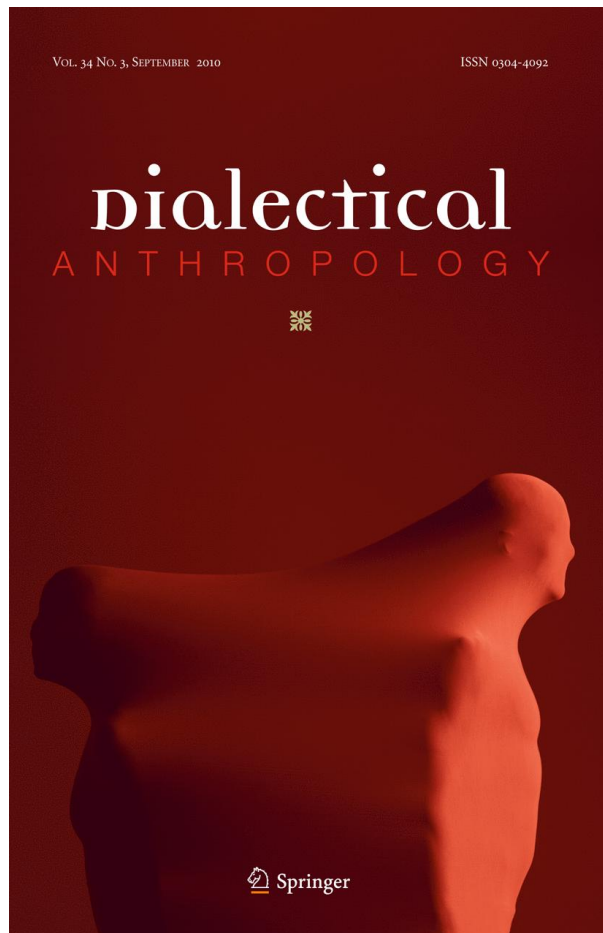


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On the ethics and practice of contemporary social theory: from crisis talk to multiattentional method

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Abstract Using an approach derived from the anthropology and sociology of knowledge, this article explores the historical emergence of European social theory and its contemporary place in the human sciences. I direct ethnographic attention to a sense of crisis or impasse in social theory's capacity to frame and to analyze the complexity of contemporary relations in the world. By reanalyzing this crisis talk as a phenomenological reaction to the growing (sub)specialization of social theory, I offer a new way of thinking about social theory in terms of specialized analytical attentions. I also suggest how we can move from crisis talk to a new ethics of theoretical complementarity, inspired by Dilthey, which I term "multiattentional method."

Keywords Anthropology of knowledge · Social life of theory · Crisis discourse · Ethics · Attention · Phenomenology · Para-ethnography · Dilthey

Scenes from a 'crisis in theory'

Head grasped firmly between his hands, a prominent political scientist interrupts the discussion at Cornell University's Mellon Humanities Seminar in an act of professed desperation. "Please, I'm having a lot of trouble following the discussion here; perhaps one of you could explain to me what you mean by 'theory,' what do humanists mean by 'theory,' what is its purpose? I have a feeling that what you and I mean by 'theory' are very different." The question is startling. Breaths are held across the circle as the rest of us look at each other, wondering who among us is willing and capable of answering such a question. One of the seminar co-organizers suggests, "Well, this is only a partial answer, but I would say that theory involves a

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mode of analysis centered on a discussion of causality, you know, explaining why something happens.” Another co-organizer jumps in, “That’s not how I would put it, I would describe it more as a mode of meta-reading.” A few more moments of awkward silence pass, our eyes largely averted. Not wanting to prolong this, the political scientist straightens up in his chair and continues more energetically, “In my field, theory might mean a paradigm we use to organize our data, but I have this strange impression that theory is something entirely different for humanists. For example, my colleagues in political theory have this practice of composing their arguments, like jumping from log to log across a river. [*He mimes a political theorist crouching, arms drawn up, poised to pounce forward*] OK, I want to talk about power, where’s Foucault, let me jump here. Now I am on to sovereignty so let me jump over there to Agamben or Schmitt. And so on. [*throwing his hands in the air*] I admit that I find this very strange and roundabout, why not make the argument directly? So, I’m just looking for clarification.”

About a year earlier, there is a subcommittee meeting of the Cornell Humanities Council. We have been tasked with drafting a response on behalf of Cornell’s humanities departments to then-Cornell President Jeff Lehman’s call to campus engagement around three themes: life in the age of the genome, wisdom in the age of information, and sustainability in the age of globalization. A meeting of the Council and the chairs of the humanities departments and programs weeks earlier had produced responses to the three themes ranging from indifference to disquiet to considerable indignation. Where were the concerns of the humanities in these themes? Did this call indicate that the university administration was planning to expand the life, information, and environmental sciences on campus, perhaps even at our expense? The mood at the subcommittee meeting is tense but hopeful, later turning exhausted and distracted as we work through draft after draft of the core text. In a chatty lull from our editorial work, one of the subcommittee members comments, “You know, it occurs to me that we might also want to take advantage of this moment to suggest new directions in which Cornell humanities could grow.” The rest of us nod encouragingly. She continues, “It does concern me that Cornell humanities has seemed to lose its identity. For so long, it was theory, there was so much energy in theory here. But these days, theory is... [pauses] Well, anyway, it feels like that moment is past, at least here, but we still have not found our new focal point, I mean, assuming that we need one.”

Two years earlier, I was teaching a mixed undergraduate-graduate level seminar on the ethnography of professions and institutions. One of the last readings of the semester is Paul Rabinow’s remarkable documentation of the scientific and political complex surrounding efforts to nationalize the French genome, *French DNA*. In the final pages of *French DNA*, Rabinow calls for the development of a new, “nominalist” sensibility, a circumvention of theory and an analytical opening toward change and emergence: “A ‘happening’ in the world is what needs to be understood ... It is only that so much effort has been devoted in the name of social science to explaining away the emergence of new forms as the result of something else that we lack adequate means to conceptualize the forms/events as the curious and potent singularities that they are” (1999:180). Rabinow positions this new sensibility against both deconstructionism (“an ethic of revealing the inherent

instability of all knowledge”) and “totalizing categories like epoch, civilization, culture and society” that stand in “conceptual ruins” (181). The last sentence of the book reads: “Because if, as philosophically oriented anthropologists, the goal of our labor is understanding, then our concepts and our modes of work must themselves be capable of making something new happen in a field of knowledge.” As we read these passages aloud, we mull the implications for anthropology of centering “making something new happen” as an objective in its own right. Does all theory, of necessity, cut emergent social and technical realities down to size, thus amputating their epistemological or ontological uniqueness in favor of analytical recognizability? What alternative kind(s) of knowledge would Rabinow’s sensibility offer? In the midst of all this, a perplexed undergraduate anthropology major interjects, “But if we have to stop talking about culture then what is anthropology?” A grad student chuckles that he is going “to miss theory.”

