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Comment on Richard Swedberg/2. On Swedberg's Account of Theorizing

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/2

On Swedberg's Account of Theorizing

by Mustafa Emirbayer

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Richard Swedberg's paper, "On Charles S. Peirce's Lecture 'How to Theorize' (1903)," is a follow-up and pendant to his important *Theory and Society* article, "Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the Context of Discovery." The *Theory and Society* essay presents to sociologists and other social scientists a bold and provocative new agenda: "to assign an independent place to theorizing (as opposed to theory) and also to develop some basic rules for how to theorize" [Swedberg 2012a, 1]. The present article elaborates on this agenda. "Since there exists very little material on how to theorize," it contends, it is "important to draw attention to the material that does exist" [Swedberg 2012b], including Charles S. Peirce's work, which Swedberg discusses ably.

Swedberg's work has the considerable merit not only of advancing Peirce scholarship on a significant topic, but in the process also of opening up an important new terrain for discussion and debate. The turn from completed, published theory back to theorizing; the close examination of fundamental operations involved in theorizing; the inquiry into how to teach skills in theorizing – all these are welcome and refreshing innovations. And some of Swedberg's most interesting observations concern the neglect of theorizing in early- to mid-Twentieth century philosophy of science; in the sociological writings of Merton and Zetterberg; and in the theory construction movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In what follows, however, I wish to highlight some of what I see as the flaws in Swedberg's program. In so doing, I wish to devote critical attention to both papers, since difficulties only partly visible in the present essay are

more apparent when set against the backdrop of his earlier and broader formulations in the *Theory and Society* article.

Let me set aside the problematic reliance in both papers on the long-questioned distinction between contexts of discovery and of verification (for a brilliant critique, see Somers 1998). What is most striking in Swedberg's work is the highly stylized contrast he draws between the two contexts. Repeatedly, he presents discovery as creative, imaginative, inspired, and fresh, while verification he portrays as rule-bound and dull: "The research process [...] consists of two phases: an early and imaginative phase of theorizing and a later phase in which the major research task is carried out according to the rules of the profession" [Swedberg 2012a, 9]. "In brief, creativity is primarily what matters when a theory is devised; and scientific logic and rigor is primarily what matters in the context of justification" [*ibidem*, 6]. Social scientists who devote much creative labor to research design, generating data, and confronting theory with evidence will find much to argue with in this invidious comparison.

Theorizing also is presented in nonsociological fashion as a deeply personal, expressive act; we have here a spirit of romanticism and aesthetic individualism. "The act of theorizing is deeply personal in the sense that you can only theorize well by doing it yourself and drawing on your own experiences and resources" [*ibidem*, 2]. "The goal is for the student to learn to theorize on his or her own" [*ibidem*, 2]. "Creative theorizing is a personal enterprise and everybody needs to find his or her own way of doing it" [*ibidem*, 32]. "To be good at abduction essentially means going into oneself [...]" [*ibidem*, 18]. "Theorizing [...]" necessitates a personal exploration [...] To theorize well you need to open yourself up, to observe yourself, and to listen carefully to yourself" [*ibidem*, 33-34]. (In the present essay, Swedberg also cites Peirce on the importance of consulting one's subconscious.) This sentiment is combined with a democratic-populist sensibility: "Theorizing is deeply democratic in that it is built on the assumption that everyone can theorize [...] The goal is for every social scientist to be his or her own theorist" [*ibidem*, 29]. "There is no reason to believe that only a small number of gifted scholars can produce theory. Everyone who can think, can ultimately also theorize; and the project of theorizing is therefore inherently democratic" [*ibidem*, 33]. Here Swedberg cites Kant; in the present essay [Swedberg 2012b] he also quotes Peirce to similar effect.

