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Is social theory losing its relevance? A call for social impact and cocreation from dialogic sociology

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Abstract

Currently, the interest in and use of social theory by policy-makers, organizations, and citizens have decreased worldwide. While excellent research focuses on the social influences of social theory and teaching methods, the research often neglects the link between social theory and contemporary societal needs. This gap is addressed by examining the social impact and effects on the motivation for using dialogic theory, which emphasizes dialog and consensus building. Following a communicative methodology approach, this study includes nine communicative interviews and three participatory observations: two in seminars with readers of *The Dialogic Society* (TDS) ("*duihuashehui* (《对话社会》)") by Flecha, and one in an online, international debate about the book. The findings reveal a fourfold impact: First, increased motivation for sociology and social theory; second, deeper comprehension of the theory; third, potential for transforming social contexts; and fourth a shift toward cocreation and social impact. This study highlights key aspects of dialogic theory to address contemporary needs and to bridge the gap between theory and practice to revitalize the field of social theory in diverse contexts, highlighting the way the dialogic theory contributes and could contribute to different countries, including China. In doing so, this study helps advance the development of an independent knowledge system in philosophy and social science in China, which China proposed in 2024.

Keywords: Dialogic sociology, Dialogic society, Social theory, Social impact, Cocreation

Introduction

Some Western authors publishing theory—such as Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens—appear to be losing relevance in the scientific community, as reflected in a decline in their citation numbers on the Web of Science between 2023 and 2024. For example, citations for Habermas decreased from 129 in 2023 to 121 in 2024; Foucault's citations dropped from 37 in 2023 to 25 in 2024; and Giddens saw a decline from 33 in 2023 to 22 in 2024. This trend aligns with the increasing emphasis on “social impact” in recent years in the international scientific community, which prioritizes

contributions from social sciences to advance citizenship and address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Reflections on why certain social theories have lost their relevance

This paper reflects on some factors that have caused some social theories to lose their relevance. First, the social theoretical works that try to analyze in depth how society works appear less frequently and are even less frequently used by either researchers or society (Bruhn 2001). This factor can be corroborated by looking at the most read titles in sociology or theory published over the last twenty years: None of them attempt to unravel all of the mechanisms that explain human action and interaction (Desmond 2016; Wilkerson 2020; Gladwell 2019; Putnam 2020; Pinker 2011). Instead, many of the most recently published works either examine or develop previous theoretical contributions (Rosenfeldt 2024; Döllinger 2024; Xie 2023; Zhao and Chen 2019) or develop new approximations to understand specific aspects of social reality (Lahire 2020; Hanieh and Ziadah 2023; Song 2022), in line with what Robert K. Merton (1968) defined as middle-range theories (Stolz 2023; Crothers 2024). However, the relevance of theoretical contributions hinges on their alignment with two key criteria: societal relevance and the advancement of knowledge in a manner that responds to established social goals (Poppy 2015). In the absence of either criterion, a contribution's long-term value diminishes.

Second, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a single individual to produce a theory that encompasses all social mechanisms, builds on the theoretical knowledge already produced and advances from it to create new understandings. This phenomenon explains how, even if the traditional practices in the social sciences and humanities have been for scientists to individually sign most works (Kuld and O'Hagan 2018), over the past 30 years, coauthorship in these fields has substantially increased (Ossenblok et al. 2014; Patania et al. 2017). This shift in research in the social sciences and humanities aligns them better with the natural and life sciences, where projects in which multiple scientists work together as a team have been the standard practice for longer (Henriksen 2016). Indeed, researcher collaborations not only positively affect productivity (Jeong et al. 2011) but also increases researcher influence (Barjak 2006). In the case of sociology, international collaboration between sociologists has been found to foster productivity (Akbaritabar et al. 2018).

Third, the inclusion of diverse voices has often been neglected in social theory. For example, fewer women and minority group authors are recognized for their contributions to the field (Isaksson 2020; Munté et al. 2011). Whereas this negligence is common in most disciplines, these differences are especially prominent in the social sciences (Paul-Hus et al. 2019). A very clear example of this is that of Jane Addams. She made key contributions to the field of sociology, she was among the founding scholars of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago; and the relevance of her work was recognized by her peers at the time, including John Dewey (1983). However, she is rarely considered among the founders of sociology, and many times, she has unfairly been dismissed as "just" being a social worker (Deegan 2017), stressing a nonexistent incompatibility between elaborating theory and practicing it. Another example of this neglect can be seen in the list elaborated in 1998 in the Montreal World Congress of Sociology (ISA,

Table 1 The list of the ten most influential books in sociology launched during the 16th ESA Conference in 2024.

Title of the book	Author(s)
Twenty Years at Hull House	Jane Addams
Women and Social Transformation	Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Judith Butler, Lidia Puigvert
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste	Pierre Bourdieu
The Second Sex	Simone de Beauvoir
Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity	Judith Butler
The Dialogic Society. The sociology scientists and citizens like and use	Ramon Flecha
Capital: A Critique of Political Economy	Karl Marx
The Sociological Imagination	Charles Wright Mills
Economy and Society	Max Weber
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism	Max Weber

n.d.), in which the participants chose what they considered to be the most important works in social theory: Most of them are the works of Western, white, men.

Fourth, some of these social theories have neglected citizens’ voices as cocreation agents in the scientific knowledge creation process. However, currently, citizens worldwide demand new ways of incorporating their voices in the comprehension of their realities and an increasing use of dialog and dialogic mechanisms in the definition of solutions to the problems that affect them (Torras-Gómez, et al. 2019). Societies need cocreated scientific knowledge to allow a wide diversity of social actors (policy-makers, organizations and citizens) to address these societal challenges. In Europe, research programs have already incorporated this claim in their program design, incorporating new requirements of social impact and cocreation (Flecha et al. 2022).

