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Anonymous and the Art of Theorizing

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Abstract

A rarity in contemporary sociology, DeGloma presents a theory-driven, theory-rich monograph on identity. On the one hand, the text works hard to balance a commitment to sociological theory that is uncommon in most corners of the discipline. On the other hand, the text ambitiously models itself on an older type of sociological book, like much of Goffman's (1959, 1963a) early oeuvre or, perhaps, those mid-century books that transcended the ivory tower like Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*. The following essay seeks to emulate the spirit of theorizing that DeGloma's work emulates and inspires in so far as my intention is to engage with the text, first highlighting what I think are the most generative aspects of the argument and then locating gaps that serve as excellent departure points for building on Goffman's and DeGloma's work.

Keywords: Sociological theory; Erving Goffman; Identity; Theorizing.

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In the early 1990s, as dial-up internet and its attendant chatrooms became a feature of everyday life in my household, the lurking specter of anonymity became increasingly salient in my reality. As a teenage boy, the dangers of anonymity were not nearly as frightening as they were for my female counterparts, who were even more at risk of being targeted by creeps hiding behind anonymity as they were in public spaces. Admittedly, my friends and I used the anonymity to extend our own ventures into prank phone calling into the nascent cyberspace. It was all so new, and like the earliest version of the telephone, its promises and pitfalls were completely unknowable. As a father of two young boys, near-totally surrounded by anonymous forces, including those animated by AI technology, anonymity has become something I contemplate beyond mere intellectual exercises. And in *Anonymous*, Thomas DeGloma (2023) provides some clues, insights, and poignant analysis to scratch that itch.

A rarity in contemporary sociology, DeGloma presents a theory-driven, theory-rich monograph on identity. I say rarity for two reasons. First, the text works hard to balance a commitment to sociological theory that is uncommon in most corners of the discipline. Theoretical treatises remain present, but largely suffer from commitments to the opacity of Bourdieu's and Foucault's that, like a badge of honor, substitute obfuscation, abstraction, and vagaries for clarity, precision, and simple prose. While this might offend many social scientists' sensibilities, theories that provide elusive concepts act as Rorschach tests more so than abstract explanations designed to generate hypotheses and empirical verification. It does not mean Bourdieu, for instance, is useless, but rather his writing style — which he himself admitted was counterproductive (Bourdieu, 2011) — exemplifies a social science that values esoteric and highly specialized language over a common theoretical lexicon. Moreover, what sometimes masquerades as theory is in fact empirically driven generalizations that are not works of theorizing. Second, the text ambitiously models itself on an older type of sociological book, like much of Goffman's (1959 & 1963a) early oeuvre or, perhaps, those mid-century books that transcended the ivory tower like Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*. On this score, however, DeGloma's work learns from their mistakes and grounds itself in greater empirical depth and breadth, substantiating its claims in ways that Riesman never could. For these two reasons alone, the book is noteworthy and destined to be something microsociologists will read and cite for years to come.

In what follows, I hope to emulate the spirit of theorizing that DeGloma's work emulates and inspires. From a meta perspective, my intention is to engage with the text, first highlighting what I think are the most generative aspects of the argument. More specifically, as a generalist whose first love was microsociology, I see two very important points to build on. The first thinks through a core Goffmanian question that is often in the background of most Goffmanian accounts and yet seems to be instructive for taking DeGloma's argument to its most generalizable level. Purposefully or not, DeGloma's text pulls us into an important distinction made by Goffman throughout his career between virtual and real identities. The interplay between these two, and the potential for discrepancy, animated much of Goffman's insights into situational complexity. Anonymity and pseudonymity add to Goffman's own categories in fruitful ways. The second point shifts from "reading" extant theory to me trying my own hand at extending DeGloma's theory, thereby illustrating the role other theorists can play in pushing theory in complementary ways. Here I offer a formal typology that organizes his four different forms of anonymity (e.g., everyone, no one), inspired by the cases and arguments he puts forth throughout. In the second half of the essay, I turn to what I think are valid criticisms meant less to poke holes than to suggest the threads others might consider relevant points for further theorizing. In this sense, I hope that this essay both reveals practical ways of theorizing and inspires greater engagement with theory in productive ways. To be sure, my own proclivi-

ties towards and opinions about theorizing are just that: my own. However, celebrating clarity, precision, creativity, and a commitment to building on the shoulders of giants without falling prey to exegetical worship seems the most promising path for a discipline that remains attached to theory but struggles with what it means to be a theorist or to theorize (Abrutyn & Lizardo, Forthcoming). The essay concludes by turning some of DeGloma's own conclusions into sociology as an enterprise. Once again, the motivation for doing so is to highlight the power that good theory offers sociology, even as a mechanism of self-reflexivity.

