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Theorizing theory: Invitation to a broader conversation about 'theory' in sociology

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Abstract

'Theory' is a seminal term in sociology. Sociologists tend to ask that articles, chapters and monographs are 'theoretical', 'develop theory' or 'make a theoretical contribution'. Yet, as demonstrated in Gabriel Abend's 2008 article 'The Meaning of 'Theory'', it is generally unclear what sociologists mean when they talk about theory. Abend distinguishes seven different meanings sociologists tend to impute to 'theory' and argues that no single definition can usefully capture these substantively different meanings. Counter to Abend, we propose and defend a minimal and versatile theory of theory, which does capture the important common denominators in sociologists' various uses of the term theory. The major strengths of our proposal are that it enables informed and synthetic discussion and fosters reflexivity about differences and similarities between different types of theory. Our minimal theory of theory thus serves as an invitation to a broader conversation about theory in sociology.

KEYWORDS

Abend, assumptions, epistemology, metatheory, sociological theory, theorizing

1 | INTRODUCTION

'Theory' is a concept of profound importance to sociology. Even though we seldom discuss why, it is generally agreed that more theory is needed and that theoretical contributions are the norm. Yet, as contributors have shown time

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and again, sociologists show remarkable variation in their understandings of the term (cf. Alexander, 1987, chap. 1; Blumer, 1954; Carleheden, 2019; Kalleberg, 2017; Merton, 1945, 1967). A particularly illuminating and relatively recent contribution in this regard is Gabriel Abend's article "The meaning of theory" (2008), in which he reconstructs seven co-existing yet incommensurable meanings attributed to 'theory' in contemporary sociology, which lead to significant confusion when sociologists assume they are talking about the same thing. As this semantic confusion hampers the discipline's progress, Abend (2008, p. 192) challenges sociologists to engage in 'semantic therapy' to sort out their conceptual morass. Only by clarifying our understanding of theory can we improve understanding and communication in the field, according to Abend.

To date, there has been no serious proposal addressing 'Abend's challenge' for sociology. In fact, despite being widely read and cited, Abend's article arguably—and ironically—marks a relative decline in sociological interest about what theory is and means. The year after its publication, a shift started that would move emphasis away from theory and towards theorizing (Swedberg, 2009, see also e.g., Swedberg, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2016; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). The dominant view in this emerging "theorizing movement" (Lizardo, 2015, p. 19) seems to be that there is little to gain from discussing different definitions of 'theory' and that the real way forward to energize sociology is focusing on the craft of theorizing (i.e., on how to *make* theory, cf. Swedberg, 2014b, 2016).¹

With this article we return to 'Abend's challenge' and propose a thin but useful theory of theory in sociology. Rather than a full-fledged solution to Abend's challenge, our proposal is meant as a *common ground* upon which discussions about theory can build, by serving as a simple heuristic to aid communication about theory in sociology. In laying out and defending our proposal, our article also reformulates Abend's challenge in a more constructive direction by challenging both his diagnosis of the present situation in sociology and his dismissal of the utility of a minimal or thin conception of theory. As we will show, there is much to be gained from having a minimal and versatile conception of theory that enables informed exchange between strands and positions in a fragmented discipline such as sociology. Indeed, we see an urgent need to improve our thinking and discussions about theory in sociology, given the centrality of the concept for sociologists' identity, prestige, career prospects and intellectual endeavors. Importantly, such deliberations cannot be restricted to an "aristocracy of theorists" (Lizardo, 2015, p. 5) that is decoupled from the rest of sociology (Carleheden, 2019; Lizardo, 2015), but requires sociologists of all stripes and creeds to get involved in the conversation.

In the following we describe 'Abend's challenge' for sociology, before laying out our own proposal for a thin but useful conception of theory, showing how this captures the important common denominators of different understandings of 'theory' in sociology, and charting a fruitful way forward for sociological discussions about theory. In so doing we engage closely with Abend's arguments, not as a footnote to his article but as a contribution to the general problem he addressed, namely our discipline's conceptual malaise concerning theory.

2 | ABEND'S CHALLENGE

What we call 'Abend's challenge' refers to his description of the present state of confusion about 'theory' in sociology and the obstacles to its resolution. The starting premise is Abend's identification of a wide range of meanings attributed to the word 'theory' by sociologists. In brief, Abend (2008, pp. 177–181) claims that sociologists' use of 'theory' variously refers to: general propositions that establish a relationship between variables (*theory 1*); explanations of particular social phenomena (*theory 2*); original interpretations of certain slices of the empirical world (*theory 3*); studies of, and the students of, the (neo)classics and their works (*theory 4*); overall perspectives (*theory 5*); accounts with a fundamental normative component (*theory 6*); and studies of foundational problems that sociology has encountered (*theory 7*).