As a clear example of the dialogic turn in societies and of the international relevance of the Dialogic Society (TDS), a survey was launched during the 16th European Sociological Association (ESA) Conference in 2024, to replicate the 1998 Montreal initiative to elaborate a list of the ten most influential books in sociology¹ (see Table 1), launched with the same conditions as the survey taken during the ISA Conference of Montreal. In 2024, the survey was conducted only among the conference participants, most of whom were sociologists from European countries. The resulting list included four female authors, as opposed to the 1998 survey, which included only male authors. Additionally, the more valued books indicated a great advancement in sociology toward social theories which respond to the dialogic turn in societies and that are oriented to social impact, especially given the fact that the book of *The Dialogic Society* (Flecha 2022) was on the list (Pulido 2024).

A fifth factor that some social sciences and theories have not often considered is interdisciplinarity. Although sociology may share areas of inquiry with other disciplines, some of those areas have remained only in the potential interdisciplinarity stage (Rydze-wski 2021). This approach does not respond to current social needs. Indeed, the challenges posed by the twenty-first century require the integration of both life and social

¹ This action emerged from Project Visibles, launched by a professor in the Department of Sociology of the University of Granada. This project was situated to overcome the invisibility of women sociologists.

sciences. Ensuring the well-being of Earth's inhabitants by 2050 demands a collaborative effort among science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, on the one hand, and social sciences—including law, political science, sociology, and psychology (Sacchi et al. 2021)—on the other hand. Scientific studies highlight the potential of collaborative science. Facilitating access to global resources for all researchers empowers international teams to work together and address humanity's most pressing problems (Hall et al. 2008; Soler-Gallart 2015). Moreover, research suggests that interdisciplinarity helps improve methods (Morss et al. 2021), fosters a better understanding of human nature (Ledford 2015) and improves social outcomes (Larivière, Haustein, and Börner 2015). Fortunately, social sciences are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary as they try to respond to social challenges through joint teams of scientists with different backgrounds (Buyalskaya et al. 2021).

Finally, one key factor that contributes to the loss of relevance of some Western social theories is their lack of social impact. As the European Commission's Expert Report "Monitoring the Impact of EU Framework Programmes" (Flecha, Radauer, and van den Besselaar 2018) defines it, social impact refers to concrete improvements in people's lives driven by the application of research outcomes. This demand for social impact is increasingly echoed by both governments and society, reflecting a desire to ensure that research aligns with pressing societal needs and goals. Achieving a social impact requires not only collaboration among diverse scientific disciplines but also cocreation processes with communities, stakeholders, and citizens. Theory or research that responds solely to theorists and researchers' interests, neglecting the most pressing challenges faced by citizens, ultimately fails to align with either the contemporary objectives of science (Poppy 2015) or well-established social goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Marcone 2022). Fulfilling these demands necessitates not only scientific expertise but also the creation of egalitarian spaces for dialog. Such spaces, grounded in democratic values, foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Social theory can play a crucial role in this endeavor by providing the theoretical knowledge base for cocreation in research—a key element for maximizing social impact—as well as the know-how for orienting research to social impact. In this context, the theory of dialogic society (Flecha et al. 2022) appears particularly relevant for addressing this challenge. The theory emphasizes dialog and consensus building, embraces diverse perspectives, and ultimately aims to improve the lives of citizens. The international relevance of TDS and its author is well proven by the fact that the author ranks first in the scientific international ranking of social impact.

Emerging dialogic trends in western social theory

The theory of dialogic society responds to the increasing need to develop social theories that can demonstrate, through validated scientific evidence that they are achieving social impact. As mentioned in previous section, achieving such an impact requires extensive interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers from diverse fields, along with continual dialog with various sectors of society (Flecha et al. 2018; Flecha 2022).

Importantly, this dialogic and impact-oriented approach is not limited to a single region; rather, it is increasingly reflected in contributions from diverse geographical and cultural settings. For example, Hongzhi Xu and Tianyi Wang (2023) advocate for

Chinese social theory to emphasize the subjectivity of citizens in theoretical constructions, a perspective that aligns with the cocreation and social impact focus of this new strand of Western theory.

In New Zealand, Wolf Amanda (2016) analyzed dialogic engagements to impact and orient policy-making in the face of environmental challenges. Specifically, she reflected on the characteristics of dialogs among citizens and scientists, understanding dialog as a collective learning experience, and incorporating in this understanding Ramon Flecha and Marta Soler's (2014) contribution of the concrete way through which the theory of dialogic society is specified in the research process: the communicative methodology. Through the communicative methodology, scientific knowledge is put into dialog with the knowledge of people from communities and institutions to analyze successful actions in different fields of society and to help recreate these successful actions in different contexts through collaboration among scientists and the public (Wolf 2016).

This focus on the need for sociology to contribute to the improvements of societies recovers the original sense of sociology worldwide as a discipline: "When citizens decided to govern themselves, new sciences were created that allowed them to have a deeper knowledge of themselves so that they and their representatives could make informed decisions" (Flecha et al. 2022: 459).

The theory of Dialogic Society clearly exemplifies this influential trend in social theory. Through its continual engagement with various sciences, governments, and diverse social sectors, it plays a pivotal role in enriching sociology's perspectives and methodologies. Its inclusive approach fosters collaboration with citizens and scientists from different fields, including those in the natural sciences, to ensure that research is democratized and generates tangible social improvements (Flecha et al. 2022).