1 Finding Inspiration in Underexplored Goffmanian Corners

Rather than regurgitate the "plot", I would like to highlight what I think is the basic theoretical argument while acknowledging I am refracting it through my own theoretical biases and lens. A core theoretical argument Goffman makes in less-traveled essays like "On Cooling out the Mark" (1952) and "Role Distance" (1961b) is that the moral self is a reputational self (Abrutyn & Zhang, 2024). By this, Goffman implies the primary problem facing the self in any given encounter is the constant danger and risk of misaligning the *real* and *virtual* self. Goffman never expounds or defines either of these in the way that I would prefer, but it is clear that the former refers to the individual's self-conception — or something that is trans-situational or "global" (Turner, 2010, pp. 195ff.) — and the latter reflects the performative role they play or project as "demanded" by audience and encounter. The dynamics of these two selves run throughout Goffman. For instance, in *The Presentation of Self*, Goffman (1959) tells us that being too engrossed — that is, total alignment between the real and virtual — is risky because one no longer is self-aware of mistakes, transgressions, or other signals for careful adaptation (p. 216). Conversely, too much distance and the performance's authenticity and the actor's credibility collapse; someone who "mails in a performance" with no effort to even pretend that it is a performance becomes a person of ill repute, if only because we question whether they care about reputational claims to dignity and respect made by others or even themselves (Goffman, 1967).

Successful encounters depend on sufficient alignment between the two, though what sufficient means varies due to structural, cultural, political, and other factors (Goffman, 1961b). What is clear is that greater embracement — or the term Goffman (1961b, p. 106) uses to talk about alignment — translates into convincing performances that are affectively rewarding, and which uphold the ceremonial order (Abrutyn & Zhang, 2024). What is notable, for Goffman, is that we — the audience, other actors, team members — are attuned to checking for discrepancies, which is why the confidence man, or conman in today's parlance, was so interesting to him (Goffman, 1952). The confidence man must both embrace the virtual role while forcing their real role to align, or to hide this misalignment artfully. The problem is that they must inhabit the artificial role if they are to convince the mark that they are authentic.

DeGloma, of course, is not interested in the con man (more on this shortly), because the masking must be known by the audience if anonymity is to become significant in a symbolic interactionist sense. But, the parallels are worth considering. The anonymous actor or community *plays* with the idea of real and virtual, hiding the former while emphasizing the latter. This is achieved by manipulating the four "planes" of reality (Abrutyn, 2016). Physically, identity equipment designed to disguise the real self calls attention to the mystery in some cases, and yet, like the con, people ponder the mystery in hopes of catching discrepancies. Temporally, the real self is set aside while the virtual self, divorced from signs of past or future encounters, is free to operate in the present. Indeed, the temporality of reputation is perhaps my favorite

insight of DeGloma's (2023, p. 10). Reputation depends so much on the ledger people carry about others' actions (Boehm, 2012), and anonymity paradoxically frees people from reputational baggage while also making them less trustworthy because they do not have a "paper trail", so to speak. Socially, the virtual self is elevated to one of the four types DeGloma (2023) identifies: someone, everyone, anyone, and no one (pp. 18ff). This removes the person from any clear structural position in an articulated field, rendering them, again, reputation-less. Finally, anonymity implies that the virtual self becomes the only source of symbolic meaning, something that anonymous people appear to share with musical artists (see Formilan & Stark, 2023). Masks, fake names, representational identity equipment, and the like are purposefully chosen, and become a sort of hinge between which the "real" person and the intended (and unintended) audience interact. It is here, especially, that the commitment to a symbolic interactionist logic — that is, both the actor and the audience must identify and label the actor as an anonymous avatar representing something — runs aground of Goffman's own resistance to microsociological perspectives (Verhoeven, 1993); and, presumably, how he might see anonymity and conmen as more closely related in a dramaturgical account embedded in a Durkheimian or Radcliffe-Brownian perspective. Either way, it is at this symbolic level that physical, temporal, and social space can be more firmly grounded in a past, even if that past is mythic or fictional, or has little to do with the real self-leveraging that virtual self.

