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Andrew Abbott, Athanasios Karafillidis | Interview | 20.04.2017

The Shining, not the Moon

Andrew Abbott in conversation with Athanasios Karafillidis

Am 16. Juni 2016 hielt der an der University of Chicago lehrende Wissenssoziologe Andrew Abbott am Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung einen Vortrag über [The Future of Expert Knowledge](#). Athanasios Karafillidis nutzte die Gelegenheit, um mit Prof. Abbott über sein neues Buch *Processual Sociology* und seine soziale Ontologie zu sprechen. Nebenbei kamen Themen wie die Bedeutung normativer Fragen, die Zukunft des intellektuellen Lebens an den Universitäten sowie die Rolle Abbotts innerer Dämonen zur Sprache.

You have just published a new book entitled *Processual Sociology*. When I first saw the announcement I thought it is your long-awaited work about social process.

Well, I am a person who starts things easily but does not finish them easily. I wrote my first book in the eighties, but around 1997 I found myself in the middle of working on several other books, one of those was the first version of my social process book. But then I began to panic and decided to finish the easier things first. So *Department and Discipline* was published in 1999, *Time Matters* and *Chaos of Disciplines* followed in 2001, *Methods of Discovery* in 2004. I finished a lot of projects in order to begin another decade of research. Then I started by revising the social process book, but soon new substantive work on libraries took over.

Currently I am once again in the finishing-things-mode: My book on library research came out in 2014, and I have just put out *Processual Sociology*, which is a collection of both published and not yet published essays. Now, in March 2017, a collection of review essays I was writing under the name of Barbara Celarent in the *American Journal of Sociology* will be available. Moreover, I am once again partway through the manuscript of my theory book about process after revisions in 2003, 2008, and 2010. Finally, I am also writing a little book which is going to be translated into Chinese. Some of these projects were hastened by the fact that my older brother recently died. That is the kind of thing that really does make you decide to hurry up.

You have always been preoccupied with processual ontology. Let us begin with the ultimate test you once proposed in your book *Methods of Discovery* – the "taxi driver

test", in a slightly modified form, that is, you are not limited to only five sentences. Could you please sketch the main idea of your processual ontology?

I think the main idea is very straight forward. The real problem is to understand social change, and there are two ways of trying to do so: The traditional one is to assume that society has a bunch of rules or structures, and that every now and then the latter change somehow. Logically, however, it is impossible that a stable system of things changes just occasionally. The only explanation might be that it breaks down altogether. The other approach is to assume that the world is changing all the time. But then, how do you explain social stability?

Well, of course, it is possible to explain stability as an outcome of continuous change. In physics, we find phenomena like standing waves or resonance structures that are dynamically stable structures in processes of events, interference patterns are another example. My basic idea is to stop regarding social change as the thing that needs to be explained. Instead, I assume the social world is always changing and therefore, I take stability as the thing that needs to be explained. By doing this, I am following in the footsteps of Isaac Newton who said: "I am not going to try to explain change, I am not going to tell you why things move. That is the medieval question. I am going to *assume* that they move in order to describe regularities of *how* they move."

So, my point is to also start from the notion that the world is changing all the time, which is the only logical place to start from, in order to explain stability. Why is it that I, a person, have some kind of continuity? Even my body is being replaced all the time, my cells are replacing themselves. And yet my body keeps the memories of all the diseases I have ever had etc. But explaining this stability is a tricky thing to do. In short, you cannot explain social change as an occasional outcome of stability; it cannot be rigorously derived from a system that is basically stable. The reverse is possible, however: You can explain how stability emerges out of a system which is in perpetual change.

Now the taxi driver is not interested in the details, though. He wants to know why everything is changing all the time. So you could ask him: "Remember when you were in High School?" And he might say: "No, I don't remember that." You insist: "Remember ten years ago when you were married to this other woman?" Now he will say: "Ah, yeah." You go on: "Well, at the time you got married to that person, you could probably remember High School." Then he will say: "Yeah, now I remember High School." So you say, "See, you are just an *event* passing through your life." Our taxi driver will know that, especially the

taxi drivers in the US, as most of them are migrants. They know about life being a perpetual sequence of changes. It might be the case that our whole focus on stability is a product of modern societies. Even what we think of as traditional is not particularly stable at all.

