

# Theory's Best Practice

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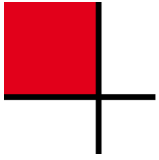
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## Theory's best practice

Sverre Spoelstra

### abstract

Why is theorizing important? What does it do? This note reflects on the broad question of what we do when we theorize, taking its starting point from the Greek notion of *theoria*. The argument is that theorizing as an uncertain journey, i.e. as a form of travelling along a path towards the unknown or unfamiliar, has unjustly fallen into disrepute. The notion of 'theory' is today primarily associated with methodology and the ideas of a fixed path or a stable position. But this is not the only type of theory that critical organization studies needs. In this paper I consider how the notions of 'strong' and 'weak' theory can help us understand the role of theorizing in organization. Theory's best practice involves making us see and think differently, and this, in a sense, is as practical as it gets.

### Introduction

In 2004, the *ephemera* collective replaced its original subtitle, 'critical dialogues on organization', with a new version: 'theory and politics in organization'. The first had survived for just three years, while the second has remained with us ever since. This should not be surprising, given that *ephemera* has always had a dual focus on theory, with a special interest in philosophy, on the one hand, and in politics, and the movements that challenge the hegemony of transnational corporations in particular, on the other.

When I joined *ephemera*, around the same time as the change in subtitle, the collective was fairly evenly split between those who were mainly interested in philosophy of organization in its own right and those who were interested in philosophy of organization to the extent that it provides the tools to resist contemporary capitalism. One might say that the split was roughly between those who were in it for the practice of theorizing and those who saw theorizing as a vehicle for practice. The difference between the two, to the extent that it can be maintained (in theory and/or practice), is interesting in and of itself.

My aim in this note is to undertake a similar project to that pursued by Steffen Böhm in his 2002 *ephemera* note, 'Movements of theory and practice', that is, to explore the relation between theory and practice in our contemporary context. This context is most fundamentally defined by the pull towards action that has become part of our zeitgeist. Climate change and biodiversity loss are challenges that demand action, as do the problems raised by the 'Me Too' movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the advance of post-truth politics. Whether on a conscious or a subconscious level, today's age is underpinned by a feeling that something *must* be done, sooner rather than later, and ideally years ago. In this climate, it seems natural to value practice over theory.

The second contextual factor that is important to consider is the assault on theory that has its origins in the culture wars currently being waged across the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as elsewhere in Europe. This full-blown attack is primarily directed at the intellectual traditions out of which critical organization studies has grown (including critical theory, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism). Such theoretical traditions, in some extreme articulations, are collectively dismissed as involving a 'postmodernist' dismissal of facts and truth (e.g. Kakutani, 2018; Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020).

### **The practical turn**

It seems to me that in the 20 years since *ephemera* was founded, theory and theorizing have fallen into disrepute, even in critical organization studies.

The tide has gradually turned from an infatuation with the latest translations of French philosophers to a concern with how to make an impact on the world. In critical organization studies, we have, for example, witnessed calls for 'critical consulting' (Voronov, 2008) and 'critical performativity' (Spicer et al., 2009). Both are expressions of the idea that critical academics should descend from their 'ivory towers' to make a real-life impact on organizations. Such work refers implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) to the notion of 'the end of philosophy' that was first popularized in the 1970s and 1980s. Proponents of this view draw inspiration from Marx's (1998/1888) famous 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach ('Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'), which they interpret as a call for action, an action that would have no time for the useless speculations of philosophy.

Such changes are not limited to organization studies. Across the humanities and social sciences, academics increasingly feel the pressure to make their work more 'relevant' (without any agreement on what such relevance would amount to). This renewed orientation towards practice is also reflected in research assessment exercises that seek to measure the impact of research, and is particularly fitting for the age of Facebook and Twitter, in which impact, at least in terms of clicks, can easily be measured.

