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Citation: Susen, S. (2023). The End of Big Theory? A Rejoinder to Strand. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 12(11), pp. 54-73.

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<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

The End of Big Theory? A Rejoinder to Strand

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Susen, Simon. 2023. "The End of Big Theory? A Rejoinder to Strand." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (11): 54–73. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-8hI>.

I would like to start by thanking Michael Strand (2023) for his thoughtful comments on my recent article, entitled ‘Lessons from Reckwitz and Rosa: Towards a Constructive Dialogue between Critical Analytics and Critical Theory’.¹ As stated in the title of his commentary, Strand aims to answer the following question: ‘Why Don’t Big Theory Books Work in the US?’² Seeking to respond to this question, Strand makes a series of insightful remarks, some of which draw on, and some of which go beyond, my previous attempt at establishing a fruitful dialogue between Reckwitz’s critical analytics and Rosa’s critical theory. While, in this rejoinder, I will not be able to cover all the excellent points made by Strand in his commentary, I will try to address at least some of them, notably those that—in my view—are particularly significant and worthwhile discussing in more detail. In addition, I will highlight the matters that—to my mind—need to be explored further by formulating twelve open questions.

1. Between Centre and Periphery

Strand states at the outset that one of the main reasons Reckwitz and Rosa are peripheral to his vision is that they are peripheral to the vision of most US-American sociologists. On his account, these two prominent German social theorists exist on the margins of US-American intellectual discourse in general and US-American sociology in particular. If this is the case, then it is hardly surprising that they are, at best, known superficially (by reference to soundbites such as ‘practice’ and ‘acceleration’, respectively) or, at worst, almost completely ignored by most contemporary researchers and scholars working in Anglo-American academia across the humanities and social sciences.

In a rather modest fashion, Strand recognizes that the cognitive maps prevalent in US-American sociology may be so limited (and, by implication, so US- or at least Anglo-centric) that major European thinkers whose works are increasingly influential in their own (and neighbouring) countries may have less of an impact on the other side of the pond, especially in its English-speaking parts. The high-resolution reception of their writings in Europe—above all in their countries of origin—may be contrasted with a lack of interest in, if not complete ignorance of, their works (not only among members of academia but also among members of the wider public) in the US.

☛ Question 1: Is the waning influence of European scholars in US academia a recent phenomenon? If so, does it apply only to some disciplines (such as sociology) and subdisciplinary fields (such as social theory), or does it apply also to other fields of inquiry, across all three main branches of knowledge (that is, the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences)?

2. US-American Hegemony in a Global Context

Whether we like it or not, US-American academia is hegemonic, in the sense that—its inner divisions and inequities notwithstanding—it (still) constitutes the most influential, powerful,

¹ Susen (2023).

² Susen (2023).

and resourceful *national* realm of scientific research in the world. Of course, the word ‘America’ is problematic or—as pointed out by Strand—perhaps even meaningless, given that, strictly speaking, it refers to an entire continent, also known as ‘the Americas’, comprising the totality of North, Central, and South America.³ And yet, the propensity to monopolize the term ‘American’ to refer to only one, albeit geographically extensive and (still) globally hegemonic, country—rather than to an entire continent—is an essential part of the US-American mindset, including its presumably critical voices, such as the ‘American Sociological Association’.

The issue arising from this US-centric *modus operandi* put to one side, it is telling that the number of PhDs from postgraduate research programmes in the US-American field holding academic positions at European universities far outstrips the number of cases in which the opposite holds true. We should, however, add a caveat: while, statistically speaking, it is no secret that it is far more difficult for UK-based scholars to establish themselves in the US-American academic job market than the other way around (resulting in a kind of ‘vertical autonomy’),⁴ this logic—due to obvious language barriers—does not apply to those European countries in which Anglophone teaching and research continue to be the exception, rather than the norm. In continental Europe, mastery of a language other than English is a *de facto* requirement for entering the academic job market on a permanent basis.

Be that as it may, the notion that US-American sociology ‘is what most of “sociology” exists as’⁵ is contentious. Even if one were to buy into the centre/periphery divide in relation to most, if not all, academic fields, one would have to accept that global sociology is a highly variegated, if not fragmented, conglomerate of divergent (that is, geographically, culturally, linguistically, and ideologically specific) traditions of thought.

☛ Question 2: What criteria should we use to distinguish between different sociological traditions and to measure their local, national, regional, and/or global impact?

3. Theory of Society *vs.* Social Theory

The distinction between *Gesellschaftstheorie* and *Sozialtheorie* is essential to understanding the difference between ‘theory of society’ and ‘social theory’. It should be noted, however, that—unlike Reckwitz—Rosa remains largely unconvinced by this distinction,⁶ including the intellectual division of labour attached to it. More importantly, it is disputable whether there is ‘a public appetite for “theory of society”, for efforts to comprehend “the whole”’,⁷ while sociologists seem reluctant, or perhaps unable, ‘to satisfy the hunger’.⁸ Anybody who has engaged with key trends, debates, and challenges dominating sociology in the 21st century across the world will have noticed that the very idea of a ‘theory of society’⁹ is almost completely off the menu—not only at the level of undergraduate and postgraduate *teaching*

³ On this point, see Susen (2023, 1n1; 2013a, 98n4).

