WHAT THEORISTS DO

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Abstract: This essay explores the different ways of doing theory. Using highly structured, strongly causal, and proposition-based "grand theory" as a reference point, I describe and provide examples of three alternative approaches: critical theory, heuristic theory, and inter-textual theory. My intent is to encourage urban theorists to pay as much attention to how they theorize as they do to the meaning of "the urban." [Key words: theory, urban, knowledge production.]

In the literature on cities, theory building mainly involves interrogating the "urban." Of lesser concern is how we theorize.[2] Phil Hubbard (2006, p. 3) is clear on this point. The major deficiency of urban theory, he maintains, is its avoidance of "the materiality of the city." What theory needs is a set of "key ideas," parsimoniously presented, as to "what cities are, what they do and how they work" (p. 6). He proposes four: (1) representations of the city and the discourses in which action is embedded; (2) everyday, material practices; (3) mobility and the concomitant negotiation of spatial scales; and (4) networks and connectivity. These ideas are the basis for an "ontological framework for thinking about cityness" (p. 248). In short, absent "an appropriate language and vocabulary for describing cities" (p. 247), there is no urban theory. The message is that the act of theorizing is either inconsequential or inseparable from the sorting out of the subject matter.

I am not criticizing Hubbard or the many others (see, for example, Storper, 2001; Leitner and Sheppard, 2003; Parker, 2004; Roy, 2011) who view the development of urban theory in this way. The lack of attention to theorizing is an absence in their work, not a flaw. Certainly, how we conceive of the city and define the "urban"—that is, how we manage ontologically—is unavoidable for theorizing the city. If there is a challenge facing urban theory, however, it resides not just in the adjective but in the noun. When we focus on the meaning of "urban," our attention turns to theory's objects: globalization, governance, racial segregation; to issues of scale: local, regional, global; and to social change as brought about by actors (banks, mayors, social movements), forces (urbanization, migration), and cultural values (anti-urbanism, innovation, xenophobia). But doing so, and thereby avoiding the task of theorizing, seems to harbor two assumptions. One is that the crafting of theory is unproblematic. The other is that theory is, procedurally, just one thing—as if the only significant differences are those involving subject matter, for example, the discrepancies between what Edward Glaeser (2011) and Saskia Sassen (1991) think about cities. Neither assumption is defensible. Crafting theories takes skill, and theorists, when doing so, have to make numerous choices regarding their theoretical paths. The way we reflect on the world is as important, if not more so, than what we think about it.

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[2]There is also a lack of attention to methodology in theory-building arguments, as Lake (2005) has maintained.

The purpose of this essay is to encourage urban scholars to pay as much attention to how they think about the city as they do to the qualities that give it ontological presence. I do so by offering a number of stylized "types" of theorizing, illustrating them with examples from the urban literature, and exploring their differences. My assumption is that by reflecting on what we mean by and how we go about theorizing, we become more critical as scholars and position ourselves for unanticipated insights. The way we theorize influences what we "see" and label as eventful. To write urban theory without attending to how theorizing is done is to take up only one of its challenges.

Of course, a large literature exists on the meaning and performance of theory, particularly if one includes the philosophy of science. A glance at the latter finds Andrew Sayer (1992) exploring the differences between verification and falsification, Roy Bhaskar (1989) ruminating on the differences among transcendental, scientific, and critical realism, and Patrick Baert (2005) assessing the ideas of key figures—Emile Durkheim, Karl Popper, Richard Rorty—on the philosophy of knowledge. Overall, this literature is intensely semantic and indifferent to substantive content. Is explanation or interpretation preferable? Should we be guided by Max Weber or Bruno Latour? How is "reality" even known?

Overlapping the philosophy of science literature are two others. One is found mostly within sociology and offers instructions on how to do theory (Stinchcombe, 1968; Blalock, 1969; Abbott, 2004). A standard set of themes is discussed: teleological versus functional explanations, one-way versus recursive causal structures, and the nature of the epistemic correlation between concepts and indicators. A third body of literature uses broad distinctions to highlight the fundamental choices made when one theorizes. This literature often blurs the distinction between theory and method. Examples include Lin's (1998) positivist versus intrepretivist approaches, Weiss's (1966) analytical versus holistic research designs, and Barnes's (2001) epistemological and hermeneutic theorizing.

