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Guiding distinctions of social theory: Results from two online brainstormings and one quantitative analysis of the ISA Books of the XX Century corpus

Steffen Roth
Excelia Business School, France; University of Cambridge, UK

Steve Watson
University of Cambridge, UK

Sören Möller
University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

Lars Clausen
UCL University College, Denmark

Krešimir Žažar
University of Zagreb, Croatia

Harry Dahms
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

Augusto Sales
Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration, Brazil

Vincent Lien
University of Cambridge, UK

Corresponding author:
Steffen Roth, Excelia Business School, 102 rue de Coureilles, 17000 La Rochelle, France.
Email: roths@excelia-group.com

Abstract
In this article, we report on the results of two online brainstormings that have collected over 480 and over 219 guiding distinctions of social theory, respectively. We draw on the results of these brainstormings as well as on a quantitative analysis of the Top 100 sociological groundworks as listed in the *ISA Books of the XX Century* ranking to identify the most influential distinctions of social theory and show that the bulk of these guiding distinctions consists of 'false' or analogue distinctions. We further demonstrate how systematic explorations of these distinction may facilitate a still pending digital transformation of social theory, defined as (a) the translation of analogue into digital social theories, (b) the design of new digital social theories and (c) the design of digital theory platforms useful for quality checks and the debugging of existing and future social theories. This article concludes that such a digital transformation of social theory is needed as the digital transformation of society and the relentlessly growing amount of digital data are revolutionising the processes of research and knowledge production in the social sciences, whereas social theory development still follows rather conservative, analogue patterns, thus lagging behind the social phenomena and methodological innovations it aims to reflect upon.

Keywords
Big data, corpus analysis, digital sociology, digital theorising, false distinctions

Introduction: Guiding distinctions of social theory

The concept of guiding distinctions refers to distinctions—such as economy/society, bourgeoisie/proletariat, community/society, nature/culture, system/environment, structure/agency, north/south, or male/female—that guide theory-building, frame research, spark controversies, or dominate discourses in academic fields.

While there is little doubt that the evolution of sociology and the neighbouring social sciences has been significantly shaped by such distinctions or dichotomies as well as the resulting dilemmas (Jenks, 1998; Sztompka, 1979), there is less consensus about which distinctions have been guiding or ought to guide theory development and empirical research in our fields. Consequently, collections of guiding distinctions or theories built upon them have faced accusations of eclecticism (see, for example, Borch, 2012), a charge that carries even more weight as the importance and pertinence of sociological guiding distinctions can vary over time and across different regions of the world. For example, big data research by Roth et al. (2017, 2019a) has shown that the relevance of function systems such as politics, economy, science, art, or religion has undergone significant changes within the period between 1800 and 2000, and exhibits considerable differences across the English, French, German and other language areas. This implies that prominent distinctions, like Max Weber's (1978 [1922]) famous opposition between economy and society, may be instrumental for a certain period but can eventually became obsolete as society evolves, leading to increasingly inadequate representations of society. This risk is further heightened by sometimes considerable delays between original language publications and their translations into other languages.

These considerations are all the more pertinent in the light of major social changes, such as the current digital transformation of society—namely, the increasing translation of analogue content into digital information. As outlined by Roth et al. (2019b), however, there exists a performative contradiction between widespread evocations of the increasing ubiquity of digital technologies and the fact that most people, including researchers, use these technologies for doing things that could be done without them. One result of this contradiction is what the authors refer to as 'print theories of computer societies', an expression that refers to the current abundance of books and articles providing analogue theories of digital societies, in contrast with the scarcity of truly digital social theories. This mismatch is particularly problematic as digital methods not only provide ever-larger data sets for the testing of established theories but also allow for, and even necessitate, new forms of *digital* theorising (Kitchin, 2014). As digital theorising implies the translation of analogue content into digital, binary distinctions, the digital transformation of society underscores the need for a closer focus on the role of guiding distinctions in social theorising.

In the present article, we address this need by exploring and developing answers to the following questions: 'What are, or have been, the guiding distinctions of social theory in the 20th and 21st century?' and 'How compatible are these guiding distinctions with the ongoing digital transformation of society?'.

To answer these questions, we shall first outline how social theorists have addressed guiding distinctions, before drawing on selected distinctions to develop a framework that facilitates the distinction between analogue and digital distinctions as well as the translation of analogue distinctions into digital ones.

Next, we shall introduce the procedures and report on the outcomes of two different approaches to identifying the most influential distinctions of social theory: (1) two pertinent online brainstormings performed in 2019 and 2024, respectively, and (2) a quantitative analysis of the Top 100 sociological groundworks as listed in the International Sociological Association's (ISA) *Books of the XX Century* ranking.

Applying our framework to this sample of guiding distinctions, we demonstrate that the majority of them consists of 'false' or analogue distinctions that still require translation into digital ones. We conclude that this translation is essential for facilitating the development of new digital social theories as well as the design of digital theory platforms that can be used for quality checks and the debugging of existing social theories.

Distinctions: True and false

While some social theorists have recognised the importance of guiding distinctions in the plural, the dominant approach to these distinctions is a selective focus on one. The distinctions between economy and society (Weber, 1978 [1922]), structure and agency (Giddens, 1984), system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1987), enlightenment and myth (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1947]), modernity and postmodernity (Bauman, 1993), or core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Wallerstein, 1974) are cases in point.

However, a smaller sample of social theorists has attempted combined observations of guiding distinctions, with varying degrees of integration. For example, Norbert Elias' (1994) *The Civilizing Process* is built around the distinctions between civilised and

uncivilised behaviours, public and private life, and insider and outsider groups. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990) work, for its part, is based on the distinction between habitus and field, with the latter being defined and confined by the distinction between actor and position. Moreover, the famous correspondence matrix in his *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984: 128) is made of a cross-tabulation of the two distinctions: economic capital versus cultural capital and lower versus higher capital volume.

