Guiding distinctions of social theory. Analogue guidelines or digital transformers? An introduction

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Abstract
This article introduces and situates the concept of guiding distinctions as a foundational yet underexamined category in sociological theory. Building on social systems theory and the calculus of indications, it argues that distinctions are not merely heuristic oppositions but operative selections that render the social world observable. While classical dichotomies such as structure/agency or individual/society have long shaped sociological discourse, the role of binary distinctions in the digital transformation of society calls for renewed attention to how distinctions function, what they reveal and what they obscure. The article serves both as a theory statement and as an introduction to the special issue 'Guiding Distinctions of Social Theory: Analogue Guidelines or Digital Transformers?' The article advances a distinction-sensitive approach to theory design, centred on the difference between true and false distinctions and the translation of analogue (false) into digital (true) distinctions. Drawing on examples from Parsons,

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Bourdieu and recent systems-theoretical research, the article explores the implications of this approach for building more robust theoretical architectures. It concludes that the digital transformation of society must be matched by a corresponding digital transformation of social theorising. At the same time, it cautions against the uncritical adoption of binary schemas by emphasising the paradoxical, recursive and context-dependent nature of all distinctions.

Introduction

Social theory begins with a cut. From the classical dichotomies of individual and society, structure and agency, to the more recent distinctions between analogue and digital, the act of theorising the social presupposes the drawing of distinctions. These distinctions are not merely heuristic devices; they are the very operations through which the social world becomes observable and communicable. Following George Spencer Brown's (1979) insight that all observation begins with a distinction, and Niklas Luhmann's (2012, 2013) elaboration of this operation as the core motif of social systems theory, we may assert that distinctions are not just tools of theory – they are foundational to the mode of theorising.

Despite this foundational role, guiding distinctions have often remained implicit in social theory, apart from a few notable exceptions (Jenks, 1998; Sztompka, 2013). When made explicit, these distinctions are frequently treated as settled coordinates or artificial separations that must be overcome in pursuit of more integrated or holistic approaches. Yet, as the digital transformation of society proceeds apace – that is, a transformation characterised not merely by binary oppositions in thought, as in Cartesian dualisms, but by the operationalisation of binary code as a universal medium for representing and processing distinctions – it becomes increasingly urgent to interrogate how digital distinctions are drawn, how they operate and what they render visible or obscure. This special issue addresses this urgency by foregrounding guiding distinctions as a core category of sociological analysis. Our aim is not merely to inventory classical dichotomies, but to rethink distinctions as basic operations that structure theoretical architectures, frame social diagnostics and shape the very possibilities of critique.

Against this backdrop, the present article pursues a dual purpose. First, it seeks to familiarise readers with the concept of guiding distinctions and its role in social theorising, particularly from a systems-theoretical perspective. Second, it introduces the contributions to this *Current Sociology monograph.* The article begins by situating guiding distinctions in relation to classical and contemporary sociological concepts (section 'A distinctive approach to core sociological concepts'), before turning to the individual contributions (section 'An overview of this collection'), each of which develops and operationalises specific distinctions or constellations thereof. Section 'Expanding architectures of distinctions' expands on the architectural logic of distinctions by examining their

quality, convertibility and implications for future theory design. The final section reflects on the paradoxes of true and false distinctions and outlines a post-/digital horizon for social theorising. Taken together, this article makes the case for a distinction-conscious approach to theory construction – one that is both analytically rigorous and reflexively aware of its own observational foundations.

A distinctive approach to core sociological concepts

The evolution of sociological theory is closely intertwined with the evolution of its guiding distinctions. Core dichotomies such as structure/agency, system/environment, individual/society, nature/culture, or public/private have not only framed theoretical schools but have also defined the very boundaries of what counts as a sociological problem. Whether approached through the lens of Marxist class analysis, Weberian ideal types, Durkheimian solidarities, or poststructuralist deconstructions, the work of theorising has largely consisted in selecting, refining and combining distinctions that differentiate one domain of the social from another. As Roth et al. (2025b) demonstrate through both qualitative and quantitative analyses, the field of social theory can be read as a history of its guiding distinctions. These distinctions structure discourse, frame controversies and establish observational priorities. They are not peripheral tools of theorising – they are theorising.

