



May 1998

# Ecological Narratives; Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others

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## Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Krippendorff, K. (1998). Ecological narratives; Reclaiming the voice of theorized others. In J. V. Ciprut (Ed.), *The art of the Feud: Reconceptualizing international relations* (pp. 1-26). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers. Retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/79](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/79)

Annenberg Working Paper, May 1998. Later published in 2000.

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# Ecological Narratives; Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others

## **Abstract**

The urge to theorize has been a driving force of Western intellectual tradition. It underlies academic discourse, giving the scientific enterprise its vitality. Without systematic theorizing much of contemporary culture, particularly technology, would be virtually unthinkable.

Naturally, theorizing has not been without critics. The skeptics have raised their voices against the ability of theory to describe anything at all. Radical empiricists, such as Francis Bacon, and even some logical positivists, have had stories to tell of the "blindness of abstraction." Now, postmodernists, poststructuralists, constructionists, deconstructionists, and many others are questioning the intelligibility of master narratives and the ability of unifying theories or logical/ mathematical systems to represent reality. From their perspective, science, literature, and law are just three of many literary genres, each cultivating their own reading of texts.

The most recent critique comes from feminist scholars. Although feminism is not a unified perspective, feminist thought has grown far beyond its early advocacy of equal rights, be it by conceptualizing patriarchal society, exploring gender differences, or contributing scathing critiques of male rationality, technological world constructions, and the oppressive consequences of theory. Along its path, feminism has emphasized the embodied nature of knowledge, for example by accounting for voices instead of texts. Feminism advocated relational epistemologies, insisted on the participation of emotions, and discovered validation in practical actions that could lead to personal liberation.

## **Comments**

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## **Ecological Narratives; Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others**

By Klaus Krippendorff

1998.5.27

### **Introduction**

The urge to theorize has been a driving force of Western intellectual tradition. It underlies academic discourse, giving the scientific enterprise its vitality. Without systematic theorizing much of contemporary culture, particularly technology, would be virtually unthinkable.

Naturally, theorizing has not been without critics. The skeptics have raised their voices against the ability of theory to describe anything at all. Radical empiricists, such as Francis Bacon, and even some logical positivists, have had stories to tell of the "blindness of abstraction." Now, postmodernists, poststructuralists, constructionists, deconstructionists, and many others are questioning the intelligibility of master narratives and the ability of unifying theories or logical/mathematical systems to represent reality. From their perspective, science, literature, and law are just three of many literary genres, each cultivating their own reading of texts.

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Narrower in scope but no less important is the opposition to theory by philosophers concerned with ethics. Dwight Furrow (1995), for instance, influenced by a rereading of Aristotle, questions the capacity of normative ethical theory to provide guidance on normative questions and challenges its relevance to the lived experience of moral agents. Such critiques are fueled by a need to understand the Holocaust and other atrocities committed since World War II by people with theories to live by.

Within literary scholarship, writers continue to reexamine their own foundations by questioning the intelligibility of texts in terms of the theory-driven distinction between meanings and an author's intentions. To them there is nothing in a text that could point to the difference between the two, and no method that could shed light on what this distinction creates. For Knapp & Michaels (1985:30): "[theory] is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside [the] practice [of reading and interpretation] in order to govern [that] practice from without. ...[N]o one can reach [such] a position." This leads them to propose that "the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end."

The foregoing critiques have very different histories and little in common with each other except for their opposition to systematic theorizing. Often they even oppose each other. For example, feminists have been criticized for essentializing the very gender differences they oppose; and proponents of postmodernism, for being silent on moral questions that undermine the intelligibility of moral experiences.

Many of these critiques rely on what I would call deficiency arguments--a rhetorical strategy that seeks to show the failure of a theory by pointing to what it blatantly omits or surreptitiously distorts without recognizing that such critiques are based on another theory--usually one closer to these critics heart and therefore more "real" to them. Critiques of ideology, Marxist for example, excel in this. They argue against theories of knowledge from a perspective that is assumed to be "free" of ideological biases, more encompassing in scope, capturing a broader territory, or offering a greater number of distinctions. Yet, using one theory to criticize another remains entirely within the practice of theorizing and cannot therefore reveal the blind spots of theorizing. Worse, unable to recognize these blind spots makes theorists blind to their own blindness.

The following examines the social role of theory and the particular relation that theorizing entails between theorists and the theorized others who are the natural focus of social scientific inquiries.

### **Some Entailments of Theorizing**

Etymologically, theory comes from the Greek *theoria*, the meaning of which comprises not only the process of "looking at," "viewing," "contemplating," or "speculating," but also the very object perceived, "a sight," "a tableau," or "a spectacle." These meanings imply a distinct attitude vis-à-vis what is theorized. Spectacles are created to be seen and discussed, not to be altered. Spectacles are in front of the viewer's eye. In such accounts of theorizing, the use of ocular metaphors entails a tacit *preference for sight* over sound, touch and feelings, and it assigns secondary importance to voices, to stories, to oral traditions and to practical knowledge. It is no accident that we speak of scientific "observers," not of scientific listeners. There is no auditory or tactile analogue to "observation" and, although reading and writing would be difficult without sight, we tend to exclude them when we speak of observing things.

As spectators, *theorists observe but do not allow themselves to enter their domain of observation*. Consequently, theorists endow facts, naively conceptualized as residing outside of us, the power to determine which theories are valid. It is the belief in this ontology, and only that, which ultimately justifies claims of being able to theorize facts for what they are, without preconceptions and without accountability to those who may be affected by these theories.

Since the 17th century, science has become increasingly "successful" in disconnecting theory from facts and observation from practice, notwithstanding that etymology links "fact" to manufacture. Perhaps with the exception of hermeneutics and constructivism, all scientific methods operationalize the derivation of theories from observational data. Aside the rare admission that data depend on theory, I know of no formalization of this reverse dependency or interactions between the two (see Woolgar, 1993:36, 53-66).

Ethnographic analyses of scientific practices reveal the cherished uni-directionality in proceeding from observations to theories to be a myth (see Garfinkle, 1967; Garfinkle et al., 1982). But overcoming this uni-directional conception would seem impossible as long as theories are stated in terms of an extensional logic, such as the logic of propositions, or modeled by computers, which are sequential machines that embody the very same logic. To preserve this uni-directionality of scientific discourse against the threat of vicious paradoxes, Bertrand Russell invented his famous Theory of Logical Types, which has the effect of outlawing self-reference. It is this restricted notion of logic and of language that places scientific observers at the top of logical hierarchies, that conceptualizes description top-downwards, and that leads theorists to believe *they could observe their world without being observed by the objects of their observation*.

