

Making Sense of Reality Together: Interdisciplinary “Ways of Seeing”

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Pragmatic Inquiry brings together a remarkably creative transcontinental and interdisciplinary group of researchers who met on a regular basis over four years to explore together novel analytical tools to make sense and account for social reality. It will give the reader a renewed sense of possibilities for capturing social complexity. Each chapter zooms in on a different conceptual device that aims to illuminate relatively unexplored aspects of reality. The authors draw on the work of influential scholars – for instance, Foucault’s notion of “*dispositif*” – but they go beyond them by digging in greater depth, extending and transposing such concepts to new objects.

What is gained from the collaboration is also new “ways of seeing,” as authors elaborate novel lenses that capture realities that would not be visible otherwise. For instance, the concept of “*assemblage*” (discussed in the chapter by Stavrianakis) captures sets of relationships that “enable.” The concept of “*qualification*” (in the chapter by Kuipers and Franssen) brings together several lines of inquiry to significantly broaden our understanding of valuation. Other papers explore some of the most central and polymorphous analytical tools in contemporary sociology and anthropology, concepts such as “*field*” (Bartley), “*institution*” (Cefai), and “*narratives*” (Wertsch and Batiashvili), that rival with “culture,” “structure,” and “agency” as conceptual catch-alls. The authors force us to reflect on the implicit background assumptions adopted by social scientists who have used such notions. Their chapters disentangle much telegraphic work by parceling out the roles played by shared meanings in solidifying or enabling

stable patterns of social relations. Language or meaning-making play a central role in such background conditions, as illustrated for instance in the piece by Boccagni and Duyvendak on the notion of “*making home*.” This is particularly evident when one considers the demarcation of symbolic boundaries separating what is inside and out.

Sociologists and anthropologists will put this book to different uses, given the disciplinary conversations against which each group will read the various chapters. Consumers of contemporary social science can observe how exceedingly rare it is that books engage both audiences at once. That the contributors have taken up this challenge is, in itself, a remarkable feat. It is made possible by the fact that the volume brings together European scholars who work in institutions where these disciplines find themselves in the same administrative unit: at the Centre d'études des mouvements sociaux (CEMS) and the Ecole des Hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, and at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. On the American side, the contributors are all affiliated with Washington University in St. Louis, which did not have a department of sociology until recently (this department was closed in the nineties). This institutional peculiarity certainly encouraged anthropologists to engage with sociology in order to expose students to disciplinary expertise that no other department was covering. These three institutions have hosted a shared doctoral training program for several years, which facilitated conversation across disciplinary boundaries among the contributors to this volume. This intellectual cosmopolitanism is also evident in the work of each of the four editors -- two anthropologists and two sociologists who stand out not only because of their original substantive work, but also by their interdisciplinary breadth and trans-Atlantic orientation.

This postface highlights the contribution of the volume to the study of cultural processes, which I have written about in a 2014 *Socioeconomic Review* article titled “What is Missing? Causal Pathways to Inequality” (co-authored with Stefan Beljean and Matthew Clair). This paper focuses on routine and taken-for-granted unfolding processes by which intersubjective meaning-making takes shapes – processes such as identification and rationalization, as well as subtypes such as racialization and stigmatization (for identification), and evaluation and standardization (for rationalization) – to this list, one could also add commensuration, domination, modernization, and other processes where symbolic dimensions play a central role.

Just as is the case for most of the chapters in this volume, this paper concerns conditions of possibility that contribute to the structuration of reality and that enable various types of interaction – for instance, as is the case for the concept of “*dispositif*” (see Dodier and Barbot’s chapter) whereby a preexisting structure of symbolic and social relationships are necessary conditions for specific outcomes (here, the mobilization of victims joining forces in legal trials). Both this volume and our paper has the potential to contribute to a growing conversation around “meaningful mechanism models” and related concepts in American sociology.¹ But the connections and parallels have yet to be drawn. This is for future research agendas.

¹ Knight, Carly and Isaac Reed. 2019. “Meaning and Modularity: the Multivalence of “Mechanisms” in Sociological Explanations.” *Sociological Theory*. 37 (30): 234-256; Morton, Matthew, 2014. “Mechanisms and Meaning Structures.” *Sociological Theory*. 32 (2): 162-187;

Below I reflect on some of the strong points of the collaboration, which are captured under the headings of **theorizing, pragmatism, interdisciplinarity, and technology and materiality.**

Theorizing:

Diane Vaughan defines analogical theorizing, as “a method that compares similar events or activities across different social settings, leads to more refined and generalizable theoretical explanations.”² In the sociological tradition, this type of theorizing has often involved the production of analytical devices, notions such as “frame,” “structural hole,” or “neighborhood effect.” In chapters included here, the notions that are in the limelight include concepts such “*demonstration*” (Rosental), “*market device*” (Velthuis), and “complexity” (Dan-Cohen), which are now the objects of growing attention across social science disciplines.

