

Fuck Nuance

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Abstract

Nuance is not a virtue of good sociological theory. Although often demanded and superficially attractive, nuance inhibits the abstraction on which good theory depends. I describe three “nuance traps” common in sociology and show why they should be avoided on grounds of principle, aesthetics, and strategy. The argument is made without prejudice to the substantive heterogeneity of the discipline.

Keywords

theory, nuance, models, fuck

Nuance is not a virtue of good sociological theory. Sociologists typically use *nuance* as a term of praise. Almost without exception, when nuance is mentioned it is because someone is asking for more of it. I argue that, for the problems facing sociology at present, demanding more nuance typically obstructs the development of theory that is intellectually interesting, empirically generative, or practically successful.

As alleged virtues go, nuance is superficially attractive. Isn’t the mark of a good thinker the ability to see subtle differences in kind or gracefully shade the meaning of terms? Shouldn’t we cultivate the ability to insinuate overtones in our concepts? Furthermore, isn’t nuance especially appropriate to the difficult problems we study? Our research problems are complex, rich, and multifaceted. When sophisticated thinkers face a rich and complex world, how can nuance not be the wisest approach?

It would be foolish, not to say barely comprehensible, to argue against the very idea of nuance. That would be like arguing against the idea of yellow or the concept of ostriches. Nor does it make much sense to think of nuance as something we can add to or take away from theory just as we please. That is a bit like the author whom Mary McCarthy described as busily revising a short story in order to “put in the symbols” (Goodman 1978:58). What I call “Actually Existing Nuance” in sociological theory refers to a common and specific phenomenon, one most everyone working in sociology has witnessed, fallen victim to, or perpetrated at some time. It is the act of making—or the call to make—some bit of theory “richer” or “more sophisticated” by adding complexity to it, usually by way of some

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additional dimension, level, or aspect, but in the absence of any strong means of disciplining or specifying the relationship between the new elements and the existing ones. Sociologists do this to themselves, and they demand it of others. Sometimes they see it as one of the discipline's comparative virtues. I contend that it is typically a holding maneuver. It is what one does when faced with a question for which one does not yet have a compelling or interesting answer. Thinking up compelling or interesting ideas is difficult, so it is often easier to embrace complexity than to cut through it.

It is not that theory should be maximally simple. Generative research programs develop theories that aim for a fruitful combination of simplicity and strength (Lewis 1973:73). Those theories are built with the aid of techniques, methods, or rules that actively constrain what one can say. It can be hard to abide by whatever these formal, logical, or methodological standards demand. Yet in practice, they are what keep the theory under control. Perhaps counterintuitively, by establishing limits they are also what allow for the creative development of new ideas.

Actually Existing Nuance is not burdened by these constraints. It is more like a free-floating demand that something be added. When faced with a problem that is hard to solve, a line of thinking that requires us to commit to some defeasible claim, or a logical dilemma we must bite the bullet on, the nuance-promoting theorist says, "But isn't it more *complicated* than that?" or "Isn't it really *both/and*?" or "Aren't these phenomena *mutually constitutive*?" or "Aren't you leaving out [something]?" or "How does the theory deal with agency, or structure, or culture, or temporality, or power, or [some other abstract noun]?" This sort of nuance is, I contend, fundamentally antitheoretical. It blocks the process of abstraction on which theory depends, and it inhibits the creative process that makes theorizing a useful activity.

NUANCE RISING

Is it fair to single out nuance as a distinctively contemporary problem? Perhaps it is simply a constant feature of theory, like a chronic skin condition. Or maybe, in a world of big data and TED talks, nuance is much less common now than in the past. Either way, we would have less reason to make a fuss. Figure 1 shows the relative incidence of the words *nuance* or *nuanced* in research articles published in the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces* from the inception of each journal until the end of 2013. As is immediately evident, sociology seems to have been largely devoid of self-conscious nuance until the 1980s. It then began to spread. From around 1990, use of the term *nuance* exploded to the point where it now appears in between a fifth and a quarter of all articles published in these journals.

