

Call for abstracts and papers

Special issue of Current Sociology (Current Sociology Monograph series)

Guiding distinctions of social theory. Analogue guidelines or digital transformers?

Proponents

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Theme

The concept of “guiding distinctions” refers to distinctions – such as economy/society, bourgeoisie/proletariat, community/society, nature/culture, system/environment, structure/agency, north/south, black/white, male/female, or, most recently, analogue/digital – that guide theory-building, frame research, spark controversies, or dominate discourses in sociology and neighbouring social sciences.

The rise of digital technology has prompted the need for critical reflections on existing and emerging guiding distinctions. This is particularly crucial in understanding their impact on shaping and transforming social theorization and epistemic hierarchies across diverse global contexts. This special issue encourages creative contemplation. Contributions are especially sought from scholars based in, or conducting research on, the Global South or under-represented communities.

The understanding of distinctions in social theory has evolved considerably since the foundational contributions of theorists like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. These early frameworks primarily seemed to offer discrete and dichotomic categorizations, serving as initial tools for social theorising. However, over time, researchers acknowledged the interrelated nature of the categories introduced and employed by the classics, along with their usefulness as productive (and active) tools rather than (passive) descriptors. The concept of intersectionality, for instance, was coined to explore how race, class, and gender converge to produce and sustain complex social experiences. In parallel ways, shifts in perspective from viewing these distinctions as static to understanding them as dynamic social constructs became prominent. Thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, for instance, in the light of more or less profoundly altered circumstances, echoed Hegel’s dialectical and Marx’s critical examinations of the stability and validity of traditional distinctions, thus casting light on power structures they often concealed and reinforced. Systems theory, particularly as articulated by Niklas Luhmann, presents distinctions as self-observing mechanisms in social systems. Concurrently, advances in computational methods facilitate large-scale, quantitative analyses of social

distinctions, complementing and enhancing established qualitative approaches. Globalization necessitated further nuancing these distinctions, introducing variables like individualism and collectivism as frameworks for cross-cultural study. Temporal shifts, often catalysed by historical events or social movements, have also problematised and reshaped such seemingly rigid distinctions as race and ethnicity.

The rise of digital technology has spawned new distinctions like online/offline and user/algorithm, challenging and expanding existing theoretical frameworks. Digital technology has been reshaping social theory by altering such traditional distinctions as public/private and by introducing novel distinctions, e.g., online/offline. By implication, it also has been expanding methodological approaches and enabling large-scale quantitative analyses alongside qualitative methods. Digital technology also globalizes “ –de-provincializes” -- cultural contexts, in the process complicating conventional distinctions and introducing fluidity as a feature of temporal changes, and reconfiguring distinctions such as gender or race. Finally, digital technology currently is transforming the activity of theorizing through digital platforms that allow real-time, collaborative discourse.

A focus on the guiding distinctions social theory is therefore not only of general relevance as a mode of critical reflection on past, present, and future trends in social theorising and research, but also specifically as a means to address the challenges of the ongoing digital transformation of society and the academic disciplines charged with illuminating the latter.

ICT and the increasing availability of digital data are dramatically changing the processes of research and knowledge production in sociology. While the pace, scale, and scope of methodological innovation in digital sociology and the computational social sciences are impressive, theory development is much less dynamic in these fields (Roth 2019; Roth et al., 2019) not least due to resistance against the digital transformation, including the digital transformation of social theory, particularly among critical sociologists (Ossewaarde 2019). This mismatch is problematic as digital methods do not only provide ever-larger datasets for the testing of established theories, but also allow and even call for new forms of digital theorising (Kitchin 2014). Novel and innovative forms of theorising would imply the translation of analogue content into digital, binary distinctions such as 1/0. Contributions to our proposed special issue will therefore address questions of the following non-exclusive type:

1. What are influential guiding distinctions and how have they shaped sociological theorising and research? What are the guiding distinctions in the making, and where do they come from? How have guiding distinctions shaped social theorisation and social research in different parts of the world?
2. Are extant guiding distinctions in sociology useful for digital sociological theorising and research? If not, how can prominent analogue distinctions be translated into digital ones?
3. Does analogue sociological content exist that can or must not be translated into digital one? (How) Have manifestations of digital technology in the social world challenged or subverted prominent analogue distinctions in sociological theorising and research and/or transformed traditional epistemic hierarchies?
4. Is it necessary or desirable to defend and protect the analogue lifeworld (of theorising) from its translation into digital systems (theories)?
5. What prospects for trans-paradigmatic digital theory platforms or theoretical operation systems exist or are conceivable that can process all pertinent guiding distinctions?

