Who Gets to Be a Theorist? The Oppression of Marginal Theories

Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang
A Tribute to Lewis and Rose Laub Coser

Conflict sociology is a paradigm-shifting framework for research that emphasises the role of power struggles in shaping societal change. One of the founding members was Lewis A. Coser, and his wife, Rose Coser, was a passionate feminist and a strong defender of affirmative action and social justice. Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago in the USA, was so inspired by their work that she decided to explore what it means to theorise from the margins.

Mainstream sociology theory typically involves research in Western countries aiming to ascertain causal relationships via quantitative research. Marginal theories, however, involve critical studies that harness empirical evidence, like ethnography, which emphasises the importance of understanding a given individual, group, culture and so on, within their own specific context.

Lewis Coser was a refugee that fled Nazi Germany and, at 41 years old, began a doctoral program in sociology at Columbia University. It can be argued that Lewis and Rose Coser benefited from their marginality early in their careers, which gave them a unique lens to develop theoretical insights about conflict, authority, and institutions. Through illuminating the Cosers’ life story, Dr Hoang teaches us that ‘the process of arriving at one’s theories is just as important of a story as the theoretical contribution itself’.

The Marginalisation of Women and Feminist Theories

As she reflected on the influence that Rose Coser had on her husband’s ideas, Dr Hoang questioned why the award is not named the Lewis and Rose Coser Award. She elaborated, ‘Why do men tend to get recognition and respect as theorists while the women who theorised alongside them and propped up their careers are labelled as empiricists, not theorists?’.

Women are often underrepresented in scholarship, often due to the gatekeeping within academia via journal reviewers, editorial boards and book publishers, which, as Dr Hoang explained, hinders the impact that female scholars can possibly have. Dr Hoang pointed to a personal example, in which an article she submitted to the American Sociological Review received feedback that she should abandon a woman theorist whose theory focused on gender, because the reviewer did not view it as theoretically sophisticated. As such, the reviewer encouraged her to cite two men instead.
Highlighting Publication Biases with Data

The data collected by Dr Hoang showed that two mainstream journals seem to be closing the gender gaps among authors, with 60% of papers published by men, 39% by women authors, and 1% by non-binary authors. She further explained that 29% of papers were on gender, while only 4% of all articles engaged with feminist theory.

These data affirm the hypothesis by earlier scholars that only certain types of papers on the topic of gender make it into mainstream outlets. It may be the case that feminist theory gets relegated to the subfield sociology journals, like Gender & Society. This led Dr Hoang to question what counts as general sociology with a larger appeal for the top journals and, importantly, who decides what counts.

The overwhelming dominance of quantitative methods inevitably leads to a problem where qualitative papers must force themselves into quantitative logic, which values causality and generalisability. The missed opportunities of this approach, explained Dr Hoang, is that it loses thick description and storytelling that can inform theoretical frameworks.

Let's Celebrate Marginal Work!

Although sociology as a discipline has made some advances in recognising the theoretical contributions of women like Rose Coser, Dr Hoang believes there is still a long way to go 'because the center is Anglo and masculine', with editorial boards underrepresenting women and people of colour, thus reinforcing research that maintains the status quo.

Although there is a rapid rise in Asian economies and a declining significance of the West, Sociology as a discipline still doesn't have theories to explain a new global order beyond paradigms such as Global North/South. In tribute to Lewis and Rose Coser, Dr Hoang urges us not to oppress the view from the margins but to celebrate it and make room for it because, in the margins, the most paradigm-shifting work may emerge.
Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang is Professor of Sociology and the Director of Global Studies at the University of Chicago. She obtained her PhD from the University of California Berkeley in 2011 on women, gender, and sexuality. Her current research examines deal-making in frontier and emerging economies, and she is particularly interested in the sociology of gender, global sociology, economic sociology, and qualitative/ethnographic research methods. Dr Hoang is the author of two award-winning books: Spiderweb Capitalism and Dealing in Desire. Between 2017 and 2020, Dr Hoang was an associate editor at the American Journal of Sociology, and over the years, her work has been published in highly rated academic journals. Her books and peer-reviewed journal articles have been awarded over 26 prizes from several different professional associations, including the Association of American Publishers, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the American Sociological Association.