The notion of event is actually at the center of your whole enterprise.

Yes. All you are is an event. You are the performance of yourself that is going on today, and you have to make yourself every day, by making the event that will be you. If you read some old letters of yours from twenty or thirty years ago, you will probably be very surprised to discover who you used to be at that time.

This also touches on the distinction between theory and method that you discussed in Time Matters. In my view your theory is a method to look at the social world. The distinction between theory and method seems to vanish.

Yes, they are kind of the same thing. It is important to see how this came up in the course of my life. I never intended to create a new social ontology. Instead, I studied history and literature in college and then moved on to sociology. I ended up doing historical sociology, but many of my colleagues were doing empirical work straightforward. But because of my intellectual background, I needed to put history and sociology together, and indeed my need to spell out an ontology grew out of the empirical work I took up before.

In my dissertation, for example, I tried to explain why there were no psychiatrists in mental hospitals from 1880 to 1930 in the United States. In 1880, there were no people called psychiatrists, in 1930 there were. The name “psychiatrist” itself only came into existence long time after the group had actually started out as a group, in fact as a group of “medical superintendents”. The original name of the American Psychiatric Association is “Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane”. Assistant physicians, for example, were not allowed to join the association because they were no medical superintendents – they were only doctors. In those days, too, neurology was being developed as a specialty; it specialized in taking all the patients other doctors did not like or could not figure out. Between them, the medical superintendents and the neurologists were in charge of the insane and the neurotic, merging into something called medical psychology from about 1890 to 1920. Afterwards they separated out again, but along new lines: The neurologists began to study only “organic” disease, whereas the psychiatrists looked at “psychological” or “psychoneurotic” disease. These two groups (as names and groups) already existed before, but now they were differentiated along another dimension. They

merged for a while and messed around together before they separated out in a different way.

To give a broader example, suppose you have the kind of data we usually have on the labor force and ask the question: “What jobs do people hold over time?” You would not be able to answer that question in case of psychiatrists and neurologists (and by the way lots of other groups, too) because the whole nature of their jobs had changed fundamentally. Those kinds of problems in applying standard methods to different kinds of data made me think about change and stability. In the formal exposition opening the book *Time Matters* (“Transcending General Linear Reality”) I studied the philosophical assumptions that are involved in our standard way of approaching things. At that time, I was convinced that most important of these assumptions was that the sequence in which things happen does not matter enough in standard methods, so I focused on that. Later on, I began to worry about the other assumptions as well. Eventually, I moved towards an ontology of events because I wanted to create a way of thinking that would enable you to write history as well as sociology, by assuming the same social world for both. So it is a pattern common enough: At the outset you are just feeling around for stuff before you find out what you are actually looking for.

When you speak about doing ontology there is one thing that leaves me puzzled. In Greek philosophy ontology is related to substance, to the being or not being of something, to isolated atoms. I think what you are doing is rather epistemology. You are studying how we recognize things and social events.

There is that – but we also need to address the epistemological question in a cultural way. How do we name things? The whole idea of substance is itself an ontological concept. The ancient philosophers who are philosophers of substance are Aristotle's generation. He does talk about substance as being, yet I am much more attached to the Eleatic School, Parmenides and Zeno and so on. The latter are concerned with the continuity of things. Parmenides thinks about the oneness of it all, and Zeno discusses the paradoxes of time and separation. That is all about the idea of process. The Eleatics' notion is not a notion of being in the Aristotelian way. Instead they describe being as a process. The nature of the social world is processes.

Clearly, the modern philosopher on whom I am drawing is Alfred North Whitehead. Probably I got him all wrong, but that does not matter anyway: I just steal whatever ideas I want, and do the best I can with them. However, you are right – to a certain extent the use

of the word ontology has a certain kind of Aristotelian reference and that is a problem in a way. It would be wrong to assume that an event means “when something happens to something” because then the thing would have to be there in order to have something happen to it. In my view (and certainly Whitehead’s), all that exists is events. The world is just events. It is us who hook those events up into lineages we recognize, like this chair here, for example. When you read it in Whitehead, this argument is very astonishing because he is arguing about the natural world, not just about the social world. It is hard for me to look out at some rocks, for example, and to think of them as being in process. It is hard to figure them in process. They look kind of rocklike to me.

