January 2000

Ecological Narratives: Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others

Klaus Krippendorff
University of Pennsylvania, kkrippendorff@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/97
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
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.
CHAPTER 1

Ecological Narratives: Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others

KLADIUS Krippendorff

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 others are questioning the intelligibility of master narratives and the ability of unifying theories or of logical/mathematical systems to represent reality. From their perspective, science, literature, and law are just three of many literary genres, each cultivating its own reading of texts.

The most recent critique comes from feminist scholars. Feminism is not a unified perspective. Feminist thought has grown far beyond its early advocacy of equal rights, by conceptualizing patriarchal society, exploring gender differences, and contributing scathing critiques of male rationality, of technological world constructions, and of the oppressive consequences of theory itself. 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.

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 all 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 and Michaels (1985: 30): “[T]heory 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; proponents of postmodernism, for being silent on moral questions that significantly undermine the intelligibility of moral experiences.

Many of these critiques rely on what I would call deficiency arguments—a rhetorical strategy that seeks to expose the failure of a theory by showing what it blatantly omits or surreptitiously distorts, without recognizing that such critiques are based on another theory—usually one closer to these critics’ hearts 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 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 summarizes the social role of theory and the particular relation that theorizing entails between theorists and the theorized others who are in fact 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 with the power to determine which theories are valid. It is the belief in this ontology, if nothing else, that ultimately justifies claims of being able to theorize facts for what they are, without bias or preconceptions and without accountability to those who may be affected by these theories.

Since the seventeenth 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 from the rare admission that data depend on theory, I know of no formalization of this reverse dependency or of interactions between the two (see Woolgar, 1993: 36, 53–66).

Ethnographic analyses of scientific practices reveal the cherished unidirectionality in proceeding from observations to theories to be a myth (see Garfinkle, 1967; Garfinkle, Lynch, and Livingstone, 1982). But overcoming this unidirectional conception would seem impossible as long as theories are stated in terms of 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 unidirectionality 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 theory and belief. 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 do so *about* something. When we believe, we do so *in* something. In beliefs, the emotional detach-
ment 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. For 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, but the truths of beliefs are held. Contrary to popular conceptions of theories as very accurate representations, theories are attractive because they can exceed their domain of observation in at least five ways: (1) 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, their generalizations rely on a good deal of belief. (2) Theories also predict under the assumption that the patterns observed in the past will persist into the future. Beliefs in such continuities have much practical value, but, as Francis Bacon already noted, they are ascertainable only in retrospect. (3) Theories also integrate several propositions into a single coherent network and (4) generate empirical hypotheses from very few quasi-axiomatic propositions. (3) and (4) are predicated on the belief that the logic of propositions corresponds to the logic of the world. For Carl Hempel (Mitchell, 1985: 7), moreover, (5) 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 the gaps of missed observations; and smoothing the rugged curves—none of which are derivable from observation and measurement.

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

Foucault's (1977) metaphorical use of the *panopticon*, to show 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 the built-in ocularity to its ultimate socio-logical conclusion: the government of one view at the expense of all others (see Holsti, this volume).

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 and political phenomena, in economics, linguistics, psychology, and systems science, for instance. While rationality and consistency are seen as twin values in scientific explorations, they also provide two different aspects of the monologism that theory implies. Being "rational" is tantamount to expressing oneself 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 both social theorizing and theory building in international relations.

**THE LANGUAGING 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, perhaps deliberately, hidden in objectivist parlance. 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. Proposition (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—even though metaphors reside in language, not in nature. Proposition (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 is likely 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 nonmaterial structures break? The failure to recognize the metaphorical nature of language even in our most rigorous scientific discourses attests to remarkable unawareness of how language directs the world that we theorize.

Theories are formed in language, but they must be languaged into being in a manner to 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 (see also Mansbach, in this volume), 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 that language is a neutral medium of representation (as formalized in propositional logic) nor from the corollary that theories may be justifiable solely by observations (of objects outside language). The notion of languaging as a dialogical process permits us to recognize theories as mediating between their stakeholders, as residing in processes of communication (as in Pirages, this volume). From this perspective, theories cannot be found in the contents of statements nor inside individual minds but in processes of their conti-
ecological narratives. Theories that fail to compel people to reproduce and recirculate them within their community simply fade away.