When I moved to Lund University in 2006 from The University of Leicester, where I had written my PhD on the rather high-theory question 'What is organization?', I experienced this gradual shift as an abrupt event. In Leicester, the overall culture at the time could be summarized neatly with a single question: 'What books did you read last week?' (which *really* was a normal question to ask at the time; I have fond memories of the many reading groups in which I participated while I was there). When I arrived at Lund, I found that theory had already lost much of the respect it had once had. The overall sentiment was that, as a rule of thumb, it is better to do another interview than to read another book. This feeling is now widespread. Indeed, during the writing process for this paper, the University of Leicester, once host to the world's most critically oriented management school, has cut critical management studies and political economy from the curriculum through a series of forced redundancies – in order to make space for

specifically ‘practical’ specializations, such as quantitative data analytics, leadership, and entrepreneurship.

To some readers, the idea that theorizing has fallen into disrepute will no doubt sound rather strange, as the dominant scholarly narrative at present claims exactly the opposite. Most papers contemplating the state of theory and theorizing in organization studies warn about an increasing ‘theory-fetishism’ (Avison and Malaurent, 2014; Hambrick, 2007). The argument is that organizational journals increasingly publish formulaic papers with minute ‘theoretical contributions’ that have little to do with the data upon which they are supposedly based, and do equally little to address the concerns of practitioners. In this context, Avison and Malaurent (2014: 329) point towards the danger of ‘acceptance by stealth’, referring to those ‘theoretical’ papers that are accepted for publication because they tick all the necessary boxes, despite being ‘dull’, making a ‘minimal real contribution’, and having ‘very little, if any, impact on the community’. Their proposed solution is the promotion of ‘theory light’ papers, which are ‘those papers where theory plays no significant part in the paper and the contribution lies elsewhere’ (*ibid.*: 330). Others explicitly argue that qualitative and critical research should become more empirical, that is, that it should be based on interviews, observations, or other forms of data collection (e.g. Silverman, 2014). The idea is that when one comes closer to the empirical world, the research one produces will also be of more value for that empirical world.

To put it another way, the dominant perspective holds that research needs to become *less theoretical* if it is to be useful, a view based on the assumption that there is some essential tradeoff between the theoretical-conceptual and the practical-empirical. Embracing this apparent dichotomy, it seems that many critics have taken to heart Dennis Gioia’s (1999: 230) call to ‘Get off the veranda!’ (‘which means that armchair theorizing only goes so far and too easily ends up in the clouds, whereas a dose of data just might help ground us in practical reality’). Gioia’s suggestion was that rather than ‘working from concept to concept’, we should instead work ‘from data to workable concept’ (*ibid.*).

As I will explain later in the note, I do not disagree with the premise that many 'theoretical contributions' figured prominently in the 'best' journals in our field are really quite worthless; what I *do* disagree with is the supposition that these papers are actually theoretical in any meaningful sense, and that the solution ought to be sought in making organization studies *less* theoretical. Tellingly, Avison and Malaurent (2014: 327) do not consider papers that communicate 'new and exciting ideas' to be theoretical. Rather, such contributions are classified under the desirable category of 'theory light'. But what has happened to our notion of theory and theorizing when papers that make us think differently are no longer associated with theory simply by virtue of having this desirable outcome?

The issue boils down to whether moving 'from concept to concept', in Gioia's terms, is really as fruitless as is commonly assumed. To interrogate this question, we can ask what happens *in the practice of* moving from concept to concept, and whether, even if such movement does not directly solve particular practical problems, or add to the stock of evidence-based knowledge, it might perhaps generate benefits of other kinds.

While the current iteration of our question about the nature of theory may seem distinctively modern, it is, in fact, an age-old issue, and one that the classical Greeks were already struggling with more than two millennia ago. Indeed, the language we use now to discuss this question is itself rooted in Greek thought and terminology. As we shall see, these Greek underpinnings continue to frame our own thoughts on the subject, for better and for worse. In exploring these issues, it will therefore be useful to consider the Greek understanding of the notion of 'theory', which was laden with connotations relating to 'sight' and 'seeing' when it was originally drawn into philosophical discourse.

## **The two-world notion of theory**

In *The life of the mind*, Hannah Arendt (1981) suggests that the distinction between theory and practice that we, implicitly or explicitly, tend to cling to is itself a theory, which she calls 'the two-world theory'. It is, furthermore, a theory with significant implications for practice.