But DeGloma's account does not draw only, at least implicitly, from Goffman's (1961b) thoughts on role distance and embracement, as the *motives* behind efforts to protect anonymity find parallels in the virtual-real self-concept. In *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963b), for instance, the discreditable person, or one whose principal interpersonal problem is managing dangerous information, is motivated by the anticipation of what "discovery" will do to their reputation. To be sure, DeGloma's (2023) book deals with far more than the subversive function of anonymity (see Chapter 3), and yet the "secret" and reputational claims-making is always central to the motive for performing hidden identities. Having one's identity spoiled always carries interpersonal costs, though subversive identities that may also signal stigmas — or, marks of less-than-human status — could even cost one their life. These points are further fleshed out in classic role theory, where consistency and appearance principles predict efforts to maintain a given front (Turner, 1978): even though the anonymous or pseudonymous role is inconsistent or purposefully compartmentalized with our real self, the same pressures arise over time for the virtual self. Thus, these theoretical principles might be lurking in the background to help understand why and how the expectations a person internalizes when donning their mask push them to dramatize the performance for the sake of authenticity and credibility. Giving away any sense of real self in a performance may be disqualifying to other members of a team, but it risks serious reputational costs beyond the situation and setting. Of course, this pressure may be even more intense for those who are self-aware that their virtual and real self are separated by a yawning chasm, causing them to work hard to ensure they are not only taken for who they present as but also meet the expectations of others.

In short, new theories are best when they manage to build on that which exists, but without laboring to do so by inventing new concepts or relying too heavily on fidelity to classic texts (Abrutyn & Lizardo, Forthcoming). Far too often, new theories are really old wine in new bottles or pay such strong fealty to their source material that they offer little new beyond verbiage. For Goffman, who is too often labeled cynical for his lack of interest in some sort of core self, this tension between the performance and the performer remains essential to understanding his model of action, morality, and structure. The act of anonymizing one's self in DeGloma's specific sense of the term is a wrinkle he never considered — at least to my knowledge, but one

he would have appreciated given his commitment to finding the rules in seemingly exceptional cases (Jaworski, 2000) that, in fact, simply cast a mirror, uncomfortable as it may be, back upon the reader.

2 Anonymous Types?

Besides extending existing theories, a theory can be assessed for its generative and explanatory qualities. The four forms of "impersonal agency" (DeGloma, 2023, pp. 18–26) — someone, everyone, anyone, and no one — are an intriguing, though I felt underutilized, conceptual tool; a tantalizing place, however, for building outward in ways that contribute to DeGloma's project. It was clear to me that, despite my own sense of the shortcomings of fourfold models that promote (static) ideal types, his model lent itself to this sort of descriptive theorizing. Figure 1 is my attempt at this. On the left side, I have *collective representationality*, or whether or not both performer and audience understand the actor as an individual or as a representation of some sort of community.

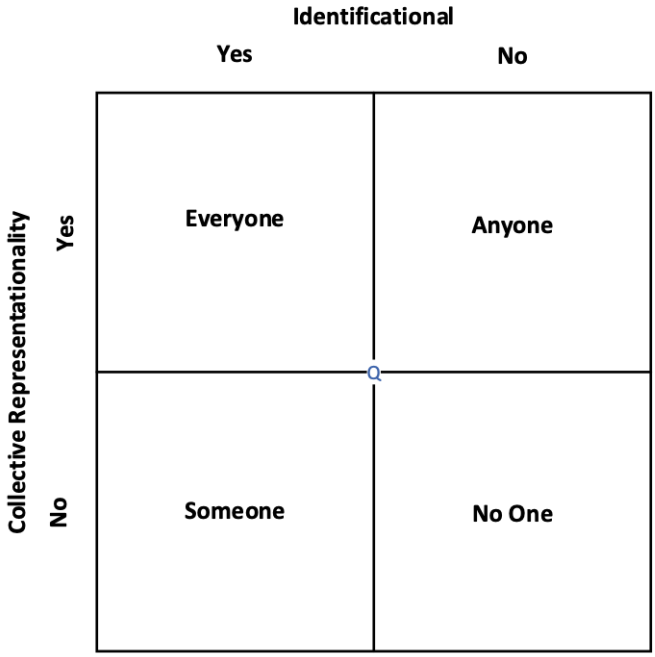

Figure 1. Visual Model of DeGLoma's Anonymous Identity

A key dimension DeGloma teases throughout, one that speaks very clearly to an underlying distinction between anonymity and pseudonymity, is whether or not the identity is individualized and specific to the person who adopts it or is designed to hide amongst an unknowable group of like-minded others. This distinction is important because it seems to get directly at the sort of variation in motives we might expect, as well as the meaning attributed to the anonymous actor. Everyone and anyone, then, are collective identities, even if performed by an individual. A member of the KKK or a single freedom fighter in a Guy Fawkes mask becomes the embodiment of their respective "group". They act, presumably, for value-oriented purposes, even if their own motives are less lofty and far more self-interested.