One of the most systematic, if not rigid, attempts at combined observations of guiding distinctions is undoubtedly Talcott Parsons' infamous AGIL matrix, which is constructed by combining the distinctions of external versus internal and means versus ends (Parsons, 1937) or instrumental versus consummatory orientation (Parsons et al., 1953), respectively. As is well-known, Parsons justified his emphasis on particularly these guiding distinctions by the fact that he derived them from his more general attempt to synthesise and integrate the foundational theories of classical sociology, most notably those of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, into a coherent framework. Equally well-known, however, is the severe criticism this approach has faced (e.g. Pope et al., 1975), including from his short-term post-graduate student Niklas Luhmann (2012: 4f), who later acknowledged Parsons' approach as the 'only systematic sociological theory currently available', yet criticised it by saying that 'Parsons (. . .) does not himself occur in the many boxes of his theory. And this is ultimately why the theory (. . .) only offers impressionistic, more or less feuilletonistic views of modern society'. Luhmann (1995, 2012, 2013) addressed this issue by developing his version of a self-implicative systems theory based on a broad range of distinctions, including system/environment, autopoiesis/allopoiesis, operational closure/structural coupling, information/utterance/understanding, or interaction/organisation/society. However, in doing so, Luhmann failed to fully consider the different properties and in-/compatibilities of the distinctions he used to build his theoretical edifice.

Similar criticism can be directed to the few attempts to provide more or less comprehensive overviews of guiding distinctions, dichotomies, or dilemmas of social theory. Sztompka (1979), for example, identified the following set of dilemmas that he believed drove social theorising at the time of his writing: science versus humanities, science of man versus science of society, knowledge versus action, detachment versus bias, object versus subject, and society as a whole versus society as an aggregate. The group of authors united in Jenks (1998), for their part, identify a total of 23 'core sociological dichotomies': structure/agency, continuity/change, fact/value, local/global, qualitative/quantitative, culture/nature, relativism/absolutism, public/private, sex/gender, race/ethnicity, idealism/materialism, nationalism/internationalism, theory/practice, civil/political, active/passive, subject/object, image/text, needs/wants, life/death, high/mass, modernity/postmodernity and work/leisure. As is apparent, these attempts result in non-exclusive lists that reflect at least as much to the specific authors' observational preferences as they do the broader field of social theory.

Even if we abstract from issues of comprehensiveness and contingence as we review the above references to individual, combined, or complied lists of distinctions, however, we find that they are indeed of different structural and analytical qualities. This circumstance becomes apparent if we examine the following considerations.

In some of his recent articles, Roth (2019, 2024) draws on George Spencer Brown's (1979: 1) dictum that 'we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction', an

idea supported by Luhmann (1995: 172) who insists that all forms of observation imply the drawing of a distinction and the indication of 'one side of the distinction and not the other. The other side, the unmarked side, can be anything that is, for the time being, of no concern'. Roth (2024: 262) carries this general observation of observation to the realm of science: 'To observe, we must draw distinctions. To observe scientifically, we must draw the distinction between true or false distinctions'.

According to Spencer Brown (1979: 1), 'distinction is perfect continence', meaning that a true distinction divides the entire frame of reference into two mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive parts. The paradox of scientific observation then lies in the fact that, by definition, all distinctions are true because they perfectly divide their reference frame – otherwise, they wouldn't be considered distinctions at all. However, in scientific observation, we are required to differentiate between true and false distinctions. Therefore, some distinctions that are technically true must be regarded as false. Roth's (2024: 263) solution to this paradox is

> To argue that distinctions are, by default, neither true nor false and can, therefore, be both true and false at the same time. Consider the distinction between 0 and 1, for example. If we consider 0 and 1 to be two elements of the number range, then the distinction between these two numbers is false in that the two distinguished elements are obviously not jointly exhaustive, and therefore do not match the above requirement of perfect continence. Yet, if these two numbers represent two values of a binary code system, then their distinction is clearly a true one as it splits the entire frame of reference into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive sides. The crux of the matter is hence not whether or what distinctions are essentially true or false, but rather what follows if we take a distinction for a true or false one.

The author then proceeds to demonstrate that true distinctions can be 'unhesitatingly' combined with other true distinctions, including the respective distinction itself, while false distinctions can be translated into two true distinctions. As an example, the author refers to the distinction between capitalism and socialism, which is a true distinction only *if* we imply that all forms of non-capitalism are socialist and all forms of non-socialism are capitalist. Otherwise, the false distinction can be translated into the two true distinctions of capitalism versus non-capitalism and socialism versus non-socialism.

The use of 'if' in the above paragraph indicates that definitions of whether distinctions are true or false depend on a frame of reference shaped by other distinctions. The example of the colours red and blue is a case in point. Whereas it is obvious that the colour spectrum encompasses more colours than red and blue, which implies that the distinction between red and blue is not jointly exhaustive, the Matrix movie frames the red and blue pills as mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive options: either to leave or remain within the Matrix.

What is important in our context is that the translation of false into true distinctions corresponds to the translation of analogue into digital ones. In fact, the possibility to translate a false, analogue distinction—such as capitalism/socialism—into two true, binary distinctions demonstrates that analogue distinctions actually consist of two interrelated distinctions rather than representing a single one. This also aligns with the common understanding or connotation of 'analogue' as referring to the coexistence and relatedness of two or more objects, aspects, or events.

Table 1. Types and examples of true and false distinctions (own source).