All observation, as George Spencer Brown (1979) noted, begins with a distinction. To observe is to indicate something on the basis of a difference. This general logic, central to Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, holds across the biological, psychic and social domains. In each case, systems constitute their realities through distinctions. A biological system distinguishes nutrients from waste; a psychic system distinguishes perceptions from noise; and a social system distinguishes communicative relevance from irrelevance. In this sense, distinctions are not only cognitive tools of theorists, but also operational principles of the systems they seek to observe.

From a systems-theoretical perspective, then, distinctions serve as access cues to a system's environment. No system can access its environment directly. Instead, it observes its surroundings through distinctions that render certain aspects visible while rendering others invisible. Distinctions provide selectivity. They create relevance. They open and close pathways of interaction, interpretation and communication. In this capacity, guiding distinctions do not simply reflect the world; they constitute the way in which systems orient themselves towards the world.

It follows that combinations of distinctions generate what might be called 'windows to the world' – structured perspectives through which a system can navigate complexity. The power of such combinations lies in their ability to generate ordered representations of what would otherwise be an unstructured multiplicity of possibilities. These compound distinctions act as sense-making devices, enabling both theoretical abstraction and practical orientation.

Classic examples of such conceptual windows include Talcott Parsons' (1937; Parsons et al., 1953) AGIL scheme and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) correspondence matrix. Parsons' analytical framework was built by a combination of the distinctions of internal/external and means/ends (or instrumental/consummatory, in a later formulation) to yield a

fourfold matrix of functional imperatives – adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency – through which he modelled the systemic requirements of any social system. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1984) correspondence analysis, prominently featured his Distinctions, organises the social space through the distinction between economic versus cultural capital, and a gradational differentiation based on capital volume, ranging from low to high, generating a topography of taste that maps class positions onto lifestyles and aesthetic preferences. While the latter is not a binary distinction in a strict sense, it nevertheless structures social space by positioning actors along a vertical axis of capital accumulation.

While the AGIL scheme remains a canonical reference point in sociology, it has also drawn extensive criticism. Holton (2001: 156), for example, decried it as 'a triumphalist Occidental organising framework, within which evidence of historical complexity is exquisitely tortured to fit Parsons' grand theoretical apparatus'. Such critiques typically object not to the formal use of distinctions per se, but to the rigidity of Parsons' commitment to a *fixed set* of distinctions and his insistence on their universal applicability.

While Luhmann followed Parsons in recognising the value of structured matrices, he was also among his sharpest critics. In line with long-standing concerns about the rigidity and universality of Parsons' distinctions, Luhmann (2012: 4) lamented that Parsons 'does not himself occur in the many boxes of his theory'. For Luhmann, this absence of cognitive self-implication indicated a deeper flaw: Parsons' AGIL framework, though elegant in form, remained confined to the viewpoint of an unacknowledged observer. The matrix, while purporting to be a general theory, was ultimately the projection of a particular perspective – one that disavowed its own contingency.

This criticism, however, does not invalidate the matrix architecture as such. Rather, it prompts two complementary strategies for dealing with the shortcomings of rigid cross-tabulations. The first is to retain the matrix form while rendering it more observer-sensitive. As illustrated in scenario planning (Amer et al., 2013), this approach retains the analytical power of combining two key distinctions to map a space of possible futures, while also empowering observers to freely select the guiding distinctions through which they construct their windows to the world. Instead of prescribing a fixed schema, the matrix becomes a flexible observational device, attuned to context, purpose and paradigm. If required to overcome simplifications, this approach can be extended to n-factorial scenarios as outlined in Roth et al. (2025a).

The second strategy goes beyond flexible architecture and focuses on the *quality* of guiding distinctions themselves. Not all distinctions are equally informative. Some distinctions offer coherent insights while others introduce fuzziness, ambiguity, or categorical confusion.

While the question of what makes a guiding distinction theoretically robust will be the focus of section 'Expanding architectures of distinctions', section 'An overview of this collection' already illustrates the power of a distinctive approach to social theory as brings together a wide range of contributions, each exploring and operationalising distinct guiding distinctions – or combination thereof. This diversity of perspectives not only testifies to the continued relevance of guiding distinctions in past, present and most likely also future theory design; it also demonstrates how different choices of distinctions create radically different windows to the (social) world. Rather than prescribing a

single analytical lens, the contributions show what becomes visible when theorists are given the freedom to build their own observational tools. Together, they make a compelling case for a pluralistic, context-sensitive and distinction-conscious approach to social theorising.