Abend argues that these types, or the meanings imputed to them, are so substantially different that they must be regarded as *incommensurable*.² He illustrates his point by using the Spanish word *banco* as an analogy to 'theory' in sociology. In Spanish, 'banco' refers to banks as well as benches (Abend, 2008, p. 181). Yet 'banco' is not a unified

concept for phenomena like banks and benches, but two homonyms—words with little in common save their spelling and pronunciation in the Spanish language. The various meanings imputed by sociologists to ‘theory’, claims Abend, have about as little in common as banks and benches. Although some meanings might be compatible (cf., Abend, 2008, pp. 178, 181), Abend sees untranslatable differences between several of the types in his typology. For instance, an ‘overall perspective’ like queer theory (theory 4) is nothing like ‘a set of general propositions about the relationship between variables’ as in Durkheim’s theory of anomie and suicide (theory 1). Consequently, ‘theory’ is not, in actual practice, a concept that unifies the various types of theory, but homonyms with little or no semantic common ground. When sociologists argue about theory, therefore, they typically are not talking about the same thing. This hampers discussion and knowledge production in sociology, says Abend, and there is therefore a need to clear up what we mean by ‘theory’, so that our discussions and our thinking can develop fruitfully (Abend, 2008, pp. 175–6). We must “improve understanding and communication, without which there can be no productive (indeed, no meaningful) *substantive* discussion” (Abend, 2008, p. 176) about theory.

In specifying what is required of a viable solution to this predicament, Abend claims that the challenge facing sociology is as much political as intellectual in kind (Abend, 2008, pp. 193–4). This is because all seven types represent uses of the word ‘theory’ that are accepted within communities of practice that fly under the banner of ‘sociology’. All seven types are thus *legitimate* conceptions of theory in sociology, a fact that follows from sociology itself being a discipline with a pluralistic core (just like we disagree about what theory is, we disagree about what sociology is). While some communities might claim that they hold ‘the one and true’ meaning of theory, this claim rests on a “Socratic error”, according to Abend (2008, p. 182), because theory does not have some ultimate reality. Instead, a unified conception of theory must be *made*, and however one chooses to make it, it must be eligible for support among the global community of scholars that make up sociology (Abend, 2008, p. 194). That is to say, “a satisfactory solution must take all the different legitimate stances into account” (Abend, 2008, p. 194). This means, says Abend (2008:184), that the solution must cater to a plurality of ontological and epistemological stances, which can only be achieved by a concept of theory that makes as few ontological and epistemological requirements as possible. It cannot, for example, have built-in realist or constructivist preconceptions. Importantly, however, Abend (2008, pp. 187–188) also warns against a unified conception of theory that is *too* thin and general. In his words, “[I]f ‘theory’ *means* “the connection of ideas,” the class would be excessively large and the concept not really useful”.

In effect, Abend describes what is required of a functional solution to the present state of confusion about theory in sociology. This is what we dub ‘Abend’s challenge’: to come up with a general conception of theory that caters to the plurality of legitimate theoretical stances in sociology, but without making it overly thin and therefore useless; a conception that is simple, but not too simple. This is a challenge for which Abend does not provide a solution, and to our knowledge no other serious proposals have been presented.³

3 | A THIN BUT USEFUL CONCEPTION OF THEORY

With this article, we engage with Abend’s challenge and propose a thin but useful theory of theory. Our proposal is not meant to be a full-fledged solution (which would require a comprehensive political process, see Abend, 2008, pp. 191–195), but rather a *problematization and specification* of some core premises of this challenge and a *common ground* upon which further discussions about theory can build. As we will demonstrate, our proposal reformulates Abend’s challenge in a more constructive direction by challenging both his diagnosis of the present situation in sociology and his dismissal of the utility a thin or minimal conception of theory.

Our minimal definition is as follows: *a theory is a set of assumptions about one or several phenomena*.⁴ ‘Phenomena’ is used in a wide sense, referring simply to the ‘X’ that a given theory is about. Class theory is about class, gender theory is about gender, and so on. ‘Phenomena’ thus covers *anything that can be made an object of human consciousness*, including ideas, concepts, things and events. Phenomena can be highly abstract (texts or, indeed, theory) but also quite particular (Abend’s article on the meaning of ‘theory’). ‘Phenomena’ also include ‘moral objects’ such as values, the good life, and so on.

'Assumptions' too is used in a wide sense to refer to a theory's content. Class theory consists of assumptions about class, gender theory consists of assumptions about gender, and so on. We use 'set' to denote that theories always encompass multiple assumptions.⁵ We chose 'assumptions', rather than, say, 'claims', 'hypotheses', 'logical propositions' or 'postulates', because we want a concept that covers a wide range of theory types, not just those where the assumptions are formalised and systematised, but also those where they are implicit, informal and less orderly. The concept of assumptions is also flexible, since an assumption can be more or less supported by evidence,⁶ descriptive and normative, and since we can both hold assumptions to be true or probable and entertain them for the sake of argument or perspective. That is, we can approach them from the point of view of veracity ('these assumptions are valid') or utility ('these assumptions are useful'). But whichever approach, they remain, in our terminology, assumptions.