Written neither in the style of the philosophy of science nor meant to be a guide to constructing theory, this essay takes as its model Albert O. Hirschman's "The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding" (1970), one of the best articles ever written about how to think theoretically. In it, Hirschman distinguishes between paradigms and historical narrative, and uses an example of each to connect the way we theorize to how reality is conceived, what we discover, how we position ourselves in relation to our subjects, and the possibilities for collective and progressive action. His core distinction is vulnerable to innumerable criticisms from a variety of intellectual positions. But this distinction works, it anchors the nuances of his argument while avoiding the entanglements that haunt the usual epistemological discussion.

My intention is to mimic that tradition—to draw broad distinctions, tie ideas to practices, and be useful (see also Flyvbjerg, 2001). Like Hirschman, my argument pivots on a series of analytical categories—types of theorizing—derived not from the terminology of the philosophy of science but from the experience of reading the urban literature. My objective is to identify what urban scholars actually write and to reflect on their approaches rather than to begin with a philosophical framework and then assume that the literature fits snugly within it. The types emerge from a sense that some theorists make use of formal propositions and are intent on developing major, expansive arguments; others lead with critical commentary; a third group works with short, loosely organized lists of urban attributes; and a fourth cohort focuses on the texts of other theorists. In addition, like Hirschman and unlike most scholars who write theory, I include examples of different

theoretical approaches. Examples problematize categories as they ground one's thinking in real-world practices. Rather than analyzing "the meanings and validity of the concepts that others use to explore or understand" the world (Schorske, 1997, p. 299), I am concerned with what theorists actually do.

As a second disclaimer, typologies and the types that comprise them are unavoidably problematic, not to mention highly unstable (see, for example, Wyly [2011] on positivism). Consequently, the ways one might actually theorize are innumerable and few theorists maintain purity in the face of the need to make their arguments convincing. Although categories might be helpful, they are always artificial. Urban theorists face a similar problem when they carve up the city (Amin and Graham, 1997). From a richly complex and unorganized reality (Jubien, 2001), they select a few qualities to represent the "urban," ignore others, and offer labels that speak more to the social construction of these qualities than their empirical integrity. Therefore, and this hardly seems worth saying, I make no claims that the types I propose are integral, incommensurate, or the only ways to theorize.

Similarly, I am uninterested in whether one or another way of theorizing is best for urban scholarship, whether it be critical urban geography, urban planning, or urban history. Such a task strikes me as inherently misguided as well as irritatingly sectarian. There is no best way to theorize; there are different ways with different consequences for what one finds, understands, and conveys to others—and for one's politics. In this, I agree with Barnes (2009) and Wyly (2011) on the need for a pluralist conversation. Nevertheless, I do have preferences.

BACKGROUND

At one time, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, a particular way of theorizing dominated in the social sciences (Schorske, 1997): what I call *grand theories*, and which Barnes (2001) labels as epistemological. Such theories were concept-driven, self-contained, proposition-based, relentlessly causal, and abstract. Subsequently, though, they lost their allure (Barnes, 2001; Rodgers, 2011). Their seeming imperviousness to other points of view, failure to interrogate concepts, and political abstention came to outweigh their scope, internal coherence, and promise of simplicity. Heavily influenced by formal logics (as encountered in analytical philosophy) and the natural sciences (physics in particular), grand theorists undertook a theoretical project that required social reality to conform to theoretical demands for consistency and elegance (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In a postmodern, post-structural world of bricolage, situated and embodied knowledges, and differences, however, consistency and elegance have little value. With some exceptions, what passes as urban theory today is theory as a fluid and contingent way of exploring the logics and meanings of reality, not theory as a set of formal propositions.