	Mutually exclusive	Jointly Exhaustive	Examples
True distinctions	1	1	system/environment, life/death,
False distinctions (Type 1)	1	0	economy/religion, post-/modernity
False distinctions (Type 2)	0	1	economy/society, theory/practice
False distinctions (Type 3)	0	0	property/access male/female

Applying the distinction between true and false distinctions to some of the above-mentioned guiding distinctions of social theory, we find that many qualify as false distinctions (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows a theory subroutine, that is, a small programme that can detect whether distinctions are true or false distinction. According to this programme, distinctions are false if they are either not mutually exclusive (Type 1) or not jointly exhaustive (Type 2), or because they are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive (Type 3). For instance, the distinction of modernity versus post-modernity is a false distinction if we acknowledge that there is also a pre-modernity, which implies that the two sides of the original distinction are not jointly exhaustive (Type 1). Similarly, economy versus religion is false *if* we follow Luhmann (1995, 2013) and consider both as part of a larger set of function systems of society, also including politics, science, art, or health. In this sense, the influential economy/society distinction is a false one, too, yet now because the two sides of the distinction are not mutually exclusive (Type 2) *if* we again follow Luhmann, who defines the economy as one functional subsystem of society. The same is true for the distinction of theory versus practice *if* we consider the possibility of observing theory as practice. Yet another case of false distinctions (Type 3) pertains to those that are neither mutually exclusive not jointly exhaustive, as is the case of the distinction between 'property' and 'access', since ownership implies access, while not all forms of access are contingent on property, as some forms may also be based, for example, on sacral privileges to access resources or spaces that are taboo to others. A prime example of Type 3 distinctions, however, is 'male/female' as the two sides of the distinction are neither mutually exclusive (some persons self-identify as both male and female) nor jointly exhaustive (some persons self-identify as neither male nor female), at least according to some current social-theoretical mainstreams.

By contrast, distinctions such as system/environment, life/death, or insider/outsider generally qualify as true, binary distinctions in most contexts.

In the manner just described, the framework presented in Table 1 is therefore useful not only for categorising distinctions into true and false ones but also for determining whether they are analogue or digital, or basically distinctions at all.

However, as we still lack a systematic overview of the most relevant guiding distinctions of social theory, in the following section of this article, we shall outline how we

aimed to identify these distinctions, before drawing on our framework to assess their general compatibility with the goal of a digital transformation of social theory.

Methodological approaches

The methods we employed to identify the most relevant social-theoretical guiding distinctions of the 20th and 21st century include one qualitative and one quantitative big data approach.

As for the qualitive dimension of our research, we organised two online brainstormings on the general topic of 'Guiding distinctions of social theory'. The first brainstorming was organised on the discontinued platform partizo.com and live between April and June 2019, inviting individual contributions typically consisting of a guiding distinction in the headline and additional explanatory or illustrative content in the body (see Figure 1). As the coronavirus crisis had soon after changed the priorities of the initiators and the participants of the original brainstorming, the decision was made to organise a second brainstorming, which run on padlet.com from April to June 2024. In either case, participants could not only contribute their own distinctions but also rate other participants' distinctions. Both brainstormings were supported by the International Sociological Association, and the second session also received support from the European Sociological Association. Non-anonymous participants in the brainstormings included a geographically diverse group of scholars such as Philipp Altmann (Ecuador), Jean-Sébastien Guy† (Canada), Roar Hagen (Norway), Anahit Hakobyan (Armenia), Lionel Lewkow (Chile), Loet Leydesdorff† (The Netherlands), Mulu Burhane Hundera (Ethopia), Ilaria Riccioni (Italy), Alisson Soares (Brazil), Fatma Fulya Tepe (Turkey) and Frank Welz (Austria).

This qualitative approach was complemented by a quantitative analysis. We obtained electronic copies of the Top 100 sociological groundworks listed in the *ISA Books of the XX Century* ranking available on the ISA website (https://www.isa-sociology.org/, see / About ISA/History of ISA/Books of the XX Century). After compiling these 100 books into a single corpus and cleaning the data, we extracted a list of the most frequent terms as they appear across all the books within this corpus. To control for potential biases introduced by later prefaces or translators' comments, we omitted the first 5% of the entire word count of each book. We then manually scanned this word frequency list for the most frequent social-theoretical keywords and concepts based on the absolute numbers of their occurrence across all books, also aggregating keywords sharing the same word stem or other apparent similarities (e.g. 'nature' and 'natural', 'capitalist' and 'capitalism', or 'social' and 'Social'). This process included necessary exceptions from this rule. For instance, 'woman' and 'women' were combined, but this was not possible for 'man' and 'men', as 'man' serves not only as a counter-concept to 'woman' but also to other concepts, such as 'machine' or 'nature'. In most cases, however, we merged similar word forms into their most frequent form as found in our TOP 100 ISA Books corpus. For example, the word frequency of 'economic' reported in Table 3 encompasses not only the term itself but also its variants, such as 'economy', 'Economic' and 'Economy'. Thus, all variants of the 100 most frequent sociological concepts were grouped under their most common form, provided the contributing variants ranked within the top 2500 most frequent terms in the entire corpus.

Figure 1. Screenshot of contributions to the 2019 brainstorming (own source).

The results from both our brainstorming and our quantitative corpus analysis are presented in the subsequent section of this article.

Results

The two online brainstormings performed in 2019 and 2024 produced 488 and 219 individual contributions, which were then rated by the participants as listed in Table 2.

Table 2 lists the 25 most popular guiding distinctions from each brainstorming. For the 2019 brainstorming, these have been pertinent guiding distinctions that received at least 5 positive votes from the participants, while the 2024 session lists distinctions that garnered at least three positive ratings. The table also provides a selection of lower-rated but still noteworthy distinctions.

In contrast to the brainstorming, the quantitative analysis of the Top 100 sociological groundworks, as listed in the *International Sociological Association's Books of the XX Century* ranking, did not directly identify guiding distinctions. Instead, it produced the list of the 100 most prominent social theoretical concepts presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Selected guiding distinctions of social theory as identified by the 2019 and 2024 online brainstormings (own source).