This two-world theory is most famously articulated by Plato in the *Republic*, in which he distinguishes between the divine and unchanging world of Ideas (or Forms) and the ever-fluctuating world of appearances. The famous allegory of the cave that stands at the centre of the dialogue tells the story of the philosopher who leaves the world of appearance and ascends to the higher world of truth. Having seen the truth, he then returns to the cave to share what he has learned. However, when he tells those still living among the shadows what he has seen, he is met not with admiration but with skepticism and even violent rage.

According to Plato, the theorist can see the true nature of things because of his familiarity with the Forms, but the people, if they are without proper education, cannot recognize this truth for what it is. Instead, they are more inclined to follow imposters who are good at selling imitations of truth. For Plato, these masters of deception include the rhetoricians, sophists, and demagogues who vied for political control of the state through the use of the crafty lie and the well-turned phrase: they are essentially misleaders while the philosopher-king is the true leader precisely because he, by contrast, has access to, and is concerned with, the truth.

The two-world theory distinguishes between a world of stable being, where truth is to be found, and a world of everchanging becoming, in which there is only appearance. We are born into the world of appearance, but we are not trapped in it: we can try to find a way out by looking beyond appearances to the higher truth of the other world. To the extent that we manage to do so, we become part of that other world. Humans, therefore, Plato's Socrates says, 'should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven' by means of 'becoming as like God as possible' (*Theaetetus*, 176b). Yet, this other world, because it is higher, is also, in a sense, truly practical, in that it forms the basis for the transformation of the here and now: we are capable of creating better – truer – imitations in the world of appearances thanks to the philosopher.

As Andrea Nightingale (2004) shows, Plato's account of the philosopher king is deeply rooted in the Greek notion of *theoria*. Before Plato associated the term with philosophy, *theoria* referred to the cultural practice of witnessing

religious festivals outside the city or, more broadly, of learning from foreign contexts. The *theoros* who has journeyed out to see returns home as a transformed being, but this transformation can happen only if the *theoros* manages to fully detach herself from her own cultural bonds during the journey. The journey of the *theoros* has three stages – leaving the city, witnessing an event, and returning home – a tripartite division which also neatly maps onto Plato's allegory of the cave. As in the cultural practice of *theoria*, Plato's theoretical philosopher returns to the city (or the cave) as a transformed being. Like the *theoros* sent out by the city, Plato's theoretical philosopher must be fully dedicated to seeing the world of Forms in its own right without being held back by where he has come from. It is through this radical detachment from the practical sphere that the philosopher is transformed, and it is this transformation itself that can be beneficial for the city (provided that its people are capable of recognizing the true value that the *theoros* brings).

The distinction between two worlds – one physical and the other accessible only to the intellect – that underpins Plato's version of *theoria* is still with us in various forms. Both critics and adherents of theory still base their views on Plato's opposition between theory and practice. In Plato's paradoxical version of this opposition, theory can be practical only when it is not pursued for the sake of practice.

While Plato may have been the first to set out on this journey, it is only with his pupil, Aristotle, that we find the first proper articulation of the idea of 'theory for its own sake'. In Aristotle, the *theoros* goes on a journey to find the truth, but never returns home (Nightingale, 2004). Theory, for Aristotle, is supremely useless, but in a positive rather than negative sense: theorizing consists of the highest form of human activity, defined by freedom (from ends) and leisure.

In what follows, I suggest that there is something both troubling and enlightening about the Greek notion of *theoria*. The troubling element consists in the assertion that the theorist goes on a journey to a higher realm – the assumption underlying what Arendt aptly labelled the two-world notion of theory – and can therefore assume a higher status than that



attainable by 'ordinary' people. But it is simultaneously enlightening to reflect on the Greek conception of theory as a transformative activity, as something that shows its worth in itself; in a transformation of seeing.

### **Theory/practice today**

When we speak today about the theory/practice distinction, we may not think first of a 'religious' scheme of division into a higher and lower sphere. In organization studies, the word 'theory' has become primarily associated with the so-called 'theory building' and 'theory-testing' traditions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Sutton and Staw, 1995). These traditions are modelled on the success of the natural sciences, in the context of which the first can be characterized as inductive (moving from empirical data to the formulation of a theory that offers an explanation of these data) and the second as deductive (formulating a theory and hypotheses that are subsequently tested empirically). The discussion about the lack of 'relevance' of the resulting theories – the 'rigour-relevance gap' – is based on the concern that the theories resulting from these traditions do not provide the practical guidance that managers and other organizational actors are seeking (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). In other words, the mainstream in management studies tends to associate the notions of 'theory' and 'practice' with the theories of management science and the doings of so-called 'practitioners'.