An overview of this collection

In his article 'Distinguishing Next Society', Dirk Baecker (2025) revisits the epochal question of societal transformation through the combined lenses of Marshall McLuhan's media theory and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, thus proposing a compelling vision of a next society. In so doing, Baecker advances the argument that societies evolve through media-induced surpluses of meaning. Just as the printing press catalysed the rise of modern functionally differentiated society, the advent of electronic and digital media generates a new kind of surplus – of connectivity, data and immediacy – that traditional structures and cultures can no longer accommodate. Baecker introduces the notion of triple interpenetration – among social systems (communication), psychic systems (perception) and computers (data processing) – as the analytical hallmark of this emerging social formation. He identifies three guiding distinctions that define the reality of the next society: the oscillation between local and global communication, between the search for irritants and the defence against them, and between predictive data and data space. These distinctions are not merely observed but reinforced through operations of medium and form, which Baecker positions as the foundational calculus of sociological understanding in the digital age. Importantly, his article elevates digital data to the status of a second 'connective medium' alongside values, linking not only world events but also the operations of human and machine perception. Baecker's contribution offers a theoretically ambitious and conceptually refined framework for rethinking societal structure and culture in an age where artificial systems seem to participate in communication. It invites us to theorise not simply an end of modernity, but also the computational complexity of what may come next.

Petro Martin Giordano and Gaston Becerra's (2025) article 'General Conceptions in Sociological Tensions: The Dualism of Niklas Luhmann' offers a novel framework for comparing sociological theories by shifting focus from dichotomies, dilemmas and guiding distinctions to the more flexible and abstract category of tensions. While traditional dualisms such as individual/society or realism/constructivism are often treated as dichotomies to be overcome or resolved, the authors argue that tensions allow for a richer conceptualisation of theoretical programmes by considering their positions, conceptions and overarching general conceptions. Their core proposal is a typology of how theories handle tensions: (a) monism (emphasising one pole), (b) integration (synthesising both poles) and (c) dualism (maintaining the difference between the poles). Using Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory as a test case, the article examines three classical sociological tensions: individual/society, knowledge/reality and description/critique. Giordano and Becerra posit that Luhmann consistently favours a dualist conception, emphasising distinction rather than synthesis or unification. While Luhmann would likely have rejected the label of dualism, Giordano and Becerra compare Luhmann's stance to monist (e.g. Touraine) and integrative (e.g. Bourdieu) approaches, showing how different sociological

programmes generate distinct but identifiable constellations of thought. In sum, this article suggest that we need to reframe how we compare theories – not through rigid taxonomies or idealist syntheses, but by mapping how they differentially relate to enduring sociological tensions. It thus provides an original conceptual lens for evaluating coherence, compatibility and innovation across diverse strands of sociological thought.

In 'Society/Nature: Enactive Perspectives for Social Systems Theory', Hugo Cadenas (2025) tackles one of the most persistent and prominent guiding distinctions in contemporary social theorising: *society vs. nature*. Against the backdrop of the perceived urgency of climate change, the Cadenas revisits Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory (SST) to explore whether and how the system/environment distinction can be rethought in order to accommodate more complex and responsive models of society–environment interaction. To this end, the article engages with three theoretical perspectives critical of SST: *Ontological Relativism*, which emphasises the plurality of cosmologies; *Transcendent Connectionism*, which foregrounds actor-network hybrids; and *Circular Cosmologism*, which emphasises the interdependencies of ecological systems, sometimes framed in terms of planetary intelligence. While each of these approaches challenges the adequacy of SST's system/environment distinction, the authors argue that SST can accommodate many of their insights – provided it is extended and complemented by enactive perspectives. The core proposal is to develop a *Systemic Enactive Approach* (SEA) to social systems theory. Enactivism, derived from Maturana and Varela's work on autopoiesis and cognition, is used here to stress the relational and embodied character of system formation and meaning making. Thus, the author proposes that communication itself should be reconceived not as information transfer but as embodied, emergent coordination within and across system boundaries – including interactions between human and non-human agents. This article offers a heterodox approach that stretches beyond social systems theory in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann as it aims to combine it with enactivist cognitive science and ecological anthropology. It challenges sociocentric readings of SST and opens space for a reformulated understanding of society/nature as a productive, system-relative difference rather than a metaphysical divide. In doing so, the embarks towards new theoretical terrain, where guiding distinctions are understood as contingent, embodied and subject to systemic evolution.

