

PERSPECTIVES

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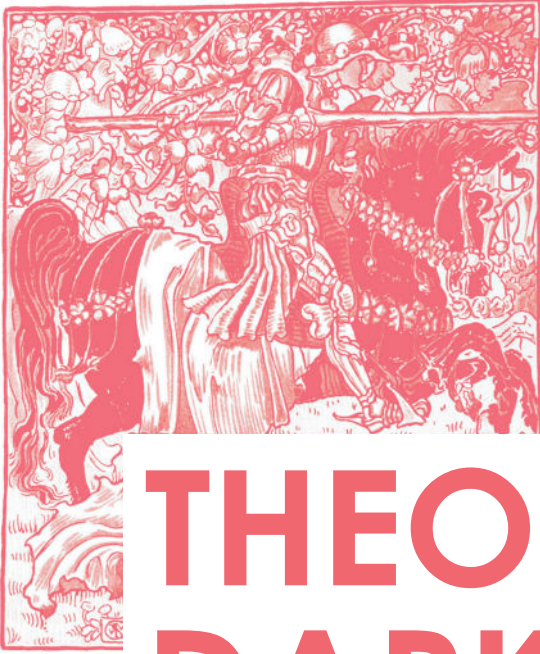
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LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

THEORY FOR THE DARK AGES

Marion Fourcade - *University of California, Berkeley*



Every year, as I ready for the next semester of undergraduate or graduate social theory, I face the same nagging temptation. Is this going to be the year when I finally throw it all out

of the window? In my wildest fantasies, I commit sociological parricide, slash through the syllabus with a sharp pen, and replace venerated authors with unfamiliar names (some of whom are not even known as sociologists). But soon I start backtracking. It would be an irresponsible move, I reason –a disservice to my students, who are expected to know this stuff. Any new choices would be just as arbitrary as the old ones, and after teaching them for so many these years I have grown fond of these writers. And so, I tone down my radical fancies. I make some additions on account of personal curiosity, student interest, intellectual

fad, or the urgency of events. But making room for incoming authors by dropping syllabus fixtures is a painful process. I have trouble letting go of my past infatuations, even as I embrace new ones.

The social theory syllabus is a remarkable object, especially when seen in comparative perspective. Different social sciences have different ways of anchoring their disciplinary cultures. Economists have “principles,” simple rules that guide their view of how the allocation of scarce resources takes place. The apparent timelessness of these rules, the translation of core economic theories (e.g., “the theory of the consumer”, the “theory of the producer”) into a set of simple mathematical equations, the general assumption of a unity of motive (self-interest), means that the whole apparatus is easily appropriated and disseminated throughout the field. The authors of these rules, in fact, have long been forgotten. We, on the other hand, have no native method and no specific

field of action, since for us everything is amenable to a sociological analysis, and every kind of analysis is legitimate –as long as we deem it rigorous enough. The result is that we mostly know one another as sociologists because of a shared set of texts. There is, in fact, little else that unites us. Most important among these are the books and articles written by the so-called “social theorists.” We are familiar with their works, but also with their persons: we read biographies about them, take pleasure in our intimate knowledge of their quirks, judge their character and their politics, relate their social theories to their social position.

The paradox indeed is that the persisting “centrality” (Alexander 1987) of these canonical texts often makes us feel uncomfortable –another key difference with economics. Economists believe in a world where power does not matter, even though in its organization and everyday life their own field is all about hierarchy and deference to the authority of a small elite. (Fourcade, Ollion and Algan 2015) Sociologists, by contrast, believe in a world where power is everywhere, and they actively look for it in their own professional lives. The social theory syllabus, inevitably, is one of these sites of struggle, always in search for insiders and outsiders. And rightly so: any candid sociology of sociology will soon reveal that it has often served the interests of Western colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism (Connell 1989, Go 2016) and repeatedly failed to adequately represent the diverse history and interests of the discipline. (Morris 2014, Romero 2017) Every social theory instructor has had to tread cautiously around certain phrases that smell foul by present-day moral and political standards, or admit,

The social theory syllabus, inevitably, is one of these sites of struggle, always in search of insiders and outsiders ... But for all practical purposes it remains the glue... that keeps us talking to one another ...

with embarrassment, that many core texts ignore or gloss over essential historical facts.

As the contingent product of history and of the whims and legitimate arbitrariness of individual taste, the teaching of social theory is eminently unsatisfactory and contestable. But for all practical purposes it remains the glue—all at once malleable and rigid—that keeps us talking to one another (even if it is to fight about theory!). It is a fixture, a social structure in our field—mostly because we treat it that way: Theory provides the language and metaphors which organize our approach to substantive questions, our political imagination, and our scholarly strivings.

My own attachment to social theory straddles these two contradictory positions. It is both tenuous and profound. Tenuous, because I am painfully aware of the contingent and contentious nature of its construction. The field’s intellectualist dispositions, which sometimes veer into pointless displays of erudition, also frustrate me. I came to sociology out of a dissatisfaction with the abstraction of philosophical discourse and I have remained suspicious of theory for theory’s sake. But profound, also. The fact is that—for better or for worse—

these texts have become inextricably bound with who I am as a sociologist. They connect me to previous and future generations. Sometimes in spite of myself, they invite me to play intellectual games and send me on wild goose chases of an etymological or conceptual nature. They are a source of inspiration for my own work, even when their analytical or empirical purpose seems far removed from mine.

Why do we need theory after all? I once wrote a short

piece for this very newsletter, lamenting the stifling division between “theory” and “research” that is so central to the way we think about the training of the next generation of sociologists in the United States (Fourcade 2004). The fact is that much of what we call “theory” is simply compelling research. Most of the books and articles in our present-day pantheon, from Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* to Goffman’s *Presentation of Self*, from Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* to Bourdieu’s *Distinction* were not explicitly designed as theoretical contributions. Rather, each is an empirically-grounded analysis of some specific historical moment or slice of present social life, but one where the author is also willing to speak to some broader theme as they make their way. Many of the other classics in our canon were influential pamphlets or works of journalism, some dashed off almost in passing. As Bargheer (2014) adroitly put it, “theory is not an intrinsic quality of a text—it is a product of the way a text is used.” The more it is used, and the more diverse the range of use contexts, the more the text will “come to be referred to as theory. [...] The only necessary requirement for empirical research to be relabeled as sociological theory is the passing of time.” It is the boundary nature of these objects, the multivocality of understanding and the layers of sedimented practice, that crystallizes their epistemological status within the field.

The fact is that
much of what we
call ‘theory’ is simply
compelling research

There are many reasons why some texts end up being more useful than others, but no hard and fast rule. Mostly, you know a good theory when you see it. Sometimes it is about the author’s ability to throw away details to highlight one big intuition (Healy 2017). Sometimes it is the result of a sustained effort to make one’s way

against the grain of common sense (Durkheim 2014). Sometimes it is about identifying meaningful empirical regularities or simply *naming* a phenomenon one has observed in the world. Sometimes, it is about predicting a future that may or may not realize itself, of seeing the right thing at the right time. Sometimes it is about performing a kind of intellectual sacrifice, like offering oneself relentlessly as a straw man, wreaking havoc onto previous theories or constantly hammering out a properly counter-intuitive argument. And sometimes it is about sheer volume and repetition, as when an author uses the same conceptual language to identify similar mechanisms across a wide range of empirical domains—in other words, performs the usefulness of their own theory.