Indeed, Flecha's theory represents a further step regarding other theories similar to dialogic theory, such as Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984) or Touraine's claim of sociological intervention (Touraine 1981). In his theory of communicative action, Habermas used Austin's linguistic theory of speech acts to construct a sociological analysis of power and validity. However, Habermas focused on the linguistic dimension of speech acts, misunderstanding some of John Searle's and John Langshaw Austin's concepts, as Flecha explains in *The Dialogic Society* (2022), and Habermas did not consider other dimensions of language, such as eye movements or body language, which are incorporated into the communicative acts developed by the theory of Dialogic Society. With the sociological intervention method, Alain Touraine focused on his attention on the study, from the researcher's perspective, of collective behaviors through which forms of social organizations and institutional processes are produced as a result of social conflicts over the control and appropriation of cultural patterns, but Touraine conceptualized neither the possibilities of cocreation nor the achievement of social impact from social theory and research as the theory of Dialogic Society does.

Tracing the evolution of Chinese sociology: from western roots to indigenous innovation

Sociology was introduced to China from the West in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries (Li 2019), with its theoretical frameworks largely rooted in some Western social theories (Xie 2023; Zhao and Chen 2019). Early sociologists such as Wenzao Wu, Kaidao Yang, and Shilian Xu advocated for the "Sinicization of sociology" as far back as

the 1930s, aiming to localize sociological research to better reflect China's unique social and cultural contexts (Li 2020). Sociology thus became the earliest and most dedicated discipline in China's social sciences to pursue localized research.

Before sociology's abolition in 1952, various Western theories had already entered Chinese academic circles, including Spencer's social evolution, Durkheim's methodology, Malinowski's functional anthropology, and the Chicago School's community research (Xie 2017). However, the abolition of sociology stalled the translation and study of these works, halting the discipline's development (Xiao and Guo 2019; Xie 2017). After sociology was reinstated in 1979, translating and studying Western social theories resurged, which revitalized sociological research in China (Xie 2017; Xiao and Guo 2019). Simultaneously, Chinese researchers began reconstructing and developing "Chinese social theory" to address China's unique social dynamics (Xiao and Guo 2019).

One of the most renowned contributions to Chinese sociology is Xiaotong Fei's "differential mode of association" ("*chaxugeju*(差序格局)"), introduced in his 1948 *From the Soil* (Fei 1948). This theory describes social relationships in China as concentric circles radiating from an individual's core, reflecting the country's relational and hierarchical social structure. Hangsheng Zheng further advanced Chinese sociology by introducing five key theories—social operation, social transformation, disciplinary localization, social interconstruction, and practice structure—laying the foundation for a distinctly Chinese sociological framework (Huang and Huan 2023; Li and Hong 2020; Xie 2017).

Key academic contributions have also emerged in the study of early Chinese sociology, including Mingmo Han's *History of Chinese Sociology* ("*zhongguoshehuixueshi*(中国社会学史)") (1987), Yabin Yang's *Modern Chinese Sociology* (2001), Ming Yan's *A Discipline and an Era: Sociology in China* ("*yimenxuekeyuyigeshidai:shehuixuezaizhongguo*(一门学科与一个时代:社会学在中国)") (2004), and Shaojie Liu's *The Origin and Expansion of Chinese Sociology* ("*zhongguoshehuixuedefaduananyukuoizhan*(中国社会学的发端与扩展)") (2007). The ideas of early Chinese sociologists—such as Shuming Liang, Fu Yan, Quentin Pan, Xiaotong Fei, Xujing Chen, Tung-tsu Chu, Benwen Sun, Wen-tsao Wu, Jinghan Li, and Jingyao Yan—along with their associated theories and theoretical implications have increasingly attracted attention and research (Xie 2017).

Despite these efforts, Chinese sociology still relies heavily on some Western frameworks, such as theories of social stratification, mobility, and relative deprivation (Xie 2023). Original theories developed by Chinese scholars remain rare and are often adaptations of Western ideas, such as the Sinicization of Marxism and neo-Weberian approaches to social stratification (Xie 2023; Zheng and Chen 2024; Yu 2019). Among Western theories, Marxism has the most significant influence, aligning closely with China's socialist framework and shaping contemporary research in politics, culture, and social life. It holds a central and unparalleled position as the foremost research field within contemporary Chinese humanities and social sciences (Wang and Peters 2023). Similarly, Ulrich Beck's theory of individualization (Beck 2016), which was originally formulated to explain neoliberal practices in the West, was adapted by Yunxiang Yan (2010) to analyze various aspects of contemporary Chinese society, such as family structure, internal migration, and struggles for rights (Qi 2016).

The reliance on some Western theories has sparked debates about the localization of sociology in China. Some scholars argue that these Western frameworks cannot fully

capture the complexities of China's social realities, advocating for theoretical innovations rooted in indigenous knowledge and traditions (Chen 2024; Liu 2025). Others stress the importance of universal social science concepts and methodologies, advocating for their integration to enhance academic rigor and international collaboration (Fan 2024). These debates highlight the ongoing tensions between adopting global principles and preserving cultural specificity in Chinese sociology.

Bridging theory and impact

Similarly, understanding the recent development of some Western social theories has become crucial. This understanding could contribute to the development of uniquely Chinese sociological theories—a long-standing goal for many Chinese sociological theorists (Xie 2017). It also aligns with the broader objective of “accelerating the construction of an independent philosophical and social science knowledge system in China” (Gao 2022).

This article focuses especially on specifying the ways in which TDS (Flecha 2022) is increasingly relevant to different social actors and in different and diverse contexts and countries. Specifically, this article aims to show, first, how the theory of dialogic society overcomes the previous limitations of some Western social theories, and second, how reading and discussing social theory aimed at social impact, such as TDS, increases the motivation for social theory and sociology, allows for a deeper comprehension of social theory, contributes to the transformation of diverse social contexts, and orients the sociological profession to social impact and cocreation. For these reasons, the theory of dialogic society contributes to or could contribute to different countries, including China, which is in the process of “accelerating the construction of an independent philosophical and social science knowledge system”.