⁴ On the concept of ‘vertical autonomy’, see Buchholz (2016, esp. 31, 33, 36, 40–44, 48–53).

⁵ Strand (2023, n 1–2).

⁶ On this point, see Susen (2023, 548, 560–562). See also Reckwitz, Rosa, and Bauer (2021, 282 HR).

⁷ Strand (2023, 3).

⁸ Strand (2023, 3).

⁹ See Susen (2020a).

but also at the level of *research* and, crucially, at the level of securing *funding* for both the former and the latter.

Arguably, this tendency to focus on issue-specific empirical questions (and to frame them in a way that favours policy-oriented solutions) has contributed to the abandonment of ambitious attempts at providing catch-all theories and big-picture accounts of social reality. The instrumental attitudes fostered by the increasing commodification, marketization, corporatization, and managerialization of academic teaching and research have played a nontrivial role in weakening the status of ‘theory’—whether in the form of *Gesellschaftstheorie* or in the form of *Sozialtheorie*—in contemporary sociology.

6♣ Question 3: What needs to be done to revitalize the pursuit of ‘theory’ in the social sciences in general and sociology in particular (across both the Global North and the Global South)?

4. European Social Theory in the US

Strand makes several perceptive remarks on the limited extent to which the writings published by Reckwitz and Rosa have been reviewed in US-American journals, let alone served as sources of inspiration for substantive articles aimed at developing their sociological (and philosophical) insights further. The *American Journal Sociology* and *Social Forces* are a case in point: in none of these two high-impact journals, which feature book reviews (with considerable influence, notably in the US-American field of sociology), the works of Reckwitz and Rosa have been properly discussed. Yet, two of Reckwitz’s books and one of Rosa’s books have been (for the most part, positively) reviewed in *Contemporary Sociology*,¹⁰ which publishes critical discussions of recent works in sociology and related disciplines that—in its editors’ estimation—merit the attention of sociologists.

As highlighted by Strand, however, these reviews illustrate that the big-picture projects pursued by Reckwitz and Rosa (that is, the former’s ‘critical analytics’ and the latter’s ‘critical theory’) represent intellectual endeavours that have gone out of fashion and, hence, are hardly taken seriously, let alone developed further, in the US. It would be interesting to gather up-to-date data on the coverage of (contemporary) European social theory in (contemporary) US-American journals. It would be hardly surprising if the limited engagement with the works of Reckwitz and Rosa turned out to be symptomatic of a wider trend, marked by a lack of interest in, if not a legitimacy crisis of, what—on the other side of the Atlantic—may be (rightly or wrongly) perceived as ‘old-style’ European social theory. One may speculate about the reasons for this curious historical constellation of transatlantic intellectual disconnection. Arguably, there is ‘not enough European social theory’ in the US because there is ‘not enough US’ in European social theory.

6♣ Question 4: Is one of the principal reasons for the limited engagement with contemporary European social theory in the US that the former fails to address the key

¹⁰ On Reckwitz, see Sciortino (2023) and Stokes (2019). On Rosa, see Reed (2014) and Ritzer (2017).

issues at stake (and, by implication, the conceptual, methodological, and empirical sensibilities prevalent) in the context of the latter?

5. Sociological Theory *vs.* Social Theory

In continental European sociology, the large-scale explanatory ambitions associated with *Gesellschaftstheorie* appear to have been replaced by the issue-specific foci associated with *Sozialtheorie*. The former is committed to studying societies by shedding light on their historicity. The latter aims to provide cutting-edge vocabularies for capturing different elements of sociality. Similarly, in Anglo-American sociology, the broad scope of *social theory* appears to have been abandoned in favour of a rather narrow enterprise commonly known as *sociological theory*. In terms of both their underpinnings and their contributions, the former is interdisciplinary, whereas the latter is largely confined to one discipline.¹¹ Whatever one makes of these distinctions, one runs the risk of suffering reputational damage if one is caught pursuing the project of ‘sociological theory’¹² in an overly narrow sense—that is, by moving *exclusively* within the hermetically sealed (that is, conceptually, methodologically, and empirically self-referential) realm of one discipline, which, in this case, is sociology.

The debate on the distinction between ‘social theory’ and ‘sociological theory’ is, of course, hardly new.¹³ Whereas the latter tends to be regarded as a largely *analytic* endeavour, the former is commonly thought of as having ‘a strong *normative* thrust’.¹⁴ The question that emerges, therefore, is whether the distinction between ‘social theory’ and ‘sociological theory’ (and, by implication, the distinction between *Gesellschaftstheorie* and *Sozialtheorie*) can, and should, be defended along the following lines: broad *vs.* narrow, normative *vs.* analytic, foundational *vs.* technical, speculative *vs.* scientific, philosophical *vs.* sociological—and so forth.