Social theory is most useful, perhaps, when it provides a vocabulary to make sense of a generically conceived present, not only on its own terms, but also in relation to the past, and to other possible presents elsewhere. After all, social theory as we know it was born out of a will to diagnose—and transcend—the unfolding ills of industrial modernity. It was about “prophecy and progress”, as Krishan Kumar (1986) put it, and it combined a definite gloom about the future with a certain hopefulness about the promise of sociology to guide its course. Those we now recognize as the “classical social theorists” warned us about alienation, exploitation, disenchantment, rationalization, and anomie. But they also engaged and confronted new kinds of politics (socialism, liberalism), moral and cultural ideals (individualism, solidarity, freedom, equality), and their age’s rising faith in expertise and administration. They and their contemporaries also sought to collect facts—huge quantities of them. They carefully documented the economic, religious, and demographic conditions of their time. They assembled mountains of evidence to describe the vast range and heterogeneity of social practices across societies and throughout history. And they vividly depicted the experience of modern life in the West.

And so, as we struggle to make sense of another set of transformational changes in the course of human and technological development, as our political aspirations fluctuate, and as new kinds of information about people's lives and their interactions with their environment are now available to us, where are interesting and useful insights going to come from? What new ideals will their authors endorse and inspire? How will they work? What will they foresee?

...the ASA 2019 sessions will begin from the same kind of ambitious questioning that inspired earlier waves of social theory development and look for emerging trends and exciting ideas...

These are, broadly speaking, the core themes that the topical panels at the 2019 annual conference of the ASA hope to probe and debate. Rather than taking actually existing (or self-appointed) theories and theorists as their starting point, the ASA 2019 sessions will begin instead from the same kind of ambitious questions that inspired earlier waves of social theory development and look for emerging trends and exciting ideas.

“Social Theory and Social Progress: Freedom, Solidarity, Democracy, Equality,” an invited session organized by Chris Muller (UC Berkeley), will be devoted to the past and present uses of social and political theory for crafting putatively hopeful futures. Panelists in this session will

explore—and critique—the role of the social sciences in promoting (and fighting over) progressive values and social designs. They will also discuss how social scientists are inserting themselves in today's political debates, or how they might profitably do so.

“Social Theory and Social Decay: Illiberalism, Autocracy, Violence” is the counterpart invited session, organized by yours truly. It will analyze the transformation of social and political bodies as illiberalism, autocracy and violence take root. This session will reflect upon the challenge that old and new waves of exclusion, destruction and democratic decline throughout the world pose both to existing social theories and to the practices and policies these theories might have inspired. Panelists are invited to take seriously Hannah Arendt's dark warning that “everything is possible.”

“Social Theory and Social Data,” organized by Kieran Healy (Duke University), will explore social theory's productive but uneasy relationship with the data sources of its time. Theorists often of necessity go “beyond the data” as they make their arguments, but fruitful periods of theoretical innovation tend to coincide with the development of new tools for collecting and analyzing data. This session will explore the practical relationship between theory and data, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities facing social theory in an era often characterized by the scale, scope, and social character of empirical data in its many forms.

Finally, **“Social Theory for Our Grandchildren: Humanity's Future in Theoretical Perspective,”** organized by Rebecca Elliott (London School of Economics) and myself, invites panelists to speculate on what the social, economic and political world of our grandchildren might look like. How do climate change, the advent of bio-genetic technologies, or the rise of civil and military artificial intelligence (among others) change the way we live

our lives, our culture, and our relationships with other living species? This session shamelessly exploits sociology's anticipatory disposition and encourages wild conjectures and projections about the future of human civilization. This is no time to hold back.

I realize now that these panels, the latter one especially, may have been an unconscious attempt to realize, in a muted fashion, some of the destructive fantasies I mentioned at the onset of this note. But I am confident I am not the only one who harbors these urges deep in my bones. So please, join me!

It is perhaps especially auspicious, given the central themes in these panels, that the much anticipated 2019 Lewis Coser award lecture and salon will celebrate Julian Go! A Professor of sociology at Boston University, Go is the author of two books on the culture and politics of empire (*American Empire and the Politics of Meaning*, Duke University Press 2008; and *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present*, Cambridge University Press 2011), as well as the recent *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford University Press 2016). Go will speak, fittingly, on "The Empire of Social Theory." (This is a tentative title)

The theory roundtables this year will be organized by the wonderful Jordanna Matlon (American University).

Having disrupted the intellectual landscape in the sessions and the business meeting, you will be free to relax, connect with colleagues, and ransack tasty appetizers and drinks in a NYC bistro, steps from the hotel. (Wine/beer open bar). The ASA 2019 Reception, ably organized by Alissa Boguslaw (New School), will be co-hosted by the Culture and Theory Sections on Monday, August 12, 2019, 6:30pm - 8:30pm at Papillon Bistro & Bar –22 E 54th St, New York, NY 10022.

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The ASA Section on Theory seeks your help to continue its efforts to support scholarship in social theory within sociology and related disciplines. Current members can help by renewing their section membership for 2018. We also are looking to reach out to graduate students who may have theoretical interests but have not yet joined the section. The ASA Theory Section is large, vibrant, and open to any and all forms of sociological theory.

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SEEING THE WORLD

HOW U.S. UNIVERSITIES MAKE KNOWLEDGE IN A GLOBAL ERA



Interview with Cynthia Miller-Idriss
Professor of Education and Sociology at American University



*Perspectives editors sat with Professor Cynthia Miller-Idriss to discuss her new book **Seeing the World: How U.S. Universities Make Knowledge in a Global Era** (with Mitchell Stevens*

and Seteney Shami - Princeton UP). Their book draws on interviews with scholars and university leaders to understand how international research is perceived and valued across American social sciences.

Perspectives Editors:

Your book on area studies and the social sciences foregrounds the distinction between context and decontextual work. Could tell us about the sorts of institutional practices that sustain this separation between the contextual work and theoretical social science?

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: Sociology, out of the disciplines that we studied, was the warriest of international contextual work. The debate is often framed as “this deep rich context is not worth it, if it’s done overseas” unless you can relate it back to the U.S. I think that the discipline of Sociology has clung to its core interests for good reasons. It really is oriented around race, gender, social class, and it has been for really long time focused on these key issues of inequality. That’s core to the discipline and always will be, but for some reason that I don’t fully understand myself even though we’ve tried to trace it in this book, that interest in inequalities doesn’t really extend to inequalities outside of the U.S. in a systematic way. In terms of labor markets and publications, Sociology does worse in terms of how much time and energy it devotes to regions outside of the U.S. According to the department chairs that we spoke with, in part because they believe that the market demands it, they don’t believe that students should spend their time on it - a self-fulfilling prophecy in some way. They believe that unless you already have the language -if you come

in already speaking it, that may be a different story—that you’re never going to get good enough in the language while in graduate school or on the tenure track for that to be a good investment of your time. One of the department chairs said that he could never in good faith even recommend that an undergraduate starts taking Mandarin, because Chinese sociologists will just run circles around any Americans sociologist who tries to study China.

Some of this is a kind of rational hedging of bets in very competitive and tight labor markets because there’s an imperative to reproduce your own discipline and try to place your students and that’s part of how people maintain prestige in the field. That sounds a

Sociology, out of the disciplines that we studied, was the wariest of international contextual work

little cynical, but it is the way it works. At the top of the field, people really want to place their students. They want to celebrate that. They want their students to get the best shots possible and they see the labor market working in this way. Why doesn’t it work quite as bad in Economics and Political Science? It’s bad in different ways. Political science has a kind of baked-in comparative structure to their comparative positions still in the departments, and so they have a little bit more of a history of comparative work.

