



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

Why Don't Big Theory Books Work in the US? A Reply to Simon Susen

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Strand, Michael. 2023. "Why Don't Big Theory Books Work in the US? A Reply to Simon Susen." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (10): 1–18. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-87J>.

In “Lessons from Reckwitz and Rosa: Towards a Constructive Dialogue between Critical Analytics and Critical Theory” (2023), Simon Susen provides an impressive and thorough dissection of the complicated and broad ranging arguments of two of the defining European sociologists of the current generation: Andreas Reckwitz and Hartmut Rosa. I cannot add a lot to Susen’s comprehensive discussion, and that might be for the simple fact that I am an American sociologist. Reckwitz and Rosa are therefore peripheral to my vision, and this fielded ignorance will frame my response. I’ll attempt something comparative and dialogic: to use my fielded ignorance to establish a position from which to interrogate the common sense of my own field.¹

Here is my reasoning for this response and its style as clearly as I can make it: In case the idea here was to generate contention over Rosa and Reckwitz, we won’t have it. I don’t have much to object to in Susen’s piece, because I must treat it descriptively. I have no other reference point. Rosa and Reckwitz mean only very specific things for me (e.g. “acceleration” and “practice” respectively) which have been filtered down to me, it seems, through several filters. Most of what Rosa and Reckwitz have written, I realize after reading Susen’s summation, have been lost in the shuffle. So I seek to explain the process and history of my own ignorance, because Susen has convinced me that Rosa and Reckwitz are two theorists whom I *should be into*. But this in turn makes me wonder why, should I be inclined to agree with Susen, it also seems to mean that I would, *per force*, have to surrender my own credulity and entertain the possibility that social theory of a kind not currently recognized by my field has also been wiped clean from *my* cognitive map.

I will preface my comments by saying (“symmetrically”; Bloor 1976) that I can attempt this kind of approach without inferring that the appeal, or lack thereof, in the American sociological field has anything to do with the veracity (or lack thereof) of Reckwitz and Rosa’s claims, as Susen presents them to us; though it does have something to do, or so I will claim, with *how* they deliver those claims—their style and concerns, their apparent motivation for writing, what they are apparently seeking to do by theorizing—and how that delivery is categorized by a resident of the American field with an average habitus, like me. I am assuming that I am not unique. Rosa and Reckwitz are “big theory” to my presumptively very typical American eye. But what is this category of which I so assuredly speak: “big theory”? Susen does not use it to describe Reckwitz and Rosa. I do. But how does the classifier classify himself?

¹ “America,” a word, is effectively meaningless for our purposes. I use it instead of “US” only because the “American Sociological Association” does. This should imply, in addition to referring to the German field, that there are *national* sociologies (here I agree with Bourdieu 1991) but no global sociological field, though the American field does have some measure of “vertical autonomy” (Buchholz 2016) relative to others (observable, for instance, in the number of PhDs from programs in the American field holding jobs at non-American universities, and the far fewer number of the reverse; the currency given to publication in American-based journals versus publication in journals outside of the American field even for non-American based sociologists).

Personae Non Grata

Susen demonstrates in engrossing detail how Reckwitz and Rosa make proposals of extraordinary range and ambition for sociology. Yet American sociology, which is what most of “sociology” exists as today, pays almost no notice.² For Susen, Reckwitz and Rosa’s related pursuits are framed by a particular distinction through which not only their claims pass but also their self-consciousness of what they are doing.

Sozialtheorie, or “social theory,” is a vocabulary for talking about society as an ontological and epistemological object. Susen mentions rational choice theory, actor-network theory, practice theory, structuralism and neo-institutionalism as contributions to social theory.

Gesellschaftstheorie, or “theory of society,” is historical and topical by comparison, focused on an analysis of the present. Susen mentions theories and analyses of capitalism as an example. Reckwitz, as Susen explains, advocates for a division of labor. *Sozialtheorien* creates the concepts that *Gesellschaftstheorien* will put to use. For Rosa, the relation is slightly different: *Sozialtheorien* “limits the horizon of what can be articulated” by a *Gesellschaftstheorie*.

When Reckwitz and Rosa (2023) write a book together, it should come as no carries the indicative title *Spätmoderne in der Krise: Was leistet die Gesellschaftstheorie*, or *Late Modernity in Crisis: Why We Need a Theory of Society*. In that book, Reckwitz and Rosa point to a paradox: there is a public appetite for “theory of society,” for efforts to comprehend “the whole,” but sociologists are reluctant to satisfy the hunger. They point to various factors involved, like “the expectations of a competitive scientific research world in terms of quantifiable research findings, publications in peer-reviewed journals and the acquisition of third-party funding.” They are speaking of recent changes to German sociology; for an American sociologist, this is all too familiar. It is business as usual. What Reckwitz and Rosa lament as the decline of a “theory of society” may have come to fruition in the American field long ago, but not many seem to have noticed.

De Te Fabula Narratur!

