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The International Origins of Social and Political Theory

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Abstract

This article introduces the main themes that animate this special issue: the necessary entanglement of theory and history, the cortical relationship between theory and practice, and the transboundary (i.e. international) relations that help to constitute systems of both thought and practice. We integrate the contributions to the special issue within these overarching themes and identify their main contributions. We make three core arguments: first, all theory is situated knowledge, derived in and through historical context; second, theory-practice is a single field in which theory arises out of and acts upon historical experience; and third, both social and political theory have international origins, arising from transboundary encounters.

Introduction

What is the relationship between history and theory? Most of the time, theory seems to stand apart history. Social scientists apply theories to historical events, seeing history as a testing bed or as a site of “operationalization” for their theoretical schemas (e.g. Elman and Elman eds, 2001; for a critique, see Lawson, 2012). Others, among them historians of thought, see theory as speech acts either rooted in their particular time and place (e.g. Skinner, 1988), or, alternately, as reflections of broader social forces (e.g. Vitalis, 2016). On either account, theory (as intellectual systems) and history (as events, experiences and practices) appear as distinct domains. This special issue takes a different view: the relations between history and theory are better conceived as co-constitutive. Theory is made in history, and it helps to make history. Understanding theory, and understanding history, requires inquiry attuned to the entwinedness of theory and history.

The authors in the special issue develop this insight in two distinctive directions. Firstly, they do so through a focus on “transboundary” (i.e. international) encounters and the ways in which they generate and shape theorizing. Secondly, they direct attention to the immersion of theorists and theory in practice. In this introduction, we say a little more about what we mean by a co-constitutive approach to history and theory, and about each of these distinctive directions. We also comment briefly on the papers that follow.

History/Theory

What does it mean to say that theory is made in history, and that it helps to make history? It means that theories arise historically, formed amid encounters between theorists and the events and practices they experience and take part in. Haiti's revolutionary slaves informed Hegel's thinking on masters and slaves (Buck-Morss, 2000). Napoleon's France schooled Clausewitz by defeating him in battle and making him a prisoner (Strachan, 2007, 46). Marx studied in the hothouse of Europe's 1848 uprisings. Historical 'happenings'—often unexpected and even shocking to contemporaries—help to generate, frame and shape theory. To take just one example explored in depth in this special issue, Hannah Arendt's lived experiences of totalitarianism and exile fundamentally informed her political action as well as her theorizing (Owens, this volume).

Theories are not only formed historically, they are also refracted through ongoing encounters; theories are reconceived in different times and places. Jeppe Mulich (this volume) shows how theorists have wrongly interpreted the postcolonial order in the New World at the turn of the nineteenth century as a radical break from the past, laying the groundwork for an international order centered on nation-states. Seen in the context of the time, the Western Hemisphere was mainly the site of creative, but limited, experimentation in existing notions of divided sovereignty and composite polities – imperialism remained the principle source of political authority throughout the 19th century and the only really radical experiment in the New World—Haiti—was overlooked by political theorists until recently. Similarly, David Blaney (this volume) shows how contemporary disciplinary divisions between economics and political theory obscures the central role played by Alfred Marshall, a leading political economist in late Victorian Britain, in constituting both the ideas and practices that helped to shape British imperialism (also see Bell, 2007). Both Mulich and Blaney make clear that theoretical interpretations are recrafted as they encounter new histories, new times and new places. As Daniel Levine also shows in his contribution to this volume, the historical contexts that form the crucible in which theorizing is produced, are often forgotten by later actors and thinkers operating in different contexts. Theory is not something “out there,” removed from history, even retrospectively. Rather, theories are assessed and reassessed, made and remade through ongoing encounters with history.

Theory, then, is made historically. At the same time, theory informs practice, shaping events and processes, governments and economies, wars and revolutions. And equally clearly, thinkers immersed in practice produce the theories that help to make history. Often, the boundaries between theory and practice characteristic of the contemporary professionalized academy have obscured their co-constitutive interaction. David Ricardo, to