The ocular metaphor is so prevalent within the scientific community that theorists are encouraged to keep their distance not just to the observed but to their theories as well. A case in point is the distinction between theories and beliefs. In scientific texts, theories appear as more or less confirmed hypotheses--each having a calculable probability, however small, of being invalid. Not so for beliefs. When we theorize, we theorize *about* something. When we believe, we believe *in* something. In beliefs, the emotional detachment that theorists claim to have vis-à-vis their theories is erased in favor of the virtual certainty that things are the way they are *seen and spoken of*. In the words of Stanley Fish (1985:116), "[a] theory is a special achievement of consciousness; a belief is a prerequisite of being conscious at all. Beliefs are not what you think *about* but what you think *with*...it is within the space provided by their articulations that mental activity--including the activity of theorizing--goes on. Theories are something you can have--you can wield them and hold them at a distance; beliefs have *you*, in the sense that there can be no distance between them and the acts they enable." The truths of theories may be pondered; the truths of beliefs are held.

Contrary to popular conceptions of theories as accurate representations, theories are attractive because they exceed their domain of observation in at least five ways: (i) Theories *generalize* to cases claimed to be similar to those observed. Yet, without further observations, no assurance is available that the unobserved cases would support a theory's claim. Therefore, generalizations rely on a good deal of belief. (ii) Theories *predict* under the assumption that the patterns observed in the past will persist into the future. Belief in such continuities have much practical value but, as Francis Bacon already noted, they are ascertainable only in retrospect. (iii) Theories *integrate* several propositions into a single coherent network and (iv) they *generate empirical hypotheses* from very few quasi-axiomatic propositions. (iii) and (iv) are predicated on the belief that the logic of propositions corresponds to the logic of the world. According to Carl Hempel (Mitchell, 1985:7), (v) theory tends to be taken as "a complex spatial network [that] floats, as it were, above the plane of observation and is anchored to it by rules of interpretation." Yet rules of interpretation always are the rules of a theorist or of a community of theorists, not of an observed nature. They allow theorists to justify omitting details deemed irrelevant, accidental, unique, inconsistent, or subjective; filling in of the gaps of missed observations; or smoothing the rugged curves--none of which is derivable from observation and measurement.

Politically, the more territory a theory covers the more it is preferred, the better it will be remembered, and the more likely it will be applied. Thus, theorizing supports a *conceptual imperialism*; the urge to oversee, predict, control, and govern ever growing territories (Krippendorff, 1993)--an inkling that science shares with other forms of government in national, spiritual, or commercial spheres of life. True, theories by themselves neither reign nor rule. Once institutionalized, however, they do encourage their users to "survey," "capture," "represent," "monitor," and ultimately "manage" if not "discipline" what they claim to describe. The underlying logic of propositions, especially its Theory of Logical Types, encourages the construction of logical hierarchies of ever-increasing levels of abstractions, from objects to language, to meta-language, to meta-meta-language, and so forth with theorists being comfortable only at the top.

Foucault's (1977) metaphorical use of the *panopticon* in accounts of how knowledge works in society is telling. The panopticon is an ideal prison design that enables centrally located guards to monitor the behavior of all inmates who in turn can see only the guards observing them, but not each other. Here discipline is assured by the efficiency of observation. In taking this design as a metaphor to explore power relations in society, Foucault equates knowledge and theory and carries its built-in ocularity to its ultimate socio-logical conclusion: the government of one view at the expense of all others.

Theories are also expected to be rational and consistent, ideally in the form of mathematical expressions, as systems

of equations for example. Formalizations of this kind have the double advantage of being computable in principle and of sparing one the complications of context and meaning. Mathematical theories provide the backbone of the natural sciences but have made inroads also in efforts to explain social phenomena, in economics, linguistics, psychology, and systems science, for instance. While rationality and consistency are considered twin values of scientific explorations, they are also two different aspects of the monologism that theory implies. Being "rational" is tantamount to speaking in the voice of one's community, a voice that is assumed common to all of its members and sanctioned as such. Rationality defers one's own voice to a fictional authority. Being "consistent," on the other hand, is tantamount to avoiding contradictions among the propositions of a theory. Consistency entails the belief that a single overarching logic could govern the phenomena a theory claims to be about. The requirement that theories be both rational and consistent thus reduces them to *monological* constructions in the dual sense of being the product of a single *voice* and of being cast in terms of *one (coherent) logic*. This has considerable implications for social theorizing.

## The Linguaging of Theories

Consider the following rather typical propositions, which could be found in any social science writing:

- (a) *Institutions have four functions;*
- (b) *Nationalism is an outgrowth of modernism;*
- (c) *Terrorism is caused by a breakdown in political structures;*
- (d) *Unemployment feeds crime.*

In the context of the foregoing, these four propositions should be troublesome: None of them indicates whose truths they state, attesting to their complete disembodiment. All hide that they are fundamentally about what people do. Institutions, nationalism, terrorism, unemployment and crime do not exist without their performers. Yet, their voices are silenced in each of these generalizations. There is no indication of how their behaviors end up being so categorized. Even the voice of the theorist remains hidden, perhaps deliberately, behind an objectivist language.

Language is implicated here in even more fundamental ways, however: Of the four propositions (a) asserts that a concept "has" or is "in possession of" properties which lends an almost physical existence to this concept, to institutions as it were. (b) applies an agricultural metaphor to two rather high-level abstractions from a complex nexus of human behaviors without referring to any particular group of people or locale—but metaphors reside in language not in nature. (c) claims two abstractions, a category of human behavior and a stable pattern abstracted from a process, to be causally related. How could that be? And (d) accounts for what probably is a statistical correlation between two variables in terms of nutrition, one being an agent, the other its target. A casual reading of these propositions gives the impression that they state facts. However, such a reading overlooks their metaphorical nature. How could concepts cause anything analogous to how billiard balls bounce against each other? How could measurement variables act or interact? In what sense could non-material structures break? The failure to recognize the metaphorical nature of language, even in the most rigorous scientific discourses, attests to a remarkable unawareness of how language directs the world we theorize.

Clearly, theories are formed in language, but they also must be languaged into being and be fit to survive in processes of human communication. In the context of their communication, the notion of theory suffers from *two illusions*:

- (1) The first stems from the belief that the form of theory could be separated from what language makes available and that, by the same token, human communication has no influence on how and where theories come into being. Theories are not merely found. They are constructed, proposed, promoted, published, discussed, and either adopted or rejected. Their

reality lies in stating them, in understanding them as such, and in enacting them into actual practices. These are the acts of real people, actors who see some virtue in promulgating what they speak of. It follows that theorizing cannot be understood from a notion of language as a neutral medium of representation (as formalized in propositional logic) nor from its corollary of theories being solely justifiable by observations (of objects outside language). The notion of languaging as a dialogical process permits us to recognize theories as mediating between their stakeholders and residing as such in processes of communication. From this perspective, theories cannot be found in the contents of statements nor inside individual minds, but in processes of their continuous rearticulations. Theories that fail to compel people to reproduce and circulate them within their community simply fade away.