Further analysis of these simple trends is of course possible. For example, perhaps academics everywhere are calling for more nuance because there is less and less of it out in the world. We can control for baseline changes in the academic use of the term by subtracting the annual incidence rate across all 4.7 million articles in the JSTOR corpus. Doing so does not change the pattern. We might also look to the particular conditions of the use of these terms. Consistent with the discussion above, the term is seen across a range of substantive research areas and methodological approaches. Other major sociology journals also show this trend, although to interestingly varying degrees.¹ I take the clear trend across journals as *prime facie* evidence that nuance is strongly in the ascendant. By now it covers large parts of sociology much as people imagine kudzu covers large parts of the South. It is so widespread and well established that it seems to be a native feature of the landscape. But in fact it is a pernicious and invasive weed.

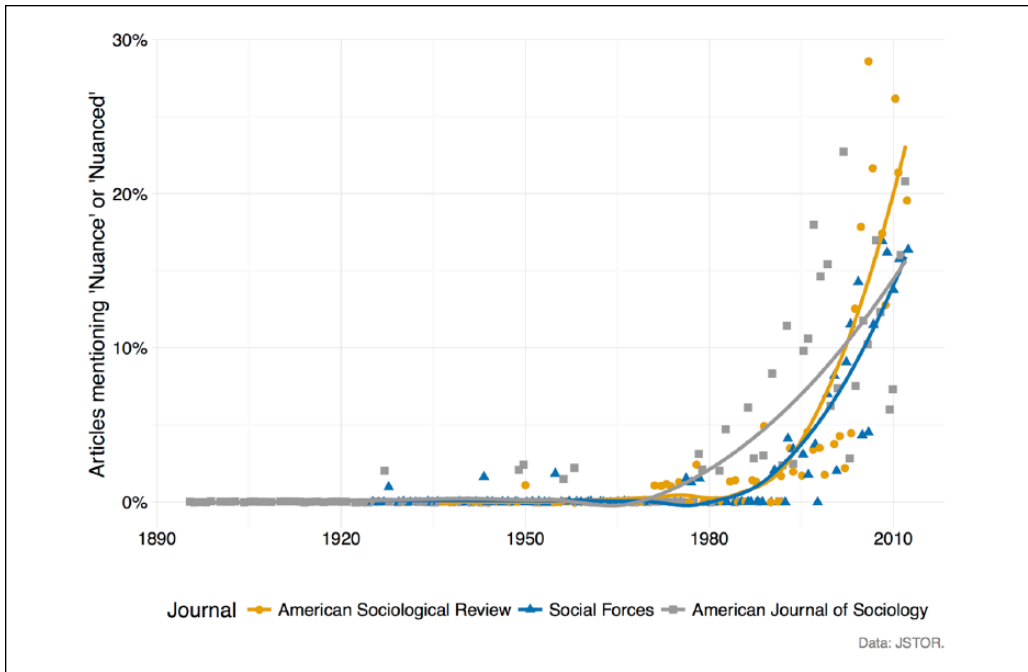


Figure 1. Nuance in three sociology journals.

NUANCE TRAPS

My principal target is a habit of thought, not a particular theorist or school. Theory in sociology is a heterogeneous enterprise, mostly because the discipline is so thematically wide-ranging. This is a polite way of saying that sociology is only weakly disciplinary. Interesting work in the field is varied in scope, method, and style. At various times, factions in sociology have tried to subsume or expel one another. Their successes have never been more than partial and temporary. Like society itself, sociology is motley and manifold. Thus, I do not advocate some religion of theoretical salvation. For example, I do not argue that everyone should start formally modeling things, even though model systems are very useful sorts of fictions that foster collaborative investigation of the world (Godfrey-Smith 2009; Paul 2012). Such models may be mathematical, but they also include things like model organisms, model cases, and real or artificial model settings, things that tend to be underappreciated by sociologists. I will not argue on behalf of some Great Thinker, classical or contemporary, even though the best parts of the theorists we most often teach are hardly ever the nuanced parts. And I certainly will not try to rule some topical areas or research programs off-limits *a priori*, even though no one in a field finds everything that happens in it of equal interest or importance.