As communications, theories serve various social functions. They can define a theorist's identity. They can form the basis of particular research programs or schools of thought. They can also become institutionalized in disciplines that require adherence to or belief in them from its practitioners. Linguists, biologists, psychologists, all academic disciplines, distinguish themselves by the theories they believe in. Sometimes, theories may 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 perceive such as a threat to their very identity. When known, a theory can affect the behavior of the theorized by 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 discover new meanings by way of 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 that people have of it, this is typical, not exceptional. 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 well undermine their validity: They take considerable methodological precautions to protect their ontology from such challenges. But 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 triumphs of the natural sciences, convinced that the social sciences, too, could discover and accumulate a body of theories, social the-
orists have effectively succeeded in rendering social theory "unsocial," political theory "apolitical," and so forth. The widespread practice of theorizing the social (see Holsti and Mansbach, this volume) 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, if only by holding the theorized reality constant while collectively denying that they had anything to do with it. This grand self-deception correlates well with the myth that theorists could stay outside of the language that they use in explaining the world as inhabited by people without linguistic intelligence of their own and taking a "God’s eye view" (Putnam, 1981) of the universe. Scholars who have dared to question such monological practices have been seriously sanctioned. This has happened to several philosophers of science—including Popper, Lakatos, and Kuhn—among whom physicists chose to single out the late Paul Feyerabend 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 when theorizing our domain of observation, hide behind an objectivist language, and lose touch with the social world that 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, as I have done elsewhere (Ciprut, 2000), before submitting a proposal for an alternative theoretical path.

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" are the observed, the conservatives, the unemployed, the Catholics, and the terrorists. All of "them" are labeled and assigned to particular classes on account of characteristics that all members of such classes are assumed to share. Classification begins at the data-generating stage of social research. In interviewing, 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 repressed systematically. In the theater, spectators would have no problems distinguishing between actors and the characters that they play on stage. In social research, individuals are the very categories that a theory provides for them. Where individuals do not 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 achieved when a polyphony (a multitude of voices) is channeled into a single synthesized 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 is to avow the artificial unsocial nature of theorizing.

In everyday languaging, third-person pronouns refer to those absent. Theorizing makes this absence a virtue that bestows on 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 ends up being responsible for estranging others from ourselves.

(2) **Theorizing Trivializes Others by Reducing Them to Obedient Mechanisms.** As spectators, when social theorists observe human behaviors, including verbal interactions, they do so 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 patterned regularities. Here, talk of “regularities” assumes that these are followed without choice in the matter; talk of their “discovery,” that they existed prior to observation and measurement. Note that such assumptions are not only built into mathematical theories of behavior and inscribed into computational techniques for analysis of behavioral data—they can also penetrate less formalized talk of social causation. For example, plays are usually scripted, and scripts explain much of what theater audiences end up seeing. For the strict determinacy of machines, scripts are to performances much as computer programs are to computations, however. They are in control of the plot. Thus, describing human behavior in terms of scripts, rules, and grammars, even as reactions to messages, conjures the determinism of obedient mechanisms. Since spectators can never be sure of whether, when, and to what extent an observed behavior is minutely scripted, responses to unobserved conditions or improvised or deterministic accounts have no observational basis. They are a matter of preferences—unless theorists step out of their observer’s role to 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 sufficient condition to determine the presence of human intelligence or agency. Yet theorists cannot afford this interaction since it would shift the authority for theorizing to the subjects being observed and thus 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 en-
gaging 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 quite all right for sociologists like Goffman (1959, 1963) to describe social interactions in dramaturgical categories; and for psychologists like Schank and Abelson (1977) to interpret a same behavior in terms of individuals following rules and scripts; for literary scholars like Hirsch (1967) to extract intentions from authors' 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. Only by informed consent may human subjects be used in scientific experiments. Yet after signing their 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. In order 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 that 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.

The deception of informants as to the main purpose of their participation in a research project, the myriad questions that are irrelevant to interviewees’ lives, the contrived stimulus conditions to which subjects are asked to respond—all 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. Yes, theorizing does subject 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, following instructions is part of what we can do. But replicating such undesirable
human conditions, at the expense of human agency, for the mere 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 that human beings can live together (see Teune and Milnar, this volume); sociology, with how people organize themselves into larger wholes and coordinate their actions in ways that sustain these wholes (see Pirages's chapter, this volume); political science, with how people create publics, arrive at some consensus on agendas, and mandate their leaders to form governments (see Lipschutz's chapter, this volume); international relations, with how the peoples of the world perceive, and deal with, each other across national boundaries (see Buzan's chapter, this volume), resolve international conflicts (see Zartman's chapter, this volume), and regulate the innumerable interactions between the diverse constituencies of nation-states; and communication research, with how people construct, sustain, and transform their social universe by communicating with each other.