Adding to this, we divide theoretical assumptions into two types: assumptions about the *properties of phenomena* (i.e., about what *X* is like), and assumptions about the *relationships between phenomena* (such as '*X* causes *P*', '*X* correlates with *P*', or '*X* makes *P* meaningful').⁷ Class theories typically say something about what classes are like but also about how they relate to other phenomena such as income or power. Gender theories typically say something about what kind of phenomenon gender is and how gender relates to other phenomena, such as income or power.

Thus, theories are sets of assumptions about the properties of and relationships between phenomena. This definition is descriptive rather than prescriptive: it refers to both good and bad theory, however conceived (a distinction we revisit later). Our definition is also purposively thin or minimal, thus running counter to a key premise of Abend's challenge. As mentioned, Abend (2008, pp. 187–188) dismisses outright the utility of thin conceptions of theory because they are "excessively large" and "not really useful" (see also Martin, 2015, pp. 4–5). In our view, however, the usefulness of a thin conception depends on what it is being used for.

In arguing for a minimal definition of theory, we are not seeking to *incorporate* all the various meanings identified in Abend's typology, but to provide a *heuristic to aid communication and facilitate constructive discussion* about theory in sociology. Using a metaphor of a tree, we could say that our thin definition is the trunk, whereas theory types such as in Abend's typology represent the branches. While distinct, the branches are all connected to the trunk, and the trunk is what makes the branches relevant to one another, because it reveals that they are, or enables us to treat them as though they were, indeed part of the same tree. Our thin concept of theory can thus facilitate movement and exchange *between* theoretical branches. Those who are preoccupied mostly with their own branch and where it should grow, gain the advantage of comparison—either full-fledged or as a means of sensitisation—thus becoming aware of all strengths and weaknesses, and common and idiosyncratic aspects of their own branch. Those whose interests span more than one branch have the advantage of moving between branches, to see how each branch relates to the trunk and, moreover, how it relates to other branches on the same tree. This is achieved, metaphorically, by moving down one branch to the trunk and then up another branch and stopping to consider the path that was taken to get there. On their way, they encounter others coming from different places, and can share their experiences from the paths they have trodden. Such an exercise is important to anyone who hopes to balance their specialisation with a certain breadth of scope, student and professor alike.

The reader might still have an inkling that our definition is too thin and thus too *wide*. Surely, something must be missing? Could we not have added, for instance, that a theory is a set of assumptions about phenomena *that explains, predicts, or brings insight* or has other specific effects (e.g., Homans, 1964, p. 812; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021)? Our answer is that by adding to our conception in this way, each addition would simultaneously be agreeable to one part of the sociological community and disagreeable to another. Instead, our proposition balances the trade-off between simple and simplistic and takes seriously Abend's demand for ontological and epistemological pluralism. In fact, it comes with virtually no ontological or epistemological commitments. Its central components—phenomena and assumptions—have featured in scholarly debates for much longer than the discipline of sociology has existed. Realists and constructivists, materialists and idealists and rationalists and empiricists, as they are usually portrayed in methodological debates and textbooks, tend to disagree about how assumptions shape the phenomena under study, and thus the extent to which phenomena can be treated as separate from assumptions; yet the concepts of

assumptions and phenomena are pivotal to all parties in the discussion. This is an advantage of our proposal because it means that the central components of the concept of theory, and their internal arrangements, can feature straightforwardly in these discussions—they belong to neither side. Thus, as the purpose of our theory of theory is to aide communication and facilitate constructive discussion, our proposal is not too simple. It is simple enough.⁸

Striving for simplicity also has the added virtue of counteracting sociologists' taken-for-granted belief that 'theory', the word, must be very complex because (many) theories are. Indeed, we suspect that many sociologists experience cognitive dissonance between a simple conception of 'theory' and the expectation (and experience!) that theory is difficult—perhaps even to the extent that the very thing that makes theory feel like theory, that makes it feel special, interesting, and important, seems almost to disappear. But it is not, we believe, its semantic meaning as such that makes theory feel special, but its analytical functions—its role in aiding us in the asking and answering of questions, and in describing, evaluating, interpreting, explaining, predicting, and so on. 'Theory' can be, we urge, conceived of as quite simple even if many theories are quite complex, and even if the work of making, understanding, and using them is a challenge of a lifetime. Theory *in action* is profoundly complex, just as *specific theories* can be challenging to grasp, but theory *as concept* does not have to be.⁹

To elaborate how our minimal concept can move the conversation about theory in sociology forward, we will first show how it simplifies Abend's challenge by revealing important common denominators in sociologists' talk about theory, and then demonstrate how it indicates the lines along which future discussions about theory in sociology can be held.

