

Investigating the Social World

Week 2: Why Theory Matters

Lecture 2: Why Theory Matters and What Theory Does



Recap: What ISW does (and does not do)

- ▶ ISW is about knowledge production in social sciences
 - How social researchers have produced such varieties of knowledge (and why)
 - How you find yourself a place in the broad social sciences enterprise
 - How you relate yourself to others and search for collaborations
- ▶ ISW is not a conventional **methods** module by itself, but by the end of this module,
 - It will give you a system to think through your research
 - It will give you a framework to plan your (future) methods training

Recap: What makes “good” social sciences research?

- ▶ Personal stake
- ▶ Addresses a compelling research question
- ▶ Employs new data and methods
- ▶ Empirical verdict on conventional wisdom and conceptual policy (or theoretical) debates
- ▶ Motivate follow-up research: Replication and expansion of the scope condition

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Issue 1

FREE DISTRIBUTION OR COST-SHARING? EVIDENCE
FROM A RANDOMIZED MALARIA PREVENTION
EXPERIMENT*

JESSICA COHEN AND PASCALINE DUPAS

It is often argued that cost-sharing—charging a subsidized, positive price—for a health product is necessary to avoid wasting resources on those who will not use or do not need the product. We explore this argument through a field experiment in Kenya, in which we randomized the price at which prenatal clinics could sell long-lasting antimalarial insecticide-treated bed nets (ITNs) to pregnant women. We find no evidence that cost-sharing reduces wastage on those who will not use the product: women who received free ITNs are not less likely to use them than those who paid subsidized positive prices. We also find no evidence that cost-sharing induces selection of women who need the net more: those who pay higher prices appear no sicker than the average prenatal client in the area in terms of measured anemia (an important indicator of malaria). Cost-sharing does, however, considerably dampen demand. We find that uptake drops by sixty percentage points when the price of ITNs increases from zero to \$0.60 (i.e., from 100% to 90% subsidy), a price still \$0.15 below the price at which ITNs are currently sold to pregnant women in Kenya. We combine our estimates in a cost-effectiveness analysis of the impact of ITN prices on child mortality that incorporates both private and social returns to ITN usage. Overall, our results suggest that free distribution of ITNs could save many more lives than cost-sharing programs have achieved so far, and, given the large positive externality associated with widespread usage of ITNs, would likely do so at a lesser cost per life saved.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2010.125.1.1>



Using the Results from Rigorous Multisite Evaluations to Inform Local Policy Decisions

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Stephen H. Bell
Ian Schmid
Azim Shivji
Elizabeth A. Stuart

Abstract

Evidence-based policy at the local level requires predicting the impact of an intervention to inform whether it should be adopted. Increasingly, local policymakers have access to published research evaluating the effectiveness of policy interventions from national research clearinghouses that review and disseminate evidence from program evaluations. Through these evaluations, local policymakers have a wealth of evidence describing what works, but not necessarily where. Multisite evaluations may produce unbiased estimates of the average impact of an intervention in the study sample and still produce inaccurate predictions of the impact for localities outside the sample for two reasons: (1) the impact of the intervention may vary across localities, and (2) the evaluation estimate is subject to sampling error. Unfortunately, there is relatively little evidence on how much the impacts of policy interventions vary from one locality to another and almost no evidence on the implications of this variation for the accuracy with which the local impact of adopting an intervention can be predicted using findings from an evaluation in other localities. In this paper, we present a set of methods for quantifying the accuracy of the local predictions that can be obtained using the results of multisite randomized trials and for assessing the likelihood that prediction errors will lead to errors in local policy decisions. We demonstrate these methods using three evaluations of educational interventions, providing the first empirical evidence of the ability to use multisite evaluations to predict impacts in individual localities—i.e., the ability of “evidence-based policy” to improve local policy. © 2019 by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22154>

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Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective

Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones &
Sonya R. Porter

WORKING PAPER 24441

DOI 10.3386/w24441

ISSUE DATE March 2018

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We study the sources of racial disparities in income using anonymized longitudinal data covering nearly the entire U.S. population from 1989-2015. We document three results. First, black Americans and American Indians have much lower rates of upward mobility and higher rates of downward mobility than whites, leading to persistent disparities across generations. Conditional on parent income, the black-white income gap is driven by differences in wages and employment rates between black and white men; there are no such differences between black and white women. Hispanic Americans have rates of intergenerational mobility more similar to whites than blacks, leading the Hispanic-white income gap to shrink across generations. Second, differences in parental marital status, education, and wealth explain little of the black-white income gap conditional on parent income. Third, the black-white gap persists even among boys who grow up in the same neighborhood. Controlling for parental income, black boys have lower incomes in adulthood than white boys in 99% of Census tracts. The few areas with small black-white gaps tend to be low-poverty neighborhoods with low levels of racial bias among whites and high rates of father presence among blacks. Black males who move to such neighborhoods earlier in childhood have significantly better outcomes. However, fewer than 5% of black children grow up in such areas. Our findings suggest that reducing the black-white income gap will require efforts whose impacts cross neighborhood and class lines and increase upward mobility specifically for black men.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz042>



