Publishing Theory at ASR

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Excluding the annual ASA Presidential addresses, it is no secret that traditionally peer-reviewed theory papers are kind of a rare sight at American Sociological Review. “Theory” papers are kept track of as a category just like any other “method” (e.g. ethnography, historical, experimental, and so on) and usually show up in the annual mea culpa (a.k.a. report) written by the editors at the end of the year as one of the perennially “under-represented” categories. In the past, editors have engaged in strategies to boost the number of theory papers in the journal, such as sending special reminders to the theory section listserv that theory submissions are welcome and considered. In their initial proposal, the current editorship noted that even when theory authors are brave enough to actually send them on, theory pieces may have a tougher time than traditional empirical work making it through the review process. This is mainly because they pose unique evaluative challenges for reviewers. To try to address this issue, they developed a set of specialized reviewers guidelines to help readers deal with theory papers on their own merits.1

The relative dearth of theory paper publications at ASR presents an interesting puzzle because one does not need a formal citation analysis to observe that conditional on publication, ASR theory pieces tend to have a pretty big impact, sometimes re-orienting entire fields and becoming perennial citation classics (Jacobs, 2005). For instance, by all accounts ASR’s most cited paper is DiMaggio and Powell’s 1983 “Iron Cage Revisited,” a theory piece that is one of the founding documents of institutional analysis and organizational studies in sociology. The most widely cited cultural sociology piece published in the journal (Swidler, 1986) is a theory piece that continues to set the intellectual agenda for debate in that field—and increasingly across a wide number of other fields—thirty years after its publication date. Most recently, Neil Gross’s (2009) theory piece on pragmatism and social mechanisms is one of the most highly-cited papers published in the journal in the last few years. Given this striking record of extreme success, you would think that it would be in the interest of editors to seek out and nurture these types of submissions, yet their appearance remains both rare and sporadic.

Obviously, there are a number of factors that can account for this phenomenon. Theory pieces do seem harder to get evaluative consensus on. In addition, reviewers may feel more freedom, with respect to these pieces, to be more “hands on” and ask for complete re-writes or re-orientations of the argument. After all, while reviewers will seldom ask authors of empirical pieces to go out and collect new data, insofar as theory pieces are just words, readers may feel like words can be easily deleted and replaced by others (such as their own preferred set of words). This may lead theory papers to get stuck in endless rounds of somewhat radical R&R requests with frustrated authors, reviewers, and editors on all sides.

From the point of view of prospective theory authors, fixing the relevant time-scale to the span of one research career, reviewers and their demands (whether reasonable or not) are

1 https://docs.google.com/document/d/17N6x_HRBWu2DGKloY4-wlFY_ma-Nsf9e8i23Ez0n8E/pub
essentially exogenous. As such, I would like to focus these brief remarks on what authors can do to make a potential theory piece one that could have a decent shot to be published in *ASR*. My remarks are mostly based on my years of experience as a consumer of theory pieces all kinds (*ASR*-style or not), as an occasional producer of theory pieces (mostly of the standard kind but more recently of one that crossed over the *ASR* threshold), and from the more privileged viewpoint of my last two years as co-editor of the journal seeing theory pieces come and go (mostly go).

The first issue to resolve is whether the object to which we are referring—“the *ASR* theory piece”—is a real thing or just a spurious post hoc construction. This question is tricky, and the best way to cut through it is to use a simple field theory principle: *When stuck between realism and constructionism, just go with a tautology.* So, *ASR* theory pieces are a real object, and they just happen to be whatever theory pieces have been published in *ASR* in recent memory. Insofar as these theory pieces have qualities that make them different from high-quality theory pieces that don’t get published in *ASR*—but do appear in specialized top theory outlets such as *Sociological Theory*—then authors can strive to calibrate their production strategies around the existing models.

I do believe that there are a number of things that make *ASR* theory pieces different from their brethren in other journals. (My sense is that some of what I have to say applies, with exceptions, to the “*AJS* theory piece,” although I would qualify this one as yet another animal). First, and most obvious, is that the *ASR* theory piece is accessible and, for the most part, jargon-free. When such pieces do introduce jargon, or even a term that would be “embarrassing” for a theorist not to be familiar with, you will observe the author go into a pedagogical mode and carefully and gently introduce the lingo to the reader (see for instance, Gross’s [2009:360-364] canonical discussion of the various meanings of the term “social mechanism”). The skilled *ASR* theory piece author does not presume common knowledge of the great world of theory shared by self-identified theorists. Instead, s/he takes the point of view of the most generalized of generalized others.

