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Fuck Nuance[*]

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Abstract: Seriously, fuck it.

INTRODUCTION

Nuance is not a virtue of good sociological theory. Sociologists typically use it as a term of praise, and almost without exception when nuance is mentioned it is because someone is asking for more of it. I shall argue that, for the problems facing Sociology at present, demanding more nuance typically obstructs the development of theory that is intellectually interesting, empirically generative, or practically successful.

As alleged virtues go, nuance is superficially attractive. Isn't the mark of a good thinker the ability to see subtle differences in kind or gracefully shade the meaning terms? Shouldn't we cultivate the ability to insinuate overtones of meaning in our concepts? Further, isn't nuance especially appropriate to the difficult problems we study? I am sure that, like mine, your research problems are complex, rich, and multi-faceted. (Why would you study them if they were simple, thin, and one-dimensional?) When

faced with problems like that, a cultivated capacity for nuance might seem to reflect both the difficulty of the topic and the sophistication of the researcher approaching it. I am sure that, like me, you are a sophisticated thinker. When sophisticated people like us face this rich and complex world, how can nuance not be the wisest approach?

It would be foolish, not to say barely comprehensible, for me to try to argue against the idea of nuance in general. That would be like arguing against the idea of yellow, or the concept of ostriches. It does not make much sense, in any case, to think of nuance as something that has a distinctive role all of its own in theory, or as something that we can add to or take away from theory just as we please. That is a bit like the author whom Mary McCarthy described busily revising a short story in order to "put in the symbols" (Goodman 1978, 58). What I will call "Actually-Existing Nuance" in sociological theory refers to a common and specific phenomenon, one most everyone working in Sociology has witnessed, fallen victim to, or perpetrated at some time. It is the act of making—or the call to make—some bit of theory "richer" or "more sophisticated" by adding complexity to it, usually by way of some additional dimension, level, or aspect, but in the absence of any strong means of disciplining or specifying the relationship between the new elements and the existing ones. Theorists do this to themselves and demand it of others. It is typically a holding maneuver. It is what you do when faced with a question that you do not yet have a compelling or interesting answer to. Thinking up compelling or interesting ideas is quite difficult, and so often it is easier to embrace complexity than cut through it.

It is not that theory should be maximally simple. Generative research programs develop theories that aim for a fruitful combination of simplicity and strength (Lewis 1973, 73). Those theories are built out with the aid of some techniques or rules that actively constrain what one can say. It can be hard to abide by whatever these formal, logical, or methodological rules demand. Yet in practice they are what keep the theory under control. Actually-Existing Nuance is not burdened by this constraint. It is more like a free-floating request that something more be added. When faced with a problem that is hard to solve, or a line of thinking that requires us to commit to some defeasible claim, or a logical dilemma we must bite the bullet on, the nuance-promoting theorist says "But isn't it more *complicated* than that?"; or "Isn't it really *both/and*?"; or "Aren't these phenomena *mutually constitutive*?"; or "How does your theory deal with Structure, or Culture, or Temporality, or Power, or [some other abstract noun]?". This sort of nuance is fundamentally anti-theoretical. It blocks the process of abstraction that theory depends on. By now it covers large parts of sociological theory much as kudzu covers large parts of the South: it is so widespread and well-established that it seems to be a native feature of the landscape. But in fact it is a pernicious and invasive weed.

