

Theory as parallax and provocation

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Theory then and theory now

The prompt to which this short essay responds starts with a question of origin. When and where did I first encounter theory? In the spirit of life histories, of the sort that anthropology finds intriguing, I could answer that I found theory in a graduate seminar. However, as informants often do, I will shift my answer (and hence the question) to say that theory was there before anthropology and before the classroom in the United States. Theory was theory first in the world, in the references I heard to dialectical materialism to explain Chile's coup d'état and the Argentine military junta. Also, under the label of philosophy, theory was there in high school when I was assigned Freud's "The Ego and the Id" for psychology class. Theory was always a worldly affair.

Life histories are difficult, especially when one is asked to identify a point of origin. But, as informants do, I will also entertain the question asked and respond that I encountered "theory," as an objectified anthropological entity demanding identification, in graduate school. The memory is vivid. The seminar room had no windows and we sat around the table with the professor at the front. The topic was capitalism and life, and during our first meeting, after going through the syllabus, the professor asked us to define theory. Following a brief and awkward silence, we were able to craft something of a discussion until the question was returned to the professor who, wittingly, refused to give

us a definition and instead leaped into the unfolding of the class to say that there, in the duration of our course, we would examine what theory might be.

I withdrew from the class. Maybe a conflict with another required course, a re-evaluation of the credit load, or an overlap with teaching obligations forced me to do so. But after all these years, I continue to wonder whether the class spent any time discussing what theory *qua* theory is. I think of that unheard definition as a symbol of my unruly engagement with theory; a personal relation that has become intellectually stimulating and slightly risky. Thus, going back to the life history that the prompt invites, I could say that theory became anthropology's not as a list of authors, but as a modality of thought always demanding elucidation; not as a generic form of logical argumentation, but as a case specific way of assembling particularity and generality to engage with the world. Theory became a modality of engagement with the ideas of others in intimate conversation with the puzzles of a specific project. Theory was, from my anthropological beginnings, more than "application" of concepts to new contexts. Understanding theory as a form of engagement with ideas has made me wary of strong and sustained identifications with distinct schools of thought or graduate education brands across projects. This does not mean that I believe ideas are individual accomplishments devoid of histories and genealogies. It does imply, however, that to the extent that we can reflexively decide on theoretical orientations, those histories and genealogies are not deterministic. They are open-ended structures with the capacity of being transformed through the questions that we endeavor to ask in a specific inquiry.

My doubts about strong and sustained theoretical identifications in ethnographic inquiry can be explained in relation to density. It seems that very strong theoretical

identifications often saturate ethnographic projects before they unfold. Leaving very little room for ethnographic surprise, they seem to result in a form of theoretical forecasting that is, in my view, problematic and for which, most of the time, ethnographic engagement is made to appear, if not unnecessary, without theoretical significance beyond providing “empirical” illustration. In such cases, it seems that the story to be told is known before the research commences; theoretical saturation at the expense of analytic re-configuration.

In my work, I try to sidestep this saturated theoretical determinism by paying attention to theory as a particular mode of braiding a question through a project I am working on. Certainly, I am not suggesting one starts anew with every project. One can, however, intentionally bracket comfortable “theoretical” markers that seem to work too well and whose insights can be anticipated. This would be a tactic of induced discomfort that might, initially, favor inquisitive untidiness over elegant parsimony. A bit unruly, yet far from claiming any anarchist sensibilities, this intellectual attitude towards theory recognizes the genealogies of ideas but is not bound to their kinship maps as guidelines for argumentation or explanation. This modality of theory-work keeps space for ethnographic surprise, as theoretical surprise, tactically open.

I trace one of the precursors of this relation with theory to my graduate training. During my first year in the anthropology Ph.D. program at the University of California, Irvine, I enrolled in the required three-quarter pro-seminar sequence. The sequence is designed to introduce students to a selection of conceptual and theoretical discussions of anthropology and adjacent fields from the 18th century onwards. The class was organized as a series of three oscillations. Each quarter circled back and reassessed anthropology, and to some extent the human sciences, by asking a different question about society, power,

and knowledge. Our seminar was designed to shake up, from the very beginning of our training, assumptions of epistemic hierarchy, linear genealogies, and teleological thinking. Frazer, Leach, Latour, Strathern, Evans Pritchard, Grosz and Geertz were all part of the mix, as were Marx, Durkheim and Weber, along with many others.