4 | REVEALING A COMMON GROUND

In arguing for incommensurability, Abend does not claim that no common ground exists between any of the various meanings imputed to theory, but that *no ground is common to them all*. We disagree and argue that there are important common denominators in what sociologists mean by the word 'theory'. Each of Abend's types may be 'translated' using our conception as a Rosetta stone. The point of doing so is not to arrive at a more practical, elegant, or recognisable typology than Abend's, but rather to demonstrate the important common denominators in sociologists' talk about theory, thereby significantly simplifying Abend's challenge and providing grounds for continued and improved deliberation about theory.

The translations, together with notes that schematically indicate the translation procedure, are shown in Table 1 (and elaborated in appendix 1). They are based on the same kind of semantic analysis as Abend's—we are guided by what we, as readers, teachers, and researchers in sociology, think sociologists mean when they use the word 'theory' in this way or that.¹⁰ Three things about these translations deserve brief remark.

4.1 | Vanishing metatheoretical concepts?

First, some key metatheoretical terms, such as 'propositions' and 'variables' from theory 1 and 'explanation' from theory 2, seem almost to vanish from our translations. This does not, we emphasize, signal their unimportance to theory or to metatheoretical discussions in sociology, but rather our position that each term can be reframed as a specification or configuration of the elements in our thin conception of theory. Even if the words are taken out, that is, the functions they referred to can be expressed using the elements in the translation. So, for instance, 'propositions' can be thought of as formalised (and testable) *assumptions*, 'variables' can be thought of as abstract *phenomena* (such as age, gender or class), and 'explanations' can be thought of as accounts of specific *assumptions* about the properties of the explanans and/or its relationship to other *phenomena*.¹¹ This does not mean that we think sociologists should stop using these terms. Rather, the implication is that they are *compatible* with our conception of theory, rather than indicators of incommensurable theory types. There is common ground.

TABLE 1 Summary of translation.

	Abend's types	Our translations	Translation procedure
1	A set of general propositions that establish a relationship between variables	A set of <u>general</u> assumptions about the relationship between <u>abstract</u> phenomena	Propositions → formalised assumptions Variables → abstract phenomena
2	An explanation of a particular social phenomenon	A set of assumptions about a <u>particular social</u> phenomenon	Explanation → account of the assumptions about properties ascribed to particular phenomena and/or its relationship to other phenomena.
3	An original "interpretation" of a certain slice of the empirical world	An <u>original</u> set of assumptions about phenomena in a <u>particular part of the world</u>	Interpretation → account of assumptions about phenomena A certain slice of the empirical world → phenomena in a particular slice of the world.
4	Study of and the students of the writings of the (neo) classics	(Studies, articulations or alterations of) <u>existing</u> sets of assumptions about phenomena found in (neo) classical works.	The original refers to a type of <i>academic</i> , based on the sort of work they do with (neo)classics. The translation emphasises the theories of the (neo)classics and specifies types of theory-related work.
5	An overall perspective (from which one sees and interprets the world)	A set of assumptions about phenomena (that are used as a perspective)	Overall perspective → set of assumptions about phenomena.
6	An account that has a fundamental normative component	A set of assumptions about a phenomenon, where <u>normative</u> assumptions are a central component	Theoretical components → assumptions about phenomena Normative components → normative assumptions about phenomena
7	The study of foundational problems that sociology has encountered	(Articulations or alterations of) assumptions about abstract phenomena that are involved in a foundational problem of sociology	Foundational problem → problem tied to the properties of or relationship between (frequently discussed) abstract phenomena (e.g. 'actors' or 'structures').

4.2 | Disentangling actions and actors from theory

Second, some elements denoting actions and actors in Abend's types were reframed in our translation. Beginning with actors, Abend's (2008, p. 179) theory 4 refers to 'the study of and the students of the writings of the (neo)classics', about which he notes that you can be 'a theorist 4' and do theory 4, but "you cannot *have*, *have developed*, or *put forward* a [theory 4]", because it refers as much to the people studying classic works as it does to any result of those studies. Here we disagree with Abend's semantic analysis. We think he is right about sociologists' language use, but wrong about what sociologists *mean* when using language this way. We agree that sociologists who engage with the classics are often called 'theorists', that their courses are called 'theory courses', that their published introductory books or re-interpretations are found in the 'theory section', and exegesis is indeed sometimes described as a form of 'theory work' (e.g., Levine, 2017, p. xxi). But what makes readers and teachers of these works 'theorists', what makes their classes and publications theoretical, and what makes exegesis 'theory work', is engagement with studies by famous theoreticians, and with theories in those studies. It is theories by the (neo)classics that are being studied, taught, written about, and, occasionally, re-interpreted. We believe this conforms to what is meant when sociologists use language in these ways. If we are right, then, counter to Abend, you can have, have developed, and put forward theories of this kind—the classics did at some point. Therefore, the students of the (neo)classics, Abend's 'theorists 4',

disappear in our translation. Not because they do not matter but because they are not actually thought of by sociologists as theory. Treating it as if they were only exacerbates the impression of semantic chaos in sociology.