Political science is emerging from a generation of a harder core focus on methodology and theory that in some ways devalued contextual work somewhat, but there’s a slight return to it, I think, now. Economics is model-driven, and so it’s not that they’re not doing

international work, but that they are clear that the international work they’re doing is toward universal models and that context is not important except, in terms of being able to explain anomalies in that data. So when you have spikes in the data that you can’t explain, then some context might explain that, but you don’t really have to go live there for a year to interrogate that or understand why those spikes in the data makes the name.

PE: *Do these professional imperatives come to inform epistemological intuitions about what work we should be doing? One could explain to students that they shouldn’t do this or that, not because of the difficulty of learning a language, but because of its generalizability, etc.*

Miller-Idriss: One thing I think is important to acknowledge is that none of us, as authors of the book, and everyone who worked on the team, is a mainstream sociologist, political scientist, or economist with our primary appointment in a mainstream department. We were all on the margins ourselves, although we’ve been trained in mainstream departments. Mitchell (Stevens) and I were working in interdisciplinary fields and departments, Seteney (Shami) entirely at the Social Science Research Council. That probably shapes what I’m going to say about epistemology, but I think the answer to that question is that, it’s not just kind of benevolent tactic or strategy but is also rooted in beliefs about what the best kind of knowledge is. I think that what we heard from the faculty was that they really believe this is what the discipline should be doing; they were also reinforcing that. There was one chair who said “you have to connect anything outside the country to things that are in the U.S. because that’s what people care about, it’s knowledgeable. I say that tongue in cheek but it’s true.” So, he was being reflective, but also reinforcing. I think it’s not fair to give them a complete pass, that they’re just trying to get around the system and make sure their students

get jobs, but that they're also reinforcing the system - and some of them more strongly than others. You're being trained in a place like I was trained at, that has really strong comparative historical roots, and that really sees theory as being driven by contextual work. I saw my project as creating theory, refining theory, but not in the absence of data that I gathered from the ground. But I think there are others, as I told you when I first sent that dissertation book out for review, one of the reviewers said that they fundamentally disagreed with the premise of the book, which was that qualitative data could generate theory. I think that there's the contingent in the field that does believe that. I think that's something that faculty feel that they are up against, whether they believe it or not, that's the reality they feel they're faced with as they are sending students out.

PE: *Recent theoretical movements have tried to push sociological theory in new directions, we're thinking of Southern theory and post-colonial theory. How does your research help us make sense of the difficulties these movements have faced?*

Miller-Idriss: Also, a great question. For me, one of the biggest flaws in American sociology (and education work, which I also spend a lot of time on, global education work) is the fact that even when we work internationally we are often applying measures and constructs that are created with theory in mind, or driven by theory in some way, but that are totally rooted in American-centric ideas and ways of thinking. What Raewyn Connell and others like her bring so strongly to the table is this understanding.

For example, I am advising a group right now that is doing research with fifteen countries with Muslim youth, including in Turkey and we are looking at six constructs: empathy, forgiveness, moral reasoning, community-mindedness, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy. There was originally a seventh construct, self-

worth, but we couldn't find enough existing measures. We wanted things that were valid and reliable, and all the existing measures of self-worth would say things like 'when I reach a goal I feel good about myself' or 'when I get good grades, I feel worthy' or whatever, not exactly phrased like that, but essentially that my individual achievement makes me feel good about myself. We were going into rural parts of Indonesia, let's say, to places that have much stronger collectivist norms, familiar kinds of rootedness and we just couldn't see that that would, first of all, reflect necessarily how young people were feeling about themselves. There wasn't a measure that said, for example, 'I feel good about myself when I contribute to the family' or 'when I'm a part of the community.' There were all these American ideas about the individualistic nature of success and how you feel good about yourself. And so, we dropped it eventually, and said we're just going to have to come back to it when we can create our own. The team is very much rooted in sending the constructs overseas to different folks in different countries to be reflected on and come back, but it's this idea that you're going to try to drive constructs that come from within the community rather but that still are vetted by and are being designed with very strong research methodology and defensible measurements and goals.

I'm more optimistic than, I think others are. I have felt that there's tremendous promise in something like Southern Theory, but the truth is that it's still considered kind of fringe within the field...

I hope that that's an example of something that will contribute back to theory and method, but I think that's the dilemma we get into: when we have this completely parochial sense of what George Steinmetz calls 'homeland methodology', when you have this kind of gaze that is so inward turning that you don't even realize it's inward turning, that it shapes the very questions you ask in ways that shape the results you get. That's where something like Southern theory can challenge that: There are other ways of knowledge, other ways of knowing, other ways of thinking, and we have to start working from within to get the constructs and measures and ways of thinking more locally rooted in places, and have those start to shape the way we come back. But ultimately, it hasn't had a major impact on the mainstream of the field. I'm more optimistic than, I think, others are. I have felt that there's tremendous promise in something like Southern theory, but the truth is it's still considered kind of fringe within the field. That's where I get less optimistic: If Raewyn Connell can't do it, then who can?!

PE: *Because of the separation between area studies and the social sciences, the humanities are most represented in area studies--but the humanities are often highly theoretical. Could you say a bit about what it means for the relationship between the area studies and the social sciences that theory has developed in a particular way in area studies.*

Miller-Idriss: There's several interesting things here. One is that area studies were created to incentivize social scientists to engage with regions, but that never really happened. There was this brief heyday, modernization theory was probably it – this moment where scholars felt they had the capacity and the power in these fields to solve pressing problems of the world and of national security – that they could bring their expertise to bear on it. But that pretty quickly faded and there were good reasons why sociologists distanced themselves. We trace it in the book. There

were a couple of major controversies where social scientific knowledge was misused by the government for nefarious ends in overseas conflicts, for example. So, I think that there was a retreat of the social sciences from policy relevant work. That factors into this whole story because area studies centers, which are meant to be policy relevant in some way or related to the nation's needs in some way, were kind of abandoned by social scientists who in many ways would be best suited to engage those policy questions.

Even where I was trained, a professor here in Michigan told me "leave the policy implications to the policymakers. Don't put them in your conclusion! That's the policymaker's job. Your job is to provide evidence." There's this fear of being subjective or biased or getting too close to the regions, being too immersed, and not having a clear, neutral, objective stance about things, issues that, I think, anthropologists and historians just worry less about because you have to be deeply embedded in places and in local histories in order to tell stories about places in the histories, which is what you are supposed, more or less, to do in those fields. We didn't study the humanities disciplines, so I can't really say how they would have talked about it, but certainly there is the sense, in mainstream sociology, that we're striving for some kind pure objectivity, and that being too close to particular regions taints that. That's another dynamic there, that I feel like the humanities just don't have in the same way. Economists will say that "the context isn't needed" but sociologists wouldn't say that so much as they would say "it may contribute to bias in some way". It's still useful as long as it connects back', and that's why extrapolating from those regions is part of what the field wants us to do as scholar, because that lifts it up out of the individual cases into arguments that can be made.

And to some extent that makes sense. When I write my book, I don't want only people who are interested in Germany to read these books. I want people to

care because I feel like I've learned something that says something bigger about extremism or about universities. We're not just talking about these eight universities. We're talking about *universities*.