In any case, Aristotle’s account of being dominates our discussions. If you think that being is one thing and that how we *talk* about being is another separate thing, then this would be an epistemological approach. Considering the thing underneath not to be substance but a sort of uniform thing which is exposed to these events would be a different approach, it seems to me.

I still think that ontology has a problematic undertone. It hardly seems appropriate for discussing the becoming of things.

For the becoming of things, yes, but the point is that there is nothing but their becoming. To say you are a Christian or a Muslim does not actually mean that you have achieved some state of being, but that you are *trying to achieve* that state of being. You are always in the process. You can look at this from a linguistic perspective. In English, for example, the noun form of the verb is the present participle, the -ing form (“knowing”, “doing”). In French or German, the noun form is the infinitive. But the infinitive “to go” has a sense of potentiality to it, not of actuality, whereas “going” has the sense of actuality. In French, in order to describe such a process you have to use the elaborate form “être en train de”, “to be in the middle of”. And of course you have languages like Hopi, which is the language that Whorf wrote about, in which even many objects are described as processes. The noun for the moon in Hopi is “the shining”.

So, your methodological injunction seems to be: “Look at events!” or “Look at processes of events!” But how do I recognize events and how do I record them? Is this interview as a whole an event or is rather every single sentence we produce an event? And who decides which perspective is the appropriate one?

A quick answer would be that it is a fractal. The interview is an event made up of sentences

which are events themselves, and each piece of each sentence is an event, too. In speaking of events, I want to avoid the approach – associated with Bill Sewell – in which events are always big transformations. It is not likely that there are big transformations now and then, with the world just moving along the rest of the time. No, the world is always transforming itself. I want to get away from the notion that there are special events and then there is everything else. That is just a mistake. We are having an event right now. I am sure we will find ways to think about those pieces of events interesting you, and that the fractal approach will be a useful way to think about them.

So you can think of this interview as an event. The first portion of it is also an event, the first portion of the first portion is an event, etc. Still you might also think it is a thing, with each part of it being a thing itself and so on. Either way you will be thinking fractally about the social world instead of believing it has some kind of rocklike atoms down at the bottom. To think about this interview as several events implies to understand it as becoming, as embedded in a present. In this present, the *former* present is always turning into the immediate past, and the process of turning it into the past is what makes the current present the present. Our focus must be on the presentness and the process of becoming in the present, instead of thinking about the world as having substances which are fixed unchangingly and to which “things happen”. Things do not have properties which can change. Rather, the things *themselves* change. The examples that really convinced me of this were occupations. It is not the case that there are occupations like psychiatry that have always existed, sometimes having this and sometimes having that property. Obviously, occupations change in themselves, not simply in their properties.

The reason why we do not think the same of a lot of things in the social process is that we do not like the idea that human beings might be like that. We want human beings to really *be there*, which is not true. Your body is replacing itself all the time; you are replacing parts of your personality all the time. And indeed, humans are not a single thing for another reason: There is a big difference between the personality and the body. When a man has cancer, he suddenly realizes that his personality is stuck in this body which now has this defect. Or to put it another way, it is easier to say: "I want to be a great sprinter" than to come to terms with the fact that your body is not the body of a great sprinter. Too bad. We need to think about the world in terms of events.

In the end, it boils down to the interest of the observer. A person who wants to understand how the interview unfolds observes other events than someone who is interested in the interview with regard to scholarly publishing for example. Would

you agree?

Obviously there are different descriptions of social events. This is an interview between you as a particular human being and me as another particular human being. If a woman was listening to us, she might say: "This is a couple of men talking. They are having this men talk, it is kind of bla, bla, bla." She might regard it as a totally different thing. We have lots of descriptions of the social world and many of the things we are talking about concern the battles between these descriptions. Of course, I do not mean that there is nothing consequential going on in the social world that has nothing to do with descriptions of it. Many things in the social process happen because of the endurance of particular bodies and particular individuals, for example. If suddenly the labor force evinces a huge need for highly trained labor although there is nobody with that kind of training, that highly trained labor cannot simply be invented. They must be created by training. The social world is full of consequential events that do not need any kind of description in order to be consequential.

Events might have a duration, but, as George Herbert Mead put it, they might be like a moment that comes and vanishes at the same time. They can be bigger or smaller, but only to a certain extent.