To that end, this paper analyses the outcomes of reading and debating *The Dialogic Society* by Flecha (2022), which has been translated into Chinese, among other languages. This book offers a theoretical framework from dialogic sociology that addresses contemporary social demands. It has garnered over 40,000 downloads, reflecting its widespread recognition. Moreover, the book emerges from a cocreation process involving researchers from diverse disciplines, professionals, policy-makers, and citizens, all of whom represent various gender identities, cultural backgrounds, and religious affiliations. Specifically, this paper shows how reading and discussing social theory aimed at social impact increases the motivation for social theory and sociology, allows for a deeper comprehension of social theory, helps transform diverse social contexts, and orients the sociological profession to social impact and cocreation, highlighting how dialogic theory contributes to and could contribute to different countries, including China.

The contributions of this paper also align requirements from sociology globally to improve citizens' lives and advance the development of social theory in diverse contexts with this dialogic approach, overcoming the limitations of some Western social theories.

Method

Design

This qualitative research follows a communicative methodology (CM) approach. This design allows researchers to establish an egalitarian dialog with participants, in which

Table 2 Participant profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Location	Profile
Clàudia	Female	26	Spain	PhD candidate in Education
Idoia	Female	30	USA	PhD candidate in Curriculum & Instruction
Queralt	Female	49	Spain	Vocational Education Teacher
Julianna	Female	32	Spain	Sociology professor and researcher
Neret	Female	33	Spain	Sociology professor and researcher
Sílvia	Female	39	Spain	Sociology professor and researcher
Maria	Female	20	Spain	Criminology student, class seminar participant
Iñaki	Male	24	Spain	PhD candidate in Sociology, participant in the Raimon Bonal Seminar
Miquel	Male	71	Spain	Sociology professional, participant of the Raimon Bonal Seminar

Table 3 Participant profiles

Name	Gender	Location	Profile
Xiaofang	Female	China	Young scholar
Susanne	Female	Germany	Professor of Adult Education/Continuing Education
Bernardo	Male	Brazil	Professor of the Bachelor's Degree in Intercultural Indigenous Education
Anna	Female	Ghana	Predoctoral researcher
Susan	Female	Pakistan	Predoctoral researcher

the former provides scientific evidence and the latter provide their everyday knowledge and experience. This dialog results in the cocreation of new knowledge that emerges in the dialog and that surpasses the knowledge that would result from considering both sides separately. Similarly, CM guarantees that research recommendations arise from collaborative dialog among researchers, members of vulnerable groups, educators, policy-makers, employers, professionals, and other community members. Moreover, the dialog between researchers and social actors with a communicative approach is committed to identifying and addressing solutions to social problems (Gómez et al. 2011). Scientific research using this approach has been proven to orient research results to social impact (Girbes et al. 2022; Roca et al. 2022; Soler-Gallart and Flecha 2022), including that aimed at assessing the social impact of a book (Gómez et al. 2022).

Participants

Fourteen participants were included in the research. These participants had different profiles, from sociology professors and researchers to professionals and university students. However, they had all read and discussed the book *The Dialogic Society* (TDS), by Flecha (2022). The participants listed in Table 3 joined an online seminar, and therefore, their ages could not be collected. For this reason, the participant profiles are presented separately in Table 2 and Table 3, as follows:

Procedures

All of the participants were informed about the objectives of the research. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and altruistic and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without having to provide a reason. All of the participants agreed to join under these conditions. Therefore, this research followed the ethical criteria required for qualitative studies.

The data were gathered via two techniques: communicative interviews and the participatory observation of seminars. With respect to the first, nine participants were interviewed following the communicative approach. Under this framework, an egalitarian dialog was established in which the participants were prompted to share their views and experiences reading and debating TDS. The communicative interviews took place between March and May 2024, either face-to-face or via Zoom, and all of the interviews were audio-recorded for the analysis. None of the interviews exceeded 15 min.

The participatory observations of two seminars titled “With the book in hand” and of one international, online debate on *The Dialogic Society* constituted the second data-gathering technique. In the seminars “With the book in hand”, the participants directly read a book, in this case TDS, and reflect on it in an open and democratic dialog in which the participants share excerpts from the book and comment on them. In these dialogs, new knowledge is cocreated that goes beyond individual understandings of the work (Díez-Palomar et al. 2022). The first seminar was held during a criminology degree class, which was part of the research methods course of a Spanish university and was attended by 67 20-year students. The second seminar, the Raimon Bonal seminar, is devoted to the dialogic debate of scientific works. It is promoted by the Sociological Theory group of the Catalan Sociological Association; it takes place once a month, and participation is open.

To gather the data for these two seminars, researchers joined the debate, either in the role of participants or as professors moderating the session. For the class setting, notes were collected on the seminar dialog, whereas the Raimon Bonal seminar was audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

The international debate on *The Dialogic Society* was held by an online seminar on the Zoom platform and recorded with the agreement of the participants. This study analyses the contributions of the speakers to this seminar and includes some relevant quotes from them with their formal consent.

Data analysis

The recordings of one seminar and the interviews were transcribed. Together with the notes taken during the other seminar, these materials were analyzed line-by-line by three researchers on the team. Four categories were established to code the data gathered. In cases of discrepancies, a consensus was reached between the researchers through dialog. Table 4 presents the analyzed categories:

Table 4 Categories of analysis

Category	Definition
Increased motivation for sociology and social theory	References to a newfound or increased interest in sociology and/or the use of social theory
Deeper comprehension of social theory	Mentioning of improved understandability or knowledge increase
Transformation of diverse social contexts	Identification of improvements in the contexts of the participants as a result of implementing social theory
Orientation of the sociological profession to social impact and cocreation	Evidence of a shift in how the profession is conducted, with more importance given to dialog with diverse stakeholders and social improvement

Results

The dialogic reading and discussion of the book *The Dialogic Society* has been shown to elicit four key aspects among readers: First, an increased motivation for sociology and social theory; second, a deeper comprehension of social theory; third, the transformation of diverse social contexts through the implementation of such theory; and fourth, the orientation of the sociological profession to social impact and cocreation.

