

This book sets out a different approach to teaching and learning theory. The focus here is on the method of theoretical reproduction of new generations includes a certain amount of random variation, meaning that occasional glitches in the process of reproduction will be common.

It might seem that these common values would be threatened, but here is that journalistic investigation of the intricate and complex world of the mind in the tower of the soul.

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# A GOOD BOOK, IN THEORY

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then this means that advocates of this social order model not  
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THIRD EDITION

ALAN SEARS and JAMES CAIRNS

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IN  
THEORY

常州大学图书馆  
藏书章  
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THROUGH INQUIRY

THIRD EDITION



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5201 Dufferin Street  
North York, Ontario,  
Canada, M3H 5T8

UK, Ireland, and continental Europe  
NBN International  
Estover Road, Plymouth, PL6 7PY, UK  
ORDERS PHONE: 44 (0) 1752 202301

2250 Military Road  
Tonawanda, New York,  
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A GOOD BOOK, IN THEORY

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## *Preface: Users' Guide for Students and Instructors*

**Y**OU WILL probably skip this preface. Lots of us never read the instructions when we buy something new. We just plunge in impatiently and try to figure it out on the go. Prefaces are like instruction manuals for books, so we often ignore them and get right into the reading. At times, however, we regret our impatience because we can't figure something out on our own. Sometimes there are useful things to learn from instructions.

Of course, books usually do not need a users' guide. This book is, however, rather different from most of the theory texts that are available, so we thought it might be helpful to say a bit about why we wrote it and how it might be useful.

### THE ORIGIN STORY OF THIS BOOK

**T**HIS BOOK grew directly out of our teaching experiences in postsecondary institutions. Alan wrote the first edition of the book after teaching compulsory theory courses for over 15 years. Students had to take these courses to meet the requirements for their degree. Over time, Alan became convinced that he was doing something wrong. The students forced to take those courses told him in written evaluations that he did a fairly good job of making dry material somewhat interesting. But they were not convinced that there was a very good reason for these theory courses to be compulsory. These courses did not succeed at developing students' appetites for theoretical thinking; they did not convince students that anything they learned here could be useful in their futures.

In retrospect, Alan realized that his general approach has been to introduce students to a set of social theories without ever providing any guide to theoretical thinking itself. As a result, students in those courses drew on their prior educational experience and tried to approach theories in a fact-like way, learning by rote, for example, that Marx wrote about class struggle and Durkheim about the division of labour. But the courses did not equip them to understand why that distinction might matter. A small number of students worked it out for themselves, but many others never saw the usefulness of theory courses.

Alan went back to his own experience of postsecondary education to help identify this problem. He took five years off between getting a three-year BA and returning for a fourth year before applying to graduate school. He got really nervous when he returned to classes because he had retained virtually nothing. He could remember vaguely, for example, that Durkheim and Weber both did comparisons of Catholics and Protestants, but, beyond that, he did not have a clue about their major contributions. He was afraid that he was entering fourth-year courses with almost no memory of the prerequisite courses he had taken along the way.

Yet, that fourth year proved to be much easier than the previous three. Alan realized pretty quickly that retaining the specific, detailed content of the courses he had already taken was not that important as this content was fairly easy to learn again. He *had* learned something important in his first three years of university, but it was not the detailed content. Rather, although he wasn't fully aware of it at the time, he had begun to acquire ways of doing systemic inquiry. He had developed an approach to learning that included methods for reading, writing, analysing texts, listening to teachers, and engaging in discussion. Those methods were more important to his survival in fourth year than the facts he had memorized for exams and forgotten long ago, usually within moments of completing the final. His years in the workforce helped him develop a confidence and sense of purpose that, together with the methods learned previously, allowed him to thrive the year he returned.



So Alan set out to write a book that focused on the method of theoretical thinking rather than on the specific details of particular schools of social thought. The process of writing this book also got him more interested in questions of learning and teaching at the postsecondary level. In that context, he was asked to work with others (Matt Feagan, Kris Erickson, and Chris Cachia) to develop workshops that would help teaching assistants hone their craft. James participated in one of those workshops near the end of his PhD studies.

That's how the two of us met. We ended up having a lot of conversations about learning and teaching and, ultimately, got the chance to co-instruct a first-year course using this book.