However, I do claim that the more we tend to value nuance as such—that is, as a virtue to be cultivated, or as the first thing to look for when assessing arguments—the more we will tend to slide toward one or more of three nuance traps. First is the ever more detailed, merely empirical description of the world. This is the nuance of the *fine-grain*. It is a rejection of theory masquerading as increased accuracy. Second is the ever more extensive expansion of some theoretical system in a way that effectively closes it off from rebuttal or disconfirmation by anything in the world. This is the nuance of the *conceptual framework*. It

is an evasion of the demand that a theory be refutable. And third is the insinuation that a sensitivity to nuance is a manifestation of one's distinctive (often metaphorically expressed and at times seemingly ineffable) ability to grasp and express the richness, texture, and flow of social reality itself. This is the nuance of the *connoisseur*. It is mostly a species of self-congratulatory symbolic violence.

Of these nuance traps, sociology has historically been criticized for its tendencies toward the nuance of the conceptual framework (Rule 1997:98–119). This is due largely to the influence of Talcott Parsons (1937, 1952), whose work shows an inexhaustible capacity to pause, back up, and ask, “What are the general prerequisites for answering this question?” when faced with literally any sociological question—including *that* question. In seminars, at conferences, and in the current literature, however, the other two nuance traps are now more common. There is a strong tendency to embrace the fine-grain, both as a means of defense against criticism and as a guarantor of the value of everyone's empirical research project. Relatedly, there is a desire to equate calling for a more sophisticated approach to a theoretical problem with actually providing one, and to tie such calls to the alleged sophistication of the people making them.

I present a case against Actually Existing Nuance on three grounds, focusing mostly on the nuances of the fine-grain and the *connoisseur*. First, I ask whether nuance is in principle a feature of good theory—that is, theory that seems to produce correct explanations for things. Second, I ask whether nuance is a feature of interesting theory—that is, theory that we both want to dig our teeth into and feel good about having chewed on afterward. And third, I ask whether nuance is a feature of theory likely to produce professionally or publicly influential social science. The answer to all these questions is No.

ON PRINCIPLED GROUNDS

The most important thing about a theory is whether it is any good. Demands for more nuance actively inhibit the process of abstraction that good theory depends on. What is abstraction here? It is not simply generalization, that is, the production of law-like statements like “All ravens are black” or “All social revolutions are precipitated by fiscal crisis in the presence of divided elites” (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948). It is not metaphorical or analogical reasoning, either. Analogical reasoning is a common and powerful tool for theory and it has abstract elements, but it is a more involved process than simple abstraction (Hesse 1966; Stebbing 1933). Rosen (2014) provides a helpful definition: Abstraction is a way of thinking where “new ideas or conceptions are formed by considering several objects or ideas and omitting the features that distinguish them.” Abstraction means throwing away detail, getting rid of particulars. We begin with a variety of different things or events—objects, people, countries—and by ignoring how they differ, we produce some abstract concept like “furniture,” “honor killing,” “social-democratic welfare state,” or “white privilege.”

This sort of abstraction is part of the guts of social theory. By doing it we produce the concepts that we use to make explanatory generalizations or that we analogize with across cases. Rosen (2014) goes on to remark that, in this process, an immediate challenge is that “nothing . . . requires that ideas formed in this way represent or correspond to a distinctive kind of object.”² That is, there is no guarantee that the abstractions we come up with will be of any use to us.

This means that not just any old idea will do. Figuring out whether a theoretical concept is a good one is a central problem of abstraction. The rules for producing logically defensible concepts and theories are pretty well formalized. The literature on how to produce good or productive ideas is more vague. It takes the form of lists of strategies, tricks, and heuristics.