NUANCE TRAPS

Let me be clear about what is and is not at stake. Theory in Sociology is a heterogeneous enterprise, mostly because the discipline is so thematically wide-ranging. This is a polite way of saying that Sociology is only weakly disciplinary. But polite or impolite, the upshot is the same. Interesting work in the field is very varied in scope, method, and style. Factions in Sociology have at various times tried to subsume or expel one another. Their successes have never been more than partial and temporary. Like society itself, Sociology is motley and manifold. Thus, I do not advocate some religion of theoretical salvation you must all convert to. For example, I will not argue that everyone should start formally modeling things—even though model systems are very useful sorts of fictions that foster collaborative investigation of the world (Godfrey-Smith 2009; Paul 2012). These may be mathematical, but they also include things like model organisms, model cases, and real or artificial model settings, something that tends to be under-appreciated by Sociologists. I will not argue you must embrace some Great Thinker who Understood Everything, whether in the "classical" or "contemporary" era—even though I do think the best parts of the theorists we most often teach are hardly ever the nuanced parts. I certainly will not have the gall to rule some topical areas or research programs off-limits *a priori*—even though I may not be that interested in what you are working on right now, and you might feel the same way about me. And I will not advocate that we retreat from or abandon theory—even though I am the sort of person who likes to look at pictures of data, and feel we should do that pretty often (Healy and Moody 2014). We need better theory, not less of it.

However, I do claim that the more we tend to value nuance as such—that is, as a virtue to be cultivated, or as the first thing to look for when assessing arguments—the more we will tend to slide towards one or more of three nuance traps. First is the ever more detailed, merely empirical description of the world. This is the nuance of the *fine-grain*. It is a rejection of theory masquerading as increased applicability or range. Second is the ever more extensive expansion of some theoretical system in a way that effectively closes it off from rebuttal or disconfirmation by anything in the world. This is the nuance of the *conceptual framework*. It is an evasion of the demand that a theory be refutable. And third is the insinuation that your sensitivity to nuance is a manifestation of one's distinctive (often metaphorically expressed and at times seemingly ineffable) ability to grasp and express the richness, texture, and flow of social reality itself. This is the nuance of the *connoisseur*. It is mostly a species of self-congratulatory symbolic violence.

Of these nuance traps, Sociology has historically been most prone to the nuance of the conceptual framework (Rule 1997, Chapter 4). This is thanks to Talcott Parsons' inexhaustible capacity to pause for a moment, back up, and ask "What are the general prerequisites for answering this question?" when faced with literally any sociological

question—including *that* question (Parsons 1937, 1952). In seminars, at conferences, and in the current literature, however, the other two nuance traps are by now more common. There is a strong tendency to embrace the fine-grain, both as a means of defense against criticism and as a moral guarantor of the value of everyone's empirical research project. Relatedly, there is a desire to equate calling for a more sophisticated approach to a theoretical problem with actually providing one, and to tie such calls to the alleged sophistication of the people making them.

I will make a three-part case against Actually-Existing Nuance, focusing mostly on the nuances of the fine-grain and the connoisseur. First, I ask whether nuance is in principle a feature of good theory—that is, theory that seems to produce correct explanations for things. Second, I ask whether nuance is a feature of interesting theory—that is, theory that we both want to dig our teeth into and feel good about having chewed on afterwards. And third, I ask whether nuance is a feature of theory likely to produce professionally or publicly influential social science. The answer to all of these questions is No.

ON PRINCIPLED GROUNDS

Demands for more nuance actively inhibit the process of abstraction that good theory depends on. What is abstraction here? It is not simply generalization—the production of law-like statements like "All ravens are black" or "All social revolutions are precipitated by fiscal crisis in the presence of divided elites" (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948). It is not metaphorical or analogical reasoning, either. Analogical reasoning is a common and powerful tool for theory and it has abstract elements, but it is a more involved process than simple abstraction (Hesse 1966; Stebbing 1933). Gideon Rosen provides a helpful definition of what I have in mind. Abstraction is a way of thinking where "new ideas or conceptions are formed by considering several objects or ideas and omitting the features that distinguish them" (Rosen 2014, Sec. 6). Abstraction means throwing away detail, getting rid of particulars. You start with a variety of different things or events—objects, people, countries—and by *ignoring* how they differ you produce some abstract concept like "furniture", or "honor killing", or "social-democratic welfare state".