No.	Distinctions 2019 (488)	Rating	Distinctions 2024 (219)	Rating
1	true/false	23	base/superstructure	9
2	Luhmann/Habermas	9	system/environment	8
3	nature/culture	9	analogue/digital	6
4	community/society	8	means/ends	6
5	medium/form	8	spaceman/cowboy	6
6	ego/alter	7	tradition/modernity	6
7	work/capital	7	Habermas/Luhmann	5
8	centre/periphery	7	operation/observation	5
9	system/environment	7	mechanic/organic	5
10	structure/agency	7	centre/periphery	5
11	ascription/ achievement	6	description/ prescription	5
12	sincerity/transparency	6	north/south	5
13	dys-/functional	6	metric/nonmetric	5
14	economy/society	6	similar/equal	5
15	inclusion/exclusion	6	state/society	5
16	information/ redundancy	5	man/machine	4
17	capitalism/socialism	5	to have/to be	4
18	fact/value	5	action/behaviour	4
19	people of colour/ white	5	normal state/crisis	4
20	method/theory	5	capitalism/socialism	4
21	body/mind	5	structure/process	4
22	presence/absence	5	top/bottom	4
23	substance/function	5	empirical/theoretical	4
24	man/nature	5	objective/subjective	3
25	male/female	5	micro/macro	3
	<5: market-state, state-nation, national-international, society-individual, modern-traditional, data-theory, objective-subjective, inquiry-advocacy, etc.		$\leqslant 3$: culture-nature, communication-action, agency-structure, lordship-bondage, functional-dysfunctional, ego-alter, society-individual, utopia-dystopia, etc.	

Table 3 ranks core sociological concepts based on their absolute frequency across the Top 100 books compiled in the ISA Books of the XX Century ranking. The table also includes the most frequent references to nations or national cultures (e.g. 'French' or 'England'), settlements (e.g. 'New York' or 'London') and sociological writers (e.g. 'Marx' or 'Parsons'). While the references to nations and settlements pertain to individual terms that have not been merged, the frequencies for authors are aggregates of variants, such as 'Parsons', 'Parsons' and 'Parsonian'.

Table 3. The Top 100 of social theoretical concepts as found in the Top 100 sociological works in the ISA Books of the XX Century ranking (own source).

No.	Distinction	True	No.	Distinction	Frequency
1	Social	66289	51	control	10849
2	production	36963	52	war	10767
3	political	35432	53	women	10546
4	system	33206	54	Revolution	10473
5	society	33112	55	national	10405
6	Action	32230	56	country	10266
7	Work	30876	57	free	9502
8	*State*	*30642*	58	reason	9494
9	*Part*	*29853*	59	modern	9417
10	Power	29036	60	family	9219
11	relations	28758	61	institutions	9171
12	Class	28231	62	activity	8954
13	Theory	27680	63	old	8252
14	Fact	27248	64	public	8102
15	economic	27141	65	rule	8069
16	individual	23972	66	market	7982
17	Group	23055	67	trade	7545
18	knowledge	21741	68	military	7473
19	Labour	20477	69	children	7207
20	Value	20016	70	community	7162
21	History	19863	71	book	6933
22	Real	19846	72	culture	6927
23	Person	19542	73	attitude	6871
24	science	19207	74	commodity	6858
25	*capital*	*19204*	75	conflict	6825
26	process	18353	76	authority	6817
27	change	18244	77	behaviour	6734
28	problem	17497	78	property	6616
29	structure	17267	79	status	6468
30	Law	17125	80	Press	6278
31	organisation	17017	81	practice	6183
32	People	16747	82	government	6133
33	*Order*	*16380*	83	University	6004
34	Nature	15795	84	central	5975
35	sociology	14906	85	education	5912
36	Money	14231	86	body	5869
37	function	13827	87	collective	5602
38	Man	13791	88	research	5425
39	capitalist	13573	89	independent	5286
40	industrial	12858	90	empirical	5247
41	Study	12805	91	private	5076

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

No.	Distinction	True	No.	Distinction	Frequency
42	Men	12787	92	population	4748
43	religious	12597	93	exchange	4620
44	Human	12484	94	understanding	4347
45	concept	12469	95	business	4278
46	*Whole*	*12146*	96	language	4230
47	members	11561	97	local	4217
48	true	11409	98	data	3988
49	result	11282	99	future	3834
50	analysis	11101	100	urban	3658

Most frequent national references: French (7066), France (6968), English (5518), England (5341), Europe (5341), German (4461), British (4016), European (3888), Germany (3500).
Most frequent settlements: (New) York (7703), London (6197), Paris (4619), Cambridge (2634).
Most frequent authors: Marx (11155), Parsons (7260), Weber (6589), Durkheim (5684).

Although the quantitative approach summarised in Table 3 does not immediately identify guiding distinctions, such distinctions can be inferred. For example, distinctions listed in Table 2 – such as 'action' (6) versus 'behavior' (77), 'society' (5) versus 'individual' (17), or 'nature' (34) versus 'man' (38) – are evidently present in or can be directly extracted from the list, respectively. Other distinctions require identifying counter-concepts. As mentioned earlier, the frequency of 'economic' includes its variants such as 'economy', 'Economic' and 'Economy'. In this sense, Table 3 also implicitly contains the distinction 'Economy' (15) versus 'Society' (5). Yet other concepts listed in Table 3, for example, 'understanding' (94), appear without their usual counter-concept, such as 'explaining', simply because the latter ranks outside the Top 100.

Certain concepts are italicised. This is in 'part' (9) because their relevance to social theorising might not be directly evident but becomes when paired with a counterpart, such as 'whole' (46), thus creating a guiding distinction that often underlies that of 'individual' (17) versus 'society' (5). Other italicised concepts highlight their ambiguity. For instance, we may 'state' (8) that we may often observe a high concentration of 'capital' (25) in a state capital.

In the subsequent section of this article, we shall discuss the social-theoretical implications of these results and apply the distinction of true and false distinctions to the distinctions identified in this section.

Discussion

Distinctions of any kind are difficult to identify through automated processes. In the context of our online brainstormings, we therefore relied on expert knowledge for the identification of the guiding distinctions of social theory. While the experts have been

successful in identifying a wide range and substantial number of these distinctions, as listed in Table 2, the sample also exhibits a remarkable bias to distinctions that are more relevant to social systems theories than to other sociological paradigms. This suggests that the topical focus on guiding distinctions has primarily resonated with social systems theorists, as the concept of distinctions is less emphasised in other paradigms. Future research could therefore benefit from conducting similar brainstormings with more multi-paradigmatic panels of experts.