This should be unsurprising, as the goodness of a theoretical abstraction partly depends on whether the insight it expresses is a real one, and that is a matter of discovery. If there were a recipe, we would all follow it. As Humphrey Lyttelton replied when asked where jazz was going, "If I knew where Jazz was going I'd be there already" (Winch 1958:87). Faced with the central problem of generating insightful abstractions, it is tempting to proceed negatively, by assessing theories in terms of what they fail to include or cover.

That is the kudzu of nuance. It is difficult to participate in seminars, attend professional meetings, or read referee reports in contemporary sociology and not see someone challenged on the grounds that their theory or research is missing something, or has ignored some dimension, or neglected to adequately address some feature of social reality. Calling for more nuance in this way makes us shy away from the riskier aspects of abstraction and theory-building generally, especially if it is the first and most frequent response we hear. Instead of pushing some abstraction or argument along for a while to see where it goes, we have a tendency to start hedging theory with particulars. People complain that some level or dimension has been left out, and they demand that it be brought back in.

Crucially, the call to "account for," "address," or "deal" with the missing item is an unconstrained process. That is, the critic is not interested in discovering whether a theory can handle this or that issue internally but rather in simply expanding the theory's "scope" with some new term or terms. *Class, institutions, emotions, structure, culture, interaction*—these or any other term are asserted generically to "matter" and thus should be incorporated into the framework just on that basis. Incorporation is the reintroduction of particularizing elements, even though those particulars were what had to be thrown away to make the abstraction in the first place. To make a loose statistical analogy, it is a little like continuing to add variables to a regression on the grounds that the explained variance keeps increasing. It is a small irony that many of those most likely to request unconstrained additive complexity from a theoretical framework would also say that piling up "explanatory" variables in a regression is hopelessly atheoretical.

This move is pervasive for two related reasons. First, the heterogeneity of research topics that sociologists pursue means that everyone is tempted to bring the particulars of his or her own empirical case to bear on whatever theoretical idea is being developed. The discipline's structure invites the fine-grain, but status still attaches to generality, and so there is a sometimes justified fear that any particular empirical finding will be ignored if it cannot be pitched as "advancing theory." We fall back on having to justify the theoretical centrality of every particular case, even if we really are just interested in developing piecemeal explanations. Neither the substantive importance nor the theoretical interest of specific topics or cases should depend on their being "incorporated" into theory in this way.

Second, nuance flourishes because of the relative absence of shared standards within the field for the evaluation of theory. These standards can be those of logic, for instance, or model-building, or research methods, or even simply an agreed-upon focus on an empirically delimited area. With one or more of these constraints in place, abstractions become possible and theory can develop. But in their absence, there is a tendency to fall back on assertions of multidimensionality or worry that one has to "account for" everything at once. A weak methodological core invites connoisseurs. Any nascent theory can be ambushed by the demand that it address several large conceptual abstractions and can be condemned as a failure when it does not.

The result is a lot of unproductive blocking. General theory suffers, but so do particular explanations. By calling for a theory to be more comprehensive, or for an explanation to include additional dimensions, or for a concept to become more flexible and multifaceted, we paradoxically end up with less clarity. We lose information by adding detail. A further

odd consequence is that the apparent scope of theories increases even as the range of their explanatory application narrows. Nuance is often elaborated in the context of relatively specific research cases. With a lot of connected empirical material to make sense of, researchers immersed in that detail are tempted to develop a suitably rich or complex “theoretical framework” that allows them to hold on to as much of it as possible in their explanation. The particulars are verbally “brought in” to the theory as general dimensions or levels of analysis—for example, by nesting individuals, interactions, neighborhoods, and states; or by considering social-psychological, cultural, and structural aspects of the phenomenon; or by the claim that (for instance) institutions matter, power matters, culture matters, the interaction of all of them together matters, and something suggested by the particular case at hand also matters.