I could multiply these episodes from everyday academic life, but one suspects their gist is already familiar. The three moments I have highlighted are obviously indebted to idiosyncratic historical moments, institutional, disciplinary, and interpersonal settings of their own. But all also reflect something of the *Zeitgeist* of theory in the humanities and in the humanistic social sciences. That is, an enduring sense of the valued craft of theory, perhaps even of the professional necessity of theoretical investment and engagement, coupled to a sense of its incommunicability and preciousness. A sense that theory as practice stands at an awkward impasse, awaiting renewal or collapse, often connected to narratives citing the overwhelming complexity of the contemporary. A sense that theoretical investment, especially investment in critical theory, is increasingly being shouldered aside by new interest in socio-politico-technical “emergence” (for example in the context of science and technological studies) that is willing to hold theory in abeyance, awaiting some future empirical or conceptual completion, in a way strikingly reminiscent of early American pragmatism (e.g., James 1907). But, one could fairly ask whether such a sense-complex, even taken together, constitute a “state of crisis” of/for/in theory. And thus other questions immediately arise.

Are such senses simply anxious, perhaps routine phantoms of social estrangement in the Hegelian-Marxian sense? Are they principally relational or ideological, reflecting intergenerational or interfactional dispositions and tensions? If the air has really gone out of theory in some more fundamental way, then when did this happen and why? Is it simply an epistemological crisis, a shift in paradigms owed to some philosophical resurgence of empiricism, pragmatism, nominalism, postmodernism, etc.? Can it be linked to shifting demographic and organizational trends within the academy or within intellectual culture at large? Should a crisis of theory be attached to new geopolitics and empire, to marketization and liberalism, even to the expansive hegemony of finance capital? What is the symptom and what is the pathogenic nucleus (not to mention, where is the transference?), as Freud might have asked? Without some provisional answers to these questions, a crisis of theory—if that is, in fact, what we are experiencing—resists diagnosis. It is anyway difficult to imagine what an appropriate response, theoretical or otherwise, would be to our disquieted condition. What new “sensibilities” might soothe or enroll us?

As an anthropologist of intellectual culture and as someone who is moreover deeply invested in social theory both as craft and as ethnographic object, such questions have grown upon me. To be frank, for a long time my usual reaction to talk along the lines of “theory is in trouble” was fairly dismissive. This ocean of intellectual activity that we gloss as “the human sciences” contains such a breathtaking array of specialized attentions and discourses that tensions, vanities, and polarizations are inevitable within and among them. Under these conditions, a claim that theory is in decline usually involves illocutionary arts of positioning which signal not that all theory is in decline but rather that certain modes and languages of theory are out of fashion with respect to other positions in the field. There’s surely nothing specific about those arts to our moment in time. Has not “cutting edge” or “progressive” theory always summoned the bad old metaphysics as its shambling foil? Nevertheless, I have come to feel that it is insufficient to expose the factionalism always inhering in truth claims regarding theory. That is to say, something about the sense of a crisis in theory these days is at once more basic and far-reaching than Bourdieu’s “social physics” (1991:111) of the symbolic-political agon of intellectual life can capture. To put aside for a moment the somewhat chimerical question of whether theory is *actually* in decline—and according to which criteria one would measure such a decline—I think it is fair to say that the widespread sense of a contemporary dilemma for theory as intellectual practice is a significant, perhaps even general, phenomenon in the human sciences, and thus one that deserves more focused attention and discussion.

That attentional work is the main objective of this essay, although it will become clear in the sections below that I am also developing what is in essence a social-phenomenological argument to account for the contemporary trajectory of crisis talk concerning theory and also suggesting a response to this sense of crisis at the level of how we manage our practices of theoretical attention.

Social theory: para-ethnographic challenges for a child of epistemic abundance

The immediate concern motivating this essay is current critical discourse on social theory within sociocultural anthropology. Sociocultural anthropology thrives on juxtaposing its methods of fieldwork and ethnography with social analysis and social theory. Thus, it provides an apt, if necessarily also limited, case study of the current state of social theory in the human sciences. I provisionally define “social theory,” for reasons that will become clear in the next section, as a set of specialized analytical attentions to the intersubjective and relational features of human experience. The aforementioned sense of the analytical exhaustion of social theory, classical and contemporary, (whether Bourdieuan or Marxian praxiology, Weberian historicism, Foucaultian poststructuralism, Freudian psychoanalysis or Durkheimian sociology) in the face of the complex contemporary is a theme that is increasingly resonant in anthropology, if rarely articulated with the clarity and pointedness of Rabinow’s call for a new nominalism. The origin of this sense of theoretical exhaustedness is difficult to pinpoint, but one important clue is that it has tended to

cluster in the work of those anthropologists researching and documenting other “cultures of expertise” (Holmes and Marcus 2005:236) like those of scientists, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and other professional groups. As Doug Holmes and George Marcus have noted, such anthropological engagements of other experts inevitably bring anthropological knowledge into disquieting but also potentially productive juxtaposition with a plurality of modes of “para-ethnographic” (and one could add “para-social-theoretical”) knowledge that now exist outside the networks and institutions of academic anthropology. They write:

In our experience, ethnographers trained in the tradition of anthropology do not approach the study of formal institutions such as banks, bureaucracies, corporations, and state agencies with much confidence. These are realms in which the traditional informants of ethnography must be rethought as counterparts rather than ‘others’—as both subjects and intellectual partners in inquiry. ... Here, we suggest a particular strategy for *re-functioning ethnography* around a research relation in which the ethnographer identifies a para-ethnographic dimension in such domains of expertise—the *de facto* and self-conscious critical faculty that operates in any expert domain as way of dealing with contradiction, exception, facts that are fugitive, ... Making ethnography from the found para-ethnographic redefines the status of the subject or informant, asks what different accounts one wants from such key figures in the fieldwork process, and indeed questions what the ethnography of experts means within a broad, multi-sited design of research. (Holmes and Marcus 2005:236–237)