Increased motivation for sociology and social theory

The interviewed readers, including students ranging from undergraduate to PhD candidates, explained that reading TDS increased their motivation for the field of study. In this sense, the participants coincided in noting that the book revealed previously unknown aspects of sociological theory to them, fostering newfound enthusiasm and motivation for the subject:

“Upon reading Ramon Flecha’s text about her [Jane Addams], I realized that despite having taken a sociology course, I had never heard the name Jane Addams, while names such as Durkheim and Weber have been familiar to me for years across various subjects. It was then that I decided to take an interest in her, and upon searching for her, the vast majority of pages describe her as a feminist social worker/pioneer of social work, with few describing her as a sociologist, even though she was one of the founders. Precisely this distinction between sociology and social work is one of the factors that some men have used to make her work and contributions to sociology invisible.” (Maria)

“As an example, I think of myself, what I was saying, that the examples that are described that transform the society are people from very different fields and not all those who are shown are Nobel laureates or academics. I think it serves very well to motivate all the people who read it, even if they are not Nobel laureates or academics.” (Clàudia)

This same motivation can be found in some young scholars, as explained in this quote from a Chinese scholar who participated in the dialogic gatherings with other Chinese participants in which *The Dialogic Society* was discussed:

(...) “and I think the reading and interacting based on this book The Dialogic Society can make us reflect more on the dialogic itself and its reflection can help us understand the dialog and the relationship between the interlocutors” (Xiaofang)

The sociology professors participating in the study also share how the book allowed them to make more visible the contributions of authors that are often neglected, despite having made relevant insights into sociological theory. This approach is highlighted as favorable for deepening sociological work and increasing the motivation for it:

"TDS has helped me a lot for students to get to know other authors who without this reading would not have known them. For example, I think the case of Jane Addams is the most relevant one. The students always emphasize it a lot, that they have studied sociology for many years and that no one has talked to them about it, and thanks to this reading, they can get to know other figures of references such as Jane Addams. In addition, I think that all this is closely linked to the question of motivation because it creates a sense of sociology". (Julianna)

These quotes show how the participants acknowledge that TDS enriches social theory contributions in a way that they value. TDS allows some students to discover a sociology that is more aligned with current social demands to the discipline, while TDS provides some professors with knowledge to increase the rigor of their lessons. Indeed, the participants agree that this book contributes to the motivation toward social theory by making visible the potentiality of their discipline for social transformation.

Deeper comprehension of social theory

Unlike other theoretical works that use difficult language and complex arguments, readers find TDS easy to understand, even though it addresses deep and intricate sociological concepts. Relatedly, a participating sociology professor notes that discussing TDS boosted her students' confidence in their ability to understand and critically assess scientific ideas as well as to apply them to real-world social analysis:

"A very interesting debate came out in class about how we create another idea of feminism and many girls felt very liberated because they do not feel represented with the dominant idea that exists of feminism today, but they felt very represented with what the book explains that feminism belongs to everyone and that there are plenty of representations of feminism. I see that there are issues that are very hot in our society and that allow open spaces for dialog in the classroom that without this book, I would not know how to approach, for example, also when explaining postmodern authors and the impact of postmodernism. Thanks to reading this book, we have also been able to talk about Foucault and postmodernism, dialoging it directly from the reading". (Julianna)

In this quote, the social theory presented in the book allows some students not only to understand theoretical concepts and their implications better but also to assess them critically. It also elicits dialogs that allow some professors to address complex concepts in a deep yet accessible way. Another aspect that the participant readers of TDS highlight is the fact that reading TDS has helped them identify mistakes in the concepts that they had previously learned in the study of sociological theory:

"Before reading this book [TDS] I had heard many things from authors who write about Bourdieu of how relevant of an author he was [...]. They always put him or

describe him as this super smart super intellectual person who made a truly relevant contribution [...]. The book [TDS] made me realize that he, I mean what he says, his whole theory is not contributing anything new [...]. Flecha's book helped me see the mistake in his statistical analysis where he mistakes correlation with causation [...]. So, yeah, in this sense it has been truly important for me to better understand what social theories are actually and what they have contributed or not.” (Idoia)

In line with this quote, the participants emphasized how Flecha's contributions in TDS serve two main purposes. First, TDS helps clarify some of the participants' confusion around social theory, enabling a deeper understanding of its role in social transformation toward more egalitarian and democratic societies. Second, the participants note that TDS challenges the notion of what has traditionally been considered “revolutionary” contributions, which in many cases ultimately served ideological agendas rather than substantive societal change. Two seminar participants exemplify this point:

“This book lays the foundations for the new approach to sociology. It breaks with the ideology where sociology has always been placed, even with clearly authoritarian attitudes.” (Miquel)

“Sociology was presented to us as the discipline that went against all the other disciplines as if there was a battle between sociology and the others. And this book has shown me the opposite and that is that sociology has to work with the rest of the disciplines and that is very important for today's society.” (Iñaki)

The relevance of the new approach, which involves TDS, is stressed by one of the speakers from Germany who participated in the international debate and focused on the main guidelines obtained from this book to orient her research aimed at contributing to society:

“Dialog is essential for a whole society [...]. It's the only way for our survival in the globe. The book is a combination of desire, hope, and guidance for people who are looking for emancipating dialog. It gives a clear focus on which direction we should look, focuses on what is possible, and risks our role as researchers. We can perform many analyses on how the world is not working or how we can decide on our target to contribute to society and focus our empirical evidence on the possibility of supporting society. In the book, it's very clear the perspective on what is the task of science and academic life, based on truth, beauty, and goodness.” (Susanne)

As these quotes indicate, some of the participants in the study provide evidence on how TDS clarifies relevant misunderstandings and misconceptions in social theory and offers key elements for research work oriented toward social transformation.