I think this is correct but you have to be willing to think of them as very big. Momentness is a way of thinking about the world. Fernand Braudel basically says that the 16th century is one long moment, and there is a way of thinking about the 16th century that makes it a long moment, although all kinds of things were changing within that century. The crucial thing about the present is that it is thick. Or we might say that it has duration. Imagine that you are angry about something and you write a letter about it to your friend. Your friend gets the letter after a while, but since he is involved in some own problem, he takes his time to write back. When he finally gets back to you, he will say: "You have this problem, and I think you should do so and so." Of course, you will be far past your problem by that time, you will have moved on. Yet your friend will have the same experience, he will think you are behind and you will think he is behind. There is no absolute simultaneous present in social time. It only exists in Newtonian time for the whole of the world. The social present is always extended in time because some people are closer to you than others. This fact of "distance" has immense consequences for the way events and their effects propagate through the social world. After all, the impact of events takes time to propagate, in both directions. Events always involve duration of some kind.

Duration also implies that you cannot observe an event in its unfolding. You always need to view it in retrospect, don't you?

Of course, you have to regard it in retrospect. I discussed a more elaborate way of thinking about this in my article on "Lyrical Sociology". Most of the European languages have two different forms of tense. One of which is an outside tense that narrates accomplished events, the other one speaks from the middle of a situation. In French, you have the *passé simple* and the *passé composé*. The latter is used when you are outside the event you are describing. This whole idea comes straight from Bergson. In Bergson's view, you are always in the timeline. You cannot see off; you can never see time from the outside.

In your introduction to Processual Sociology I came across the phrase: "Events are produced by causal mechanisms and moral judgments and values alike." How do causal mechanisms re-enter your theory? It seems to me that you use a different idea of causality compared to the one you criticize so fiercely in many of your writings. This may also be the reason why the word "causality" is often put in quotation marks in your current book.

In the last essay of that book I am really trying to come to terms with this issue. Obviously there are some forms of social causality. There is no form of social behavior for which you cannot find some other set of variables that will help you predicting it. Accordingly, we might expect some causality at the heart of social structures. But that explains only a part of the thing, since there are both causal and moral origins of action. Excluding one of these two aspects is like studying a baby and deciding that, in order to find out about its ancestors, you only need to look at the men among the baby's ancestors. Every past generation of the baby is made up of families, each of which has a man in it. So there is always a kind of causality in that sense. Still you are overlooking all the mothers, grandmothers etc. To every event there is a moral origin as well.

How these things relate to each other is not clear to me. The event-based approach I have taken argues that all causality takes place in the present, thus I get rid of the structure and agency problem. The Chicago School long ago realized that this problem does not exist. They really misunderstood Mead to some extent, but they saw very clearly that structure and agency is not an issue. However, it is hard to think about the relation between moral action and caused action in the present. Any form of law (in the sense of written specification of proper action) we know about presumes the ability to act in a moral manner. There is no human society that does not have moral categories. Still you can

always show that a behavior has some causality behind it. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as free will.

It is trivial to contend that there is always some causality. In my opinion this is not the problem we should focus on.

Well, but it is worth thinking about. You are not transcendently free to do anything whatever you want to. Sociologists sometimes try to argue on both sides of this question. We can see this by making a parody of Oscar Wilde's famous dictum about fashion: "Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people are wearing." Many sociologists in effect rephrase this (in reverse order) as: "If you are a sociologist, what you explain is other people's behavior. What you do yourself, that's free action." Similarly, if you talk to any sociologist, he or she is not going to tell you that his or her politics are determined by his or her social antecedents. He or she will say: "No, I chose these, they are my values", although it is his or her job to explain other people's values by various forms of causal explanation. I spent my entire career up until about three or four years ago without really noticing this issue. Then I finally realized that our concepts of inequality and moral activity needed some philosophical critique. Until that point, I just did not do any normative thinking. And now I have little time left to do so before I die.

I am interested in how causality fits into morality in a real sense, not in the Durkheimian, faux sense. Durkheim plays us a trick when he says, "I will explain morality." That is the basic strategy of the arguments in *The Division of Labour in Society*.¹ But in fact, he does not explain morality at all. He simply refuses to look at the parts of morality that are not "caused". This is particularly odd because we know that Durkheim was himself a passionately moral man. But I do not think he thought of his own moralizing as caused by something. I imagine he thought that it was genuine moral commitment.

