

theories and  
methodologies

## The Sociology of *Forms*

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CAROLINE LEVINE’S *FORMS* IS A STUDY OF FORM AS MUCH AS A SOCIOLOGY OF FORMS—A TRACKING OF THE MANY WAYS THAT THEY RELATE to one another or are conjoined in creative works. While offering an extended meditation on the formal categories of whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network as they are manifest in such works, the book organizes this meditation under the separate category of *collision*. Other terms are substituted for it—*overlap*, *encounter*, *interaction*—but the metaphoric intent remains the same. If the book seeks to sharpen our understanding of four major forms as universal elements of texts and social experience, its other interest is in honing our awareness of the complex ways these forms collide within and through narrative. This interest spurs Levine to look to sociological theory for examples of how to think about this complexity, a tradition that dates back at least to the time when György Lukács was writing under the influence of Georg Simmel, around 1910. Here I will show how her conversation with sociology follows yet another familiar path: the literary critic’s borrowing of conclusions or concepts from sociologists while eschewing the methods and theoretical models through which these conclusions or concepts are arrived at and understood. In particular, I consider the consequences of drawing on sociological thinking to make general claims about complex relations while excluding some of the methods by which generalizability is established and problematized in the social sciences. This exclusion marks a fundamental disciplinary divide that sociologically inclined literary critics continue, sometimes out of habit, sometimes out of perceived necessity, to preserve.

*Forms* is outwardly structured around another long-standing divide in literary studies—between historicism and formalism. Levine seeks to overcome the blind spots of these established modes of reading, wanting to be confined neither by historical context as a determinant of form nor by form as manifested in individual, closely read texts sealed off from history. Instead, to alter the perspective from which we view the interaction of text and context, she proposes

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a new formalism that expands the boundaries of what readers count as form. She is interested in how generalizable forms like “whole” and “rhythm,” which can be instantiated as literary, material, and social forms, harbor their own distinct organizing principles. She sees these principles as affording (limiting, constraining) the uses to which each can be put and, just as critically, influencing the outcomes of their interaction. As she puts it, “Instead of assuming that social forms are the grounds or causes of literary forms, and instead of imagining that a literary text has a form, this book asks two unfamiliar questions: what does each form afford, and what happens when forms meet?” (16).

In trying to answer the second question, *Forms* stages another methodological debate between literature and sociology. This debate, however, largely takes place behind the scenes. For while Levine turns to sociologists in every chapter for theoretical inspiration, her citations are quick stopping points on the way to intricate, kaleidoscopic readings of, among other things, architectural form, Victorian-era fiction, Greek tragedy, modernist sculpture, and the television series *The Wire*. These sociological way stations include the theory of intersectionality, new institutionalism, organization studies, and social-network analysis. Together, they add up to a body of reference that mostly draws on the subfield known as organizational sociology (the study of corporations, bureaucracies, and other kinds of institutions as systems) and whose conclusions help Levine interpret her signature forms and speculate about their manner of collision.

That Levine turns to sociology is not surprising. Literary critics have been doing so for more than a century, albeit more intensely in recent years—in part, as James English and Ted Underwood point out, because statistical methods have grown better at analyzing the kinds of complex relations that interest literary critics, but also because sociologists have an increasing interest in modeling the

complexity of texts. This exchange between sociology and literary criticism is particularly apparent in the emergent fields of distant reading and cultural analytics as Underwood has recently described them. This is not, however, the exchange in which Levine participates. Her mode of exchange is a much older one, in which “literary scholars read social scientists to borrow their conclusions rather than their methods” (English and Underwood 284). In truth, the exchange is even narrower than this: a borrowing of the concepts that derive from these conclusions. Levine’s interest in the conclusions of sociologists derives from a fascination with complexity as a description of formal interaction, which then becomes a theme for literary interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Why, then, turn to sociology at all, especially if the sociological literature itself harbors an opposing aim—not to establish complexity as a fact of interaction or as some abstract theoretical concept but to find ways, qualitatively or quantitatively, to model the patterns that define this complexity?

These opposing aims are most apparent in the book’s conversation with organizational sociology. While Levine shares with the sociologists she cites an interest in the relational nature of forms and the need to understand how their respective constraints dominate, augment, or otherwise unsettle one another, she diverges from them in how much she thinks this understanding can be formalized. At the broadest level, she approaches formal collision as if its outcomes were mostly beyond systematic study. They can be unexpected, bewildering, serendipitous, and disorderly. When forms collide, she asks early on, “Which will organize the other?” Her answer: “It is not always predictable” (7). Her consistent emphasis on unpredictability is in part an effort to show that forms may overlap and collide in many ways; knowing what results from these collisions means attending to “the specificity of particular historical situations” in which they take place (8). For her, it

also means insisting that the “results cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies” or to single hegemonic systems. There is, then, a resistance to the generalizability of formal collision—a resistance that is rooted in the belief that narratives conjoin or capture social relations in less determinate ways. Citing Bruno Latour, she stresses that “fiction writers often do better than sociologists at capturing social relations because they are free to experiment, offering ‘a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act’” (19).

