

# Shadow Plays: Theory’s Perennial Challenges

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## Abstract

This article argues that theory holds its ground when it confronts itself with the empirics of its claims *and* this confrontation is geared to the project of increasing analytical specificity. This means (1) shedding as much light as possible on the very process whereby a type of outcome gets generated or takes shape and (2) identifying the factors that condition the likelihood of this process. From this perspective, sound theorizing is predicated on both empirical grounding and analytical specificity. Combined together, these two requirements constitute the epistemic matrix of claims and concepts geared to cumulative knowledge.

## Keywords

Argumentative logics, critical juncture, contingency, fuzzy claims, process analysis

If our purpose is to gauge the requirements of sound theorizing, Simon’s (1987) critique of neoclassical economics offers a useful starting point. The gist of this critique, delivered at a University of Chicago conference in October 1985, is twofold. First, the neoclassical framework rests on a cornerstone assumption—utility maximization—that actually “supplies only a small part of the premises in economic reasoning” (Simon 1987:S209). Auxiliary assumptions regarding utilities, beliefs, or expectations provide most of the explanation. Second, despite their significance, these assumptions’ empirical grounding is either dubious or lacking.

Underlying Simon’s critique is a defense and illustration of a certain way of practicing theory. Theory straightens up and lays the ground for cumulative knowledge when it submits itself to the discipline of empirical assessments. It runs ashore when it loses sight of this imperative. Simon (1987) is adamant on this score: “Casual empiricism” is a slippery slope. “The difficulties that contemporary neo-classical economics faces on a number of fronts . . . [result from] the insufficiency of its empirical foundations” (Simon 1987:S212). Theoretical explanations owe their reliability to *sustained* confrontation with the empirics of their case.

The purpose of the present article is not to rehearse this truism—theory needs to be empirically grounded—but to reflect on the conditions that make the grounding possible. The setup of Simon’s (1987) piece is again instructive. The article is theoretical throughout:

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It delves into the meaning of concepts (“rationality”), assesses the soundness of causal claims, examines how these claims relate to one another, identifies holes or inconsistencies, and outlines analytic leads (centered, in the present case, on processes of attention and computational strategies). Here is the point: Simon engages in these tasks and sets the ground for greater accuracy because his focus is on claims that are already quite precise with regard to their analytic content and their implications (e.g., Becker’s [1981] theory of parental decisions to invest in their children’s education or Lucas’s [1981] argument about the distribution of executives’ salaries).

In this article, I argue that theory holds its ground when it confronts the empirics of its claims *and* this confrontation is geared toward the project of increasing analytic specificity. This means (1) shedding as much light as possible on the process whereby a type of outcome gets generated or takes shape and (2) identifying the factors that condition the likelihood of this process. From this perspective, sound theorizing is predicated on both empirical grounding and analytic specificity. Together, these two requirements constitute the epistemic matrix of claims and concepts geared to cumulative knowledge.

Social theory’s most serious challenges lie in argumentative setups—that is, patterned ways of articulating concepts and claims—that undermine or subvert this epistemic matrix. Simon’s (1985:296, 1987:S212) critique of neoclassical economics identifies a setup of this kind—one that relies on assumptions brought in through the back door and never properly tested. Here, I focus on setups that often go unnoticed. The first rests on indeterminate concepts and the second on unconditional claims. Concepts that are indeterminate with regard to their content open the door to arguments by assertion and various modalities of self-validation. Unconditional claims paradoxically undermine the prospect of clear-cut refutations and the goal of cumulative critical exchanges.

I then relate this critical assessment to Healy’s (2017) indictment of calls for more nuance. The indictment is well taken. So is the identification of nuance traps. Invoking “some additional dimension, level, or aspect . . . in the absence of any strong means of disciplining or specifying the relationships between the new elements and the existing ones” indeed amounts to a “holding maneuver” (Healy 2017:119). Likewise, the connoisseur’s objection that “things are more complex” treads or muddles waters, depending on the topic at hand. Yet, the kudzu rhetoric notwithstanding, I do not think the nuanced pose and its avatars are the fundamental problem. The pose is particularly dubious and counterproductive when reviewers use it as a resource. In seminar contexts, it is relatively inconsequential. Much more challenging, on the other hand, are the pitfalls of concepts that absorb empirical imputations and claims that leave their conditions of validity unspecified.

