

Investigating the Social World

Week 2: Why Theory Matters



Welcome back!

200
1823-2023 

Welcome back

- ▶ Questions?

Welcome back

- ▶ Questions?
- ▶ Student-staff communication
 - Emails
 - Office hours

Welcome back

- ▶ Questions?
- ▶ Student-staff communication
 - Emails
 - Office hours
- ▶ Assessment I: The methodological review
 - Examine a published **peer-reviewed** article
 - Answer **three** questions
 - Write up to **500 words** (max) for each response
 - Due on midday **29 March 2024**
 - More will be discussed in **Week 5**

Strategic reading in the social sciences

- ▶ Know why you are reading
 - Read the weekly description carefully
 - Skim first before you dive in
 - Pay attention to the big picture
 - Find the key information and read closely
 - Formulate your response and views
 - Know there is always more to read (e.g., further readings)
- ▶ Build and use your support system

Strategic reading in the social sciences

- ▶ Know why you are reading
- ▶ Build and use your support system
 - Study Skills workshops and online tutorials
 - Personal/module tutor office hours
 - Study clubs

Four-step approach (UC Berkeley)



- ▶ **Preview:** Get as much information about the reading before you actually read it
- ▶ **Annotating:** Read with a pencil and making notes as you read
- ▶ **Analyzing:** Break the reading apart to see how different parts relate to each other
- ▶ **Responding:** Think again how the reading relates the topic of each week; come up with summary, comments and questions

Breaking the ice

- ▶ Recap: To **produce valid knowledge claims** (cool, but how?)

Breaking the ice

- ▶ Recap: To **produce valid knowledge claims** (cool, but how?)
- ▶ Today: "**Theory comes to rescue**" (?)
 - What is your subject area? Have you taken any module with "theory" in the title?
 - What is the most important/famous theory in your subject area? And what makes it important/famous?
 - What is your main takeaway from the TED Talk by Simon Sinek. What is your main takeaway? Do you like what you hear? Is there really a "theory" in the talk?



Tracking abuse on Twitter against football players in the 2021–22 Premier League Season

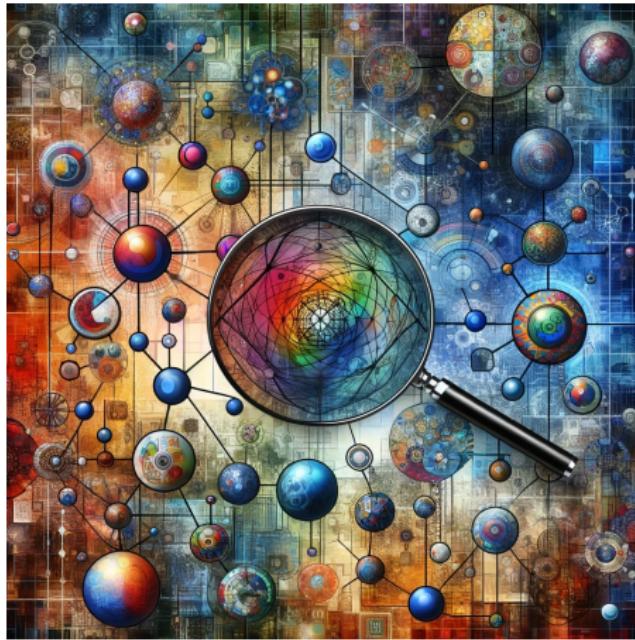
Bertie Vidgen, Yi-Ling Chung*,
Pica Johansson*, Hannah Rose Kirk*,
Angus Williams*, Scott A. Hale, Helen Margetts,
Paul Röttger, Laila Sprejer¹

The Alan Turing Institute Public Policy Programme
Online Safety Team | 2022

Offensive content warning:
This report contains some examples of
abuse (all are synthetic, i.e. not real).
You might find them offensive.

¹ Bertie Vidgen is the lead author. *Indicates equal contribution.