This sort of abstraction is part of the guts of social theory. By doing it you produce the concepts that you then use to make explanatory generalizations, or that you analogize with across cases. Rosen goes on to remark that, when you do this, an immediate challenge is that "Nothing … requires that ideas formed in this way represent or correspond to a distinctive kind of object."[1] There's no guarantee that your abstraction

[1] Rosen means something specific here by "object"—he is discussing philosophical theories about the existence of abstract objects. This is not relevant to our purposes, so we can just gloss this as referring to the sorts of things social scientists want their theories to be about.

will be of any use, by whatever lights you have for theory being useful. We want our abstract concepts to do something for us. In spiritually pure terms, we want them to help us get the right answer to what we're puzzling about. In a more businesslike manner, we want to sell our journal article by saying it has a novel concept that others should use (and cite).

This means not just any old abstract idea will do. We all know that figuring out whether a theoretical concept is any good or not is a central problem of abstraction. The literature on producing defensible ideas is pretty good and reasonably well-formalized. But the literature on how to produce *good* or *productive* ideas is much more vague. It is a set of strategies, tricks, and heuristics. If there were a recipe, we'd all be following it. As Humphrey Lyttleton replied when asked where Jazz was going, "If I knew where Jazz was going I'd be there already" (Winch 1958, 87). When facing this problem, a standard—and by now pervasive—move made by sociologists is to assess the value of a concept or theory in terms of what it leaves out. It is difficult to participate in seminars or attend professional meetings in contemporary Sociology and *not* hear an audience member say to a speaker that their theory or research is missing something, or has ignored some dimension, or neglected to adequately address some feature of social reality.

That is the kudzu of nuance. It makes us shy away from the riskier aspects of abstraction and theory-building generally, especially if it is the first and most frequent response we hear. Instead of pushing some abstraction or argument along for a while to see where it goes, there is a tendency to start hedging theory with particulars. People complain that you're leaving some level or dimension out, and tell you to bring it back in. Crucially, "accounting for", "addressing", or "dealing" with the missing item is an unconstrained process. That is, the question is not how a theory can handle this or that issue internally, but rather the suggestion to expand it with this new term or terms. Class, Institutions, Emotions, Structure, Culture, Interaction—all of them are taken generically to "matter", and you must acknowledge that they matter by incorporating them. Incorporation is the reintroduction of particularizing elements, even though those particulars were what you had to throw away in order to make your concept a theoretically useful abstraction in the first place. To make a loose statistical analogy, it is a little like continuing to add variables to a regression on the grounds that the explained variance keeps going up. It is a small irony that many of those most likely to request unconstrained additive complexity from a theoretical framework would also say this sort of quantitative move is hopelessly atheoretical.

There are two linked reasons this move is so pervasive. The first is the heterogeneity of research topics that sociologists pursue, which means that everyone is tempted to bring the particulars of their own empirical case to bear on whatever theoretical idea is being developed. Our discipline's structure invites the fine-grain. With so much variation there is a sometimes justified fear that an empirical area will be ignored on

the grounds that it is not "theoretically interesting". We fall back on having to justify the theoretical centrality of every particular case, even if we really are just interested in developing good piecemeal explanations for them. But neither the substantive importance nor the theoretical interest of specific topics or cases depends on them being "incorporated" into theory in this way.

On the other side, nuance flourishes because of the relative absence of shared standards for the evaluation of theory. Those standards can be those of logic, for instance, or model-building, or research methods, or even simply an agreed-on focus on an empirically delimited area. With one or more of those in place, abstractions become possible and theory can develop. But in their absence, there is a tendency to fall back on assertions of multi-dimensionality or worry that one has to "account for" everything at once. Our discipline's methods encourage connoisseurs. Any nascent theory can be ambushed by the demand that it address several large conceptual abstractions, and condemned to fail when it does not.