My own field research with former East German professional intellectuals—schooled as they were in Marxism and deeply informed as I was by German dialectical social theory and philosophy in graduate school—became entirely knotted in such para-ethnography in the course of fieldwork. These “found” dialectical knowledges and encounters with critical dialectical faculties eventually refocused my project on the sociogenesis and performance of dialectical knowledge itself (see Boyer 2005). Other anthropologists of experts, I should note, read into similar situations less a potentially productive encounter with knowledge and more an epistemological endpoint in the potential doubling, collapse, and/or cancellation of analytical knowledge forms—for example, how to apply theory to a situation in which the expert subject has already decided that theory has failed (see, e.g., Miyazaki and Riles 2005:322).

While such a situation highlights an interesting limit case, the more salient and general underlying problem in the engagement of experts remains sociological, one of *jurisdiction*, which Andrew Abbott terms the “defining relation” in professional life (1988:3). In other words: it poses the question of how the representative of one culture of expertise (the anthropologist) can claim legitimate analytical jurisdiction over the members of another. How could an anthropologist document another expert culture without precisely reframing their expert knowledge in the categories of his own, thus absorbing them into his jurisdiction? This problem is further complicated by the recognition of para-ethnography as a broader social phenomenon in that the anthropologist also confronts the circumstance that, non-accredited as it might be,

both ethnographic and social-theoretical knowledge-making abound outside of the disciplinary nexus of anthropology. What is the anthropologist to make of this monstrous encounter with expert knowledge that is both hers and not hers, an uncanny double in Freud's language "that having been an assurance of immortality ... becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (Freud 1919)? Can anthropology become analytically superfluous under these conditions?

What should interest us in this encounter is that it confronts the well-professionalized anthropological expert with his/her own epistemic contingency in a way that can be startling and seriously unsettling but that can also be, as in the case of para-ethnography, seductive and promising. This is why the entire debate over the limits and necessary renewal of theory seems acutely important, rising even into talk of epistemological dilemmas, in anthropological research on knowledge specialists. But the debate typically is more opaque and even somewhat perplexing to the many anthropologists who do not work within professional cultures or cultures of expertise. This suggests, for reasons I explain in greater detail below, that the sense of dilemma or "crisis" in theory is emerging precisely at the level of the practices of theoretical engagement and analytical attention that constitute different disciplines and arts of inquiry in the human sciences. And this is a helpful insight for considering whether and how to respond to a sense of crisis in theory.

But, before moving on to discuss theory in terms of practices of attention, let me offer a broader social and historical outlook on the development of social theory as intellectual practice across the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, which provides further clues for understanding our contemporary sense of crisis. As noted in the first section, a sense of impasse in theory is by no means limited to anthropology, let alone to a specific subfield of anthropology. The story I tell below (a very compressed one, I am afraid) outlines the sociogenesis and historical transformation of social theory in the European tradition. This choice of focus obviously raises the question as to whether the European tradition should be allowed to center contemporary discussions of theoretical crisis and renewal as it long has. Historicizing and culturalizing the European tradition nevertheless should be valuable for projects of challenging its ideological self-imagination as "universal" knowledge.

European social theory accompanied the modernization and translocalization of European societies. Although social and cultural reflections always had their place in European philosophical and religious texts, they only emerged in earnest as an object of extensive, focused and comparative analytical attentions in the eighteenth century, and they only became a dominant discourse complex within European intellectual cultures in the later nineteenth century. Many processes converged in the historical emergence of social theory, none of which I have the space here to discuss in the detail they deserve. Among them were the expansion and eventual reliance of European societies upon long distance trade; the military interventions and occupations that sought to stabilize those trade relations; the spread of religious missionization everywhere in the wake of European military and commercial expansion; the development of new technologies of communication and governance that permitted ever more translocal spheres of social mediation within Europe and between Europe, its colonies, and other states and communities; the participation of

naturalist and humanist science in European colonialism; the gradual movement of science and philosophy into European universities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their subsequent marginalization of theology; the expansion of the scale of higher education (numbers of students trained, size of the professoriate) and its institutionalization as a pillar of modern state and civic formation; and the evolution of modern academic disciplines in the late nineteenth century in part as a means of legitimating the expansion of professoriate and in part to give institutional recognition and validation to the diversification and specialization of scholarly research practices and attentions.

Social theory gradually came into itself in this environment largely as an effort, I would argue, to collate and make sense of the increasing wealth of knowledge gathering in European metropolitan centers concerning the abundance and diversity of forms of human social life. Their integration as “human” and “social” was precisely what was at stake, much as Foucault has suggested in his various discussions of modern *pouvoir-savoir* (e.g., 1971, 1979). The early proto-para-ethnography and –social theory circulating in texts like Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*, Rousseau’s second discourse, or in the reflections on language and culture offered by Vico and Herder are remarkable for their well-known theological narratives and classificatory impulses (for example, their relentless centering of Northern and Western Christian “freedom” and Enlightenment against Eastern and Southern despotism and ignorance). But they are also remarkable for the at times profound sense of anxiety they convey over the limitations on their own capacities of judgment and knowledge. One can think, for example, of Rousseau’s addendum (in a footnote) that “it seems that philosophy travels nowhere,” (1987[1754]:99) an uncomfortable recognition of the ethnographic inadequacy of his own universalizing narrative of the fall of man into society, leaving open the possibility of to-be-found knowledge that would transform his schema. Or, of Montesquieu’s passing reflection on the stakes of Negro slavery for European subjectivity: “It is impossible for us to assume that these people [slaves] are men because if we assumed they were men one would begin to believe that we ourselves were not Christians” (1989/1748: 250).