The issue of accessibility might seem like something that doesn’t deserve to be mentioned, yet it is something that I have observed many theory authors struggle mightily with in their submissions. Part of the problem here is that the production of contemporary theory is its own specialized thing. This means that authors of theory pieces tend to acquire field-specific skills in writing papers that can easily be deciphered by their self-identified theory peers, but that are essentially undecipherable to a modal sociologist. So one piece of advice for prospective theory authors is to get feedback on their pieces from a number of sociologists who do not identify as “theorists” before sending the paper out. Think of this as the “normal sociologist” version of the “grandmother” test. For instance, you can ask that person whether they belong to the theory section. If they say “no,” then you may want them to read your paper and give you comments as to what parts are obscure.

Second, authors of *ASR* theory pieces identify a "big" problem of discipline-wide interest at the outset and sell you a solution. It is common to see theory authors delve immediately into abstruse argumentation and exegesis without clearly outlining what’s in it for the reader. Dense argumentation or deep exegesis can be part of an *ASR* theory piece, but they must be
justified at every step. It’s like going to the doctor: before you get poked and prodded, the doctor usually tells you what sort of benefit you are going to get from the pain that you are about to experience. *ASR* theory authors have to understand that general readers feel the same way about most of the standard apparatus of theory argumentation. They’ll be willing to follow, but only with a strong assurance that they’ll come up with something valuable from the journey.

Note also the reference to a “big” problem. This is an intentionally ambiguous phrase that does refer to something important, which is that right now there are two different conceptions of theoretical problems. One the one hand, we have the regular theoretical problems faced by regular theories within specific fields. These could be things like resource mobilization theory in social movement studies, or identity theory in social psychology. Then, there are the “general” analytic problems usually dealt with by people who self-identify as theorists; these are the problems of “action,” “structure,” “culture,” or even “social explanation.” It is clear that the typical *ASR* theory piece (with exceptions) leverages deep familiarity with an argumentative arsenal honed by dealing with the latter set of “general” problems to sell solutions to a general readership that primarily lives in the world of more specific theories such as those of race, unemployment, or class mobilization. The trick is to bridge the gap and convince people that your general solutions matter regardless of the specific problems that they are dealing with in their particular fields.

Finally, there is the issue of styles of theory work. There are many modes of theoretical production among theorists, and my sense is that not all of them are equally positioned to make the sort of contribution that can hit the *ASR* theory piece sweet spot—being accessible and making a strong argument for general relevance. However, some theorists are more deeply invested in some modes of producing theory (because they are really good at them) than others, and may struggle when faced with the fact that their preferred mode of producing theory simply does not fit the requirements of a plausible theory piece in the *ASR* mold.

Take, for instance, deep exegesis of “classical” authors. This is in many ways the “canonical” mode of theory production, having been first perfected by Parsons himself. Yet, with few exceptions, you will note that the classic *ASR* theory pieces almost never engage in this. It is also likely that any current submission to *ASR* whose main warrant or contribution is deep classical exegesis will also struggle from the gate. Another mode of theory production that would probably not be useful in an *ASR* theory piece is the “worldview” development mode, in which entire schemes applicable to all of social life are developed.

My own sense is that most successful *ASR* theory pieces tend to engage in what Gabi Abend (2008) once referred to as “theory.” This type of theory “does not refer to an overarching...way of looking at or representing the social world.” It is, instead, “the study of certain special problems that sociology has encountered...They may be described as ‘philosophical’ problems, insofar as they call for reflection...and some sort of conceptual analysis” (Abend, 2008:181). I bet that if you look back at the classic, influential, *ASR*-style theory pieces, you will find this sort of theory work, not worldviews and exegeses of the classics, at center stage. Curiously, this may be a muscle that is relatively underdeveloped among contemporary theory producers, but one that they could benefit greatly from honing further.
REFERENCES