When her celebration of the unpredictable nature of formal collision is read against the sociologists Levine cites, or against her own justifications for a return to the study of forms, two contradictions arise. In the first case, *Forms* seems satisfied with complexity as a methodological endpoint, whereas the sociologists treat it as the starting point for methodological innovation and debate. This innovation and debate go mostly unacknowledged by Levine, however, cutting her dialogue with sociology off at the point complexity is recognized but in need of interrogation and analysis. With respect to her own call for a renewed attention to literary form, the resistance to generalization reintroduces the same antiformalist tendencies that she steers us away from in her introduction. Thus, Levine rejects such tendencies by insisting on the stability, portability, and situatedness of forms so that we might better understand their patterns of affordance across time and space, thereby counterbalancing the undue attention given by antiformalists to “fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution” (9). Yet just as such “deconstructive” tendencies are being pushed out the front door of her new formalism, they reenter through the back, when formal collision is described.

For example, in discussing the interaction of temporal rhythms, she writes that they “must be seen to function together and differ-

ently, overlapping and colliding, to produce a diachronic complexity as subtle and finely grained as any careful, scholarly grasp of particularity” (67). Elsewhere she argues that “the binary opposition is just one of a number of powerfully organizing forms, and . . . many outcomes follow from other forms, as well as from more mundane, more minor, and more contingent formal encounters, where different forms are not necessarily related, opposed, or deeply expressive, but simply happen to cross paths at a particular site” (19). To borrow a term from organizational sociology, Levine reveals in these descriptions literary criticism’s own “path dependency”—our belief, as she puts it, that what we as critics “have traditionally done best [is read] for complex interrelationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements” (23). But there’s a critical difference between reading for complexity, as if it’s simply there to be noticed, and reading to create systematic knowledge of it. The latter is something literary critics do less well, in part because the freedom of narrative’s vast playground is privileged over the rules and habits that potentially govern this freedom. For these rules and habits to be considered we would do well to learn other ways of reading for complexity. Here, the sociological literature is rich with possibilities.

Levine’s first citation of this literature regards “intersectional analysis,” developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1991 and, as Levine describes it, intended as a way to focus attention on “how different social hierarchies overlap, sometimes powerfully reinforcing one another” (4). The sociologist Leslie McCall writes that an interest in

intersectionality arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations. It was not possible, for example, to understand a black woman’s experience from previous stud-

ies of gender combined with previous studies of race because the former focused on white women and the latter on black men. (1780)

Intersectional analysis became attractive to social scientists and cultural studies scholars alike for the way it destabilized essential categories like race, class, and gender and insisted on reading individual identity through both categorical overlap and difference within categories. Its success as a theory, however, also depended on its methodological vagueness and lack of clarity on how to determine when overlap and difference were significant and when they were not (Davis). A combination of precise theoretical mechanisms and overly broad method has, as Tressie McMillan Cottom observes, “created tensions about what intersectionality really means and how best to measure it (or, if it should be measured at all!).”

According to McCall, these tensions stem from competing epistemological orientations toward categories. Some theorists assume an *anticategorical* outlook that considers social life “too irreducibly complex . . . to make fixed categories anything but social fictions” (1773). Philosophically, this renders the use of any category suspect; methodologically, it renders suspect “the process of categorization itself and any research that is based on such categorization” and leads to studies that explore this radical irreducibility through individual case studies (1777). Other theorists take an *intracategorical* view: they are similarly skeptical of categories and seek to interrogate the boundary-making and boundary-defining processes of intersectionality, yet they also acknowledge “the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time” (1774). McCall remarks that feminists of color have been instrumental in developing the intracategorical approach as a way to critique broad categorical generalizations while still recognizing the strategic function that categories serve. By this account, Levine

falls nearer the intracategorical approach. Indeed, she argues at one point that we should continue to take the structures of race, class, and gender extremely seriously even as we “expand the logic of intersectional analysis . . . [by] tracking the encounters of these with many other kinds of forms” (11). Forms, like categories, are inherently durable for Levine, and we understand their operation better the more of them we observe.

