

## Theorising Theory – Reflections on the BJS Annual Lecture

*MSc student Jalal Pour, in collaboration with Naveen Khan and Ruth Ofori-Danso, offers his reflections on the recent British Journal of Sociology (BJS) Annual Lecture.*



The 2015 British Journal of Sociology Annual Public Lecture, entitled “Before Theory Comes Theorising or How to Make Social Science More Interesting,” took place on the 15<sup>th</sup> October in the Sheikh Zayed Theatre, LSE. The talk was given by Professor Richard Swedberg, of Cornell University. In his lecture Swedberg sought to make the case that we should rethink our relationship to one of the fundamental features of sociology and the social sciences: theory. In particular, and perhaps this was aimed more at those in the academy, he was critical of the way in which theory is practiced and taught. In the following, I offer a brief summary of his central argument as well as some reflections on it.

Swedberg’s point of departure was the claim that while there have been tremendous developments since World War II in methods, the other key pillar in social scientific research, this has not been matched in theory. Indeed, he suggested this has resulted in an increasing imbalance between theory and methods in sociology.

Swedberg took issue with the fact that students are often only taught what he called ‘theory on paper’, the substance of particular theories, such as Durkheim’s theory of the division of labour. For him, however, this is only the polished end product of a much longer and messier process. That is to say, theory is the end point of *theorising*. And for Swedberg it is precisely this role of theorising, the process that precedes text, which he referred to as ‘theorising as practice’, that is a crucially important yet neglected aspect of sociological training and research. Thus, it is this situation that he is concerned to address.

As many social science students can attest, we often take methods classes where we are taught different methodological tools, how and when to apply them, culminating in a practical project where we put these to use. Yet, in agreement with Swedberg, this is certainly not echoed with theory. With this in mind he wants social scientists, especially those in positions of teaching, to encourage students to become competent in how to use theory and how to theorise, rather than just knowing the body of particular theories. Borrowing terminology from Hans Reichenbach, Swedberg made the case that we should pay more attention to the way theory develops, through processes of theorising, in the ‘context of discovery’; or, to use the language of Goffman, ‘backstage’. In his view, a strong emphasis on theorising makes for more creative theory. As such, he called for theory to be supplemented by “(theorising) theory”.

Theorising, Swedberg maintained, is an inherently practical endeavour. It is something one must learn through experience, through trial and error, rather than be dictated by a teacher or gleaned

purely from reading; like all great things, for it to work, it must be practiced. Nonetheless, this does not mean to say that teachers are not necessary. On the contrary, in a humorous quip, he suggested that like many sports trainers who are ‘too old to play themselves’, their role is to help coach the next generation. In particular, their responsibility is to help students overcome what he called the Fear of Theory, and to provide them with guidance on how to cultivate the necessary attitude and work habits required for theorising.

Following this, Swedberg suggested that learning to theorise can only be done effectively through concrete exercises, and so he spoke about how he helps students to do so in the course he runs at Cornell. Beginning with the instruction to go and observe any social phenomenon, ideally one that they are not familiar with, Swedberg listed the steps he encourages his students to work through (with the stipulation that they must ‘construct theories to suit facts not facts to suit theories’):

- Step 1: Observe; learn something about the topic before theorising
- Step 2: Name the phenomenon
- Step 3: Use and develop one/several concepts; develop a hybrid concept
- Step 4: Push further – perhaps use a metaphor, an analogy, a typology, a classification; try to build in process
- Step 5: Come up with an explanation, rather than a description only

Ironically, given that the lecture was about theory, Swedberg’s approach was very pragmatic and practical. Undoubtedly, it provided some important food for thought for both students and academics. In terms of some brief thoughts on the lecture, in a sense Swedberg’s argument is not a particularly radical; in fact I would say it is somewhat logical and reasonable. From my experience there certainly is an imbalance between theory and methods in the way sociology is taught, not to mention a total lack of attention given to teaching theorising itself. In this sense, I commend Swedberg on his attempt to rebalance this state of affairs, and particularly like the emphasis he places on the ‘hands-on’ nature of theorising. I would certainly enjoy the course he runs at Cornell, and hope in the future to see similar ones appear in the UK.

The discipline of sociology as a whole is undoubtedly hindered if theory – and in particular theorising – continues to play a marginalised role, so I hope Swedberg’s intervention may play a part in redressing this. Not only would this make social science more interesting, as suggested in the title of the lecture, but I also think it would raise the quality of research produced.

---

October 21st, 2015 | [Sociology Events](#) | [0 Comments](#)

---