♣ Question 5: Are there compelling intellectual and institutional (along with research- and teaching-related) reasons to defend the distinction between ‘social theory’ and ‘sociological theory’ (and, by implication, the distinction between ‘*Gesellschaftstheorie*’ and ‘*Sozialtheorie*’)? If so, on what grounds should sociologists pursue one, rather than the other?

6. Between Import and Export

From the beginning of its existence, Anglophone sociology (notably in the US and UK) has been marked by a strong reliance on other—that is, culturally and linguistically divergent—traditions prevalent in the discipline. The most obvious manifestation of this dependence on non-Anglophone modes of inquiry can be found in the enduring legacy of the founding figures of sociology—above all, the ‘Holy Trinity’ of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. To this

¹¹ On this point, see, for instance, Baert and Silva (2010 [1998], 287). See also Susen (2013a, 81 and 88–89).

¹² See Strand (2023, 5).

¹³ On this point, see, for example: Abend (2008, esp. 179–181), Baert and Silva (2010 [1998], 287), Benzecry, Krause, and Reed (2017), Susen (2013a, 81, 88–89). See also, for instance: Antonio (1989; 2000), Chibber (2013; 2022), Krause (2021), Martin (2011), Porpora (2015), Reed (2011; 2020), Tavory and Timmermans (2014).

¹⁴ Antonio (2000, 77, italics added). Cf. Strand (2023, 4).

triadic intellectual infrastructure, we should add the lasting influence of seminal figures such as (in alphabetical order) Auguste Comte, W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Harriet Martineau, George Herbert Mead, Georg Simmel, Hebert Spencer, Mary Wollstonecraft—to mention only a few.¹⁵

Since, to a greater or lesser degree, all variants of contemporary sociology are built upon the works of ‘the classics’, upon whose intellectual contributions the discipline as a whole is founded,¹⁶ Germanophone and Francophone modes of thinking will always remain an integral part of its development and constitution. Even if present or future forms of German-speaking and French-speaking sociology became utterly irrelevant, these would continue to permeate the discipline, owing to its Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian roots.

In the current context, one route to (pseudo)originality would be to imitate ‘the model of the French importation’¹⁷—which was prevalent a few decades ago—as a mode of hybrid (that is, Franco-Saxon) theory generation. Alternatively, as a US-American scholar, one might pursue the same strategy in relation to contemporary German intellectual thought, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Irrespective of one’s preferred approach, it is true that ‘[s]ociology, along with anthropology, is an immense importer of theory’.¹⁸ It is also true, however, that sociology has proved capable of developing its own conceptual frameworks and theories (especially social and cultural theories) and, in some cases, even exporting them to adjacent disciplinary and subdisciplinary fields. In other words, sociology is not just a recipient and importer but also a producer and exporter of ‘theory’ (broadly defined). Among the most obvious examples are Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian (and, by implication, historical-materialist, functionalist, and interpretive) perspectives.¹⁹

Directly or indirectly influenced by these ‘classical’ traditions of thought, numerous currents of social theory have emerged. These can be categorized according to different criteria. Among the most influential branches of contemporary social thought are the following:²⁰

- ‘early’ functionalism and neofunctionalism / systems theory;
- linguistic structuralism, anthropological structuralism, sociological/genetic structuralism, and poststructuralism;
- philosophical and sociological pragmatism;
- critical theory, both ‘within and beyond’ the Frankfurt School;
- micro-sociology and the sociology of everyday life;
- conflict theories;

¹⁵ See, for example: Craib (1997), Giddens (1996 [1971]), Hawthorn (1987 [1976]), Morrison (2006 [1995]), Sayer (1991). See also Susen (2015, 11, 12, 236, and 248; 2020a, xviii, 14, 97, 98, and 116). In addition, see Susen and Turner (2011a).

¹⁶ On this point, see, for instance, Susen and Turner (2011b; 2021). See also, for example: Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, and Virk (2012 [2002]), Craib (1997), Ritzer and Goodman (2008 [1992]).

¹⁷ Strand (2023, 5).

¹⁸ Strand (2023, 5).

¹⁹ See Susen (2021, 131–132).

²⁰ See Susen (2021, 132–134).

- rational choice theories, game theories, social exchange theories, and neo-institutionalist approaches;
- social theories of modernity / modernities;
- social theories of late modernity, second modernity, and reflexive modernity;
- social theories of postmodernity / postmodern social theories;
- social theories of globalization;
- social theories of cosmopolitanism;
- social theories of space;
- social theories of gender / feminism;
- social theories of class and stratification;
- social theories of ‘race’ and ethnicity;
- post- and decolonial theories;
- social theories of power and domination;
- science and technology studies / actor-network theories.

In most cases, these branches of contemporary social thought are based on a *combination* of ‘imported’ and ‘exported’—and, hence, interdisciplinary—knowledge. While the transatlantic *importation* of French ‘theory’ has been systematically documented,²¹ it may be worth exploring the degree to which this process can, or should, also be described as a form of ‘transatlantic *exportation*’, in the sense that the thinkers in question *themselves* (together with their disciples, followers, and publishers) have *actively* contributed to this dynamic, hoping that it would benefit their academic careers and, more generally, enhance their influence on the global stage. Even if the German (or, more broadly, Germanophone) counterpart to this process remains less well-documented, there can be little doubt that Habermas—while he has gone a bit out of fashion in the US—remains the central figure in this regard. Granted, there are other ‘suspects’, such as Luhmann and Honneth;²² yet, their influence in the US has been on the wane, especially in recent years. The key question, of course, is *why* this appears to be the case.