Fifteen years ago, the American-based sociologist Gabriel Abend (2008) took semantic stock of the varied uses of the word “theory” in the American field. Echoing the pluralism (or anomie) that others have also registered, he found seven distinct theory types, ranging from basic explanations of variable correlation (e.g. When variable X is correlated with variable Z in the presence of variable Y, you should expect to see outcome A) to expertise and exegesis of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Du Bois, and the like. In this guise, *Sozialtheorie* appears to be

² None of Reckwitz’s books have been reviewed in two of the major journals that feature book reviews in the American field, *American Journal Sociology* or *Social Forces*. In *Contemporary Sociology* (the journal of reviews), two of his books have been reviewed, positively but with interesting additions that I will expand upon below (Scirotino 2023; Stokes 2019). Rosa’s work has not been reviewed in *AJS* or *SF* either, though his *Social Acceleration* finds two reviews (Ritzer 2017; Reed 2014 this latter is a review essay) in *Contemporary Sociology*. Both receive Rosa’s book positively, but this comment from Ritzer is telling, as I’ll suggest below: “It is a kind of theory reminiscent in the United States of the work of Talcott Parsons, especially after 1950, a kind of theory that is unfortunately little done, or read, in the United States today” (Ritzer 2017, 471).

Theory₅ in Abend's categories, or an "overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world," and *Gesellschaftstheorie* is a kind of Theory₆, or a "contemplation" of the present as part of an "explicitly normative" project. Abend mentions feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and critical theory as examples. When Abend expands on this particular theory type, he does something similar to what Susen observes vis-a-vis Reckwitz and Rosa. Theory₆ leads Abend to make a distinction he makes nowhere else: between "social theory" (Theory₆ is typically a version of this) and "sociological theory," which he doesn't really explain, though we can infer that what Abend means by "sociological theory" is Theory₇ or the kind of theory that, for Abend, grapples with issues like the "micro-macro problem, structure and agency, the problem of social order."

What Abend means by social theory is not *Sozialtheorie*, and here is the important point: *neither is it Gesellschaftstheorie*. Two reviewers (Ritzer 2014; Sciortino 2021) of Reckwitz and Rosa draw an indicative parallel in this respect. To these reviewers Reckwitz and Rosa harken back to an older era of American sociology, which included figures like David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*), Daniel Bell (*The End of Ideology*) and Talcott Parsons. Parsons is mentioned in both reviews as an analogue, particularly his *The System of Modern Societies* (1971).³ Both reviewers leverage a comparison: if Reckwitz and Rosa remind them of bygone American sociology it is because *it really is gone in American sociology*, and the current American field can be singled out as "current" if for no other reason than that it does not feature that kind of sociology anymore. The kind of sociology that is missing is not systems theory, exactly, but neither is it what Abend calls social theory. It is what Susen describes for us as *Gesellschaftstheorie*.

Thus my own categories of thought get more reflexive. Why has a "theory of society" disappeared from American sociology? Is its disappearance why I reach for the category of "big theory" (and its attendant dismissiveness) when faced with Reckwitz and Rosa's body of work?

The recent agenda-setting volume in the American field *Social Theory Now* (Benzecry, Krause and Reed 2017) acknowledges "sociological theory" as a thing but advocates for "social theory."⁴ Reminiscent of Abend's Theory₆, this appears to mean something like theory

³ As Sciortino puts it, in reference to Reckwitz's *End of Illusions*: it "[aims] at nothing less than the interpretation of the spirit of contemporary society, of its *Zeitgeist*—[it] is a recent example of an established sociological genre ... [standing] in a line of sociological reflections that include such great works as Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Bell's *The End of Ideology* (1960), Parsons's *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), or Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979)—a genre that has produced, in recent years, the extraordinary success of Zygmunt Bauman's analyses of many liquid things" (2023, 167). For their part, Reckwitz and Rosa (2023) mention David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Bauman's *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Scott Lash and John Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space*, Giddens' *The Consequences of Modernity*, and Manuel Castells' *Information Age* trilogy as books featuring a type of theory that once thrived but are now mostly gone.

⁴ A very impressionistic sampling, would seem to show that the theory books published by major university presses in sociology in recent years seem to all have other sociologists (in principle) as their target audience. It does not seem like Rosa and Reckwitz are so specific. A theory of society would suggest as much. The American books take the form sociological theory mixed with selective and wide-ranging doses of bridging with social theory (Reed 2011; Reed 2019; Porpora 2015; Martin 2011; Chibber 2022), even arguments of this

writing produced from an academically rooted intellectual field that is not sociology but which, with enough bridging work, can be “brought into sociology” (Benzecry, Krause and Reed 2017, 7). Examples mentioned include postcolonial theory, the “analysis of gender,” and the influence of Kant and Sartre on Bourdieu. “Social theory” of this form in the American field might reflect the lingering anomie that resulted from the sixties dissolution of Parsons-Merton-Lazarsfeld triumvirate, and how it made American sociology still a choice venue for the “supermarket of theory” and incredible amounts of bridgework using imports from other disciplines and fields with no particular interest in sociology themselves (Strand 2020; Bourdieu 1991).⁵ This would not seem to qualify as a theory of society in Reckwitz and Rosa’s sense of *Gesellschaftstheorie*, nor (again) does it appear to be *Sozialtheorie* on their terms.

Has a type of theory vanished from the American field? Robert Antonio (2000), in what very well could be the last article of its kind published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (hereafter *AJS*) observed the following about social theory:

Social theory is no substitute for specialized knowledge or empirical work, but it provides a means to discuss science’s purposes, directions, and role—normative issues that are beyond the purview of science per se. By contrast to sociological theory’s largely empirical, hermeneutic, or analytical intent and middle-range disciplinary focus, social theory has a strong normative thrust. It poses broad questions about the “value” of different directions of sociocultural development, knowledge, and policy. The line with philosophy is often ambiguous, but social theory is a historicist alternative to religious or meta-physical absolutism and to transcendental or deontological theories. It has philosophical presuppositions, but it debates normative matters primarily on the basis of existent, nascent, or possible sociocultural conditions and, thus, draws on social-scientific theories, concepts, and research (2000, 77).