The theorizing featured here emerges from, and is appreciated by, both the French and the American intellectual traditions, and (to a lesser extent) the Dutch tradition of analysis of cultural processes associated with Norbert Elias. Contributors include French scholars who have been deeply influenced by American tradition (e.g. Daniel Cefaï who has studied Chicago School scholarship for decades, as well as the pragmatism of Dewey, and is associated with the French school of pragmatism). We also have American-trained scholars who draw on the French tradition (e.g. Stavrianakis who studied with the anthropologist Paul Rabinow and uses the

² Vaughan, Diane. 2004. “Theorizing Disaster: Analogy, Historical Ethnography, and the Challenger Accident,” *Ethnography* 5, 3: 2004: 313-45, p. 313.

notion of “*assemblage*,” drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss, Felix Guattari, and Gilles Deleuze). Such authors are in conversation, but at a distance, with transnational references, for example by mobilizing concepts borrowed from both French pragmatism (see the chapter by Bowen on *justification*) and Bourdieusian sociology. For his part, Bartley tackles, in detail, the uses of the concept of “*field*” in French sociology and in American (and transnational) neo-institutionalism. Thus, one of the contributions of this book is to reduce ambiguity and conceptual confusion in the multifarious usages of such concepts across the two national intellectual traditions.

Some of this is pretty complicated. For instance, Stavrianakis describes an “*assemblage*” as “semiotic and bio-technical-political conditions that are background conditions for the existence of something”. Thus, he regards such *assemblages* as a precondition in the analysis of causality. Also, “*assemblage*” is related to the notion of “enablement,” defined as conditions of possibility. It also refers to the “entanglement of relationships” that are coordinated in order for something to take place – for instance the existence of supply chains of capitalism is essential for the circulation of goods. Special attention is paid to what holds the system together. In this descriptive explanatory approach (if explanation is indeed the objective), relations of causality are implicitly approached as conditions of possibility, or as process of structuration of contexts that can give birth to new phenomena. This tack is quite antithetical to the standard approach that focuses on “dependent variables” and “independent variables” (or *explanans* and *explanandum*), which structures much of American sociology and is at the center of canonical approaches to teaching methods across the social sciences. Although some will think that such an approach to causality lacks in precision and empirical specificity and is incompatible with falsification, there are several reasons why it warrants attention. One of them is a growing call for explanatory and

methodological pluralism,³ and an increasing concern with “process tracing,” which has been at the center of historical sociology as well as approaches to causality adopted by historical institutionalists in political science.⁴

What remains to be accomplished is to draw connections between these broader conversations and approaches to explanation adopted in the volume’s chapters (but note that several of these tend to be more descriptive than explanatory). The volume could facilitate progress in such a direction, and foster more ecumenical approaches to social and cultural explanations across the social sciences. An overly narrow epistemology makes us blind to the paths not taken and encourages us to operate in cumulative literatures that evolve in linear fashion. Bridging traditions may help us identify and move beyond theoretical blind-spots and avoid repetitive obsessions with specific lines of scholarship, down rabbit holes which have rapidly declining payoffs.

Pragmatism:

³ Lamont, Michèle and Ann Swidler. 2014. “Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing.” *Qualitative Sociology* 37 (2): 153-171; Godfrey-Smith, Peter. “Causal Pluralism” Pp. 326-37 in *Oxford Handbook of Causation*, edited by H. Beebe, C. Hitchcock and P. Menzies. Oxford UK: Oxford University Press. Rohlfing, Ingo. 2012. *Case Studies and Casual Inference: An Integrative Framework*. London: Palgrave.

⁴ Hirschman, Daniel and Isaac Ariel Reed. 2014. “Formation Stories and Causality in Sociology.” *Sociological Theory* 32 (4): 259-82. Collier, David. 2011. “Understanding Process-Tracing.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 44 (4): 823-30.

What brings these contributors together is also an appreciation for pragmatism, inspired by its European or American variants. The authors are all concerned with various forms of practices and how people make sense of their action together. In the European context, authors emerge from the current post-Bourdieu moment, inspired by ethnomethodology, constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. While the American pragmatists have been more concerned by habits and practice,⁵ under the influence of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, French pragmatists have aimed to enrich our understanding of how people frame their action in interaction and produce public justification.⁶ They bring to light a plurality of frames mobilized by actors, which frames are typically in tension with one another. These social scientists bridge moral and political inquiry with the study of everyday life and meaning-making.⁷

⁵ Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2013. "A Pragmatist Approach to Causality in Ethnography." *American Journal of Sociology* 119 (3): 682-714; Gross, Neil, 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74 (3): 358-79.