To be clear, the idea of a ‘native theory’ is problematic in relation to *any* academic field (be it US-American, Canadian, Mexican, or—more broadly—North American; French, German, British, or—more broadly—Western European; etc.). Historically speaking, all research traditions are the product of a variety of sources, which—in terms of their spatiotemporal contingency—cut across cultural, linguistic, and/or national boundaries. Still, we need to recognize that culturally, linguistically, and/or nationally specific research traditions (and, by implication, ‘theories’) *exist*—and that, in addition, some of them gain more traction than others. Indeed, while some of them succeed in having an impact outside their ‘native’ (that is, culturally, linguistically, and/or nationally specific) spheres of production, circulation, and consumption, others do not reach the same level of (internal *and* external) influence.

☛ Question 6: What are the main variables that determine whether a particular theory or theorist may, or may not, be able to exert influence—not only on exogenous ‘disciplinary’ but also on ‘foreign’ (that is, culturally, linguistically, and/or nationally divergent) fields of investigation?

²¹ See Cusset (2008 [2005]).

²² See Strand (2023, 14).

7. Postcolonial Theory

Strand claims that ‘[w]e get postcolonial sociology, but not a sociological postcolonial theory’.²³ Yet, regardless of whether one focuses on the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, or Australia, one can find numerous examples not only of *postcolonial sociology* but also of *sociological postcolonial theory*. Granted, most approaches associated with the former and/or the latter, while embedded in sociological modes of analysis, tend to go beyond their own epistemic comfort zones, by drawing on various other disciplines—notably history, anthropology, geography, political science, and philosophy (among several others). Their interdisciplinary outlook notwithstanding, there is a growing volume of *both* postcolonial (and decolonial) sociologies *and* sociological postcolonial (and decolonial) theories in the contemporary social sciences and humanities, across all continents.

To different degrees and in different forms, these are inspired by the ‘first wave’ (1950s and 1960s) and/or by the ‘second wave’ (from the 1970s onwards) of postcolonial studies. Among the most prominent representatives of the former are Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Albert Memmi (1920–2020), Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), and Steven Biko (1946–1977). Among the most prominent representatives of the latter are Edward Said (1935–2003), Gayatri Spivak (1942–), and Homi K. Bhabha (1949–). There is, undoubtedly, a long list of further scholars whose works have had a significant impact on postcolonial studies—for instance, Raewyn Connell (1944–) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1940–). The same applies to decolonial studies: Aníbal Quijano (1928–2018), Walter D. Mignolo (1941–), and María Lugones (1944–2020)—to mention only a few. Some influential scholars associated with both post- and decolonial studies are based in the US (for example, Julian Go) and others in the UK (for example, Gurminder K. Bhambra). Crucially, some of them (including Go and Bhambra) are, above all, *sociologists* and have made important theoretical contributions (regardless of whether these should be interpreted in terms of ‘social theory’ or ‘sociological theory’—or both).

☛ Question 7: What are the main challenges involved in decolonizing sociology in general and decolonizing social theory (and/or sociological theory) in particular?

8. Provincializing Classical Theory

Conscious of the impact of post- and decolonial studies on the humanities and social sciences, Strand makes an important point: as remarked by some reviewers,²⁴ the conceptual frameworks advocated by Rosa (and, arguably, also by Reckwitz) are not only strikingly Eurocentric (or at least Western-centric)²⁵ but also ‘severely limiting’²⁶ (and limited), in the sense that they are not necessarily applicable, let alone attentive, to non-European (or non-Western) experiences and contexts. Moreover, they remain ‘silent on the history of race and

²³ See Strand (2023, 6).

²⁴ See, for instance, Reed (2014, 822).

²⁵ See, for instance, Susen (2020b, 330–332).

²⁶ Strand (2023, 7).

empire as part and parcel of the history of accelerative modernity²⁷ (Rosa) and the history of loss (Reckwitz). A global (notably post- and/or decolonial) perspective obliges us to resist the temptation to subscribe to reductive periodizations in terms of (a) ‘early or bourgeois modernity’, (b) ‘industrial modernity’, and (c) ‘late modernity’ à la Rosa and Reckwitz.²⁸

If one shares the view that ‘[t]o provincialize classical theory is to question what should be appraised as “theory” that strives for a sense of the whole, when there are only relations’,²⁹ then the question arises how it is possible to transcend the age-old dichotomies of the humanities and social sciences—such as universalism *vs.* particularism, absolutism *vs.* relativism, foundationalism *vs.* contextualism, substantialism *vs.* relationalism, realism *vs.* constructivism, and so forth. Faced with the (in many respects, legitimate) objections raised by post- and decolonial critics of classical modernization theories, a further question arises: How is it possible to draw on the insights of these theories, while seeking to overcome their limitations?³⁰

