

Living Theory: Principles and Practices for Teaching Social Theory Ethnographically

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Abstract

This article details the principles and practices animating an “ethnographic” method of teaching social theory. As opposed to the traditional “survey” approach that aims to introduce students to the historical breadth of social thought, the primary objective of teaching ethnographically is to cultivate students as participant observers who interpret, adjudicate between, and practice social theories in their everyday lives. Three pedagogical principles are central to this approach, the first laying the groundwork for the two that follow: (1) intensive engagement with manageable portions of text, (2) conversations among theorists, and (3) dialogues between theory and lived experience. Drawing on examples from our experiences as graduate student instructors for a two-semester theory sequence, we offer practical guideposts to sociology instructors interested in integrating “living theory” into their own curricula by clarifying how each principle is put into action in course assignments, classroom discussions and activities, and evaluations of student learning. We conclude by encouraging sociology departments and instructors to consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of offering social theory courses built around in-depth readings of and conversations between social theorists and the social world.

Keywords

social theory, sociology curriculum, active learning, classroom-based exercises, critical thinking skills

In a recent commentary, Michael Burawoy (2013) introduces the tenets of teaching undergraduate sociology majors “living theory.” Reflecting on his two-semester undergraduate course, which he has taught at UC Berkeley since 1977, Burawoy discusses his move away from a traditional “survey” approach that introduces students to a comprehensive array of social theories across history. In its place, Burawoy has built an “ethnographic” approach, a metaphor that stresses intensiveness rather than extensiveness, quality rather than quantity, and understanding rather than information. Just as the ethnographer’s identity simultaneously shapes and is shaped by his or her fieldwork, the ethnographic approach teaches students that they are personally and relentlessly implicated in social theory—both as subjects and architects—when they deploy it to analyze the world that they inhabit.

Practitioners employing “survey” methods of teaching theory typically offer students short snippets from a large number of theorists, intending to introduce them to the breadth and evolution of social thought (e.g., Sica 2013). Burawoy (2013) argues that in traversing such a broad landscape of excerpts and theorists, instructors risk encouraging the passive consumption of texts and unquestioning acceptance of the instructor’s authority. Burawoy instead advocates that students engage deeply with carefully selected texts from a smaller assortment of theorists so that they may be able to apply and

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adjudicate between social theories in the world today. In the “ethnographic” approach, “students are not simply observers but *participant* observers, [who] learn that they are theorists themselves.” By developing expertise in five theorists per semester, students “learn to live theory so that theory begins to take root in them, occupying their lives, shaping their imagination” (Burawoy 2013:781). Spending two, three, or even four weeks with each theorist helps students think like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, or Simone de Beauvoir, allowing them to construct dialogues between theorists and with the world around them that push each theoretical approach to its limits.

Although Burawoy (2013) has recently elaborated the pedagogical philosophy and course design underlying his ethnographic approach to teaching theory, he is largely silent on significant aspects of its practice—the exams, exercises, and discussion sections that animate its principles and train students to become active theorists in their own right rather than passive observers. Drawing on our experiences as graduate student instructors (GSIs) for the 22nd iteration of Burawoy’s theory sequence, we elaborate on the ethnographic approach to clarify the method, offer practical guideposts to sociology instructors interested in integrating “living theory” into their own curricula, and spur discussion and debate within sociology departments around the potential benefits and drawbacks of offering their own students an ethnographic approach to learning theory.

Some GSIs encourage students to think of learning social theory like they would think of learning a foreign language: Just as language teachers wouldn’t ask them to memorize the entire dictionary before they start to express themselves, students of theory can begin by acquiring basic building blocks that enable them to think and act creatively. Students read, write, and speak theory every week; they build their vocabulary by stumbling and playing with concepts at home and in the classroom. To break from the passivity of one-way knowledge transmission from professor to student, teaching ethnographically draws on teaching techniques including active learning and interactive practice (Appelrouth 2001; Osnowitz and Jenkins 2014; Scarboro 2004; Strangfeld 2013; Wills, Brewster, and Fulkerson 2005), participant observation (Pedersen 2010; Silver and Perez 1998), and methods for materializing abstraction (Griffith 2012; Messinger 2015; Wrye 2012). In this article, we do not simply aim to elaborate a series of techniques that may be fruitfully applied in teaching social theory. Instead, our goal is to consider how these teaching tools can be used to

serve the pedagogical purpose of teaching students first and foremost to *theorize* rather than to familiarize themselves with a comprehensive volume of theory. In this way, the article contributes to both the longstanding discussion within the pages of this journal on making social theory relevant to undergraduates (Logan 1976; McCabe 2013; Silver and Perez, 1998; Weast 1996; Westhues 1991) and its more recent commitment to considering the role of graduate student instructors in higher education (Moss and Blouin 2014).