So, from the beginning, I would argue, European social theory evinced both a powerful impulse toward universalizing, classificatory schemas but also a parallel, often anxious, recognition of its own contingency. This makes sense when one considers that social theory was principally a philosophical child of epistemic abundance, struggling to find appropriate analytical frameworks and instruments for organizing an increasing volume of cultural data arriving in metropolitan Europe at the hands of its legions of social mediators (missionaries, tradesmen, soldiers, explorers, naturalists, administrators, etc.). Most often, early European social theory did everything it could to dampen down the radical potential of this data under the signs of civilizational errors, inadequacies, and eventually pathologies (and, for this reason, the strongest civilizational challenger to the West, China, always found itself at the bottom of some scale of validity). But to see these classificatory labors solely as an action of domination is perhaps to miss their message of epistemic vulnerability in the context of accumulating signs that European societies were a few among a multitude and that the cultural elements of their civilization were by no means incontrovertibly distinct, let alone superior. “Europe” emerged as a

civilizational identity in the context of this recognition of *marginality* and was deployed as a defensive means of constituting a sense of singularity (see Wolff 1994). The emergence of social theory on the intellectual cultural landscape of metropolitan Europe thus marked the erosion of a theologically framed cultural localism in the experience of translocal social mediation, but for this very reason it leaned its shoulder into the decaying rampart, making para-theological universalism its earliest and strongest message. Still, as we have seen, this universalism never entirely suppressed recognition of its own contingency. And, indeed, contingency became a more and more central focus of social theoretical enterprise as the nineteenth century progressed. Hegel is a wonderful watershed in this respect: one finds in his philosophy of history the crystallization of the first para-theological theory of *universal contingency* in his centering of dialectical relationality as the motivating principle and method of being.

Moving on to what I might term the “golden age” of social theory from the mid-nineteenth century to the interwar period, two trends are immediately apparent: first, the sheer expansion and specialization of social theoretical inquiry with new subfields coalescing around language and semiosis, history, consciousness, experience, culture, and socialization, among others; second, the migration of contingency from an anxious surplus or remainder to a central focus of at least some variants of social theory. On the one hand, one confronts in the golden age some of the strongest universalist messages social theory has ever produced in the manner of Durkheimian sociology (e.g., the study of Society as a *sui generis* reality), whose further move to enshrine itself as the new science of science has been carried proudly forward into the twentieth century by Bourdieu (2000) and many others. Yet one also finds a lively and diverse mass of theories operating in the zone of universal contingency, such as phenomenology and psychoanalysis, whose theoretical projects center ultimately on the irreducibility of some contingent dimension or juncture of what is posed as “universal” human experience, such as the engagement of self and world or the complex of desire and repression. But the diversification of languages and attentions within social theory meant that contingency, and more specifically, critical reflexivity, likewise became a central focus, a site of intellectual attachment and enhancement within social theoretical practice.

This last point will seem less abstract if I expand it by looking more closely at the specific case of the efflorescence of critical reflexivity in modern German intellectual culture, which is one of my own primary areas of research (Boyer 2005). It is well known that, in the 1820s, following the Napoleonic wars and the collapse of a reform movement aimed at liberalizing and modernizing the state administration of intellectual culture, at first radical and later increasingly moderate voices in German intellectual culture began to articulate critical theoretical and philosophical knowledge of modernity. These voices were by no means distinctive to Germany within Europe. Yet, owing to the relative absence of integrating translocal institutions (e.g., a “nation-state”) within German-speaking Central Europe before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the relatively well-integrated German educated middle-classes did feel a disproportionate entitlement to guide and to define the modernizing national essence (culminating eventually in

the myth of “the people of poets and thinkers”). If the 1790s, e.g., were narrated in German philosophy as a time of national *Werden* (becoming), later, especially after 1848’s failure to win major concessions from the German aristocracy to middle class elites, German intellectuals were more apt to describe Germany’s national modernization in critical terms, as an erosion, overformalization, or watering down of national cultural life in the face of forces of ungovernable social mediation, forces that were captured in terms like *Kapital* (capital) and *Massenkultur* (mass culture; see also Postone 1980 for a parallel theory of Anti-Semitism).

This discourse peaked in Germany in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century (see Ringer 1969), and by this time, it was more generally a powerful feature of European humanist discourse on modernization. The ubiquity and intuitiveness of a sense of cultural crisis and decline especially among humanist intellectuals require some further explanation. Let me suggest, briefly, three more specific processes in which it was anchored.

First, public and professional knowledge-making was becoming more commonplace and thus less sanctified with rising numbers of university graduates occupying an expanding public culture. Many university graduates continued to commit themselves to traditional domains of intellectual activity like scholarship, religion, law, and state administration. But their proportion within the intelligentsia as a whole decreased as, by the late nineteenth century, new specialized modes of knowledge-making mushroomed on the margins of intellectual culture in political movements, around new technical developments (like mass printing) and in relationship to commercial activities (cf. Gramsci 1971:9–14). Although new intellectual professions like political organization, advertising, consultancy, and so on developed in part in response to tight labor markets for the traditional educated professions, they were often regarded as pariah forms of intellectual activity by intellectuals affiliated with administration and universities (Weber 1992[1919]). As intellectual labor entered its early phase of privatization and marketization in the late nineteenth century, and as European public cultures expanded in scale and diversified in content, many humanist intellectuals grew certain that this “mass culture,” with its dual propensity to particularize and to collectivize, was acting to limit or to pervert their creative powers.

Second, academic humanists experienced a decline in intra-institutional status as universities began in the last decades of the nineteenth century to shift their emphasis from the humanities (particularly, law, philosophy and history) to research science (especially biological, chemical, physical, and military sciences). The capital-intensive character of research in these fields meant that institutional resources and, to some extent, prestige shifted from the humanities to the sciences, which contributed to a sense of the state’s weakening commitment to “culture” among its self-appointed guardians (Jarausch 1982; Ringer 1969).

Third, professionalism within European intellectual cultures became a general social phenomenon during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a result of the formation of modern professional associations as well as modern academic disciplines. Both kinds of institutions further compartmentalized intellectual culture by codifying special social and linguistic conditions of competence to legitimate the claims of their memberships to particular jurisdictions of expertise. The “man of letters” venerated in the early

nineteenth century came to be replaced by the professional “expert” as the general ideal type of intellectual culture. As a result of the cultivation of these new identities and “cultures of expertise,” communication among them became more limited and truth claims originating within one community of experts were not easily translated to others. Even within the humanities and within philosophy, there was less intuition and discussion of a pure *Urwissen* (foundational knowledge) that early nineteenth century philosophers like Fichte and Schelling had argued could serve as the integrative horizon of all future *Wissenschaft* (science, knowledge). Instead, one found Nietzsche railing against the proliferation of science and “expertise” in German culture and decrying the devolution of philosophy into “theory of knowledge” (1994[1886]:125). And one found Dilthey struggling to produce a manifesto for the “human sciences” that would provide a philosophical foundation and integrative purposive to the dizzying array of humanist research practices.