☛ Question 8: Grappling with Western accounts of modernization, how can we avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

9. Esoteric *vs.* Exoteric Sociology

One may argue about the advantages and disadvantages of the increasing specialization and professionalization of sociology in general and US-American sociology in particular. The causes and consequences of these two closely interrelated processes have been widely discussed and examined, not only in terms of the gradual fragmentation of the discipline but also—as mentioned above—in terms of the commodification,³¹ marketization, corporatization, and managerialization of academic teaching and research.³²

In the context of Strand’s analysis, the preceding reflection is connected to a key distinction—namely, the distinction between an *expert-facing, field-immanent, and esoteric* sociology, on the one hand, and a *public-facing, field-transcendent, and exoteric* sociology, on the other.³³ Not only in the US but also in other countries, contemporary social scientists (including sociologists and social theorists) are faced with a twofold challenge:

On the one hand, they are expected to focus on narrowly defined thematic areas to ever-greater levels, to build professional careers by carving a niche for themselves, and to establish themselves as experts in (sub)disciplinary fields of study, to which only a handful of highly specialized researchers have

²⁷ Strand (2023, 7).

²⁸ See Susen (2023, 548).

²⁹ Strand (2023, 7). On this point, see also Go (2020). Cf. Vandenberghe (1999).

³⁰ On this point, see Susen (2020a, esp. ‘Epilogue: Critical Remarks’, Chapter 13).

³¹ See, for example, Susen and Turner (2011b; 2021).

³² For an overview, see Susen (2020a, esp. Chapters 10, 11, and 12). See also, for instance: Back (2016), Bailey and Freedman (2011), Burton (2016), Collini (2012; 2017), Crook (2003, esp. 9–10 and 13–14), Crouch (2016), Evans (2004), Furedi (2006 [2004]; 2017), Holmwood (2010a; 2010b; 2011), McGettigan (2013), Power (1994; 1997), Rosenfeld (2010), Savage (2010), Smart (2016, esp. 464, 468–472), Sparkes (2007), Strathern (2000), Willetts (2017), Wright and Shore (2017).

³³ See Strand (2023, 6).

access and about which knowledge is generated by virtue of codified vehicles of ‘private language’, mastered exclusively by ‘insiders’ and protected by academic gatekeepers, capable of policing the boundaries of their epistemic comfort zones and institutional resources.

On the other hand, they are expected to prove that their work is embedded in social reality, translatable into public policy, and measurable in terms of its impact beyond academia, thereby ensuring that it is not only accessible but also relevant to members of the general public, in a way that is perceived (at least potentially) as consequential and (ideally) as having the capacity to enhance particular aspects of society.

☛ Question 9: Marked by the tension between expert-facing and public-facing, field-immanent and field-transcendent, esoteric and exoteric requirements, imposed on those committed to the pursuit of an academic enterprise that is both insightful and useful, how can sociologists ensure that their discipline remains both sufficiently critical to speak truth to power and sufficiently pragmatic to justify its social relevance, including to those suspicious, if not contemptuous, of it?

10. Reconstitution

Academic disciplines go through ups and downs. Their waves of success and failure may vary significantly across time and space: they may be thriving in one context, but in crisis in another. Whether such a context is defined *geographically* (in terms of ‘continent’, ‘region’, or ‘country’), *institutionally* (in terms of ‘university’, ‘faculty’, or ‘department’), *temporally* (in terms of ‘the past’, ‘the present’, or ‘the future’), *intellectually* (in terms of a particular type of research- and/or teaching-specific engagement), or in any other fashion, academic disciplines are marked by periods of success and periods of decline. Not only individually but also collectively, the representatives of academic disciplines experience highs and lows, finding themselves sometimes on the front foot and sometimes on the back foot.

The US-American field of sociology is no exception. It ‘underwent a reconstitution in “the sixties” based on its rejection and the field’s anomic resettling’,³⁴ resulting in a ‘near death experience’,³⁵ not least due to plummeting student numbers and what might be called ‘a legitimation crisis’, from which it subsequently recovered. It may be a bit far-fetched to suggest that both the US-American field and the German field went through a ‘theory boom’.³⁶ It is certainly the case, however, that—in light of its ‘Parsons revival’³⁷ moment (which had been generated, or at least magnified, by Luhmann and Habermas)—the German field displayed ‘a sustained concern with modernity as a sense of the whole’,³⁸ epitomized in

³⁴ Strand (2023, 7–8; 2020).

³⁵ See Turner and Turner (1990).

³⁶ Strand (2023, 8), See Moebius (2021, Chapter 6).

³⁷ Strand (2023, 8). See, for example: Bourricaud (1981 [1977]), Camic (1987), Gerhardt (2005), Graça (2008), Habermas (1987 [1981]-c), Habermas (1987 [1981]-d), Robertson and Turner (1991), Rocher (1974 [1972]), Treviño (2001; 2016).