As communications, theories serve a variety of social functions. They can define a theorist's identity. They can form the basis of particular research programs or schools of thought. They can become institutionalized in disciplines that require adherence to or belief in them from its practitioners. Linguists, psychologists, biologists, indeed all academic disciplines, distinguish themselves by the theories they believe in. Sometimes theories take the form of abstract paradigms that privilege particular scientific explorations. At other times, they certify practitioners and protect them against criticisms from other disciplines. In either case, theories are political phenomena.

(2) The second illusion arises from the conviction that social theories have invariant and single meanings. Unlike natural scientific theories, social theories, once published, can reenter and touch the lives of the very people about whom they speak (Krippendorff, 1996). When such a reentry occurs, theories and those theorized in them begin to interact and modify each other in ways that violate the idea of theory as a descriptive account of stable facts, as a representation of an unintelligent world. Those who find themselves theorized might use this publicity as a way to enhance their status or see it as a threat to their identity. When known, a theory can affect the behavior of the theorized and either strengthening or invalidating it. Black Power and feminist movements, for example, effectively countered prevailing theories about them by theories of their own. Theories may also be adopted by people who find new meanings in living through their propositions, acting out their stereotypes, preserving their distinctions, and making them truer thereby. The mass media, by catering to audiences who are conceptualized in terms of their size and attractiveness, "mainstream" the public, causing more people to become similar to each other, and thus enhancing their attractiveness to advertisers. Taking theories, especially predictive ones, as prescriptions for action can turn them into self-fulfilling prophecies. In social reality, which depends on the knowledge people have of it, this is typical, not an exception. Thus, *theories* of social phenomena do not merely represent, they also *transform their objects in the process of their communication*. Positivists have reasons to worry that the reentry of theories into their domain of observation could undermine their validity and take considerable methodological precautions to protect their ontology from such challenges.

If theorizing is a political process and if the dissemination of social theories does change their validity, one might think that political science would have much to say about the politics of theorizing; and that the theories created in the *social sciences* would at least *account for their own social consequences*. This, however, seems not to be the case.

Inspired by the successes of the natural sciences and convinced that the social sciences too, could discover and accumulate a body of theories, social theorists have effectively succeeded in rendering social theory "unsocial," political theory "a-political," and so forth. The widespread practice of theorizing the social conceals its communicative and political nature.

*Theorizing the social seems to work only where theorists, the institutions using their theories, and the theorized others collude in holding the theorized reality constant while collectively denying that they had anything to do with it.* This grand self-deception is correlated well with the myth that theorists could stay outside of the language they are using; explain a

world as inhabited by people without linguistic intelligence of their own; and take a "God's eye view" (Putnam, 1981) of the universe. Scholars who have dared to question such monological views can be seriously sanctioned. This has happened to several philosophers of science--Popper, Lakatos, and Kuhn--among whom physicists have singled out the late Feynabend as *"The Worst Enemy of Science"* (Horgan, 1993).

It would seem that the foregoing offers us a choice. We can continue practicing natural science methods of theorizing our domain of observation, hiding ourselves behind an objectivist language, and losing touch with the social world we unwittingly transform. Or, we can deliberately and responsibly involve ourselves in the very politics that our inquiries set in motion. To underscore the urgency of this choice, let me explore how fellow humans fare in theories about them.

## Theorizing the Other

(1) **Theorizing gives birth to distant otherness.** As generalizations, theories classify observations and theorize people in terms of third person plural. "They" are the subjects of experiments, the interviewees of surveys and the respondents to mail questionnaires. "They" also are the conservatives, the unemployed, the Catholics and the terrorists. All of "them" are labeled and assigned to particular classes on account of characteristics all members of such classes are assumed to share. Classification already begins at the data generating stage of social research. In interviewing, for example, neither the identity of the interviewee nor that of the interviewer becomes data. For fear of biasing the data, personal knowledge, which could emerge when experimenters come too close to their subjects, is systematically repressed. In the theater, spectators have no problems distinguishing between actors and the characters they play on stage. But in social research, individuals are the very categories that a theory provides for them. Where individuals do identify with a group, belief, or trait, theorists are not prohibited from dismissing such declarations as subjective, lacking abstraction, or irrelevant to their theory. When quoted, individual voices are taken to exemplify the voice of a class. This is accomplished by channeling a polyphony of voices into a single artificially constructed voice--one for each class or category of the theorist's choosing. Classes never speak, however; only individuals do, albeit always to others, even when they are virtual. In the reality of everyday life, collective monologues, choruses for example, are extremely rare. To take such exceptions as a norm for social scientific insights attests to the artificial and unsocial nature of theorizing.

In everyday languaging, third person pronouns refer to those absent. Theorizing makes this absence a virtue that gives theorists the freedom to characterize others in ways radically different and inferior to themselves. Whether one calls this a professional disability (a deafness to individual voices or an institutionalized disrespect for otherness), theorizing is responsible for estranging others from us.

(2) **Theorizing trivializes others by reducing them to obedient mechanisms.** As spectators, social theorists observe human behaviors, including verbal interactions, from outside the spectacle. From this perspective, behaviors appear as linear sequences, temporally ordered chains of events, or trajectories in a Cartesian space within predefined coordinates. To understand trajectories, natural scientists seek to discover their regularities. However, talk of "regularities" assumes that they are followed without choice in the matter and talk of their "discovery" that they existed prior to observation and measurement. Such assumptions are not only built into mathematical theories of behavior and inscribed into computational techniques for analyzing behavioral data, they can also enter less formalized talk of social causation. For example, plays are usually scripted and scripts explain much of what theater audiences end up seeing. But for the strict determinacy of machines, scripts are to performances much as computer programs are to computations. They are in control of the plot. Describing human behavior in terms of scripts, rules, and grammars, even as reactive to messages, conjure the determinism of obedient mechanisms. Since spectators can never be sure of whether, when and to what extent an



observed behavior is minutely scripted, a response to unobserved conditions or improvised, deterministic accounts have no observational basis. They are a matter of preferences--unless theorists step out of their observer role and ask pertinent questions. However, even the Turing Test, designed to distinguish machine from human intelligence, is never quite conclusive. Its use has taught us that interaction is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to determine the presence of human intelligence or agency. Yet, theorists cannot afford this interaction. It would shift the authority for theorizing to the subjects being observed and erode the theorists' objective observer status. Thus, theorizing remains stuck in causal and mechanistic explanations of human behavior, from which that of the theorists is excluded.

Without engaging theorized others in conversations on the theories being developed about them, social theorists are remarkably free to explore any theory that would be of interest to their community. Although novel conceptualizations may not come easy, from the convenient position of an outside observer it is all right for sociologists like Goffman (1959, 1963) to describe social interactions in dramaturgical categories; for psychologists like Schank and Abelson (1977) to interpret the same behavior in terms of individuals following rules and scripts; for literary scholars like Hirsch (1967) to extract intentions from an author's writings; for cognitive scientists to develop algorithms that are presumed to govern individuals' processing and exchange of information; or for economists and political scientists to measure the efficacy with which actors apply available resources. Without consulting the constituents of the social phenomenon of interest, almost anything goes.