Our quantitative big data analysis of the ISA Books of the 20th Century corpus, for its part, produced paradigmatically more diverse results. Political terms such as 'political' and 'state', and 'power' feature prominently among the Top 10 sociological concepts, reflecting either a strong focus on political issues within society, a predominant preoccupation with power issues within the corpus, or both. This emphasis on politics aligns well with Roth et al.'s (2019a) analysis of the larger Google Books corpus, for which Roth et al. (2017) 'coined the amusing term socioencephalography' (Solovyev, 2024: 158), and which similarly identifies politics as the most dominant function system of society throughout the 20th century. Still, it is also worth noting that Niklas Luhmann's (1995) seminal work *Social Systems* also stands out, as its title comprises what seem to be the most and fourth-most important sociological concepts of the 20th century.

A significant limitation of our research design remains its reliance on canonical sociological works from the 20th century, which might exclude newer theoretical developments that have become significant in the 21st century, such as digital sociology or climate change theories. If the analysed corpus primarily consists of Western sociological texts, the list might also underrepresent or overlook guiding distinctions that are central to non-Western or global South perspectives, such as postcolonial theory or decoloniality.

Nevertheless, our combined qualitative and quantitative approach has been successful in capturing and cross-validating wide range of the most prominent guiding distinctions of social sciences. This is evident when the concepts listed in Table 3 are paired with relevant counter-concepts and combined with the distinctions identified in the online brainstorming (see Table 4).

Table 4 not only lists some of the most prominent guiding distinctions of the 20th and 21st century but also categorises these distinctions into true and different types of false distinctions, using the scheme outlined in Table 1.

The results show that most of these distinctions are false (Types False 1–3), while only a minority are true (T).

Regarding false distinctions of Type F1, examples include 'mechanic/organic' or 'community/society', which are mutually exclusive, but not jointly exhaustive distinctions *if* they are considered variants of the 'traditional/modern' distinction, which appears clearly inexhaustive *if* we take into account concepts such as post-modernism. However, if these distinctions are instead seen as variants of the more basic 'before/after' distinction, they may also be considered true *if* we follow Luhmann's idea that the present serves as a differential dividing time into past and future, thereby creating mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive opposites.

False distinctions of Type F2 include the distinctions between theory and practice, *if* theory is considered a practice, or theory and method, *if* theory is considered method

Table 4. Selected guiding distinctions as identified by our online brainstormings and derived from our quantitative analysis, now also categorised as true or false according to the scheme outlined in Table 1 (own table).

Distinction	True	Distinction	True
analogue/digital	T	national/international	F1
ascription/achievement	?	nature/culture	?
base/superstructure	?	normal state/crisis	?
behaviour/action	F2	north/south	F1
behaviour/attitude	F1	objective/subjective	T
body/mind	F1	old/new	T
body/organism	T	operation/observation	?
capital/labour	F1	order/chaos	?
capital/work	F1	organisation/institution	?
capitalism/socialism	F1	organisation/market	?
central/peripheral	T	organisation/network	F1
change/stability	T	part/whole	F2
civil/barbaric	T	people of colour/white	T
civil/military	T	people/government	?
civil/political	F3	people/population	?
class/caste	F1	person/human	F2
class/estate	F1	person/individual	F2
commodity/gift	F1	political/economic	F1
community/society	F1	power/law	F1
conflict/consensus	F1	power/money	F1
conflict/cooperation	F1	power/powerlessness	T
culture/civilisation	F2	presence/absence	T
data/information	?	problem/solution	F1
description/prescription	F1	production/consumption	F1
dys-/functional	T	property/access	F3
economy/society	F1 F2 F3	public/private	T
education/ignorance	?	real/fake	T
education/science	F1	relation/element	?
ego/alter	T	research/activism	F1
empirical/theoretical	?	research/teaching	F1
fact/fiction	?	revolution/reform	F1
fact/value	F1	revolution/restoration	F1
family/business	F1	rule/exception	T
family/children	F2	rule/routine	?
free/unfree	F	science/fiction	?
function/substance	?	science/ideology	F1
future/past	T F1	science/religion	F1
Habermas/Luhmann	F1	similar/equal	F1
in-/dependent	T	spaceman/cowboy	F1
inclusion/exclusion	T	state/government	F2
individual/group	F1	state/market	F1

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Distinction	True	Distinction	True
individual/society	F2	state/society	F2
language/speech	F2	status/stigma	?
local/global	F1	structure/agency	F1
male/female	F3	structure/process	F1
man/machine	F1 F2 F3	system/environment	T
man/nature	F1 F2 F3	theory/method	T F2
man/woman	F3	theory/practice	F2
means/ends	F1	to have/to be	F1
mechanic/organic	F1	top/bottom	T
medium/form	T	trade/distribution	?
metric/nonmetric	T	true/false	T
micro/macro	F1	understanding/explaining	?
modern/traditional	F1		

(e.g. Roth et al., 2021). Such interpretations turn one side of the distinction into the other's subset, thus producing constellations such as 'state/government' (where the latter is a subset of the former) or, in Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, 'economy/society' (where the former is a subsystem of the latter). *If* 'action' is considered a special case of 'behaviour', then this distinction too, is of Type F2, since it consists of two sides that are jointly exhaustive, but not mutually exclusive.

Finally, false distinctions fall into Type F3 when their sides are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive. As indicated in Tables 1 and 4, this is the case for the distinctions of 'male/female' or 'man/woman', which are increasingly viewed as neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive, as evidenced by the increased social theoretical and societal interest in persons who identify as both male and female or as neither male nor female, respectively. Other examples include intersections rather than distinctions such as 'family/household' or 'property/access', as well as the popular distinction between 'man' and 'nature'. The latter, too, is neither mutually exclusive (*if* we subscribe to the popular claim that 'man is part of nature') nor jointly exhaustive (*if* we further argue that man's environment is made not only of nature but also of analogue or digital machines).