³⁸ Strand (2023, 8).

the Habermasian architecture of the social in terms of the relationship between ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system’.³⁹ In the US-American field, by contrast, most developments tended to be less holistic and, in some cases, attached to a high-resolution focus on particular aspects of the social, notably by conceiving of it primarily in cultural terms, as illustrated in Alexander’s ‘cultural sociology’.⁴⁰

In an admittedly crude manner, we may characterize the situation as follows: the idea of *Gesellschaftstheorie* (and, by implication, ‘theory of society’) has been, and continues to be, widespread in the German field of sociology; the idea of ‘sociological theory’ (and, by implication, *Sozialtheorie*) has been, and continues to be, prevalent in the US-American field of sociology.

In the US-American field, not even sympathetic critics are likely to believe that ‘sociological theory’, let alone ‘social theory’, is ‘on the “royal road” to anywhere’.⁴¹ In the best-case scenario, it has been downgraded to a sort of ‘service project’;⁴² in the worst-case scenario, it is on its way out. If the latter is the case, then its demise is a matter of when, not if. If the former is the case, then—far from taking on the role of providing a ‘masterbuilder’ conception of society by virtue of foundational knowledge—sociological theory has been relegated to fulfilling an ‘underlabourer’ function, offering conceptual toolkits of mere ‘orientation’ for empirical sociologists, who call the shots.

A noticeable trend (which the US-American field appears to have in common with most of its non-US-American counterparts across the world) is what may be described as *the de-theorization of sociological research* (especially if it is supported by external funding bodies) *and of the sociology curriculum* (given that, in a competitive global system of higher education, most academic institutions are driven by metrics). The devaluation of ‘theory’ goes hand in hand with the privileging of research methods, empirical data collection, substantive issues, impact case studies, and policy-oriented agendas. In such a scenario, ‘theory’—not only at the level of *teaching* and at the level of *research* but also, crucially, at the level of *funding* for both teaching and research—is, at best, an afterthought or, at worst, an obstacle to being ‘successful’. If ‘[t]eaching theory is among the lowest prestige and least consequential in the curriculum’⁴³ (and if, by the same token, both researching and doing theory are among the lowest prestige and least consequential in sociological inquiry), then it is no surprise that it has been pushed to the fringes of the discipline.

In such a climate—dominated by fierce competition over the symbolic, material, institutional, and financial resources that need to be secured to fund small-scale and large-scale teaching and research programmes—it is no accident that there has been a substantial shift in the academic publishing industry:⁴⁴ a shift away from traditional monographs and (co)edited volumes towards introductory books, handbooks, and topical books, which are likely to sell more copies (and, hence, to be more profitable) than their ‘legacy predecessors’.

³⁹ See Habermas (1987 [1981]-b). See also Habermas (1987 [1981]-a). In addition, see Bohman (1989) and Susen (2007, esp. Chapter 3, section i). Cf. Joas (1991 [1986]).

⁴⁰ See Alexander (1996; 2003). See also Santoro (2011). In addition, see Susen (2015, 96, 97, 242, and 335n73).

⁴¹ Strand (2023, 8).

⁴² Strand (2023, 8).

⁴³ Strand (2023, 8).

⁴⁴ See Thompson (2005; 2012 [2010]; 2021).

With this ‘market logic at work’,⁴⁵ even those publishing houses that make a deliberate attempt to bypass this (systemically driven and structurally confined) mode of functioning will struggle to subvert, let alone to eliminate, the ‘prestige gap’⁴⁶ between themselves and their major competitors.

The marketization of teaching and research has deepened the chasm between those publishers that continue to provide space for traditional publication formats and those publishers that are driven, above all, by profit maximization and, hence, promote more lucrative publication formats. Among those in the former category are *academic publishers* (such as Routledge, Palgrave, and—as the most prestigious version—Polity) and *independent publishers* (such as Anthem, Pluto, Coffee House, and so forth). Among those in the latter category are major *university presses* (such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Princeton University Press, Yale University Press, Harvard University Press, Duke University Press, Columbia University Press, University of Chicago Press, University of California Press, and so forth).

One obvious problem for all theoretically inclined scholars, and junior scholars in particular, is that a manuscript published by an independent publisher, or academic publisher, may not only fail to enjoy the same value, to carry the same weight, and to have the same impact as a manuscript published by an influential university press.⁴⁷ In a more fundamental sense, the former—its intellectual merits notwithstanding—may not even suffice to secure a tenure-track position in the US-American field or a permanent position in the European (notably British) field, whereas the latter may be—almost by definition—a safe ticket to job security.

Another—perhaps less obvious, but nonetheless significant—problem is that, at least in continental Europe, single- and co-authored books continue to be the preferred format for serious theoretical contributions.⁴⁸ This applies especially to ‘grand theory’ (or, in Strand’s words, ‘big theory’) projects, whose complexity is hardly reducible to the formulaic confines of a standard 8,000-word journal article, which—with some exceptions—has become the benchmark for so-called high-impact research in the Anglo-Saxon world and beyond. More importantly, it is hard to find many journal articles that have changed sociology in a significant way. There are, however, numerous monographs and books that have achieved just that.