As Antonio (78) elaborates, “social theories offer sociological ‘good reasons’ for securing, reforming or changing a sociocultural regime ... in my view, social theory is a distinctly modern practice that began with the first-generation modern theorists and is entwined with the rise of social science.” More generally, “social theory *cannot* replace sociological theory or science, but it is a means for reflecting on their relation to public life.” Antonio insists that the boundary be maintained between social theory and sociological theory, as neither can pass each other’s tests without conflation (e.g. sociological theory *should* be “too narrow” and “too technical,” social theory *should* be “too broad” and “too philosophical”).

that border more (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) or less (Krause 2021) with methods. Some work (Go 2016) is more the bridge-work from social theory. Some work does more of the opposite and contributes to social theory from a position more from *within* social theory (Chibber 2013). I’m probably forgetting someone. I’m sorry.

⁵ A virtuoso of this bridgework in the American field has been Mustafa Emirbayer who in a series of articles (Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994) in *AJS* in the 1990s performs incredible syntheses and resolutions of hitherto dualistic oppositions, often through bridgework via American pragmatism, a trend which has continued ever since (see Gross, Reed and Winship 2022).

The interesting thing is that Antonio makes these claims in an article that has many of the elements that, as Susen describes it, Rosa and Reckwitz associate with *Gesellschaftstheorie*. Antonio (2000, 75) quotes Donald Levine’s observation that the core problem of social theory is “coming to grips with the modern order.” Antonio appears to do this by observing that this order, following its postmodern reconfiguration, consists of various tendencies toward “reactionary tribalism.”

The paradoxical thing is that, if we include Parsons as a parallel to Reckwitz and Rosa, the approach that he took aspires to a picture of the “whole” as a kind of professional ideology of sociology, indicating what sociologists could speak for and consult on for an interested clientele.⁶ A sense of the “whole” was exactly what Parsons associated with sociologists as respectful professionals. What Antonio attempts to do in the year 2000, however, is most definitely not Parsonian. So what is it? All of this leads me to suspect that I might be missing something from my own disciplinary unconscious.

E Pluribus Unum

So what if, apart from Abend’s types, the distinctions between theory are relational; more than that, what if they are contested (Selg 2013)? What if what they happen to signify conveys the state of the contest at a given time? I too associate social theory not with a “theory of society” but with a transdisciplinary import market. Very few, it seems, want to be caught doing mere “sociological theory” these days, yet it is tough to avoid, if for no other reason than the expectation that sociologists anchor sociological claims in a vocabulary that at least minimally departs from the vocabulary used by laypersons and their own accounting schemes. This too, however, seems subject to stall; and it probably *will* stall once the culture/agency/structure seam, inherited from the aftermath of the sixties, has finally been exhausted.

It is no wonder why, then, social theory in the contemporary American sense accumulates much of the theory capital in the field. Social theory in its distinction from sociological theory carries many affordances.⁷ One is to effectively position oneself as the conduit of a theory type, an obligatory passage point, mimicking the French importation a couple generations earlier. Social theory is also a way to establish total critiques of sociology. Among the appeals of social theory (and likely only because of the questionable status of its native theory) in the American field is that it can reward broad reading, in a way that is unlikely to be replicated in any other field. Sociology, along with anthropology, has proven to be an immense importer of theory. The challenge is to do the bridgework into sociology, make it fit with an ongoing theoretical discourse in the field (like culture) or create that theoretical discourse anew by setting the syncretic terms for it (like postcolonial theory).

⁶ The historian Howard Brick (2006) makes the point, contrary to nearly all fielded assumptions and prejudices, that Parsons’ aspirations here are not entirely condemnable. At least from the point of view of Parsons’ sense of the whole is concerned, its goal was, in Brick’s view, to envision a postcapitalist society.

⁷ One of which is (and has been) to make the theory specialization (such as it is) in the American field to appear less white and less male than it (still) is (Lizardo 2014).

An older meaning of social theory in the American field more closely fits with “theory of society” in the German field, but as Antonio (2000) observes, it was embattled for many decades prior, with many welcoming its demise and replacement by sociological theory as a “sign of disciplinary modernization and progress.” German *Sozialtheorie* seems akin to sociological theory. In the American field there does not seem to be, at present, a sense that sociological theory should assist or set the limits of a *Gesellschaftstheorie* as the latter is no longer objectively possible.⁸ The recommendation is, again, outwardly focused rather than inward: establish a trading zone between transdisciplinary social theory and sociology. What arises, it seems, is not much of an exchange however; we get postcolonial sociology, but not a sociological postcolonial theory.

The *Gesellschaftstheorie* elements of Rosa and Reckwitz are not mirror images of *Gesellschaftstheorie*(esque) in American sociology of the past. A “theory of society” could not possibly convey the same thing now in the American field as it did when Parsons wrote *The System of Modern Societies* or when Riesman et al published *The Lonely Crowd*. A few details might serve to demonstrate the point. The former was written from the heights of modernization theory, which within a decade or so would be surpassed in its vilification in the American field only, perhaps, by Parsons himself. The latter was authored primarily by Riesman, who never acquired a sociology PhD, and assisted by Nathan Glazer, who did but this is subsidiary to his never not being a New York Intellectual first and foremost (even in Berkeley; see Bloom 1986). Riesman’s other assistant, Reuel Denney, was a decorated faculty member—in poetry. Although they are published nearly 20 years apart, Parsons’ *System* and Riesman’s *Lonely* speak to the tension in the American field. We might express this as a vision of sociology as a specialization of professionals bearing expert knowledge and judgment versus sociology as more of a nominalistic arena of conversation, a “space between fields” (Eyal 2012) akin, in some organizational ways, to the multidisciplinary studies programs at American universities that pull faculty from multiple fields.