The purpose of theory is to make sense of the world. To do so, theorists engage in abstractions and the generalizations that flow from them. And whereas theory is almost always abstract, abstraction is not theory. What concerns me here is that theory can be constructed in various ways. I begin with grand theorizing and then discuss three other approaches: (1) critical theorizing that differs from grand theory in its ideology and rejection of positivism; (2) heuristic theorizing that abandons the formal claims (i.e., proposition-making) and totalizing impulse of grand theory; and (3) inter-textual theorizing that focuses on the intellectual positions of particular theorists and schools of thought. Although I do not

undertake an analytical comparison, I am generally concerned with, and will eventually comment on, the way in which these approaches use evidence, function politically, and position themselves in relation to both their subjects and collective action.

GRAND THEORY

Geoffrey West, trained as a physicist, "considers urban theory to be a field without principles, much like physics before Kepler pioneered the laws of planetary motion in the 17th century" (Lehrer, 2010, p. 48). He argues that all cities are the same. Focusing on what makes them unique—their differences—diverts our attention from the underlying logics—the deep structure—that they share. His goal is an urban science that discovers and codifies the "rules that govern everything" (p. 48). These rules explain how cities grow and develop. And although "every fundamental law has exceptions" (p. 50), the essential theory, if properly formulated, will remain both true and powerful. West is a grand theorist.

Grand theory appears when scholars craft formal arguments using precisely defined concepts and highly specified relationships, limit their attention to a few of each (thereby adhering to the criterion of parsimony), and set out to capture the underlying logic of the reality under investigation (Abbott, 2001). Causality is privileged, and testable propositions are the sites where theory encounters empirical evidence. The quarry is the enduring logic that explains and even transcends the evidence, and grand theorists pursue this logic by striving to exhaust the relevant factors that might explain a given phenomenon. As explanation, grand theory is designed to bring order and meaning to "the data." In fact, the data stand for reality; they are valid representations of the world with no slippage between one and the other, a position that defines positivism. For many of these theorists, explanation also establishes the basis for prediction. Such theory tends to be quite abstract—the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 34) labeled it "drunk on syntax"—and aims through abstraction to achieve a high level of generalization.

Whether grand theorists or not, most social scientists believe strongly that their obligation is to offer explanations and they do so in relatively abstract language. A social science should enable us to understand how society works. This requires the stripping away of the particularities and minor perturbations—the noise—that are always present as well as the uncovering of the embedded logics that give phenomena their distinctiveness. Social theory has to erase the inconsequential details to reveal causal forces. Description, often characterized as "simple" description, is, at best, prelude to explanation. It is explanation that constitutes theory. As explanation becomes more encompassing, attaining coverage through abstraction, it becomes grand (Lenski, 1988). And, as it reveals the essential logic governing the data, it also becomes predictive; core logics (it is assumed) change slowly, thereby enabling the (near) future to be much like the present.

This bias for abstraction co-exists uneasily with the interest in testing propositions with independently derived and empirical evidence. What does one do with the exceptions, the noise, the errors, and the unavoidable variations in the data? These qualities push the theory toward concreteness, abstraction's opposite (Sayer, 1992). Grand theorists have several ways of coping with such anomalies. They also are dismissive of the problems that arise if one draws a distinction between the evidence and the reality it supposedly represents. For them, the data are unproblematic representations. No reality lies hidden beneath them, except the abstract logic that governs the reality that the data themselves

mirror. To this extent, grand theory has a conservative bias; its goal is to explain the status quo, not discover an alternative, potential, or emancipatory reality (Wyly, 2011).

One group that clings to grand theory are the urban economists. Consider the work of Edward Glaeser, one of its best-known practitioners. In "Growth in Cities" published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1992, Glaeser and his co-authors considered three theories of economic growth, each of which centers on technological externalities. The shared hypothesis is that the growth of urban economies depends on innovations in one firm that increase the productivity of other firms. Innovation leads to the commercialization of new products and processes, and thereby attracts investment capital, boosts employment, creates new businesses, and causes existing businesses to expand. Economic theorists, however, disagree about the way knowledge spillover works. The Marshall-Arrow-Romer (MAR) approach argues that the key is the sharing and borrowing of ideas among firms within the same industry. Because these firms make similar products and likely use similar processes, they can easily recognize—and understand—innovation by a competitor and quickly imitate it. In contrast, Jane Jacobs (1969), the noted urban critic, has argued that knowledge transfers generate growth mainly when they occur between firms in different industries. New ideas come from "outside" the industry and it is their novelty that sparks creativity and leads to adaptation by the recipient firm. This is the source of innovation. Consequently, whereas MAR theory supports specialized economies and spatial monopolies, Jacobs's theory supports industrial diversification. (Both rest on geographic concentration.) The third theory comes from the business professor Michael Porter and his work on industrial clusters and regional competitiveness. He claims that local competition stimulates growth, not local monopoly or local diversity. Fierce competition creates a fear of obsolescence (or a loss of market share) and spurs the search for new ideas, products, and processes. These theories of economic growth are simple in formulation, consisting of only a few concepts: knowledge spillovers, degree of industrial diversification, and competitiveness.