Does School Spending Matter? The New Literature on an Old Question

C. Kirabo Jackson

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DOI 10.3386/w25368

ISSUE DATE December 2018

Social scientists have long sought to examine the causal impact of school spending on child outcomes. For a long time, the literature on this topic was largely descriptive so that it had been difficult to draw strong causal claims. However, there have been several recent studies in this space that employ larger data-sets and use quasi-experimental methods that allow for much more credible causal claims. Focusing on studies of students in the United States, this paper briefly discusses the older literature and highlights some of its limitations. It then describes a recent quasi-experimental literature on the impact of school spending on child outcomes, highlights some key papers, and presents a summary of the recent findings. Policy implications and areas for future research are discussed.

<https://www.nber.org/papers/w25368>



XIV—Cluelessness

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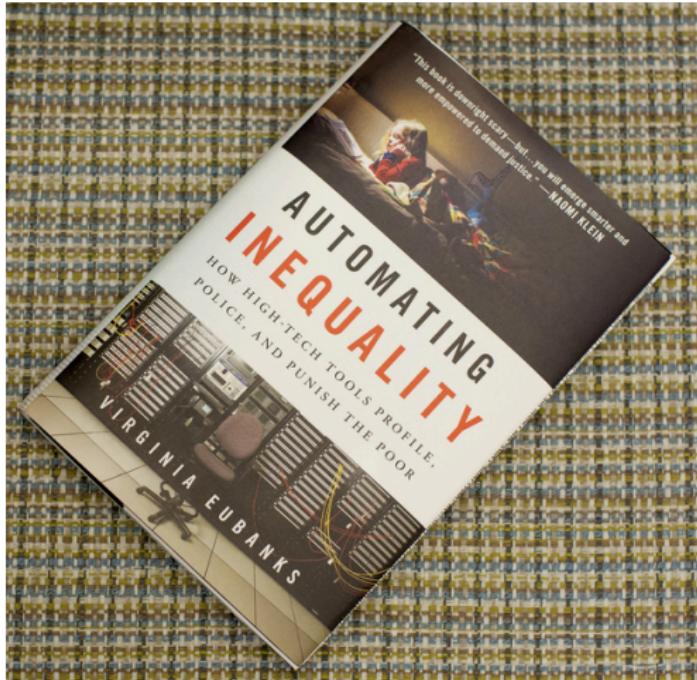
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Decisions, whether moral or prudential, should be guided at least in part by considerations of the consequences that would result from the various available actions. For any given action, however, the majority of its consequences are unpredictable at the time of decision. Many have worried that this leaves us, in some important sense, *clueless*. In this paper, I distinguish between ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ possible sources of cluelessness. In terms of this taxonomy, the majority of the existing literature on cluelessness focuses on the simple sources. I argue, contra James Lenman in particular, that *these* would-be sources of cluelessness are unproblematic, on the grounds that indifference-based reasoning is far less problematic than Lenman (along with many others) supposes. However, there does seem to be a genuine phenomenon of cluelessness associated with the ‘complex’ sources; here, indifference-based reasoning is inapplicable by anyone’s lights. This ‘complex problem of cluelessness’ is vivid and pressing, in particular, in the context of Effective Altruism. This motivates a more thorough examination of the precise nature of cluelessness, and the precise source of the associated phenomenology of discomfort in forced-choice situations. The latter parts of the paper make some initial explorations in those directions.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ariscoc/aow018>



<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseresviewofbooks/2018/07/02/book-review-automating-inequality-how-high-tech-tools-profile-police-and-punish-the-poor-by-virginia-eubanks/>