Moving on to actions, two types of action were disentangled from Abend's theory types, namely that of conducting a study, and of using theory as a perspective (the disentangled and translated actions are specified and put in brackets in Table 1). Beginning with the former, whereas Abend's theories 4 and 7 contain the phrase 'the study of'—indicating that theory in these cases implies the conducting of a study—our translations disentangle 'theories' from 'studies'. Although theories result from, and are important analytical resources in, the conduct of studies, a theory of X is not, in our translation, synonymous with 'a study of X'. Neither *The Capital* (Marx, 1906) nor *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978) are theories, but rather published studies that can be said to contain theories. A study consists of theory, but also of data (widely conceived), methods and questions (Kalleberg, 2017). That is, while theory is in different bodies of work, it can rarely be said to be that work. There is always more to a study than theory. In line with that, we need not assume that sociologists believe that the whole of *The Capital* is theory just because they refer to it as theory.

The latter disentangled action type is that of using theory as a perspective. Abend (2008, p. 179) describes theory 5 as "an overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world", exemplified with approaches such as feminist theory, queer theory, game theory and poststructuralist theory, to name but a few. Abend is right that sociologists tend to talk about theory as a perspective, and although we have nothing but anecdotal evidence to offer, we readily assume that some theories are more typically described as such than others (e.g., Foucault's (2008) theory of governmentality more often than Lamont's (2009) theory of professional judgement in interdisciplinary peer review panels). In our translation, we disentangle theory from how it is used. In our view, to speak of theories as perspectives implies that to 'have' or 'employ' their set of assumptions affects how we see certain phenomena (where 'seeing' is a deep metaphor for comprehension). Our translation's shift from *being* a perspective to being *used* as a perspective relies on our belief that most sociologists would reasonably agree that a theory does not determine its use (nor does its originator), and that one and the same theory can be used in a variety of ways for a range of purposes.¹² As an illustration, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021, pp. 506–7) nicely demonstrate how one and the same theory—Perrow's (1978) theory of objectives in human service organisations—can be used to *explain*, but also to *comprehend*, *categorise*, (re)produce or *challenge* phenomena. Our point, then, is that the perspective-part has less to do with the theory *as* theory than its particular use. Theories are pliable, and their power is always, at least in part, determined by the creativity and insight of their users and their context of use.¹³ Thus, in principle at least, any set of assumptions may (be deliberately used to) affect how you "see" some phenomena, or how you perceive and reason about it.

4.3 | Intact theoretical qualifiers

Third, some elements remain untouched by our translation. These are the underlined words in Table 1 (e.g., 'abstract', 'particular' and 'original'). They fall outside of our conception of theory. Apart from these elements, sociologists talk of 'theory' seems mostly to conform with our definition. The implication is that a theory may be, for instance, highly abstract, or quite particular, and yet remain in each case a theory, understood as a set of assumptions about one or multiple phenomena. Simultaneously, the underlined words tell us something about the important differences in what sociologists mean by 'theory'. As we get back to in the next section, they can be variously approached as expressing different opinions about: what sociological theory is; what makes sociological theory good; or what distinguishes different subcategories of 'theory' in sociology. Semantically speaking, however, these non-translated elements are not an imposition to our goal of identifying a common ground in sociologists' talk about theory. What comes across as unreconcilable difference of opinion about 'theory' in Abend's analysis is recast in our translation as differences of opinion about whether theory should explain, be abstract, and so on.

Having discussed Abend's typology and our translations, the argument could be made that the translations in Table 1 are only moderately successful—they are neither elegant nor intuitive, and few roll off the tongue. Yet it could

no longer be claimed that Abend's theory types have as little in common as do banks and benches. Instead, there are important common denominators in sociologists' talk about theory, a fact that significantly simplifies Abend's challenge as it reveals grounds for continued and improved deliberation about theory.

5 | IDENTIFYING KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

In addition to revealing common denominators, our translations also indicate the lines along which future discussions about theory in sociology can be held. They do so in two main ways, each revealing a different set of questions for deliberation.