Employing a grand-theory mentality, Glaeser and his co-authors assess the validity of the three theories by reducing them to a "simple economic model" (Glaeser et al., 1992, p. 1132). This model is a production function that consists of two factors: the level of technology in a given industry and labor costs. From this function is developed a growth rate for the city that is the sum of the growth in national and local technology. The growth rate is then equated to a function that includes specialization, diversity, and monopoly (which captures competitiveness). The resultant equation allows them "to associate the growth of employment in an industry in a city with measures of technological externalities given by the theories" (p. 1134). Using U.S. metropolitan areas and employment, payroll, and establishment data from the Bureau of the Census, they sort through—test—the three different explanations for how innovations occur. In short, the theory is causal in intent, searching for the factors that produce change (in this case, innovation). Abstraction reigns; a complex reality of knowledge production, dissemination, adoption, and application is reduced to a few concepts. Moreover, the argument ostensibly exhausts the conceptual space of innovation and allows the growth of cities to be predicted. Prediction follows explanation.

Approaching theory in this way allows it to be evaluated by using quantitative data. The hypothesized relationships are specified, the concepts operationalized as indicators, and the theory, through its assumptions, is assigned to a class of phenomena, in this case urban

economies. The conceptual model and the empirical model are considered to be equivalent such that the empirical findings regarding the latter depict the workings of the former. In this way, grand theory enables and is enabled by large-sample, quantitative methodologies. Although this suggests that the data are being used to shape theory, the exact opposite is happening. The theory has been established prior to the evidence, and has been developed using a stylized model of urban economies that has all the qualities of grand theory: formal, abstract, parsimonious, causally determinative, and proposition-based.

Proposition-based theories, though, need not be "grand" in the sense of being highly abstract, formal in intent, and causally determinative. A good example is Mustafa Dikec's *Badlands of the Republic* (2007), a study of the evolution of urban policy in France from the early 1980s to the early 2000s as it pertains to the lower- and working-class suburbs known as the *banlieues*. Dikec structures the book around two simple propositions. One is that space is produced through practices of articulation. His goal is to use this proposition to understand how policy and urban space co-evolve. From this, it follows that when governments make policies about specific spaces, they are not only preparing for intervention but also providing form and content to these spaces. The spaces become what governmental policy imagines them to be. In the case of the *banlieues*, this means undisciplined milieus of feral youth and unassimilated immigrants.

To this Dikec adds a second proposition: French governmental policy cannot escape the gravitational pull of the "Republic," a political imaginary that dominates the French state and filters all understandings of the Other. The problem is how to fit the menacing exteriority of the *banlieues* into an imaginary that knows only French citizens of a particular kind. Although French republicanism, Dikec claims, is not "inherently incompatible with diversity" (p. 177), it is so white and Christian that it is unable to accommodate it.

Dikec's way of theorizing also points to something else that is noteworthy about grand theorizing. Grand theories can also be critical theories and not just tied tightly to formal logics or committed to reflecting the world as it is.

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theorizing is close to grand theorizing in form but often far removed ideologically from that theory's conservative tendencies, but not from its totalizing impulse (Storper, 2001). It rejects positivism's assumption that reality is truth; that is, that what actually exists is all that might exist (Hays, 1984; Baert, 2005; Sayer, 2000; Brenner, 2009). Whereas experience and evidence based on our experiences are useful for understanding how the world works, critical theorists argue that they are best understood as appearances. Consequently, the task of the theorist is to expose the hidden mechanisms— the "conditions of possibility" (Brenner, 2009, p. 199)—behind what we experience and can measure. The gap between actuality and potentiality is what separates society as it is from society as it could be. Maintaining that gap —and this is what makes such theory ideologically critical—are mechanisms of injustice and mystification. What is hidden is the truth, and the point of critical theory is to protect theorists and others from the seduction of appearances.