Clayton Fordahl's (2025) article on 'Primitive Social Theory: On the History of the "Primitive Concept" in Sociology and its Applications under Post-Digital Modernity' presents an intellectual history of the 'primitive' as a sociological concept, tracing its marginal status in classical sociology, its centrality in 20th-century modernisation theory and its contemporary potential under conditions of post-digital modernity. While anthropologists and postcolonial scholars have long critiqued the concept, its sociological trajectory remains undertheorised. This article aims to fill that gap by mapping out how the primitive became a functional binary within modernisation theory, especially in the work of Talcott Parsons and his followers, who replaced the classical tradition/modernity distinction with the more universal and exportable primitive/modern distinction. Drawing on detailed textual analysis of thinkers from Tönnies and Durkheim to Parsons, Shils and Almond, the article shows how the primitive gradually became a conceptual placeholder for undifferentiated societies, allowing for global theories of development that moved beyond the historically specific case of European feudalism. Yet the primitive also

became a lightning rod for critique: postcolonial theorists, anthropologists and sociologists alike denounced it as Eurocentric, racist and analytically empty. By the late 20th century, the term had virtually disappeared from serious sociological inquiry. Against this background, the article makes a provocative case for a renewed sociology of the primitive. Drawing on contemporary reinterpretations of Durkheim (Alexander) and Marx (Saito), it argues that the primitive may offer both a romantic and analytical resource for critique. In a digital age defined by relentless differentiation, hyper-rationalisation and technological acceleration, the primitive can serve as a conceptual foil that foregrounds unity, embodiment and ecological harmony. Rather than rejecting or digitising the primitive as a 'false distinction' (Roth, 2025b), the article proposes its strategic exaggeration – as a critical fiction and contrast medium – capable of illuminating the pathologies of digital modernity and reintroducing the possibility of more holistic social imaginaries.

Diane Laflamme (2025), in her article 'Is Ethics a Utopia? Yes, when Moral Distinctions Impair the Ethical Aim', explores the tension between ethics and morality in the context of digital theorising, asking whether ethics is a utopia – a question to which both Niklas Luhmann and Paul Ricœur offer different but complementary responses. Drawing on Luhmann's systems theory and Ricœur's phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, the Laflamme develops a dialogue between digital and analogue theorising to interrogate the guiding distinctions that structure ethical reflection. At the heart of this approach lies a critique of binary moral codes – particularly the good/bad distinction – which may function as 'true' digital distinctions (Roth, 2019; Roth, 2023) but risk blinding observers to complexity by excluding the third. Ricœur, by contrast, works with what the article terms 'pseudo-binary distinctions', which retain ambiguity and openness to re-entry, allowing ethical reasoning to navigate between ideals and practical judgement. Ethics, from a Luhmannian perspective, appears utopian when moral codes are treated as rigid binary schemata; yet Ricœur insists that ethics remains an attainable aim – so long as it is interpreted flexibly and imaginatively. The article's originality lies in its careful juxtaposition of Luhmannian and Ricœurian perspectives to frame ethics as both a theory of difference and an imaginative project. It identifies meaning – conceived as the interplay between actuality and potentiality – as the common analytical ground. The work ultimately argues for a dual movement of learning: systems can learn to code more sensitively, and human actors can learn to combine logical argumentation with utopian imagination in moral judgement. This allows ethics to escape the paralysis of binary logic without sacrificing normative aspiration. The article contributes a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach to ethics under conditions of digital transformation and serves as a methodological model for how distinctions – true or false – might be navigated in future ethical theorising.

In his article 'Interpenetration and the Town and Gown Divide: A Systems Theoretical Reading of Porterhouse Blue', Vincent Lien (2025) offers a rich, interdisciplinary reading of the classic town versus gown divide through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, focusing particularly on the concept of *interpenetration*. Drawing on the satirical novel *Porterhouse Blue* by Tom Sharpe, the Lien shows how fiction can serve as a fertile medium for second-order observation of organisational and other social systems. The Cambridge college setting of the novel is used to explore the complex, conflict-laden

interplay between two social systems: the town (as a political segment of society) and the gown (representing the university as educational and research organisation). By tracing the interactions between fictional characters – Skullion, Sir Godber Evans, Zipser and others – the article demonstrates how organisational structures both resist and absorb external pressures, from political reform to social change. These fictional episodes are interpreted not merely as comedic absurdities but as analytically rich illustrations of *entropy, conflict and systemic self-reproduction* under modern conditions of functional differentiation. The core theoretical move is to show how *interpenetration* creates conditions of heightened contingency, complexity and potential destabilisation. Satire reveals not just contradictions within the systems but also their blind spots and unintended consequences. Particular attention is given to how *mass media*, *academic traditions* and *personal identities* become sites where systems exchange and manage complexity. Lien's article stands out for its methodological creativity, using literary satire to explicate and test systems-theoretical concepts. It not only deepens our understanding of the town/gown relation as a guiding distinction but also shows how systemic entanglements can erupt into entropy when adaptation fails.