## INDETERMINATE

Let us first examine argumentative logics induced by conceptual invocations that have no definite content. I start with one example—the customary way that comparative studies draw on the notion of “critical juncture”—to illustrate a class of concepts that are widely used even though their empirical referent remains open to question. In a second step, I outline how indeterminate concepts influence validation practices. I then examine how we can overcome the predicament.

### *Critical Junctures*

*Critical juncture* has become a staple of analyses of political and institutional developments. The original formulation of the notion designates periods of change that have lasting

consequences (Collier and Collier 1991:30; Krasner 1984:240; Lipset and Rokkan 1967:47). Drawing on institutional economics, an updated version emphasizes the “contingent” character of these periods and the self-reinforcing nature of their consequences (Mahoney 2000:513; Pierson 2000:63, 2004:51). References to critical junctures work in tandem with references to path dependency. A critical juncture induces a developmental path, and path dependency reveals which junctures can be deemed critical.

Given the centrality acquired by the notion, we would expect it to capture a specific class of conjunctures identifiable in light of clearly defined properties. Yet, standard usages remain silent regarding which properties of these conjunctures differentiate them *as an empirical class* from other moments of change. The notion is all over the map in terms of temporal referents. Multiple decades are a “critical moment” as much as days, weeks, months, or years might be. Nothing apart from the mention that these junctures have long-lasting consequences properly distinguishes them as temporal conjunctures *sui generis*. As a result, figuring out when a conjuncture becomes critical and when it stops being so proves to be a vain exercise.

This usage of *critical juncture* is emblematic of a class of concepts that is invoked in the absence of clear-cut empirical referents. For example, we refer to *contingency* to vaguely denote what could have been otherwise, what is variable, unpredictable, unaccounted for, or indeterminate. We mention a *field* to evoke power relationships or interactions partly structured by institutions without further specification. *Hegemony* describes a mode of political domination all the more invidious in that it eludes systematic observation. We invoke *modernity* without indicating whether the notion connotes an epoch in time, a societal organization, a set of subjective dispositions, a relation to technology or rationality, the prevalence of mass politics, or all these intuitive meanings blended together. “Political opportunity structure” is running the risk of “soaking up every aspect of the social movement environment” (Gamson and Meyer 1996:275).

The peculiarity of such conceptual invocations is that they leave their empirical content for the most part indeterminate. Lacking the definitional criteria that would allow us to trace them empirically and differentiate them from others that bear a family resemblance, we cannot figure out when we observe their putative referent and when we do not. They have the epistemic status of a Rorschach blot: indistinct and thus open to multiple interpretations. By way of consequence, we do not know when these concepts are empirically relevant and when they are not. Their meaning is primarily evocative. They resonate with an intuitive understanding.

### *Elusiveness's Gifts*

Indeterminate concepts shape argumentative practices in different ways. First, they do not discipline arguments, that is, they do not impose their specifications on the viability and plausibility of hypothetical claims. Rather, they adapt and adjust to the specifics of the claims they are intended to back up. They can do so because their content is indeterminate. The logic of empirical demonstration then gets turned on its head. Instead of setting constraints on the scope of the claim, the concept becomes its appendices. It trails the argument.

Second, indeterminate concepts are prime candidates for reification. Reified concepts introduce themselves as self-enclosed and self-propelling entities endowed somehow with agency. On the causal stage, they push things around and run a show of their own. Such imputations are possible only because they have been set free from their empirical moorings. The show would otherwise lose any credence. That is why reified concepts are most at ease when they are in one another's company. In giving each other replies, they lend credibility to their act (as long as we do not question what lays behind).

Third, there is an elective affinity between content indeterminacy and data fuzziness. Elusive concepts attract fuzzy data because the criteria for assessing which pieces of evidence fit an argument and which do not are loose. Conversely, fuzzy data make it possible to duck hard questions, potential discrepancies, and observations that could problematize the analytic scheme.

These different features explain why indeterminate concepts are particularly attractive for arguments meant to capture broad patterns from the synoptic standpoint of an omniscient observer—what could be called the Hegelian standpoint. Not only are they low cost regarding usage, but they convey the impression of accomplishing a lot given the scales of analysis on which they are deployed. With regard to validation claims, the world they inhabit seems easily accessible. If they are evocative to boot, the likelihood that they will quickly take hold is high.