Three pedagogical principles are central to the ethnographic approach, the first laying the groundwork for the two that follow: (1) intensive engagement with manageable portions of text, (2) conversations among theorists, and (3) dialogues between theory and lived experience. In the following sections, we identify three problems that instructors of a survey course in social theory may confront and explain how the ethnographic method addresses these limitations. We demonstrate the method by explaining how the mechanics of assignments, section discussions, and examinations animate each of these principles. In doing so, we aim to stimulate discussion around matters of course design, including whether instructors should favor depth over breadth in course readings, whether departments should require majors to complete one or two social theory courses, and how instructors can integrate theory and practice to equip students to use the world around them to illuminate, contest, and reconstruct theory.

CONTEXT

At Berkeley, the professor typically handles syllabus construction, three weekly hours of lecture, and crafting exams, while GSIs are responsible for designing and leading two hours of discussion sections each week, creating and grading assignments, and holding office hours. Two hundred undergraduates were enrolled in the lecture course, and each discussion section included 20 students. Although nearly all of the students are sociology majors in their second, third, or fourth years—for whom the two-semester course is a requirement for graduation—undergraduates enter the course with varying backgrounds. Most have taken at least an introductory sociology course, and many have either completed or are concurrently enrolled in two prerequisites for declaring the major (a course in sociological methods and a course in logic or statistics). About 37 percent of sociology majors are underrepresented minorities (black, Latino,

American Indian), 40 percent have transferred from other institutions (a vast majority of them community colleges), and many are non-native English speakers. Students also vary widely in their academic preparation, and most have little prior familiarity with course texts.

DEPTH VERSUS BREADTH: INTENSIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MANAGEABLE PORTIONS OF TEXT

Survey courses may require students to read short excerpts from social theory textbooks or immense assignments of entire original works. In either case, the professor remains the “expert” with deep knowledge of the theoretical corpus. Students responsible for reading brief passages are left with little space to develop their own interpretations, while those wrestling with complete books in short periods of time may find it difficult to identify and work with key concepts.

Alternatively, the ethnographic approach calls for protracted, stubbornly recurrent engagement with a limited field of text. The professor issues relatively short reading assignments before each lecture (typically 10–25 pages in length, though sometimes only a few pages or paragraphs) and at times may reassign the same passages for two consecutive classes to encourage students to deepen their engagement with the most complex ideas. The course also devotes significant time to a select group of theorists. For example, over the year-long course that we taught, students attended 12 lectures on Marx and Engels, 9 on Weber, and 7 on Durkheim. The manageable passages and length of time spent on each theorist allows GSIs to build the two weekly discussion sections around deep engagement with the texts—often involving collective analysis of short excerpts—rather than further lecturing on a litany of concepts. Devoting more time to fewer works helps students cultivate the deeper level of comprehension that enables them to “do theory” themselves.

Evaluating ethnographically is not aimed at assessing the student’s knowledge of a large number of theorists or even comprehension of all of the key concepts introduced by any given theorist. Instead, exams prioritize close (and concise) engagement with a handful of theorists. Exams do not require students to survey the mountain range of theory from below by way of multiple-choice questions or short-answer responses. Teaching ethnographically

pushes students to climb just a few mountains and see things from their summits, and they are evaluated not only on their comprehension of this limited corpus but also on their ability to use the conceptual tools they have learned to theorize social relations in their own world. The written examinations, two each semester, are take-home, and students are given two weeks to complete them. Each is composed of three to four essays and strictly limited to no more than 750 or 1,000 words per essay.