PE: *We're wondering if the area studies chairs talked about the kind of theory that is done in area studies.*

Miller-Idriss: Not so much. Probably because they are interdisciplinary by nature, they didn't really have as coherent a story to tell about a theoretical or methodological set of commonly held ideas about what success means. What they did talk about, though, was the relative importance of their regions in global geopolitics, and the relative importance of their regions on campus. They talked about more about the logistical aspects of their lives as center directors and how reliant they are on the department to care about things enough to offer courses, and that kind of stuff, so that the knowledge that they can produce in terms of teaching students is also dependent on the tenuring departments, who are able to determine what gets taught. Sometimes the centers can subsidize positions and hire adjuncts, but they don't have their own tenure lines to control.

So even though they are heavily historical, and humanities focused, they aren't exclusively that, so they didn't really talk about those terms. A lot of the center directors we interviewed were political scientists and sociologists, or from the social science disciplines anyway. One said "you can't be a Syria expert in political science, you have to be a person who studies nation-building, and happens to have spent some time in Syria, and then moves on to test that theory in other parts of the world". He said that as a center director,

but also as a political scientist in a kind of cynical way, frustrated at the way his field works. As center directors, they are working there for three years. They aren't permanent hires but are on loan from another administrative department. And the same things with the deans. They all had been faculty first, so they held their disciplinary assumptions as well. A lot of them came from the social sciences instead of from the humanities. That also probably factored into the way that they talked about area studies.

PE: *The book highlights the recent rise of non-departments, no longer around areas but rather processes, networks, or themes. One way we could think about this is that it is an encouraging thing that we are moving from a bounded conception of context to a relational conception. What does the rise of these mean for international research?*

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Miller-Idriss: Trend of non-departments that have opened up over the last fifteen to twenty years in thematic areas is a really interesting trend. It's going to sound kind of teleological, but I see it as progress. I think it's a positive step toward thinking about knowledge in interdisciplinary

ways that aren't just interdisciplinary for the sake of being interdisciplinary, but that are oriented toward questions such as 'How can we think about migration differently?'.

I think in the best scenarios, the disciplines challenge each other. I spent time a year while I was doing my other book on Germany at a center that was almost entirely populated by humanities scholars. The book was an image-based project, so I was one of only two sociologists (the only social scientists). The other one was only there for four months and I was there for

the whole year with this whole group of art historians, classicists and religious scholars. They really challenged me to move beyond in my thinking. I was working on three thousand images or whatever. So, I would give a paper and show sixty-four images and one of them would give a paper on one image. They pressed me to stop seeing images as data points and to start looking at one image closely and understand what more was happening in that image. And when I did interviews with young people, they challenged me in the same way. They said, 'well you can't necessarily understand the symbol is right wing,' even though it was clearly a right-wing symbol, 'because you don't know if they're wearing it intentionally or not.' And now I see in the image that there's another person and there's obviously a police officer in the back – so there's this is probably a right-wing rally. All these other contextual clues would allow for that image to be understood in a right-wing way. This helped me sort of slow down and look at individual images, look at musculature and facial expression, and not just the symbol on the t-shirt I was studying. That was tremendously useful, to have that cross-fertilization across methods with these scholars in the humanities.

In the best possible world, that's what these kinds of centers do. They challenge the methodological nationalism and the theoretical narrowness that we have developed in our disciplines by just not reading widely and not being challenged by folks outside. But in the best possible worlds, I think, that would also include people who are deeply embedded and focused in areas. I think if you're going to study migration, let's say, and there is a Center for Immigration, you also need someone who knows about the refugee crisis. You need people who understand the economics, the political situation, and the instability, but you also need people who know Syria, who know the history. Somebody ideally with roots in that region or from that region, or at least who has spent a ton of time and it's not just studying this as data points in a slur of sixty-

four images, but who really understands how to slow down. I think that's a little Pollyanna-ish, "in the ideal world", but the point of all of that is to step back for a minute and ask 'why do we structure knowledge the way we do? How do we know it's the right way? Or even if there's no right or wrong way to do it, what are the repercussions of structuring knowledge production in the way we have? And understanding that this may be leading us to miss tremendous frameworks that could help us understand social issues in a different way. That's what I hope the enduring impact of the book will be. Not even necessarily about how we think about the rest of the world or not, but how absurd it is to think that our way of doing things is the only way of doing that, and how we can step outside of that and look at it critically.

... in the best possible worlds, I think, that would also include people who are deeply embedded and focused in areas... Somebody ideally with roots in the region or from the region, or at least has spent a ton of time

PE: *Your book seems to have implications for advising, particularly students from international backgrounds. How do you work with students who come with such backgrounds?*

Miller-Idriss: It gets back to this question of tactics and strategy versus how to benefit from different perspectives. Some of it is linguistic. In German there are words, and there are in other languages as well, that reflects concepts that don't exist in English. And when you learn those words, it can change the way

you think about the world in some small way. One of my favorite phrases in German is the word 'to miss somebody.' There's three different ways of saying miss – you can say 'I miss eating bagels,' or 'I missed someone,' but when you say you miss someone, you say 'you are missing from me.' It's a reflexive. You can also say 'I miss you' in the way you miss bagels. But if you really miss someone, you're not missing them, *they are missing from you*. That's a small example of a linguistic concept that can shift what you think you might be seeing in the world. Your language shapes what you believe even conceptually to be possible to see. And if it is happening with language, of course, it's happening with everything else – the way you are raised and what you bring.

In an ideal world, all of those international perspectives would enhance and improve sociology as a field--and hopefully the more diverse our field gets, the better that we'll get because that's true for anyone who comes from a different background than what the norm has been, for the same reason why we know there are gendered understandings of the world and racialized understanding of the world that comes from the experience of observing the world through different lenses. Standpoint theory says that, right? But that's the ideal. In reality, what I fear is that when people come in from overseas contexts, that's sort of stamped out of them. The training washes a lot of that away. One of the things we have to do as a field is to hold on

to that – *not just intellectual diversity, but conceptual diversity*. Not just as adding to, but also changing the field from within, changing the way that we think – that is what Southern theory should be doing. It should not just be an add on at the fringes that reminds us that there are other ways of thinking, but that should actually challenge the concepts we are using to think about ourselves in the mainstream of sociology.

There are improvements compared to when I was being trained, and I think even the fact that we are able to write the book and publish it in a mainstream sociology press, and that people want us to talk about

it in mainstream sociology departments and in political science departments, that is a good thing. It shows a willingness. I think that for a long time, people weren't even looking at the university as an organizational unit. And we have Michèle Lamont, Elizabeth Armstrong, Amy Binder. We have a lot of people who are looking at what is happening in the university as a way of

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confronting how ideas are shaped. And not just around inequality – who graduates and who gets what kinds of jobs – but how people think and how their thinking is shaped within the university... I think that's a good sign. I hope in twenty years you'll be looking at this as '*what a funny little artifact!*'

JUNIOR THEORISTS SYMPOSIUM CALL FOR PAPERS

New York, NY, August 9th, 2019.

Conference Organizers:

Fauzia Husain - *University of Virginia*

Madeleine Pape - *University of Wisconsin, Madison*

The Junior Theorists Symposium (JTS) is now accepting submissions for the 2019 Annual Meeting, to be held on August 9th, 2019, in New York, NY. The JTS is a one-day conference featuring the work of emerging sociologists engaged in theoretical work, broadly defined. Sponsored in part by the Theory Section of the ASA, the conference has provided a platform for the work of early career sociologists since 2005. We especially welcome submissions that broaden the practice of theory beyond its traditional themes, topics, and disciplinary function.

We invite all ABD graduate students, postdocs, and assistant professors who received their PhDs from 2015 onwards to submit up to a three-page précis (800-1000 words).