I was surprised to find these new directions in your research. When I started reading the book, I did not expect that at all.

You know, you cannot go to your grave without having said something about free will. In a certain way, I have always unconsciously thought about all these topics. I became a sociologist because of what happened to me in college. In *The Disobedient Generation*² I have published a piece about that. In the 1960s, I began to understand that people had fundamentally different views of the social world, especially over the war in Vietnam. But I thought somehow I could understand or resolve all those differences. Well, it is now fifty

years since I went to college. I ought to have an answer by now.

You distinguish between empirical and normative, but does this distinction make sense? Norms are shaping the world empirically...

Yes, we have histories of normative schemes. You can see this clearly in the history of law if you look at Frederick Pollock and Frederic W. Maitland's *History of English Law*³ or the great tradition of Friedrich Carl von Savigny, Otto von Gierke and Rudolf von Jhering in Germany. In their writing they are discussing the history of a moral body of stuff. Gierke is fascinated by *Genossenschaftsrecht* and its notions. After all, German law is not the same as English common law or Roman civil law. You can write that kind of history, although the judges, of course, may write the moral history of law themselves. They are the people who are creating new moral judgements out of the old texts, at least in the common law system.

In your new book you even use the term “humanistic sociology”.

I am not like my friend Roger V. Gould who just wanted to do straight science. I have to be figuring out these problems, including moral ones. But I am also interested in them because I have gotten tired of political correctness in my discipline and began to wonder how to discuss it.

For example, I am concerned with the incoherence of the notion of equal opportunity which follows from the idea of the liberal state. The concept of equal opportunity is a simple one. If you take away somebody's artificial advantages and disadvantages, the ones society has given to him or her, then you can give to the person what he or she “really deserves”. Well, who is this homunculus that really deserves something? And when can that homunculus be observed? We know that – with regard to equal opportunities – by the age of six much damage has already been done to disadvantaged children in the United States as well as in Europe. So when should we have a look, maybe at the age of one? Or already in the womb?

The more general point is that if you throw away all social aspects of the self, nothing of it will remain. There is only the classic tabula rasa of absolutely equal beings as it is outlined by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in their views of the social world. These absolutely equal persons cannot deserve anything different, however, because they are all exactly the same, by the definitions of contractarianism. Thus, the concept of equal opportunity turns out to be incoherent philosophically, if we accept the notion of a

self created in social interaction. This is a problem the whole liberal theory has because like the ideal of equal opportunity, it is fundamentally hostile to the notion of the social self. Yet, nothing could be clearer than that the individual self emerges from an interwoven process in which a growing individual human body confronts the world of experience, a confrontation that takes place within the context of an ongoing society. This is a dual process of assimilation of and accommodation to “the social,” and has been delineated by Baldwin, Mead, Piaget, and many others. Given that widely accepted view, it is a serious contradiction that probably 95 % of the sociologists in the United States working on inequality and favoring equal opportunity are devoted believers in the social self. This is a serious difficulty.

Do you think it is a typical contradiction in American sociology? It seems to me that a strong tradition of normative thinking exists in the US.

The notion that inequality can be handled by using the concept of equal opportunity is one of the obvious ways to deal with the problem of inequality in a liberal society. There are two ways of reacting to the fact of inequality. You can either say: "Hey, we don't give a damn about what you deserve, everyone should get the same" (equality of place), or you can follow Rawls and say: "Everybody should have an equal shot at rewards which however may be unequal *given* that they have accepted the level of inequality without knowing where in that scale of inequality they will be." (Rawlsian equal opportunity). Virtually no one in America is making the straight equality of place argument. People think it is unrealistic to pay all occupations exactly the same or to simply give everybody a flat rate. They are more likely to think: "Well, just scale down the top salaries to a hundred times as much as the lowest salary instead of a thousand or a hundred thousand times".

Only very few people in the USA get beyond the equal opportunity version of things. Due to a serious tradition of socialism throughout Europe, on the other hand, you do have people making equality of place arguments here. Of course the situation is quite different beyond the Western world. Indeed, we need to face the fact that much of the rest of the world does not believe in liberalism. So that raises a further question, which is how to think about sociology or social science more generally, when you need to include people in that social science who do not believe in liberalism and who may think hierarchy is just fine, frequently on religious grounds. The West must acknowledge that forcing the liberal and egalitarian program onto the rest of the world is a certain kind of imperialism.