One example of how evaluations take advantage of students’ intensive work with a small number of theorists is in the final exam of the first semester, in which students are tasked with putting Marxist social theorists into dialogue over a current event. In this rendition of the course, students were given a set of four diverse and accessible articles on the Tunisian Revolution, including a long-form feature from *The New Yorker* and a short commentary from the online magazine of the Arab Studies Institute. Essay questions required students to bring the journalistic articles together with selections of primary texts covered in the course. The first part of each question asked students to demonstrate their comprehension of the theorists: “Based on your reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, what are the economic conditions of revolution and what are the stages of class struggle?”; “How does Lenin add to Marx and Engels’s theory of the state?”; “How does Gramsci’s theory of hegemony lead him to expand on Lenin’s theory of the transition to communism?”; and “Describe Fanon’s two trajectories of decolonization and how this advances Gramsci’s theory of revolution.” Having first established their comprehension, the second part of the question required students to engage in active theorization: “In what ways does the Tunisian Revolution conform to or diverge from Marx and Engels’s theory?” “In what ways does Ben Ali’s dictatorship conform to Lenin’s view of the state, and to what extent was it replaced by a socialist state?”; “To what extent was the Tunisian revolution a ‘war of movement’ or a ‘war of position?’”; and “What would Fanon make of this Second Tunisian Revolution?” While these questions are indeed difficult, students had spent a considerable amount of time studying each of the theorists and had practiced similar exercises in interpreting recent events. The sharp focus that students developed by delving deeply into only five theorists during the semester allowed them to become social theorists in their own right in assessing the Tunisian revolution and supporting their interpretations with passages from classic sociological texts.

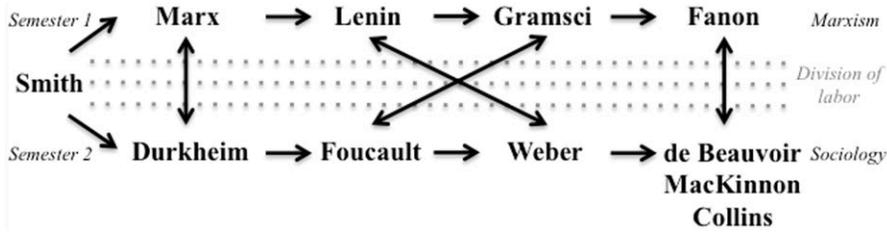


Figure 1. Outline of the year-long social theory sequence.

CONVERSATIONS AMONG THEORISTS: DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH DIALOGUE

Survey courses that cover a broad array of theorists across history often require instructors to concisely confer key concepts in the limited time dedicated to each thinker. This can reduce the time available for comparisons and conversations between theorists. When comparisons and conversations are drawn in survey courses, they are often portrayed as “advances” or are used to clarify the concepts put forward by the particular theorist under examination.

Teaching ethnographically places conversations among theorists at the center rather than the periphery of course design, class discussion, and evaluation. Just as ethnographers’ most penetrating insights often emerge not through interviews with individual subjects but from field observations of interactions between them, students deepen their grasp of theory by envisioning debates between theorists. This practice is enabled by the course’s in-depth approach, which allows students to work intensively with and create dialogues between each theorist to explain social interactions, institutions, politics, power, and inequality in the world today. The centrality of this pedagogical tenet is built into the course design, which Burawoy illustrates on the blackboard on the first day of lecture (Figure 1).

The diagram depicts two aspects of course design that diverge from traditional theory classes. First, an ethnographic course is anchored by a meta-theme that is general enough to encompass core ideas of each of the major theorists covered. In this rendition of the course, the theme was *the division of labor*, which included theories of *class, solidarity, rationalization, power, race, and gender*. Second, the course is not organized chronologically. Departing from Adam Smith as our foil, the first semester of the course engaged undergraduates in dialogues within a single theoretical tradition—“Marxism”—giving students a perspective of the evolution of a

school of thought. In the second semester, students worked through a series of critical responses to Marxism, beginning with Durkheim and Foucault, then moving on to Weber and de Beauvoir, and followed by MacKinnon and Collins.¹ Critical dialogues were constructed not only among this set of thinkers but also back to the Marxist theorists, as indicated by the double-pointed arrows in the diagram in Figure 1. In the final six weeks of the course, a third dialogue took shape around how feminist thinkers (represented by de Beauvoir, MacKinnon, and Collins) have assimilated, rejected, and moved beyond the sociological canon.