Transformation of diverse social contexts through the implementation of social theory

The participant readers of TDS explained that the readings and debates on the book prompted them to reflect on positive or negative personal experiences, their possible causes, and the consequences in their lives. Some of the related topics that emerge include the role of true friendship or love in people's lives after reading and debating TDS:

“In the gathering we did, many debates related to friendship emerged related to the importance of relationships of companionship, friendship, to the importance of giving value to it. And how these relationships can have a positive impact on people’s lives and health is very remarkable and very important for future professionals, who can promote coexistence between people. Then, the whole issue of friendship, love, positive and nontoxic relationships became much emphasized.” (Queralt)

This teacher’s experience illustrates that after reading TDS and discussing it in class, her students identified the importance of genuine friendships. They learned the consequences of having relationships on the basis of deep connections or negative feelings, such as envy, jealousy, or coercion. Importantly, students also highlighted the link between healthy relationships and well-being, a link that empowers them to choose positive connections in both their personal and professional lives.

Additionally, beyond their own lives, the interviewed TDS readers increasingly understand the role of theory in a changing society. As this sociology professor reports,

“At the time when the conflict between Israel and Palestine began, the issue arose that if there is no dialog there is conflict. Many [students] highlighted this idea that, in many situations of life, it is like this, that dialog is key, and we discussed what this dialog implies, listening to the other. Therefore, I do think that these are very deep dialogs that lead to seeing reality in a less simple way but also to seeing how we can influence it. Because they are not very distant aspects, [it’s not as if] you do not know what you can do, like it is a long way off. [On the contrary] you can, in your day-to-day life, you can choose if you choose dialog and reach consensus and what that implies, instead of each one of us closing in on our part.” (Neret)

In line with this professor’s quote, the participants pointed to the fact that TDS has helped their students see how sociological theory not only provides them with a deeper understanding of social realities but also with the tools to act on it, successfully managing the increasing cultural and social diversity present in society.

Specifically, the relevance of TDS in diverse geographical and sociopolitical contexts is highlighted by one of the speakers from Brazil in the international debate on the book, stressing the opportunity this book provides for reflection and action:

(...) The book offers us ways to overcome the problems of contemporary society such as social inequalities, access to quality education, gender-based violence, the defense of minorities and combating racism, through scientific evidence backed by a great number of research projects in a country like Brazil where [these problems] are just too far from being resolved especially considering our recent political past. This book is an excellent opportunity for reflection and action, as it not only deepens the debate on these issues but also provides data and possibilities for overcoming the problems through what the book classifies as scientifically proven successful actions, finding answers to the political, social and economic problems of contemporary societies (Bernardo).

A similar argument is given by a scholar from Ghana, contributing to the impact of TDS on the participants from this country from diverse social and cultural backgrounds:

(...) In line with this book's theory of dialogic learning in Ghana, I have witnessed the tremendous impact this book and its theory has on participants regardless of their background or their status. In this case DLGs (Dialogic Literary Gatherings) needs affordances for participants in Ghana from various ethnic groups to engage in egalitarian dialog, which helps them increase their confidence. To summarize, I would like to emphasize that we may not have the same opinion or that we may be coming from different disciplines, but, like the image on the cover of the book made up of different shapes of triangles and a quadrilateral, we can collaborate to form a beautiful gem such as a diamond and to impact our societies or indeed stand on the shoulders of giants (Anna).

These quotes provide evidence on the relevance of TDS in diverse contexts and countries, as participants with different geographical and social backgrounds emphasize the impact of Flecha's contributions.

Orientation of the sociological profession to social impact and cocreation

The need to make progress toward cocreation processes in research, as well as in any professional area, leads the participants to take a dialogic approach in analyzing societies. Specifically, the interviewed readers of TDS reflect on how the book resonates not just within academia but also with professionals from different fields:

"I am dedicated to governance between the different social actors. Reading this book [TDS], I see that a good part of what I have worked on has a lot to do with what the book proposes, opening a new field for sociologists toward the construction of a more harmonious society. This whole topic in the professional world has much of a future because it gives sociologists a methodology that is completely useful for generating knowledge, coexistence and resolving conflicts. [...] The perspective of dialog gives the discipline much more social impact than it has." (Miquel)

This quote reflects the view of this participant, who shares that professionals working outside academia see the value in this social theory, for the tools it gives them to generate knowledge, promote coexistence, and resolve conflicts. In line with this, the participants reported that TDS has opened doors for sociology to create synergies with other relevant scientific disciplines, with researchers from diverse backgrounds demanding theoretical contributions for social impact and cocreation for their own disciplines:

"The book even opens the door to working on awareness campaigns on health issues, for example, when it comments on the whole issue related to tobacco or when it analyzes how violent models are presented as attractive and the effects this has on health. This demonstrates, once again, a collaboration between sociology and, in this case, the field of health. From this perspective, a key to the book is very evident, which is interdisciplinarity." (Iñaki)

Similarly, an interviewed sociology professor also acknowledges this shift in the mindset of their students, who, after reading the book, become more concerned about the need to orient their work toward cocreation and social impact:

"[Students] say that it is another way of doing things, because they have been told

things must be done without cocreation, from their offices, and here they are seeing the importance of doing it for social impact and with people. This presents them with a before and after. And you see how from then on, they approach their TFGs [dissertations] differently, even. [...]. A student, for example, who wanted to work on labor relations and who wanted to dedicate himself to it, after discussing these issues after reading TDS, is doing a TFG (Final Degree's Essay) on human resources but to improve sexual harassment in companies, which is highly oriented to social impact. This is just an example, but this happened millions of times.” (Silvia)

This professor's observation highlights that reading TDS encourages a shift in research focus toward social impact, achieved through collaboration with citizens. Similarly, the interviewed readers' recognition of egalitarian dialog emerges as a crucial element. Such dialog fosters the continuous development of new agreements and understandings, ultimately enabling some professionals to better direct their work toward societal improvement.

