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Reflections on Social Theory

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Congratulations to disClosure *on the occasion of its 25th edition!*

Twenty five plus years is a long time for an irregular academic program—especially for one that is more likely to have an established place in a bookstore than at the academy and that has perpetuated itself more as an opportunity to bring people together than as a forum for studying a specific subject matter. UK's Committee on Social Theory must have hit on a winning formula.

This could not have been foreseen at its rather inauspicious beginning. One evening in the summer of 1988, sitting in the then scruffy back room at Lynaugh's, JP Jones and I sighed that we were bored at UK and in Lexington. Over the two years, however, since we had arrived in Kentucky, he, a geographer, and I, a philosopher, had discovered a shared interest in theoretical works about social life. The indistinct area of theory in which we were both interested included works of geographical thinkers such as Harvey, Soja, and Gregory, with which he was conversant but which were previously unknown to me, and the texts of sociological or philosophical thinkers such as Bourdieu, Giddens, or Heidegger, with which I was conversant and with which he had varying degrees of familiarity. We could not help but notice that the two of us who shared this interest hailed from different disciplines. In that moment of personal desperation was born the idea of setting up some sort of program in "social theory." The premise behind this idea was that there exists a body of theoretical work about society that is not the property of any given discipline but that constitutes a nondisciplinary-specific—or transdisciplinary, as we came to call it—arena of ideas, theories, and ways of thinking.

This idea led to an application for a College enrichment grant to support a combined public lecture series/team-taught graduate seminar in social theory. The theme of that first spring combination was Topics in Social Theory. The rousing success of that venture led the next year to a larger MFAP (Multidisciplinary Feasibility Assessment Program) grant that JP, Wolfgang Natter (who had joined us as one of the instructors of the initial graduate seminar), and I received to establish basic components of the program that, twenty six years later, is known as Social Theory. It was the only "nonscience" application to be funded through the MFAP program.

It was evident almost immediately that the premise behind the program was correct: there really did exist a nondisciplinary-specific body of theoretical ideas about social life that scholars schooled in different disciplines drew on. Moreover, then, like now, there existed in the College of Arts and Sciences a healthy number of scholars in different departments who were interested in these ideas. The success of

the program, consequently, was not surprising. Indeed, a central reason why the Social Theory program has succeeded is because it has acted as a faculty development program for those studying social life who draw on theory and are intellectually drawn to a community of like-minded scholars with whom one can associate, learn, and exchange ideas. One of the great unintended benefits of the program is that it has served as an effective recruitment tool for attracting new faculty members to the College's Humanities and Social Science departments.

Graduate education was also a key component of the program from its inception: graduate students were just as enthusiastic about the initial seminar and lecture series as were both the faculty members co-teaching the seminar and the other faculty members who attended the lectures. The regularization of ST courses and introduction of the student-edited annual, *disClosure*, underwrote the formal certificate that scores of graduate students have since earned. I believe, however, that the Social Theory program has always been primarily a development program for students, too. It is the intellectual vibrancy and relevance of the program that has sustained it through the years and will continue to do so in the future.

Like many colleagues, my own intellectual trajectory has been decisively inflected by participation in the program. Exposure to ideas of which I might otherwise have remained ignorant has informed the evolution of the topics I write about and the groups with which I interact. I came to UK as a philosopher who knew something about theories of sociality, above all in sociology and anthropology, but who primarily engaged with philosophical issues. Today, I as a scholar have not interacted with philosophers for years. Instead, I publish and meet with faculty members and students primarily in the fields of geography, sociology, education theory, and organizational studies. This transformation could not have happened without Social Theory.

Theoretically, I believe that the future of social affairs is indeterminate and that it is luck, sometimes mere luck, if predications about it prove true. The Social Theory program, however, looks like a pretty good bet. The premises behind its formation remain true, and the benefits it brings are sustainable. All it takes is time and interest (and money).