Orienting the course around critical dialogues pertaining to a meta-theme rather than a chronological race across “social theory” writ large “replaces the search for a universe of theories that are connected by an inner destiny with a focus on the connections within theories as well as connections among theories, although without any superimposed teleology” (Burawoy 2013:780). The dialogic design inherent in teaching ethnographically carries on a continual conversation between theorists. Theorists do not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend a previous work; rather, dialogue extends in both directions, and each theory is altered and enriched through conversation. This maneuver compels students to think of social theories not as historical artifacts but rather as lenses for interpreting their social worlds.

Students practice placing theorists in critical dialogues in discussion sections, which focus on drawing theorists into conversation with each other over passages of text. Instructors call up on key concepts introduced by prior theorists to draw out the implications of subsequent works. In a section meeting on *Discipline and Punish*, one instructor asked students to offer Foucauldian responses to quotations from the texts of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. For example, students confronted Foucault’s skepticism of Durkheim’s assertion that law and punishment foster solidarity rather than terror and his fear of the totalizing “regulated society” proposed by Gramsci. In



Figure 2. A student's visual rendering of the course used as a guide for the final oral exam.

each instance, students were asked to decide which theorist they sided with and why.

After practicing these theoretical dialogues in assignments and class discussions, students are then evaluated on their ability to construct such conversations. Most important in this respect is the final exam, covering both semesters of theorists. In an oral exam, students engage in a 20-minute conversation with their GSI covering the content of the entire course. Beginning at the course's endpoint with de Beauvoir and Collins's notions of consciousness and the nature of objectivity, students build conversations between theorists within and across traditions. Many prepare diagrams to guide the conversations. For example, one student created a poster (Figure 2) on which she affixed title cards representing nearly two dozen themes from the course (e.g., hegemony, objectification, normalization). Underneath each title card were smaller cards containing the names of two to four theorists. She then attached a small, colored piece of string to connect the theorists: Green string reflected strong agreement between theorists on the theme, red represented strong disagreement, and yellow stood for a mix of similarities and differences. During the exam, her GSI asked her to reconstruct some of the dialogues that she had represented on the poster: For example, why did she believe that Collins and Foucault held opposing views on knowledge and power whereas Collins

and Durkheim were in agreement? If one exam in the course could be called a "survey," it would certainly be this one, but again, students are not evaluated simply on their ability to identify key concepts but rather on their ability to draw out the tensions between and implications of competing and complementary perspectives from which to view the social world.

THEORY IN THE WORLD: CULTIVATING SOCIAL THEORISTS

In a post-course survey, many students shared that at the course's outset, they had dreaded learning social theory and were skeptical of the course's utility. As one respondent explained: "At first I thought that we would be talking about high-level concepts that I wouldn't be able to connect to and speaking of things that didn't have much importance to my life." Other students reported having originally believed that social theory would be "abstract" and "irrelevant" (cf. Lowney 1998). An ethnographic approach to teaching theory attempts to challenge both of these preconceptions by helping students see theory as a useful lens for deciphering their own world and validating students' lived experiences as a tool that can be used to challenge and reconstruct theory. In this sense, students

become auto-ethnographers (Ellis and Bochner 2000): reflexive investigators of the institutions that they inhabit, the media they consume, and the broader cultural, political, and economic systems within which they are embedded.

While most instructors of survey courses integrate applications of social theory to the contemporary world, applications are often used to clarify a key concept or ground an abstract argument in a concrete context. The ethnographic method of teaching theory, however, turns this use of application on its head, making theory first and foremost a tool that students use to decipher political events, economic systems, cultural attitudes, and their everyday lives. Instructors use real-world examples to demonstrate not only how theory illuminates the world around us but also how the world around us exposes the limitations and internal contradictions of individual theories. When confronted with data that appear to conflict with a theory, students are asked to reconstruct the theory on its own terms: How would the theorist respond to this anomaly?