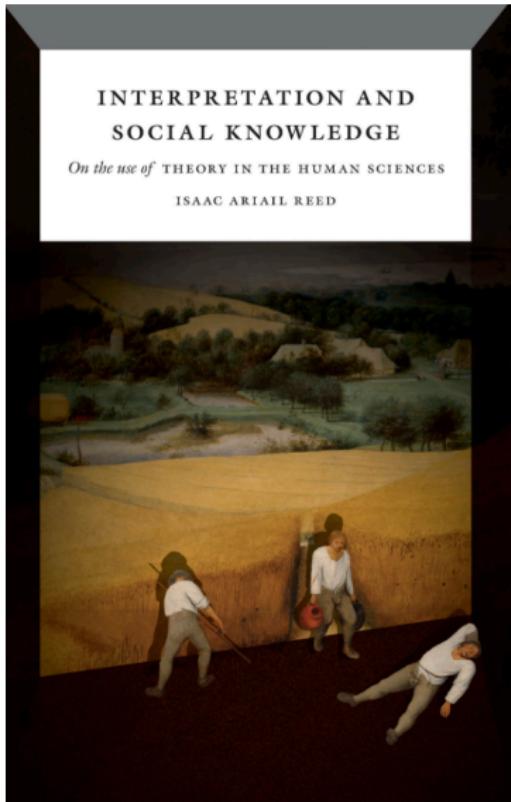
Breaking the ice

- ▶ Week 1: Social societies aim to **produce "valid" knowledge claims** (cool, but how?)

Breaking the ice

- ▶ Week 1: Social sciences aim 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? Do you like what you hear? Is there really a "theory" in the talk?

- ▶ 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?
- ▶ How do we evaluate your theory? (we will be addressing this in the coming week)



"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

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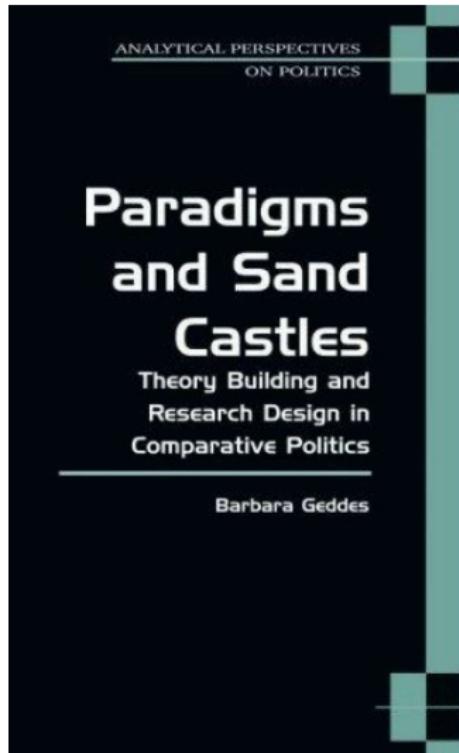
- ▶ Theory as interpretation
- ▶ Theory as explanation
- ▶ Theory as ideology

- ▶ 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

- ▶ 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

- ▶ 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**

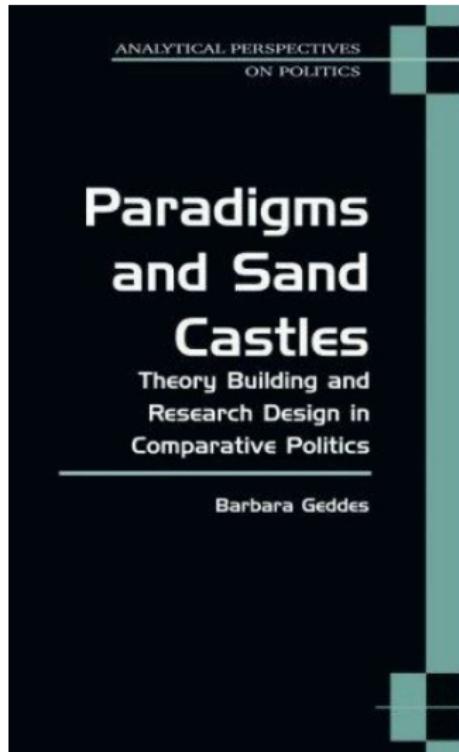
- A set of more or less consistent theories and hypotheses that "explain" various aspects of social reality
- When taken together, these theories and hypotheses form a "coherent" understanding of the outcome of interest
- Similar to "theory as explanation"

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
- Similar to "theory as interpretation"