Firstly, in translating Abend's theory types, we identified a series of important features in Abend's typology that our minimal definition of theory *did not* capture, but which may nevertheless serve as a means of facilitating and structuring further deliberations. These were: the level of abstraction/generality, the functions of interpretation, explanation, and evaluation, and the degree of originality, scope, and disciplinary centrality—all of which are features about which sociologists are known or expected to disagree.¹⁴ Regarding abstraction/generality, some think that this is the hallmark of sociological theory (e.g., Alexander, 1987, p. 2; Carleheden, 2016; Joas & Knöbl, 2009:chap. 1).¹⁵ Others disagree, as is evident precisely in Abend's theory 2 (about particular phenomena; see also the Mexican 'style of sociological thought' in Abend, 2006). Regarding functions, some require theories to *explain* or show explanatory pretenses (e.g., Healy, 2017; Homans, 1964; Stinchcombe, 1987). Others find explanation insufficient (Turner, in Abend, 2008, p. 186), or simply one function among many that may be required of sociological theory (Krause, 2016; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021), together with *interpretation*. Like 'explanation', however, the meaning of 'interpretation' is usually not specified. *Evaluation* (normativity) has, to our knowledge, never been a requirement, nor do sociologists currently tend to consider normativity as antithetical to theory. Yet disagreements come to light in connection with explanations and interpretations, about how theories can be normative and scientific at the same time. Finally, although originality, scope, and disciplinary centrality seldom feature as focal points of debate, sociologists are likely to disagree about the degree to which theory must be new or encompassing, and about what is most central to our fragmented discipline (or indeed where we locate its center).

All these points of known and expected disagreement are important to discussions about theory in sociology. Yet instead of trying to work any of them into our minimal conception of theory—which could only yield definitions that are simultaneously agreeable to one part of the sociological community and disagreeable to another—we propose that they be used in conjunction with our conception, as a *springboard* for theoretical discussions in sociology. The point here is not to end these discussions, but to help them move along. We could discuss, for instance, why and when abstraction is important, or what we require of a theory that explains, or what separates studies and theories that are framed as explanatory or interpretative. Our definition of theory can thus be a means of identifying and communicating the similarities and differences between competing understandings.

Secondly, when confronting our minimal definition with Abend's seven theory types, we were also reminded of some fundamental distinctions that are left untouched in Abend's contribution—concerning the differences between (a) scientific and non-scientific theory, (b) sociological and non-sociological theory, and (c) descriptive and normative understandings of the term 'theory' itself—all of which provide crucial lines for further deliberation about theory in sociology.

Beginning with the distinction between *scientific and non-scientific theory* (in various forms), an implication of our minimal definition is that theory encompasses not just the assumptions of scientists but also those of politicians, professionals, experts, activists, and lay persons. We see this inclusiveness as an advantage of our proposal. While theory is often taken for granted as belonging to science¹⁶—a boundary object (Gieryn, 1983) that sets science apart from non-science—it is generally unclear what is scientific about it. For instance, explanations of particular social phenomena, overall perspectives, or original interpretations of certain slices of the empirical world (Abend's theory 2, 3 and 5), are all things we encounter regularly outside of science. Moreover, scientific theories are often built

upon or inspired by theories from other sectors, such as industry, art and fiction (e.g., Holton, 1973; Merton, 1938; Shapin, 2009; Shapin and Schaffer (1985), 2011). Thus, a distinct advantage of a definition that *does not* limit theory to science, is that it encourages us to inquire and identify precisely what it is that typically distinguishes scientific theories from other theories, lay or otherwise, or what characterises good (or bad) theories, in science or sociology, and so on. Using our definition, this *certain something* must relate either to the phenomena the theory is about or the assumptions it consists of. There are manifold possible directions to such discussions. One is to argue that (good) scientific theory explicates its central assumptions, whereas other theories leave them implicit. Another is to argue that the assumptions of (good) scientific theories are supported by robust evidence, whereas those of other theories are not (known to be). Still another is to argue that (good) scientific theory is testable and can be disproven. And yet another is to argue that the important difference between theory within science and without is (mainly) not to do with the theories themselves, but with how they are used and developed, or who is using and developing them.¹⁷ Other distinctions abound.¹⁸ Rather than just assume that scientists have theories that stand above and apart from the mere assumptions of the laity, a wide conception of theory invites us to recognise and discuss similarities and differences in how scientific and non-scientific theories are brought about, understood, discussed, used and refined.

Moving on, our thin conception also highlights the blurriness of the boundaries that would distinguish *sociological theory* from *non-sociological theory*. In fact, nothing in our conception is exclusively sociological. But as with science above, it is typically unclear what is sociological about 'sociological theory'. For instance, apart from theory 7 (which mentions *sociology*) and, to some extent, theory 2 (which specifies a *social* phenomenon), there is not much uniquely sociological about Abend's types (which, to reiterate, typify how sociologists actually talk about theory).¹⁹ There is not, for instance, much uniquely *sociological* about 'a set of general propositions that establish a relationship between variables' (theory 1), which is just as easily found in astronomy or economics, or theories with 'a fundamental normative component' (theory 6), which abound in philosophy and political science. Or consider Merton's (1967, p. 39) famous definition of 'sociological theory' as "logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived"—which clearly does little to delimit 'sociological theory' from 'theory' in other disciplines. Our point being that conceptions of theory generally are not helpful in demarcating *sociological theory*. Rather than damning our thin conception of theory for making the fuzziness of our discipline's boundaries visible, therefore, we should embrace the opportunity to discuss the foundational questions about who we are and what we do. Is, for instance, sociological theory a sub-species of scientific theory, or is it a broader category with one foot in the academy and one outside? Is the presence of a *social* phenomenon, or a *sociological* explanation or interpretation, a necessary, or perhaps even a sufficient, condition for naming a theory 'sociological' (and whatever does 'social' or 'sociological' mean in these cases)? Or is sociological theory whatever results from the activities of a group of people known as sociologists—a position Merton (1968, p. 140) took at one point.