But what you call humanism is a concept deeply rooted in Western thought.

Yes, you are right. But I also think that the notion of humanism as an ideal is founded on the notion that all human beings have dignity – and that is not the same as equality. Dignity makes everybody equal in that sense. Especially the Abrahamic religions have pushed this argument – everybody is equally facing God. A contrast might be the situation under Maoism, where it seemed possible to assume the existence of great equality, whereas at the same time millions of people could die in famines without that becoming the central matter of political life. In my opinion the humanistic notion implies that individual lives all have the same dignity. And in one sense we all are still equal: There is only one outcome for life, and there is no variance in that outcome. We are all going to die eventually. There is a form of fundamental equality in this.

You contend that social processes are made by human beings. However, science and technology studies are busy discussing the fact that a lot of other entities, technological ones like algorithms and machines or everyday objects, also do things or produce events that come back to us somehow.

They produce results, but they do not produce things. Machines for example do not have intentions. I do not pay a whole lot of attention to STS because I have the impression that all those different branches in the sociology of science are like little dissenting churches. There are the STS, the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK), and the Bath School, etc. I do not know much about this whole actor network thing. But it seems unlikely that anybody thinks of machines having intentions the way we believe human beings have. In my view, the notion of intention needs to be clarified; not “interrogated” as they would probably say, but theorized. We all believe that people have intentions and we judge them correspondingly. Everybody involved in the business of social thought believes in the state of law, and law is built on the assumption of human beings having intentions. Things do not have intentions, they only produce results. Those results can certainly be unexpected, but I do not think they are intended. Even if a computer is finally able to play Go, it cannot make up the game called Go. Humans did that.

Of course despite machines and algorithms also physical structures coerce people in all kinds of ways. Take the kind of life you can live in Hamburg for example. It is shaped by where the streets are, how far it is from here to there, and what the physical structure of the city is. For various reasons having to do with human activities it is true that many German cities had to be rebuilt relatively recently. But still the physical structure in the world tends to last. My house is 120 years old and it has had the same shape for 120 years although it may be inconvenient for old people. A house as a physical structure has a

coercive character, just like the physical and biological world in general. Although these things constrain us, this does not mean we are not free to act. Nor does it mean that those things do act.

Yet they produce events to which we react.

Yes, they do, but the physical world is a system going on its own way, not ours. Take climate change, for instance. When I was an undergraduate back in the 1960s, I worked in climatology and one of the first things you learn there is that the climate is always changing. However, our society is extremely optimized for only a very narrow range of climates. It was warmer a thousand years ago than it is now, and it was much warmer six thousand years ago than it is now. Yet, twenty thousand years ago, at the place where my office is in Chicago, you would have found a mile-thick layer of ice.

Having our current social system optimized for a very particular level and type of climate, we discovered fossil fuels and created a lot of pollution, which will push the climate rapidly enough to force us to reoptimize. We do not just have to face natural climate change; there is also human-induced climate change. The latter can have multiplier effects because of the way the climate system works. So we as actors have become part of the climatic system. But that does not mean that the climate system itself acts.

In my view the three basic concepts characterizing your work on social theory are events, processes, and boundaries. You developed the latter concept in one of your most radical papers called "Things of Boundaries".⁴ I think it fits quite well into a processual sociology but you do not really use it anymore. There seems to be a missing link, especially between events and boundaries. If boundaries come first and entities follow from there, as you contend, then boundaries and proto-boundaries must have an eventful character. In my opinion the link is to construe events as distinctive events – what you call “sites of difference” are basically events of difference. Every event draws a distinction.

Well, yes, my argument about how things come from boundaries starts with sites of difference, which are local, as is everything in the social world. It is the connection of several sites of difference together that makes an enclosable thing. So you might have four different items on your desk and you can place them in such a way that they create an “inside” and an “outside.” That is how boundaries become the origin of things – I discussed the case of the occupation of social work as an example. Several different kinds of

opposition (trained versus untrained in one area of proto-social-work, men versus women in another, full-time versus amateur in a third) are “hooked up” (here: trained, women, professionals) and you have the enclosable occupation called social work. Lots of types of work and people who could have become social workers were ruled out by this particular formation of the profession. Thus, there are sites of difference, as you say. But the processual issue is to find out what or who makes them. Unlike in the *Processual Sociology* book, I did not embed the “Things of Boundaries” argument into a concept of a thick present. Once I did this in my new book, I realized that the particular order of these “hook-ups” makes a difference, and that at any given time some possible hook-ups may be more important or feasible than others. Accordingly, the “Things of Boundaries” argument improved once I put it into this kind of flow.