Similarly, one of the speakers from Pakistan participating in the international debate emphasized one of the strong points of TDS, which is its capacity to provide a holistic framework for the understanding and transformation of different contexts and societies through a cocreation process:

*“I think what this example highlights is that what we need is a positive mindset and a belief in the human ability to change—regardless of despite our age or state of mind or background. Therefore, overall, I think that *The Dialogic Society* is a deeply compelling work that will help everyone understand themselves and others around them regardless of if you're in Spain or in Pakistan in China and the United States because it does not speak to the differences between us, but it speaks to what unites us, which is our shared humanity.” (Susan)*

This orientation to the cocreation and social impact of sociological work is a need shared by many of the participants, as reflected in the quotes, especially for some of the participants from other countries.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examines the impact of *The Dialogic Society* on readers' engagement with social theory. The insights gained from this study are particularly relevant to the context of China since Chinese social theory has long been influenced by some Western models, often adapting and reconstructing them to fit local contexts. In particular, the findings challenge the notion that social theory is losing relevance in contemporary society, aligning with concerns raised by scholars such as John Bruhn (2001) about the declining use of social theory by researchers and the public.

Revitalizing social theory: the impact of *the dialogic society* on reader engagement and social transformation

First, the results show an increase in the motivation for sociology and social theory among the participant readers of TDS. Specifically, they highlight that TDS makes visible previously overlooked figures, such as Jane Addams, fostering a sense of discovery and appreciation for sociological contributions. This contribution aligns with critiques

by scholars regarding the historical exclusion of women (Isaksson 2020) and minorities (Munté et al. 2011) from recognized contributions in the field, as well as the need to make research relevant to society. By demonstrating how theory can inform real-world issues such as conflict resolution and positive social relationships, TDS motivates readers to apply theory to improve society. This motivation directly addresses the concern raised by Guy Poppy (2015) regarding the need for theoretical contributions to be aligned with societal relevance and the advancement of knowledge to respond to the societal challenges defined by citizenship (Flecha et al. 2022). It also corresponds with the Chinese government's objective of focusing on and improving people's well-being and increasing their quality of life (Xi 2022) as well as the direction for constructing Chinese social theory (Xu and Wang 2023).

Second, the participants identified an improved comprehension of social theory after reading the book. By critiquing traditional interpretations (e.g., Bourdieu's statistical analysis), TDS encourages deeper comprehension and critical thinking (Roca et al. 2022), which is regarded as an important goal of talent cultivation in higher education (Zhang 2024). In this sense, it challenges what has traditionally been considered "revolutionary" contributions, which ultimately served ideological agendas in many cases. Additionally, unlike other texts, TDS uses clear language, allowing readers to understand and critically assess theoretical concepts, apply them to real-world social issues, and elicit dialogs around complex concepts in a deep yet accessible manner. These findings align with the critiques of Alan Sokal (2010), and Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1999) toward postmodernist authors, denouncing the lack of science in their contributions and the need for obtuse language and reasoning to hide this fact.

Third, another identified result is the transformation of diverse social contexts through the implementation of social theory. The participants reported that engaging with TDS prompts readers to reflect on their own experiences through the lens of social theory. For example, discussions about friendship highlight the importance of positive relationships for well-being. This focus on transformation and social improvement combats the trend of social theory being perceived as overly abstract (Desmond 2016). Moreover, TDS provides readers with tools to understand and address social issues, encouraging them to see the applicability of social theory beyond academic settings. As Jianjun Shu (2012) states, modern social theory is not only theoretical and historical but also practical. This sociological approach is in line with the contribution of Flecha and colleagues (2022), in which dialogic sociologies are presented as key to providing research-based solutions for current societal challenges.

Finally, a paramount aspect that emerges from reading the book is a shift toward social impact and cocreation. TDS encourages dialog and collaboration among sociologists, professionals from other disciplines, and citizens. This suggestion aligns with the increasing demand for interdisciplinary research addressing societal needs (Sacchi et al. 2021; Girbes et al. 2022; Rydzewski 2021). It also reflects the observed rise of coauthorship in the social sciences (Ossenblok et al. 2014; Patania et al. 2017), which, in line with the current research, suggests positive development in the field of social theory (Akbaritabar et al. 2018; Jeong et al. 2011; Barjak 2006). Moreover, TDS highlights the importance of dialog and cocreation processes, fostering collaboration and consensus-building to achieve social impact. This point aligns with the growing recognition of the need

for research to be inclusive and address the challenges faced by citizens (Flecha et al. 2022; Poppy 2015; Soler-Gallart 2015; Ledford 2015). This need is increasingly identified worldwide, in different contexts and countries, as well as in China, where the Chinese policy “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Talent Evaluation Mechanism by Classification” (“*guanyuyufenleituijinrencaipingjiajizhigaigedezhidaoyijian*(关于分类推进人才评价机制改革的指导意见)”), for example, emphasizes that the evaluation of talents in philosophy and social sciences should focus on social benefits, reflecting the Chinese government’s focus on improving citizens’ lives.