In the quest for well-defined causal relationships, critical theorizing overlaps grand theorizing in its pursuit of definitive explanations. Like grand theorists, critical theorists also hope to uncover the logic or essence of the city. Unlike grand theorists, however,

they aspire to reveal the underlying mechanisms that create this actual world, the inequal-ity, oppression, and marginalization that are the consequences of the contradictions of capitalism. And while critical theorists might recognize contingent relationships, they are committed to the discovery of an embedded and hidden logic. In addition, critical theo-rists are generally more interpretive than explanatory when compared to grand theorists. This is particularly the case where critical theory overlaps with more heuristic approaches (see below). Those who situate themselves in this gray area also are more likely than the "purer" critical theorists to shun proposition-building. Further blurring the typology are the strategic positivists who refuse to view evidence (particularly quantitative data) as mere appearances (Wyly, 2009; Wyly, 2011).

One of the classic examples of critical theory is Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), a book that roots capitalism's consumerist mentality in repressive desublima-tion, a forced psychological submergence of critical faculties. Marxist theorists (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 1996) of the city who find capital accumulation and class struggle behind all social phenomena are also good examples of this theoretical approach. But critical theory is not limited to avowed Marxists. Robinson's (2006) exposure of the politics underlying the categories of "global" and "megacities,"[3] Simone's (2004) probing of how ways of life are negotiated in African cities, and Dear's (2000) works on the postmodern city are all critical in style and substance but without Marxist trappings.

Critical urban scholars, then, believe that what we are told, how the world is presented to us, hides the "real" forces that shape society. Take the debate about suburbanization in the United States. In an early and seminal article applying Marxist theory to the city, Richard Walker (1981) rejected the dominant view of postwar suburbanization that por-trayed it as a matter of voluntary consumer choice, affluence, and the demand elasticity of the development industry. Instead, he argued that suburbanization, at root, is embedded in the capitalist contradiction that separates the home from the workplace, capitalism's need to expand consumption to fuel production, and the geographical and social extension of a bourgeois mode of reproduction. Supported by state policies, suburbanization enabled capitalism to exploit the exchange- and use-value of space for its own survival. Developers did not simply respond to consumer demand, suburbanites were not simply pursuing the American dream of homeownership in a low-density setting, and local governments did not build schools, playgrounds, and water treatment plants simply to ensure the welfare of their residents. Behind what we see, and were told by the popular media (and not a few scholars), was the continued reproduction of capitalism with households following rather than leading the process.

Another, more recent example comes from Steve Macek's (2006) account of the mass media's depiction of "moral decline and rampant criminality" (p. xii) in urban America during the 1980s and 1990s. Macek documents how the print and television media pub-licized images of burning buildings, homeless people, homicides, pornographic video stores, and the crack cocaine epidemic. If the media were to be believed, Americans feared city life. "Suburban paranoia" was a frequent trope of films, advertising, and television news. To believe that these urban conditions were objective facts and that suburban fear was unmediated, however, misses the forces that were actually operating. Behind these

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[3]See also Robinson (2011)—*Ed.*

representations, Macek argues, was a combination of enduring U.S. racism and a dema-gogic strain of American conservatism. The media was a tool in service of a right-wing assault on the cities where racial minorities and left-leaning intellectuals were concentrated. The discourse, moreover, had consequences: excessively punitive crime laws, a "broken windows" thesis that targeted quality-of-life "crimes," and a mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani (1994–2002), whose intolerance for others was essential to his politi-cal appeal. The task of critical theory is to separate what happened from what potentially might have happened; media representations could have taken a more compassionate turn and/or investigated the roots of these consequences and the injustices that produced them.