Viewed against the backdrop of these processes, I would argue that intellectual discourse on the crisis of culture in Germany and elsewhere in Europe reflected, above all, an experiential sense of the loss of social distinction, integrity, and power that accompanied the expansion and pluricentralization of intellectual culture. This afflicted humanist intellectuals especially in that they felt themselves moving from the center of national modernization to its margins. Yet what I would view as relatively immediate humanist anxieties concerning loss of social status and the contingency of knowledge were often authorized in language of the broadest categories of ontological and epistemological rupture or crisis: the nation itself was said to be under assault by the extractive internationalism of commerce or by the Jewry; culture was said to be under assault by the functional differentiation of modern society; knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) was said to be dissolving into myriad technical knowledges and into an instrumental orientation to knowledge itself. I would argue that there was a particular catharsis in the discourse of crisis—it discharged an immediate social crisis into a general social crisis. And yet, if there was some relief in the talking cure of crisis discourse, there was no real respite from the sociological conditions of epistemic jurisdiction or from the experiential hopelessness of stabilizing any claim for absolute knowledge in a highly-factionalized and -compartmentalized intellectual culture. The late nineteenth century was the origin of what we might now call a “postmodern” sensibility toward epistemic vulnerability and situatedness. Indeed, this sketch of the expansion, specialization, and compartmentalization of intellectual culture is as much a twentieth and now twenty-first century story as it is a nineteenth century one. If what we are experiencing today could properly be called a “crisis in theory,” then we should acknowledge that its origins lie in the transformation of intellectual culture in the nineteenth century.

But it is worth noting that European social theory also generated an intriguing internal dialogue with its own narratives of crisis. As Fritz Ringer (1969) notes insightfully, it was the widespread discourse on cultural crisis and on a crisis of *Wissenschaft* within German academic culture after the 1890s alongside the advance of social democratic institutions that prompted social theorists like Karl Mannheim and Georg Lukács in the 1920s to reframe epistemic certainty in terms of social contexts and dynamics. In his essay on “The Problem of a Sociology of Knowledge,” Mannheim cited the post-Enlightenment collapse of epistemic certainty as a key

precipitating factor in the need to develop a sociology of knowledge. “Self-transcendence and self-relativization of thought consist in the fact that individual thinkers, and still more the dominant outlook of a given epoch, far from according primacy to thought, conceive of thought as something subordinate to more comprehensive factors” (1993:190). By recasting (and mythologizing) the certainty of the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon, the sociology of knowledge was able to reframe the problem of certainty in knowledge in historical and relational terms. This was a move of no little significance, since it replaced an anxious discourse on epistemic dissolution with a new specialized and reflexive social science focused on the constitution of epistemic forms. It found solace in “context,” in producing knowledge of the conditions of the production of knowledge rather than in producing universalist knowledge itself. As the first sociologist of knowledge, Marx, once observed of Adam Smith, Smith was able to conceptualize universal categories of “labor” and “value” unknowable to physiocratic economists precisely because his society was in the process of homogenizing the character of human labor and of social wealth through institutions of private property and wage labor. Marx, writing in the 1840s, took this dialectical insight itself as a signal that the age of bourgeois ideology was coming to a close. And yet, nearly a 100 years later in *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim rejected the idea that the sociology of knowledge could ever really replace the lost certainty of the Enlightenment. Instead he offered, rather poetically, the goal of making “use of the intellectual twilight which dominates our epoch” (1936:85) to discern what partial orders of truth can be identified in the elaborate play of light and shadow in intellectual culture.

In sum, I would emphasize that, although there is a real process of historical transformation ongoing within social theory, it has never been the case of a pure epistemological revolution, let’s say from universalist to reflexive, or from modern to postmodern knowledge, although both traditionalists and avantgardes (“oblates” and “consecrated heretics” in Bourdieu’s language; 1988:73–127) typically organize their meta-theoretical narratives in this way, emphasizing breaks between the then, the now, and what is to come in theory. I would describe the evolution of social theory instead as a more gradual process of subspecialization and accretion of theoretical foci and attentions. It has also been a process of differential institutionalization, which has allowed some modes of universalist social theory (especially those favorable to political and economic elites) to sustain, extend, and reproduce themselves (as in the case of rational choice/utilitarian economic theory) while at the same time opening more marginal discursive and institutional spaces for other modes of social theory more sensitive to and more invested in contingency, like praxiology and psychoanalysis. The available modes of social theory, especially those devoted to epistemic contingency, exploded in the postwar period, a movement that is often glossed as “postmodern” or “poststructural” and which deserves further discussion in its own right.

For the moment, I would just say that I think it is a mistake to look for the source of contemporary intuitions of crisis in the specific content of postmodern theory. It is not or not alone the centering of contingency in these theoretical arts that is disquieting. Rather, the sense of crisis within theory today stems as much from its unwieldy, unknowable abundance and from its level of analytical, linguistic, and

attentional specialization as from anything else. If we are prone to feel asea or to sense gaps in theory today, it is precisely because of our constant confrontation (in academic life, but not only there) with a plurality of specialized and specializing theoretical languages, which increasingly do not communicate effectively with one another. The locus of crisis is not really a paucity of instruments with which to comprehend the contemporary. Rather, as the case of para-ethnography instructs us, the problem is that we have too many instruments that do not recognize, let alone comprehend, each other across the labyrinth of our cultures of expertise. Reflecting on how we might reorganize or “re-function,” to use Marcus and Holmes’s term, the practice of theory in this respect is the topic of the remainder of this essay.