In addition to the categories T, F1, F2 and F3, Table 4 also contains several question marks. These marks do indicate a reluctance to make difficult decisions, but rather highlight that classifications of distinctions are often contingent on the tacit or explicit definitions of the concepts being distinguished. The same is true for the 'F1 F2 F3' label assigned to the distinction 'economy/society', which falls under F2 only *if* we accept Luhmann's definition of the economy as a subsystem of society. However, *if* the 'economy/society' distinction is considered, for example, within the context of sustainability science, then the small theory programme outlined in Table 1 might produces different results (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 depicts variants of the so-called triple-bottom-line (3BL) model, which is highly influential in sustainability sciences and beyond. The variant located top right of

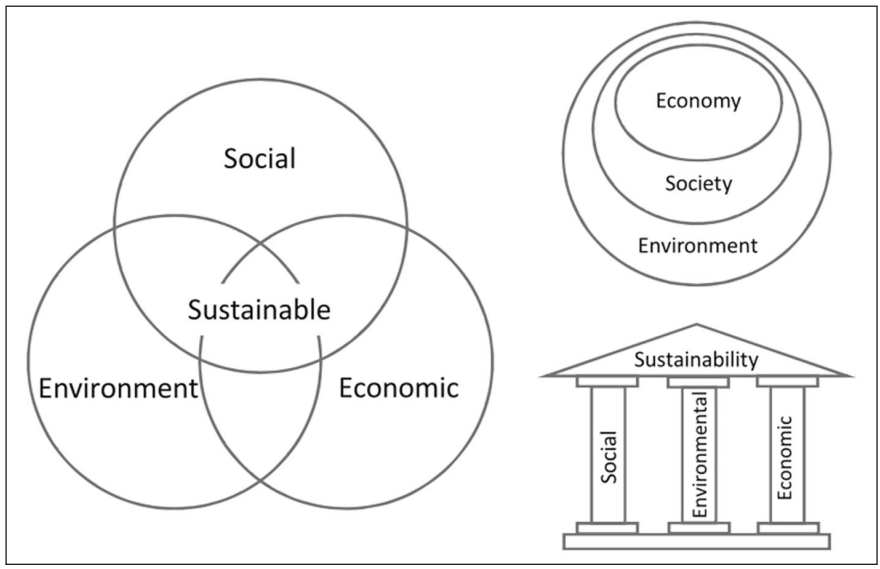

Figure 2. Variants of the classical triple-bottom-line model (Purvis et al., 2019: 682).

the figure corresponds to Luhmann's conceptualisation of the economy-society relationship, in which the former is presented as a subsystem of the latter. The major difference to Luhmann's approach, however, is that the 3BL variant in question also posits that society is a subsystem of the (natural) environment. While this interpretation of the society-nature relationship would constitute a category error in Luhmannian systems theory, this 3BL model variant nonetheless highlights the difference between false distinctions of Type F2 and those of Types F1 and F3. Specifically, the bottom right model offers a compact representation of the distinction between the economic and the social realms as a mutually exclusive but not jointly exhaustive (Type F1). In contrast, the left-hand model constitutes attempts to portray economy and society as concepts that are neither mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive (Type 3).

From this discussion of Figure 1, it follows that the many question marks in table are not an indication of our inability to make tough decisions based on our own paradigm, but rather reflect our reluctance to impose our paradigm onto a framework that works for all paradigms.

Nevertheless, regardless of paradigmatic preferences, the question as to whether a distinction is true or false remains a difference that makes a difference, particularly when combining distinctions, including instances of the self-application of a distinction.

Consider the example of the distinction of 'capitalism/socialism' discussed in Roth (2023: 455) (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5 shows that if we treat 'capitalism/socialism' as a true distinction, then we can combine it with itself, effectively turning capitalism and socialisms into poles of a scale that also contains various degrees of mixed types.

Table 5. Capitalism/socialism.

	Capitalism	Socialism
Capitalism	Capitalism	Socialist capitalism
Socialism	Capitalist socialism	Socialism

Source: Roth (2023: 455).
A true distinction?

Table 6. Capitalism/socialism.

	Capitalism	Non-Capitalism
Socialism	Capitalist socialism Socialist capitalism	Socialism
Non-Socialism	Capitalism	Despotism Feudalism Fascism Environmentalism

Source: Roth (2023: 455).
A false distinction.

If by contrast we consider 'capitalism/socialism' to be a false distinction, we can translate it into two true distinctions. Table 6 illustrates the outcome of this exercise, showing distinct categories not only for either capitalism or socialism but also for political systems or ideologies that are both capitalist and socialist, as well as for systems or ideologies that are neither capitalist nor socialist, such as despotism, fascism, or environmentalism.

From the perspective of a digital approach to guiding distinctions, treating false distinctions as if they were true leads to literally analogue observations of poles, grades and various mixed types. However, translating false into true distinctions, we generate distinct categories not only for each of the two sides of the former distinction but also for mixed types and concepts that were not covered by the original distinction. This highlights the importance of the truth value of guiding distinctions of social theory, as it has significant implications for social theorising.

Conclusions

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods employed in this article offers a robust approach to identifying the guiding distinctions of social theory in the 20th and 21st centuries. The qualitative brainstorming provides breadth and diversity, while the quantitative analysis offered an empirical, objective foundation for identifying central concepts. By compiling the most frequent terms across seminal sociological works, this approach provides an empirical foundation for identifying central concepts.

The frequency of terms in the corpus reflects their prominence in sociological discourse, ensuring that the identified guiding distinctions are not arbitrary but grounded in

actual usage. The approach benefits from analysing a wide array of influential texts. This ensures that the identified terms are representative of key sociological theories and debates across different authors and schools of thought, thus offering a comprehensive overview of the discipline. The most frequent terms are likely to correspond to core theoretical constructs that have shaped sociological thought. For example, terms like 'social', 'system' and 'power' are fundamental to many key sociological theories, indicating that our approach effectively captures the central elements of sociological discourse.

It is important to note that the list of guiding distinctions identified is by no means exhaustive. While the methodology ensures that the most central and frequently discussed concepts in sociological theory are captured, it inevitably omits less frequent but potentially significant distinctions.