Scientific 'theory', in these traditions, aims at an objective representation of reality that is not influenced by the subjective experiences of that reality. This is what methodology, in the realist tradition, tries to achieve: it separates theories from practical interests by imposing a number of rules on the scientist that would ensure things like value-neutrality, falsifiability, testability, reliability, validity, and the like. The resulting practice of science, as Popper (1992: 32) has remarked, is game-like, and the main feature of games (or of play in general) is adherence to a set of rules that are distinct from the normal rules one follows in life.

In comparison with Plato's version of the two-world theory, modern science has been democratized: access to the truth has, in a sense, become open to

all. The pursuit still attempts to get beyond appearance, but it no longer needs a philosopher to get there. To be a theorist, or a scientist, is to reside in a parallel world, with its own temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the goal is to represent or explain the world of appearance as adequately as possible. Theory is supposed to mirror reality, while not itself partaking in that reality. What it needs instead is method, i.e. clarity about the path to knowledge, about causes, laws, or other mechanisms that explain or predict surface phenomena. Once the path to knowledge is paved, any scientist should be able to walk the route for themselves simply by following the methodological rules of the discipline. The possibility of reaching the same destination by following the same path is known as 'replicability', which is generally considered to be a key condition for scientific progress.

Science may still need creative people to formulate theories, but to decide whether or not these theories indeed belong to the realm of representational truth is a matter of more or less mechanical testing, a matter of practice that all trained practitioners of science are capable of. The metaphor of the unpredictable and even dangerous journey of the *theoros* that informed Plato's thinking is changed into a quite different image of travelling: the scientist merely follows the path (*method*) that is already laid out for him or her, and the uncontroversial destiny of evidence-based knowledge is pre-given.

### **Strong and weak theories**

In the theory-building and theory-testing traditions, theory is seen as the goal of the research process (e.g. Sutton and Staw, 1995). The practice that leads to theory is oriented towards the development of models and concepts that would explain or predict a particular phenomenon. The theory itself is understood as some kind of bounded entity, which is deemed 'strong' when it remains unaltered in the face of the flux of the empirical world, in contrast to a 'weak' theory that constantly finds it necessary to change its shape to fit the changing world. A strong theory rarely needs to change shape because it explains the phenomenon that it theorizes in all its possible manifestations. The world of appearances, to which we belong as 'practitioners' of living, is

volatile. Nevertheless, the changes that dramatically affect us do not affect strong theory. Like a lazy dog, a strong theory hardly lifts its eyelid when something happens; there is little that it considers worthy of interrupting its sleep. According to this conception of theory, there is not much scope for the idea of theory itself as some kind of fragile ‘thing’ that is constantly at play in relation to that which we encounter in our practices, be it the practices of fieldwork, of reading books, or any other activity. There is also little scope for a notion of theorizing that actively works upon the implicit theories that are always already part of the way in which we look at things.

As Thomas Kuhn (1970) has observed, in practice, strong theories come with strong faith. Kuhn even goes so far as to suggest that ‘Normal science’ *requires* a pseudo-religious dogmatism; a strong unwillingness to question the theory that defines the paradigm when confronted with empirical facts that do not fit easily with the theory’s predictions. For Kuhn, such dogmatic faith is a good thing, because without this faith science would lose the determinism needed for scientific progress. However, while such an idea may hold descriptively in certain cases, it is a grave mistake to generalize this into an imperative that would hold for all knowledge domains.

This can be seen quite clearly in the case of organization studies, in which strong theories are much harder to sustain in the face of a frustratingly intransigent empirical reality. In contrast to most of the objects of the natural sciences, organizations and their inhabitants rarely behave in reliably predictable ways. As a consequence, the methods that are borrowed from the natural sciences have a much narrower range of applicability. While some scholars, notably Karl Weick (1995), have argued that organizational theories are only ever approximations of a strong theory, their assumptions remain locked into the notion that a strong theory is the ideal for which one should aim.