Theory viewed through the specialization of attentions

All of this brings us back to the question of how we should best understand theory as intellectual practice. In other words, to return to the beginning of the essay, how should we answer my colleague in political science’s rather brave question as to the status and purpose of theory in the human sciences today? Is it sufficient to say that theory is a method of framing data, of determining causality, or of producing a meta-reading? Bourdieu has described the proscriptive, authoritarian capacities of the “theory effect” (1991:106). I have already written at some length elsewhere (Boyer 2003) of theory as language, specifically as an exclusionary register of professional communication and as a medium of value-circulation through practices of citation. I will not dispute that theory can and does serve all these purposes in some institutional settings but composing a list of theoretical “functions,” however extensive, does not really tell us a great deal about the practical experience and meaning of theory; nor does it help us to identify what distinguishes different modes of social theory from each other.

This is the reason for my turn to the problem of *attentions*, a move that is clearly informed by my own theoretical commitments in dialectical phenomenology (from Hegel to Marx to Schutz) but which I think does not restrict itself to that tradition.

I would define different theoretical languages and practices as distinguished principally by specialized attentions. Rather than rehearse here the rather elaborate discussions of attention as an epistemic mediator between percepts and concepts that have emerged within phenomenology (see, for example, Merleau-Ponty 1962:26–51), what I mean by “specialized attentions” in theory can be best illustrated with reference to a few concrete examples. Take, e.g., Marx’s social theory. What attentions center it? What inattentions bedevil it? In the center, especially of Marx’s writing up to the *Grundrisse*, is his analytical attention to productive human activity (*Arbeit* or *Tätigkeit*). This is the focal point of Marx’s rethinking of Hegel’s dialectics as well as the nucleus of his discussions of estrangement (*Entfremdung*), and, indeed, later, of capital itself. Marx defines the species being of humanity as consisting of the human intervention into nature for needs-satisfaction and –production (1971[1844]:566). His critique of social alienation focuses on humanity’s historical effort to recognize its species being, its propensity for “free production,” and above all for the free production of the self.

The negation of alienation, the overcoming of capitalism, and the historical threshold of communism are nothing less than stages in the generalization of (self)-productive freedom by and for humanity.

Now, despite the rather marvelous set of analytical insights that cluster around Marx's core *praxiological* attention (ideology, fetishism, value, estrangement, etc.), it is no secret that blind spots also abound in Marx's social theory. Where, for example, is the place of language in his social theory? Where is a discussion of desire or of institutions as forces in their own right? Indeed, these considerations, central as they are to other modes of social theory, drift into the margins of Marx's social theory—they are either never mentioned or articulated as functionally dependent upon the praxiological center (e.g., “language is practical ... actual consciousness; 1971[1846]:31). One could interpret such glosses as theoretical failures. And this is a normal strategy of critical engagement, to be followed quickly by reprimands, amendments, exonerations, etc., culminating in the occupation of a variety of “post-Marxian” positions. But, in this respect, does not all theory “fail”? Certainly, it is not Marx's distinctive failure that his attentions are limited. The very sharpening of analytical attention around a central problem or dimension of human experience such as “productive activity” acts both to constitute a set of analytical possibilities and to flatten what lies outside the zone of attention into relative trivialities.

Consider Freudian psychoanalysis, for example. From his work on hysteria and dreams through to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud's analytics centered on the complex of desire and repression in human psychosocial experience. This has remained the perduring unique contribution of psychoanalysis to social theory; no other mode of social theory moves desire to the hallucinatory hub of experience (and although utilitarianism sometimes comes close, its conception of desire is always more demure and contained than Freud's “primary process”; 1900). Moreover, Freud surely was more pluricentric in his attentions than Marx—his parallel insights into language, e.g., were detailed enough to be later developed from analogy into ontology by Lacan. But one can likewise easily locate profound inattentions in Freudian social theory. The specificity of social relations and institutions beyond the family are undefined, appearing most often anecdotally. And, when they are analyzed, they bear the unmistakable imprint of having been functionalized to the core psychocentric theory (e.g., his late theory of a “collective unconscious”) rather than having been allowed to occupy the center of analytical attention in their own right. Likewise, Freudian psychoanalysis does not manage historical and cultural differences in ego formation effectively, a fact that has seriously (but perhaps unnecessarily) limited the engagement of Freud in anthropology, for example (see Obeyesekere 1990).

One could offer similar observations of the way that market relations and competitive struggle stand in the center of Bourdieu's analytical attentions or of the informatic-cybernetic attentions (linkages, operators, networks, technologies, systems) that frequently are centered in Foucaultian and Luhmannian social theory. In each and every mode of social theory, some aspects or dimensions of relational human experience are featured and others are backgrounded or displaced. The general principle is that specialized analytical attention within social theory allows

the greater isolation, specification, and definition of its core subject of inquiry. But, in this process, the core subject tends to emerge as “agent” around which other features of social experience cluster as instruments or addenda, if they are allowed to emerge in the narrative at all.

I will not linger on the implications of this view of theory for understanding academic life other than to note that much debate among theorists and theoretical “camps” can be interpreted as beginning and closing around differences in attentions. The apparent incommensurability between specialized attentions invites contests between different communities of specialists over whether some attentions are more valid than others. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that in the course of professional academic life a significant portion of our analytical energies are either channeled into participating in such “debates” or into ignoring them. To ignore them is to sacrifice the possibility of communication between the theoretical arts. And yet, the payoff to participation often seems limited. For example, entering into a debate between Marxians and Freudians, we already know more or less the reading each side will offer of the other’s core attentions and of what they are “missing.”

What is much more rarely argued in such contexts is how both “productive human activity” and “desire/repression” might be fundamental to experience, and, indeed, how the differentiated theoretical practices in question necessarily *entitle* rather than *invalidate* one another within a division of attentional focus. If anything, what emerges from a rethinking of theory in terms of attentions is a sense that, e.g., Marxian and Freudian approaches are equivalently valid. Which is not, of course, to say that they are the same. Beyond their attentional differences, all theories are historical, cultural documents, ideologically scaled to the social investments of their articulators, coded in the discursive norms of their times, and elaborated to the degree of analytical-disciplinary complexity prevalent in their intellectual cultures. But I would nevertheless insist that, in principle, their attentions are equivalently valid. At least, I can think of no acceptable principle one could use to discard entire arts of social theory in favor of others. In practice, their analytical prisms cast patterns of light and shadow differentially; in some matters they co-illuminate in more or less refined ways (with Freud and Marx perhaps, the problem of value), in others a deeper umbra of inattention presides. But, already, by making *theoretical complementarity* an object of attention and ethical investment in its own right, we stand to gain something more from the encounter between two arts of social theory speaking across history and intellectual culture than simply a confirmation of analytic incommensurability, or worse yet, the facile sense that old theory is a crude throwaway relative to the analytical possibilities of new theory.