This distinction is made more clearly along the top axis, where I make the distinction between whether or not the anonymity is designed to appeal to an actual audience or to whomever. That is to say, Stephen King's (Richard Bachman) or J.K. Rowling's (Robert Galbraith) pseudonyms represent both their own authorship and voice and an imaginary "other" with whom readers can identify. The same goes for the aforementioned use of the Guy Fawkes mask for public performance: their ambitions in choosing the hood or mask are directed at both their fellow members as well as the intended target. Conversely, anyone or no one are purposefully employed to obfuscate identification. The man who dons a KKK mask, for example, hopes to strike fear into all minorities by shrouding any shred of presumed individuality in a mass of impersonality — that is, lost in a sea of white robes and hoods, the individual becomes a cog in a terrifying machine. Their actions, to be sure, are aimed at collective representations for both their victims, fellow members, and the assumed sympathetic community they "nobly" defend, but any sense of individual personhood behind it is purposefully opaque.

As with any model, I recognize these types are not clear-cut but reflect ideal "poles". But, they do help us add some explanatory power to DeGloma. For example, throughout his work, there is a suggestion that these forms of impersonal agency may change over time. That is, what starts out as anonymity for the sake of *someone* can, under the right conditions, become anonymity used to convey *everyone* or *anyone*. The "how" surrounding this transformative process is beyond the scope of this paper, but a lone actor masked or shrouded in secrecy can become symbolic of a movement or a totemic object for a group. Their original motive can be forgotten, unknown, or suppressed as they are elevated to something collective. It seems to me that this is one of the most interesting comparative lines of research that might arise from this book, contributing to the social movement's literature as well as the sociology of altruism and morality. The same, of course, could be said about someone becoming anyone. The logic here is slightly different, as the motives and goals of an agent wanting to be anyone instead of everyone are not necessarily compatible.

3 A Critique without Criticism?

At this point in the genre, one must turn to the criticisms of the text if they are to satisfy the formal structural demands. Critique, like sanction, can mean positive, productive, and generative comments. Thus, within the overarching frame of this essay, I would like to point to a couple of points that remain open to discussion, debate, and clarification. So, in the spirit of homing in on places I found to be confusing or undermining the overall architecture of the book, I offer some departures for more extended discourse about theorizing and the challenges therein. The difference is instructive.

For instance, if I were a reviewer leveling a critique, I would have pushed harder on the occasional blurriness between the anonymity/pseudonymity distinction. In many ways, DeGloma conceptualizes the latter as a subset or aspect of some forms or types of anonymity. Pen names, for instance, are key "cover representations" for authors who want to be *someone* and not themselves or *no one* for various reasons. This distinction is carried out throughout the book, often in the initial example used for a chapter. From a rhetorical standpoint, this makes complete sense: the reader can easily identify with an individual's decision to hide their real identity to take artistic or commercial chances that they might otherwise not be able to take. But, from a theoretical position, it is not always clear if the book is about anonymity or pseudonymity. Of course, the book *is* about the former and carefully makes a solid case, but the weight given to the

latter can confuse the issue at times. Indeed, at times, pseudonymity even feels more compelling to the reader, or at least this reader; perhaps because it illustrates DeGloma's larger arguments about how and why audiences identify with some anonymous actors more easily than others? To be sure, this is my thinnest criticism and one that is more a hazard of occupation than a fair point to make. In the following three sections, however, I attempt to reflect on theoretical puzzles that I think were left unanswered or unaddressed, but which, in a book designed to attract readers who are not necessarily theoretically inclined, were not entirely possible to investigate further.

3.1 Goffmanian Threads

First, to pick up a thread about Goffman left earlier: the line between the confidence man and anonymous agency remains vaguely open. To explain what I mean, let me first point out that a weakness in the text is the symbolic interactionist presumption that anonymity must be a given in any encounter for it to fit the book's model. In one sense, this is the case for public performances: The KKK member on TV in a hood; the Stephen King book in a bookstore under the name Richard Bachman; the graffiti artist, Banksy, in pop culture. But what about in real encounters? In order for anonymity to be a thing, that is, both the performer and the audience must be "in on it". The actor must signal their intention so that anonymity becomes an object, so to speak, of meaningful significance. But, *awareness* of identities is not always so simple. In the parlance of too many sociology courses: anonymity remains unproblematized!