As I see it, the widespread disillusion with ‘theory’ in organization studies bears testimony to the limitations of the methodologies of the theory-testing and theory-building traditions. The implicit pretense of these traditions to strong theorizing easily becomes counter-productive: instead of offering genuinely strong explanations for organizational phenomena,

they rather strengthen a faith that all too often stands in the way of organizational inquiry. In such cases, the faith that is a prerequisite for strong theory starts to lead a life of its own. While this faith may serve a wide range of personal and institutional ends, it does not make the contribution to knowledge that one would expect of a genuinely strong theory.

What are labelled 'theories' in our field, e.g. 'institutional theory' or 'transformational leadership theory', do not amount to strong theories that stand tall against the flux of life in and of organizations. Rather, they offer a perspective on or image of organizational life that may be helpful in making sense of what is happening, or that inspires us to take certain actions, but that may also blind us to other ways of understanding a situation or phenomenon.

Let us take transformational leadership theory as an example. The content of this self-declared 'strong theory', on my interpretation at least, amounts to the idea that leaders who stand above their organizations are more desirable than leaders who operate within the organization (Spoelstra, 2018). Because of their high status, they are deemed capable of changing the direction of organizations while also lifting their employees up to higher ground. Such an image of leadership may inspire us to take the initiative, to be self-sacrificial, and to pursue other traits that we may deem worthy and beneficial in relation to this ideal image. But a paradigm of this sort can also give rise to hubris, lack of collaboration, and even to moral transgressions. In other words, a 'theory' such as that from which the notion of transformational leadership springs, actively participates in practice, for better and worse. It certainly does not reside in the kind of parallel world in which the strong theories of the natural sciences enjoy their uninterrupted sleep. 'Theory' becomes a way of pursuing certain practical ends, but it does so without taking a real interest in practice itself.

In contrast to a strong theory, the typical understanding of a weak theory is a theory that is of limited explanatory value, in the sense that it does little more than offer a description of an empirical object or situation. 'Weak' is then understood as deficient in relation to 'strong', as the absence of

strength (e.g. Sutton and Staw, 1995). But as the critics of theory fetishism rightly point out, not pretending to the building of a strong theory can also be a strength in that it creates spaces for alternative, equally valuable, research contributions. Such an understanding satisfies Avison and Malaurent's (2014) demand for approaches that are 'theory light', in the sense that the relative absence of strong theories creates space for rich empirical descriptions or papers that make one think.

Alternatively, instead of thinking of weak theories in terms of the absence of strengths, one may also think of 'weak theorizing' as a strength in itself. Loosely following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1997) suggestion, we might focus on the state of mind of the theorizer, seeing weak theory as a mode of theorizing that is weak in terms of its dogmatic faith. The theorizer of weak theory is strong in their willingness to change their mind, to change the shape of the theory, or, as Paul K. Saint-Amour (2018: 443) puts it, 'weak thought *weakens* the peremptoriness of what passes for the inarguable'. The Greek notion of *theoria*, and the accompanying character of the *theoros*, is helpful here: the *theoros* travels to other cities so that she may change her mind; so that she is transformed. The entire ambition of the *theoros* is to drift away from the familiar. To practice weak theorizing is to look for the most beneficial conditions under which to change one's mind.

It should, perhaps, not come as a surprise that one can find this (positive) notion of weak theory in ethnography (Stewart, 2008) and archaeology (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018). Here, the 'weakness' of the theory refers to the openness to foreign things that the researcher encounters. In Kathleen Stewart's (2008: 105) words, '[b]y following things, a weak theory allows us to wonder where they might take us'. Indeed, the Greek practice of *theoria* can be understood as being rather close to what some critics understand as taking place when one engages in ethnographic fieldwork: the ethnographer is ready to let go of their preunderstanding; by 'going native', they may eventually resurface as a changed person.