Moreover, focusing solely on word frequencies might neglect the theoretical depth and the complexities of the concepts these words represent. Theoretical constructs often involve nuanced arguments, which cannot be captured by merely counting word occurrences. This approach risks flattening the complexity of sociological theory into a list of buzzwords. However, our qualitative approach as well as the multi-paradigmatic design of our digital framework for social theorising mitigate the limitations of the corpus analysis. Significantly the list of the top 100 sociological concepts as well as the compilation of guiding distinctions of social theory presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively, provides a strong starting point for deeper analysis.

Future research could, therefore, focus on challenges around categorical features and relations (Skoblik, 2024) or the compatibility of particularly the most prominent guiding distinctions and venture at their better integration, while others could scan less prominent distinctions to identify emerging trends or controversies. Additional efforts could aim to uncover previously unknown guiding distinctions, which might reveal structural holes and other gaps in both past and present sociological discourses.

In all these efforts, it will be crucial to develop tools not only for identifying past, present, or future guiding distinctions but also for analysing how distinctions can generate other distinctions or be traced back to their roots.

Another important focus of this article was the compatible of the identified guiding distinctions with the ongoing digital transformation of society in general and social theorising in particular. In this regard, we demonstrated that most guiding distinctions identified in this article fall into one of the three different types of false distinctions (Types F1–3), and hence must first be translated into true ones before they can become components of digital social theory architectures. A major challenge in this context pertains to concepts that are ostensibly untranslatable. These are concepts that are not easy to identify as distinctions because they seem to lack or obscure their counter-concept Concepts like 'institution', 'practice' or 'meaning' are prime examples, as nearly every aspect of social life can be considered a practice, institution, or said to have meaning. In social systems theory, these overarching concepts are expressed in Luhmann's (1995: 62) observation that meaninglessness is merely a special case of meaningfulness.

Although intellectually appealing, such universal supersets or media constitute non-distinctions, which, from a digital social theorising perspective, indicate serious flaws in the respective discourses or paradigms, not least because Saussure (1959) has convincingly argued that language is a system of distinctions between words and that there is,

consequently, no inherent meaning in individual words. The example of the word 'good', whose meaning does not emerge before it is tacitly distinguished from counter concepts such as 'bad', 'evil', or 'service', is a case in point.

While the role of ostensibly antonym-free concepts or universal antonyms, respectively, in digital social theorising remains to be fully explored, there is little doubt that distinctions, whether true or false, have played a key role in shaping the forms and functions of social theorising throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries.

'As the self-concept of a digital social theory is not that of an analogue story written line-by-line and recited word-by-word, but rather that of a literal social theory *programme*' (Roth, 2019: 92), one of the major contributions of this article has been the application of the digital theory *subroutine* presented in Table 1 to some of the most prominent guiding distinctions of social theory, as presented in Table 4. In demonstrating and discussing this process, we argue that such a digital approach is, by default, unbiased towards particular paradigms or types of distinctions. This statement expressively includes false, analogue distinctions, simply because identifying a distinction as false reveals that it is more than one. This implies that any false distinction can be translated into two true ones, thus rendering it compatible with digital social theorising. Therefore, such translations constitute a central part of the ongoing digital transformation of social theory, a process that may eventually lead to the design of digital theory platforms that can be used for quality checks and the debugging of existing and future social theories.

The assertation that at least some future social theories are digital is supported by the digital transformation of society and the relentlessly growing amount of digital data, which are revolutionising the processes of research and knowledge production in the social sciences. Without such digital theories, our attempts at making sense of one of the most profound social transformations of the last decades would remain confined by conservative, analogue 'print theories of computer societies' (Roth et al., 2019b), which systematically fail to match the methodological innovations and social phenomena they aim to reflect upon.

The main and ultimate ambition of this article, therefore, was to demonstrate that a digital transformation of social theorising is both necessary and possible, while also posing a significant and worthy challenge for the leading social theorists of our time.

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ORCID iD

Steffen Roth https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8502-601X

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Author biographies

Steffen Roth FRSA is a Full Professor of Management at Excelia Business School, La Rochelle, France, and a Visiting Academic at the University of Cambridge, UK. He is also a Visiting Professor of Management and Organization at the University of Witten-Herdecke, Germany, and a Member of the Executive Committee of the Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, Croatia. Steffen holds the title of Full Professor of Social Sciences at Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius, Lithuania, where he is the Founding Director of the Next Society Institute, as well as the title of Adjunct Professor (venia legendi) in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland. He has also been awarded a Habilitation (facultas docendi) in Economic and Environmental Sociology by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research. He earned a PhD in Sociology from the University of Geneva and a PhD in Economics and Management from the Chemnitz University of Technology. Currently, he serves as the field editor for social systems theory of Systems Research and Behavioral Science and as a member of the editorial board of Sociology. The journals his research has been published in include Journal of Business Ethics, Sociology of Health & Illness, Journal of Business Research, Ecological Economics, Administration and Society, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, European Journal of the History of Economic Thought, European Management Journal, Journal of Cleaner Production, and Futures.

Steve Watson is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, where his work is in the transdisciplinary sociology and theory in the context of education. His research considers the AI, especially large language models and their role and implications in and for society and education. He has also published research on the sociology of media, politics, and education. His work is informed by George Spencer Brown and Niklas Luhmann drawing on the ideas of distinction and recursion in the abductive conceptualisation of social phenomena and lived experience in the context of education and in relation to technology. He is currently an editor on the Cambridge Journal of Education. He has published research in the British Education Research Journal, Critical Studies in Education, Globalisations, Societies and Education, Teaching and Teacher Education, Technology, Pedagogy and Education.

Sören Möller is Professor of Biostatistics at the University of Southern Denmark. His research is focused on statistical involvement in a wide range of epidemiological, clinical epidemiological and clinical studies as well as untypical bias sources in statistical methods.

Lars Clausen is a senior researcher and educational consultant at UCL University College. He is also the Managing Director of the Next Society Institute at Kazimieras Simonavičius University in Vilnius. His research interest include organizational development, sociology of war, educational theory, accounting history, and communication design.