I could have inferred from that experience a sense of theory as a system of canonical and interconnected ideas that travel beyond the specific conjunctures from which they were drawn. However, the cyclical structure of the course enacted a historical sensibility that did not rely on clear lines of authority or evolutionary undertones of knowledge progression. While introducing us to exciting intellectual traditions, the class valued surprise and recursivity, and disrupted predictable graduate “criticism of everything” by calling our attention to unexpected and disruptive anticipations and survivals. More than anything else, the proseminar series opened our eyes to the deep historicity of all knowledge forms, especially of theoretical ideas. I could have also taken the proseminar as a rich “knowledge bank” from which to borrow explanations that elucidate the complications of the world. But, the very structure of this pedagogical experience took me elsewhere. Instead of thinking of theory as a resource to be extracted and consumed, or assembled and produced, theory, in its thing-like form as an object labeled so, appeared to have a certain precariousness. A fragility inflicted by how the pro-seminar, and other critical theory classes I took, revealed the radical historicity of works and names labeled theoretical. In this line, I could say that my systematic encounter with theory was also a systematic de-stabilization of any belief in its solidity as a transcendent object.

Looking back to the pro-seminar, I am not sure whether theory was ever explicitly defined there either. Or maybe I have forgotten the definition that was given. Regardless,

the effect is what continues to be interesting. This lack of definition allowed me to deem works with fundamentally different aesthetics as theoretical. Rather than using a definition to sieve through bodies of thought that deserve the label from others that don't, I came to consider theory as something to be deciphered as a function of what a particular author helped me do, see or sense. Theory was never a *found object* with self-evident forms and uses. It was always a way to interrogate worlds that I had become puzzled by, worlds whose contours were never self-evident. Theory work was a collective, historically-specific project of putting the words captured by others to work for understanding their materials and to help me better craft the questions and ethnographic sensibilities that animated my projects.

It seems to me that this form of theory work differs from at least some trends of contemporary anthropology that reduce theory to explanation. The world presents itself in all of its messiness and Tsing, Peirce, Strathern, or Hegel are invoked to loosen the "empirical" knot. It is as if authors and their most recognized "concepts" circulate as tokens of authority, icons of lineages, ingredients to help enrich our writings, or as genealogies to grant historical depth to one's thinking. The invocation of a theorist, a theory, or a concept, clearly marked as such, with all the linguistic devices used to do so, draws into a text a rhetorical power that is highly specific. Think, for instance, about the contexts, tones, and textures with which David Schneider, Karl Marx or bell hooks make it into a text to support, challenge or interrupt an idea. As is probably clear by now, the use of theory as direct clarification to afford more power to one's words seemed, early on in my training and to this day, somewhat limiting of the creative potential of anthropological intellectual labor.

A key moment in the development of this view came during a seminar discussion of Bronislaw Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935). In the conversation, my own thinking about theory began to fold onto itself making a pre-existing discomfort speakable. At the moment, what had been a bodily anxiety for which I did not have a language took the form of an argument. A fellow student offered a critical perspective on *Coral Gardens* for its lack of any theoretical spine. Where is the theory here, he asked. I was perplexed by the contention that there was no theory in the book, and we got into a heated discussion around whether theory needs to be labeled, identified as such, to actually exist. In a way, his critique was that in *Coral Gardens* theory was not lifted from the rest of the text through citations of others' ideas or as a declarative statement that summarized Malinowski's own theorizations. More recently, I have heard similar critiques from graduate students who mostly recognize theory in the form of a citation or a reference and have a harder time recognizing theory in the structure of an ethnographic argument.

I can see the pragmatic utility of turning theory into a thing that is textually marked through citation practices and differentiation techniques (e.g. parenthesis, quotation marks). Theory-as-thing is extremely efficient in establishing glosses that make possible many of the discussions anthropologists are engaged in. Proclaiming and labeling things theoretical, and bounding them into a systematized assemblage of ideas is, in a way, part and parcel of what we do. In this form, theory helps string ideas and observations together and develop elegant bodies of interconnected and cohesive concepts—including the ways in which cohesion is used to explain contradiction. The functionality of theory in this form, and our familiarity with it, makes all the more understandable the presentist request for Malinowski to drop more citations and alert us more clearly to his theorizations in *Coral*

Gardens. The down side of that preference and familiarity is that it has grown to justify what I think of as a form of thin nominalism.

By thin nominalism I want to index ethnographers' deep investment in coining new terms and diagnosing new phenomena. In many cases the proposition is a new category but, for the most part, the analytic work sustaining those new names and word combinations is an assemblage of theory as literary references, as bounded explanations, as things. The unfortunate consequence of this is that ethnography, as a theoretical project beyond bounded catchphrases displaying a beauty that seduces us, is sometimes unrecognized as theoretical. When clearly marked as theory, statements are efficient scaffolds for an edifice whose name might seem peculiar but whose form can often be anticipated. I find that this type of work seldom provides the insights that anthropology, at least in theory (so to speak), promises.