But the same notion also holds for how we choose to engage with theorizing in the philosophical tradition. The moment one starts to theorize, one also begins to drift. This is a drifting away from something one sees, or

something one reads. It is a drifting away from the practice we engage with. But this does not, of course, necessarily imply a drifting *towards* something unworldly, like Plato's Forms or the divine. Theorizing can remain close to practice, in the sense that it reflects on the practices that we observe or engage in at times when we are not theorizing. These can be, and often are, the very same practices that we have drifted away from when we start to theorize. But in theorizing, at least in the philosophical tradition, the theorist does not engage directly with the object or phenomenon from which we have drifted away. Rather, he or she starts to work on the concepts that are already present in the direct experience of practice. This work on the concepts through which one sees and experiences then leads to further drifting, a movement from concept to concept to concept, that only ends as a result of external impositions (having to do 'real work', doing the laundry, falling asleep, etc.). The drifting itself is initiated not by the researcher but, rather, in the encounter between the researcher and the concept, and what that encounter produces is more drifting, more movement that leads us to other concepts.

This may sound abstract, but it is really quite concrete, and part of the daily life we all experience, not just that of the professional philosopher. For instance, we may be engaged in something practical, like planning a holiday, but while doing so our mind wanders. We begin to ask why we need to get away from our regular life to begin with, which may lead us to question the value of our work and the society within which it is embedded, and thus to other concepts, and so on. Do we end up in the clouds by drifting away like that? Far from it. It seems to me that we are rather actively working on how we come to see and experience our practical life.

Jacques Derrida (2019), in a recently published lecture series from 1976-1977, insists that the most common interpretation of Marx is incorrect: Marx was not, in fact, calling for the end of philosophy. On the contrary, he was calling for an operation that would rescue philosophy from mysticism through practice. The less famous 8<sup>th</sup> thesis provided Derrida with the clues he needed. It reads:

Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. (Marx, 1998: 574)

In other words, on Derrida's interpretation Marx says that philosophy, a good thing, has degenerated into mysticism, a bad thing, and now practice is needed to turn philosophy into a good thing again. The assumed trade-off between the theoretical and the practical is false: theory does not imply a flight from the practical; far from it, theory needs to stay close to the practical in order to remain theoretical.

Theorizing, one might say, is something that comes out of a practice; it comes out of it by drifting away from it. It drifts away from practice through a concept, and then the drifting continues: one drifts from concept to concept in a movement that cannot be fully controlled, but that can be followed through. There is neither management nor leadership in theorizing, but there is followership. Theorizing is therefore itself a practice, even if this practice, by its own nature, draws our attention away from the purposive relations that make up the practical sphere.

## **Conclusion**

Theory works on the way that we see things; it is the work of thought upon itself so that we see and experience practice differently. Through it, we acquire a vision not of truth, of God, or the Forms, but of practice. Theory is not elevated, but rather a 'besides', a way to temporarily stand beside ourselves, beside our culture, and beside the fixed paths we are on that stem from the academic disciplines in which we partake. Theory shows its value in itself, independent of practical evaluations, which is to say that its value is not determined by purposive relations. In this sense, theorizing really is, as Aristotle maintained, supremely useless, which is another way of saying that theorizing drifts away from practical valuations in order to maintain its own distinctive character. But it need not turn to the clouds or heavens to get there.

But one could still ask, why are we in need of theorizing now? After all, one might think that it is pretty clear that climate change is the most urgent

problem of our times and that it is equally clear what needs to be done about it (mitigate carbon emissions, decrease production and consumption, etc.). Instead of losing oneself in questions of a philosophical nature, one may argue that today is the time to think about practical solutions to well-defined problems.

The objection is understandable given the urgency of tackling climate change, but the underlying logic that time used on theorizing is time lost for finding practical solutions is flawed. There is no fundamental trade-off between theorizing and finding practice-oriented solutions. While it might seem straightforward that a response to climate change requires reducing consumption, it is also clear that practical efforts to accomplish this are bound up with larger questions, such as the role that organizations and technology can and should play in mitigating climate change, or the relationship between nature and humankind. Indeed, it is hard to think of questions that are less straightforward than these. It is impossible to grapple with them without theorizing, without drifting away from a narrow focus on the matters urgently at hand.

Universities are far from the only places where theory happens. Theorizing is far too ordinary for that. But when it is excluded from such educational establishments, they are much impoverished. Indeed, a department or business school that does not allow its staff and its students to drift is interested in neither study nor education. This is not the time to downsize theory, and least of all in the university.

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