Such a view is inadequate for several reasons. For one thing, theorizing as it actually occurs is very much a process of grasping the current state of an intellectual field, intuiting how one can make an original contribution to it, and inserting oneself into its scholarly debates and controversies in a novel way. None of this is addressed in Swedberg's account. For another thing, imaginative self-insertion into an intellectual field requires deep knowledge of a social-scientific tradition. Apart from a few

remarks about putting in the requisite hours of theoretical study – “the 10,000-Hour Rule of Malcolm Gladwell” [Swedberg 2012a, 8] – Swedberg pays remarkably little attention to this crucial aspect of the theorizing process. We hear almost nothing about the importance of cultivating a *theoretical culture* through self-discipline and large expenditures of time and effort, that is, through work that entails a good deal more than reaching into oneself or, as Swedberg stresses in both papers, “free association” [e.g., Swedberg 2012b]. Perhaps his silence on this score is due to the sharp discordance between this high entry fee and his own upbeat, “everyone can do it” message.

Swedberg’s arguments are inadequate for yet another reason. His discussion of what he calls the “craft” of theorizing [e.g., Swedberg 2012a, 16] entirely neglects the all-important role of mentorship. “*One gradually teaches oneself how to theorize,*” writes Swedberg [*ibidem*, 16-17; italics added]. “[*S*]tudents learn to theorize themselves” [*ibidem*, 29; italics added]. “I tell them to write up their theorizing exercises, and that *I will not read them.* [...] (O)ne should in my view also *refrain from telling the students how to write up their exercises*” [*ibidem*, 32; italics added]. Time-honored models for teaching craftsmanship, models that involve setting an example, providing careful *in situ* guidance, and, through systematic instruction in a workshop setting (as in a medieval guild), gradually shaping in students a new intellectual habitus – these are all ignored. We hear primarily about introspection and self-instruction.

Finally, Swedberg’s view, despite the lip-service it pays to reflexivity [*ibidem*, 12-13], fails to recognize its own scholastic posture. Intellectual life is presented as a playful, “as-if” way of being, “very close to the ‘let’s pretend’ mode of play which enables children to open imaginary worlds,” as Bourdieu once put it. This posture “is what incites people to enter into the play-world of theoretical conjecture and mental experimentation (and) to raise problems for the pleasure of solving them, [...] not because they arise in the world, under the pressure of urgency” [Bourdieu 2000, 12-13]. Swedberg’s summary of Peirce on “creative fancy,” on replicating “the plasticity of childhood,” and on safeguarding what Swedberg calls “the magic time” for “just let(ing) go” [Swedberg 2012b] captures the essence of this scholastic orientation. The lack of critical reflexivity here is troubling. The theorizing scholar is encouraged to engage in playful flights of the imagination, but in Swedberg’s account he or she never seems mindful of the larger pressures and urgencies of social life. These never seem to enter into his or her theorizing process. Hence the overall sense of frivolity that permeates Swedberg’s enterprise. Why theorize at all, much less do all the other work that social investigators do? We never really are given a satisfactory answer.

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/2

On Swedberg's Account of Theorizing

Abstract: As part of the larger project of trying to revitalize social theory by drawing attention to theorizing, I analyze the views of philosopher Charles S. Peirce on this topic. I take my departure in his 1903 lecture called "How to Theorize" and note that for Peirce theorizing was closely linked to his concept of abduction. In analyzing this central concept in Peirce's work, I suggest that we may want to look at it especially from a practical point of view. More precisely, what can we learn from Peirce in terms of concrete tips and suggestions for how we ourselves should go about theorizing? I also supplement the material from the 1903 lecture with what can be found in Peirce's later writings.

Keywords: Theory, social theory, theorizing, Peirce, Charles S., abduction.

Mustafa Emirbayer is Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He has published numerous influential essays on classical and contemporary social theory, organization studies, ethnomethodology, social network analysis, cultural sociology, social movement studies, research on social revolutions, social work, studies of civil society and the public sphere, and the historical sociology of education. Currently, he is completing a two-volume project on the sociology of race in America (coauthored with Matthew Desmond).