During the first lecture, students are told that social theorists make claims that can be falsified based on real-world observations and that theory should thus be subject to empirical examination. Based on this premise, instructors present comparisons of theories that predict contradictory empirical outcomes. Does the division of labor lead to universal opulence (Smith) or immiseration (Marx)? Does it foster harmony and the development of human potential (Durkheim) or conflict and the stifling of human capacities (Marx)? Is punishment an expression of solidarity (Durkheim) or power (Foucault)? Students are then invited to bring data to bear on these conflicting perspectives.

Before class, students engage in homework, or what might be better titled *fieldwork*. Outside of the classroom, students are *participant observers*: They *observe* theory by reading texts, and they *participate* in theory by engaging in weekly exercises of theoretical exegesis, comparison, and application. Because field notes can take multiple forms, students are often given the option of providing a concise, 250-word response to the weekly query and/or sketching a diagram, table, or illustration. Here it is useful to dissect a typical fieldwork prompt.

Most often, a fieldwork assignment is anchored in application, asking students to decode real-life cases of their own choosing (e.g., “Compare two original examples [not given by Foucault] of hierarchical observation, normalization, or examination in society today.”). To ensure that the

application is firmly rooted in the theorist’s own ideas, students begin with a basic exegesis, interpreting a text and directly engaging with passages from the reading in their response. Finally, after connecting their own observations with the theory being studied that week, students are asked to build a conversation between theorists (e.g., “How might another theorist that we have studied explain these same examples of domination and control?”). While the weekly assignments did not always integrate all three of these components, over the course of studying any theorist, all would be put into lively conversation.

In addition to weekly assignments are two “theory in action” exercises that call on students not simply to *apply* theory but to *reconstruct* theory through defense or critique. In the first semester, students complete an extended essay drawing on the social theories covered in class to comment on and analyze a current affair of their choice, such as authoring op-eds on contemporary class struggles or commenting on articles from the mainstream press on economic inequality from the perspectives of Smith and Marx. In the second semester, students take photographs related to a particular theory and pair each image with a textual interpretation (cf. Eisen 2012). These are posted on a blog that is read by the entire class. In both assignments, students reconstruct theory by defending the enduring relevance of a theorist (one student described how her experiences in a work-study job supported Marx’s theory of exploitation) and/or critiquing a theorist by highlighting a discrediting case (another observed the Berkeley police’s panoptic gaze over 4/20 celebrations on campus and considered why this surveillance, contrary to Foucault’s theory, did not appear to generate self-regulation among revelers engaged in illegal activities). Three photographs from the blog appear in Figure 3 with brief captions to offer a taste of students’ completed work.

While application exercises are common in weekly assignments, exams, discussion section activities, and even lectures, the “theory in action” assignments infuse life into theory perhaps more than any other. The photo blog in particular—now a mosaic of images that mostly captures otherwise mundane activities and objects on and around campus—illustrates how students have both absorbed theory into their lives and how they have in turn injected their lives into theory.

Section meetings—which follow initial readings, lectures, and homework-turned-fieldwork exercises—operate as laboratories in which students collectively test theory. Undergraduates share



Figure 3. Sample “theory in action” photo assignments.

(Left) In relation to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, a student considers how homeless individuals in Berkeley are treated as lepers, plague victims, and disciplined individuals depending on the social context. (Center) A student describes how a favorite cafe near campus operated by Brazilian immigrants represents Weber’s “spirit of capitalism” but also a sense of familial traditionalism that runs counter to the typical bureaucratic efficiencies of the Protestant work ethic. (Right) A student reconsiders her belly-dance performance for a cultural showcase at UC Berkeley, examining how it might reproduce masculine domination and feminine inauthenticity according to de Beauvoir.

their fieldwork observations and interpretations, and GSIs provide students with factual and fictional cases in the form of newspaper articles, short video clips, and photographs for them to interpret and challenge using the tools provided by pre-section activities. Even the most carefully selected cases are unlikely to perfectly match any given theory, allowing students to reveal the limits and contradictions inherent in each writer’s premises. The very best cases can be connected to or ruptured by multiple theories at once.