**(3) Theorizing inscribes its monologism into its observational data and creates the very unsocial conditions in which theories can survive.** At moments of contact between the theorist and the theorized, social research invariably depends on collaboration and dialogue. Human subjects can be used in scientific experiments only by informed consent. Yet, after signing a consent form, their ability to understand the nature of their involvement and to say "no" to practices they might consider unconscionable is rarely ever called upon again, does not enter the data, and has therefore little chance to inform a theory that speaks to these subjects' capabilities. To uphold the notion that theory is responsive to observations only, the dialogical nature of the actual contact must be hidden and the collaboration needed to conclude an experiment concealed. Or consider interviewing. In this asymmetrical interaction, the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee is expected to answer them. Interviewees are allowed to speak only within the narrow confines of what is relevant. In effect, interviewees are being *used* to support the point researchers intend to make, and in the course of this exploitation, the asymmetrical power relations are necessarily and irretrievably inscribed in the data on which theories are constructed.

Deception of informants as to the purpose of their participation in a research project, questions that are irrelevant to an interviewees' life, and contrived stimulus conditions to which subjects are asked to respond, affirm the essential asymmetry, artificiality and unsocial conditions that spawn the data for social and psychological theories. These power relations creep into the data making process in obvious violation of the idea of theory as observer-independent. In fact: *theorizing subjects its subjects*. It renders them *serviceable* (Sampson, 1993) *to theories that end up demonstrating little more than how well theorists have managed to disable the social nature of human beings*. True, submitting to authorities and following instructions is part of what we can do. But replicating these less than desirable human conditions at the expense of human agency, for the sake of theorizing, amounts to political suicide for the social sciences.

**(4) Theorizing nurtures a culture of blindness to the political nature of theory--for theorist and theorized alike.** The social sciences are concerned with the ways human beings *can* live together: Sociology, with how people organize themselves into larger wholes and coordinate their actions in ways that sustain these wholes; Political Science, with how people create publics, arrive at consensus on agendas, mandate their leaders to form governments;

International Relations, with how peoples perceive each other across national boundaries, resolve international conflicts, and regulate the myriad of interactions between diverse constituencies of nation states; Communication Research, with how people construct, sustain and transform their social realities by communicating with each other. But none of these social phenomena can be understood by straightjacking people into mechanistic conceptions and removing from them the spaces in which they interact with one another. The celebration of theory, the use of ocular metaphors for knowing, the reliance on extensional logic, and the naturalness with which people accept confinements during data making processes, all have become part of a culture that suppresses the awareness of the political nature of theories--not only for theorists but also for all those who see each other in these terms. The culture of theorizing makes it difficult for the social sciences to reflect on its social nature.

This self-defeating consequence of theorizing is not recognizable from within a representational notion of language, a notion that philosophers like Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, Bakhtin, and Rorty have systematically challenged in preference to less abstract and dialogical conceptions. Their critiques center largely on the fact that words are actions too and that languaging accomplishes things beyond describing them. Reentry adds a cybernetic spin to their critique, showing that languaging is recursive. Where language informs action, theories are likely to become self-validating. Under these conditions, generalizations of others, whether published in scientific journals or disseminated in the mass media, provide fertile ground for social prejudices to arise and to become truths that easily can subordinate, discipline, marginalize and criminalize others for their otherness.

It is always possible to contest and reject a claim. However, in view of the authority that scientific theories conjure in our culture, contesting them would go against a whole complex of deep-rooted cultural beliefs. Among them that theories have but one legitimate interpretation and that theories are shaped by observations, not by theorists. The latter belief leaves no real target for challenges; the former makes political considerations seem irrelevant.

Whenever scientific accounts concern specific populations--be they the homeless, women, homosexuals, Afro-Americans, Catholics, teachers, consumers, or Arabs--they can achieve two things: in the immediate, they can entice "us" to treat "them" in the categories these accounts employ. In the long run, this treatment can transform "them" into the homogenous groups we claim "they" are. Self-validation or reification is typical in the social sciences. As Giddens (1984) observed, has not the mere metaphorical use of the term "market" in 19th century academic writings about economic activities ended up materializing that reality in ways that, today, neither economists nor CEO's would dare to question? Has not our conception of "the public" shifted from what was discussed in salons and side street cafes to what scholars theorized as public opinion and then encouraged polls to measure? Has not the use of hydraulic and archeological metaphors in Freud's writing of the human psyche produced a whole industry of psychotherapists and their clients for all of whom mental disorders have become as real as they can be? Have not the theories of consumer behavior and of mass media consumption, so avidly embraced by advertising agencies, brought forth the very consumerism that these theories needed in order to survive by creating the very passive audiences that theories of mass communication are so good at describing? Do not correlations reported between intelligence, ethnicity and crime, together with genetic explanation, inform educational policies and hiring practices that keep such correlations real, well beyond published data. And do not statistics of cultural, racial, sexual, and national population characteristics inform and reify the very distinctions that statisticians build into their survey instruments and then naively "discover?" Is it then not likely that theories, which cannot but describe human nature in mechanistic terms, create the very cultural dupes needed for television to work, abet the very behaviors needed for institutions to persist, discourage people from contesting scientific theories about them, and create obedient citizens who might differ in whom they vote for but not in how they could be influenced?

This is the reality we face. I am not suggesting that the project of the social sciences is doomed. Rather, if theorizing does continue to dominate our understanding of other human beings, it unwittingly installs an intellectual imperialism in our social world that silences the voices of the theorized, prevents us from engaging in meaningful conversations with those who constitute the social phenomena we wish to understand, and risks depriving us of the only source for understanding of how social phenomena come to be.

### **A Proposal for Ecological Narratives**

Much of scientific theorizing, it must be emphasized, is manifest not in talk but in writing. Many of the entailments of theorizing I have sketched may not be entirely attitudinal nor epistemological, but traceable to what the medium of writing makes (un)available to the theorist. In writing this essay, I too feel the pull of monologism, writing of social phenomena in the absence of those I am writing of. I too stand to be accused of theorizing about theorizing. But after considerable deliberations, I am proposing a form of writing that might circumvent this practice. I am calling it an *ecological narrative*, **a way of writing a story of social phenomena that embraces the stories of its human constituents and can be reembodyed in their lives.**

An *ecology* of diverse plants and animals, human populations explicitly included, can be said to

- a. arise in the interactions among its many constituents, who,
- b. by distinguishing among kinds of interactions,
- c. organize themselves into families, cultures, species, and
- d. enact their own local and positional understandings of their worlds.
- e. An ecology is always larger than the world of any of its constituents. Hence, an ecology is neither theorizable (comprehensible) from any one position within that ecology nor fully exploitable (controllable) by any one of its species, possible dominance relations among them notwithstanding.

