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Silences in sociological theorising, or: how social order is not for us*

Disruptions have always been of special interest to sociologists, and my colleagues who have so kindly followed up on *The Sociology of Disruption* (Vollmer 2013) in this journal have pointed to a number of nuances to this interest that are well worth attending to. Their commentaries are contributions to the sociology of disruption in their own right, and despite the important differences they are indicating these contributions are overall very much congenial to what I had been trying to accomplish in the book. Michael Dellwing (84-101) elaborates on the vulnerability of the interaction order and extends the sociology of disruption towards the sociology of deviance and to investigations of contemporary media economies. Tobias Röhl (102-108) picks up in particular on differences between disruptive situations and the later re-doing of disruptiveness and solicits additional attention to the role of material arrangements, infrastructures and non-human agents in such doings and re-doings of disruptiveness. The contribution by Thomas Scheffer (109-116) explores the broader theme how disruptions as continuously redone collective accomplishments are carried forward in time within a collective, which situates disruptive events in wider social and societal settings and thus emphatically re-iterates the central organising theme of the book.

Variations of our emphases and vocabularies aside, this convergence of interests and tendencies of exploring disruptions and their impact on social configurations is encouraging. At the same time, some of the claims I had been putting forward struggle to find traction in the confluence of sociological theorising that is apparent here, and this despite my best efforts in flagging several of these clumsier issues of theorising in my opening contribution to this journal. I have only myself to blame for this failure of blatant hand-waving, and I hope to be forgiven for the extra attempt here. In responding to my colleagues, I would like to appeal to a motivation for our efforts at sociological theorising, and perhaps our more idiosyncratic ones at that, which we perhaps make too little use of overall. We are all personally much more exposed to the fringes of social experience than most of our theories appear to acknowledge, and it is odd that we still draw so little on our own frustrations and embarrassments in this regard when trying to challenge these theories.

Michael Dellwing points out that disruptions attract contests over how they are being defined not at least since disruptions are often of strategic use. I agree that the strategic employment and re-doing of disruptions and disruptiveness is a topic that warrants more attention than it has been receiving. I have to admit though that I still find myself worry-

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ing somewhat more about the attention, or rather the lack thereof, awarded to those disruptions that are not of much strategic appeal or use and do not attract respective contests and contestants. I also concur with Dellwing (87-88) that the constitution of disruptions as discrete event requires social ratification by more than one member of a collective that responds to these. Again though, I would suspect that concentrating on respectively ratified disruptions will end up marginalising other forms of poorly ratified or entirely unratified disruptiveness. These less ratified forms of disruptiveness can substantially affect a collective, even if such disruptiveness diffuses collectively through sublime or entirely private forms of embarrassment, shaken beliefs, resentments, enthusiasms, or nasty habits.

Tobias Röhl (106-107) points out that my perspective in this respect perhaps overemphasises the role of human bodies as transmitters of disruptiveness and that I lose out somewhat on the role of non-human agency. I fully accept this observation. I would insist that human bodies are indeed where many of the minor and major disruptions of social life within a collective go to get some sleep – incubating until they surface again, often for apparently no good reason and in settings which are connected to an original incidence of disruptiveness by nothing else than the trajectory of these human bodies. Something similar could certainly be said about the many unratified cracks in non-human actors, their material manifestations, and their role for tying social life together across single situations. I very much look forward to hearing more in this regard from the promising line of research which Röhl and his colleagues at Siegen are currently involved in. There is certainly also some legacy of social and organisational theory to be updated by reconsidering the work of Perrow (1999 [1984]), among others, on the genesis of disaster in heterogeneous assemblages of socio-technical-material agencies. However, I suspect that if we do not give sufficient attention specifically to human bodies as »vehicles of situational immortality« (Katz 1999: 37),³ we will be missing out on crucial dynamics of social change in the wake of disruptiveness even as we continue to expand our ways of including more and more of our non-human co-interactants in the sociological theorising of disruptive or disruption-driven change. I do not think that we have done an entirely convincing job yet in understanding how our very own human material and its travels in space and time affect our collective capacities to find, re-do, or reject order and disruptiveness.