Submission details can be found [here](#). Questions can be directed to juniortheorists@gmail.com

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 11, 2019
BY 11:59PM EST**

NAVIGATING THE TRANSNATIONAL TURN IN A DEEPLY UNEQUAL WORLD

*For we walked, changing our country
More often than our shoes*
Bertolt Brecht, "To Those Born Afterwards"^[1]

Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.
James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem"^[2]



Jaeun Kim
University of Michigan

It was an exceptionally warm February day in Kawasaki, Japan, in 2009 that Chin-su (pseudonym) brought up Brecht's poem. I was conducting fieldwork for what would become Chapter 2 of my book (Kim 2016) examining the prolonged and vehement competition between North and South Korea to create their own citizens out of colonial-era Korean migrants stranded in the former metropole. Chin-su told me how

he came to change his nationality in his Foreigner's Registry from Chōsen (the term often associated with North Korea) to Kankoku (South Korea) at the request of his soon-to-be-in-laws. His father, who fled the civilian massacre by the fledgling South Korean government in 1948 and became a high-ranking official in a powerful pro-North Korea organization in Japan, eventually underwent the same change. Chin-su's family were among numerous Koreans in Japan who changed their paper identity to South Koreans in the last four decades. Many did so despite their enduring sympathy for North Korea, cultivated critically by their attendance in North Korea-supported schools. This massive southbound movement *on paper* can be explained in part by a profound

impasse in which those who maintained the Chōsen designation increasingly found themselves. Due to North Korea's lack of international recognition, they were treated as stateless people on some occasions, with all the complications that accompany being an anomaly in the contemporary interstate system. On other occasions, they were treated as North Koreans, with all the negative consequences of being affiliated with this pariah state. These include stringent visa regulations, prolonged interrogation by immigration officers, and restrictions on their opportunities to expand businesses overseas or to study abroad.[3]

The seeming pragmatism of people like Chin-su, this disjuncture between the subjective and objective identification, may be interpreted as the limited power of South Korea's transborder nation-building strategy, which targeted the bureaucratic persona rather than the soul of the people. Or, more broadly, one might read it as a sign that the nation-state in general has become increasingly incapable of shaping loyalties and subjective identities in a globalizing world—an assessment captured by terms like “passport citizenship” (Harpaz 2013), “postnational citizenship” (Soysal 1994), or the “lightening of citizenship” (Joppke 2010). Chin-su's intention to quote Brecht was similarly to emphasize the irrelevance of his nationality change to who he really was.[4] And yet what should we make out of the fact that, under the current interstate system, individuals had better wear shoes, and if possible, wear *better* shoes? The increasing transborder flows of goods and people over the past decades have multiplied the occasions on which the state-granted official identity becomes the only acceptable currency for various transactions. In such a world, it is a critical liability to become illegible

subjects (c.f. Scott 1998), “orphan[s] of infrastructure” (Star 2006), as is the case for those identified as Chōsen. Increasing global mobility has aggravated, rather than attenuated, the inconvenience, humiliation, and anxiety experienced by these “orphans”—those who cannot be neatly pigeonholed into the existing categorical system, or, to tweak Chin-su's metaphor, those who are forced to travel with bare feet.

“Birthright Lottery” in a Transnational World

Findings like these make me pause at some of the sweeping claims in transnationalism scholarship, even as my book is indebted immensely to the so-called “transnational turn” in the fields of immigration, nationalism, and citizenship. Scholars focusing on the challenges that increasing immigration poses to affluent liberal democracies in the North have argued that nation-states' monopolistic claim to the loyalty, belonging, and identity of their domestic populations has been considerably weakened by the rise of the postnational, multicultural, transnational, and cosmopolitan forms of membership and belonging.

Those focusing on the thickening ties between developing countries in the South and their emigrant or diaspora populations in the North, for their part, have argued that globalization has produced “deterritorialized nation-states” (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994), “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998), and “diasporic public spheres” (Appadurai 1996), often suggesting a fundamental shift in the territoriality of the nation-state and nationalism. In a

similar vein, anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1999, 2) has identified “the split between state-imposed identity and personal identity” as the key characteristic of “flexible

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citizenship”—that is, “the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation” (Ong 1999, 112). The accumulation of multiple passports within the family by means of investment and children’s overseas education constitutes the major strategy of flexible citizenship for wealthy members of Chinese diasporas, for whom these passports have as little bearing on their identity, yes, as their shoes...[5]

Not all multiple passport holders, however, are wealthy transnational elites, the symbol of hypermobility and flexible national identification. Paolo Gaibazzi (2014, 44) notes that the multiple low-ranked passports (from Ivory Coast, Mali, Ghana, and Gambia) that his informant in Gambia in West Africa had accumulated over the years are rather “visible traces of [his] failed attempts to find loopholes in the global visa regime,” the certification of his “legally-induced immobility.” Similarly, the countries whose citizens faced the greatest likelihood of U.S. visa refusal in 2007 were Laos (72.9%), Uzbekistan (70.9%), Yemen (64.2%), Guyana (62.3%), Armenia (61.4%), Mongolia (60.6%), and Senegal (59.5%) (Mau 2010, 352). These numbers in fact underestimate the effect of the gatekeeping practices of affluent democracies: prohibitive visa fees and stringent documentary requirements deter the majority of the citizens of these countries from applying for U.S. visas in the first place. Another illustration that comes to my mind is an exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art in New York that I saw in November 2016.[6] A long table in the wall listed countries of origin (if known) of numerous migrants

who died while seeking to access Europe or getting deported: Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Congo, Chad, or simply somewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1). This list poignantly demonstrates how those who were born with an unfortunate ticket in the “birthright lottery” (Shachar 2009) have a much higher chance of getting caught in “the Fortress [Europe]’ walls and moats” after being denied access to “its bridges and gates,” to borrow the metaphors from Finotelli and Sciortino (2013, 82). In a world purportedly “deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational” (Appadurai 1996, 188), cross-border mobility that opens access to affluent democracies remains a scarce good for the absolute majority of the world population, whose “bad” passports make their migration ventures constant struggles to overcome blockade rather than an unencumbered flow.

Passport and visa practices provide the bureaucratic underpinnings of this enduring “national order of things” (Malkki 1995) and the profound inequality it entails. U.S. sociology, despite its long-lasting interest in inequality, however, has left these practices largely undertheorized. That the groundbreaking work on the modern passport was produced by a sociologist (Torpey 2000) and has had a huge impact on neighboring social science disciplines should make this relative stasis in our own discipline puzzling. “Methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) obscures the fact that citizenship-based social closure (Brubaker 1992) remains the most powerful mechanism reproducing durable inequality on the global level (Korzeniewicz and Morgan 2012; Milanovic 2012; Faist 2016). Our inquiry into migration and inequality instead focuses on the