While not everybody will agree with the contention that ‘the wordy and demanding theory book is probably the only venue to truly work out conceptual claims’,⁴⁹ it is certainly the case that every publisher (and, indeed, every author and editor) will need to make a decision on whether to target a (somewhat limited) *expert market* or a (widely accessible) *public market*.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Strand (2023, 9). Cf. Thornton and Ocasio (1999). Cf. also Greco (2015).

⁴⁶ Strand (2023, 9).

⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that Polity Press may be regarded as an exception. Arguably, a Polity publication carries more or less the same weight as a major university press publication. Of course, the same applies to Suhrkamp Verlag (in Germany) and Éditions Gallimard (in France), among many other examples.

⁴⁸ See Strand (2023, 9).

⁴⁹ Strand (2023, 9).

⁵⁰ Cf. Reed (2011).

One need not be an economic strategist to work out that a bestseller in the large context of wider society is more profitable than a bestseller in the narrow context of an academic field. Some publishers, authors, and editors are more strategic and opportunistic than others; but, in any case, this situation imposes serious limitations on what aspiring theorists can, and cannot, achieve within their academic disciplines and beyond. Put in Bourdieusian terms, any kind of ‘theory-prone habitus’ will struggle to assert itself in a ‘theory-a(d)verse field’. In such a field, ‘theory capital’—irrespective of its quality and quantity—has hardly any use value, let alone exchange value.

☛ Question 10: What does the future hold for the next generation(s) of ‘theorists’ across the world?

11. Theory Journals

Whatever one makes of the increasingly marginalized position of ‘theorists’ in the US-American field of sociology (and beyond), one should recognize that various ‘theory’ journals continue to exist, providing stimulating fora for conceptual analysis, especially in the English-speaking world. In the US, *Sociological Theory* and *Theory & Society* (and, in a more interdisciplinary sense, journals such as *Philosophy & Social Criticism* and *Social Epistemology*) are a case in point. In Europe (notably the UK), the same applies to the *European Journal of Social Theory*, the *Journal of Classical Sociology*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, and *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*—among several other relevant journals.

As Strand rightly notes, these journals tend to have a lower impact factor than their standard, mid-tier, and subfield counterparts. In terms of the review process, it may be no less difficult and laborious to publish an article in a high-quality ‘theory’ journal than in other types of journals. The effort that goes into publishing a paper in a top-notch ‘theory’ journal may not pay off, however, if it fails to ‘move the needle in a job hire or tenure evaluation’.⁵¹ In short, publications in ‘theory’ journals, regardless of their respective intellectual contributions, tend to carry less weight than those that appear in mainstream—that is, more empirically oriented—sociology outlets.

☛ Question 11: Should different sociologists and social scientists—depending on whether their work is primarily methodological, empirical, or theoretical—be assessed according to different criteria?

12. Social Theorists as Civil Servants

Strand suggests that there are noticeable differences between US-American and German academia. Crucial in this respect is the relationship between ‘the public’ and ‘the private’ and, more specifically, between the state and the market. Touching on this point, Strand affirms that Reckwitz and Rosa ‘hold chairs in “general and theoretical sociology” at German universities, all of which are state institutions’,⁵² and that, therefore, they are ‘civil servants of high rank’⁵³ (a professional position that has no equivalent in US academia).

⁵¹ Strand (2023, 10).

⁵² Strand (2023, 11).

⁵³ Strand (2023, 11).

The previous observation, however, needs to be qualified. While it is true that Rosa holds a Chair in ‘General and Theoretical Sociology’ [*Allgemeine und Theoretische Soziologie*] (at Friedrich Schiller University Jena), Reckwitz holds a Chair in ‘Social Theory and Cultural Sociology’ [*Allgemeine Soziologie und Kultursociologie*] (at Humboldt University of Berlin). The official translation of Reckwitz’s professional title into English is misleading, in the sense that his German designation does *not* contain the noun ‘*Theorie*’ or—as in Rosa’s case—the adjective ‘*theoretisch*’.

In any case, Strand makes two significant points here. First, the position of an academic civil servant [*Staatsbeamter* or *fonctionnaire d’État*] of high rank, which is common in continental European countries (such as Germany and France), does not exist in the US—although it should be acknowledged that chaired professors at US public or state universities are the closest equivalent to this professional category. Second, in the contemporary US-American field of academia, holding a professorial title such as ‘General and Theoretical Sociology’ is highly unlikely, if not almost inconceivable.

To this one may object that some academics in the US (and the UK for that matter) hold—or used to hold—titles such as ‘Professor of Social and Political Thought’ and ‘Professor of Social and Political Theory’. Admittedly, the title ‘Professor of Social Theory’ is far less common than ‘Professor of Political Theory’, not only in the US but also in most other (English-speaking) countries. This imbalance is indicative of the fact that, in most academic fields across the world, *social theory* finds itself in a much weaker position than *political theory* (in terms of both teaching and research—and, by extension, in terms of securing funding for both teaching and research). One of the main reasons for this is that the latter tends to be taught and researched across several disciplines (that is, especially in political science and philosophy, but also in law and history), whereas the former tends to be taught and researched almost exclusively in one discipline (that is, in sociology), although there are some exceptions (notably in subdisciplinary fields such as social philosophy, social psychology, and social history—among others).