Originally I drew my inspiration for the whole argument from the game of Go. I was playing Go a lot in the early 1990s, and I was asked to write a paper about boundaries. Suddenly I was singing to myself in the shower something like “Boundaries of Things, Boundaries of Things” – and one day I just put the comma in a new place and all of a sudden I had the phrase “Things of Boundaries.” All I had to do was to think of the title and then wonder what it meant. Boundaries come first, things come later.

So this idea of boundaries is still shaping your sociological approach?

Think about Bismarck and his politics. He was always trying to hook things up so the balance of Europe was maintained and nobody got ahead of anybody else. Before he could do that he obviously needed to create his original “thing” which is Germany. After that, he could act like Mr. Peace himself with respect to the large system of alliances. It certainly helped that he was sitting on top of the largest productive operation in the continent. Thus he knew that peace was good for him and his allies. He was the ultimate “Things of Boundaries” guy. Because he was afraid of a new boundary arising between the leaders and the working people he invented the social insurance. Think again of the before mentioned objects sitting on your desk, only imagine that they are all slow moving animals – annelid worms, for example. If Bismarck wanted to keep his enclosures enclosed, he had to keep these worms moving around so that they are connected to each other and create an inside and an outside to this “thing”. If a worm started to cut his enclosure in half, he would lift the worm and put it somewhere else.

When I read the paper of the talk you gave in Bielefeld,⁵ I was perplexed about your confession of not reading theory anymore. Would you also recommend stop reading

theory to young researchers? Then they would also stop reading your work of course.

My attitude towards this issue changes all the time. It is true, however, that I have not been reading theory for many years. I stopped because I began to find it both repetitive and confusing. It was repetitive because most of it concerned things I had already thought for myself or (more commonly) I had found in the theorists I had already read before. It also was confusing because each new theorist had his or her own special language and I spent more time translating the new ideas into my own theoretical language than I did actually thinking about those new ideas.

Empirically, if we step back and actually look at the history of theory, we find that theory is mainly remembered whenever it enhances the progress made in later periods. Look at Herbert Spencer, who created the *Descriptive Sociology*,⁶ an enormous folio series containing a printed out database of everything you could find about all cultures existing at that time. It is spectacular, it is wonderful. It is the Human Relations Area Files seventy years ahead of time. It is a relational database on societies over a century before relational databases were formally invented. But all of this is completely forgotten. Why do we read Herbert Spencer now? Because reading him enables us to say that Durkheim is wonderful, because Durkheim found out that Spencer was wrong. Theories thus may become part of some narrative in the future, but they may also be merely whipping boys – and in any case they usually survive for only a few years.

More broadly, the relation between young and old people in the disciplines has changed fundamentally in the last fifty years. During the first half of the 20th century in the United States and before 1945 in places like Germany, academia was expanding very, very fast, which means that mostly scholars were young. In those days there was not a lot of theory to read, only two or three really famous senior authors, so you could read and compare them easily. However, it would be impossible to read all famous theorists nowadays because there are lots of them. Today, there is a flat age distribution in most disciplines and there are just as many people in sociology who are in their sixties as there are in their thirties. But if we recognize that with a few exceptions theory is something scholars move towards as they move beyond their first empirical work, then an older discipline is a discipline with more people doing general, synthetic work and theory. It is also true that sociology has retained much of its past theory, so there is simply more and more of it to read. All of these things mean there is much more theory to read these days (and there is less time to read it, but this is a separate argument.)