Public-facing sociology books written with a non-strict audience in mind still exist in the American field. The format and focus has been shaped by a generation of urban ethnography. An example (often trotted out) is Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted* (2016), and alongside this we can include his more recent *Poverty, By America* (2023). Desmond is, by any measure, at the core of the American field. Perhaps he is pioneering a model here: both public- and field-facing. His work on eviction has yielded several articles published in the American field’s top two journals (Desmond and Wilmers 2019; Desmond and Travis 2018; Desmond 2012a; 2012b). Perhaps this demonstrates the introduction of a publishing model more commonly seen in cognitive science and physics (to mention just two examples) that attempts to appeal to the marketability and public interest in the science by translating its

⁸ A partial but notable exception, so much so that it might be the harbinger of something new, is Isaac Reed’s *Power in Modernity* (2019), which would seem to combine social theory (in the current American sense), sociological theory (in the current American sense), *Sozialtheorie* (in the current German sense) and *Gesellschaftstheorie*/social theory the present German/past American sense.

field-specific appeal into exoteric knowledge.⁹ The key question, in these cases, is what are the sources of its field-specific appeal?

Poverty is one of only two books written (as far as I can tell) by a sociologist reviewed (or excerpted) over the past year in either the *New York Times Book Review* or *New York Review of Books* (the other being Michael Mann’s *On Wars* [2023]). Both of these publications could serve, however minimally, as some indication of the interests of the established US intellectual elite (mostly secure in the university orbit; not the university precariat) and a powerful portion of its reading class (Griswold 2001). This might not seem to augur well for the American field. We might conjecture at this point that, on this more heteronomous measure, the lack of a “theory of society” might yield a lack of interest from the group whom, we could expect, should be interested. Rosa’s *Resonance*, all 800 pages of it, gained a cover feature in the German popular news magazine *Stern*. But our conjecture is false for a very simple reason: A “theory of society” does exist in the American field. And it is intimately intertwined with the face that public-facing sociology typically takes on.

In this case, the sense of the “whole” consists of race, class, gender and sexuality as dimensions of inequality, as indications of iniquitous social structure, as a range of recognizable identities, and as intersections that indicate the accumulation of typical experiences and standpoints from which to document difference, critique knowledge claim, and target public policy (alongside doxic blindness attendant with privilege on any dimension; see Hamilton et al 2019). It is difficult to speak meaningfully of a “we” in a sense that might be implied by a “theory of society” in either its old American or contemporary Germanic sense. A theory of society, of this sort, can generate public attention with a platform. The sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom’s *Thick* (2019) is a virtuoso application of this theory, and also a bestseller. Cottom doubles as a widely-read columnist for the *New York Times*.

A comment from one review of Rosa’s *Social Acceleration* also seems telling in this regard and indicates the hard pivot in the American field from the days when Parsons (1971, 1) could drop lines like: “the modern type of society has emerged in a single evolutionary arena, the West,” and that along the “evolutionary path from the earliest human societies to the present ones,” this constitutes a “major jump in adaptive capacity.” In reference to Rosa’s periodization of “classical modernity” and “late modernity,” the reviewer observes that, should they be applied to periodize American history, Rosa’s categories would be severely limiting (to say the least) because of what their construction seems to have omitted and whether, in turn, a sense of the whole *should* be achieved in the way that Rosa does it: “one is left to wonder why Rosa is silent on the history of race and empire as part and parcel of the history of accelerative modernity, particularly given his Hegelian starting point” (Reed 2014, 822). Attention to race and empire, particularly by those in the core departments of the present American field, has galvanized many arguments to the same effect. To provincialize

⁹ Theoretical physics has a long history of this double dipping, from Einstein and Hawking, who both present a field-theoretic paradox in bearing high autonomous field capital and high heteronomous capital, the one affecting the other as a direct correlation, but with *heteronomy* being the dependent variable.

classical theory, for instance, is to question what should be appraised as “theory” that strives for a sense of the whole, when there are only relations and perspectives coincident with empire and its contamination of (metropolitan) sociology’s “epistemic structures” (Go 2020). The apparent identities and Global North location of Reckwitz and Rosa are not lost in this regard. They are shared across nearly all the authors whose work is brought into alignment with their own.

“Modernity” still frames what most evidently counts as *Gesellschaftstheorie* according to either the American or German fields, and thus more generally how *Gesellschaftstheorie* can constitute an engagement in wider intellectual discourse (see Alexander 1995). This is the kind, presumably, that certain reviewers of Rosa find missing from the American sociological field at present (Ritzer 2017). Modernity remains a fraught topic: the American field underwent a reconstitution in “the sixties” based on its rejection and the field’s anomic resettling (Strand 2020; amid bottoming out student numbers leading to a “near death experience” [Turner and Turner 1990]). A similar reconstitution of the (West) German field does not seem to have taken place in the sixties. A “theory boom” happened in both fields, but in Germany (Moebius 2021, chapter 6) it involved a Parsons *revival*, a sustained concern with modernity as a sense of the whole (via Habermas), and the programmatic legitimacy leant to “systems” thinking by Luhmann.¹⁰