But none of these social phenomena can be understood by straightjacketing 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 very culture of theorizing makes it difficult for the social sciences to reflect on its social nature.

This self-defeating consequence of theorizing in the social sciences is not recognizable from within a representational sense or notion of language that philosophers such as L.J.J. Wittgenstein, R. Rorty, M. M. Bakhtin, J. C. Austin, and J. R. Searle have so 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, our generalizations of others, whether published as scientific papers, in journals, or disseminated in the mass media, provide fertile ground for social prejudices to arise and to become truths that can easily subordinate, discipline, marginalize, and criminalize others for their otherness.

It is always possible to contest and reject a claim. But in view of the authority that scientific theories do 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, African Americans, Arabs, Catholics, consumers, or teachers—they can achieve two things: In the immediate, they can entice "us" to treat "them" in the very categories that these accounts employ. In the long run, this treatment can transform "them" into the homogenous groups that 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 the academic writings of the nineteenth century about economic activities ended up materializing that reality in ways that, today, neither economists nor chief executive officers 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 clients for all of whom mental disorders have become as real as they can be? And 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 precisely the 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 our educational policies and hiring practices that keep such correlations real, well beyond published data? Do not statistics of cultural, racial, sexual, and national population characteristics inform and reify the very distinctions that statisticians initially 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, help create the very cultural dupes that television requires, abet the very behaviors that enable institutions to persist, discourage people from contesting scientific theories about them, and create obedient citizens who might differ as to whom they vote for but not as to how they could be influenced?

This is the reality we face. I am not suggesting that the project of the social sciences is doomed. I am submitting that 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, that prevents us from engaging in meaningful conversations with those who constitute the social phenomena we wish to understand, and that risks depriving us therefore of our primary source for understanding how social phenomena come to be.
A PROPOSAL FOR ECOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

Much of scientific theorizing, it must be emphasized, is manifested not in talk but in writing. Many of the entailments of theorizing that I have sketched may not be entirely attitudinal or epistemological but traceable to what the medium of writing makes (un)available to the theorist. In writing this chapter, I, too, feel the pull of monologism: After all, I am conceiving of social phenomena in the absence of those I am writing about. I, too, stand to be accused of theorizing about theorizing. But after considerable deliberations, what I am proposing here is a form of writing that might circumvent the old practice. I am calling it an ecological narrative, a manner of writing a story of social phenomena that embraces the stories of its human constituents and in so doing can be reembodied in their lives.

An ecology of diverse plants and animals, human populations explicitly included, can be said to arise in the interactions among its many constituents who, by distinguishing among kinds of interactions, organize themselves into families, cultures, and species and enact their own local and positional understandings of their worlds (Pirages's, Teune and Mlinar's, Zartman's, Buzan's, and Lipschutz's chapters, each in its own way, deal with ecology). An ecology is always more encompassing than the world of any of its constituents. Hence, an ecology is neither wholly theorizable (comprehensible) from any one position within that ecology nor fully exploitable (controllable) by any one of its species, all possible dominance relations (see Buzan, this volume) among them notwithstanding.

By stark analogy, a narrative can be said to arise in the stories told or written in the expectation of being understood and rearticulable by active listeners or readers—constituents of that narrative—who, by sharing certain stories and not others, especially of themselves, form numerous narrative communities. Their individual members understand these stories as giving meaning to their lives within these communities. 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 to prolong the ongoing process in real time. Like ecologies, conversations are not manageable by any one party and the interpretation of what is said cannot be expected to be the same for each participant. They are not theorizable from any single position. Consensus can neither be expected nor demanded. Conceptual diversity and conflicts, even struggles over correct 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 foster 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 on or emulate a mechanistic, organismic, or mentalistic system. Instead, it may be understood in terms of a dialogical concept of language—namely, through languaging or conversation.

An ecological narrative mitigates natural tensions between social and individual explanations. On the one hand, social realities are brought forth in dialogue, in interactions that involve 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 skills and abilities of its individual constituents. What does this mean for writing social science? I state my proposal in six points:

First, to narrate ecologically means to recognize 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, since even theories should be regarded as someone’s theories, they should be considered to lead to manifold interpretations, scientific insistence on single readings aside. Not least, ecological narratives have to acknowledge explicitly their positional and polysemous nature.