By stark analogy, a *narrative* can be said to

- a. arise in the stories told or written in the expectation of being understood and rearticulable by active listeners or readers--the constituents of that narrative--who,
- b. by sharing certain stories and not others, especially of themselves,
- c. form numerous narrative communities. Their individual members
- d. understand these stories as giving meaning to their lives within these communities.
- e. Narratives are always incomplete. They cannot carry their full history into the present and they preserve the possibility of being extendable by rearticulation, commentary, recomposition, or the addition of other, heretofore unheard, voices.

For a start, one could liken an **ecological narrative** to the written records of a conversation whose readers can distinguish between several voices responding to each other, can understand what is going on in the exchanges, and could carry the process onward--ideally by feeling invited to join the conversation as participants and continue the process in real-time. Like ecologies, conversations are not manageable by any one party, nor can the interpretation of what is said be expected to be the same for each participant. They are not theorizable from any single position. Consensus cannot be expected nor demanded. Conceptual diversity and conflicts, even struggles over interpretation--over conceptions of the whole for example--are constitutive of the multiple and ever emerging conversational realities, precisely because

these conceptions live in processes of communication. Should alien conceptions, theories for example, enter from outside a conversation, their viability would depend on nothing simpler than being rearticulable and meaningful to its constituents. Ecological narratives have to encourage such readings.

An ecological narrative is not social, political, or international because it *represents* social, political, or international phenomena (as theorists must claim for their theories) but rather because its *distinctions are an acknowledged part of what is being narrated*, enacted, and hence experienced by its participants. Such a narrative cannot be modeled after or emulate a mechanistic, organismic, or mentalistic system. It may instead be understood in terms of a *dialogical concept of language*--namely, through *linguaging* or *conversation*.

An ecological narrative mitigates the natural tension between social and individual explanations. On the one hand, social realities are brought forth in dialogue, in interactions involving language which is a social phenomenon as well, and on the other hand, such realities constitutively depend on and are informed by the conceptual, narrative, and conversational abilities of its individual constituents. What then does this mean for writing social science? I am stating my proposal in six points:

(1) To narrate ecologically means to acknowledge that **observational accounts do not exist without their narrators**. Observations are made by observers. **Narratives are made by narrators capable of being observers** as well. And this **entails a particular standpoint or perspective from which each speaks**. Positionless accounts divert the attention of their readers away from the narrator as the source of such accounts to contents outside of the process of giving accounts to each other. It is the latent consequences of positionless rhetoric that renders scientific discourse so troubling. To overcome this rhetoric, I am recommending that we social scientists actively assert our responsibilities for what we write, for example, by adopting the first-person pronouns "I," or "we;" by using verbs that elucidate our active involvement; by assuring our readers that the path we happen to be taking need not be theirs; and by explicitly acknowledging that our narrative constructions might affect unknown or unintended others as well. In ecological accounts, even theories should be regarded as someone's theories, as I have suggested, and be considered to lead to many interpretations, scientific insistence on single readings notwithstanding. Ecological narratives have to acknowledge explicitly their positional and polysemous nature.

(2) In ecological narratives we **must grant others their voices as well**. We need to let the constituents of social phenomena speak for themselves, of themselves, from positions of their own choosing, and in situations in which they feel comfortable and at home. Listening to what people want to say and taking their narratives seriously opens us up to worlds otherwise unthinkable, even uncomfortable or troublesome. Ecological narratives must acknowledge the agency of others, the spaces that they have created in order to move about and to take standpoints different from ours. Otherness is our most important challenge.

Reporting the stories of those whose worlds we wish to understand is practiced by several research traditions, especially *ethnography*. Unfortunately, however, even ethnography has acquired the flavor of being applicable to ordinary folks only. The method does not prevent (the often anthropological) ethnographers to float above their informers much as theorists seek to stay above their facts. The voice of the ethnographer should be considered neither uncontestable nor immune to ethnographical research.

This does not speak against abstractions. Politicians do not shy away from conceptualizing their political realities in positionless, abstract and stereotypical terms. Since an objectivist rhetoric can provide power and influence to its users,

this practice is likely to continue. In contrast, by always acknowledging the source of such abstractions, ecological narratives will not capitalize on this rhetoric. Those who use them--politicians, but also political analysts who interpret their speeches and analyze the political climates, structures, or events of which the former speak--merely add their voices to political processes, voices that should not be taken more seriously than by the other participants. Often, the voices of social scientists, as important as they may be in the social scientific literature, might mean nothing to those directly engaged in the events being written of. Thus, merely reporting on what others say or do, assembling a kaleidoscope of parallel ethnographies, recording a polyphony of voices, writing a polyphonic novel--as Bakhtin would say--is not enough.

(3) I am suggesting, therefore, that ecological narratives try not to take the stories they record at face value. **Everything said or written should (i) be qualified in terms of how their listeners or readers respond to it and (ii) be approached with as few theoretical presuppositions as possible.** The first part of this recommendation is not entirely new but rarely heeded. It takes seriously Bakhtin's notion (see Todorov, 1988:41-60) that any utterance implies at least two voices, that of the speaker and that of the addressee. The meaning of an utterance--the speech act it performs, for example, or the sense it makes to someone--critically depends on the relation between what we hear a speaker to say and how we observe its listeners to respond (see Holquist, 1990). What we hear being said, the stories we read and quote, should not be considered "inherently" meaningful, "containing" meanings or "conveying" its author's "intentions," even when they mean something definite *to us*. "Containing," "conveying," "intending" invoke metaphors that objectify meanings as entities and seemingly dispense with the need for our reading. Semiotics has largely followed this line of theorizing. In ecological narratives, we must refrain from vying to be the sole authority on meanings, on others' understandings. We must instead find ways of listening to how others take what we may hear quite differently, how they respond in ways we would not. This calls on us to locate meanings in the responses and rearticulations that they trigger, in the relations between writers and readers or between speakers and listeners. We, too, always assume one of these positions. Only in the last instance would meaning be our interpretation--but not forever because the narratives that result from ours are as important as the narratives we incorporate in our own. To narrate ecologically means to curb the self-arrogating assumption of our being the only reader/interpreter/respondent of note. To show what something means is to embed it, where possible, within the networks of its responsive (re)articulations.

In scholarly writing, to be sure, we do quote our sources, often extensively, but mostly in support of the point we hope to make. By contrast, in an ecological narrative we must resist censoring the voices of others. This calls for our not dismissing the stories we hear being told--unless they are dismissed within the conversations from which they stem. It calls for avoiding the temptation of presuming to know what others "really" intend--without consulting them. In particular, this calls for renouncing our self-celebratory "hermeneutics of suspicion," by which elevate us to a position of knowing what we deny others to be aware of, hegemony for one example, or our systematic doubt in the sincerity of others, conspiracy theory for another—that is, unless "hegemony" or "deception" occur in the conversation we are attempting to enter.