Lastly, in its descriptive formulation, our definition also helps highlight a distinction between descriptive and normative understandings of the term theory. This is a basic yet timely distinction because most discussions about what theory *is* are really (or could fruitfully be recast as) discussions about what is *good* theory. Being clear about 'is' and 'ought' will clear up confusions that would otherwise lead to wasted opportunity for fruitful dialogue. For instance, it can help us discuss key descriptive questions—such as 'What types of theory dominate sociology today (and why)?', 'What distinguishes sociological theory or scientific theory from non-scientific theories?', and 'What is the role of theory in sociological inquiries?'—without our answers being muddled by our (implicit) normative orientations towards these and similar issues. Addressing such descriptive questions is important on its own, but can also, in turn, give analytical force and fodder for our discussions of normative questions such as 'What is good sociological theory?' and 'What should be expected of sociologists in terms of theory development?'. Discussions guided by clearly stated descriptive and normative questions may in turn go a long way towards answering *constructive* questions (Kalleberg, 2017), about where to go or what to do next. For instance, answering questions about the types of theory that dominate sociology today and what makes theory good or bad can lead to informed and specific recommendations about what types of theory we need more of. To illustrate the potential rewards of such discussions in sociology, imagine getting a reviewer for your next article who, rather than asserting that 'more theory is needed' instead points in the direction of *what kind* is needed, and *for what purpose*. The improvement would be tremendous.

6 | MOVING FORWARD

We have proposed a minimal and versatile theory of theory, that enables informed and synthetic discussion and fosters reflexivity about the differences and similarities between types of theory in sociology.²⁰

Our thin conception of theory is meant to facilitate dialogue and help sociologists find an interest in thinking and reaching across our special interests. Even if we do not accept Abend's claim of incommensurability, we surely accept that there are tremendous differences between what sociologists talk about when they talk about theory. Our claim is that these differences aside, there is enough of a common ground for deliberations to commence.

Importantly, such deliberations cannot be restricted to an "aristocracy of theorists" (Lizardo, 2015, p. 5), but requires sociologists of all walks to get involved in the conversation. To give the contours of such a conversation, let us imagine, for the sake of argument, the oversimplified reality that all sociologists were either a 'Gunn' or a 'Marit' (affectionately drawn and caricatured from the authors' academic network, feel free to replace them with other, perhaps less Scandinavian sounding names). Gunns prefer theory to be clearly presented as propositions in a logical system, leading to empirically testable hypotheses that explain phenomena, preferably in the form of mechanisms. They have distaste for postmodernism and other forms of theory that they feel stray from their ideal of scientific objectivity. Marits, on the other hand, like theory to be thought provoking, to offer new perspectives or tools in their toolkit for making rich interpretations of some particular case or concept. They dislike the notion of 'testable theory' because theory is a lens, not true or false but a source of creativity for criticising taken-for-granted assumptions, and moreover because they believe that it is impossible to completely separate theory from phenomena, subject from object, and that objectivity as such therefore is unachievable.

What we want to do is to invite Gunns and Marits to a discussion about theory in sociology, a discussion we hope will bring the discipline forward and help unleash the potential for theorizing across the board. The only thing they must do to facilitate this discussion is to agree, provisionally at least, that theories are sets of assumptions about (the properties of and interrelations between) phenomena. Upon this descriptive foundation, they may engage with one another in fruitful discussions about what makes theory *scientific*, what makes sociological theory *good*, and what sort of theory we need more or less of (and why)—and countless other dimensions and distinctions concerning theory and theorizing in sociology.