The result is a lot of unproductive blocking. Both specific explanations and more abstract concepts and theories suffer. By calling for a theory to be more comprehensive, or for an explanation to include additional dimensions, or a concept to become more flexible and multifaceted, we paradoxically end up with *less* clarity. We lose information by adding detail. A further odd consequence is that the apparent scope of theories increases even as the range of their actually-accomplished application in explanations narrows. Nuance is often elaborated in the context of relatively specific cases. With a lot of connected empirical material to make sense of, researchers immersed in that detail are tempted to develop a suitably rich or complex "theoretical framework" that allows them to hold on to as much of it as possible in their explanation. The particulars are "brought in" to the theory as general dimensions or levels of analysis—e.g., by nesting individuals, interactions, neighborhoods, and states; or by considering social-psychological, cultural, and structural aspects of the phenomenon; or by the simple claim that (for example) institutions matter, power matters, and culture matters, along with something new that the particular case suggests also matters.

It is usually impossible to generate the sort of empirical data that would do all of these dimensions justice, or allow them to be systematically compared or related. Instead the result is a constellation of cases, each with its own grotesquely overpowered theoretical vocabulary. Concept stands near concept—"Culture!" "Structure!" "Meaning!" "Power!"—like a herd of Brontosauruses ruminating in a primeval swamp. Each lumbering monster is in the same body of water, but with little else in the way of contact.

ON AESTHETIC GROUNDS

The blocking that nuance causes is not just a matter of practical or strictly empirical utility. It also has an aesthetic aspect. This is most obvious with the nuance of the connoisseur. Connoisseurs call for the contemplation of complexity almost for its own sake, or remind everyone that things are more subtle than they seem, or than you just said. The attractive thing about this move is that it is literally always available to the person who wants to make it. Theory is founded on abstraction, abstraction means throwing away detail for the sake of a bit of generality, and so things are *always* "more complicated than that"—for any value of "that". Connoisseurship gets its aesthetic bite, and a little kick of symbolic violence, from the easy insinuation that the person trying to simplify things is, sadly, a bit less sophisticated a thinker than the person pointing out that things are more complicated.

Social theory in this aestheticized mode operates in a similar way to the discourse surrounding fine wine, cuisine, or art. A logic of sophisticated appreciation prevails, combined with a hierarchy of taste based on one's knowledge of the world, or knowledge of what people have written about the world. Aestheticized theory resembles these institutional spheres because connoisseurship thrives best in settings where judgment is frequent but measurement is hard. This favors the development and expansion of specialist vocabularies that are highly elaborated but only loosely connected to measurable features of what is being talked about. There are rules governing the use of these vocabularies, but they are hard to learn. Moreover, while you may be confident that there is *some* sort of reliable connection between the vocabulary and the object, you cannot really be sure you are competent unless you have been certified by another expert in the field. A Master Sommelier probably knows a lot more about wine than you, but it is still reasonable to be skeptical whether detailed wine-talk has any sort of codifiable connection to the taste of wines. Sociological theory in this style is carried on in a similar cloud of terms that allow for rich verbal expression that carries with it clear signals of the sophistication of the speaker.

It is important to stress that the aesthetic dimension of theory is not simply the preserve of opaque Europeans. The alternative to the nuance of the connoisseur is not some pure world of scientific theory free from aesthetic considerations and subject only to the direct constraints of empirical evidence, clear thinking, and graceful prose. To borrow a technical term from Harry Frankfurt (1988), that is bullshit. Indeed, "I Don't Take Any Bullshit" is an especially tedious sort of bullshit. It is better to acknowledge the aesthetic aspect of theory explicitly and choose to embrace a style.