In this regard, terrorism provides a good example. Terrorists tend to hold well worked-out constructions of reality that make their actions meaningful to them. It is our own normative theory of how all good citizens should behave that justifies our dismissal of their world as a distortion of reality, a reality whose self-serving construction we fail to realize as such. In this (our) reality, our actions tend to drive uncomfortable others from mere deviants to active dissenters onto terrorists, that is, into the very categories we may fear but also require to apply disabling punishments. In effect, terrorism preserves a world without the need to grant spaces for alternative realities to coexist.

Finally, and concerning the second part of my third recommendation, in order to minimize the constraints of theoretical presuppositions, ecological narratives should be approached as naively as possible, with a deliberately open

mind, and from a position of "not knowing" as the therapist Harlene Anderson (1997) recommends. This is to overcome the ever-present temptation of projecting our own theory onto others and, instead, to take in and to echo what others tell us, including who they are. While this would make ecological narratives more complex (and possibly less elegant) than monological theories or undigested collections of individual ethnographies, I suggest that public policy decisions, international events, political debates, social problems, even family happenings--when seen through such narrative networks--rarely are more complex than the stories that their constituents can tell of these events, of each others' stories of these events, and of their responses to them. Whereas ethnographers assemble individual stories, ecological narrators will have to weave them (back) into social fabrics, as the examples further below may demonstrate.

(4) In as much as **social realities arise in the co-enactment of the understandings participants have** of their worlds, of themselves and of each other in them, **understanding the worlds that others occupy** (my second point) and **how they define themselves** in relation to one another (my third point) **is a key to understand the dynamics that unfolds in the interactions across these worlds**. In ecological narratives, what would matter most is how the constituents of a social phenomenon perceive each other's capabilities, intentions, views, and likely responses to what happens or is being said. In classical systems theory, it is the theorist who specifies the relations between the components of a system, before attending to their consequences. Systems theory, like all theories, makes no room for human agency. It does not provide options among which the "components" of a system may select their systems conceptions. It leaves no spaces for the human constituents of social systems to act on the awareness of each other's choices. Game theory would come close to such awareness, were it not theorized from outside of the players. The game theorist assumes that all players face each other in a shared world of payoffs, a world that is of the theorist construction. In contrast, narrating ecologically means respecting the potentially different worlds of those who language each other into being; who give each other accounts of the paths they are pursuing; who co-ordinate their stories; and who thus find themselves co-directing a social dynamics *from inside the process* being narrated by them. Ecological narratives require and therefore must respect the agency of their narrators. Moreover, and conceding the necessary openness of narratives, ecological *narrators have to make some effort to extend the network of recorded stories by articulating their possible continuations*, ideally in ways that would make sense to those being narrated in them.

I suppose one might slip here into speaking of predictions. But this is precisely what would deny those narrated their agency and dismiss the possibility of their accepting or contesting narratives of concern to them. By contrast, an ecological narrative would not assign agency to abstractions, to systems for example, or to the physical environment, but presume its narrators' ability to act on their understanding of what they see, of each other's stories and of each other's understandings of these stories. Respectful communication requires such a recursively embedded understanding. Mechanistic explanations that cannot acknowledge this understanding may indeed arise in narratives but not on the part of the ecological narrators for whom such an understanding is constitutive.

(5) As all other participants in a dialogue, ecological narrators have to live with the humbling experience that **social realities are profoundly unpredictable** and that all **accounts of them must therefore remain open-ended, incomplete and constitutively incoherent** much of the time. This may prove disturbing for outside observers who must struggle with great numbers of seemingly contradictory accounts that may make a lot of sense within, or with generalizations that appear arbitrary and shallow to those involved. In everyday life, people communicate with each other selectively, creating parallel conversational realities. Taken together, they form loosely connected "multi-versa" which supplant the construction of a singular and coherent system or universe. Globalization, the claimed effect of mass media technologies, is far from converging towards a unified world. Its reality is complex, multi-faceted, fractionalized, tentative and continually reconstructed and maintained. Narrators cannot be in these multi-versa all at once. Even simple constructions,

such as terrorism, sweeping and judgmental as it may be, survive only in particular networks of told stories. For example, the network of manifestos issued by revolutionaries seeking to change the world; of stories told by the members of an establishment who face unexpected disrespect and violence from a previously unknown group; of police reports generated by officers who try to fulfill their duty by apprehending criminals; of the narratives by victims and their grieving families; of speeches by politicians seeking to cash in on an instance of public uncertainty; of the accounts that TV viewers and newspaper readers obtain by attending to the news, etc. Each acknowledges or responds to some of the other stories and all compete for attention in a public space in which terrorism is defined, politicized, thrives, and eventually recedes into history. This offers the ecological narrator much to work from. Readers of such narratives may have to tolerate at least as much diversity, inconsistency, and contradiction as is evident in the multi-versity of the interwoven worlds being narrated. One can hardly start from the assumption that the worlds such stories bring forth are common or even complementary to one another. In fact, it is the very discrepancies and discontinuities of these worlds that enable their narrators to extrapolate a dynamic of what might happen, should these narratives come in contact. Stories evolve in the very dynamics they individually inform. And in these interactions, stories rarely ever stay the same.

As dialogical accounts, ecological narratives cannot but be incomplete: (i) They present no more than one discursive moment in the process of their continual rearticulation. (ii) Efforts to embrace the narratives of all of its constituents can be at best fair, at worst illusory, but always contestable by anyone present. (iii) The telling (communication) of these narratives can be responsive to only some of the many voices that, together, inform their multi-logical self-producing future.

(6) If politics means acting in the belief of knowing others' intentions, being cognizant of the history of one's own participation in the political process, and being mindful of how one's own languaging might enable, constrain or (re)organize the public lives of others, including one's own, then **a social science that acknowledges its own politics offers two ways of understanding its phenomena.**

The **first** way is more in line with our established scholarly tradition. I like to see it as a mere step toward the second. It involves **sitting back and analyzing** the network of narratives heard and then *extrapolating* from them all *conceivable continuations*, without getting personally involved. This is what journalists claim they do when reporting an event through the stories of its participants, witnesses and stakeholders. This is also what political activists do when discussing strategy with their advisors before going public.

The **second** and largely neglected way of understanding is manifest in one's **active participation and discursive intervention in the social processes of concern.** This is achieved by tuning narratives and actions to their possible effects; inviting others to voice their concerns, even to comment on each other's stories; and to collaborate with us in writing of what is happening. This means collectively weaving and reweaving available narratives into each other until the process reflects the many stakes claimed by its participants and allows the process to continue without the need of a definite conclusion.