Second, 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 choice and in situations in which they can feel comfortable and at home. Listening to what people want to say and taking their narratives seriously open us up to worlds otherwise
unthinkable, even when uncomfortable or troublesome at times. Ecological narratives must acknowledge the agency of others and the spaces that they have created in order to move about and to take standpoints different from ours. Otherness is our most important challenge (see Zartman and complement with Holsti’s, Buzan’s, and Mansbach’s chapters, this volume).

Reporting the stories of those whose worlds we wish to learn to understand is done by several research traditions, especially ethnography. But unfortunately, even ethnography has acquired the flavor of being applicable to ordinary folks only. Their method does not prevent (the often anthropological) ethnographers from floating above their informers, much as theorists seek to stay above their facts. The voice of the ethnographer should be considered neither uncontestable nor superior to ethnographical research. This does not speak against abstractions. Politicians do not shy away from conceptualizing their political realities in abstract, positionless, and often stereotypical terms. Since an objectivist rhetoric can provide power and influence to its users, its use is likely to continue. Rather, by always acknowledging the source of such abstractions, ecological narratives will not capitalize on this rhetoric. Those who use them—politicians but also certain analysts who interpret political speeches and analyze political climates, structures, or events of which politicians speak—merely add their voices to political processes, voices that should not be taken more seriously than those of 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 sorts, writing a polyphonic novel—as Bakhtin would say—is simply not enough.

Third, I suggest, therefore, that ecological narratives try not to take the stories that they record at face value. Everything said or written (a) should be qualified in terms of how their readers or listeners respond to it and (b) should 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 say and how we observe its listeners respond (see Holquist, 1990). What we hear being said, the stories we read and quote, should not be considered “inherently” meaningful, as “containing” meanings or “conveying” its author’s “intentions,” even when they mean something definite to us. For “containing,” “conveying,” and “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. But, 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 differently, to 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. For we, too, assume merely 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 that 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 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—even without consulting them. In particular, this calls for renouncing our self-celebratory “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which elevate us to a position of knowing what we deny others to be aware of—hegemony, for example, or our systematic doubt in the sincerity of others, or conspiracy theory, for instance, unless “hegemony” or “deception” occurs 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 acknowledge as such. In this (our own) reality, our actions tend to drive uncomfortable-others from being mere deviants to becoming active dissenters or terrorists; to fall into the very categories that we may fear and to which we require that disabling punishments apply. In effect, fighting terror preserves a world without need to grant spaces for alternative realities to coexist.

In order to minimize the constraints of theoretical presuppositions, our approach to ecological narratives should be as naive as possible, offering a deliberately open mind, from a position of “not knowing,” as the therapist Harlene Anderson (1997) recommends—this, in order 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. True, this could well make ecological narratives more complex (and possibly less elegant) than the more current monological theories or the extant undigested collections of individual ethnographies. But public policy decisions, international events, political debates, social problems, and even family
happenings—when seen through such narrative networks—are rarely more complex than the stories that their constituents can tell of these events, of each other's 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.

Fourth, inasmuch as social realities do arise in the co-enactment of the understandings that participants have of their worlds, of themselves, and of each other in them, understanding the worlds that others occupy and how they define themselves in relation to one another is key to understanding the dynamics that unfold in the interactions across these worlds. In ecological narratives, what would matter most is how the various constituents of a social phenomenon perceive each other's stance, capabilities, intentions, views, and probable 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 system’s 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 have come close to such an 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’s own construction. In contrast, narrating ecologically means a priori respect for the potentially unlike worlds of those who language each other into being; who give each other accounts of the paths they are pursuing; who coordinate their stories; and who thus find themselves codirecting a social dynamics from inside the process being narrated by them. Ecological narratives require and therefore must esteem the agency of their narrators. 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 the narratives of concern to them. An ecological narrative would not assign agency to abstractions, to systems, for example, or to the physical environment, but would 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 unable to acknowledge this understanding may indeed arise in narratives, although not from the ecological narrators for whom such an understanding is wholly constitutive.
Fifth, as all other participants in a dialogue, ecological narrators have to live with the humbling experience that social realities are profoundly unpredictable, that all accounts of them therefore must 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 from within and also with generalizations that appear arbitrary and shallow from without.

In everyday life, people communicate with each other selectively, creating parallel conversational realities. Taken together, these realities form loosely connected “multi-versa” that supplant the construction of a singular and coherent system or “uni-verse.”