### *Tracing*

We get out of this predicament by (1) spelling out the definitional properties of the concept as an empirical class and (2) gauging how these properties can be traced empirically (Ermakoff 2015:70). What are the characteristic features of contingency as a mode of causality? What constitutes a set of relations as a field? Which dispositions, activities, or types of organizations reveal modernity? What are the distinctive markers of an opportunity structure? Markers, traces, and indicators are not necessarily amenable to direct observation. They may take the form of indexes, correlates, or observable implications (Przeworski and Sprague 1971). In any case, we should be in a position to gauge their empirical significance. Furthermore, they should help us differentiate a concept's empirical referent from others with which it could easily get confused. In so doing, we ratchet up the empirical specificity of the concept.

One could craft a concept of critical juncture, for example, that highlights the very possibility of drastic and durable change in a way that is empirically traceable. Cappocia and Kelemen (2007:360–61) suggest measuring criticalness in light of two factors: “the change of probability of the outcome of interest that is connected with the juncture” and “the duration of the impact of the critical juncture relative to the duration of the juncture itself.” Both measures rest on an analysis of “specific decisions taken by powerful actors during narrowly circumscribed periods” (p. 362). Taking issue with a retrospective understanding of such conjunctures, Ermakoff (2008:323–355) grounds the analysis of open-ended conjunctures in the concept of “critical decisions,” that is, decisions that actors know are highly consequential for other people, entail individual risks, and substantially alter the cost structure of subsequent options once the decision is made.

Similarly, we can empirically ground references to contingency by distinguishing between chance events, as defined by Cournot (the intersection of causally independent causal series), and open-ended action systems resulting from actors' mutual indeterminacy (Cournot [1851] 1975:34; Ermakoff 2015:110–13). We operationalize a field in light of the value criteria and the “shared understandings” or “shared subjectivities” that actors mobilize as they relate to one another within a formally regulated setting given the positions they hold (Fligstein and McAdam 2011:4; Martin 2003:42). Modernity becomes empirically tangible when fleshed out by reference to a belief system anchored in a domain of practice. Political opportunities can be operationalized in terms of structural incentives or signaling effects (Meyer and Minkoff 2004:1467–71).

## UNCONDITIONAL

Consider the following statements: (1) “Dominated agents, who assess the value of their position and their characteristics by applying a system of schemes of perception and appreciation

which is the embodiment of the objective laws whereby their value is objectively constituted, tend to attribute to themselves what the distribution attributes to them” (Bourdieu [1979] 1984:471). (2) “In unsettled cultural periods, explicit ideologies directly govern action, but structural opportunities for action determine which among competing ideologies survive in the long run” (Swidler 1986:273). (3) “The actor chooses the action which will maximize utility” (Coleman 1990:14). (4) “Social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue’” (Putnam 2000:19).

All four statements set forth a theoretical claim—that is, abstracted from any particular case—about the relation between a state (e.g., a socially dominated position, “unsettled times,” individual rationality, social capital) and a behavioral or behavior-related outcome (e.g., mobility expectations, ideological action, optimization, civic-ness). These claims, moreover, make no mention of factors that might condition the possibility or the occurrence of the relation. They share an assumption of unconditional validity.

Unimodal theories of action exemplify this mode of theorizing (Ermakoff 2010:530, 549, 2013:101). Their peculiarity is to elevate one mode of action to the status of universal explanatory clue. For instance, the *theory of practice*, as Bourdieu ([1979] 1984:140-41) labels his conceptual framework, theorizes action as regulated by the set of dispositions and classificatory schemes informed by agents’ social positions. Rational choice theory, for its part, views action as geared to the optimization of one’s interests (Coleman 1990:14).

### *Contradictions and Exclusivity Claims*

This argumentative setup has several implications for the practice of critical exchanges and validation. First, given their lack of attention to conditional factors, unconditional claims are open to contradictory empirical observations. Going back to the statements quoted earlier: (1) Both quantitative and ethnographic studies underscore that black adolescents in the United States hold more positive beliefs about schooling than white students despite expected barriers about upward mobility (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:539-40; Harris 2008:615-24, 2011:53-127; Tyson 2011:17-34). (2) For some groups, times of disruption generate cognitive and behavioral uncertainty that undercuts ideological commitments (Ermakoff 2008:245-304). (3) Optimization strictly defined does not adequately describe the behaviors of actors trained to be strategic (e.g., investors) in various contexts (DellaVigna 2009:360-66). (4) Groups opposing norms of democratic civic-ness are characterized by high social capital (Berman 1997:402; Riley 2005:298).