So this might be part of the answer: this accumulated history means that modernity discourse infused the German field just as it was extracted from the American. Hence, “big theory” that engages with modernity in the style of Reckwitz and Rose remains an objective possibility in the German field while it has been immensely truncated in the American. But this is not exactly the case. The American field allows for modernity discourse; yet it remains imbued with what counts as sociological theory today, or is combined with other aspects of academic capital, as opposed to standing on its own. It is not discourse dispensed from the heights by a professional, as it seemed to be for Parsons and which, paradoxically, makes his writing more resemble *Gesellschaftstheorie* in the German field than anything currently existing in the American. Only a few in the American field still believe that sociological theory is, by itself, on the royal road to anywhere. It is more of a service project. The mainstream of the American field at present tends to endorse total (as opposed to immanent) critiques of modernity, including a focus on the imperial and racialized foundations of academic knowledge and to remediate epistemic justice, and skepticism toward a sense of the future as “progress” (see Seamster and Ray 2018). This is combined with pursuit of the fruits still available in a tempered sociological theory, most of which revolves around basic questions or puzzle-solving (see Benzecry, Reed and Krause 2017, 8ff), the resolution of which is worth it when it will be picked up by and “help” empirical research.¹¹

Not coincidentally, this modus operandi appears amid significant changes to the material conditions for theory production in the American field. We might wonder which direction

¹⁰ The interesting thing is that “systems theory” in the American field is not generally considered to be sociological. As “complexity theory,” it is translated through bridgework into the field to the extent that it is engaged at all. In part (perhaps in large part) this can be diagnosed as a Parsonian amnesia (not unlike my own).

¹¹ For the last couple decades this has revolved principally around questions of culture

the causal arrow points in. In many departments, the graduate level theory seminar has been condensed into a one-semester omnibus; jokes abound about the impossible task of constructing this syllabus.¹² Meanwhile rumors circulate. At some places (particularly Big Ten type places), “the theory course” may simply be abolished entirely, and replaced by additional methods training, against the wishes of graduate students.¹³ Teaching theory is among the lowest prestige and least consequential in the curriculum, typically given over to junior faculty, young associate professors, or even the hired adjunct seeking enough gigs to pay the bills.

Decisive shifts occur elsewhere in the material conditions. Book publishing and theory do not go hand in hand in the American field (in contrast to what Reckwitz and Rosa suggest [2023] that books are the “preferred format” for theory). The remaining major university presses (Chicago, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, Columbia, Stanford, Rutgers, UNC) with extensive sociology catalogs appear reluctant to publish anything that smells of big theory without a prior accumulation of symbolic capital as a top-notch empirical researcher. (This certainly speaks of the diminished capital that might be useful strictly for “doing theory”).¹⁴ Oxford and Cambridge University Presses may have some inclination (though, in the case of the latter, a critical realism series vampirically sucks up their theory publishings), but theory books at those venues are uncommon and infrequent. They are more common at places like Polity Press (Giddens’ press) where we find the English language translations of both Reckwitz and Rosa, which appears to do a yeoman’s labor. (When a big name American sociologist goes to publish in Polity, it takes the form of *What is Historical Sociology? Or What is Cultural Sociology?* When Reckwitz and Rosa go to publish there it takes the form of *Resonance* or *Society of Singularities*). Routledge and Palgrave continue to publish in a similar vein, but an apparent shift toward a content-growth model from a quality-control one means the prestige gap between them and university presses grows and grows. The latter (for now) contain the symbolic profits that can still be cashed in (e.g. tenure!). No junior scholar on the tenure track in the American field would perceive a manuscript landing at Polity, Routledge or Palgrave as a hurdle cleared, a step in the right direction.

There is a market logic at work here, reflecting academic publishing’s reorientation toward the heteronomous market, competing for what still remains of the general interest reader (Thornton and Ocasio 1999).¹⁵ University libraries still need stocked, as well, and presumably with non-general interest monographs. This is the critical natural resource for university press publishing (see Greco 2015). But how long should we expect library finances at even R1 universities to maintain this fragile instituted market when reading, if judged strictly (and impressionistically) by how libraries are typically used at universities by the paying customers, seems like a practice loosely (not essentially) coupled to the mission of universities?

¹² <https://kieranhealy.org/files/teaching/theory-by-complaining.pdf>

¹³ Here I report what was confided to me by graduate students at (literally) a Big Ten place, one that nevertheless includes a rich theory history.

¹⁴ To my knowledge, the last “theory book” published by a junior scholar, and which presumably played a big role in a tenure decision, through one of these presses was Isaac Reed’s *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (2011).

¹⁵ Consult the bookstore at any major American airport.

The public market for sociology books in the US has been shaped by a generation of urban ethnography. This appetite has appeared to dwindle, being displaced during the Trump years on various exposes of seemingly even more hidden parts and people in the country, in a kind of mass retrospective on “what happened” (Clinton 2017). In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, this was partially displaced by a sudden topical focus on race and racism (see Ray 2022, 125ff). Reckwitz and Rosa are probably right: the wordy and demanding theory book is probably the only venue to truly work out conceptual claims. But for those resident in the American field who sets out to do this, it is highly likely that the only market for what they produce will be other sociologists. The public market will, presumably, not pay much attention should they even be made privy to the existence of the work. After all, they have been made to trust a mediocre computer scientist *cum* network analyst (Pentland 2015) for “deep think” about social structure more than an accomplished sociologist (Martin 2009).