Thomas Scheffer is particularly keen to elaborate on the perspective on broader social change that had been the central organising theme and analytical frame of the book. The reference to process in particular is obviously as central here as it had been there, and the idea that a number of »formative objects« (112-115) are carried forward in a collective is very much congenial. I suspect though that most of us do not enter the broad church of social practice just to kneel and praise. With respect to the present topic I would caution against re-framing disruptive occasions in terms of well-accomplished, if not entirely altar-ready collective objects such as, most notoriously, »historical« events (see Sewell 2005). How such collective constructions are being put together is worth investigating not at least since the objects thus accomplished and re-done are consequential for those

3 A reference I am at pains to include once again here – not at least since I quite embarrassingly misquoted it in the book.

who will confront them as life goes on. But overall any interest in »formative objects« would do well to dissociate itself from collective tendencies to normalise, individualise and ultimately rule out the less object-ready aspects of disruptive occasions. The competence with which members of a collective impose certain formative objects on one another – not to forget the competence in filing away incompatible experiences and memories or learning to ignore what is going on around the altar – has much to be admired. Our convergence on ratified, well-worked out and then at some point even well-known disruptions though once again will tend to draw us away from engaging with the many disruptions that never come close to becoming more widely – »formative« within a collective. There is a lot of silence involved in how collectives process disruptiveness, not despite but because all the work that goes into doing, undoing and re-doing disruptions. Sociological theorising, with theories of practice as recently canonised additions, should be keener to break such silences.

The sociology of disruption points to a certain amount of particularism inherent to how social structures and processes are accomplished on a very elementary level – the level at which people regain their composure despite the negative experience which they continuously encounter and find ways of moving on. That questions of position and membership tend to take precedence over substantial concerns with disruptions in responding to these is a finding of the book that was based on an admittedly – and Röhl (103-104) is right once again in pointing this out – rather purposive sample. I agree with Röhl that there are cases of responding to disruptiveness in which a search for information and knowledge takes centre stage instead. These are mentioned in the book mostly with respect to the normalisation of disruptions (Vollmer 2013: 95-102, 179-186). Sociological theorising is at risk of piling onto such normalisations. As much as we might like to model our fellow citizens as fellow social scientists, we need to be aware that the way in which social structure and process find footing after a shakeup is not reflected by the normalisation of disruptiveness within a collective. Not including the non-ratified experience of disruptiveness implies not including experiences and expectations that may very much be consequential as life goes on, and for how it goes on. I suspect that respective exclusions very much affect and depress the status in particular of the non-human actors that Röhl, Potthast and the Siegen group are interested in. Such gradual or categorical exclusions should not be papered over by sociological theorising, nor, I suspect, can they unilaterally be resolved by taking a respectively enlightened socio-ontological stance (Latour 1993).

The sociology of disruption should indeed be much more outspoken still about the fact that social life is disorderly, and in that respect I find Dellwing's emphasis on the unruly character of everyday life particularly helpful (89-90). The stability we are being presented with is often one that does not quite represent the trouble that people of all shapes and colours encounter and go through in maintaining an appearance of orderliness and in »doing being ordinary« (Sacks 1984). People struggle just as they understand that, more often than not, social order is not for them. Social order as rolled out from situation to situation will not rule in their favour, it does not leave them better off for it, it often does not make them feel entirely fine about themselves, and it certainly does not generally let them feel better about one another. If we are honest, »them« is us – in everyday

and academic life. We do »get« the position of Schutz's homecoming soldier (Schutz 1964: 106-119), even if we have not been to war. All of us come home in this special sense several times every day.

The particularistic, confrontational and self-imposing aspects of social order, pervasive to its daily experience for all of us, sit rather unwell with the implicit idealism with which we still refer to the alleged positive collective result from holding at bay disorder or the proverbial war of all against all. Social order is not set up for anybody and in its real-life manifestations from situation to situation it is not unambiguously good for anybody. We have all learned to live with that, but in sociological theorising, of all places, we have to put more effort into overcoming the deafening »silence of the social« that surrounds us (Hirschauer 2006). And certainly, more is needed than a statement that such particularities and inequalities exist, that we do not like them, or that we gracefully will include the »others« and their unheard voices in our theorising. These others is us. We need to become much better at understanding how »effective cooperation in maintaining expectations« (Goffman 1983: 5), in sociological theorising and elsewhere, takes place in a manner that marginalises a substantial part of what we experience day in and day out while, at the same time, it makes us pretend that we feel perfectly fine about it.

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