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Comment on Richard Swedberg/4. On the Politics and Culture of Theorizing-as-Abduction

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/4

On the Politics and Culture of Theorizing-as-Abduction

by Isaac Ariail Reed

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With the C.S. Peirce renaissance well underway in sociology, Richard Swedberg enters the fray in a precise and useful way. He connects abduction to theorizing, and by doing so brings to contemporary theoretical problems in sociology both Peirce's meditations on inquiry and his philosophy of mind. Furthermore, Swedberg marshals Peirce's insights for the project of theorizing in the context of discovery, thus developing a crucial link between Peirce and the philosophy of science of Karl Popper.¹ In what follows, I contextualize Swedberg's interpretation of Peirce, suggesting that it moves us towards a new set of "reflexive" or metatheoretical problems in sociology, and then develop some questions for Swedberg's Peirce-inflected conceptualization of theorizing.

In his early work, Jürgen Habermas [1971] used Peirce – indeed, some of the very same texts that Swedberg uses – to set up a non-positivist logic of inquiry for *natural* science, and then to connect this logic to "purposive-rational action" and the human interest in control and manipulation. The point of Habermas' use of Peirce, then, was to develop a distinction between what was at the root of the experimental natural sciences (a human interest in control), and what was at the root of the historical-hermeneutic and "critical" sciences (an interest in understanding and emancipation, respectively). Though Habermas has since re-engaged pragmatism many times,

¹ Justin Cruickshank [2007] also develops a link between Popper and pragmatism.

this fundamental division remains with us; it is a way of acknowledging the successes of, but not imitating, natural science in social theory.

In direct contrast to this, Roy Bhaskar [1998] introduced retrodution as part of a schema for the possibility of naturalism in social science. In critical realism, the idea is that, even without experiments, and without much hope for prediction, the social sciences could still engage in scientific explanation by moving from facts to what explains them. In his original argument Bhaskar suggested that theoretical re-description of the components of an event or phenomenon would allow the investigator to bring his knowledge of “mechanisms” or “nomic statements” to bear, and thus build an explanation.

Bhaskar’s original reference for retrodution was the transcendental retrodutions of Immanuel Kant.² In more recent work, critical realists have drawn a distinction between abduction and retrodution that in some ways mirrors the move by Swedberg to put abduction in the context of discovery, and thus a discussion has emerged about realism and pragmatism that has prominent places for Peirce, Kant, and Popper [e.g., Bertilsson 2004; Danemark et. al. 2002; Cruickshank 2007]. What is at stake here? By linking retrodution to his central triad of the empirical, the actual, and the real, Bhaskar, and later other critical realists, put *tremendous ontological pressure* on retrodution as an intellectual operation. In critical realism, then, “retrodution” loses its pragmatic character as it becomes inseparable from the problem of determining the fundamental ontology of the social, and thus deeply woven into debates on structure and agency, emergence and micro/meso/macro, concept-dependence [Cruickshank 2004; King 2004; Reed 2011].

From my reading of Swedberg, he is after something quite different. He is not proposing a social ontology or micro foundations, nor does he necessarily think that is where better theorizing will lead us. Instead, he is after the cultivation of the capacity to theorize, a capacity that will produce a wide variety of concepts and proposed explanations, not necessarily ontologically consistent with each other, that can be carried into the context of justification as the basis for research design. This is, in my view, a use of Peirce that is liberating for social theory, useful for sociology, and true to the spirit of Peirce’s philosophy. Whether it can liberate us once and for all from the question of the differences between natural and social science is a harder question.

As a “friend of discovery” [Gutting 1980, cited in Aufrecht 2010, 3], then, Swedberg faces the problem of understanding the *structure and process* of theoriza-

² Hence an interesting twist: Bhaskar de-transcendentalizes Kant, moving towards Marx’s *Capital* as the avatar of social scientific retrodution, while Habermas uses the pragmatic Peirce as the basis of his quasi-transcendental account of knowledge and human interests. Habermas dropped the transcendental language in the work that followed *Knowledge and Human Interests*, however.

tion. The basic issue is this: Swedberg rejects relegating theorizing, with discovery, to some inscrutable realm of hunches, dreams, and serendipity. Instead, he wants to develop the capacity to theorize by specifying its rules (even if these rules are partly about breaking rules), and by understanding its process. Two aspects of this process stand out from his interpretation of Peirce's "How to Theorize": surprise and economy. And they lead to two different sets of questions.