McCall, however, insists that we need not more categories but a different way of looking at them—a third approach that trades philosophical skepticism for methodological precision. She calls this approach *intercategorical* because it takes the evolving relation between social groups as the object of analysis, provisionally assuming the existence of social categories in order to explicate their relation empirically. This approach turns categorical complexity from a fact to be asserted into a hypothesis to be tested—it asks not *how* broader social categories fail to reflect the empirical realities of finer-grained social groupings or inequalities between groups but *whether* they do so (1785). Methodologically, this results in comparative, multigroup studies that sacrifice complexity at the level of individual social groups or communities to gain complexity at the level of dimensions (e.g., race, class, gender) that interact across these groups or communities. It may be that what one finds in such a study, as in McCall’s analysis of wage inequality, is that no single dimension can adequately describe the full structure of “multiple, intersecting, and conflicting” dimensions that define a social reality (1791). But to arrive at this conclusion through empirical hypothesis testing is different from merely asserting that multiple intersecting dimensions produce unexpected or crosscutting effects. For in other cases, as McCall notes, evidence suggests that some dimensions do carry more weight than others. The researcher’s task is to imagine and test different outcomes for a set of relations

in a given social context, thus allowing one to say which of these outcomes is significant and which not. Descriptions of complexity, in other words, benefit from generalizable and testable models, a lesson reinforced in much of the literature on organizational sociology that Levine cites in her book. It is a lesson, however, that she is reluctant to draw on, preferring to celebrate the generalizability of form but not of formal collision.

Such reluctance is all the more curious given that organizational sociology itself is rich with models for understanding how organizations relate to the environments that constitute, influence, and penetrate them. In fact, its history can be told as an ongoing debate about “the determinants of organizational structure” and how to frame the complex interactions that give shape to it (Scott 5). Some argue for comparing the particular resources and technical information available to any one organization (contingency theory); others want to see the organization as embedded in a system of relations (network theory) or as a member of a population of similar organizations (organizational ecology); still others have looked to the cultural features that internally regulate an organization (institutional theory). Levine gestures to this diverse methodological landscape by citing a canonical study that lists some of the many possible determinants of organizational structure. But while she reads this list as confirmation of “how complex these interacting forms can be” (102), the sociologists make clear that “it is not sufficient to talk about context or organizational environment in general terms”; rather, we should be asking “what are the dimensions of context, or the environment, which are important—how can organizational environments be described and measured?” (Pfeffer and Salancik 62). They further highlight three dimensions they believe are critical to determining the impact of these environments: the *concentration* of resources in an organization, its degree of

*interconnectedness* with other organizations, and how much *uncertainty* is attributed to its environment (69). Similarly, when Levine cites Rosabeth Kanter’s work on the position of women in organizations, she finds its conclusions compelling because it shows how colliding hierarchies carry “unpredictable effects” and can “reroute and deform as much as they organize” (Levine 106). Kanter, for her part, stresses the importance of a “comprehensive and integrated theory” and singles out three variables as central explanatory dimensions: “the structure of opportunity, the structure of power, and the proportional distribution of people of different kinds (the social composition of peer clusters)” (245).

Organizational sociologists have spent decades revealing how messy and complex are the relations that structure corporations, bureaucracies, and other kinds of small- and large-scale organizations. Levine, in choosing the organization as her central metaphor for colliding forms, aims to incorporate this awareness of system complexity into readings of aesthetic texts and their contexts. As her own case studies demonstrate, there is much to be gained from such a merger. Nevertheless, it remains in doubt how much benefit can come from this borrowed awareness if we neglect to engage with the methodological debates and orientations that underlie it. All the sociologists whom Levine cites are interested in the fact of organizational complexity as much as they are in devising ways to model it and identify (or at least hypothesize about) its primary determinants in a given context. They tend to want to search for predictable, generalizable, and statistically meaningful patterns in the noise that this complexity produces. When an institutional sociologist like Marc Schneiberg, for instance, argues that the historical paths followed by institutions are “littered with elements or fragments of more or less developed systems of alternatives—a path . . . containing *within* it *structural* possibilities for *alternatives*” (72), he is not sug-

gesting that these elements or fragments are scattered randomly or that they “could at any moment give rise to more hopeful arrangements,” as Levine understands him (Levine 12). To the contrary, he views these possibilities as “determined by history, by prior organization, and by the distribution of existing forms” and uses standard statistical methods to identify when the legacies of past organizations “acquire sufficient weight” to construct alternative pathways (Schneiberg 71–72, 48).

