

THEORY

CAN BE

MORE

THAN

IT USED

TO BE

Learning

Anthropology's

Method in a

Time of

Transition

EDITED BY

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AND George E. Marcus

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RESPONSES

Theory as Parallax and Provocation*Andrea Balletero*

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. As informants often do, however, I will shift my answer (and hence the question) to say that theory was there before anthropology or the classroom in the United States. Preceding my encounter with anthropology, theory was in the world, in dialectical materialism explaining the coup d'état in Chile and the military junta in Argentina. Under the label of philosophy, theory was also 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 beginnings. But, as informants do, I will also entertain the question, and answer that I encountered "theory," as an objectified anthropological entity demanding identification, in graduate school. The memory is vivid. The room had no windows and we sat around the seminar table. The topic was capitalism and life, and during our first meeting, after going through the syllabus, the professor asked for a definition of *theory*. Following a brief yet awkward silence, we were able to craft something of a discussion until the question was returned to the professor who, wittingly, refused to give 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 reevaluation of the credit load, or a conflict 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 this never-heard definition as a symbol of my unruly engagement with theory—a personal relation that has become intellectually productive 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 mode of engagement with the ideas of others that went beyond the "application" of concepts to new contexts. Understanding theory as a form of engagement has made me wary of strong and sustained identifications with distinct schools of thought. This does not mean, however, that ideas are individual accomplishments devoid of histories and genealogies. It does imply, though, that to the extent that we can reflexively decide between 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 identification in ethnographic inquiry can be explained in relation to density. It seems that very strong theoretical identification often saturates ethnographic projects

before they unfold. Leaving very little room for surprise or spark, this identification seems to result in a form of theoretical forecasting that is problematic and for which, most of the time, ethnographic engagement is made to appear, if not unnecessary, without theoretical significance beyond the provision of "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 reconfiguration.

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 research project. 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 toward 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 PhD program at the University of California, Irvine, I enrolled in the required three-quarter proseminar sequence. The class was designed to introduce students to a selection of conceptual and theoretical discussions in anthropology and adjacent fields from the eighteenth century onward. 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 questions about society, power, or 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, Weber, and 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. The cyclical structure of the course, however, enacted a historical sensibility that did not rely on clear lines of authority or evolutionary undertones of knowledge progress.

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 knowledge forms, especially of theoretical ideas. I could have taken the proseminar as a rich “knowledge bank” from which to borrow explanations to 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 thinglike form, appeared to have a certain precariousness—a fragility inflicted by how the proseminar, 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 destabilization of any belief in its solidity as a transcendent object.

Looking back to the proseminar, I am not sure whether theory was ever explicitly defined there either. Or perhaps I have forgotten the definition that was given. Regardless, the effect is what is 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 do not, I came to consider theory as something to be deciphered by what a particular author helps 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 whose contours were never self-evident. Theory was a collective, historically specific effort to put the words captured by others to work for both understanding their ideas and to help me better craft the questions and ethnographic sensibilities that continue to animate my projects.

It seems to me that this form of theory 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, 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, and/or genealogies that grant historical depth to one’s thinking. The invocation of a theorist or a concept, clearly marked as such, with all the linguistic devices necessary to do so, draws into a text a highly specific rhetorical power. Think, for instance, about the

contexts and tones 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, 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 Malinowski’s *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935). In the conversation, my own thinking about theory began to fold onto itself, making an already 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 observation that *Coral Gardens* lacked 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, my friend’s critique was that in *Coral Gardens* theory was not lifted from the rest of the text in the shape of citations of others’ ideas or as declarative statements that summarized Malinowski’s own theorizations.

I can see the pragmatic utility of turning theory into a thing that is textually marked through citation practices and textual differentiation techniques (e.g., parentheses and 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, has become part and parcel of, what we do. In this form, theory strings observations together and turns them into elegant bodies of interconnected and cohesive concepts. 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 alerts us more clearly to his theorizations in *Coral Gardens*. The downside of this preference for clearly marked theory is that it justifies what I think of as a form of thin nominalism.