My ambivalence about becoming complacent with theory by taking it as a thing and by fetishizing its nominalist and rhetorical power, opens a good occasion to outline two thought routines that I have used for working with theory in my research and teaching: theory as parallax and theory as provocation. In their use, these artifacts of thought help me frame ethnographic questions, and possibly answers, in ways that cannot be fully anticipated. I have used them not to generate a pre-determined type of ethnographic text, a rhetorical strategy, or a type of explanation, but to lay the grounds from which a question or insight can emerge. These are not mechanisms to produce elucidation. Instead, they help develop questions and worlds to be examined and which do not map neatly onto theoretical family charts.

Parallax and provocation as theory artifacts

The process of designing my dissertation research and the writing of my oral examination documents were moments of my training when theory as parallax began to take shape, although at the time I did not use that wording. A parallax alters one's vision of an object as a function of the existence of shifting positions from which said object can be apprehended. By shifting perspectives the object's reference to other elements in the plane of view also shifts, revealing certain relations and obscuring others. This is not mere recognition that there might be multiple perspectives on an object. It is a second level realization of what becomes relationally comprehensible as specific elements become visible, while other become obstructed, through the particular arrangement that the parallax, with its co-existing and multiple possible lines of view, affords. The possibility of multiple angles of observation cannot be merely ignored to settle into one or two preferred perspectives. Through the parallax, that very possibility becomes the object of theoretical reflection through the particularities of the specific ethnographic project at hand.

The relations between elements made visible through the parallax (e.g. questions, concepts, objects of study, hunches) work as schematics of investigation in which the role of theory is constantly shifting and is much more than elegant explications of sets of gathered events. Parallax theorizations have help me assemble spaces of inquiry whose most exciting corners are their blurred spots; those worlds that escape clear articulation and slide off when perspectives shift. With the parallax, the aspiration for a complex enough picture that resembles the "empirical" vanishes, because comprehensiveness and fidelity to complexity are structurally impossible. The parallax is constituted by the fact

that there are things that cannot be seen, cannot be known. The un-seeable changes from one moment to the next, but nevertheless it exists. In this modality of engagement, theory cannot be said to either precede or follow an object of study. Theory as parallax constitutes that object of investigation as something that simultaneously pre-exists the act of observation and is created by the parallax itself. At the same time, its power is activated in the process of assembling the lines of vision that constitute the arrangement of elements in view. As a mode of thinking, the parallax is essentially a series of movements, a chain of shifts that transform an ethnographic project into glimpses that are momentarily captured through different texts or other representational devices such as the research proposal, the sound collage, the journal article, the monograph, or the exhibition—none of them fully exhausting the possibilities of the parallax as a modality of thinking.

Here, the use of theory is different from saying that a theoretical approach provides a perspective on an already identified issue. That orientation would seem to me more like using a theory, as a bounded thing, to explain a pre-determined phenomenon. Conversely, the parallax is useful because it puts theory to work in the creation of a problem space in need of exploration. In thinking with the parallax, the question of what theory is remains bracketed. That taxonomic desire is stopped in its tracks. Here “theory” is thought about in relation to what can be done with it. Its fixity melts into action. In the parallax theory is an artifact in motion, which is momentarily positioned at an angle to produce an empirical configuration asking for scrutiny, before being repositioned. In this modality, theory helps us produce a question whose answer cannot be anticipated because one does not yet know what it is that one wants to know. That which is worth learning depends on the parallax itself.

The second modality of theory that I want to refer to is the deliberate staging of provocation as an epistemic mood. This idea of theory as provocation goes back to my interactions in the field, to a series of instances when my informants probed or educated me on “theory.” On one occasion, after giving a presentation on my preliminary findings to some of my collaborators in Brazil, one audience member asked whether I had considered how Habermas would explain the public discussion spaces the state had created in Ceará. On another occasion, during a long trip in Costa Rica, a collaborator gave me a short lecture on Lacanian psychoanalysis and suggested thinking about desire to understand the lack of any important accomplishments in the Costa Rican public sector. In its thing-like form, as a bounded idea identifiable with an author, theory seemed to always be ahead of me in the field. As many scholars working on expert regimes and technical issues have noted, in its thing-like form theory is no longer a valuable resource to distinguish the researcher’s insights from the views and explanations of our informants. Considering this, what is left for theory-as-thing to do? One answer is provocation. By exerting gentle pressure and irritating the comfortable reliance on a particular theoretical tradition as a valuable predictor of our research results, provocation pushes one to constant self-evaluation, in the best style of our neoliberal times. It forces me to constantly revisit that which is left behind or outside the purview of a particular thought tradition. The repressed returns, with a provocative attitude, to ask for justification of its exclusion. In other words, what a Habermasian approach for thinking about public hearings in Brazil overlooks, for example, would have to figure in the explicit crafting of an object of investigation. Its exclusion would demand consideration although not necessarily inclusion as an interview question, field site, or proposition.