The point is to ask different audiences with different preferences to go along with the disciplinary-political project of beginning this discussion anew. All they have to give up are fruitless turf wars and dialogical stalemates with their fellows. They may still front their particular views on good and bad theory or where sociology needs to go next but, importantly, gain the opportunity to do so on common semantic ground with those they wish to challenge or persuade. To paraphrase Merton (1972, p. 44)²¹: *Gunns and Marits in the domain of sociological theory, unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win.*

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although we welcome discussions of theorizing and find them fruitful, theorizing—defined roughly as the process of making theory—cannot be discussed clearly without a clear conception of theory (Krause, 2016).
- ² Although Abend does not use this term, his presentation of the span of meanings associated with ‘theory’ in sociology nevertheless depicts a situation that is aptly characterised as incommensurable (Abend has confirmed that aptness in private correspondence).
- ³ A partial exception is Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2021) discussion of ‘theory’ in management and organisation studies.
- ⁴ Our theory of theory has previously been outlined in a Norwegian monograph (Johannessen et al., 2018) about how to use theory in qualitative analyses.
- ⁵ In our view, assumptions never come alone. When one does appear to figure in solitude, it is usually we who fail to see the bundle of assumptions of which it is part.
- ⁶ Conceived widely, ‘assumptions’ includes not just ‘hunches’ but also the exceedingly well-founded assumptions that make up our current best theories of evolution, social inequality, or quantum mechanics. Accordingly, Karl Popper (1972) famously opted for falsification rather than verification because, he argued, even our most solid scientific facts remain tentative propositions, conjectures, or hypotheses, that is, assumptions in our wording.
- ⁷ Some theoretical traditions are fit to problematise the distinction between properties and relationships; in Saussurean semiotics for instance, the properties of words (i.e., their meaning) result from their relationship to other words (Saussure, 2011). This, and other relational metaphysics (cf. Emirbayer, 1997), implies an overlap between relationships and properties wherein properties are relational. If such a view implies that the distinction is useless (e.g., that there is no need of distinguishing, say, properties of phenomena from causal relationships with other phenomena), it can simply be ignored. We kept it because it facilitates pluralism beyond such relational views.
- ⁸ We note that thin definitions of theory are also found among influential thinkers in sociology. Consider, for instance, Alexander’s (1987:2) definition of theory as ‘a generalization separated from particulars, an abstraction separated from a concrete case’. This definition is certainly not on a higher level of complexity than ours. The key difference is Alexander’s emphasis on abstraction, which we have chosen to leave out since it might be seen to preclude Abend’s theory 2 (‘an explanation of a *particular* social phenomenon’).
- ⁹ The importance of the analytical role of theory could be reflected in a possible extension to our conception, where sets of assumptions about phenomena *become* theories *when they are used for analytical purposes*, or *when they are considered in an analytical context*. However, as we worry that this extension makes our proposal harder to accept for some, we have opted not to include it.
- ¹⁰ Abend’s analysis is not empirical in the sense of being based on a systematic inquiry into an identifiable set of sources, but rather based on extensive reading experience (likely coupled with teaching experiences and participation in academic seminars and at conferences).
- ¹¹ With regards to propositions, the argument is not that ‘to propose’ is the same as ‘to assume’, but rather that propositions are based on or expressive of assumptions.
- ¹² Admittedly, we are agnostic as to whether we are here describing what sociologists could reasonably be said to mean, or what we believe they *should* mean, when using the word ‘theory’. That said, we consider the distinction between theory and theoretical activity to be both simple and clarifying, thus serving our (and Abend’s) aim of improving communication and discussion about theory in sociology.
- ¹³ The pliability of theory also applies to theories that are more tightly woven into a specific case, in the form of a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1972). An example is O’Donnell’s (2014) use of Geertz’s theory of Balinese cockfights to think about video games and game design. Sociologists might of think that doing so is bad use of theory, bad sociology, or even bad science, and we are not saying that any theory should be used for anything, or that it necessarily ends well. But it *does* happen.
- ¹⁴ These are the elements identified in translating Abend’s typology. Other avenues of factual and potential disagreement could be cited, including but not limited to whether theory should *predict*, be *testable*, or be *true* or just *useful*.
- ¹⁵ While it could be claimed that abstraction and generalisation mean different things, they are nevertheless often used interchangeably.

- ¹⁶ Abend seemingly takes this position when describing (sociological) theory as distinguished from “the accounts of society that laypersons, poets and journalists offer” (2008:174, our italics).
- ¹⁷ One possible interpretation is that a scientific theory is what is either employed in a scientific analysis or results from it. That is, a theory is scientific in context, *in relation to a scientific study or a group of scientists*. Consequently, a theory may be brought into a scientific context and thereby become scientific theory.
- ¹⁸ Combinations are of course also possible, such as when Stinchcombe (1975, p. 27) described “elegance, power of fruitfulness, economy, and precision” as “the traditional general virtues of theories”.
- ¹⁹ It is also rarely clarified what is meant by ‘social’, ‘sociology’ or ‘sociological’ in these cases.
- ²⁰ There are also pedagogical gains from presenting theory in an accessible manner. A thin definition is useful both for teaching theory and for helping students ask simple questions such as, ‘What is the theory about?’, and ‘What are its central assumptions?’
- ²¹ Merton (1972, p. 44), in turn, paraphrased Marx and Engels’ famous credo from their even more famous manifesto (but, for once, failed to cite his sources!).

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