sociological theory, in some cases because theoretically-inclined sociologists *were* influenced by them, in others because theorists were able to build on certain of their underlying assumptions in forging their own intellectual agenda, and in still others because the movements raised concerns to which sociological theorists felt they had to respond. More generally, these movements – centered in the humanities – lent an air of excitement to the idea of theory as an intellectual pursuit. This excitement, coming as it did on the heels of native theoretical ferment in sociology linked to critique and reconstruction of the Parsonsian project, spilled over to affect even those theoretical programs in sociology like rational choice theory and expectation-states theory that stood in stark opposition to postmodernism and kindred movements. Today, however, the debates associated with these movements have all but played themselves out – at precisely the same time that sociological theory is undergoing a massive generational turnover. The major European theorists – Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas – have either passed away or moved out of their most productive career phases, while the major American theorists – Alexander, Calhoun, Collins, Wright, etc., while continuing to produce path-breaking work, have in most cases already written their *magna opera*. The followers of many of these theorists have arrayed themselves into schools dedicated to the furtherance of their master’s thought and its application to new areas. The scholarship produced by such schools – by the growing cadre of American Bourdieusians, for example, or by students of Collins – is important and certainly deserves to be published in journals like *Sociological Theory*. But most of it is not radically innovative. Aside from occasional fresh contributions by a younger generation of theorists like Mustafa Emirbayer, John Levi Martin, or Anne Rawls, it is not clear from whom we could expect the kind of innovation and ambition to forge an entirely new approach associated with those American theorists who made their mark in the 1970s, and 1980s, and the

Europeans who were their predecessors. Because this is so, I have reluctantly come to agree with Calhoun that sociological theory today is in something of a doldrums.

This is not to say that no creative work is being done in sociological theory anymore. To the contrary: it is being done, in spades. But I follow Michèle Lamont in thinking that most such work is being carried out outside the purview of theory proper in substantive subfields of the discipline such as historical sociology, the sociology of culture, the sociology of science, the sociology of gender, the sociology of race, political sociology, and economic sociology. Here can be found scholars committed to research on substantive, empirical topics who aim in many cases to leverage their research into theoretical knowledge elaborated at a high level of abstraction and sophistication. To pick a few examples more or less at random think of Karin Knorr Cetina, Phil Gorski, Paul Lichterman, Ann Mische, Chistian Smith, Viviana Zelizer, or Andreas Wimmer. Some of these scholars publish in *Sociological Theory*, but many set their sights on the *American Journal of Sociology* or *Theory & Society* or more specialized outlets.

As I see it, the job of the next editor of *Sociological Theory* is to continue to provide a home for high quality papers reflective of established theoretical approaches and schools – while also finding a way to pull more of this innovative, substantive-theoretical work into the pages of the journal, building bridges between theory proper and other subfields. The goal should be to get all sociologists with creative theoretical interests and ambitions to publish in one place so that the intellectual energies that have recently migrated elsewhere can be refocused on the project of theory, and theorists with diverse concerns brought into fruitful dialogue with one another. In this way, *Sociological Theory* could help to revivify the field.

To accomplish this, I would take a multipronged approach. First, I would assemble an editorial board composed of a mix of self-identified theorists and substantively-oriented sociologists with theoretical interests and ask them to work their networks to encourage the submission of outstanding theory papers (though I would not, as a policy, directly solicit manuscripts from any individual scholar). Second, I would tap into these networks as well as my own to amass a highly selective pool of reviewers capable of providing comments on manuscripts that would move them significantly forward, as the comments of Calhoun and his reviewers did for my very first article publication. This would enhance the overall quality of the journal and make it a place where the most promising young scholars would want to send their papers so that they could be honed by the review process. Consistent with this effort, I would also work closely with the editorial board to vet out unpromising papers in advance so that reviewers would not be overwhelmed by the volume of review requests. Third, I would continue the policies of the current editors of reaching out to non-American scholars as both potential authors and reviewers, the credibility of which would be enhanced by my institutional location outside the U.S. In so doing I would again target specialists in theory as well as other sociologists with theoretical minds. Fourth, I would stick steadfastly to an editorial policy of pluralism and make a consistent effort to ensure that all cutting-edge theoretical work, no matter its orientation, would be welcomed in the journal, and that no school or approach could be said to have captured it. To this end I would not run any special issues; doing so often

raises charges of particularism and favoritism. Equally important when it comes to pluralism – given the present composition of the theory field – would be to strive for balance between more and less formalized approaches to theory and theory-building. Fifth and finally, I would communicate my interest in publishing theory pieces by scholars whose primary home may be in other subfields through repeated contributions to ASA section newsletters and appearances at regional and topically-specialized conferences in the U.S. and elsewhere.