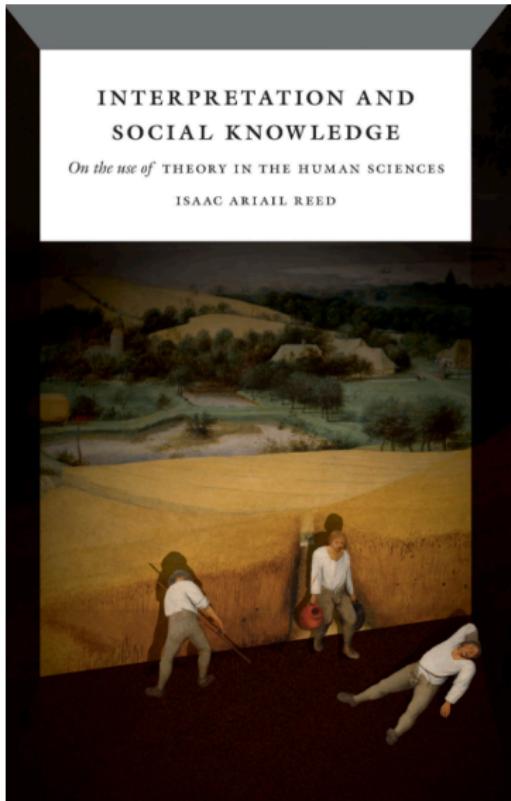
Fighting with race: complex solidarities & constrained sameness

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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.



"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

► 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

► Combined

- ▶ Verbal
- ▶ Formal
 - "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**, public choice theory, positive/game theory, social "physics," and 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**.”

A learning agent that acquires social norms from public sanctions in decentralized multi-agent settings

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Abstract

Society is characterized by the presence of a variety of social norms: collective patterns of sanctioning that can prevent miscoordination and free-riding. Inspired by this, we aim to construct learning dynamics where potentially beneficial social norms can emerge. Since social norms are underpinned by sanctioning, we introduce a training regime where agents can access all sanctioning events but learning is otherwise decentralized. This setting is technologically interesting because sanctioning events may be the only available public signal in decentralized multi-agent systems where reward or policy-sharing is infeasible or undesirable. To achieve collective action in this setting, we construct an agent architecture containing a classifier module that categorizes observed behaviors as approved or disapproved, and a motivation to punish in accord with the group. We show that social norms emerge in multi-agent systems containing this agent and investigate the conditions under which this helps them achieve socially beneficial outcomes.

Keywords

Multi-agent systems, social norms, reinforcement learning



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

The Analytic Narrative Project

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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: Build and bolster the theory-empirics alignment with 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?
- ▶ 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
- ▶ More in Week 6

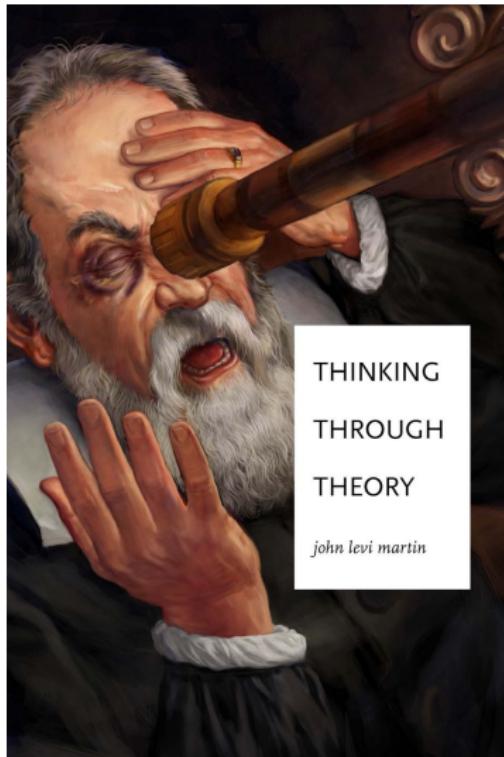
Thank you!



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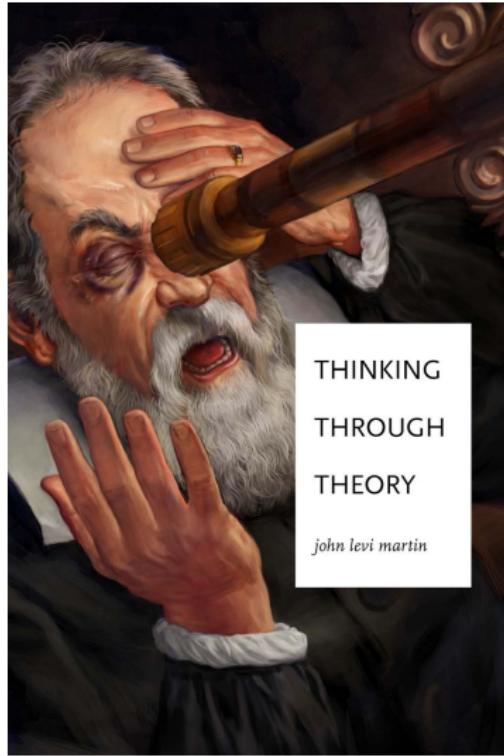
Thinking through theory (Martin 2015)



- ▶ **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