Organisational background

The present call for abstracts and papers is associated with initiatives from two paradigmatically different communities, namely the International Social Theory Consortium (ISTC: <http://www.socialtheory.org>) and the Luhmann Conference (<https://luhmannconference.com>). Both communities have been organising conferences for over a decade now. Whereas the ISTC (founded in 2000) has been a gathering place that is welcoming – nonexclusively – to a broad range of social political and critical theorists and philosophers, as well as sociologists, the Luhmann Conference has been a prime venue for scholars influenced by social systems theory and cybernetics. Both communities will synchronise their 2024 conference activities with the topical focus of the proposed special issue of *Current Sociology*. In the case of the Luhmann Conference community, the motto of its 2024 Conference in Dubrovnik will be “Guiding distinctions. Observed with social systems theory.” The ISTC 2024, for its part, is planning to include dedicated tracks on the proposed special issue topic. The support of these two paradigmatically different and diverse communities combined with an open call will warrant for a most diverse set of contributions to the proposed special issue. Moreover, while the ISTC conference venues have traditionally been alternating between the North America and Europe (and attracting participants from other parts of the world with less frequency), the Luhmann Conference has turned into a truly global event regularly attracting submissions and presenters not only from a broad range of European countries, but also from countries such as Brazil, Armenia, South Africa, Japan, Malaysia, the United States, or Australia.

Expected contributions

The guest editors welcome regular research papers of either theoretical or empirical nature, or innovative combinations of both. In addition, there is dedicated space for unconventional formats and interventions from both scholars and storytellers or artists. Non-traditional formats will also act to diversify contributions with regard to the authors' regional, age, or social background.

Timeline

- 15 June 2024: Deadline for submission of abstracts of 500-1000 words. Please email your abstracts to the corresponding special issue editor, Prof. Dr. Steffen Roth, roths@excelia-group.com.
- 10 September 2024: Deadline for full paper submission. All papers should be submitted through *Current Sociology*'s [ScholarOne](#) portal, following the [submission guidelines](#).
- 1 December 2024: Review feedback and decisions on acceptance, revision, or rejection.
- 1 February 2025: Deadline for submission of revised manuscripts.

The special issue is scheduled for publication in July 2025.

Proponents' biography

Steffen Roth is Full Professor of Management at Excelsia Business School, La Rochelle, France, and Full Professor of Social Sciences as well as President of the Senate at Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius, Lithuania. He is also Adjunct Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland, Visiting Professor of Management and Organization at the University of Witten-Herdecke, Germany, and member of the Executive Committee of the Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, Croatia. Steffen is the field editor for social systems theory of *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* and a member of the editorial board of *Sociology*. He has been a co-guest editor of numerous special issues of academic journals such as, more recently, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* (2019), *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (2023), or *Futures* (in press). The journals his research has been published in include *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Ecological Economics*, *Administration and Society*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, *European Management Journal*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, and *Futures*.

Steve Watson is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, where his work is in the transdisciplinary sociology and theory in the context of education. His research considers the AI, especially large language models and their role and implications in and for society and education. He has also published research on the sociology of media, politics, and education. His work is informed by George Spencer Brown and Niklas Luhmann drawing on the ideas of distinction and recursion in the abductive conceptualisation of social phenomena and lived experience in the context of education and in relation to technology. He is currently an editor on the *Cambridge Journal of Education*. He has published research in the *British Education Research Journal*, *Critical Studies in Education*, *Globalisations*, *Societies and Education*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*.

Harry F. Dahms is Full Professor of Sociology, co-director of the Center for the Study of Social Justice and co-chair of the Committee on Social Theory at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA. Dahms is also director of the International Social Theory Consortium (ISTC). His primary research and teaching areas are theoretical sociology (social, sociological, and critical theory), economic sociology, globalization, planetary sociology, social inequality, social justice, artificial intelligence, and science fiction. He is the editor of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* and has been a co-guest editor of several special issues in academic journals, including *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* and *Futures*. In addition to numerous contributions to *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, his research has been published in such journals as *Sociological Theory*, *Critical Sociology*, *Comparative Sociology*, *Basic Income Studies*, *Bulletin of Science, Technology, & Society*, *Fast Capitalism*, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, and numerous edited volumes.

Arthur Atanesyan is a full professor and head of the Applied Sociology Department at the Yerevan State University, Armenia. He holds a PhD in Political Sciences from the Armenian National Academy of Sciences and a habilitation from the Armenian Institute of National Strategic Studies. He was a Fulbright scholar at the University of South Carolina, US, and a visiting scholar at the Tufts University, US. His research has been published in journals such as *Южно-российский журнал социальных наук*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, *Demokratizatsiya*, or *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan University*.

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