The American field itself, and its internal publication engines, offers a kind of safe haven, albeit limited, for theory, though seemingly now in a way that makes them less distinct. The American theory journals (*Sociological Theory*, or *ST* and *Theory & Society*, or *T&S*) that might move the needle in a job hire or tenure evaluation have smaller impact factors than mid-tier general or subfield specific journals. In *ST* and *T&S*, “theory only” articles, which is a category that would not have made much sense when these journals started in the late 1970s and early 1980s, may have become more the exception than the rule. The case-based theory application rooted in qualitative data analysis has emerged to make theory journals more resemble the table of contents of major general journals.¹⁶ “Empirical relevance” becomes a prominent point of evaluation and hierarchization, possibly so much so that it is hard to determine how to even evaluate a more theory-centric article setting out to make a conceptual point without data.¹⁷ Theory writing needs to justify itself more the less it seems to add anything particularly distinctive to the disciplinary self-consciousness created and recreated by published work. What remains of shared theoretical concerns in the American field might therefore be stuck in a repeat loop of key words carrying a heavy amount of epistemological and ontological weight (like “structure,” “agency,” and “culture”), but which have become so routinely used that many would probably balk at evidence of their actual conceptuality or historicity.

The most critical resource of the American sociological field, the only reliable and morphologically large audience it has, is the undergraduate student body, especially sociology majors in non top-tier departments (Turner and Turner 1990, 194). Undergraduates often associate sociology with a certain, historic appropriation of social justice on behalf of the state. Foundational funders in the American field (e.g. Russell Sage, Ford, National Science Foundation, among others) further appropriate this appropriation by establishing grant

¹⁶ Impressionistically, those journals might be a fourth or fifth choice rather than a first, which means they exist within the same subspace as the big generals. “Theory journal” is a moniker of increasingly less distinction in the field. Anecdotally, I can verify this in being asked to review, in a couple of cases, the same paper at the succession of journals that any member of the American field would expect of a paper for which the author has the highest aspirations. On both occasions, *ST* and *T&S* came late in the sequence.

¹⁷ I say this based on accumulated experience and my acquired habitus of journal review, applying equally to both acceptance and to rejection in a strange symmetry.

writing and policy deliverables as a metric of importance for the documentation of social problems. Both early and late stage research will ultimately lead to policy proposals, fueling reformist aspirations, but possibly within the narrow key allowable by elite capture and its mediation of “those who they consider problems” (see Táíwò 2022).

Certain discipline-wide habits were possibly created at an earlier time and relative to a different political field. Now, relative to the present US political field of dysfunction, a far-right judicial branch with federal power, and (particularly at the level of state government) academia as a political football for one major party, with the other dominated by remote party intellectuals and professional-managers, these habits may have become deeply hysteretical (Strand and Lizardo 2017).

How to “develop a meaningful relationship to the world” (e.g. Rosa’s “resonance”) is on the radar of American sociology, in a sense, but is translated into “community partnership” and “service learning.” American universities with their escalating price points and bloated administrative costs pitch majors on “skills and experiences,” most often designed to come in ready to consume form as resume builders, which can justify the cost of investment as a kind of “self-appreciation” of one’s status as human capital that (hopefully) will make itself true in a future market competition (Feher 2009). A quasi-vocational preparation students can expect as this is the least questionable. It is so disambiguated that it is not uncommon to find starting salary estimates listed alongside each possible major as public advertisement for prospective students. In this environment, the sheer immateriality and non-instrumentality of questions about “resonance” or “a society of singularities” are easily hackneyed. They may also deepen fears about the sociology major itself. As our brethren of the literature departments can certainly attest, “impracticality” can very rapidly assume the terrifying sound of the death knell and endless night. Hysteresis might, should it play out that way, yield a boutique sociology in the future, confined to academic spaces several degrees removed “from necessity” and to the insular fractions found there who can still “play seriously” about serious problems. Any hauntology of American sociology will, after all, reveal social voyeurism as its constant specter.

Après Moi, Le Déluge

All of this plays a role, I am arguing, in my wielding the dismissive category of “big theory” toward Reckwitz and Rosa, and the silence that mostly greets them on the part of those like me in the American field. But there are also material conditions and a history involved that unfolds on their native grounds. Both Reckwitz and Rosa hold chairs in “general and theoretical sociology” at German universities, specifically Humboldt University of Berlin (Reckwitz) and the University of Jena (Rosa), both of which are state institutions. They are therefore civil servants of high rank. For the American field, the closest equivalent to them would be a chaired professor at a public (state) university, and it borders on the unthinkable to imagine a similar chair given to a professor of that named speciality in the American

field—perhaps for the simple fact that it presently has no objective possibility.¹⁸ As suburb a category like “theoretische soziologie” is it is non-sequitur in the American field (outside of a brilliant but forgotten green-covered textbook with that exact title written by Randall Collins [1988]), though you might be surprised at the frequency and ease with which “theoretical sociology” rolls off the tongue of an undergraduate, a university administrator, or family relative without the confusion those two words combined seem to spawn among American sociologists. As Susen shows us, to be general and theoretical in the German field is to do both *Sozialtheorie*, presumably with the main audience being other sociologists, and *Gesellschaftstheorie*, presumably with a broad audience in mind. A strict materialist might say, as some have said about American sociology in public universities, that Rosa and Reckwitz are oriented to the public because of the threat of a taxpayer revolt; they are paid by the public after all. But this would only strike the American sociologist as that much more remarkable; in Germany, public sociology means *Gesellschaftstheorie* not the Michael Burawoy (2021) version of it.