The difference in emphasis is important because it leads to strikingly divergent readings of complexity that carry their own political implications. Consider *Form*'s final chapter, on *The Wire*, in which Levine argues that its appeal, for both literary critics and sociologists alike, is “its capacity to represent multiple forms operating at once” (134). The sociologists in this case are Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson, who celebrate *The Wire* because it demonstrates the interconnectedness of the many factors driving systemic urban inequality in a way that is difficult to achieve in academic scholarship, where in-depth analysis requires that a discussion focus on individual factors (166). While Levine would agree with Chaddha and Wilson that the fictional series offers its own theory of the social world, she intuits a theory very different from theirs. Levine argues that, “far from an ideologically coherent society with power lodged in the hands of a few, *The Wire* gives us a social world constantly unsettled by the bewildering and unexpected effects of clashes among wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks” (149). Once again, the emphasis is on the unpredictability of formal collisions and the possibilities this opens up for challenging political authority. For Chaddha and Wilson, however, a great strength of the show is that by “depicting the interrelationship of social, political, and economic institutions that work together to constrain the lives of the urban poor,” it effectively captures the concept of “concentra-

tion effects” developed by urban sociologists (188, 174).<sup>2</sup> They find in the show a model of collision not as unpredictable but as cumulative, every element concentrating further the effects of inequality on a specific population. Thus, where Levine's model finds individual freedom, their model finds structural oppression. The free play attributed to narrative makes it difficult for Levine to see her model as but one of many because she allows this imagined freedom to be the primary determinant of complexity. Instead, what if literary critics were to engage with sociological method by drawing on its penchant for specifying different types of possible social interaction, the range of effects these interactions produce, and the relative weight of individual elements in producing these effects—in short, by formalizing collision to expand our ways of imagining it and of comparing its effects across examples and contexts? Far from reducing complexity, this formalization would help define the background against which the “bewildering and unexpected effects” of complexity become legible.

More than thirty years ago, Franco Moretti proposed his own “sociology of symbolic forms,” observing that “it is impossible to deny that human society is a multifarious, complex, overdetermined whole; but the theoretical difficulty obviously lies in trying to establish the *hierarchy* of different historical factors” (*Signs* 19). Any solution, he argued, must be broadly historical and empirical, involving a careful weighing of the extraliterary phenomena that can help orient and control one's research questions—a singling out, in other words, of meaningful determinants whose significance to a given historical problem can be tested. *Forms* may not be invested in extraliterary phenomena in the same way, but it *is* invested in trying to understand “what happens when forms meet” (16). Its solution, to paraphrase Moretti's more recent work, is to insist on the interpretation of individual instances of formal collision over

the explanation of general structures or patterns of collision (*Graphs* 91). *Forms* insists on providing but one explanation (namely, that all depends on the particular instance) over generating many possible explanations. New experiments with quantitative approaches, which lend themselves to comparative modeling and hypothesis testing, suggest how literary critics might begin to rebalance their long-standing preference for individual interpretation over structural explanation. These experiments include studies of formal differentiation in fields of cultural production (Algee-Hewitt et al.; Sapiro, “Globalization” and “Metamorphosis”) and formal collision across languages (Long and So). But even in such experimental work there is still a reluctance to fully embrace sociological methods and a form of reasoning oriented around testable, generalizable models (Goldstone; Underwood).

Why this continued reluctance? Is it always warranted? To be sure, the kinds of empirical data that allow organizational sociologists to model the effects of different determinants are hard to obtain in literary studies, where our determinants are less easily quantified or more difficult to abstract because they appear so variable and contingent.<sup>3</sup> But to treat unpredictability and free play as all-determining is itself a model of relation and should not prevent us from having the same intense debates that intersectional theorists have had about the methodological and philosophical risks or rewards of isolating complex relations in one way as opposed to another. Nor should it stop us from developing as diverse a set of models as the organizational sociologists have for thinking about what drives these relations in specific contexts. Truly embracing a sociology of forms means being as principled in how we generalize the affordances of forms as we are in generalizing their patterns of collision and interaction. Here, a fuller reckoning with the methods of sociology, not just its concepts

or conclusions, will prevent us from circling over the same old ground.

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## NOTES

1. My thanks go to Andrew Goldstone for helping me clarify this distinction among concepts, conclusions, and methods as objects of borrowing by literary critics. I would also like to thank Ted Underwood and Wai Chee Dimock for their feedback on the essay.
2. The concept signifies “that the various processes associated with concentrated poverty work together to produce uniquely severe disadvantage for residents” of poor neighborhoods (174).
3. For Levine’s own recent take on the relation of numbers to representation, see her “Enormity Effect.”

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