Krešimir Žažar is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Zagreb, Croatia, and Senior Research Fellow at the Kazimieras Simonavičius University in Vilnius, Lithuania. He was the secretary of the Croatian Sociological Society from 2011 to 2013. As of 2019 and 2021,

respectively, he has been a member of the steering committee of the organization International Social Theory Consortium as well as a member of the Executive Committee of the European Sociological Association. Prof. Žažar has co-published three monographs and over 20 academic articles.

Harry Dahms is Full Professor of Sociology, co-director of the Center for the Study of Social Justice and co-chair of the Committee on Social Theory at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA. Dahms is also director of the International Social Theory Consortium (ISTC). His primary research and teaching areas are theoretical sociology (social, sociological, and criti-cal theory), economic sociology, globalization, planetary sociology, social inequality, social justice, artificial intelligence, and science fiction. He is the editor of Current Perspectives in Social Theory and has been a co-guest editor of several special issues in academic journals, including Technological Forecasting and Social Change and Futures. In addition to numerous contribu-tions to Current Perspectives in Social Theory, his research has been published in such journals as Sociological Theory, Critical Sociology, Comparative Sociology, Basic Income Studies, Bulletin of Science, Technology, & Society, Fast Capitalism, Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal, disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory, and numerous edited volumes.

Augusto Sales is a professor, researcher, and head of professional master's programs at FGV EBAPE. He holds a doctorate degree in Business Administration from Rennes School of Business (France) and master's from FGV EBAPE and Georgetown University (USA) in Management and International Business, respectively. Before joining FGV EBAPE, he had a career in major international consulting firms (Deloitte and KPMG), including 12 years as lead partner of KPMG's Global Strategy Group in Brazil and Latin America, in addition to two years as a strategy consultant for the Cities Lab of Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) working on the issue of affordable housing for the Ministry of Economy of the Brazilian Federal Government. Augusto also participates as a researcher and Chairman of the Next Society Institute (NSI), a European think tank maintained by Kazimieras Simonavičius University (KSU), Lithuania, which investigates practical applications of social systems theory, especially the ideas developed by the German philosopher Niklas Luhmann, in management. Professional strategist, Augusto worked with multicultural teams in the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Middle East assisting large corporations, family businesses, investment funds, multilateral organizations, governments, and the development sector in their most pressing challenges. At FGV EBAPE, he develops research in the fields of strategy, including mergers and acquisitions (M&A), and in the practical application of Niklas Luhmann's ideas, particularly the theory of social systems, in management sciences. Augusto has published articles in international and domestic scientific journals, including the Journal of Organizational Change Management (JOCM), Systems Research and Behavioral Science (SRBS) and RAUSP Management Journal, being co-author of the award-winning article "Government.com? Multifunctional cabinet portfolio analysis of 201 national governments", which received the Emerald Literati Award in 2020.

Vincent Lien is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. He holds a MA in English Literature from Bangor University, a MEd from the University of Cambridge, and a DPhil in English Literature from the University of York.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous présentons les résultats de deux séances en ligne d'échange d'idées qui ont permis de recueillir plus de 480 distinctions directrices de la théorie sociale lors de la première séance et plus de 219 lors de la deuxième séance. Les résultats de ces séances ainsi qu'une analyse quantitative des 100 ouvrages sociologiques de base figurant dans le classement 'Books of the XX Century' de l'ISA sont utilisés

pour identifier les distinctions les plus influentes de la théorie sociale et montrer que la majeure partie de ces distinctions directrices est constituée de « fausses » distinctions ou de distinctions analogiques. Nous montrons par ailleurs comment l'exploration systématique de ces distinctions peut faciliter une transformation numérique de la théorie sociale qui reste encore à réaliser, consistant à a) traduire les théories sociales analogiques en théories sociales numériques, b) concevoir de nouvelles théories sociales numériques, et c) concevoir des plateformes théoriques numériques utiles pour le contrôle de qualité et le débogage des théories sociales existantes et futures. L'article aboutit à la conclusion qu'une telle transformation numérique de la théorie sociale est nécessaire dans la mesure où la transformation numérique de la société et la croissance incessante des données numériques sont en train de révolutionner les processus de recherche et de production de connaissances dans les sciences sociales, alors que la théorie sociale continue de se développer suivant des modèles analogiques plutôt conservateurs, accusant par là un retard par rapport aux phénomènes sociaux et aux innovations méthodologiques qu'elle se propose d'examiner.

Mots-clés
análisis del corpus, big data, distinciones falsas, sociología digital, teorización digital

Resumen
En este artículo se presentan los resultados de dos sesiones de intercambio de ideas en línea que han recopilado más de 480 distinciones directrices de teoría social en la primera sesión y más de 219 en la segunda sesión. Se usan los resultados de estas sesiones de intercambio de ideas, así como un análisis cuantitativo de los 100 principales trabajos básicos de sociología enumerados en el ranking de la ISA *Books of the XX Century* (Libros del Siglo XX), para identificar las distinciones más influyentes de la teoría social y demostrar que la mayor parte de estas distinciones directrices consisten en distinciones 'falsas' o analógicas. Se demuestra además que las exploraciones sistemáticas de estas distinciones pueden facilitar una transformación digital aún pendiente de la teoría social, definida como a) la traducción de teorías sociales analógicas en digitales, b) el diseño de nuevas teorías sociales digitales, y c) el diseño de plataformas de teoría digital útiles para los controles de calidad y la depuración de teorías sociales existentes y futuras. El artículo concluye que dicha transformación digital de la teoría social es necesaria, ya que la transformación digital de la sociedad y la cantidad cada vez mayor de datos digitales están revolucionando los procesos de investigación y producción de conocimiento en las ciencias sociales, mientras que el desarrollo de la teoría social todavía sigue patrones analógicos más bien conservadores, por lo que queda rezagada con respecto a los fenómenos sociales y las innovaciones metodológicas sobre las que pretende reflexionar.

Palabras clave
analyse de corpus, big data, fausses distinctions, sociologie numérique, théorisation numérique