Consider a typical example. A GSI exhibited a 90-second clip from the “social science-fiction” show *The Wire* (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows 2011). The program’s first season, which centers on conflicts between Baltimore Police and a narcotics-dealing organization, includes an attempted drug raid in which a man is brutally and publicly beaten by police. While covering early sociological thought, the GSI showed this clip and asked, “What would Durkheim say?” Students struggled, at least initially, to reconcile such a contemporary spectacle of penal force with Durkheim’s vision of modernity and the predicted evolution into restitutive law. They then debated whether such a scene expresses or challenges Durkheim’s hypothesis that punishment bolsters collective solidarity for the fictional witnesses of the beating. Later, when covering postmodern thought, the GSI replayed the same video clip and asked, “What would Foucault say?” Here, students were tasked with making sense of such corporal punishment in the so-called disciplinary society: Flesh remains the primary template of punishment

when the soul should be targeted. Afterward, in conversation with their earlier Durkheimian reading and rupture, they considered whether among the fictional spectators of violence such police force revitalizes collective solidarity (as Durkheim might claim) or instills a terror of state power (as Foucault might have it). The video clip, which is recognizable yet also foreign to both *The Division of Labour in Society* and *Discipline and Punish*, provided a means for students to collectively stress test theory.

In addition to drawing on media artifacts, we also endeavored to create dialogues between theorists and events that were relevant to undergraduates’ daily lives. Again, these exercises were designed to encourage students to interrogate each theorist’s premises and understand what each theoretical stance allows him or her to see and what it might overlook in comparison with other theories. During the second semester of our course, Berkeley’s Graduate Student Employee union held a two-day strike. We informed our students about a survey that had revealed that GSIs in our department tended to work beyond the 20 hours per week for which they were paid. We asked them how various theorists might account for this phenomenon. Some evoked Marxian critiques of capitalism, arguing that tax cuts for the wealthy and economic crises had starved public education budgets, leading the UC to increase GSI teaching loads. Indeed, section sizes had recently been raised in our course and many others. Others analyzed the workload violations through a Durkheimian lens of solidarity, arguing that feelings of connection and loyalty

to students might inspire GSIs to voluntarily work unpaid overtime—a noncontractual element of contracts. Still others evoked Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Weber's notion of vocation, and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, each intimating divergent and often oppositional political projects. In discussion sections, students practice viewing the world through the lenses of social theory in a low-stakes environment, finding support in the text for their interpretations, and discovering that there may be multiple valid interpretations of any given phenomenon.

In exams, students are also tasked with constructing theoretical dialogues around a topical event. In addition to the first semester final exam focused on the Tunisian Revolution discussed previously, another exam required students to write op-eds on a State of the Union address using the voices of Marx and Durkheim; still another had students scrutinize the operations of a poultry plant in Arizona, counterposing a Weberian perspective centered on the concept of bureaucracy with a Foucauldian critique built around the notion of discipline. Although these exams present undergraduates with challenging tasks, the course design amply supports their efforts: The readings in the syllabus are short and meaty, instructors carefully curate the topical articles assigned to highlight particular theoretical themes, the assignments give students weekly practice and feedback on applying and comparing theories, and class discussions enact the conversational form in which exam questions are framed.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have used examples from the classroom to outline three principles of an ethnographic method of teaching social theory, summarized in Table 1. First, students engage intensively with manageable reading assignments, enabling them to develop their own robust interpretations of texts. Second, students deepen their understanding of individual theorists by constructing dialogues between thinkers. And third, students become active social theorists in their own right by testing and reconstructing central concepts as they observe the world around them. We believe that this approach remedies shortcomings of traditional survey courses: the breadth that can discourage students from developing confidence in their own interpretations of texts, the presentation of theorists in teleological sequence, and applications that clarify at the expense of complexifying theoretical perspectives.

Our rendering of the "survey method" is undoubtedly an ideal-typical construction that does not account for variation across theory courses. Nor do we claim that these three principles are somehow novel or unique to what we are calling "teaching ethnographically." Instead, we have aimed to present a novel framework for organizing an undergraduate social theory course that is aimed primarily at nourishing students' "sociological imaginations" (Mills 1959) and making theory relevant to the lives of sociology undergraduates (Logan 1976; McCabe 2013; Silver and Perez 1998; Weast 1996; Westhues 1991). The three principles elaborated here comprise a synthetic method for integrating assignments, class discussions, and exams in the service of these goals. In the remainder of this piece, we reflect on some of the trade-offs and shortcomings of the ethnographic approach as well as its applicability to other types of courses.