It is usually impossible to generate the sort of empirical data that would do justice to all of these dimensions or allow them to be systematically compared or related. Instead, the result is a constellation of cases, each with its own grotesquely overpowered theoretical vocabulary that allows the researcher to evade refutation and say more or less anything. Concept stands near concept—“Culture!” “Structure!” “Meaning!” “Power!”—like a herd of Brontosauruses ruminating in a primeval swamp.

ON AESTHETIC GROUNDS

The quality of a theory on principled grounds is ultimately the most important thing about it. This means that the most important reasons for rejecting nuance are the ones just outlined. However, there is more to theory and theorizing than whether it is good in this principled sense. Theory also has an aesthetic or stylistic aspect. Here, too, we find that nuance blocks our way. This is most obvious with the nuance of the connoisseur. Connoisseurs call for the contemplation of complexity almost for its own sake or remind everyone that things are subtler than they seem. The attractive thing about this move is that it is always available to the person who wants to make it. Theory is founded on abstraction, abstraction means throwing away detail for the sake of a bit of generality, and so things in the world are always “more complicated than that”—for any value of “that.” Connoisseurship gets its aesthetic bite from the easy insinuation that the person trying to simplify things is a bit less sophisticated a thinker than the person pointing out that things are more complicated.

With social theory in this mode, a logic of sophisticated appreciation prevails, combined with a hierarchy of taste based on one’s alleged capacity for subtlety. It resembles the discourses surrounding fine wine, cuisine, or art, because connoisseurship thrives best in settings where judgment is needed but measurement is hard. This favors the development and expansion of specialist vocabularies that are highly elaborated but only loosely connected to measurable features of what is being talked about. One cannot simply say any old thing (mostly), but the rules governing use of the vocabulary are hard to learn and tend not to be written down anywhere. One may be confident that there is some reliable connection between the vocabulary and the object, but competence still requires certification by another expert in the field. A Master Sommelier probably knows a lot more about wine than the average person, but it is reasonable to be skeptical whether very detailed wine-talk has a fully codifiable connection to the taste of wines. Theory in this style is carried on in a similar cloud of terms, allowing for rich verbal expression that also carries a clear signal of the speaker’s sophistication.

Note that the aesthetic dimension of theory is not simply the preserve of opaque Europeans. The alternative to the nuance of the connoisseur is not a scientific theory free from aesthetic considerations, subject only to the direct constraints of empirical evidence, clear thinking,

and graceful prose. To borrow a technical term from Frankfurt (1988), that is bullshit. Indeed, “I don’t tolerate any bullshit” is itself an especially tedious sort of bullshit. It is better to acknowledge the aesthetic aspect of theory explicitly and choose to embrace a style.

Which style? One useful elaboration of an aesthetic opposed to the connoisseur’s is Davis’s (1971) analysis of what makes theory interesting. Rather than try to reduce the virtues of theory to their strictly instrumental or formal aspects, Davis argues that, in everyday argument, we care more about whether theories are interesting than whether they are true. Truth (or something like it) still matters most, especially in the long run of intellectual life—and in the short run, too, insofar as the theory is about things like the construction of bridges or the operation of aircraft engines. In the human sciences, such direct applications are typically a long way off, the “Policy Implications” sections of social science articles notwithstanding. For the everyday practice of sociological theory, and strictly as a matter of style, a Davis-like criterion of interestingness may be preferable to a connoisseur-like criterion of nuance and complexity.

Davis’s account of what is interesting is usefully relational. He argues that interestingness depends on the relationship between the substance of the theoretical claim being made, the position of the person making it, and the composition of the audience hearing it. The same idea may be interesting or dull depending on these relationships. Things that seem quite boring to researchers embedded in a field may be very interesting or even radical when presented to nonexpert audiences. Note that this also implies that more nuance can potentially be interesting, at times. The badness of nuance is somewhat relative to the current state of the audience or research community. This view also helps us reflexively understand some degenerate forms of trying to be interesting. The main one is pretending something is counterintuitive, when to the audience it plainly is not. We see this when an expert presents as a breakthrough something other experts already take for granted—for example, the claim by a sociologist to other sociologists that they have innovated by daring to take a sociological (or more often, a *sociological*) approach.