Part I

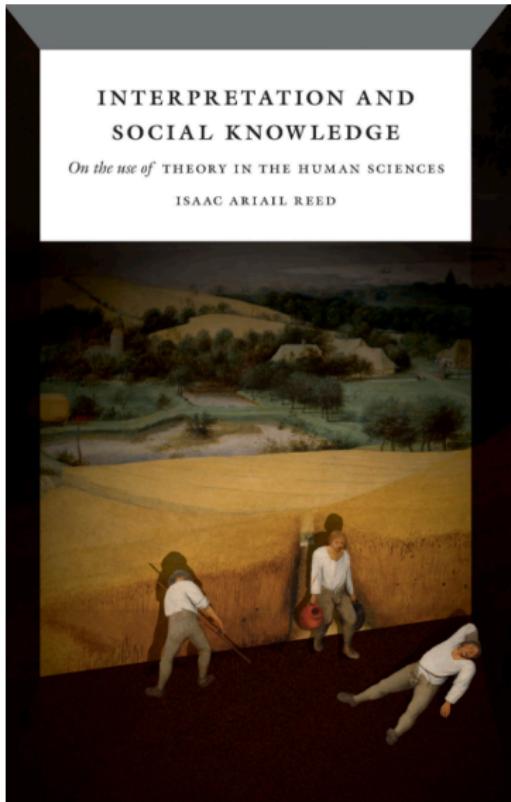


What is theory, and what does it do in social research?



“The image features a network of interconnected nodes, each a vibrant color, symbolizing the diversity and interconnectedness of social theories and concepts. The background is a collage of various cultural, historical, and modern societal elements, highlighting the scope and impact of social research. At the center, a magnifying glass focuses on a group of nodes, emphasizing the analytical nature of social research. This dynamic and complex image aims to mirror the multifaceted nature of social research theories.”

- ▶ What do we use theory for in social research?
- ▶ Do we mean the same thing when we say "theory?" (Short answer: **NO**)
- ▶ How do we present and formulate your theory?



"We have disagreements, that is, not only about how we establish the sheer existence of this or that social phenomenon, but also about **how we can claim to correctly and effectively explain, criticize, or interpret** it. In my view it is these latter disagreements [...] at the core of controversies about social knowledge."

From the Editors

What Theory Is and Can Be: Forms of Theorizing in Organizational Scholarship

Joep Cornelissen¹, Markus A. Höllerer² 
and David Seidl³ 



Organization Theory

Volume 2: 1–19

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/26317877211020328

journals.sagepub.com/home/ott

 SAGE

Using theory to “make sense of” the social world
(Cornelissen et al 2021)

Using theory to “make sense of” the social world (Cornelissen et al 2021)

- ▶ Theory as interpretation
- ▶ Theory as explanation
- ▶ Theory as ideology

Using theory to “make sense of” the social world (Cornelissen et al 2021)

- ▶ Theory as interpretation: Ways of "seeing"
 - Taking a conceptual framework to "construct a deep reading" of the social world
 - Stimulating multiple abstractions and different ways to "understanding" the world
 - Likely to be reflexive so as to re-conceptualize a topic or a phenomenon
- ▶ Theory as explanation
- ▶ Theory as ideology

Using theory to “make sense of” the social world (Cornelissen et al 2021)

- ▶ Theory as interpretation
- ▶ Theory as explanation
 - Identifying and establishing the "fundamental processes, mechanisms and structures" underlying the outcome of interest in the social world
 - Often assuming an objective stance and working around a limited set of corresponding theoretical resources and concepts
 - May be useful for forecasting and predictions; "theory of everything"
- ▶ Theory as ideology

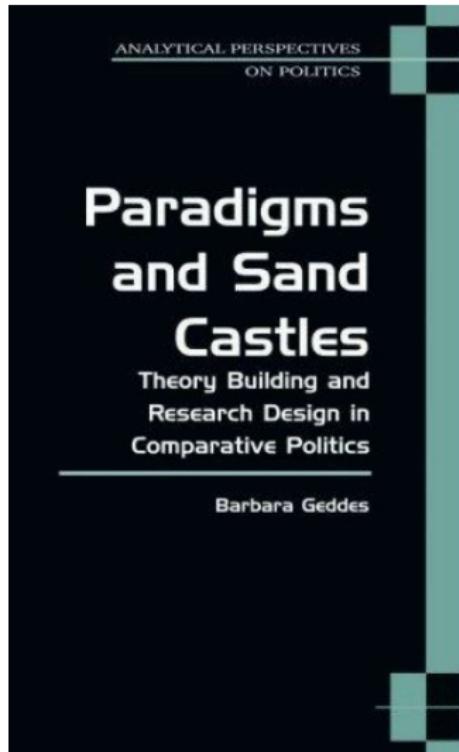
Using theory to “make sense of” the social world (Cornelissen et al 2021)