Our experience of using this book in a large introductory course convinced us that it would be helpful to write a second edition. The purpose of the course was to introduce first-year students from a number of disciplines to social science inquiry. We were encouraged by the ways in which the first edition of the book helped students learn about formal theoretical thinking, but, at different points in the semester, we found ourselves wishing that the book had expanded on the relationship between theorizing and empirical research. We decided that more could have been said about the cycle of inquiry that moves between fact-finding and explanation. This cycle was often discussed in our classes—why wasn't it explored in greater detail in the book? Teaching has a funny way of clarifying ideas that we thought we already understood.

From the start of our new project, we wanted to preserve the first edition's focus on theoretical thinking and to ensure that the book remained relevant for theory courses. At the same time, we wanted to add further discussion on the relationship of theoretical thinking to methodical research in processes of inquiry. Understanding this connection is an important part of theory education, but it is also relevant for learning research methods and for introducing social science as a specific way of knowing.

We agreed to work as a team to rewrite the book. Although we share many of the same interests—in teaching, social

theory, political journalism, and sushi, although not always in the same sorts of music—we also bring different strengths and experiences to writing this book. James brings the experience of using the text to teach a course on social science inquiry, as well as a background in interdisciplinary studies. His training in political science, communication studies, and cultural studies offered a fresh take on a project—one that addresses basic questions about the promises and limitations of academic ways of knowing.

Further, James brought a passion for teaching that he could trace back to being raised in a family of deeply committed teachers. The craft of teaching intrigued him from the outset, and he put a lot of thought into ways of engaging students so that they developed an active approach to learning. He also brought to the classroom a deep interest in music, theatre, reading, and cultural production that added tools to reflecting on different ways of knowing and interacting.

Co-teaching, with the two of us in the classroom at the same time, provided a very different experience of the professor role, challenging the idea of teaching as an individual performance. Similarly, co-writing opened up the writing process in new ways, as we collaborated to map out plans, draft sections, and rework each other's words. The experience of collaboration itself has reshaped this book. In this edition, we have shifted the voice of the book away from the very personal first-person ("I") perspective that Alan used in the first edition and we kept in the second. This has been a bit of a challenge, as the first person plural ("we") has a certain ambiguity when used in writing. It can refer to the writers of the book, but also, at a more general level, to all of us ("We all think theoretically in our everyday lives"). Further, we (James and Alan) do have different stories, preferences, and perspectives. But, ultimately, we thought that the collaborative experience was best expressed with the use of "we" in this book. We hope you can negotiate easily between the general and specific use of "we."

This third edition has offered us the chance to address gaps in the second. James has ended up doing much of his teaching

in the area of theory and methods, which provided him with different insights into how this book worked. Specifically, we decided to add more discussion of postmodern theories and a richer engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing. We also wanted to work more on the overall flow of the book and to add in some activities that might help guide the application of concepts we use.

## THEORETICAL THINKING AND ACTIVE INQUIRY

THIS BOOK sets out a different approach to teaching and learning theory. The focus here is on the role of theoretical thinking as one aspect of a larger cycle of inquiry—a cycle that moves between using our senses to explore the world around us and seeking explanations for events through the identification of general patterns. Theoretical thinking begins with the everyday theorizing we all do to make sense of the world around us. As we go through our lives, every one of us develops working assumptions based on various forms of generalization from our experience, assumptions that we use as a guide to the situations we face. Without these, we would be completely at sea when we confront anything new or different.

These generalizations are based on our ability to distinguish the aspects that are specific to a particular situation from those that are more likely to recur. When a bug crawls out of a piece of pie we are eating in a restaurant, we seek out ways to avoid repeating this disgusting experience. As a result, we have to figure out the general pattern of bug appearance so that we might alter our behaviour to reduce the possibility of this recurring. We could generalize that pies are likely to be bug-infested and so avoid pie for the rest of our lives. But this decision would go against a lifetime of eating bug-less pies; that is, our generalization would contradict the bulk of our experiences. The theory would not fit the facts. Or we

might assume that the restaurant had hygiene problems and so avoid that one place. We learn to identify the features that define a particular phenomenon as exceptional rather than as part of a more general trend.