The purported globalizing effects of mass media technologies are far from converging toward a unified world. Their reality is complex, multifaceted, fractionalized, tentative, and continually reconstructed and maintained. Narrators cannot be in these multiversa all at once. Even a simple construction such as terrorism, sweeping and judgmental as it may be, survives 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 facing an unexpected wave of disrespect or of violence from a previously unknown group; of police reports generated by officers trying to fulfill their duty in apprehending criminals; of narratives by victims and by their grieving families; of speeches by politicians seeking to cash in on an instance of public uncertainty; or of accounts that TV viewers and newspaper readers obtain by attending to the news. Each acknowledges, or connects to, some of the other stories, and all compete for attention in a public space within which terrorism is defined, politicized, even as it 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 multiversity of the interwoven worlds being narrated. One can hardly start from the assumption that the worlds, which such stories bring forth, are either similar or complementary to one another. Yet 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: (1) They present no more than one discursive moment in the process of their continual rearticulation. (2) Efforts to embrace the narratives of all of its constituents can be at best fair, at worst illusory, but always contestable by anyone present. (3) And the telling (communication) of these narratives can be responsive to only some of the many voices that, together, inform their multilogical self-producing future.

And sixth, if politics means acting in the belief of knowing others’ inten-
tions, being cognizant of the history of one’s individual participation in the political process, remaining 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 recognizes 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, 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 most political activists do when discussing requisite strategies with their advisers before going public.

The second, largely neglected way of understanding becomes evident 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 manifold stakes claimed by its participants and allows the process to continue without precipitous need for 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 very 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. An example is how politicians in a democracy manage to preserve their role as such: 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, of involving political bystanders in one’s project, of 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—the writers—back into the kind of involvement we find challenging. This second kind of understanding is thus not propositional but all too evidently 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 that they narrate, enabling the latter to direct the social phenomena being narrated without becoming an embarrassment to us, as ecological narrators.
To say that ecological narratives can, were it 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 (see fifth point) and the suggestion that all meanings be ascertainable mainly through their consequences (see third point) are unlikely to please everyone equally or always. Since ecological narratives typically provide larger contexts for their individual contributors' stories, they typically recontextualize and display the propensity to challenge and even provoke existing conceptions and practices. This can prove uncomfortable to some though 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 godlike judge, nor in the voice of omniscient spectators/interpreters/experts, but as sincere participants who not only treat all of their narrated others, and especially those that critical scholars need to challenge, with due respect but who also act in the knowledge of being held accountable for their critiques. Ecological narrators' sincerity spares embarrassment, attracts respect, prolongs their activity.

**EXAMPLES**

Perhaps an example would be useful here—not of a complete ecological narrative that 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 that sequence of events have ancient roots. The term *tragedy*, since then 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 experience of Roman persecution—as reflected in the Book of the Apocalypse (or Revelation) by St. John. But these narratives acquired new realities in the voices of people that found each other at real discursive moments.

As the tragedy unfolded, numerous narrators could be heard reporting what they saw and responding to what they heard others say. Reporters were eager to interview participants, to dramatize their stories. And without their involvement, we might never have heard of the event. Agents of an anti-terrorist (U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms—ATF) force, later joined by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) personnel, were set to arrest a criminal and eager to speak of how difficult that mission was proving to be. The U.S. attorney general, trying to assure that 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 their way 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 in the ways they did. Commentators, scholars of religion, sociopsychological experts, and militant rightists also entered the public discourse. Even the voice of God was roped into the process, speaking to Koresh through the latter's 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 premised on the coming of either a golden age or a fiery end to their universe. They saw unquestionable "signs" for the latter. Koresh, as the Lamb of Revelation, worked hard at opening The Seven Seals, which would enable him to foresee what would happen. The world of the government agents outside the compound became determined 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 or violent death. Perhaps 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, 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 toward 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 own fate but accepted it as such. The proof of the validity of their story came to them with the inferno that would end 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, which they entailed. As the tragedy unfolded, the dialogical space narrowed to a single path, eventually leading to the very end that Koresh had prophesied but also to the ultimate solution that the ATF/FBI had considered. Each side had maintained a frightful consistency within its own worldview. 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 place name of reference. Although this now neatly bracketed story no longer commemorates the logic of the less fortunate others, varied versions continue to travel below the surface. As militia movements in the United States and the Oklahoma City bombing would indicate, these narratives are still able to reproduce themselves into incidents that, although separated by time and geography, hang together by the stories that continue to fuel them.