Overall, TDS contributes to sociology by providing nine orientations that scientists and citizens like and use: dialog (egalitarian dialog with citizens both in the creation of scientific knowledge about society and in the practice of the profession in any context), the improvement of people’s lives (presenting evidence of the social impacts to be or already achieved), truth (to allow the clear recognition of statements grounded in scientific evidence or hoaxes), goodness (generating scientific knowledge that facilitates citizens’ progress toward their own objectives), beauty (dialogic societies create social beauty with their knowledge, their methodologies and their egalitarian dialogs), gender (adopting clear steps toward the equality of all human beings), culture (providing knowledge to take steps toward the elimination of any form of racism or belief discrimination), a universal attitude (sharing knowledge on successful actions that transform societies with all citizens and scientists in any context worldwide), and a forward-looking approach (in solidarity with all citizens, especially with future generations of humans) (Flecha 2022).

As can be clearly observed through these orientations, TDS is focused on citizens and society, aligned with the public sociology of Michael Burawoy. Indeed, in 2010, when analyzing the global sociological community, Burawoy mentioned several research centers worldwide that created public sociology (Burawoy 2011). One of these centers, the Community of Researchers on Excellence for All (CREA), was founded by Flecha in 1991 and was highlighted by Burawoy for developing, through a communicative approach, a specific vision of organic public sociology in which the public contributes, for example, the experience of marginality, whereas sociologists make contributions from scientific knowledge with specific ways of overcoming that marginality (Burawoy 2014).

This recognition of the capacity of citizens to contribute to the cocreation of knowledge can also be found in Gramsci’s work, which states that all men are intellectuals, although not all men develop the role of intellectuals in society. Particularly relevant for the discussion of this paper is Gramsci’s definition of the organic intellectual, which can articulate the needs and feelings of particular groups of the population (Gramsci 2005).

Overall, this study highlights the potential of TDS to revitalize the field of social theory by fostering motivation, deeper comprehension, social transformation, and a shift toward cocreation and social impact. The findings support the argument that social theory—when presented in a way that is accessible, relevant, and action-oriented—regains its relevance and contributes to social transformation. Similarly, dialogic sociology, as exemplified by TDS, offers a promising approach for social theory to regain its social impact in the twenty-first century. The insights gained from this study are particularly significant because there is evidence on the relevance of TDS for increasing the comprehension of society and responding to citizens’ needs in diverse contexts.

Enriching Chinese social theory through dialogic sociology

The theory of dialogic society also makes a relevant contribution in the context of China: social theory—which focuses on cocreation, social impact, and the inclusion of diverse voices—can enrich Chinese social theory, making it more relevant and impactful while avoiding the shortcomings of some Western social theories. This fact aligns with China's strategic goals to improve citizens' lives and address societal challenges through inclusive research approaches. By incorporating dialogic sociology principles, Chinese scholars can enhance the societal relevance and transformative potential of their sociological work, contributing to the ongoing development and refinement of Chinese social theory.

Moreover, the focus on social impact has gained increasing prominence in China in recent years. This shift is evident in national policies for research evaluation, which now prioritize societal contributions. For example, The Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era (“*shenhuaxinshidaijiaoyupingjiagaige-zongtifangan*” (深化新时代教育评价改革总体方案)) (CPC Central Committee and State Council 2020) explicitly calls for reforming scientific research evaluation to move away from metrics that prioritize the number of publications and funded projects. Instead, it advocates rewarding academic and social contributions. In this context, social theory must scientifically demonstrate its social impact, which can be achieved only through continual dialog—both among interdisciplinary researchers and with citizens. Dialogic theory, with its emphasis on social impact and cocreation, could greatly contribute to the construction of an independent knowledge system in Chinese sociology.

Limitations

While valuable for highlighting the impact identified in readers' experiences and the book's potential for social change, the study has limitations. First, the small sample size and focus on participants who already chose to read the book do not allow for generalizations to be made. Second, although *The Dialogic Society* has already achieved notable reach—garnering 40,000 downloads in just 28 months—the relatively short time since its publication restricts the scope for evaluating its short-, medium-, and long-term impacts.

Future directions for theoretical construction with TDS

Future studies could address these limitations by replicating the findings with more diverse and representative samples. Expanding the demographic range to include participants from a broader variety of countries, cultural backgrounds, and gender identities would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of TDS's global influence and social impact.

An important direction for future theoretical construction lies in the potential of *TDS* to revitalize and advance social theory by firmly linking theoretical contributions to their real-world social impacts. In doing so, TDS addresses the ongoing crisis in the social sciences by demonstrating how theory can meaningfully respond to social needs. Rooted in rigorous interdisciplinary dialog—including exchanges with Nobel Prize laureates from various fields—TDS builds vital bridges between disciplines, fostering the collaborative creation of scientific knowledge aimed at societal improvement. A central innovation of

this theory is its deep engagement with the different dimensions of dialog itself, offering refined concepts such as communicative acts, which expand upon traditional speech act theory to include nonverbal and relational dimensions of human interaction. This expanded understanding of dialog is essential for enabling inclusive cocreation processes, in which all voices contribute to the development of knowledge. By advancing such tools and frameworks, TDS paves the way for theoretical constructions that are not only scientifically robust but also capable of achieving meaningful social impact—an outcome increasingly demanded by citizens worldwide.

Abbreviations

SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TDS	The Dialogic Society

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Author contributions

Marta Soler, Carmen Elboj and Esther Oliver designed and conceived the idea of the study. Esther Oliver, Ane López de Aguilera and Mengna Guo contributed to the literature review. Mar Joanpere and Esther Oliver conducted the fieldwork and, together with Elisabeth Torras-Gómez, conducted the analysis. Esther Oliver, Elisabeth Torras-Gómez, Ane López de Aguilera and Mengna Guo wrote a draft of the paper. All the authors conducted a review of the draft and provided feedback. Elisabeth Torras-Gómez included the feedback and wrote the final version of the manuscript. Marta Soler and Carmen Elboj oversaw the whole research process and validated the final version of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the submitted version of the manuscript.

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Declarations

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The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Community of Research on Excellence for All's (CREA) Ethics Committee with the number 20240528. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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