A provocation sets a certain mood; it produces a particular atmosphere for theorizing. In my rendering, it includes a sense of epistemic care for the excluded, for that which ends up being out of theoretical limits, and especially for that which is out of our analytic zones of comfort. As provocation, then, theory incites, irritates and instigates. The point here is not to pose as a provocateur for the pleasure of doing so; how productive a provocation is depends on the particular case at hand. In my experience, provocation has been valuable to the extent that it acts as a check on the conservative effects of rhetorical strategies based on repetition and reiteration of beautiful theoretical phrases and which tend to shortchange the possibilities of anthropology as a field of thought. Provocation is a serious game. Its politics are delicate since one traverses the murky waters of potentially violent disruption. Its practice is, inevitably, an ethical field that demands epistemic reflexivity beyond positionality. And, most importantly, it is not about the fetish of innovation. It is about contributing to a larger project that surpasses our “neoliberally” individual theoretical tastes and choices.

Teaching and learning theory

What is the route of theory as a modality of thinking through anthropological writings? With my students, I am doing two things to explore what that route might look like. First, in graduate teaching I pair “theory” with ethnographies to query where and how authors connect or depart from one another. I have chosen ethnographies that explicitly claim to “use” a particular theorist with original texts from those authors. Tracing theory as assumptions, as rhetorical tools, as points of closure, or as gifts that you might pass on has been an extremely instructive exercise. This modality of pedagogy, paired with more

traditional courses on theory, exposes students to the history of ideas, de-mystifies the cohesiveness of theory, and shows the multiple registers at which theoretical work is ethnographically done. Second, I have designed a research conceptualization class around exercises where students use textual and non-textual materials to draw their own research schematics. This is not a research design or research methods class. It is a studio where readings and exercises are not planned to increase the theoretical knowledge of students but are conceptual iterations of the possible avenues that they can use to craft their own puzzles for exploration. The exercises include writing assignments as well as experimentation with other media and materials. I think of the assignments, between seven and ten per semester, as processes of theorization in their own right (some of these exercises can be found at www.ethnographystudio.ning.com). Importantly, these exercises do not rest on the textual cinching together of data and theory, but skip the distinction altogether and push analytic and conceptual experimentation through ethnographic elements that students have gathered in their preliminary investigations of their topics.

These experiments and my own reliance on parallax and provocation as theory artifacts are possible, in part, because of our peculiar historical conjuncture. On the one hand, an important part of cultural anthropology is enthralled by the valuation of difference and multiple forms of knowledge, having for the most part relegated any attempt for generality to the colonialist universalist corner. Somehow, we have all become experts holding different forms of knowledge as technocratic experts, consultants, traditional knowledge holders, tacit knowledge makers, etc. That epistemic multiplicity is implicitly and explicitly celebrated. On the other hand, anthropologists are embracing the fact that theory-as-thing is something that they share with their informants and not necessarily

something that the researcher brings to that relation. Both of these factors move some to speak about a “crisis” of anthropological theorizing. While averse to crisis talk because of the ways in which it often hurries action at the expense of careful analysis, I can see where the concern comes from. There are even calls to stop the kinds of theory-work we are doing to replace it with a “purely” ethnographic modality of theory creation. But, considering the ways in which theory appears in anthropological works that explore expert regimes, a separation between what we might call ethnographic theorization and theory-as-thing seems difficult. Emphasizing a separation between these two forms of theory, presumes that it is always clear how they differ from each other. Yet, that distinction is difficult for certain ethnographic projects for which theory-as-thing is itself ethnographic fact—the Brazil and Costa Rica instances I mentioned above are good examples. Thus, instead of cutting out thing-like theory from our accounts, we could be less timid about moving it out of its authoritative explanatory position and into a place where it becomes ethnographic object in need of investigation. Lacan’s invocation during a car ride with a water activist becomes meaningful, not because of how Lacanian psychoanalysis substantively explains desire, but because of my informant’s sense that that way of understanding desire says something about the worlds that he works in. In a situation like this, if anthropology stopped thinking with theories that have travelled (embodied by Foucault, Kristeva, Agamben, Bateson, or any other thinker deemed theoretical), it would be cutting off a slice of what for some of us constitutes part of the field site of our work. Alternatively, one could think more about and with theory-as-thing in its field-based travels; engage with it more radically, to the point that theory, as ethnographic object, implodes into its own boundaries

and, in the process, creates more open and expansive space for anthropology to do what it does best: revealing the unexpected forms the world constantly takes.