On this count, we could consult Glaser & Strauss's (1967) classic piece on awareness contexts to think about the variation in who knows what in any given encounter (p. 670). Open encounters are those that only happen when both actors know each other's identity and/or are aware of key information relevant to "what is happening" in the encounter. Closed encounters occur when at least one of the participants is unaware of someone's identity and/or relevant information. This, it seems, is the ideal awareness context for anonymity. Though, closed contexts can easily become suspicious contexts when the participant(s) who is unaware suspects and is actively trying to "unmask" the individual, raising the risk of any anonymous interaction. Finally, a pretense awareness context occurs when everyone is aware of everyone's identity and relevant information *but pretends not to be*.

To return then to my first point, the line between the confidence game and anonymity is extraordinarily blurry. Indeed, one could posit that all anonymity is a con, and all awareness contexts involving anonymity involve inherent instabilities; though, these may be managed best by well-worn masks (again, Guy Fawkes or a KKK hood). As Goffman (1952) deftly notes, the conman must embrace both the performative mask *and* keep a studied distance from this identity so as not to get taken by their own performance. It is that balance between virtual and real identity that makes it so challenging. Likewise, suspicious contexts are hazardous for both types of actors. DeGloma, not surprisingly, notes in passing that — particularly in his discussion of pseudonymity — the mystery of who is actually behind the name or mask is as appealing a draw as the substance they are conveying. Perhaps, then, what distinguishes the two is their motives, but even here, there is a fine line. Surely authors who use pen names have some self-interested goals, no? I do not wish to draw this out too far, but there were several points in the text where I wanted to hear more about interpersonal dynamics and what might be called "complicated anonymity". I would never push an author to write the book or paper I would want to write, but this feels like a missed opportunity given the microsociological nature of the subject of identity and the homage paid to Goffman.

To be sure, not being a pure theory text, these sorts of omissions are understandable. In other places, such as an offhand remark DeGloma (2023) makes about anonymity and team performances (p. 15), this piqued my interest. Goffman (1959) devoted an entire chapter of *The Presentation of Self* to team performances, outlining the motives and challenges (Chapter 2). Thus, I was excited to think about how teams work to produce, manage, repair, and protect anonymity. Unfortunately, this aside never manifests into anything beyond an allusion. Yet it is an allusion that presents an ambitious young theorist with an opportunity to push DeGloma's argument forward, especially in light of my previous remarks about awareness contexts and interpersonal anonymity, as team performances feel ripe with fascinating dynamics. I can, for instance, imagine drawing on Goffman's (1963b) notes on how spoiled identities and the use of confederates to manage information. It seems, though, that there is far more to this, as there is a degree of stagecraft that goes into generating anonymity. Just what that entails, however, remains an open and rich question.

3.2 Anonymity and Power

An additional gap, I think, has become exceedingly salient in July of 2025, but not likely when DeGloma set out to write this book. Early on, he stakes out a value-neutral position, arguing that his goal is not to judge the motive or content of anonymous agency, but rather to treat cases social-scientifically. Agreed! But, there is an unintentional bias that puts artificial constraints on leveraging the theory to help explain things happening in the U.S. right now. What I mean by this is that the vast majority of examples DeGloma selects from highlight power dynamics from the bottom up. Resistance, subversion, and the like. The KKK might be the one example he offers that illustrates how systemic power might be transferred into collective actions designed to oppress and dominate.

This makes sense, as sociology is, after all, a discipline currently centered on social change, social movements, and giving voice to marginalized actors. As such, I do not find fault with DeGloma's choices, but there are three cases I can think of that both fit his book's overarching framework but also invite some theoretical puzzling. The first parallels the KKK, but is entirely unique insofar as it is currently being sanctioned by the State explicitly: masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers tasked with rounding up illegal immigrants as mandated by the Trump administration. Ordinarily, peace officers are required by law to identify themselves, reflecting their status as agents of the tax-paying public and not the capricious desires of a dictator and his patrimonial organizational structure. This is a case begging to be examined. When and why would state actors shroud themselves in anonymity? What is gained in this strategy, and what is lost?