- ▶ Theory as interpretation
- ▶ Theory as explanation: Way(s) of "unpacking"
 - Identifying and establishing the "fundamental processes, mechanisms and structures" underlying the outcome of interest in the social world
 - Often assuming an objective stance and working around a limited set of corresponding theoretical resources and concepts
 - May be useful for forecasting and predictions; "theory of everything"
- ▶ Theory as ideology

Using theory to “make sense of” the social world (Cornelissen et al 2021)

- ▶ Theory as interpretation
- ▶ Theory as explanation
- ▶ Theory as ideology: Ways of "envisioning"
 - Taking a normative stance to imaging what the social world "should be like"
 - Providing ways of "emancipation" by bearing the critical force of well-articulated theoretical "utopias"
 - Seeking to make the world a better place (so likely to invoke emotional appeals)

Theory as paradigm v theory as approach (Geddes 2003)



► Theory as **paradigm**

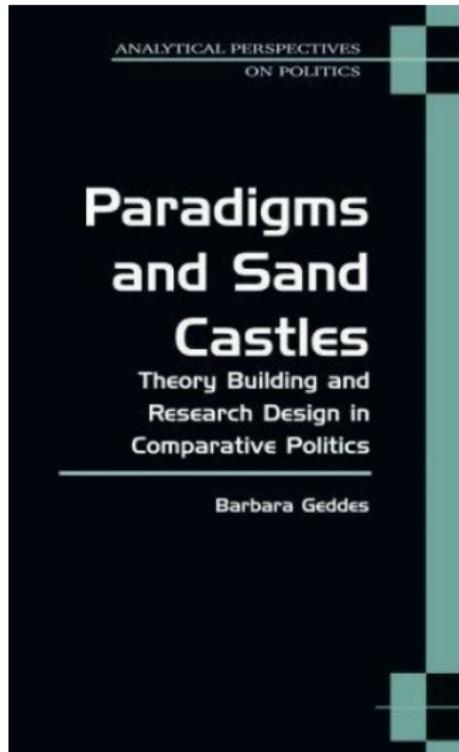
- A set of more or less consistent theories and hypotheses that "explain" various aspects of social reality
- When taken together, these theories and hypotheses form a "coherent" understanding of the outcome of interest

Oil, Islam, and Women

MICHAEL L. ROSS *University of California, Los Angeles*

Women have made less progress toward gender equality in the Middle East than in any other region. Many observers claim this is due to the region's Islamic traditions. I suggest that oil, not Islam, is at fault; and that oil production also explains why women lag behind in many other countries. Oil production reduces the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence. As a result, oil-producing states are left with atypically strong patriarchal norms, laws, and political institutions. I support this argument with global data on oil production, female work patterns, and female political representation, and by comparing oil-rich Algeria to oil-poor Morocco and Tunisia. This argument has implications for the study of the Middle East, Islamic culture, and the resource curse.

Theory as paradigm v theory as approach (Geddes 2003)



► Theory as **approach**:

- A "claim" that certain factors (e.g., classes and race) deserve attention, without articulating specific processes and/or mechanisms about them
- A "belief" that certain research methods are the most useful and appropriate means of gaining understanding