In terms of the day-to-day operation of the journal, my goals would be efficiency, transparency, and quality. Before the handover occurred, I would spend a week in New Haven observing the process employed by the Yale team and getting a sense from them of what had and hadn't worked in terms of file management, computerization, and dealings with Blackwell. I would then set up shop here in Vancouver, where several offices adjacent to mine would be turned over to the journal. With ASA funds I would hire a personable managing editor with academic publishing experience who would keep the pipeline of submissions flowing smoothly, work to ensure that reviews are returned in a timely fashion, help authors navigate the resubmission and copy editing stages of the publication process, and work with the publisher. The managing editor would be aided by two part-time student assistants whose salaries would be paid for by UBC. UBC would also provide computer and fax equipment for the office and make up whatever extra costs ASA might otherwise incur in terms of mailing or courier services because of the fact that the journal's home would be in Canada. With respect to transparency, I would make it a point to always be extremely responsive to requests from authors as to the status of their manuscripts. And as concerns quality, I would push authors politely but firmly to make their manuscripts the very best they can be, privileging a longer gestation time for manuscripts and multiple iterations of the review process where doing so would encourage excellence. I would also demand from Blackwell strong copy editors who could improve the readability of accepted pieces.

I am a relatively young scholar and have not edited a journal before. I have, however, worked very closely over the years with more senior sociologists who have extensive editorial experience, and I would not hesitate to turn to them for advice. Camic is of course a former coeditor of the *American Sociological Review*, and I also count among my closest confidants my former Harvard colleague Michèle Lamont, who has edited numerous volumes and coedits a series with Princeton University Press. With Camic and Lamont I am currently editing a book on the sociology of the social sciences and I have learned a tremendous amount from them in terms of editorial best practices. I am also friendly with many of the previous editors of *Sociological Theory*, including Alexander, Turner, and Calhoun, and would tap them for advice as well. Although one never truly knows what one's reputation in the field is, my sense is that I am viewed as a theoretically-minded sociologist with wide ranging and catholic interests, and this would serve me well as I sought to achieve balance and pluralism on the pages of the journal. I think I am also known for having high scholarly standards – reflected in the fact that the University of Chicago Press recently nominated my book, *Richard Rorty: The Making of An American Philosopher*, for a Pulitzer Prize in biography – and I would also hope to take advantage of this reputation to attract truly excellent and cogent manuscripts. Having

edited the Theory Section newsletter for several years, and served on the editorial board of *Sociological Theory*, I am well-known in the section and would have no difficulty assembling a pool of outstanding reviewers and editorial board members. I am also familiar enough with the section to know how important it is to respect the diversity of approaches and interests evident among section members even while inching the journal in a slightly new direction. In terms of strictly intellectual qualifications, I have published extensively on both classical and contemporary sociological theory and read widely across many areas of the discipline. I am a frequent reviewer for *Sociological Theory*, *ASR*, and *AJS* – among other journals – and have published often in ASA journals myself, including a new theory piece, “A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms,” which was just conditionally accepted at *ASR*.

Let me conclude by saying a few words about my institutional home for those who may be unfamiliar with Canadian higher education. UBC, with more than thirty-five thousand undergraduate students, is the major university of the province of British Columbia, and one of the top three Canadian research universities (along with Toronto and McGill). Home to a top-flight economics department – ranked first in Canada and twentieth in the world – UBC has in recent years striven for research excellence across the social sciences and beyond. In sociology this has entailed a major hiring push at the early career level, as part of which the department hired two ASA dissertation award winners (Amy Hanser from Berkeley and Wendy Roth from Harvard), me, and a number of other young sociologists trained in top programs. It is now a vibrant department composed mostly of sociologists who publish their books with leading presses and their articles in leading American and international journals. We are also deeply connected to American sociology through network ties, conference travel, and a very active colloquium series (our speakers this year for example are Karen Bradley, Stephen Turner, Ching-Kwan Lee, Mia Tuan, David Grusky, Scott Frickel, Moon-Kie Jung, Greta Krippner, Yang Yang, and Bonnie Erickson). Most of my colleagues do not work in the theory area, so I would not lean on them for direct support, but the Publications Committee should rest assured that the department is an important, if emerging, center for sociological research. The chair of the department and the administration are enthusiastic about my nomination for editorship and would be willing to devote whatever resources necessary to make sure the journal ran smoothly were it to come to UBC.