Which style? The best expression of an alternative theoretical aesthetic to the connoisseur remains Murray Davis's analysis of what makes theory *interesting* (Davis 1971). Rather than try to reduce the virtues of theory to their strictly instrumental or formal aspects, Davis convincingly argues that whether a theory is interesting

or not makes a very big difference to how it will be received by its audience. To a first approximation, we care much more about whether theories are interesting than whether they are true. Truth matters a great deal too, especially in the long run of intellectual life—and also in the short run, insofar as your theory is about things like the construction of bridges or the operation of aircraft engines. But in the human sciences such direct applications are typically a long way off, the "Policy Implications" sections of social science articles notwithstanding. In the everyday practice of sociological theory, a Davis-like criterion of interestingness is much preferable to a connoisseur-like criterion of nuance and complexity.

Davis's account is usefully dialogical. He has a convincing explanation of how interestingness is depends on the relationship between the theoretical claim being made, the position of the person making it, and the composition of the audience hearing it. The same idea may be interesting or dull depending on these relationships. Things that seem quite boring to researchers embedded in a field may be very interesting or even radical when presented to non-expert audiences. Note that this also means that adding nuance can potentially be interesting at times. The implication is that the badness of nuance is somewhat relative to the current audience and research communities. It also suggests that the worst sort of idea is one that presents as a breakthrough something that experts already take for granted—for example, the claim by a sociologist to other sociologists that it is important to take a sociological (or more often, a *sociological*) approach.

ON STRATEGIC GROUNDS

In addition to blocking new ideas and being pretty boring, in the long run nuance fails as a strategy for getting people to read and care about what you have to say. To take the most obvious example, it is traditional in Sociology to deride the way Economists work, depending as they do on an extremely pared-down model of human action. There is no less nuanced a character than *Homo Economicus*. While it is easy to snipe at theory on this basis, the strategy of assuming a can opener (as the old desert-island joke goes) turns out to be an unreasonably effective way of generating some powerful ideas.

In March of 1979, Michel Foucault gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France where he discussed the work of Gary Becker (Foucault 2010). One of the things Foucault saw right away was the scope and ambition of Becker's project, and the conceptual turn—accompanying wider social changes—which would enable economics to become not just a topic of study, like geology or English literature, but rather an "approach to human behavior" (Becker 1978). Foucault argued that Becker's innovation was to shift from the study of the economy as an institutional order of exchange to the "nature and consequences of substitutible choices":

> … The stake in all neo-liberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself … In other words, the neo-liberals say that labor was in principle part of economic analysis, but the way in which classical economic analysis was conducted was incapable of dealing with this element. Good, we do deal with it. And when we make this analysis, and do so in the terms I have just described, they are led to study how human capital is formed and accumulated, and this enables them to apply economic analyses to completely new fields and domains. (Foucault 2010, 222–227)

The shifts in focus Foucault picks out, and the concepts and methods that accompanied them, are why Becker's influence has been so enormous, why his work has been the straw man in so many social science articles, why his methods allow for such broad application, why the imagery of choice and responsibility that so often accompanies them has proved so politically attractive, why the world is now full of economists who feel empowered to dispense advice on everything from childrearing to global climate change, and why the audience for this advice is so large.

One of the pleasing things about these lectures is the way Foucault refuses to let his Parisian audience settle in to a dismissive reaction. He scolds them (p.246) about finding an economic analysis of the family simple-minded and amusing by reminding them of Pierre Rivière's description of his peasant parents' marriage. ("I will work on your field, the man says to the woman, but on condition that I can make love with you. And the woman says: You will not make love with me so long as you have not fed my chickens.") And a little later, in connection with Becker's analysis of crime, we find this:

> In his article "Crime and Punishment" Becker gives this definition of crime: I call crime any action that makes the individual run the risk of being condemned to a penalty. [*Some laughter.*] I am surprised you laugh, because it is after all very roughly the definition of crime given by the French penal code, and so of the codes inspired by it, since you are well aware how the code defines a criminal offence: a criminal offence is that which is punished by correctional penalties. … The crime is that which is punished by the law, and that's all there is to it. So, you can see the neo-liberals' definition is very close. (Foucault 2010, 251)

Here we see Michel Foucault using the work of Gary Becker to remind an audience at the Collège de France about a central insight of Émile Durkheim.