Fighting with race: complex solidarities & constrained sameness

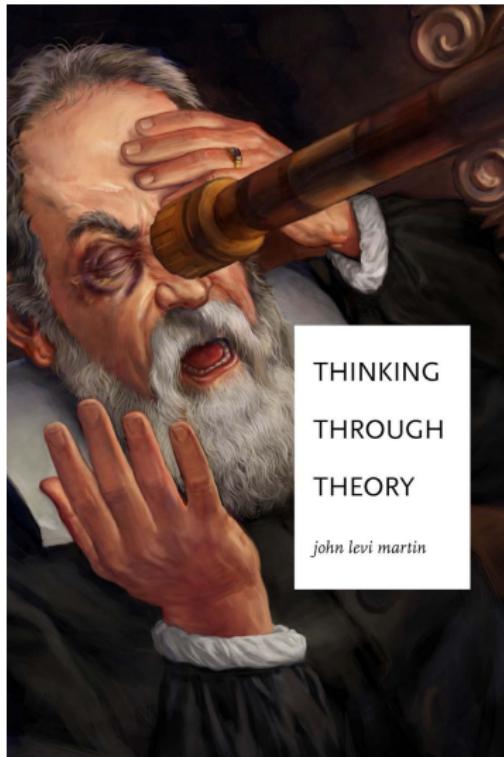
Amit Singh 

Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted at an East London Kickboxing/Muay Thai gym, this paper explores how fighters at Origins Combat Gym seek to reject race as a discursive category in favour of constructing each other as the same, bonded by years of intimately training alongside one another. Drawing upon Bourdieu, I conceptualise a racial habitus to argue that such processes are constrained; my field-site is not a racial utopia, even if it does allow for new possibilities. Nonetheless, my interlocutors' attempts to reject the logic of ethnic absolutism through forging complex localised solidarities offers hope in anti-immigrant times.

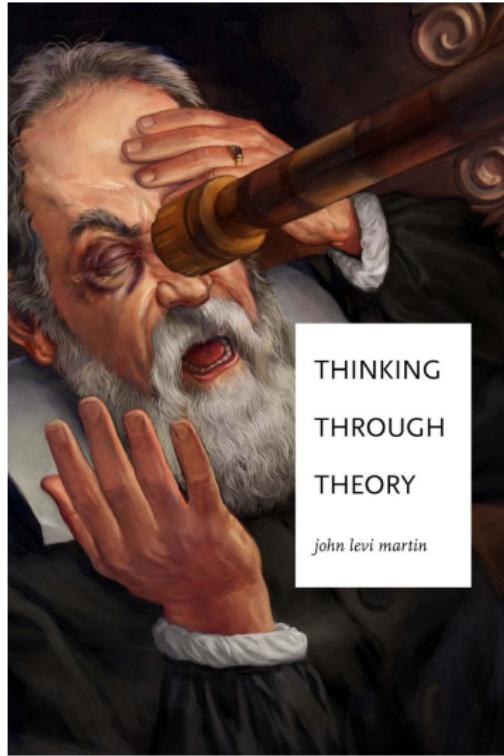
Thinking through theory (Martin 2015)



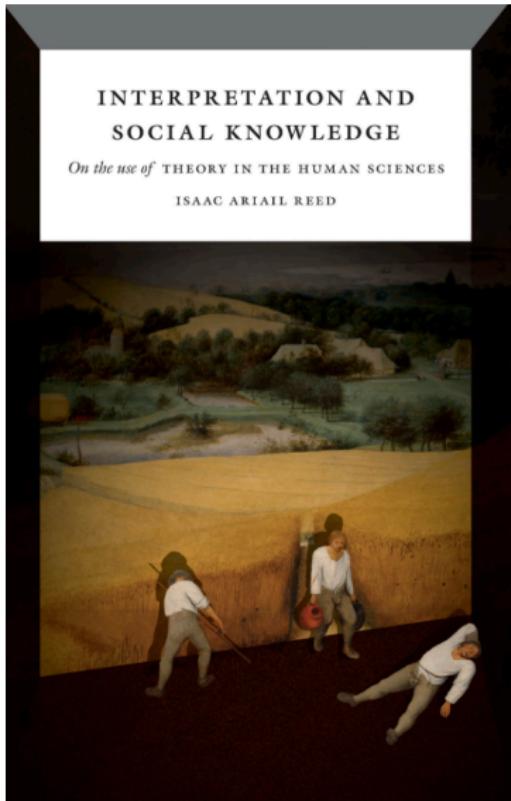
- ▶ **Theory as canonical propositions:**
Propositions or claims, often made or chosen before we begin our investigations, become theories because they are important and/or influential