⁶ Lemieux, C. 2014. "The Moral Idealism of Ordinary People as a Sociological Challenge: Reflections on the French Reception of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's *On Justification*." Pp. 153-170 In S. Susen & B. Turner (Eds.), *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*. New York: Anthem Press.

⁷ Stavo-Debaugé, Joan and Laurent Thévenot. 2015. "Sociologie pragmatique." In Christophe Le Digol (ed.) *Dictionnaire de la sociologie*, Paris: Encyclopedia Universalis <https://www.allbrary.fr/ebooks/269904-dictionnaire-de-la-sociologie>; Frère, Bruno and Daniel Jater. 2018. "French Sociological Pragmatism: Inheritor and Innovator in the American Pragmatic Sociological and Phenomenological Tradition." *Journal of Classical Sociology*. 19 (2): 138-160; Barthes, Yannick, Damien De Blic, Jean-Philippe Heurtin, Eric Lagneau, Cyril Lemieux, Dominique Linhardt, Cedric Moreau de Bellaing, Catherine Remy and Danny Trom, 2014. "Sociologie pragmatique : Model d'emploi." *Politix* No 103.

In the US, the influence of John Dewey is manifest, not only in sociology but also in anthropology.⁸ The influence of pragmatism operates through an anthropology of practice which came to replace the focus on culture in post-Geertzian anthropology.⁹ Here, pragmatism focuses on how people solve practical problems, with a relatively loose commitment to meta-theoretical frameworks, and with a focus on distinctive problems, such as that of “suffering,” which have not captured contemporary sociological imagination.¹⁰

Interdisciplinarity:

As stated above, another remarkable characteristic of this volume is that it brings together sociologists and anthropologists, a rare occurrence in the contemporary American social sciences landscape where these two disciplines often appear to be set on strongly contrasted paths. Anthropology’s post-colonial guilt led this discipline to focus on questions of power to a greater extent than is the case in sociology. Thus, anthropologists paid attention to post-Foucauldian

⁸ See for instance <http://www.asatheory.org/current-newsletter-online/new-directions-in-pragmatism>.

⁹ Ortner, Sheri. 1984. “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(1):126-166.

¹⁰ Robbins, Joel. 2013. “Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (3), 447-462.

scholars, such as Giorgio Agamben, who have had little influence on sociology.¹¹ Also, anthropology has been engaged in internal political debates connected to post-colonialism, which have not affected sociology to the same extent. This latter discipline, which is more multi-method in orientation, has had its own dramas around qualitative methodologies, while a growing number of sociologists working in other subfields eagerly embrace more positivist epistemologies (around experimentation, causal inference, and other topics that may preoccupy economists and political scientists more than anthropologists). Again, one of the virtues of the present volume is to bring these two disciplines together by focusing on their strong points of convergence, and by mobilizing analytical devices to capture social and cultural processes. That the various contributors have different complementary strengths adds immensely to the project and is a condition for its success.

Technology and materiality:

Some of the chapters are deeply influenced by the material turn in science and technology studies. It is the case for the chapter on “*demonstration*” by Rosental, the chapter on “*caring*” by Mol and Hardon, and the chapter on “*making home*” by Boccagni and Duyvendak. In the last case, the creation of boundaries around security, inclusion, and familiarity are essential to the cultural process of generating a feeling of “being at home,” which requires rejecting or erecting protection against what is viewed as threatening. In the case of “*demonstration*,” techniques and materiality are essential complementary elements in the cultural and social processes of the construction of reality, and they can produce legitimacy (e.g. through street demonstrations) as a

¹¹ Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

secondary effect. Thus, unintended consequences are central to how authors think about causality and explanation. Process-tracing requires identifying such looping effects. A comprehensive approach to explanation will require theorizing how such feedback loops converge with more direct path-dependent processes.

Conclusion:

To restate, one of the main contributions of this collective volume is to bring together authors concerned with developing our understanding of the conditions that enable the production and diffusion of meaning – for instance, processes such as “caring” and “making home” – that suggest actions toward others that are impregnated with meaning, and that require coordination and qualification to result in shared understanding.

My hope is that this volume will be read broadly and will contribute to strengthening theoretical conversations across our disciplines. Because this is a particularly talented team of contributors dotted with remarkable theoretical acumen, again, readers will emerge from reading this volume enriched by its many insights – especially if they put the various chapters in conversation with one another.

Considered together, the essays raise broader crucial questions about the purpose of theorizing at a time when many want to remove from our modes of disciplinary inquiry the need to think seriously about how questions are formulated – to narrow down and “purify” how our disciplines approach the social world.

This volume should close, once and for all, the question of whether such a reductionism is fruitful, as it certainly demonstrates that a little openness to adventure and exchange can go a long way in illuminating crucial aspects of reality that tend to remain unseen and understudied.