However, and this is the second point, ample evidence also corroborates these claims: (1) In some contexts, agents internalize objective prospects of social immobility; (2) times of disruption witness a profusion of ideological proposals that would not gain much visibility had they not some resonance with a target audience; (3) individual actors routinely engage in optimization strategies; and (4) interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity facilitate collective action geared to the provision of collective goods.

As a result of this contrasted empirical landscape, claims framed in unconditional terms end up being either true or false, depending on the evidence gathered. In the end, we do not really know on which foot to stand. Appraised in light of these discrepant empirical assessments, unconditional claims reveal themselves to be ambiguous and impervious to disconfirming observations. We get bogged down in inconclusive assertions “immune to falsification through empirical findings” because when a theory’s “domain of application” remains unspecified, “every apparent refutation can be countered by the argument that the theory was being applied to the ‘wrong’ kind of case, and the theory may then be returned, unscathed, to the ‘depository’” (Goldthorpe 1998:48).

Third, because they bid for exclusivity, unconditional claims pertaining to the same explanandum are set on colliding courses. An explanation that eschews conditional factors *de facto* asserts there is no point in attempting to qualify or restrict its relevance. Therefore, this explanation is bound to clash with any other claim focused on the same object of investigation and cast in the same mold (unconditional). For illustrative purposes, note how adamantly antithetical the proponents of various unimodal theories of action have portrayed their stance *vis-à-vis* one another. Even more revealing has been the disparaging tone with which they at times confront one another.<sup>1</sup>

Neither epistemic ambiguity—the theory is neither right nor wrong—nor theoretical antagonisms foster a scene geared to the resolution of ambiguities and challenges. When the claims under consideration provide the centerpieces of a broader theoretical framework, we have even less reason to expect protagonists to reach out for the purpose of discussing theoretical divergences. Instead, we can expect protagonists to entrench themselves and settle in some sort of cold war.

### *The Micro-analytics of Processes*

How do we extricate ourselves from theoretical stalemates of this kind? To address this question, consider how Gorman and Kmec (2009), for instance, engage the claim that women's promotion prospects decline as they move up the organizational ladder ("glass ceiling effect"). Taking note of contrasted empirical assessments (e.g., Baxter and Wright 2000:285-6; Cohen, Broschak, and Haveman 1998:723), Gorman and Kmec seek to overcome the limitations of an inconclusive diagnosis. The problem, they argue, is that insufficient attention has been paid to (1) *how* biases in evaluations of male and female candidates get triggered and (2) the "scope conditions" under which such biases are most likely to be activated (Gorman and Kmec 2009:1429, 1438-39). Their focus is thus on the *production* of biased selection given the characteristic features of high-ranking positions (i.e., high status, work uncertainty, and the historical predominance of male incumbents). Scope conditions describe how organizational parameters affect the likelihood of an increasing disadvantage pattern.

Several points are noteworthy in this inquiry. First, Gorman and Kmec (2009) take pains to theorize the very processes (the "cogs and wheels") whereby the outcome is "brought about" (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:50). Ultimately, this is what we want to pin down and test. Second, this theorizing aims to specify how individuals sharing similar characteristics enact these processes given their positional interests, beliefs, and resources. The perspective, in other words, is at once micro and analytic. Third, the factors conditioning the likelihood of these processes become theoretically tractable once the latter have been clearly specified. We overcome the liability of contradictory results through the specification of conditional factors.

## DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY

To what extent do these critical remarks overlap with or depart from Healy's (2017) indictment of calls for "nuance"? True enough, as Healy rightly points out, rhetorical postures that, under the pretense of salvaging "nuance" or invoking a "dimension," are willing to dilute explanatory claims to the point of making them shapeless are a waste of time. We all have been exposed to objections of this kind, most often in seminar contexts, at times through book reviews, and occasionally, in the context of peer reviews. Equally true, the connoisseur's (dismissive) pose leads nowhere and is, moreover (my point), ethically dubious when it serves to disparage arguments that are not to a reviewer's taste.