HEURISTIC THEORIES

Less ideological and looser in formulation than critical theories are what I call heuristic theories (Beauregard, 2008). A heuristic is a tool for discovering new ideas and operates by pointing to specific aspects of reality or ways of thinking (Abbott, 2004). A common, heuristic triad in U.S. social theory is "race, class, and gender." Implied is that the theorist should heed each when considering, let us say, the distribution of employment opportuni-ties, admission slots at prestigious universities, and social capacities such as education. To this extent, heuristic theorizing looks similar to an approach to theory that concerns itself only with the subject matter of the "urban." This is particularly the case when such theo-rists focus on specific material qualities of the city. Essentially, a heuristic theory consists of "a parsimonious set of conceptual tools and procedures for constructing objects and for transferring knowledge gleaned in one area of inquiry into another" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 52). By reminding us of what is important, heuristics channel our investigatory and inter-pretive impulses.

In urban theory, heuristics assume the form of urban "qualities" (e.g., social diversity, innovativeness, income polarization) or are brought forth as premises or even metaphors. They are often bundled, thereby suggesting a connectedness, as with "education, employ-ment, income" or "production, consumption." The most expansive (and deeply problem-atic) heuristic is "social, economic, and political." Because the heuristic theorist is disin-terested in propositions, the connections are often merely implied, suggested rather than specified. At the extreme, a single quality of the city is elevated to a dominant theoretical position, as when scholars make globalization, say, the quality of the city that explains all that is important about it (Amin and Graham, 1997).

Whatever form they take, theories constructed in this fashion are not meant to be fully scaled, internally coherent explanations. Rather, they are lists of salient factors to be addressed; concept-rich is another way to characterize them. Compared to grand theory or critical theory, explanation is left relatively undeveloped. The objective is to guide the theorist, and the requisite skill is to pick those factors—those heuristics—that capture the key processes and conditions of the urban phenomenon under review. Contingency, more-over, is privileged over causality. This often takes an interpretive form when the theorist goes in search of understanding (*verstehen*) rather than causality. That understanding can easily drift onto the ground of politics and, in doing so, connects heuristic theorizing to critical theorizing.

Consider Ananya Roy's article "Slumdog Cities" (2011). In it, she develops and cri-tiques the notion of a subaltern urbanism. Subaltern urbanism is characterized, she claims,

by three thematic biases: entrepreneurialism (particularly, informality), political agency (or the lack thereof), and the heavy hand of the slum habitus. Roy proposes to break down these tendencies by focusing on four "emergent concepts": periphery, urban informality, zones of exception (spaces of varying sovereignty), and the gray spaces that lie between legality and illegality as well as safety and death. Typical of such heuristic theorizing, the qualities are presented individually and their interconnectedness left unaddressed. Doing so precludes coherent explanation in the form that a grand theorist or critical theorist might recognize. Roy is certainly critical in her theoretical intent, but stops short of developing a "theory" that is coherent and complete. Instead, she concludes by claiming that each of the concepts "introduces a radical undecidability" to the analysis of urbanism—an ambiguity, we are led to believe, that reflects the life of subalterns in subaltern spaces.

Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002) in *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* proceed in a similar manner, except that they offer metaphors rather than qualities. In considering the everyday practices of the city, they contend that such practices need to be viewed in terms of transitivity, rhythms, and footprints (p. 9). The first addresses spatial and temporal openness, the second highlights multiple experiences, and the third captures the abundance of movements that flow through the city. For Amin and Thrift, urbanism is a matter of mobilities, distance-dependent interactions, systematizing networks, and potentials (pp. 3–4), and the city is a place of phenomenological practices. These metaphors and premises are the heuristic devices through which practices can be understood. Deploying them, Amin and Thrift create a theory of the city, one whose conceptual relationships are contingent and whose explanatory destination has been neither pre-ordained nor predicted. Unlike Roy and Hubbard, discussed earlier, who also use heuristics, these authors provide a way of looking at the world rather than a depiction of it. Their goal is an interpretive understanding, an immersion in what cityness means rather than a dissection of its forces.

In all of these examples—of grand theorizing, critical theorizing, and heuristic theorizing—theory is realized through empirical work. Whether evidence is offered prior, subsequent to, or simultaneously with the theory, the two are coupled, and this is an important quality of these approaches. They consist of abstractions, but those abstractions are meant to be concretized.