For Swedberg, observation is key to theorizing, *not* as a verification procedure but as the origin of the surprises that unseat mental habits and create problems to be solved. But what is observational "surprise"? It is an intriguing category, which appears to have some affinity with Kuhnian "anomalies." For Kuhn (or...for a certain interpretation of "Kuhn"), anomalies are relative to a given "paradigm." And paradigms are totalizing world pictures. This produces a very unpragmatic understanding of social science, because it then becomes more difficult to connect the intellectual problems of the sociological investigator to actual social reality. So, it is clear that both Peirce and Swedberg would reject the radical Kuhnians. "Paradigms" give a far too totalizing picture of the impact of scientific cultures on the working mind. But what would Swedberg propose as a replacement? For what we are really talking about here is the cultural dimension of what Peirce called the community of inquiry, and how its schemas of representation impact both the perception of surprises and the construction of solutions to scientific problems. What model of culture, I would like to know, would Swedberg choose to characterize the process of theorizing – either in its real or idealized forms? For surely how the culture of the community of inquiry works will affect its members' abilities to theorize.

Theorizing, then, has a culture. And we know from Swedberg and Peirce it has an economy. But does theorizing have a politics? Peirce explains how choosing among competing hypotheses arrived at via abduction involves a calculation of the resources (including effort or intellectual labor) required to actually test each hypothesis. But what are the authority relations that affect this process? This remains unaddressed in Swedberg's account. One direction to take in answering this question is set out in the now-classic theories of the politics of knowledge: feminist standpoint theory; the Marxist critique of bourgeois social science; postcolonial theory; Bourdieu's account of symbolic power in the academic field. However, there is also a Weberian possibility.

It may be that the dialectic between mental habit and creativity is being driven, in part, by the differential impact of tradition, legal-rational, and charismatic authority in the intellectual realm. If this were so, we could then identify how the choice of hypothesis is affected by different sources of legitimate domination in theoretical work, namely: 1) the affinity of the hypothesis with extant regimes of thought in

social science (traditional authority); 2) the degree to which the hypothesis can be clearly operationalized and thus subject to tests according to current agreed upon and written out methodological rules (legal-rational authority); and 3) the nearness of the hypothesis to new and disruptive thinkers in the intellectual terrain (charismatic authority). I would, however, like to know if Swedberg thinks these processes impact the act of abduction itself, or only the choice between which abductions to test. How “political” (in the sense of subject to legitimated intellectual domination) is his theorizer?

All of this, of course, recalls a very old formula: can we produce an analysis of the culture, and the political economy, of theorizing? Can we say something clear about how culture and political economy intersect in causing certain theories to be produced in the first place, and how they *should* intersect to produce better theory production? Without such an account, Swedberg’s combination of Peirce and Popper risks becoming too individualist. Instead, I would urge him to theorize the social mechanisms of the community of inquiry, for not only the context of justification (e.g. peer-review, methodological training in research design construction and hypothesis testing), but also for the context of discovery. Peirce imagined a highly dynamic, critical community of inquiry that would collectively approach knowledge of reality in the long run [Habermas 1971; Haskell 1984]; he was certainly less clear on how this would work in social science (sans experiment) than in natural science.

In the end, my questions and suggestions are based in Peirce’s location of scientific rationality at the level of the scientific community, an important idea that has recently been developed at length by Helen Longino [2002]. Swedberg’s project for cultivating theorizing is, if not a scientific intellectual movement, certainly a collective project for the reform of sociology; its radicalism in this regard should not be underestimated. I agree with Swedberg that the cultivation of better theorizing can lead to better (more creative, more insightful, and ultimately more true) sociology. But this eventuality is only likely to come about if we adequately conceptualize the politics and culture of theorizing, as well as its individual manifestations and its economics. Theorizing is, even within an individual mind, a deeply intersubjective phenomenon. Could we move from “how to theorize” to “how to theorize together”?

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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.

Isaac Ariail Reed is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado. He is the author of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the use of theory in the human sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). His current work addresses the cultural and social transformation of colonial North America, and theories of power and domination.