Becker is a useful case simply because his work is so often the target of nuance-based strawmanning in other social sciences. But, as noted above, I am not arguing you should

adopt this or any other theory in particular. We do not have to look outside Sociology to find useful examples. Durkheim himself is an excellent case. A thinker indifferent to fairly representing his interlocutors, and notorious for begging the question (Lukes 1992, 31–2), Durkheim theorized like a pig for most of his career, snuffling through Philosophy and Anthropology to emerge, covered in dirt, with a few truffle-like ideas that he relentlessly pushed because they were so empirically productive.

Still confining ourselves to the canonical triumvirate of sociological theorists, it seems clear that the ideas that continue to interest us most are not their most nuanced work. It is not the labyrinth of the *Grundrisse* that still attracts sociologists to Marx, it is Marx's much more straightforward theory of politics as material struggle over resources in an era of rapid technological change. Weber, too, tends to divide into his nuanced and blunt components. As the Ancient Historian G.E.M. de Ste Croix remarks,

> At times Weber can be lucid enough, even for quite long stretches; but often lapses into an obscurity which does not always repay the repeated rereadings it invites (Croix 1981, 85).

The Weber we still work with is the typologizing Weber—three kinds of authority, two kinds of rationality, the basic characterization of bureaucracy. We also draw on the visionary Weber, he of the Last Ton of Coal and the Polar Night of Icy Darkness. The details of rice rents under prebendal feudalism, or the question of whether the Turkish *sipahi* were properly fiefs or benefices, or the numerous distinctions between kinds of action, tend to fall away.[2]

In an ideal world the development of sociological theory would not be driven by strategic considerations. But the chances are that valuing nuance as such is not going to do much for us in the long run, whether we consider our situation individually or from a disciplinary point of view. Even Hume took the trouble to condense, simplify, and then rewrite his *Treatise* after it fell dead-born from the press.

CONCLUSION

You probably have some objections. One obvious response is a *tu quoque*. "Aha," Professor Nuance says, "look at the various distinctions you have made—these three different Nuance Traps! The aspects of the issue you pick out! The specific definition of nuance you gave! Doesn't this sound a little … *nuanced* to you?" No. As I said

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[2]Unless of course you are working on problems of patrimonial military organization in the near East. As noted above, nuance is not something that we can add or take away in the abstract. It's a question of research context.

at the outset, there is no point in arguing against "nuance" as such, only its practical manifestation in our field at present. Actually-Existing Nuance is not the same as making some distinctions, or being careful about what you are arguing, or being able to count to three. Nor is it simply the opposite of being stupid. Indeed, the tendency to see nuance as *equivalent* to being intelligent is just another tool of the connoisseur.

A second objection is to deny that social theory has a nuance problem at all. This is slightly paradoxical coming from people who insist the world is full of rich complexity, but it's not out of the question. I could have made my case by picking out some egregious examples of overly-nuanced theory and then spent my time ridiculing them. But I deliberately chose not to curse at anyone in particular, and avoided getting into personal fights. (I'm told this was a more common approach to theory in Sociology during the 1970s.) Instead, I invite you to spend some time in the theory literature, in conference sessions, and in seminar rooms, and decide for yourself whether Actually-Existing Nuance actually exists. I believe it does.

A third objection, or plea, is to say that there must surely be *some* room for subtlety of thought and fine distinctions of meaning in a social theory worthy of the name. I am happy to grant this. As I have argued, whether subtlety and distinction-making is intellectually productive or deathly boring is not really a feature of those practices themselves, considered in isolation, but of where it is being done and for whom. For the sake of argument, imagine a base rate of nuance production characterizing research and argument of decently average quality. Given the current state of theory in some field, the question is—should we be trying to increase the supply, or reduce it? My context is theorizing in American Sociology at the time I am writing. We are glutted with nuance. I say, fuck it.

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