number	name	country of origin	cause of death	so
211	1 N.N. (woman)	Sub-Saharan Africa	drowned, decomposed body found by Cabo de Seta (C), probably from 55/11 shipwreck	ABC/Magaz
211	1 Alii Abdul Marjan (21, man)	Bangladesh	Died, after being stabbed by two men on motorcycle in Athens (GR)	IRIS CS
211	1 Amrullah Mohamedi (17, boy)	Afghanistan	suicide, hanged himself in Parc de la Villette, Paris (F) when told he would be deported	GRATINEM
211	1 N.N.	Iran	suicide, fell out of a truck near Calais (F) while traveling to GR	LePère
211	1 N.N. (30, man)	unknown	stowaway, died of overeating in truck carrying cablestays in Fidda (D) travelling from GR	Hessner/HNA/Wat
211	1 N.N. (20-25, man)	unknown	stowaway, died of overeating in truck carrying cablestays in Fidda (D) travelling from GR	Hessner/HNA/Wat
211	1 N.N. (babies)	Sub-Saharan Africa	drowned, after boat of 600 sank just off the coast near to Tripoli (LY) on the way to Italy	Correspondent VI
211	1 N.N. (34 months, baby)	Sub-Saharan Africa	drowned, after boat of 600 sank just off the coast near to Tripoli (LY) on the way to Italy	Correspondent VI
211	1 N.N. (mom)	Sub-Saharan Africa	heard drowned, boat sank 2 miles from Adia, Algeria coast (C), 29 survivors	Humano/Publico
211	1 N.N. (woman)	Sub-Saharan Africa	heard drowned, boat sank 2 miles from Adia, Algeria coast (C), 29 survivors	Humano/Publico
211	1 N.N. (3, girl)	Sub-Saharan Africa	heard drowned, boat sank 2 miles from Adia, Algeria coast (C), 29 survivors	Humano/Publico
211	1 N.N. (1, girl)	Sub-Saharan Africa	heard drowned, boat sank 2 miles from Adia, Algeria coast (C), 29 survivors	Humano/Publico
211	1 Reinal Nwedeke (29, man)	Nigeria	died on way to hospital, after escape from detention centre, severely beaten by soldiers	Timell
211	1 N.N. (man)	Nigeria	drowned, found 3 days after shipwreck off Pantelleria (I) on the way from Libya	RIPE
211	1 Leone (38, woman)	Congo	drowned, jumped from boat that wrecked off Pantelleria (I) on the way from Libya	RIPE/DeStanda
211	1 Come (28, woman)	Congo	drowned, jumped from boat that wrecked off Pantelleria (I) on the way from Libya	RIPE/DeStanda
211	1 N.N. (man)	unknown	drowned, body found after boat wrecked off Pantelleria (I) on the way from Libya	RIPE/MAS/Mat
211	1 N.N. (pregnant woman)	Nigeria	died from drinking sea water, boat of 72 went adrift in Mediterranean for 7 days	MNS
211	1 N.N. (2 months, fetus)	Nigeria	mother died from drinking sea water, boat of 72 went adrift in Mediterranean for 16 days	MNS
211	1 N.N. (29, woman)	Somalia	body found in a drifting wooden boat off Malta's shore, rescued patrol vessels	EU/AM
211	1 N.N. (baby)	unknown	died from thirst and hunger, boat drifted in Mediterranean for 16 days, SOS ignored by NATO	Guardian/IMU
211	1 N.N. (1, baby)	unknown	died from thirst and hunger, boat drifted in Mediterranean for 16 days, SOS ignored by NATO	Guardian/IMU
211	1 N.N.	unknown	died from thirst and hunger on reaching land, boat drifted for 16 days, SOS ignored by NATO	Guardian/IMU
211	1 N.N.	unknown	died in prison near Miraflores (V) after boat left to drift for 16 days, SOS ignored by NATO	Guardian/IMU
211	1 N.N.	Ethiopia/Nigeria/Eritrea	died from thirst and hunger, boat drifted in Mediterranean for 16 days, SOS ignored by NATO	Guardian/IMU
211	1 Kambiz Roustayi (38, man)	Iran	suicide, failed asylum seeker set himself on fire in Amsterdam (NL), heard deportation	NBC/VOX/Endire
211	177 N.N.	Bangladesh/Chad/Ivory Coast	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	37 N.N. (24, woman)	Bangladesh/Chad/Ivory Coast	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	1 N.N. (20, woman)	unknown	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	1 N.N. (3, boy)	Bangladesh/Chad/Ivory Coast	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	1 N.N. (1, boy)	unknown	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	1 N.N. (23, man)	unknown	missing, part of 325 migrants on LY boat, sank 38 miles from Lampedusa in Maltese waters	IRANSA/Rea
211	1 N.N. (25, man)	Algeria	drowned, apprehended body found in van at Ancona port (I) on ferry coming from GR	PIC/MIT/AN
211	1 N.N. (23, man)	unknown	drowned while disembarking boat with 500 migrants in Modica (I), body found by Punta Region	FE/PIOM
211	1 N.N. (23, man)	Eritrea	drowned, reportedly from missing boat to Italy on 27/03, bodies found off Kerkennah (TN)	PIC/MIT/AN
211	27 N.N.	Tunisia	drowned, reportedly from missing boat to Italy on 27/03, bodies found off Kerkennah (TN)	Migaport
211	38 N.N.	Tunisia	drowned, bodies found on Tunisian beaches by coastguards	Guardian/IMU

Figure 1: MOMA Exhibit

mobility outcome of a select group of immigrants who managed to make the rare South–North migration, who are estimated to represent less than 1.5 per cent of the world population (International Organization for Migration 2013, 55). The U.S. centrism in sociology may matter in different ways as well. Claudio E. Benzecry (2014) once pointed out in this newsletter that what counts as central theoretical topics in British or continental sociology is rarely discussed in U.S. sociology. It is suggestive that some of the examples mentioned by Benzecry—e.g., actor-network theory, mobility regimes, and the role of materiality—have been central to the attempts to theorize passport and visa practices in Europe and elsewhere, both in sociology and neighboring disciplines. These scholars also often have turned to “governmentality” and “(neoliberal) biopolitics” for theoretical inspiration—the Foucauldian concepts that have not gained as much traction in U.S. sociology as “discipline.”

Visa Practices as Rites of Institution: A Bourdieusian Perspective

It was in this spirit that I attempted in my recent article (Kim 2018) to theorize visa practices as a neglected yet important locus of migration governance. I found Bourdieu’s insights into the state’s power of nomination, certification, and accreditation fruitful. These insights have spawned an important body of scholarship on official categorization and accreditation practices and their group-making and world-making power. But these studies tend to limit their analytic scope to the territorial ambit of the state. To be sure, Bourdieusian field theory has proved useful for exploring transnational and global processes surpassing the geographic scale of the nation-state (Buchholz 2016; Dezalay and Garth 1996; Fourcade 2006; Steinmetz 2008). But his theory of the state, compiled in the recently published lectures from 1990 to 1991 (Bourdieu 2014), does not address how the state’s symbolic power operates, or fails to operate, through its complex relations with

noncitizens, other states, or supranational bodies.

I approach visa policies and their enactment by frontline gatekeepers as powerful “rites of institution” consecrating the noncitizens (allegedly) equipped with a certain profile of capital as deserving authorized passage. Applying Bourdieu’s theory to contemporary passport and visa systems enables me to highlight states’ varying ability to function as the central bank of symbolic credit, that is, their capacity to cause “a de facto situation . . . [to] undergo a genuine ontological promotion” (Bourdieu 1996, 376) by mere acts of official recording. For example, kinship and marriage relations documented in the Cameroonian civil status registries are unlikely to immediately produce desirable visa statuses for family reunification, because French consular agents “consider the Cameroonian State Registry to have little reliability” (Alpes and Spire 2014, 269). The Cameroonian state in this sense is like a bank that has been declared insolvent: its low “credit rating” (cf. Fourcade 2017) affects the valorization, conversion, and legitimization of migration-facilitating capital held by its citizens.