The article 'Self/Other: Guiding Distinction for the Social Theory of the Self' by Francisco Morales (2025) reframes debates on the social self by treating the self/other relation as a guiding distinction for theorising subjectivity. Departing from the binary between individualist and social constructivist perspectives, the Morales proposes a synthesis between phenomenological accounts – particularly those of Dan Zahavi – and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. The article positions meaning, double contingency and interpenetration as central concepts for reconceiving the self in a way that acknowledges both the autonomy and embeddedness of consciousness. His argument begins with Zahavi's defence of a minimal, pre-reflective self – an embodied form of self-awareness that precedes social attribution – and challenges the tendency within micro-sociology and intersubjectivity theory to subordinate the other to the self, or vice versa. From Luhmann's standpoint, the self/other distinction is not hierarchical but paradoxical, and it is best understood as a horizon of meaning within the structural coupling of psychic and social systems. Morales' article advances a systemic interpretation of the minimal self, framing it as an operation of a psychic system. At the same time, the social self is theorised through interpenetration, whereby social systems structurally inform the formation and self-observation of psychic systems, without reducing one to the other. In so doing, this article offers a multidimensional, non-hierarchical theory of the self, in which the opposition between individual and society is replaced by the systemic distinction between system and environment. It shows how Luhmann's abstract framework can be enriched by phenomenological insights, and vice versa, providing a new model for theorising subjectivity in contexts where identity is increasingly mediated by digital and communicative complexity.

Marlene Müller-Brandeck's (2025) article 'Privilege and Discrimination in Identity Politics: "Guiding Distinctions" as a Tool for Analyzing Social Inequality' frames the concept of guiding distinctions as a powerful analytical tool for understanding the evolution of discourses on social inequality. It traces a historical and semantic shift from the classical Marxist focus on the capital/labour distinction towards the contemporary dominance of the privilege/discrimination distinction in identity politics. Müller-Brandeck

develops a formalised framework for identifying guiding distinctions and applies it to analyse autobiographical texts from the early 20th-century labour movement, feminist writings from the 1970s and 1980s, and contemporary autosociobiographies shaped by identity-political concerns. The key insight here is that identity politics does not merely broaden the range of social inequalities under scrutiny but also redefines the very semantics of inequality. While the capital/labour distinction articulated an antagonistic class structure oriented towards revolutionary struggle, the privilege/discrimination distinction underpins what the author calls a semantics of enlightenment. This shift reframes social conflict not as systemic confrontation, but as a moral-educational project in which the privileged are called upon to become aware of and relinquish their advantages. As a consequence, the article demonstrates how this new guiding distinction enables a high-resolution, intersectional and affectively charged mode of observing social inequality. It also shows how subtle microaggressions become legible as structural violence, and how discrimination is rendered as both ubiquitous and often imperceptible to those who benefit from it. This reconceptualisation is supported by a rich corpus of literature and personal testimonies that illustrate how identity-based inequalities are experienced, narrated and politicised. Original in both its theoretical architecture and empirical grounding, the article contributes to the sociology of inequality by clarifying how changes in guiding distinctions transform the ways societies perceive, represent and address injustice. It invites renewed critical reflection on the semantics of political struggle in contemporary society.