A second case that is equally fascinating but far less obvious because of its mundanity is ordinary civil bureaucrats. What is more anonymous than an actor tasked with a highly delimited sphere of authority and information, bound by formal rules, and replaceable by just about any other qualified cog? Or, at least that would be how movies like *Brazil* have historically commented on the faceless impersonality of formal bureaucracy. We interact with agents of the state and corporations all the time, who are totally anonymous to us. They are more powerful than us, which suggests anonymity being leveraged against resistance; indeed, leveraged to restrict, reduce, or prevent resistance. A form of *callous* cruelty in Collins' (1981) terms. Do these characters fit the model cleanly? If not, what might we have to say about them? If so, what do we learn from this case?

Finally, and a bit more afield, what happens when an organization, like the armed forces,

convent, or prison, imposes a homogenous, anonymous identity on its members? These are, as the reader likely recognizes, what Goffman (1961a) termed total institutions, and are designed to mortify their inhabitants through admission rituals that strip them of their biographies, identity equipment, and personal demeanor. In turn, they replace these with anonymous features like numbers, uniforms, and the like. Here, anonymity is not a device designed to empower its *dramatis personae*, but to bend them to the will of the collective. In some cases, this is voluntary, such as a woman joining a convent and becoming another "sister" whose unique personality is buried behind the uniform, while in others, it is involuntary, like a concentration camp victim being stripped of everything unique and assigned a number. The masks both cases wear are not the traditional mask that obfuscates identity, but rather one imposed through fiat and coercion in ways that are different from a nascent KKK joiner, but comparatively interesting in a diverse set of ways.

4 Final Thoughts

I would like to end this essay by calling attention to something I found to be genuinely thought-provoking in Chapter 4 on systems and anonymity, and a fascinating point worth contemplating in a discipline concerned with social causes. "When we ascribe agency to an impersonal entity or system", DeGloma (2023) writes, "we let real people off the hook, including those who steer these institutions and use them for personal gain" (p. 107). DeGloma gleans two insights here. One, systems do not act regardless of the constraints they place on actors, and two, whether people freely act or operate within the bounds of the system, shifting blame from them is problematic. Both of these points make sense, but have a certain irony given DeGloma's disciplinary membership. Sociology has struggled with making sense of human action (Martin, 2011), in part because it leans heavily into oversocializing tropes (Wrong, 1961). Indeed, research works hard to emphasize the blame due to the system or collective, while resisting challenging the individual's role (Vaughan, 1999; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2024). Especially, individuals who lack power. It becomes a paradox in sociological explanations that powerful people, like the President or Elon Musk, have agency because they are powerful, but others are stripped of their capacity to do much because of (convenient) systemic forces like "neoliberalism", "capitalism", "patriarchy", or the like. Put differently, so much of sociology is devoted to systems that constrain and oppress whole classes of people while talking about certain individuals as more freely acting. Neither position is tenable: if everyone is a puppet of the system, then theories of action are a waste of space, while, on the other hand, if some can be agents in their lives, then the systems approach becomes more heuristic than explanatory. The gap, then, is not a gap but a critical insight that DeGloma is pointing towards that questions the conventional wisdom of mainstream sociological thinking; one that is worth extending beyond these cases to critique our own profession. But, what do we do with this? At the very least, it calls for greater self-reflexivity among analysts.

Ultimately, though, this may seem like a self-indulgent way to conclude a review essay. It certainly is provocative and shows, again, that sociologists are not exempt from the same tendencies found in the very phenomena they study. And, it is this last point that I wish to conclude my thoughts on. What makes this book so interesting and exciting is that it emulates a sort of style that is not completely absent in contemporary sociology, but which is mostly obscured by the disciplinary debates about science, activism, and the meaning of "public" sociology (Brint, 2005; Burawoy, 2005). It avoids the oversimplification of ideas that pop science leverages to reach as wide an audience as possible, but sacrifices the unnecessary pedantic, esoteric, abstract,

and opaque style of writing that passes as "good" theory most of the time. It is lucid and can easily be formalized if one takes the time to write propositions or draw models. It is compelling in its use of diverse arrays of cases. And it is approachable by an educated person, which was once something sociologists worked to achieve. It refuses to bludgeon the reader with messages meant to induce guilt or mobilize change. Rather, it presents an intellectual agenda and follows through in ways that are satisfying. I can quibble, and I indeed tried to in the previous section, with missed opportunities or directions I would take if it were my project, but that is as much a reflection of being inspired by the prose and its substance.

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