Thinking with Bourdieu also enables me to argue that visa policies in general, and the visa-waiver agreement in particular, turn citizenship in select states into migration-facilitating social capital. Visa-waiver agreements accord individuals recognized as citizens of select states collectivity-owned capital, a “‘credential’ which entitles them to credit” (Bourdieu 1986, 248–49). That is, membership in a state ranked high in the global visa regime entitles one to generalized trust—the benefit of the doubt, so to speak—from the gatekeeping immigration state, leading to exemption from its “remote control” measures (Zolberg 1999, 75). By contrast, individuals holding low-ranked passports are treated as likely candidates for unwanted migration until proven otherwise.

The passport of an unrecognized state may have even lower value than a passport from the lowest-ranked

recognized state, bringing us back to the image of those forced to travel with bare feet. Anthropologist Navaro-Yashin's (2007) analysis of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), whose passport can be used only for a trip to Turkey (the only state that recognizes the TRNC), provides a good example. Despite an official ban by the TRNC government, many Turkish-Cypriots have applied for passports from the Republic of Cyprus (the state from which the TRNC separated in 1974) for international travel and migration.^[7] Navaro-Yashin relies on actor-network theory to analyze the complex effect of what she calls the "make-believe" passport of the unrecognized TRNC state. But just as illuminating is Bourdieu's (2014, 10; italics added) claim that "the state is a theological entity . . . that exists essentially because *people believe* that it exists." Missing in Bourdieu's formulation, however, is that it is not just peoples' belief (like TRNC citizens) but also belief *on the part of other states* that enables the state to function as the "central bank of symbolic credit" and confer "effective social existence" (Bourdieu 1986, 252) on its citizenry.

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This Bourdieusian perspective, if adequately buttressed by a transnational perspective, helps us avoid the perils of losing sight of the enduring significance of national identification in the contemporary world, characterized by containment, bordering, and involuntary immobility as profoundly as fluidity, flexibility, and mobility. It pushes us to move beyond the individualistic human-capital centered approach to migration and examine

how the symbolic power of the migrant-sending state can determine the collective "creditability" of its citizens. Individuals lacking such *collective credit* are forced to resort to various kinds of "illegal" schemes—often more expensive as well as riskier—based on *private credit*. To paraphrase James Baldwin quoted at the beginning of this essay, it can be extremely expensive to be capital-poor—and credit-poor—in contemporary global mobility regimes. And just as Baldwin's poor are subject to the moralization of their poverty and survival strategies, those who can afford only less dignified modalities of travel suffer from the stigmatizing insinuation (or outright accusation) of their innate criminality—an important dimension of symbolic violence to which the disadvantaged in global mobility regimes are routinely subjected. One needs look no further than the "migrant caravan."

[1] The English translation is from *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Sep., 1961), pp. 108–10.

[2] James Baldwin. [1961] 1993. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, 56–71. New York: Vintage.

[3] South Korean passport holders, on the other hand, are allowed visa-free entry to 158 countries as of 2017, including the U.S. and the Schengen countries. See <http://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php> (last retrieved on June 30, 2017).

[4] This does not seem to be how Brecht wanted his poem to be interpreted.

[5] Let me put aside for now, for the purpose of argumentation, a valid claim that shoes can have profound bearing on our identities.

[6] *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter*. October 1, 2016–January 22, 2017. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[7] This defection on paper has accelerated since the EU accession of the Republic of Cyprus in 2004 and the accompanying increase in the value of its citizenship as migration-facilitating capital.

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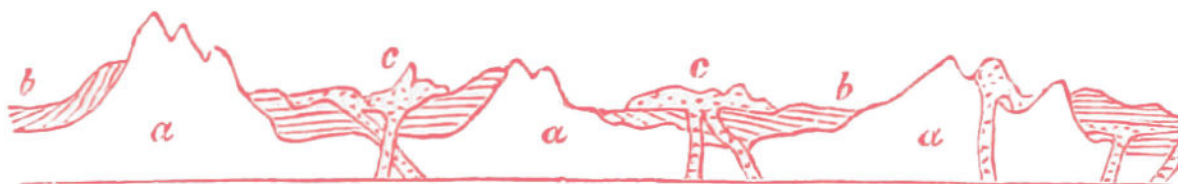
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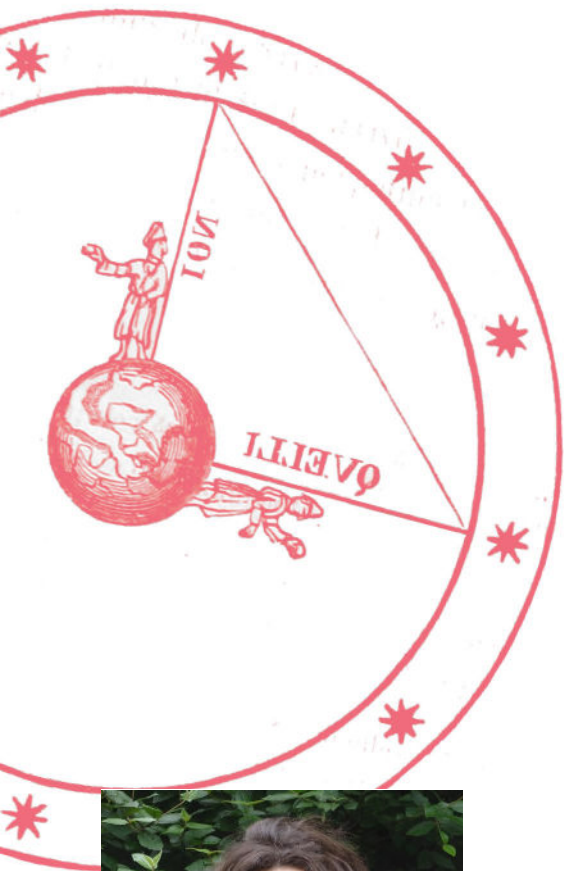
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A SOCIOLOGY OF SCHEMATIC DISCORDANCE

CHANGING RELATIONS BETWEEN MORAL
WORTH AND LEGAL SCRIPTS IN ASYLUM
ADJUDICATIONS



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One of the central, albeit largely unanswered questions

in sociology, is why and when do frontline workers, who operate under conditions of limited resources and time constraints, break from routine forms of decision-making to help people they deem “deserving,” even when this entails acting against their own professional interest. The narrative sections of ethnographic studies on decision-making in frontline agencies and social control institutions, abound with examples of agents – whether these be police officers, judges, health workers, or social welfare bureaucrats – who bend, stretch and even defy agency rules to assist “deserving” clients and persons (Fassin 2015, Zacka 2015, Lara Millan 2014, Marrow 2009, Maynard

Moody and Musheno 2003). To date, however, existing studies do not investigate the theoretical importance of this discordance between established rules and understandings of moral worth as a motivating factor of the decision-making process, even though the empirical data they provide often suggest that it is precisely this discordance which influences how frontline actors proceed to evaluate their clients.

In my work I set to examine these moments of discordance between legal and moral categories in the context of US asylum status determinations, with the goal of advancing our knowledge of when frontline workers operating under conditions of strain, shift from rule-bound forms of decision-making to engage in moral-deliberation. A growing number of

scholars have importantly highlighted how frontline actors working in various institutional contexts, such as access to welfare (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), job market decisions (Pager 2003), academic performance (Mallard and Lamont 2009), and policing (Fassin 2015), draw on moral boundaries when deciding how to allocate resources or assign rights and/or punishment. And yet, existing approaches often explain bureaucrats' willingness to engage in creative deliberation as a factor of "discretion" or an internalized sense of "the right thing to do." Building on interviews with US asylum officers, in addition to case law and administrative data on asylum applications, I propose a theoretical framework of decision-making that broadens the explanatory power of existing approaches by refocusing our attention on the ways changes in the relation between formal legal categories and embedded categories of moral worth may work to create institutional dynamics amenable to distinct forms of rule-bound versus deliberative forms of evaluation.