By thin nominalism I refer to what seems to be a perceived need to coin new terms if one is to make a theoretical contribution. In some cases, the proposed terms are in fact new categories of thought, but in others 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 is that ethnography that does not develop beautifully bounded “theoretical” phrases is sometimes taken as nontheoretical. In turn, when clearly marked, these statements become efficient scaffolds for an edifice whose name might be peculiar but whose form can often be anticipated. I find that this type of work seldom provides the insight 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 experiments that I use to work 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 predetermined type of ethnographic text or a rhetorical strategy but to lay the grounds from which a question or insight can emerge. These are not mechanisms of elucidation. Instead, they help develop questions and worlds that need to be examined because they do not map neatly into theoretical family charts.

Parallax and Provocation as Theory Artifacts

Designing my dissertation research and writing my oral examination documents were two moments of my training when theory as a 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 one’s 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 comprehensible through the parallax, with its coexisting and multiple lines of view. With the parallax the possibility of multiple angles of observation cannot be ignored to settle into a preferred perspective. 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 much more than elegant explications

of gathered events. Parallax theorizations help 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 mirrors the empirical vanishes, because comprehensiveness and complexity are structurally impossible to capture. The parallax is constituted by the fact that there are things that cannot be seen, cannot be known. While the unseeable changes from one moment to the next, it never ceases to exist. Under these circumstances, 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 preexists the act of observation and is created by the parallax itself. 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 the parallax opens.

This use of theory is different from saying that a theoretical approach provides a perspective on an issue. This orientation would seem to me more like using a theory, as a bounded thing, to explain a predetermined 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 terms of what it can do. Its definitional fixity melts into action. In the parallax, theory is an artifact in motion that is momentarily positioned at an angle to produce an empirical configuration asking for scrutiny, before being repositioned again. Here, theory helps produce questions whose answers cannot be anticipated because one does not yet know what it is that one wants to know.

The second use of theory that I want to refer to is the deliberate staging of provocation as an epistemic mood. The idea of 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 spaces the state had created in Ceará. On another

occasion, during a long trip in Costa Rica, a collaborator gave me a 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 thinglike 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, 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, 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. What a Habermasian approach for thinking about public hearings in Brazil overlooks, for instance, 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 or field site.

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. Whether provocation works as a productive thinking device is a question in need of disciplined examination and one to be assessed through its specific usages. Provocation is a serious game. Its politics are delicate given that one traverses the murky waters of potentially violent disruption. Its practice is, inevitably, an ethical field that demands epistemic reflexivity beyond positionality. And, importantly, it is not about the fetish of innovation.

Teaching and Learning Theory

What is the route of this form of theory through anthropological writing? With my students, I am doing two things to explore what that route might look like. First, in graduate teaching I have paired "theory" with ethnographies to query where and how authors connect to 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 pedagogical exercise, coupled with more traditional courses on theory, exposes students to the history of ideas, demystifies 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 for which students use textual and nontextual materials to draw their own research schematics. This is not a research design or methods class. It is a studio where readings and exercises are not planned to increase theoretical knowledge but are conceptual iterations of the possible avenues that they can use to arrive at their own analytic puzzles. The exercises include writing assignments as well as experimentation with other media and materials. I think of the exercises, 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). They 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 multiple forms of knowledge, having for the most part relegated attempts for generality to the colonialist, universalist corner. Somehow, we have all become experts holding different forms of knowledge as technocrats, consultants, traditional knowledge holders, tacit knowledge makers. 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 of a crisis of anthropological theory. While averse to crisis talk because 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 and replace it with "purely" ethnographic theorizations. 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 is itself ethnographic fact—the Brazil and Costa Rica instances I mentioned above are good examples. Thus, instead of cutting out thinglike 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 an 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 this 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 say, Foucault, Kristeva, Viveiros de Castro, Agamben, Lacan, or Latour), it would be cutting off a slice of what for some of us is the field. Alternatively, one could think more about and with theory as thing in its field 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: reveal the unexpected forms the world is constantly taking.

Undisciplined Engagements: Anthropology, Ethnography, Theory

Lisa Breglia

1

I arrived to anthropology late in my education. An English major with several years of graduate school already under my belt—including doctoral work in a cultural studies PhD program—one thing I felt familiar and comfortable with was theory. I was certainly privileged to be fully versed in the provocative thought-exercises of poststructuralism (I took