Active involvement in the collaborative rearticulation of ongoing social processes is probably also the best assurance that our narratives remain viable within the constituency of our choosing and that our role as narrator remains acceptable to that constituency. I believe all human beings are endowed with this fundamentally social ability. This may be exemplified by how politicians in a democracy manage to preserve their role as such politicians. It involves the ability to narrate compelling stories that rearticulate and braid the stories of their constituents in ways that these constituents could accept as their own. It surfaces in the ability of setting agendas, involving political bystanders in one's project, encouraging everyone to voice their concerns--while preserving the possibility for the process to continue, even in some other

form. Ecological narratives, too, should engage their readers in just such a process. Hopefully, readers' responses invite us writers back into the kind of involvement we find challenging. This second kind of understanding is, thus, not propositional but dialogical.

The criterion for the first way of understanding is that our narratives *can reenter* the social processes that they narrate. This means that they must be understandable and reproducible by their constituents and hence respectful of them. The criterion for the second way of understanding is that, upon reentry, these narratives **can contribute to the social life of those they narrate**, enabling them to direct the social phenomena being narrated **without becoming an embarrassment to us**, as ecological narrators.

To say that ecological narratives can, at least in principle, reenter and inform the processes they narrate is not to suggest that they require consensus or need to satisfy everybody. On the contrary, the inevitable inconsistencies among stories within ecological narratives (my fifth point) and the suggestion that meanings be ascertainable mainly through their consequences (my third point) are unlikely to please everyone equally or always. Since ecological narratives always provide larger contexts for their individual contributors' stories, they always re-contextualize and have the propensity to challenge and provoke existing conceptions and practices. This can prove uncomfortable to some and liberating to others. And therein lies a clear invitation for critical scholars to question constructions of reality that are deemed suspect and to alter the conditions that give rise to them—not from the position of a god-like judge, nor in the voice of omniscient spectators/interpreters/expert, but as sincere participants who not only treat all narrated others with respect—especially those that critical scholars feel the need to challenge—but also act in the knowledge of being held accountable for their critiques. To avoid embarrassment enables ecological narrators to continue playing a responsible role in that process and in return remain respected for their sincerity.

## Examples

Perhaps an example would be useful here—not of a complete ecological narrative, which would exceed the scope of this chapter, but of a story familiar enough to be merely referred to: the 1993 human tragedy in Waco, Texas. The narratives that defined the sequence of events have ancient roots. The term tragedy, now commonly used in describing the event, ties this story to a classical dramaturgical form of Hellenic origin. The apocalyptic discourse of the Davidians has been identified as the ideology of an embattled minority. It goes back to early Christian experiences of Roman persecution—as reflected in the Book of the Apocalypse (or Revelation) by St. John. These narratives acquired new realities in the voices of people that found each other at real discursive moments.

As the tragedy unfolded, many narrators could be heard reporting what they saw and responding to what they heard others say. Reporters were eager to interview participants and to dramatize their stories. Without their involvement we might never have heard of the event. The ATF agents, later joined by those of the FBI, were determined to arrest a criminal and eager to speak of how difficult that mission was proving to be. The US Attorney General, trying to assure that the actions taken were demonstrably legal and politically correct, added yet another voice. Then there was David Koresh and his fellow Branch Davidians who, having modeled themselves according to their readings of religious texts, sought to live lives of faith, best achievable within the bounds of a fenced compound. At any one moment, most of the players spoke of themselves, of those they saw themselves as facing, and of why they responded to each other the way they did. Commentators, scholars of religion, socio-psychological experts, and militant rightists also entered the public discourse. Even the voice of God was roped into the process, speaking to Koresh through his reading of the Old Testament. Each of these narratives brought forth different worlds with little if anything in common except that they could



not easily ignore each other. It was these differences that set the stage for the events that would unfold with a most terrifying determinism.

The Davidians inside the compound had constructed a world that included the coming of either a golden age or the fiery end of the universe. They saw unquestionable "signs" for the latter. Koresh, as the Lamb of Revelation, worked hard at opening The Seven Seals that would enable him to foresee what would happen. The world of the government agents outside the compound was dominated by the pursuit of a strategy that had most recently proved effective during another siege, at Ruby Ridge. It was designed to confine the movement of identified criminals and to force them to choose between surrender and violent death. Unwittingly, the Davidians reinforced the ATF/FBI's conception of the situation as a military siege, by using firearms against a forceful intrusion into their compound. For the ATF/FBI, David Koresh became an armed criminal; for the public he became the charismatic leader of an obscure, and hence potentially dangerous, cult, and a psychopath. These perceptions gave those outside the compound no reason to take Koresh's words seriously. Religious scholars surfaced in the mass media, interpreting Koresh's teachings, warning that his story anticipated someone to play the role of the evil forces that would bring about the end of the world by a disastrous inferno, an apocalypse--a role that the FBI would soon play, unknowingly. These experts advised the FBI about the role it occupied in Koresh's mind and tried to engage Koresh in dialogues aimed at dissuading him from his course of action. From what we know, these efforts failed to enter the narratives of either party. The ATF/FBI, seemingly unable to take seriously Koresh's different rationality, continued to dismiss him as an armed psychopath. They stuck to their military narrative and continued their siege, adding psychological warfare techniques--beaming bright light and broadcasting loud music and messages against the compound--with the intent to weaken the resolve of the besieged. Seeing themselves surrounded by "noisy forces of evil" and becoming increasingly suspicious of these unknown mediators, Koresh and his group became less and less inclined to consent to the kind of conversations suggested. For all sides, time became of the essence, albeit in diverging directions. Koresh sought to buy time before surrendering, ostensibly to finish writing a treatise he was inspired to leave behind. The ATF/FBI, under increasing public criticism for their lingering operation, sought instead to shorten the siege--by force if necessary--and added equipment to this effect. Thus, a world of military strategy, weapons, and logistics, driven by the public demand for quick and decisive action, interacted with an equally closed if differently oriented world in which the Davidians not only foresaw their fate, but also accepted it as such. The proof of the validity of their story came to them with the inferno that eventually ended the siege.

Increasingly evident to those of us less attached and therefore able more carefully to see how these narratives responded to each other is that these *narratives differed in content while neatly complementing each other in the behavioral responses* they entailed. As the tragedy unfolded, the dialogical space narrowed to a single path, eventually leading to the very end Koresh had prophesied and to the ultimate solution the ATF/FBI had considered. Each side had maintained a frightful consistency within its respective world construction. The death of 80 people, killed in the fire that consumed the compound, terminated their voices.

In the course of telling and retelling these narratives, there emerged a single story with a dramatic ending and a name for reference. Although this now neatly bracketed story no longer honors the logic of the less fortunate others, different versions continue to travel below the surface. As militia movements in the US and the Oklahoma City bombing would indicate, these narratives are still able to reproduce themselves into incidents that, though separated by time and geography, hang together by the stories that fuel them.