Titled 'Guiding distinctions of social theory: Results from two online brainstormings and one quantitative analysis of the ISA Books of the XX Century corpus', the article by Steffen Roth, Steve Watson, Sören Möller, Lars Clausen, Krešimir Žažar, Harry Dahms, Augusto Sales and Vincent Lien (2025) revisits one of the most underexamined, yet structurally central elements of social theory: guiding distinctions. Drawing on two online brainstormings and a big analysis of the most influential sociological groundworks as listed in the International Sociological Association's 'Books of the XX Century' ranking, the authors identify hundreds of such distinctions – ranging from the canonical (structure/agency, system/environment) to the paradigmatic (capitalism/socialism, analogue/digital). They then develop an innovative typology that distinguishes between true and false distinctions, based on whether a distinction is both mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. False distinctions – of which the majority fall short on at least one criterion – are framed as inherently analogue, whereas true distinctions are treated as digital. The article's main theoretical move is to argue that social theory, in order to catch up with the ongoing digital transformation of society, must undergo its own digital transformation. This requires translating analogue (false) distinctions into digital (true) ones and, by extension, rendering social theories compatible with formalised, recursive and programmable structures. In making this argument, Roth et al. not only diagnose the epistemological lag of analogue theory in a digital age but also offer a constructive programme for developing digital social theories and future theory platforms capable of debugging and validating sociological propositions. In so doing, this article calls for sociologists to take distinctions seriously – not just as conceptual tools, but as building blocks of a new digital epistemology. It proposes a framework for future theory development that is both post-paradigmatic and computationally aware, thus laying the groundwork for a new phase in the evolution of the discipline.

Expanding architectures of distinctions

Against the backdrop of the preceding contributions and reflections, it is evident that social theorising must carefully navigate between the clarity provided by structured architectures of distinctions and the risk inherent in an over-reliance on limited or fixed sets of distinctions. As the cases of Parsons and Bourdieu exemplify, even theoretically sophisticated frameworks may inadvertently become skewed windows to the world when they excessively prioritise certain distinctions at the expense of others. Parsons' rigid adherence to the AGIL matrix illustrates how an ostensibly comprehensive framework can inadvertently marginalise critical self-reflection and obscure the contingency of its observational stance.

Yet, the issue extends beyond mere numerical proliferation or pluralisation of distinctions. Even when theorists consciously engage diverse sets of distinctions, the question of their analytical quality remains paramount. Not all distinctions are equally productive; some enhance theoretical clarity and empirical insight, while others import conceptual biases or categorical confusions that subtly yet significantly constrain our perspectives on the social world.

A prominent example illustrating the pitfalls associated with the latter type of distinctions can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984: 128f) 'space of social positions', which he outlines using his famous matrix made of two distinctions: a horizontal axis distinguishing between cultural and economic capital, and a vertical axis that differentiates between lower and higher total mounts of either capital. On closer inspection, Bourdieu's use of these distinctions proves problematic in at least two respects.

First, positioning economic and cultural capital as mutually exclusive dimensions implies that economic processes themselves do not constitute a subset of cultural phenomena. This artificial separation of culture and economy may be challenged not only with reference to works by Karl Polanyi (1944), Max Weber (1930), or Viviane Zelizer (1997), but also Niklas Luhmann's (2012, 2013); social systems theory, according to which modern society is no longer defined in terms of a distinction between high versus low culture, but by a culture of functional differentiation, within which the economy constitutes just one among multiple social domains or 'function systems', such as politics, education, art, or religion. In this sense, economy and culture are no mutually exclusive concepts, as the economy is one aspect of culture rather than its antagonist. Hence, the economy/culture distinction qualifies as 'false distinction' as defined by Roth et al. (2025b). As a result of the application of this false distinction, the economy is not only artificially opposed to all other social domains, but also tacitly overemphasised, while all other domains are undervalued insofar as they are subsumed into a negatively defined residual category.

Second, Bourdieu's application of the originally economic metaphor of 'capital' to the sphere of culture has drawn sustained critique for introducing an economistic logic into non-economic domains. Scholars such as Jeffrey Alexander (1995) or Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) have argued that this conceptual move implicitly economises culture, thus undermining precisely the separation that Bourdieu seeks to maintain. In other words, by imposing economic reasoning onto 'cultural' practices, Bourdieu unintentionally collapses his own distinction, thus clearly demonstrating that it is a false one.

Consequently, instead of providing a supposedly neutral tool for social theorising, Bourdieu's conceptual architecture is tacitly biased towards an economy-centric worldview.

Again, these considerations are not intended to diminish Bourdieu's exceptional level of theoretical creativity or the general utility of matrices for mapping the social world; rather, they highlight that the proper choice of distinctions is as important as is the choice of proper distinctions.

Yet another insight we can derive from a distinctionist reading of Bourdieu's matrix is that cooccurrences of false binary distinctions (like economy versus culture) with truly analogue, gradational distinctions (such as relative capital volume or intensity) call for more systematic explorations of how different types of distinctions can be correctly translated into one another.