New Approach: Legal-Moral Deliberations

Institutions are comprised of both legal and moral categories. By legal categories I am referring to the official classificatory schema that agents use to organize, label and diagnose behaviors and persons (Sudnow 1965). These are the formal and procedural categories that instruct actors how to apply a given rule to a particular person or case. Conversely, by moral categories, I am referring to informal categorical distinctions that are shared and learned within a given institutional context and time period, concerning who is deserving or undeserving of benefits or punishment. Importantly, these moral scripts are not idiosyncratic but are rather embedded within the culture of the institution and workers draw on them when deciding how to enact a given rule (Wood et al. 2018; Lamont 2000).

While a long list of scholars has identified the moral and the legal as two distinct dimensions constitutive of social institutions, to date we know surprisingly little about how changes in the interrelations between these two dimensions may work to inform how institutions are enacted and applied. In my work, I identify how different relations between the moral and legal dimensions of institutions may generate conditions that are amenable to different forms of evaluation. Specifically, I distinguish between two types of relations between moral and legal scripts: relations of accordance and relations of discordance.

Relations of Accordance

In order to resonate, social institutions depend on there being a certain degree of accordance between moral and legal scripts. Accordance is achieved when frontline actors encounter a claim the attributes of which resonate with embedded understandings of moral worth and fit within established categories of the law. In these situations, moral and legal categories are often enmeshed together in the form of policy scripts to which frontline actors can default to for purpose of processing large volumes of cases in a time efficient manner, generating conditions amenable to routine processing of cases. The bulk of organizational sociology concerned with street-level bureaucracy and frontline decision-making in social control institutions focuses on this right here. Studies have importantly shown how rather than viewing cases as isolated events, frontline actors evaluate them by reference to what is thought of as expected for a given policy scripts (Gilboy 1991, Emerson 1983). However, too often overlooked are moments of discordance between these two dimensions. In my work, I identify two central forms of discordance between moral and legal categories: discordance characterized by legal deficit and discordance characterized by legal excess.

Relations of Discordance I: Legal Deficit

Moments of discordance characterized by legal deficit

occur where frontline actors encounter claims the characteristics of which resonate with embedded moral scripts, but do not fit within the formal categories of the law. In these instances, the established categories of law appear too limited to accommodate subjects construed as otherwise “morally deserving” of care or protection, hence the experience of legal deficit.

In the context of US asylum after the Cold War, moments of discordance characterized by legal deficit often occurred in relation to claims involving gender-based violence. Starting in the early 1990s, the predominant framing within feminist legal circles came to be that rape, domestic abuse and other forms of sex-based violence were inflicted on women on account of their gender. This framing of gender-based violence was gradually imported to the asylum context through agency gender guidelines and court decisions. Importantly, as of the late 1990s, asylum officers typically agreed that women who were subject to various forms of gender violence were targeted on account of their gender – a trait that they cannot change and that is fundamental to their identity – and were thus no less deserving of asylum protection than refugees persecuted on account of their race, nationality, religion, or political opinion. At the same time, asylum law recognized only very limited types of gender-based violence as eligible bases for protection. In these situations, officers experienced a legal deficit – the formal categories of the institution failed to encompass the full range of deserving subjects it ought to protect.

Relations of Discordance II: Legal Excess

Moments of discordance characterized by legal excess occur where frontline actors encounter individuals who they perceived to be *undeserving* of benefits or care, but nonetheless appear to be legally eligible for them. Here, the established legal categories appear to be too broad, failing to adequately discriminate the undeserving from the deserving. I term these types of

encounters as encounters of legal excess.

Again, if to draw from the world of asylum, moments of discordance characterized by legal excess often came up in relation to claims involving Chinese nationals fleeing China’s coerced family planning strategies. As of 1996, US asylum law provided what many officers viewed to be in practice a blanket form of protection for Chinese nationals – Chinese nationals who feared China’s one-child policy were considered to eligible to apply for asylum. At the same time, a combination of institutionalized bias and documented fraud, led officers to believe that the majority of Chinese applicants are morally undeserving of this benefit. Thus, when officers encountered Chinese claims to whom they attributed moral failure, they perceived the blanket protection accorded to them by the one-child policy provision as excessive, failing to adequately discriminate the undeserving from the deserving.

Mapping Modes of Bureaucratic Encounters

Building on in-depth interviews with 30 US asylum officers, I map out how moments of accordance and discordance in officers’ decision-making process generate institutional dynamics that are amenable to distinct forms of evaluation, with implications for how frontline actors approach their clients and define their own gatekeeping roles. I show that accordance between established legal categories and embedded moral distinctions generates conditions amenable to routinization. In these situations, officers tend to engage in a deductive form of inquiry and identify as rule-followers, approaching cases with a disposition of neutrality. Among my interviewees, this was by far the most common pattern of decision-making.

Conversely, moments of discordance characterized by both legal deficit and legal excess disrupted routine processing of cases. However, whereas discordance between high moral worth and lack of legal fit led asylum officers to engage in an inductive process of

inquiry focused on a critical assessment of law and its standards, the discordance between moral failure and high legal fit, led to a deductive process of inquiry focused on the credibility of applicants' claim to fit within the said legal category.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

A framework of decision-making centered on differing degrees of accordance or discordance between legal and moral categories, makes a number of contributions – both empirical and theoretical. First, it expands a growing asylum literature concerned with the processes through which asylum seekers are construed as undeserving criminals and bogus refugees, by focusing our attention on spaces where claims of moral worth and established categories of law do not align. I contend that these spaces, where agents have to negotiate the meaning of legal categories vis-à-vis moral ones, are critical to our understanding of processes of exclusion and inclusion at the border.

Second, identifying distinct forms of discordance between established legal categories and categories of moral worth, contributes to our understanding of the role of bias in asylum evaluations, with possible implications for the study of social inequality. When asylum officers encounter *undeserving* yet legally eligible applicants, they often assess the individual applicant in accordance to group stereotypes and relied on markers of race and class to distinguish the individual from other group members, resulting in a reaffirmation of racial and class biases. Conversely, when encountering *deserving* yet legally ineligible applicants, officers draw on biases only indirectly; in these situations, officers cease approaching applicants as mere abstractions of group stereotypes and refer to them as distinct individuals with a name and unique life story. This suggests that while processes of racialization and stigmatization play a role in shaping how we perceive and evaluate distinct groups, it is the tension between shared scripts of moral worth and

established rules that often determines their direction of influence on how evaluation unfolds.

Finally, my analysis provides new analytic terminology by which to answer with more precision the question of why people at times break from rule-bound forms of decision-making to become moral deliberators – even when this goes against their own professional interest? This question is core to our understanding of how frontline actors, whether they be asylum officers, police officers, health workers or welfare bureaucrats, proceed to evaluate clients when the needs of deserving individuals exist in tension with the restrictive limits of rules.

By conceptualizing decision-making as comprised of moments of discordance between moral and legal scripts, my analysis connects the fields of cultural, organizational and legal sociology and contributes to a building of a sociology of evaluation.

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MEMBER AWARDS & PUBLICATIONS

AWARDS

PAUL JOOSSE

ASA Clifford Geertz Award for Best Article in the Sociology of Culture (2018)

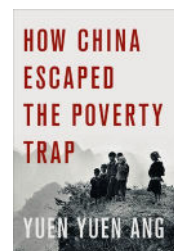
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