The generalizations we develop through our everyday theoretical thinking are extremely useful but tend also to be limited in their power because they draw only on our own insights and what we have gleaned from others. The formal theories developed in scholarly study and through social movement activism often have a penetrating power because they reflect a broader view developed through interchange over time and a live up to a more rigorous set of requirements for internal consistency and fit with the world. Although sometimes it seems as though people who write theory are primarily concerned about little more than proving themselves right and proving others wrong, formal theories are powerful because of their ability to shed light upon the way the world works. This ability is not magic; however, it is no mind trick or lucky guess either. Rather, thinking theoretically is about making sense of the facts before us and using our theories to pursue new facts.

This book illustrates some of the power of these more formal theories with reference to issues in our surroundings. The aim is to show how the world we already know can look very different through the lens of particular theories, just as looking through binoculars can provide new insights on a hike through the woods. It is a guide to theoretical thinking, which is one important and often neglected dimension of theory education and of courses on how to do research. The aim is to help readers develop a method that will assist them in making sense of the specific theories they will be exposed to through their education by relating theoretical thinking to their own activities in the world. It builds on the foundation of the everyday theorizing we all engage in all the time. The tone is a bit more chatty and informal than in most theory texts. The aim of the book is to complement rather than replace other texts that provide a detailed introduction to specific theorists and schools of thought.

Our interest in theory education stems from our shared conviction that theoretical thinking is extremely useful in the world. Theory might seem to be the most obscure and academic of subjects, particularly given its specialized vocabulary, which is difficult to penetrate and its big concepts, which can seem pretty far removed from reality. Yet it can be practical, providing vital insights that allow us to make sense of the world around us and that serve as a guide to action when we try to do something about the things we would like to change.

Theory provides us with visions of the world that go well beyond the comprehension we are able to develop through our daily activities. Malls, for example, have become major fixtures in the lives of many of us, whether we work, shop, go to movies, hang out, or eat there. Different theories allow us to see the growth of the mall over the last 50 years as one of a series of interrelated changes that have had a huge effect on our leisure, work, and political activities.

Leisure activities have tended to become much more dependent on the consumption of products we buy rather than on the things we do and create on our own or for each other. Music, for example, is something we experience mainly through recordings. Birthday parties are increasingly held at fast food restaurants or activity centres rather than at home. Shopping has become a leisure activity in its own right, rather than a means to an end (the actual purchase of something you need).

Contending theories provide very different explanations for these changes: they might be taken as signs of a generally affluent society in which most people now have access to considerable wealth, or they might be attributed to the spread of consumerism that increasingly encourages us to define our self-worth according to the products we can buy. Each of these theoretical perspectives will highlight certain aspects of the phenomenon under consideration and, at least by implication, suggest certain forms of action. Should you sign a petition against the arrival of a new Walmart in town or rush out to enjoy new access to cheaper products? Your theory of shopping in our current society will have something to do with your response. Of course, no theory of shopping, malls,

music, or anything else can be dreamed up independently from experience. Although it is true that contending theories seek to draw generalizations that go beyond our daily activities, they are always embedded in processes of inquiry that are crucially informed by the observation and documentation of human life in action.

## THEORY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

**T**HIS BOOK promotes the approach of thinking through theory by applying it. One important body of theory that we applied in writing this book examined learning in the classroom. Teachers often take the form of classroom learning for granted and teach by drawing on the model of the way their own education was structured. Similarly, people draw on the patterns they have been exposed to, whether consciously or not, in the realms of parenting and couple relationships and in other aspects of life.

The process of teaching as we were taught is being interrupted in the postsecondary environment by a range of debates that are coming to a head in the early twenty-first century. There are widespread claims that traditional approaches to university teaching are offering diminishing returns in the current context. Indeed, the development of information technology and online education raises questions about whether the classroom is even necessary at all.

This book is designed as a tool to help in the development of an active classroom environment. One model of this that has some currency is the “flipped classroom,” in which students watch lectures online at their leisure and spend class time processing information in active ways. This book is an attempt to flip the pedagogy of theory education from information transfer to active application.

The active classroom raises the vexing question of class size. University classes are large and tend to be growing. It is much easier to imagine active learning in the context of a

smaller seminar class in which interaction is at least somewhat more comfortable and participants actually get to meet each other. However, we are convinced that it is possible to engage students in active learning in a large class (e.g., over 150 students), and we have done so using this book. We make extensive use of small group activities, reflective writing, and problem-solving exercises in the classroom.