Can we go one step farther and outline what an ethics of theoretical complementarity would look like? It is in this spirit that I turn to one of the more interesting theorists of theory that the European tradition ever produced, Wilhelm Dilthey. I will comment briefly on his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*—his famously magnificent “failure” to create a new philosophical foundation for the social and cultural sciences. I will focus on the discussion of complementarity between the “special sciences” that Dilthey develops and link this to my own

proposal for a “multiattentional method” of theory as a companion project to Rabinow’s pursuit of “a larger series of limited concepts” (1999:182).

Multiattentionality in theory

The fearful specter of metaphysics loomed large over Dilthey’s project of theoretical renewal, just as it does over such projects in our own moment. Like Rabinow, Dilthey was deeply concerned with the ruinous effect of totalizing theories like Hegelian philosophy of history or Spencerian/Comtean sociology upon the human sciences. He viewed them as predicated ultimately upon unreflective metaphysical intuitions that absorbed data into pre-set patterns and paradigms rather than allowing for a more co-determining analytical engagement between concepts and empirical data. Nevertheless, also like Rabinow, Dilthey was hopeful for the future of the human sciences.

Dilthey’s hope was located in the development of what he termed the “special sciences,” ranging from anthropology and psychology, which “contain the theory of the psychophysical units of life” (1988:93), to sciences of ethnology, law, history, ethics, language, politics, and religion, which study the “systems of culture and exterior organization” of society (107). Whereas others in Dilthey’s academic environs were prone to consider the proliferation of special sciences as negative social phenomenon signaling ever further specialization of interests and atomization of knowledge and science, Dilthey saw an internal relationship between the special sciences that, were it to be harnessed, would constitute an immense leap forward for the human sciences. He wrote:

Every special science originates only by the device of selecting a portion of historico-social reality. Even history ignores the features of the lives of individual men and of society which, in the period to be described, are the same as those of all other periods; *its eye is directed toward the distinctive and the singular*. The individual historian may deceive himself in such matters, *because directing his attention in a certain way causes the selection of features to arise immediately with his sources*; but whoever compares his real accomplishment with the whole range of facts of socio-historical reality must recognize this. *From this comes the important thesis that every individual science of the mind consciously lays hold of and knows socio-historical reality only relatively, in its relationship to other sciences of the mind*. The organization of these sciences and their healthy growth in their separated state are consequently bound up with insight into the relation of each of their truths to the whole of reality of which they are a part; their organization and growth are bound up also with constant awareness of the abstraction by which these truths exist and of their limited cognitive value because of their abstract character (92, emphasis added).

The special sciences developed not on epistemological grounds, Dilthey argued, but because of the shifting organization of society itself. “As often as a distinct sphere of social activity came about which produced an ordering of facts affecting

the activity of the individual, conditions were present for a theory to emerge” (99). Indeed, Dilthey recognized that the division and specialization of intellectual practices contributed to theory the capacity for more refined analytical attentions to, and engagements with, the social world; “The ensuing technical theories, impelled by practical necessity, continually pressed more deeply into the essence of society” (98–99). So, on the one hand, the special sciences each delivered the human sciences a better quality and quantity of concepts for analyzing some aspect of the social world. But, on the other hand, they became intrinsically epistemically interdependent upon one another, for each achieved its “distinctive” and “singular” attentions by ignoring other features of life that, at least in Dilthey’s schema, would be attended to by other special sciences. “In contrast,” he wrote, “isolated special sciences fall subject to a dead abstraction ... the destructive legacy of metaphysics” (144).

The overall trajectory of Dilthey’s narrative in the *Introduction* suggests that he believed that the process of integration was already underway, since the “[special sciences] are becoming ever more clearly conscious of their relations to one another in reality” (144). Nevertheless, he set himself the “task of developing an *epistemological foundation of the human sciences*,” which would shepherd this process along. Despite recognizing that the special sciences and their theoretical attentions took shape at the level of a practical engagement with a dynamic social environment, however, Dilthey never quite managed to describe what the practice of such an epistemology would look like. This was the site of his unresolved struggle. What we find instead of a clear “foundation” in the remainder of the *Introduction* is an extensive historicization and criticism of metaphysics (which is usually why the project is described as a failure, poised itself to be swallowed back into the metaphysical miasma of epistemology). Yet, as a sort of analytical remainder to the text, Dilthey mentions in passing that the organization of the special sciences can only be known in “self-reflection” (*Selbstbesinnung*). In other words, if an ethical postulate is to be found in Dilthey’s analysis of the state of social theory in his era, it comes in the form of a recommendation that special scientists need to be more self-reflective as to the interdependency of their instruments, methods and concepts of knowing “historico-social reality.”

Where might this lead us today? With apologies to Dilthey, the special sciences have not yet recognized their analytical interdependency. Moreover, one suspects that they more than likely never will. In our current regime of academic disciplinarity, with its specialized procedures of graduate training, its technical languages, its institutionalized departments, its professionally specific conferences and journals, one can now live a rich and productive intellectual life within any one (sub)field in the human sciences and scarcely peer over one’s hedges, let alone wander outside the university walls. Of course, many scholars, to their credit, nevertheless do. But despite a normative institutional emphasis upon “interdisciplinarity” these days, genuine painstaking projects of interdisciplinary communication are relatively rare. If anything, activity is instead being focused into further levels of subdisciplinary specialization (in anthropology, e.g., it is increasingly clear that most intellectual identity and energy is scaled to subfields like “anthropology of medicine” or “anthropology of law” rather than to “anthropology” proper). This

further specialization of languages and analytics is not intrinsically negative, however. Indeed, the brilliance of Dilthey's analysis is that he recognized just how necessary specialized attentions (and their supporting institutions) are for producing new concepts and, in his terms, "signs of the real." But what to make, then, of his parallel insight that the proliferation of special sciences also narrows and segments attentions, increasing the gaps and limits between their various scopes (jurisdictions)? Is it possible to imagine an "epistemological foundation" that will bind together the diverse cultures of expertise—divided by research methods, areas of the world, and analytical attentions—that typify contemporary academic life? I doubt it.