Clearly, “interestingness” is not an unalloyed virtue. Neither is it a method for generating correct answers. Good theory still depends most on the less flashy but more principled qualities discussed earlier, such as the constraints imposed by one’s methods, fidelity to the rules of argument, and the quality of one’s insights. Interestingness is just a matter of style. But seeing as we are bound to cultivate some sort of style when doing theory, we are likely to be better off developing a taste for what is interesting (with respect to the audiences for our work) rather than a taste for nuance in the name of sophistication. If nothing else, the orientation it encourages is fundamentally different from connoisseurship. It springs from the desire to substantively engage with one’s audience rather than intellectually subdue it.

ON STRATEGIC GROUNDS

In addition to blocking new ideas and being obnoxious, nuance fails in the long run as a strategy for getting people to read and care about what you have to say. As with style, success on this dimension is not a sound basis for assessing a theory’s quality. Yet it is reasonable to want other people to take notice of your work. I argue that nuance is not much use here either. To take the obvious example, it is traditional in sociology to deride the model of human action that economists work with, depending as it does on an extremely pared-down model of rationality. There is no less nuanced a character than *homo economicus*. While it is easy to snipe at him on this basis, the strategy of assuming a can opener, as the old desert-island joke goes, has been an unreasonably effective way of generating some powerful ideas (Wigner 1960).

In March 1979, Michel Foucault (2010) gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France, where he discussed the work of Gary Becker. One of the things Foucault saw right away was the scope and ambition of Becker's project and the conceptual turn—accompanying wider social changes—that would enable economics to become not just a topic of study, like geology or English literature, but rather an “approach to human behavior” (Becker 1978). Foucault (2010:222–27) argued that Becker's innovation was to shift from the study of the economy as an institutional order of exchange to the “nature and consequences of substitutable choices”:

The stake in all neo-liberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself. . . . In other words, the neo-liberals say that labor was in principle part of economic analysis, but the way in which classical economic analysis was conducted was incapable of dealing with this element. Good, we do deal with it. And when we make this analysis, and do so in the terms I have just described, they are led to study how human capital is formed and accumulated, and this enables them to apply economic analyses to completely new fields and domains.

The shifts in focus Foucault picks out, and the concepts and methods that accompanied them, are why Becker's influence has been so enormous, why his work has been the straw man in so many social science articles, why his methods allow for such broad application, why the imagery of choice and responsibility that so often accompanies them has proved so politically attractive, why the world is now full of economists who feel empowered to dispense advice on everything from childrearing to global climate change, and why the audience for this advice is so large.

One of the pleasing things about these lectures is the way Foucault refuses to let his Parisian audience settle into a dismissive reaction. (We might note in passing that he is trying to tell them something interesting.) He scolds them (2010:246) about finding an economic analysis of the family simple-minded. A little later, in connection with Becker's analysis of crime, he says the following:

In his article “Crime and Punishment” Becker gives this definition of crime: I call crime any action that makes the individual run the risk of being condemned to a penalty. [*Some laughter.*] I am surprised you laugh, because it is after all very roughly the definition of crime given by the French penal code, and so of the codes inspired by it, since you are well aware how the code defines a criminal offence: a criminal offence is that which is punished by correctional penalties. . . . The crime is that which is punished by the law, and that's all there is to it. So, you can see the neo-liberals' definition is very close. (Foucault 2010:251)

Here, we see Foucault using the work of Becker to remind an audience at the Collège de France about a central insight of Durkheim.

Becker is a useful case simply because his work is so often the target of nuance-based straw-manning in other social sciences. As noted earlier, I am not arguing for this or any other theory in particular. Indeed, we do not have to look outside sociology to find useful examples. Durkheim himself is an excellent case. Indifferent to fairly representing his interlocutors, and notorious for begging the question (Lukes 1992:31–2), Durkheim theorized like a pig for most of his career, bluntly snuffling through philosophy and anthropology to emerge covered in dirt but with a few truffle-like ideas that he relentlessly pushed because they were so empirically productive.