I could have chosen other examples, the recent events in the former Yugoslavia, for instance. In this case, too, grand political theorizing proved quite powerless when compared to the efforts of bringing into interaction the stories that people told each other and of each other. These stories rearticulated historical events (of Turks invading the Balkans, of local heroes challenging the Austrian empire into World War I, of atrocities by Nazi collaborators in World War II) that sufficient numbers of people could relate to, that politicians could use to reconstruct present episodes as though they were historical continuities, that a univocal mass media system could compellingly dramatize and widely disseminate under immunity from competing versions with the help of the government in Belgrade. The resulting ethnic war arose entirely from within these stories. It is best understood in terms of where it took place, 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 went on to recreate the network of much earlier, if not less heinous, interactions.

I could have exemplified ecological narratives also by way of therapeutic conversations. Published psychoanalytic theory notwithstanding, therapeutic discourse is largely shielded from public scrutiny. The stories that patients bring into a session are all that therapists have available to begin the intervention. Initially, the narrators are the actors in their own stories. Soon,
however, the therapists 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 the latter to rearticulate their stories into more livable ones—until they feel competent to continue narrating their lives on their own, not only to themselves but, more important, in collaboration with others.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Each of these examples accounts 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 theorists, 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 that 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 all alike in this respect, except that our commitments to narrate ecologically as scholars and theory builders encourage us to acknowledge the possibility of diverse worlds, to attribute them to those who narrate them into being, and not least, to accept professional 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 experimental psychologists or observers of hegemony—no ecological narrator may claim the authority to speak for others without the latters' permission. Narrating what others do not (yet) understand should amount to no more than an invitation to dialogue, without attempts to purport one's superior abilities.

Ecological narratives can expand the understanding of their participants continually by including the narratives of each within the context of all others. This expansion requires access to as many narratives as is practical. Above all, it depends on a participant's openness to expand one's horizon. Superior postures and perspectives, completeness, accuracy, and finality are anathema in ecological narratives.

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

All social processes, I would argue, are self-directing, and even autopoietic, while being mediated by the stories that their constituents revive, tell each other, co-enact, and even live by. Placing these stories in ecological interaction is one way for us to make the dynamics of the ongoing social processes analyzable. Encouraging ecological narratives to reenter the processes that 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 (see Holsti's chapter, this volume). Where such distinctions come to dominate any discourse, they can easily destroy its ecological nature by erasing the very ground on which human communications can take place. This self-destruction is analogous to the one that Gregory Bateson (1972) observed in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson had 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 on instrumental criteria for human communication.

We cannot prevent social theories from reentering and, yes; transforming their domain of observation. Observations involve both the theorists and the theorized in a recursion. Ecological forms of narrating are ways of accounting for social phenomena collaboratively, without the self-serving presumption of superior abilities to theorize others. Privileging a single description as accurate is one manifestation of a claim to superiority in that a priori it disregards the voice of others and the content of their readings. In therapy, historical accuracy comes second to getting the lives of troubled patients on a better track. Meaning does not reside in references to external facts but in the viability of continued narration. The possibility for our narratives to reenter the social processes that they address provides not only a fortuitous test of their viability but also a benefit to all involved: It honors all of its human constituents' understanding, it conserves the diversity of their perspectives, it assures the continuation of the process of narrating social reality, and it 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 the 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 see what their braiding had in store for them, perhaps the mindless horror that resulted from unwavering pursuits 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 narratives merely heard of or read. Their difference results in two very different kinds of understandings. For those who live their story, the latter is indistinguishable from reality. The Davidians in Texas lived their story as much as the ATF/FBI did theirs. And the consequences of their interaction were real for both sides. But this may not be so for the stories that we read or hear others tell. An other’s story may be heard, listened to, visualized, empathized with, 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 earlier-heard narrative. Hence, ecological narrators, too, can live only their own part of the story, which they narrate: Heard stories never have the reality of 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 those of their articulations welcomed by their community—consistency with certain privileged stories, or novelty, for example. This might be all that historians can do. Justifiably perhaps, this also is the situation that invites theorizing. However, as long as the social processes of interest remain observable and retain constituents who could tell their stories and 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 remain an open issue.

To abandon our comfortable role as social theorists with well-honed observational abilities, 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, because this would also render our inquiries into our social worlds socially responsive and permit us to see each other as the political actors we have always been, it would also constitute an act of candor.

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 and becoming.

REFERENCES


