Dos and Don’ts of Theoretical Commentary

1. Dos

   a. Use the theorist’s vocabulary. For example, when reviewing exchange theory use concepts such as equilibrium, profit, utility maximization, transaction costs & rewards, etc.

   b. Depict the theorist relating her own vocabulary according to her own logic.

2. Don’ts

   a. Don’t use technical vocabulary other than that of the theorist under discussion. For example, when reviewing exchange theory do NOT use concepts such as domination, exploitation, deconstruction, etc.

   b. Off-limits arguments:

      1) The theorist does not examine her assumptions. Assumptions are (by definition) assumed, and are thus never examined empirically. It is your task to make these assumptions explicit, even if the theorist does not.

      2) The theory does not apply in all social situations. This refers to the “domain” of the theory. Most theorists acknowledge that their theory has a finite domain. (Of course, if the theorist claims her theory’s universality your critique might involve a counter-illustration or two.) Again, it is your job to specify the conditions under which a theory applies, although one would hope the theorist would be explicit on this.

      3) The theory does not take something (you name it) into account. Every theory is a theory “about something,” where “something” is usually quite abstract (e.g., what motivates human behavior, why there isn’t a war of all against all, etc.). To require that a theory is about everything is tantamount to saying, “Yours is not the only theory,” or worse, “There is a process so fundamental that any theory should take it into account.”

      4) The author is unclear on this point. Such a criticism cannot stand on its own. To make this claim, you must specify precisely where there is a gap in the theorist’s argument. Otherwise, the lack of clarity may be due to your confusion rather than the theorist’s not having developed her point sufficiently.

      5) The author’s motivation for authoring the theory is unlike the motivations of the people her theory describes. This is a special case of point 3 above.