I think the result of this development is that different generations are learning different theorists. Students today learn the same things that my generation learned by reading Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, but they learn them by reading Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. So they talk about much the same underlying problems, but with different vocabularies. After all, the basic frameworks about social life do not change much. There is: "It is all about individuals and what they do together" (That is economics). There is: "It is all sent out from central casting, which determines the general pattern around which individuals show variability" (That is Durkheim). There is: "It is all about conflict" (Marx). There is: "It is all process" (Chicago School). There is: "It is all symbols" (Geertz and company). These general views do not change. But where young people find them does change. I have just given the sources that my generation would give for these five views, but young people think that Foucault and Bourdieu are enough to know about power and domination, and do not necessarily think one has to go back to Marx. In sociology, they are likely to think Bourdieu is the crucial theorist of culture, and may not have heard of Geertz. And so on.

However, you think that you can make a difference with your own theory, don't you? Otherwise, you would not have any motivation to write.

Of course, I secretly hope that I will make a difference. But of course, I know that this is not to be expected. Usually we do not make a difference. Just go to the library and pull stuff off the shelf from a hundred years ago. You will find hundreds of books by smart people we have never heard of. That is one of the reasons why I did the Barbara Celarent series. The world is full of books. Of course, you write because you are ambitious, and all that. But ultimately the only worthwhile reason for writing is to satisfy your own inner demons.

What is your exact relation to Barbara Celarent?

I hope that other people will write books like this Celarent collection. You know, I started the series just for fun. You can tell that from the versions in the journal of the first year. I had to edit them quite severely for the book. After I turned to the rest of the world as both subject and readership, I got much more serious. The whole project did wonderful things for me; it reawakened certain parts of my intellectual life. Besides, I enjoyed inhabiting the character, and it allowed me to get rid of the sarcastic or juvenile stuff that still marks some of my writing (as one can see in this interview, too).

It would be a great exercise if everybody had to write such texts in graduate school. There

are lots of people you could write about like this, in only 3,000 words. Maybe in the new world of short attention spans, this is how theory will work. One of the great things about the collection of the Celarent essays is that it does not try to resolve anything. There is no afterword in the book about what I learned or what is the answer.

Recently, I was at a conference in Dublin, I think it was the "International Sociological Association History Research Council" group, and I suggested that whenever there is a meeting of a hundred or two hundred researchers they should all agree on reading some new book before coming. Thus, everybody would come to the conference having read the same book, a book they probably had not read before. We could make the meetings much better by doing this, simply because we would enjoy doing it – not because it is going to amount to anything in the long run. It is the same thing about life; you do it because you enjoy living it. Who knows what it amounts to in the long run?

I have a reading group with my students every Friday afternoon which started before Barbara Celarent came into existence. We all go to the library, which holds four and a half million items, and pick a range of three or four bays of shelves. Everybody just grabs a book at random and sits down in a room together, in order to read silently for an hour. Then I open a bottle of wine and pass it around. And each person talks about his book for ten minutes or so. It is a great way to end a week.

Still it is hard to know whether intellectual life will survive in universities. Their character is currently changing fast. Intellectual life moved *into* the universities at a definable moment between 1890 and 1920, in the United States at least. Intellectualism before that time had been at home in the publishing industry as well as in the Protestant clergy, the museums, and the scholarly associations. The intellectual American university was created only after American scholars had seen universities in countries like Germany. But in the late 20th century, once universities became immensely successful institutions catering to thirty, forty, or fifty percent of the eighteen-year-olds, they moved into a different business. They are now in charge of stamping people with grade A, grade B, etc. for the labor force. They are in the business of evaluating people, not thinking about things. Such an institution is no longer dedicated to education, nor is it compatible with intellectual life. One wonders what will come next...

Professor Abbott, thank you very much for the conversation.

Endnoten

1. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, übers. v. W. D. Halls, New York 1997 (Original: *De la division du travail social. Etude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures*, Paris 1893).
2. Alan Sica/Stephen Turner (Hg.), *The Disobedient Generation. Social Theorists in the Sixties*, Chicago, IL 2006.
3. Frederick Pollock/Frederic W. Maitland, *History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, 2 Bde., Cambridge 1898.
4. Andrew Abbott, *Things of Boundaries*, in: *Social Research* 62 (1995), 4, S. 857–882.
5. Andrew Abbott, [On Writing the Social Process](#).
6. Herbert Spencer, *Descriptive Sociology; or Groups of Sociological Facts*, parts 1–8, classified and arranged by Spencer, compiled and abstracted by David Duncan, Richard Schepping, and James Collier, London, 1873–1881.

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<https://www.sozopolis.de/the-shining-not-the-moon.html>