To advance this project, future research must address the practical and conceptual challenges involved in translating analogue (false or fuzzy) distinctions into digital (true and binary) ones (see Roth, 2019; Roth, 2025; Roth et al., 2025a). This task calls for methodological support beyond traditional sociological reasoning. One promising avenue lies in exploring analogies and models from informatics and systems engineering, particularly those concerned with analogue-to-digital conversion (ADC). In engineering, digitalisation entails not merely encoding values in binary form, but also designing converters that can reliably translate continuous, often ambiguous real-world inputs into discrete outputs that are usable within computational systems. Here, 'reliability' refers to the capacity to produce stable, repeatable distinctions that allow machines to process information and act upon it without ambiguity or the need for interpretive judgement.

This line of inquiry could lead towards the conceptual development of sociological digital logic. If true distinctions are understood as binary operators, then the next step is to explore how such true distinctions – or false distinctions once translated into true ones – can be strategically combined. Here, inspiration may be drawn from logic gates, the fundamental building blocks of computational systems. Logic gates do not operate in isolation; their power lies in the way they are networked to perform complex operations through the systematic linking of simple operations (e.g. AND, OR, NOT). Similarly, in a future architecture of digital social theory, the composition of distinctions into higher-order patterns may allow for new forms of observation, emulation and theory-building. In this sense, the digital transformation of social theory is not only a matter of upgrading conceptual clarity but also of programming the guiding distinctions of social theory into logically tractable formats. This transformation may prove to be an update that social theorising critically requires to meet the complexity of contemporary society.

Conclusion: distinctions, paradox and the post-/digital horizon of social theory

This special issue has gathered a range of compelling contributions that each, in their own way, make visible how the architecture of guiding distinctions continues to shape – and reshape – the contours of sociological theory. Whether they appear as foundational oppositions, latent tensions, or convolutes of seemingly intersecting categories, distinctions are

not auxiliary to theorising. They are, as Luhmann (2012) insists, the very operations through which observation becomes possible.

Yet as several of the articles suggest – and as a reflexive reading of Spencer Brown (1979) and Luhmann (2012, 2013) reinforces – distinctions are not fixed coordinates in a logical grid. They are operations that involve selection, exclusion and self-reference. To draw a distinction is to carve a difference into an otherwise undifferentiated field, but this act is never innocent. It entails a blind spot: what is marked is always accompanied by what is unmarked, and what is rendered observable is shadowed by the conditions of its own invisibility.

It is within this epistemological framework that we must reconsider the editorial claim that social theory should translate 'analogue' distinctions – seen as imprecise or non-exhaustive – into 'digital' or binary distinctions that are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive (Roth et al., 2025b). This digital transformation offers an attractive vision of theoretical clarity, and we acknowledge its heuristic value, especially in advancing more systematic and programmable theory frameworks. However, we also see the need to caution against unreflected over-identifications of digitality with truth.

From the standpoint of autopoiesis, every system constitutes itself through recursive operations that distinguish itself from environment – yet in doing so, the system remains structurally coupled with what it excludes (Luhmann, 2012; Cadena, 2025). The guiding distinction is not a neutral cut between two fully separable domains, but a contingent and paradoxical act of form, always entangled with its own conditions of possibility. The distinction between 'true' and 'false' distinctions may itself be a 'first lie' (Roth, 2024), and thus one of guiding distinctions that require critical scrutiny (Becerra, 2025; Morales, 2025).

This critique gains further urgency when considered in historical and technological context. The shift from analogue to digital systems has been a dominant motif of late modernity, shaping epistemologies in both the natural and social sciences (Ossewaarde, 2019; Roth, 2019; Roth et al., 2019). But we are now witnessing the emergence of what some consider post-digital logics – that is, forms of computation and cognition that operate beyond binary code. Quantum computing, with its principles of superposition and entanglement, is often thought to defy the basic assumptions of digital exclusivity. Neural networks process vast gradients of probabilistic inference, generating outputs not through discrete logical gates but through distributed, emergent pattern recognition. These models do not 'resolve' ambiguity; rather, they seem to inhabit it.

In light of this, we argue for a post-/digital orientation to social theorising that seeks to understand how analogue distinctions (binary, fuzzy, recursive, embodied, intersectional) emerge in different epistemic, technological and institutional contexts (Fordahl, 2025; Laflamme, 2025; Müller-Brandeck, 2025) and can be translated into one another (Roth, 2019). The task is not to decide once and for all what counts as a 'valid' distinction, but to explore the conditions under which distinctions qualify as true or false – or become socially productive in other ways.