First, it is important to acknowledge the drawbacks inherent in our remedies. For instance, owing to the depth of its engagement with a small number of theorists, the ethnographic method may fall short of the survey method's utility for introducing budding sociologists to a variety of social theorists. Instructors are faced with difficult choices when compiling a limited roster of thinkers and may have difficulty finding room for theorists widely considered central to the discipline: Our course covered neither sociological precursors like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill nor the more recent traditions linked to Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Instructors wishing to counter the overrepresentation of white male thinkers in the discipline's canon (Connell 1997; Thomas and Kukulian 2004) by introducing students to a more diverse and expansive array of thinkers may grapple with similar constraints. The ethnographic method can also leave significant gaps even in the oeuvre of the theorists covered. Our four weeks with Marx and Engels did not include the concepts of alienation or the falling rate of profit, nor were the topics of governmentality and biopower breached during our two weeks with Foucault.

In addition to reducing textual coverage, the ethnographic approach can privilege conversation at the expense of historical context and continuity. In constructing thematic interchanges between theorists, our course design neglected a chronology that some instructors may wish to maintain. After a move from Smith to Marx, we jumped from Lenin to Gramsci and Fanon. And after opening the second semester with Durkheim, we leapt eight or so decades ahead to Foucault before turning back to

Table 1. Three Principles of Teaching Theory Ethnographically in Response to Survey Courses.

	Intensive Engagement with a Select Group of Theorists and Texts	Conversations among Theorists	Dialogues between Life and Theory
Ethnographic versus survey method of teaching	Depth versus breadth	Dialogic versus teleologic	Concrete/contemporary versus abstract/historical
Limits of survey course	A comprehensive survey of social theory can narrow students' ability to engage with the depth required for interpretation and application.	Limited amount of time on each theorist reduces comparisons and conversations between theorists. Comparisons tend toward (1) teleology, portrayed as a march of "advances," or (2) instrumental, used as a means to distinguish one theory from another.	A broad chronological overview tends to fossilize social theories as abstract historical artifacts that can seem irrelevant to students' lives. More often uses lived experiences and current events to help demonstrate/explain social theories.
Response to limits	Select a limited group of theorists who can be productively placed in dialogue over a theoretical problem (e.g., division of labor). Assign short but carefully selected passages.	Place conversation between theories at the center rather than periphery of lectures and discussion. Formulate lectures and guide class discussions along multiple axes of conversations: (1) between works of a single theorist, (2) evolution of a theoretical tradition, and (3) debates between theorists within/across traditions.	Provide students with ample opportunities to practice using social theory to explain social relations and institutions. Use lived experiences to demonstrate how theory illuminates the world around us and how the world around us exposes theories' external anomalies and internal contradictions. Then assist students in reconstructing theory on its own terms using alternative theoretical lenses.
Limits of ethnographic approach	Covers a more limited array of theorists and concepts.	Privileges conversation at the expense of historical chronology.	Loosens the link between theory and historical context.

meet Weber and ending with three feminist thinkers spread across the 20th century (de Beauvoir, MacKinnon, and Collins). Theory teachers accustomed to the more traditional division between classical and contemporary theory may find such a schedule jarring, as this approach challenges instructors to carefully curate conversations around a meta-theme rather than tracing the more familiar continuity of intellectual history. Likewise, our efforts to construct conversations between students' lives and our texts loosen the link between

theory and historical context. We spend as much time dragging Marx and Durkheim to the current State of the Union and Foucault to a recent cable television program as we do detailing the industrial revolution or postmodernism.

In addition to the structural limitations of the method, we also confronted a practical challenge in training students to become theorists in their own right: balancing students' need for clear instruction on how to interpret, criticize, and reconstruct theory with the space they needed to practice creatively applying

these skills. Lectures typically pose and guide students through a variety of conversations between theorists (e.g., what Foucault might say about Gramsci's "regulated society" and how Gramsci might respond in turn). Although this approach initially privileged instructors' textual interpretations over those of our students, we believed this structure was necessary to model for students how they could create their own conversations between theorists. In essence, students would have to demonstrate that they had learned a set of theoretical rules before they were permitted to break them.