In light of Dilthey's impasse in his search to somehow contain and integrate the theoretical abundance of his own era, it seems apt to return to Rabinow's suggestion of ethics or sensibility as a more appropriate level of intervention. Yet, I do not see a nominalist ethics and sensibility as going quite far enough. In his call for a "larger series of more limited concepts," Rabinow suggests that greater innovation within conceptual specificity could serve as a vehicle for enriching our knowledge of the world. Dilthey would, I think, agree. But, in a way, Rabinow's proposal then only addresses half the problem. If my argument has been clear, the practice of linguistic, analytical, and conceptual specialization is also precisely what has created the theoretical abundance that serves as the proximate source of concerns regarding the exhaustion, crisis, or failure of theory. I will not downplay the importance of theoretical innovation, especially in those expert "spheres of social activity" like science and technology with which Rabinow is especially concerned. The problem is that conceptual innovation on its own is more likely to reproduce a sense of alienation from theory than to alleviate it. This suggests to me a parallel strategy of managing our practices of analytical attention, which I will call a "multiattentional method" of analytic engagement.

By multiattentional method, I have in mind modes of analysis that (a) recognize and reflect on the specialized attentional basis of theory and that (b) actively seek to stabilize more than one set of attentions at the center of their theoretical projects. The latter skill (multiattentionality) is obviously much more difficult to acquire than the former (reflexivity). Multiattentionality demands a conscientious and difficult commitment toward multiple analytical specializations and an ethical orientation toward not allowing one set of analytical concerns to harden into a conceptual dogma that overshadows or trivializes other analytical concerns. It also demands finding a place in our writing for explicit dialogues (and contests) to emerge among analytical commitments, for evaluating the patterns of light and shadow dispersed by different analytical investments, and for finding new ways to coordinate them theoretically, as they engage the world and locate, interpret, and publicize their "signs of the real."

The dogma of limited attentions is probably the greatest challenge facing social theory today. Where praxiology might begin as a way of understanding something about human experience and sociality, it can become ontological, "the essence of human experience and sociality," or epistemological, "the necessary condition for knowing the essence of human experience and sociality." Ditto semiology, ditto psychoanalysis, ditto informatics. And this is true whether we are thinking of the theory-for-theory's sake of some academic communication or of theory traveling

(Said 1983) in the wider world, informing social movements, anticipating social futures, legitimating or challenging institutions and authorities, inspiring creative action. If we've learned nothing else from Marx, we should have learned to be wary of the historically-situated analytical insight masquerading as transhistorical natural law. This was the message of his critique of political economy and the foundation of his entire critical engagement with capital. If all knowledge is ideological (e.g., taking practical intuition as truth) for Marx, then that extends to all theory as well, even to Marx's own theory.

Multiattentional method is obviously not going to rid us of ideology. But I believe that it could be an antidote to theoretical dogma and its limiting of analytical attentions in that multiattentional method supports thinking beyond one's core attentions and an openness to new signs of the real. At the very least, it would make the most of the analytical specialization that otherwise has contributed to the sense of theoretical crisis or impasse in which we live.

Multiattentionality, although perhaps rather less reflexive and ambitious than one might wish it to be, is already an important aspect of the development of new social theory; perhaps it has always been. Think, e.g., of two of the most celebrated social theorists of the past 25 years: Slavoj Žižek and Bruno Latour. Žižek's marriage (or to use his own metaphor: sodomy) of Hegel and Lacan both recovered the legacy of universal contingency connecting the two and juxtaposed three sets of analytical attentions (the phenomenological, the semiological and the psychoanalytic) in ways that seemed to some at least a refreshing departure from more dogmatic work in any one of these traditions (2006). Latour likewise, at least before his reinvention of himself as an ontologist (1993), productively merged together the praxiological insights into ethnomethodology with the informatic-cybernetic insights into network theory (1987).

The problem is thus not so much that multiattentional approaches are not available but rather that they are a less valued and less rigorously cultivated aspect of new social theory than they ought to be. A greater ethical and attentional coordination of theoretical practice would, I believe, help to dampen down the sense that we have exhausted the theoretical resources at our disposal. Recall Foucault's question, "Do we need a theory of power?" (2000:327), a question that has resonated across the human sciences as an epitomizing statement of the contemporary crisis of theory.

One can sympathize with Foucault's position to the extent that he means "theory" as narrow causal schema in the sense that Dilthey and Rabinow reject it as well. Yet, the question is disingenuous since Foucault proposes a choice where there is none. We *have* theory of power, including more universal theories like those that continue to justify twenty-first century American imperialism (e.g., <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>) and including more contingent theories of power that center linkages and relations and *pouvoir* (e.g., "enablement") in their analytical attentions as Foucault's does. Theory (in both the linguistic and attentional senses outlined above) is an inheritance in our intellectual practices and social lives, "needed" or not. Simply rejecting theory as a norm of intellectual practice thus does not get us very far. Indeed, even if this was certainly not Foucault's own point, such a position could be easily interpreted as a naturalization of the universal claims of market liberalism, in other words, as just more neoliberal *Denkverbot*.

More important than asking whether “we need theory” are questions such as: “what kinds of theory do we have?”, “how have they originated?”, “how are they stabilized institutionally and authorized ideologically?”, “upon what kinds of analytical attentions are they predicated?” and “can we imagine better alternatives to our current theoretical practices?” My suggestion, in the spirit of Dilthey’s call for self-reflection, is that the diagnosis and practice of what I have termed here multiattentive method could help to answer these questions. I am not expecting that reflexivity or multiattentiveness will cure our symptomological sense of crisis (for how could one reasonably expect to cure intellectual culture of its abundance and complexity except through authoritarian monopolization?) But they should help us to develop new strategies for theoretical practice that make use of the productive aspect of theoretical abundance and specialization without simply repressing it in favor of a “return to the canon” or an “embrace of the emergent.” This, I think, is the challenge of the future of social theory in the human sciences and its disciplines like anthropology: to harness the intellectual power of specialized analytical attentions without allowing any of them to become trivial.

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