INTER-TEXTUALITY

Theory can also exist without explicit or acknowledged empirical underpinnings. To be known as a theorist, rather than one who applies the theories of others, one is expected to display an impressive and convincing ability to think abstractly. One can do this in a number of ways; for example, by crafting a system of abstract and interrelated propositions (a grand theory) or setting arguments in a field of mutually referential texts (Beauregard, 2003). In the latter instance, theory is a matter of inter-textuality, that is, the way in which the writings of different theorists (or schools of thought) speak to each other. The goal is to reconcile discrepancies, uncover differences and similarities, and augment our understanding through critique. Independently collected empirical evidence is almost always absent; even examples, when used, are meant more to illustrate specific points than to form the basis of the argument. (Of course, no theory can be constructed in the absence of experiences, even if they are unacknowledged.) One's theory is based on existing theoretical work which itself was often crafted from prior inter-textual (or metaphysical) projects. It

is theory all the way down.[4] The urban scholar Kian Tajbakhsh and the geographer Doreen Massey provide examples.

In *The Promise of the City,* Tajbakhsh (2001) considers the texts of David Harvey, Manuel Castells, and Ira Katznelson. His guiding question is whether their theories can fulfill the promise of the city to engage the Other by allowing for a "continual displacement and provisional rearticulation of the subject" (p. xiii). Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jürgen Habermas, among other intellectuals, he critiques the arguments of these three urban theorists. What matters is the interplay of theoretical texts and the claims that constitute them. As an inter-textual theorist, Tajbakhsh searches for contradictions within and differences among the texts while juxtaposing each theorist's ideas with those of other theorists. Consequently, we come across statements like the following, in which Tajbakhsh reflects on Harvey's theoretical approach: "In many ways, Harvey's project in critical human geography and urban theory is analogous to Terry Eagleton's in literary criticism and Alex Callinicos's in the philosophy and theory of history: the defense of historical materialism in the face of contemporary intellectual challenges such as postmodernism, deconstruction, and the like" (p. 73). Or, consider a second illustration related to Katznelson's argument regarding the separation of workplace politics from community politics: "Laclau and Mouffe have developed an important critique of approaches such as the *City Trenches* thesis that rejects a certain notion of totality by asserting the non-necessary nature of the links uniting the elements or levels of totality" (p. 135). Tajbakhsh proceeds by weighing arguments against arguments. He searches for logical inconsistencies and absences, ignoring the issue of empirical correspondence. Throughout, he remains abstract.

Doreen Massey has also created theory in this fashion, as well as contributed significant empirical analyses to the urban literature. In *for space* (Massey, 2005), one of her more challenging and abstract texts, she elaborates an argument as to how we might fruitfully think about space. Empirical considerations are placed in the background and Massey's strategy is to craft her theoretical position out of conversations among theorists. In parts of the book, theorists tumble over each other in a cascade of inter-textuality. To wit: "Gillian Rose (1993), again drawing on Irigaray, has also analyzed these gendered distinctions between space and time, and there are significant connections to the argument being made here. It has already been seen, for instance, how Prigogine and Stengers point to some philosophers' interiorisation of time as irreversible in the face of natural science's insistence on its 'objective' reversibility. Bergson started from experience…." (p. 57). Later on: "And [James] Donald [in *Imagining the Modern City*] draws out a similar argument in his reading together of Raymond Williams and Salman Rushdie: on the one hand 'Williams' excessive investment in community' and on the other 'Rushdie's possibly equally excessive celebration of migration'" (p. 174).

Here theory is presented as the interplay of theoretical claims and texts, with each theory referenced through its major figure. As with the other ways of theorizing, moreover, inter-textuality exists in variations and combinations. Take Roy's "Slumdog Cities," discussed earlier as a heuristic theory. Roy (2011) draws on the writings of Aihwa Ong,

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[4]For some urban theorists, particularly those concerned with the urban imaginary (Huyssen, 2008), the city itself is a text. Here I mean something narrower—the representations (usually written) that theorists use to communicate their ideas to others.