From the perspective of the American field, with its discrepant political and scientific logics, what distinguishes Reckwitz and Rosa most of all in their material circumstances are probably those traits that would make their existence impossible in the American field. This might lead us to pose elementary questions to them, as if Rosa and Reckwitz had an entirely different occupation: “Do you teach?” “Do you teach large undergraduate classes?” “Do you advise theses and dissertations?” “Do you hold office hours?” “Sit on university committees?” All of these questions pertain to venues and situations that can, for an American sociologist, lead to a kind of crisis of confidence, as it brings them into contact with different audiences with different demands. The sociologist is tested differently in these venues by a whole range of factors: the esoteric properties of their knowledge and whether they can be received as exoteric (but also defeat exoteric knowledge), their potential for getting a dedicated graduate student a scarce academic job, their capacity to explain to far more powerful STEM colleagues in the American university setting that sociologists, too, use data—“they just don’t do it the way you do.”

For what they write, Reckwitz and Rosa (2023) appear to see themselves in a disciplinary knowledge field in a university setting, and thus bear the burden of being relevant to it. Yet, their critical theory (or “critical analytics” in Reckwitz’s words), as Susen shows, appears to be the least mindful of their craft or their own position as sociologists, and thus it appears the most transcendent and the least historic or local. Reckwitz and Rosa both find “modernity” only when they orient themselves that way, toward an extra-sociological space that accumulates a different history, and one that is nationally unspecific. This makes their work seem “cleft” to my eyes; a similar dual orientation is uncommon in my field. Susen focuses our attention both on the sociology (*Sozialtheorie*) available in Rosa and Reckwitz’s writing and to what they inherit as extra-sociological discourse (*Gesellschaftstheorie*). The latter appears to be the more autonomous aspect of their thought, their own appropriation of the extra-disciplinary history of modernity discourse allows *them* (rather than disciplinary

¹⁸ One prominent exception would be Jonathan Turner, who (noteworthy) is now emeritus at a public university.

relevance) to be the test of their own thinking (what Weber in “Science as a Vocation” called an inward orientation to concepts).

Some evidence suggests that the German field may eventually come to mirror many aspects of the American field, and that the transformation may be already in motion (Moebius 2021, chapter 8). The material conditions for a Reckwitz or Rosa might not be so different from those that render someone like them objectively impossible in the American field at present. Indeed, they seem to acknowledge as much. They treat the “theory of society” with a kind of conversationist’s care as if it were an endangered species (see Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 1-2). Perhaps they worry that they might be the “last of a generation” with no one like them coming again in the future. The late Zygmunt Bauman comes immediately to mind. The immense gravity of Bauman, who seems to stand as the exemplar (in the Kuhnian sense) of *Gesellschaftstheorie*, pulls Reckwitz and Rosa (willingly or not) into orbit as satellites. Bauman finds no equivalent in the American field. But there is only so much we can learn from Bauman about Rosa and Reckwitz; after all, he left *Sozialtheorie* behind. A more accurate conjecture finds Rosa and Reckwitz receiving a *Habermasian* treatment should their fate have unfolded in an alternate universe.

Rosa and Reckwitz address questions and puzzles of sociological theory that are more or less recognizable in the American field, like the dualisms of structure and agency, of individuals and social relations, of culture and materiality. As Susen demonstrates, Rosa and Reckwitz also seek to balance contingency and universality. Both of these traits were part of the appeal of Habermas’ concepts (e.g. “the public sphere”) that found remarkable traction in the American field for a brief time. Utter “Habermas” to an American sociologist at random. Their response will probably be uniformly negative; still, you will get a response. Utter “Reckwitz” or “Rosa” to them; you should only expect silence. The transatlantic importation of French theory is by now a well-documented (Cusset 2008) historical event, with trans-Atlantic (even global) consequences still unfolding to this day (more on that below). Less well-documented is the importation of German social theory. By any measure, Habermas (and to a lesser extent Niklas Luhmann and Axel Honneth) is the key figure here.¹⁹ Each of his books, at least up to the early 1990s, were reviewed by *AJS*, *SF* and *CS*. *AJS* dedicated no less than three extensive review essays to Habermas (Giddens 1977; Alexander 1985; Sica 1991). Habermas’ two-volume opus *The Theory of Communicative Action* was at the center of substantive articles published in *AJS* during roughly the same period (van den Berg 1980; Antonio 1989). This is not to mention “the public sphere” as the topic of a prodigious and meteoric publication phenomenon in America that only fizzled out in the last decade.

Not unimportant to the successful importation of Habermas to America was to promote him as an ally for Parsons amid the extensive de-Parsonizing that coincided with the sixties. Parsons would land back in Germany, seeding another deviation from the history of the American field: the very existence of Niklas Luhmann.²⁰ The capital of the German field, like

¹⁹ Many of Luhmann’s books were reviewed in *AJS*, *SF* and *CS* and a select few of Honneth’s have been.

²⁰ Rosa and Reckwitz (2023) quote Luhmann’s famous lines, which to my American eyes appear like a bold, audacious, and likely unsuccessful grant proposal: “Topic: the theory of society; Duration: 30 years; Costs: none.”

the habitual expectations it shapes, also includes the accumulated labor of Frankfurt School critical theory, with which Rosa is directly connected but as Susen notes seeks in various ways to go beyond.²¹ Judging by their reviews in American journals, Rosa and Reckwitz's sociology draws the least attention; their extra-sociological *Gesellschaftstheorie* draws the most attention.