This being said, we should seriously examine whether the cultivation of nuance is really the main challenge faced by “good theory.” Let me advance the hypothesis that many of the articles Healy (2017) identifies as mentioning *nuance* or *nuanced* (see Figure 1 in his article) do not fall into nuance traps (the nuance of the fine-grained, conceptual expansion, and connoisseur’s gaze). In other words, the reference to *nuance* may actually be less determined semantically and less consequential in terms of research practices than Healy presumes. A case in point is Meyer and Minkoff’s (2004) study, which is in Healy’s database and which I cited earlier in reference to the notion of “opportunity structure.”<sup>2</sup> Far from “actively inhibit[ing] the process of abstraction that good theory depends on” (Healy 2017:121), the reference to a more “nuanced understanding” goes along with the systematic effort to disentangle various strands of “opportunity” while submitting their assessment to a research protocol.

Until evidence is found to the contrary, I contend that calls for more nuance—which undercut the incentive for abstraction and therefore “inhibits the creative process that makes theorizing a useful activity” (Healy 2017:119)—are most evident in contexts where it is possible to take the pose without being held accountable for it: seminar and conference exchanges, anonymous reviews, and book critiques that have the privilege of being dismissive or superficial without “being disciplined” by counter-objections. It is not incidental to note that when Healy (2017:119) concretely illustrates this point about actually existing nuance, he borrows his examples from verbal exchanges: “How does the theory deal with agency, or structure, or culture, or temporality, or power, or [some other abstract noun]?”

The bane of social theory, I argued here, is not nuance per se but indeterminate concepts and unconditional claims that fend off disconfirming evidence. Undoubtedly, some new ideas and insight are made of this stuff: We start with inchoate notions and claims steeped in unconditional theorizing. But these are useful as propaedeutic steps only. In the end, we want to give disconfirming evidence its full due, pin down genetic processes as clearly as we can, and specify the factors that condition their likelihood. The problem is that in addition to being highly attractive, indeterminate concepts and unconditional claims often join forces. Claims that have the leisure of their unconditional character give credence to concepts predicated on a view from afar, removed from the bumpy road of hard-nosed empirical work. Conversely, indeterminate concepts make the task of such claims easier, especially when, duly reified, they lend their pretense of causal power to the argument being made.

The present article can therefore be interpreted as a call for discipline, similar to Healy’s (2017) on this score. However, I rely on a different understanding of where the main challenges lie given a quite straightforward conception of how claims and arguments should be gauged: “The key requirement of theory . . . is that it should have explanatory force” (Goldthorpe 1996:481). From this perspective, “the question is not whether to abstract from the complexity of the social reality . . . but whether the *appropriate abstraction* has been done” (Blossfeld and Prein 1998:9). This means going *against* simplifying assumptions when these turn out to be mistaken (Popper 1972:177; Sen, Last, and Quirk 1986:110) and specifying conditional factors whenever possible.

## CONCLUSION

Theorizing is at once inevitable and required: inevitable because understanding implies the ability to “see” (θεορειν) in the basic sense of discerning patterns and regularities, required because we objectify this understanding by translating it into the language of categories and

claims. As we do so, whether we establish contrasts and equivalences or subsume them to analytic constructs, we abstract and simplify. We abstract by selecting out dimensions and observations, and we simplify by making them analytically prevalent.

Two consequences follow. First, the real issue is not whether when we theorize we simplify or not. Nor is it how much we abstract. Rather, the key issue is how sound can we expect our abstractions to be if the point is to achieve robust understanding and, even more to the point, if we aim for cumulative knowledge? Second, there is not “one” way of practicing theory. We theorize all along and in different postures. These theoretic moves, such as the choice of a category or the reliance on some auxiliary assumptions, often go unnoticed, so mundane or customary are their usual garb. Yet, these apparently innocuous moves set the tone. If they are problematic, so is the whole endeavor.

An obvious stake is therefore attached to the most basic elements of any explanatory framework: concepts and claims. Concepts identify and sort out. We cannot do without them. Claims underpin arguments. They provide the bread and butter of explanatory attempts. Both can be set up in ways that undercut the tasks we expect from them. Concepts that take their ease with the empirics of their referent downgrade validation requirements. Claims that cover their tracks or get pitched as unqualified generalities set the ground for merry-go-round types of critical exchanges.

## NOTES

1. See, for instance, Bourdieu (1990:63-64) and Boudon (1989:156-7).
2. Meyer and Minkoff's (2004:1458) *Social Forces* article calls for a “more nuanced understanding of the relationships among institutional politics, protest, and policy.”

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