Ideally, students would depart from lecture "warmed up" to construct similar (but unique) conversations in discussion sections, on assignments, and during exams. In reality, for every student who dazzled us with penetrating and original interpretations of the texts, there was another who drew problematic comparisons between theorists or simply regurgitated examples already presented in lecture. Such instances may signal to instructors the need to rearticulate the key components of a theory in the classroom, in written feedback to students, or in office hours, and provide additional opportunities for these students to practice cross-theorist conversations.

Additionally, we do not wish to leave readers with the impression that all students benefitted equally from our approach. In terms of course content, the ethnographic approach can be considered an equalizer in comparison to survey courses focused on volume and summarizing theories because it does not privilege those with extensive prior knowledge of social theory. On the other hand, the ethnographic approach proved more challenging to students who lacked experience in thinking and writing critically and creatively about sociological concepts. There is no doubt that the ethnographic method presents some subsets of students with additional hurdles. The Berkeley sociology major is quite diverse: Transfer students accustomed to survey-type courses, students whose first language is not English, working students with less time to spare, and those whose prior educational experiences provided less rigorous preparation were often more likely to struggle when initially confronting this approach. For many—especially those not accustomed to classes organized around deep engagement with complex texts—the course was at first daunting and a significant source of anxiety.

We took steps to minimize these issues. First, discussion is closely grounded in assigned materials, and we exclude analysis of other portions of text that some students may have read in previous courses. Second, Berkeley students who wish to continue discussion beyond the classroom can seek

extra help in weekly one-on-one or small group sessions with GSIs during office hours as well as weekly open-ended Q&A sessions conducted by Professor Burawoy. Many took advantage of these resources, and many also chose to organize independent study groups that met regularly.

Instructors teaching theory in large lecture settings without graduate student assistants and those charged with teaching theory in a single semester or quarter will undoubtedly face practical challenges in executing a method that emphasizes deep reading, conversation, and application. Still, we encourage such instructors to consider how the ethnographic method suggests alternatives to the survey approach. Reasonable adjustments to the advocated method can and should be made at the discretion of instructors. We offer three basic tips for approximating this ideal-typical approach at the moment of course design: (1) Assign relatively small amounts of text for immersive reading, (2) position texts around a basic theme (e.g., the division of labor) in order to facilitate dialogues between authors, and (3) organize opportunities for students to connect their lived experiences to interpreting and challenging course material.

Indeed, we believe that this shorthand framework can be applied to courses beyond social theory. Consider, for instance, a course on research methods. Like its sibling theory course, this methods course could be constructed around an enduring question (e.g., How does race affect life chances?). The instructor of such a course would carefully select readings that approach the same general question using different methods. He or she would likely ask and re-ask students how participant observers, in-depth interviewers, survey researchers, historical-comparative scholars, and other social scientists address this central question and how their methods might enable or foreclose particular answers. Such cross-textual conversations would present unique opportunities for students to critically analyze the epistemological assumptions inherent in each method and what types of knowledge each is most likely to surface and obfuscate. Throughout the course, the instructor would also integrate students' lived experiences by assigning original research projects using various methods to address questions about the world around them.

McKinney and colleagues' (2004) ASA report on *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major* notes the variation in undergraduate programs' course offerings and requirements in sociological theory. Some departments offer a course that combines classical and contemporary theory, while others separate them; some

require majors to take one theory course, while others require two. The report concludes that a program's decision on "which ones to require, the level at which to offer them, and whether to sequence them should be based on mission and learning objectives, number of students and faculty as well as the needs and interests of the majors" (p. 6).

We urge sociology departments to reflect on how the ethnographic approach to teaching theory—particularly within the context of an integrated two-semester theory sequence—could help them meet their learning objectives. We believe that this approach can be a valuable addition to any department aiming to cultivate social theorists who can interpret, adjudicate between, and practice social theories in their everyday lives. As one student wrote on her course evaluation, "Today, I look at the world through a social theory lens. I see power dynamics, exploitation, control, monitoring, subjugation, consciousness-raising, and solidarity constantly. I can see and apply theory everywhere."

AUTHORS' NOTE

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NOTE

1. Podcasts of course lectures can be found at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/sociology-101-001-fall-2013/id703885884?mt=10> and <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/sociology-102-001-spring-2014/id804533115?mt=10>. For syllabi, see <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/courses.htm>.

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