Meanwhile, back in America, there is no one like Parsons today, no one of his stature who takes a similar approach as Reckwitz and Rosa and dear to their sociological theory, as lending a hand to developing a sense of the “whole” both in general and as an analysis of the present. An unintended consequence of drawing Habermas into alliance with Parsons, however, was also to open a small space of objective possibility in the American field for what probably appears most like *Gesellschaftstheorie* to the German eye (judging by some of the books Rosa and Reckwitz mention) when they cast a gaze at American sociology, while, to the American eye, these “socially instituted forms of communication” carry their unsavory historicity all too closely with them. This is not because of the Newtonian passage of time. Rather, it indicates the passage of symbolic struggles that results in essentially nothing remaining in the American field to accumulate this history. It appears that the last article of this kind to appear in *AJS* is now almost a quarter century old (Antonio 2000).

And thus, I am led back to my category of “big theory” through this kind of confrontation of contending points of view, of a different field and its perspective on my own and my perspective on it. I feel less particular as a result. What becomes apparent to me now is a blank spot in my cognitive map of my field, wiped clean it seems, leaving only amnesia behind.

Bildungsromantheorie

For those (like myself) who regularly teach a classical and contemporary course rotation for graduate students, the importation of French theory, along with some select German imports like Habermas, and an Anglo mediator like Giddens, is still the referent for “contemporary theory.” This is a “bizarre situation” (Lizardo 2014). It means that Reckwitz and Rosa resonate less than Habermas who has not been relevant for a long time. Still, knowledge of him might come through routine pedagogic practice (e.g. he is still found on a graduate syllabus, or on the reading list for a qualifying exam) rather than having to seek out and “learn” Habermas, as in the case of the two contemporary Germans. What happened in Paris, with its triangular extensions to Cambridge and Habermas' famously modernist house outside Munich, between roughly 1968 and 1989 may assume the form of something like the Harlem Renaissance or Athenian golden age: a site of immensely charismatic cultural production. The routinization goes on but grows tired as nothing replaces it.

²¹ There has never been anything like the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research, though maybe the closest analogue, strictly from a knowledge formation point of view, might be the RAND Corporation (Turner 2023).

Once again I am drawn toward a possible solution to my problem. “Big theory” is a category for anything that resembles what once had an objective possibility in a past iteration of the American field but has since moved nowhere, because nothing has picked it up.

“Contemporary theory” is not actually social theory in every possible meaning of the word; it is not actually a temporal designation. It is an accumulation of history. If my argument convinces even me, then the limits of what I can perceive are shaped by a past of symbolic violence recapitulated in the present. The American sociological field has several species of theory, but whatever type we consult, they all appear to render some aspect (and perhaps most) of Rosa and Reckwitz outside of cognition, except insofar as they harken back to a sociology of the American field’s past.

So let’s take stock of the categories. I have “big theory.” Reckwitz and Rosa have *Sozialtheorie* and *Gesellschaftstheorie*. The American Field has Abend’s 7 theory types, in addition to some acknowledgement of social theory (as a trading zone) and sociological theory (as a puzzle-solving endeavor); it also has “contemporary theory” and it did have “social theory” in Antonio’s sense. This is what appears to me, when I read the German work, confusingly as “big theory.” As I use it to be dismissive and skeptical of Rosa and Reckwitz, it turns out that what I am doing is recapitulating an *actual* dismissal of a past American social theory.

I have argued that this scenario is only explicable by tracing the disappearance of the kind of theory that Rosa and Reckwitz most seem to resemble. This is a valid enough point, I claim, but not because it is *Gesellschaftstheorie* that American sociologists were doing back then. It is because there is a missing (shadow) category of “social theory” that disappeared in the American field (at least in the major journals) around about 2000 CE. I have tried to extract this category and its lurking presence in my disciplinary unconscious. But it might be worth finishing up by suggesting that this allows me to see even more clearly still other classified classifiers of “theory,” this time from outside an academic field like sociology, and the reasons why we are more likely to find the missing social theory here and not in American *or* German sociology at present.

The historian Francois Cusset (2008) in his book on the French importation coins the phrase *bildungsromantheorie* to refer to the extra-academic interest in “theory” within the American space, a truly astonishing paradox, as it persists despite all major factors working against its very existence.²² As the phrase itself might imply, this *theorie* is not “theory” in any sense I’ve used so far, as it involves something more like the use of “theory” to refer to a practice: the mostly outside and independent of an academic mediation reading and discussion of theory

²² The current iteration of the space features things like, Podcasts (“Plastic Pills,” “Acid Horizon”), YouTube channels (CCK Philosophy), books published by academic (e.g. University of Minnesota Press’s Forerunners series is an example) and non-academic presses (Verso), and politically aligned journals of newsworthy stuff (*Jacobin*). This gives at least some snapshot of the space at the present moment. It has internet-based contours, and its morphology and market of producers and consumers is certainly made possible by the critical contradiction, alongside debt financing, of the American university behemoth: the ceaseless production of PhDs and the ceaseless contraction in the market for tenure track positions. The sheer cheapness of the cultural production apparatus required in the era of YouTube also factors into the political economy of the space.

removed from its arbitrary coincidence with research productivity and bureaucratically defined benchmarks. Theory is a practice that does something different among the people we find here, who, we might speculate, are contradictions in being members of the reading class but not the university field. In Cusset's words, theory in this space serves as a "form of subjectification, reenchantment, and even emancipation from inherited and environmental shackles" (2008, 224).

It should not surprise us that both Reckwitz and Rosa have more of a presence in this space than they do in the American sociological field.²³ It should also not surprise us that American sociology, with some exceptions, is mostly absent from this space—its universal currency is "big theory."

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²³ Just one indication is publishing and interviews in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on the part of both Rosa and Reckwitz. *LARB* surely is part of "the space." I would not say *NYRB* is though.

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