Too often, theory is taught in a highly academic form, sealed off from the everyday world and from a real connection to practical activity or the lived experiences of students. As a result, theory courses, from a student's perspective, do not seem essential even if they are required. Every student knows they will never be asked a question about the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan in a future (non-academic) job interview.

We wrote this book as a tool to assist in teaching theory differently. The book can be used as a jumping-off point at the beginning of a theory course—to help newcomers to the subject develop an appetite and aptitude for theoretical thinking before facing the challenge of handling the complex theories written by the big names. Alternatively, instructors could choose to assign various chapters here and there throughout a course, creating a back-and-forth pattern between the study of formal theories written at a high level of abstraction and a more grounded approach to theoretical thinking.

The book uses one theoretical debate—between the social order and conflict models of theory—to demonstrate the importance and vitality of theoretical analysis. We selected this particular debate as it closely parallels key themes in contemporary discussions of social and political issues, ranging from moral values to work processes and from social welfare to the status of women. We do not claim this debate exhausts the field of theoretical interchange, but we hope that using a more simplified debate format to introduce students to theoretical thinking will allow them an entry point into what is sometimes an overwhelming array of theoretical choices. The aim here is to prepare students

with a strong base from which they can negotiate the complex and disputed terrain of contemporary social theory. We have deliberately problematized this debate format by showing how the whole social order versus conflict frame can be critiqued from the perspectives of Indigenous ways of knowing and postmodernism.

This book can also be useful in courses not focused exclusively on the study of social theory. One of our primary goals is to elaborate on what it means to theorize as part of a process of methodical inquiry. In introductory courses, theoretical thinking can challenge students to think of disciplines as ways of seeing the world rather than as massive vaults piled high with collections of facts accumulated in previous research. The goal is to get students to begin to use disciplinary perspectives to frame their own analysis of the world around them, so they can begin to understand the practical value of the subjects they are studying in illuminating their environment directly or indirectly.

We also see a need for a better bridge between theory and methods courses. Most postsecondary curricula do not make it easy for students to understand the role of theory in the research process. Sure, we might offer some formalized statements about beginning with hypotheses derived from theory, but, nevertheless, we tend to present research methods as technical problems quite distinct from theoretical thinking. In order to reinforce the idea that theory and method are, in fact, complementary features of a particular way of learning about the world, the new chapter in this edition of the book situates theoretical thinking within a larger process of inquiry. Because it suggests that theoretical thinking is impoverished without rigorous research and that even the most technically perfect research project will yield little without an analysis grounded in powerful theoretical insights, the book could be used in theory or methods courses to draw the link between explanation and documentation.

This book could also be useful in assisting students to understand the importance of theory in courses that don't teach theory or method, primarily. We find students often



consider theory an intrusion in a course on crime, international development, or labour studies. They often hope for an unbiased perspective that will shed light on a particular area of our social existence. It is our sense that we often fail to explain the importance of theoretical analysis in studying various subjects. Theoretical thinking frames our view of the subject, whether we are conscious of our presuppositions or not. This book encourages self-reflection as a necessary tool to become more aware of our own presuppositions, as well as analysis in order to figure out those of others.

We hope that this book helps students see theoretical thinking as the development of something they already do rather than as an alien activity they can never master. Thus, the book may be useful in a variety of courses. The ultimate goal is to help students assume a more active role in their own education, seeing the things they learn as the development of their own aptitudes rather than as something external that they are forced to try to assimilate.

To that end, we have included activities and thinking points throughout the book, to help readers apply to the world around them the concepts they learn here. We designed these also to help teachers think of classroom activities that might challenge students in their classes to use theory actively—as part of a process of problem solving.

## IN PARTING

WE HOPE you have fun with this book. We think theory is a hoot. Sure, some of the reading is hard and maybe even tedious at times. Still, theory can be exciting because it allows us to be surprised by a world we thought we already knew. It makes us think in depth about cooking or football, work or fast food. This book is designed to help you play with theory, using it the way a funhouse mirror makes the familiar strange. These effects can be disturbing, as you see yourself and your everyday world reflected