This orientation invites us to think of guiding distinctions not as static inputs to be coded into systems, but as dynamic, context-sensitive operations that evolve in relation to the systems that draw them. It calls for a mode of theorising that is not only formal or logical but also aware of its own operations (Alexander, 1995; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

We do not suggest abandoning the project of formalisation or digital abstraction. Rather, we propose that these be seen as tools within a wider ecology of theoretical practice – an ecology in which distinctions are not just sharpened but also interrogated, where paradox is not a problem to be solved but a basic condition of observation.

In this spirit, the contributions collected here offer not only distinct perspectives on guiding distinctions, but also distinct orientations to the project of theory itself. Together, they chart a path beyond fixed schemas – towards a form of theorising that is attuned to difference, open to paradox and responsive to the complex, hybrid environments in which observation, communication and reflection now unfold.

Funding

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Résumé

Cet article présente et situe le concept de distinctions directrices en tant que catégorie fondamentale et pourtant peu étudiée de la théorie sociologique. À partir de la théorie des systèmes sociaux et du calcul des indications, nous soutenons que les distinctions ne sont pas simplement des oppositions heuristiques, mais des sélections opérationnelles qui rendent observable le monde social. Tandis que les dichotomies classiques, telles que celles faites entre structure et agence ou entre individu et société, configurent depuis longtemps le discours sociologique, le rôle des distinctions binaires dans la transformation numérique de la société incite à prêter une attention accrue à la façon dont les distinctions fonctionnent, ce qu'elles révèlent et ce qu'elles cachent. L'article sert à la fois d'énoncé théorique et d'introduction au numéro spécial intitulé « Guiding Distinctions of Social Theory: Analogue Guidelines or Digital Transformers? ». Dans cet article, nous proposons une approche de la conception théorique sensible aux distinctions, centrée sur la différence entre vraies et fausses distinctions et sur la traduction des distinctions analogiques (fausses) en distinctions numériques (vraies). Sur la base d'exemples tirés de Parsons, de Bourdieu et de recherches récentes dans le

domaine de la théorie des systèmes, l'article analyse les implications de cette approche pour élaborer des architectures théoriques plus robustes. Nous aboutissons à la conclusion que la transformation numérique de la société doit s'accompagner d'une transformation numérique correspondante de la théorisation sociale. Parallèlement, nous mettons en garde contre l'adoption sans critique de schémas binaires, en soulignant la nature paradoxale, récursive et dépendante du contexte de toutes les distinctions.

Mots-clés
conception théorique, conversion analogique-numérique, paradoxe, transformation numérique

Resumen
Este artículo introduce y sitúa el concepto de distinciones directrices como una categoría fundamental, aunque poco explorada, en la teoría sociológica. Partiendo de la teoría de sistemas sociales y el cálculo de indicaciones, se argumenta que las distinciones no son meras oposiciones heurísticas, sino selecciones operativas que hacen observable el mundo social. Si bien las dicotomías clásicas como estructura/agencia o individuo/sociedad han moldeado el discurso sociológico desde hace mucho tiempo, el papel de las distinciones binarias en la transformación digital de la sociedad exige prestar una atención renovada a cómo funcionan las distinciones, qué revelan y qué ocultan. El artículo sirve tanto como enunciado teórico como introducción al número especial 'Guiding Distinctions of Social Theory: Analogue Guidelines or Digital Transformers?'. El artículo propone un enfoque sensible a las distinciones para el diseño teórico, centrado en la diferencia entre distinciones verdaderas y falsas y en la traducción de distinciones analógicas (falsas) a digitales (verdaderas). Basándose en ejemplos de Parsons, Bourdieu y en investigaciones recientes sobre teoría de sistemas, el artículo explora las implicaciones de este enfoque para la construcción de arquitecturas teóricas más robustas. Concluye que la transformación digital de la sociedad debe ir acompañada de una transformación digital acorde de la teorización social. Al mismo tiempo, advierte contra la adopción acrítica de esquemas binarios, enfatizando la naturaleza paradójica, recursiva y dependiente del contexto de todas las distinciones.

Palabras clave
conversión de analógico a digital, diseño teórico, paradoja, transformación digital