Still confining ourselves to the canonical triumvirate of sociological theorists, we see that the ideas that remain most relevant to the field are not their most nuanced work. It is not the labyrinthine discussions of surplus value in the *Grundrisse* that still attract sociologists to Marx, but his much more straightforward theory of politics as struggle over material resources in an era of rapid technological change. Weber, too, tends to divide into his nuanced and blunt components. The Weber we work most with is the Typologizing Weber—three kinds of authority, two kinds of rationality, the basic features of bureaucracy. We also draw on the Visionary Weber, he of the last ton of coal and the polar night of icy darkness. His tendencies toward the extensive conceptual elaboration of myriad forms of rationality or multiple species of economic action tend to fall away in use.

Ideally, the development of theory should not be driven by strategic efforts to get people's attention. But even if we allow that as a motivation, prioritizing nuance is unlikely to help us in the long run, whether we consider our situation as individuals or from a disciplinary point of view. Even Hume took the trouble to condense, simplify, and then rewrite his *Treatise* after it fell dead-born from the press.

CONCLUSION

Theory is hard. Its difficulties tempt us to issue demands for more nuanced approaches to problems, in the form of calls for a more fine-grained view, a more elaborate conceptual scheme, or the rich sensibility of a connoisseur. I argued that these nuance traps should be resisted on principled, aesthetic, and strategic grounds. It is most important to resist on principle. Free-floating calls for nuance, unconstrained by rules of method or logic, inhibit the process of abstraction that makes theory valuable. The aesthetic and strategic disadvantages of nuance should be seen as further, and independent, reasons to avoid it, perhaps especially in a field with centrifugal tendencies and a weak public profile.

One response to the argument is a simple *tu quoque*. Consider the different aspects of the problem enumerated, the various distinctions made, and the sundry definitions advanced. Doesn't all this sound a little . . . nuanced? No. As noted at the outset, there is no point in arguing against nuance as such, only its practical manifestation in our field at present. Actually Existing Nuance is not equivalent to making some distinctions, trying to be careful about one's argument, or counting to three. Nor is it simply the opposite of being stupid. Indeed, the tendency to equate a taste for nuance with intelligence as such is simply another tool of the connoisseur.

A second objection is to deny the phenomenon and say we do not have a nuance problem. It is difficult to pull this off if your stock-in-trade is the intrinsically rich complexity of the world, but it is not out of the question. I presented some initial empirical evidence to rebut this claim. I could have made my case by picking out some egregious examples of overly nuanced theory. Instead, I deliberately chose not to curse at anyone in particular, the better to focus on the features of an increasingly widespread habit. Spend some time in the theory literature, in conference sessions, and in seminar rooms, and decide whether Actually Existing Nuance actually exists. I believe it does.

A third objection—contra the first—is to say that I have not been nuanced enough. Surely there must be some room for subtlety of thought and fine distinctions of meaning in any theory worthy of the name. I am happy to grant this. As I argued, whether subtlety and distinction-making are intellectually productive is in part a matter of where they are being done and for whom. Imagine a base rate of nuance characterizing research and argument of decently average quality. Given the current state of some field, should we be trying to increase production or restrict the supply? My context is theorizing in U.S. sociology at the time of writing. We are glutted with nuance. I say, fuck it.

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NOTES

1. A further possibility is that use of the word itself is on the rise but in a way that is decoupled from any substantive shift. Comparison with the prevalence of words like *sophisticated* and *subtle*, which are used more steadily over time, suggests this is not the case. There is strong substantive variation across humanities and social science disciplines. Code and JSTOR data to reproduce Figure 1, as well as supplementary analyses, are available at <http://github.com/kjhealy/nuance>.
2. Rosen means something specific here by “object”—he is discussing philosophical theories about the existence of abstract objects. This is not relevant to our purposes, so we can gloss this as referring to the sorts of things social scientists want their theories to be about.

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