- ▶ **Theory as generalization:**
Propositions should be made (and tested) to explain as many "cases" as possible, but some generalizations can be trivial or obvious or controversial (questions regarding the scope condition and plausibility are crucial)

Thinking through theory (Martin 2015)



- ▶ **Theory as vocabulary:** Theoretical innovations can be made by using new terms or words to "re-tell" the social reality to push new questions (and yet we may be constrained by the words we use)
- ▶ **Theory as critique:** Theoretical work as a consideration of internal consistency and possible scope or as a consideration of its political implications



"We have disagreements, that is, not only about **how we establish the sheer existence** of this or that social phenomenon, but also about how we can claim to correctly and effectively explain, criticize, or interpret it. In my view it is these latter disagreements [...] at the core of controversies about social knowledge."

Different forms or strategies of “theory-making”

- ▶ Verbal
- ▶ Formal (mathematical)
- ▶ Combined

Different forms or strategies of “theory-making”

- ▶ Verbal
 - Perhaps the most common form of theoretical "expressions"
 - Use of language is important – the analysis of "meaning" (or the discourse)
 - Abstraction through metaphor and analogy
- ▶ Formal (mathematical/computational)
- ▶ Combined

Different forms or strategies of “theory-making”

- ▶ Verbal
- ▶ Formal (mathematical and/or computational)
 - "A model or set of rules and assumptions used to understand various behaviors in mathematical terms" (APA)
 - A lot of existing/emerging fields, such as agent-based modeling, positive/game theory, social "physics," and complexity theory (or complex system)
 - An active area calling for vibrant, constructive interdisciplinary research
- ▶ Combined



“The rise of **complexity theory**, an **interdisciplinary** field studying the emergent **behavior and patterns of the interactions** of simple (and not so simple) **components**, has been one of the most important responses to the ballooning of **knowledge**.”

Different forms or strategies of “theory-making”

- ▶ Verbal
- ▶ Formal (mathematical)
- ▶ Combined: The "Analytic Narratives" project (Bates et al 1998)
 - An initiative started by several political economists in the 1990s
 - Intersection of economics, economic history, and political science
 - Integration of "elegant" rational choice-like theory and "thick" descriptions

Concluding remarks

- ▶ Foster "cultural competency" among social researchers
 - Be open-minded: "Theory" can refer to very different things, and it is important for us to respect (and understand) the differences
 - Be transparent: Your preferences and the choices you make (and do your best to explain them) in your research
 - Be cautious: The way you treat and build theory (paradigm v approach) will affect the answers you offer
- ▶ What's next: Bolster the theory-empirics alignment with *high-quality* evidence
 - Why should we use "numbers" to study the social world?
 - Why is causality important? Is causality always a must?
 - How can we generalize our insights beyond a case?

Discussion: (Re)thinking rational choice “theory”

- ▶ Before you read Geddes' book, how will you define the "rational choice theory?"
- ▶ After reading this chapter, how is Geddes' definition or discussion of the rational choice theory different from your expectations?
- ▶ Barbara Geddes says "rational choice theory is not a theory." Why? Do you agree?
- ▶ In Martin (2015), theory can be used as canonical and important propositions, as generalization, as vocabulary and as critique. How will you categorize rational choice theory based on Geddes' explanations for this theory?
- ▶ Further reading: Chapter 4 in Martin (2015)

Barbara's "verdict" on rational choice

- ▶ There are many **misperceptions** about rational choice.
 - Rational choice does not assume people are "selfish"
 - Rational choice does not assume people are driven by material interests
 - Rational choice does not assume preferences are stable or fixed
 - Rational choice does not ignore/discard ideology and/or history
- ▶ Rational choice is an **approach** (i.e., ways of seeing), not a theory
 - Rational choice highlights the importance of "rationality"
 - Rational choice does not dictate a single or universal explanation/prediction
 - Rational choice provides a micro-foundation for us to research the social world

Thank you!



c.cheng@bbk.ac.uk

200
1823-2023 