take one example, brokered stocks and manipulated markets while developing ideas that shaped, and continue to shape, economies. Clausewitz was an officer and commander, a staff college lecturer and an instructor of princes. Helen Kinsella (this volume) demonstrates how former guerrilla fighters became legal theorists at the meetings leading to the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, forcing alterations in the laws of war that accorded with their experiences in anti-colonial, nationalist struggles. Neither Kinsella's guerrilla fighters, nor figures like Ricardo and Clausewitz, much less Marx, Freud, Hayek, and Keynes, can be restricted to realms of either "thought" or "practice;" rather, their work arose from the conjoining of thought *with* practice. Much of this work went on to inform both theorizing and action in ways that vastly exceed both the achievements of the specialised scholarship of the academy and of contemporary 'policy relevant' knowledge. The point is not that theory *should* be more practice – or policy – oriented. Rather, the contributions to this special issue stress the cortical relationship between theory and practice that has been lost in the valorisation and, from other quarters, condemnation, of theory as a realm distinct from practice.

This special issue also draws attention to the "transboundary" encounters that have generated and shaped theorizing. By "transboundary" (which we use synonymously with "international"), we mean the histories that interconnect people across borders, whether these borders are represented by groups, states, regions, empires, or other entities. Thinking about government, society and economy owes profound debts to such encounters. Historiography begins as the stories of wars and travels (Herodotus, 1987 [c.440 B.C.]). The conquest of the Americas, and contemporary representations of its peoples, provided Hobbes with his vivid embodiment of the "condition of warre" in the state of nature (Hobbes, 1996 [1651], 89). Grotius generated his ideas about the law of the sea from the practices of the Indian Ocean system (Alexandrowicz, 1967; Steinberg, 2001), just as trade between Britain and India helped to form Adam Smith's ideas about free trade (Erikson, 2017), and utilitarian thought was forged in the imperial encounters between Britain and India (Chatterjee, 2012; Mehta, 1999; Stokes, 1959). The tradition of 'reason of state,' thinking about strategy and war, and treatises on diplomacy and the education of princes, take as given a world of competing sovereigns and other armed entities, their conflicting (and common) interests and policies, and their often violent encounters with one another. One of the most extreme transboundary encounters of all – war – casts a shadow over many systems of thought. As a number of contributions to this special issue show, imperial encounters have been fundamental to the generation of systems of both thought and practice, from serving as the leitmotif to the

thinking of Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall (Hammer, this volume) to understanding symbolic mourning rituals in 17th century Korea (Thurman, this volume).

In sum, this project is animated by the insight that theory arises in and through historical encounters. These encounters are iterative and, often, international. The relationship between history and theory is not something that can be reduced to a footnote, introductory note or biographical detail. Rather, establishing the generative relationship between history and theory should be the starting point for any assessment of theoretical systems. And it should also be the starting point for analyses of the histories that theoretical systems help to shape. History is an archive of events and experiences that leads to theorising, often by practitioners participating in those very events.

If theories arise historically, these theories are subsequently abstracted from historical events, experiences and practices – in effect, the tracks in which a theory are formed are subsequently covered up. Theories become seen as more or less consistent abstractions removed from the historical encounters through which they emerged. Collectively, the papers in this volume seek to uncover some of these hidden tracks and, along with them, some of the constitutive relations between history and theory. Beate Jahn (this volume) shows how the ‘world crisis’ (Bayly, 1989) of the late 18th and early 19th centuries helped to forge a modern ‘episteme’ that, in turn, produced a divide between disciplinary history and the social sciences, a divide that has been maintained – and reinforced – ever since. Samuel Chambers (this volume) repositions the Labor Theory of Value as a capitalist fairy tale, a story known to be false. Far from intending to offer an ahistorical theory of value (later dismissed as unworkable by modern economists), Marx was in fact showing how questions of value were addressed in the concrete historical context of capitalist society. Resurrected as a false theory, the Labor Theory of Value now functions both to dismiss Marx, while reifying the idea of theory as ahistorical.

Why this matters

There are three main consequences that flow from the interventions made in this special issue. First, the articles envisage a relationship between theory and history in which the former is no longer seen as outside of and/or applied to, the latter. Rather, all theory is situated knowledge, derived in and through history. The second consequence concerns establishing a distinctive notion of theory and practice. As with the theory-history relationship, it posits not theory *and* practice, but *theory-practice* as a single field constituted by the productive tension between how participants make sense of historical experiences and

the ways in which these experiences shape policy and practice. Finally, the contributors see international encounters as constitutive of theory. Theories are not forged by individuals living within distinct – and discrete – ‘local’ environments. Rather, theory is forged through ongoing encounters between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign’. Both social and political theory have international origins.

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