Giorgio Agamben, Derek Gregory, and Judith Butler to provide intellectual content for her concept of zones of exception. The heuristic is derived from the literature, although I also suspect from her experiences of conditions in subaltern spaces. For her readers, however, the concept emerges from other texts rather than being inferred from the evidence. This example additionally points to the similarities between inter-textual theory and literature reviews. At times, they are not so different, though literature reviews are almost always posed as a preface to an empirical project whereas inter-textual texts are, once written, fully realized.

CONCLUSION

Theorizing, therefore, can take a variety of forms. Yet, there also are tendencies—toward abstraction, concept-formation, and/or engagement with other theorists through "the literature" as well as a concern with credibility. Even though some scholars might claim to be theorists and others empiricists, the distinction is both forced and unhelpful. In the realm of theorizing, purity is always elusive.

One cause of impurities is empirical reality itself, a danger to which inter-textual theorizing is least vulnerable. For grand theorists, evidence enables them to test propositions and thereby verify arguments. Yet variation and particularities of the evidence threaten the abstractions out of which grand theory is constructed. Less compelled than grand theorists toward systematic and stylized approaches to data collection and analysis, critical and heuristic theorists leave room for the play of theoretical ideas. This freer interplay between theory and evidence allows them to track either along a causal (explanatory) or interpretive (meaning-based) path. For most theorists, then, evidence matters, and this means that methodology matters as well. If a theorist is going to think effectively with data, the data have to be strategically gathered and mobilized.

The political story of these four types of theorizing is even more difficult to write. Grand, heuristic, and inter-textual theorizing can be observed across the ideological spectrum. When grand theorists simultaneously embrace a positivism that privileges the status quo, however, they drift toward conservatism. By contrast, critical theorists are almost all, with few exceptions, liberal or radical in their politics. In search of troubles ranging from exploitation to marginalization, they find the status quo unacceptable and call for a just city (Fainstein, 2010), a city that can only be brought into existence through social movements that destabilize and replace existing institutions. And yet, one wonders why critical theorists cannot also be politically conservative. If the objective is to explore the hidden logics, to pierce appearances, then what is more critical than the neoclassical "hidden hand" or the intrinsic impulse to rationality assumed by rational choice theorists? To this extent, radical theorists must mean something more by critical than simply searching for embedded logics.

As a final observation, these ways of theorizing exhibit different *cognitive styles*, a phrase developed by Hirschman (1970) to capture how scholars position themselves in relation to both their readers and collective action. Grand and critical theorists incline toward the authoritative—"brash confidence" (p. 335) is the term Hirschman used. In trying to formulate a theory that fully explains a part of the world or reveals its "true" dynamics, humility is not a virtue. Similarly, for inter-textual theorizing its credibility rests on a command of the literature and a projection of assuredness. Heuristic theorizing seems less

constraining in this regard, allowing the theorist to be more reflective, exploratory, and ambiguous. The objective is to keep the conversation going rather than proposing an end to the debate. Here is where Barnes's (2001) hermeneutic theorizing—creative, open-ended, indeterminate, perspectival—fits into this typology, although heuristic theorists hardly have a monopoly on these qualities.

Theoretical types also stand in different relationships to collective action. Hirschman (1970, p. 336) accused paradigm-builders (a type of grand theorizing) of generating an "action-arousing gloomy vision." The quest for certainty pushes out any sensitivity to contingency and agency. And yet, one variant of grand theory—critical theory—is all about the need for political action. But because critical theorists are searching for hidden logics and, for the most part, avoid psychological explanations, they tend to favor structure over agency, to use a shopworn dichotomy. This works against political strategizing. Intertextual theorists are hobbled in a wholly different way; politics is a topic for discussion and not a field of action, and will remain ever so as long as they stay within the texts. Heuristic theories, less anchored in rigid frameworks, are more open politically to their subjects.

To engage "the urban" is to engage the materiality of human existence, to move closer to reality and further away from abstraction (Merrifield, 1997). Nevertheless, this does not mean that theory has to be abandoned. Content alone is insufficient for crafting urban theory. We know a good deal about cities and what to think about them. The challenge of urban theory lies in deciding how to think about what we know.

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