The more fundamental sociological point, however, is that—to use a Bourdieusian concept—the *social conditions of production* differ (on some levels, profoundly)⁵⁴ between US-American and European academic fields. To put it crudely, Reckwitz and Rosa—both as prominent scholars and as public intellectuals—could not have had the careers they have had in Germany in a country such as the US. If, in Europe, they are members of an ‘endangered species’,⁵⁵ in the US they would have long gone extinct.

It would be naïve to overlook the extent to which various European academic fields have already started to mirror their US-American counterparts—a trend that has been intensifying, in terms of both scope and scale, over the past decades.⁵⁶ Clearly, some

⁵⁴ See, for instance: Susen (2013b, 221, 224, 229, and 233–234n57; 2014, esp. 102–103; 2016, 53, 54, 56, and 67). See also, for example: Bourdieu (1975; 1982; 2002), Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008 [1976] esp. 17), Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991 [1968]).

⁵⁵ Strand (2023, 12). Cf. Reckwitz and Rosa (2023 [2021], 1–2).

⁵⁶ See Moebius (2021, Chapter 8).

European academic fields have moved closer to their American counterparts (or, more broadly, are more anglicized and/or follow more of an Anglo-Saxon model of academic research and education) than others.

At one extreme, there are European countries (such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland) whose universities appear to have become *more 'Anglo-Saxon'*—not only in terms of their teaching (for instance, the provision of English-speaking classes, modules, and programmes) and in terms of their research (for instance, the mounting pressure to publish and to collaborate in English) but also in terms of their increasingly diverse staff and student bodies (whose members tend to communicate both in the national language and, to a growing extent, in English).

At the other extreme, there are European countries (such as France, Spain, and Italy) whose public universities appear to have resisted this trend towards adopting an 'Anglo-Saxon' model—not only in terms of their teaching (classes, modules, and programmes are almost exclusively taught in the national language) and in terms of their research (the pressure to publish and to collaborate in English, although it exists, is less pronounced than in more anglicized countries) but also in terms of their staff and student bodies (whose members tend to communicate predominantly, albeit not exclusively, in the national language).

Somewhere between these two extremes, there are European countries (such as Germany, Poland, and Portugal) whose universities appear to have gone down a middle-ground path—highly traditional(ist) and 'protectionist' in some ways, but highly adaptive and 'globalist' in other ways.

Of course, the preceding (admittedly impressionistic) classification needs to be qualified, in the sense that one would have to gather solid empirical data to gain a reliable picture of the current academic landscape—not only in Europe and North America but across the world.⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, different academic sectors in different countries are marked by different degrees of commodification, marketization, corporatization, and managerialization. In any case, it is clear that—in most countries—'theory' and 'theorists' seem to find themselves in an increasingly precarious position.

Strand is right to insist on the following point: if seminal figures such as Habermas and Luhmann are out of fashion in US-American sociology, then—viewed from the other side of the pond—Reckwitz and Rosa may be regarded almost as 'strangers', inhabiting some kind of intellectual no-man's-land. Strand does not hide the fact that he is 'dismissive and sceptical of Rosa and Reckwitz'.⁵⁸ It would be helpful, however, if he could explain in more detail what the intellectual grounds for his critical attitude towards these two thinkers are. The same applies to his attempt at 'recapitulating an *actual* dismissal of a past American

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Cannizzo and Osbaldiston (2019).

⁵⁸ Strand (2023, 15, spelling modified).

social theory'.⁵⁹ As—in my estimation—Strand has convincingly demonstrated, we need to identify the objective conditions and constraints [*Sachzwänge*] that, while prevalent in a particular socio-historical constellation, form the background to intellectual projects. Conceived in this light, it is hard to see how the theoretical endeavours associated with Rosa and Reckwitz could have emerged out of, let alone flourished within, the US-American field of sociology.

♣ Question 12: What, if any, are the ‘ideal’ social conditions of production for social theory and social theorists? Or is this the wrong question?

Conclusion

In his commentary ‘Why Don’t Big Theory Books Work in the US? A Reply to Simon Susen’,⁶⁰ Strand raises a number of important issues. In my reflections on his piece, I have not sought to cover all of these issues. Rather, I have touched upon some central points that—in my view—are worth examining in more detail. Instead of providing an exhaustive account of the pros and cons, rights and wrongs, or strengths and weaknesses of Strand’s intervention, I have attempted to highlight those matters that—to my mind—need to be explored further by formulating twelve open questions (some of which include sub-questions).

It seems to me that it would be erroneous to assume that it is possible to give conclusive answers to these questions. Arguably, it will be more fruitful to take the debate to the next level by opening the conversation and asking others to contribute to it. As should be clear from my previous remarks, my responses have been spontaneous and ‘off the cuff’, in the sense that they require not only more serious thought and critical analysis but also proper (that is, conceptually sophisticated, methodologically rigorous, and empirically substantiated) research. I am hopeful that this exchange has been a step in the right direction.

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⁵⁹ Strand (2023, 15, italics in original).

⁶⁰ See Strand (2023, 15).

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