I could have chosen other examples, the recent events in former Yugoslavia for instance. Here, too, grand political theorizing proved quite powerless when compared to efforts of bringing into interactions the stories that people told each

other and of each other. These stories rearticulated historical events (Turks invading the Balkans, local heroes challenging the Austrian Empire leading to WWI, atrocities committed by Nazi collaborators in WWII) that sufficient numbers of people could relate to, that politicians could use to reconstruct present episodes as historical continuities, and that a univocal mass media system could compellingly dramatize and widely disseminate, protected from competing versions by the Belgrade government, as it were. The resulting ethnic war arose entirely from within these stories. It is best understood in terms of where which stories came to be retold and enacted and how the multiplicity of individual behaviors unfolded into unspeakable ethnic atrocities that we read of but can hardly imagine. These stories withstood the new names, places, means of delivery and narrators, and recreated the network of much earlier but equally heinous interactions.

I could have also exemplified ecological narratives by therapeutic conversations. Although therapeutic discourse is largely shielded from public scrutiny, published psychoanalytic theory notwithstanding, the stories that patients bring into a session is all what therapists have available to begin their interventions. In the beginning, the narrators are the actors in their own stories. Soon, however, the therapists will have to enter these narratives, albeit by different paths and in different roles as well. The patients' stories are as real to them as any reality can ever be. The therapists' intervention consists of conversing with their patients in ways that would enable them to rearticulate their stories into more livable ones--until they feel competent to continue narrating their lives on their own, to themselves, but above all, in collaboration with others.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Each of these examples account for social situations that, while vastly different from each other, are driven largely by the stories that their participants bring to them and enact in view of each other. We too participate in social processes as narrators, regardless of where our topics may come from. No sooner than we abandon the God's eye view of social theorists and adopt an ecological perspective, do we come to realize that in the social process we are narrating, all participants are *competent conceptualizers*, narrators, and even "theorists" *of their own local worlds*--and, as such, quite capable of offering situationally adequate accounts of the reasons for their actions. We are alike in this respect, except that our commitment to narrate ecologically would encourage us to acknowledge the possibility of diverse worlds, to attribute them to those who narrate them into being, and to accept responsibilities for our own narratives.

Narratives always leave much unsaid. Narrating unattended dimensions in the lives of others seems easy enough, especially in the absence of interaction with them. But unlike theorists, whether they are experimental psychologists or observers of hegemony, ecological narrators cannot claim the authority to speak for others without the latter's permission. Narrating what others do not (yet) understand should be no more than an invitation to dialogue, not a sign of superior abilities.

Ecological narratives can continually expand their participants' understanding by bringing the narratives of each into the context of all others. This expansion requires access to as many narratives as practical but, above all, a participant's openness to expand his or her horizon. Superior perspectives, completeness, accuracy or finality are anathema in ecological narratives.

Ecological narratives attempt to account for ongoing social phenomena in terms of all participants' understanding. The tragedy at Waco demonstrated that accounts of its unfolding that fail to embrace the narratives of its constituents, at least of its leading players, are ultimately self-destructive. In former Yugoslavia, the principal actors enacted their own literally single-minded accounts of whom they "knew" they faced and created ruin for all.

All social processes, I would argue, are self-directing, even autopoietic, while mediated by the stories that their constituents revive, tell each other, co-enact and live by. Placing these stories in an ecological interaction is one way of making the dynamics of the social processes analyzable by us. Encouraging that ecological narratives reenter the processes we claim to narrate assures us of their autonomous viability--except where distinctions between "*my*" superior and objective accounts and "*their*" inferior and subjective stories enter that process. Where such distinctions come to dominate a discourse, they can easily destroy its ecological nature by erasing the very ground on which human communication can take place. This self-destruction is analogous to the one Gregory Bateson (1972) observed in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. He searched for ways to overcome the Cartesian construction of mind as the master over matter, the cherished ideal of transforming nature in the service of exclusively human self-interests, and the reliance on validity and instrumental criteria for human communication.

We cannot prevent social theories from reentering and transforming their domain of observation. Observations involve theorists and theorized in a recursion. An ecological form of narrating is a way of accounting for social phenomena collaboratively, without the self-serving presumption of superior abilities to theorize others. The privileging of one accurate description is one manifestation of this claimed superiority. It disregards the voice of others and their different readings. In therapy, historical accuracy come second to getting the lives of troubled patients on a better track. Meaning lies not in references to external facts but in the viability of continued narration. The possibility of our narratives to reenter the social processes they address provides not only a fortuitous test of their viability, but also a benefit to everyone involved. For, it honors all of its human constituents' understanding, conserves the diversity of their perspectives, assures the continuation of the process of narrating social reality and reserves a space for our participation.

Ecological narratives could have therapeutic effects on a social scale. To be sure, the terrible stories that resurfaced in former Yugoslavia lay in waiting for a long time. However, had the mass media retold these stories in ways remotely resembling our ecological narratives, especially in Serbia where the press and television enjoyed an uncontested monopoly; had its principal actors been encouraged to appreciate the stories of the other side as complementing theirs; and had these actors been able to put them together and seen what their braiding had in store for them; perhaps the mindless horror that resulted from the unwavering pursuit of the theories that each held of the other could have been avoided.

Perhaps a last distinction is in order here: that between narratives *lived* and those merely *heard of or read*. Their difference results in two very different kinds of understandings. For those who live their story, stories are indistinguishable from reality. The Davidians in Texas lived their story as much as the ATF/FBI did theirs. And the consequences of their interactions were real indeed for both sides. But this may not be so for the stories we read or hear others tell. Someone else's story may be listened to, visualized, empathized with, and perhaps even retold. But whether such a story comes to be lived and enacted by its listener is another matter. A major problem of therapy is that it is always easier to listen to advice and to rearticulate what was said, than to live an initially heard narrative. Ecological narrators, too, can live only their part of the story that they are narrating. Heard stories never seem quite as real as lived ones.

Social scientists who do research on records (data) from a past without a present are concerned with stories heard. They are free to adopt any criterion for their articulations that their community could accept--consistency with certain privileged stories, for one example, or novelty for another. This might be all that historians can do. This also is the situation that invites theorizing, justifiably perhaps. However, as long as the social processes of interest remain observable and have constituents who could tell their stories as well as comment on ours, we as social scientists should feel obligated

to reinsert our narratives into these processes lest their viability in the lives of others remains an open issue.

To abandon our comfortable role as social theorists with superior observational ability and to acknowledge that our stake in any social reality that we construct is always only one of many could be viewed as an act of courage. However, this would also render our inquiries into our social worlds socially responsive and permit us to see each other as the political actors we are.

Reclaiming the respect for the otherness of others, which theorizing systematically undermines, has become of pressing importance. Ecological narratives could help us achieve this commonly preferred mode of being.

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