

Professor Marco Garrido, University of Chicago

“Theory with a Light Touch”



Description: I offer an appreciation of early Chicago School theorizing. This work has been called atheoretical; not so. These scholars practiced theory with a light touch, meaning: One, their work was light on theory and heavy on thick description. It was concrete in the Weberian sense of the word, or couched in reality. Two, they used theory to “light up”—meaning to illuminate (or clarify) but also to highlight (or memorialize)—particular situations, their aim being to better understand reality. Three, they held theory lightly, regarding their interpretations as partial, provisional, and eminently subject to revision. It is a style of theorizing that proceeds by embracing the particularity of social life and embedding the object of inquiry in social space and time. We might posit, in contrast, a heavy-handed style of theorizing, one that is heavy on abstraction and light on description, serves to affirm theory, and tends to be held tightly—to the point of being taken ideologically. These two styles of theorizing are fundamentally distinguished by their different relations to reality, one deferential and the other imperious. This difference matters. How we theorize conditions not just what we know about the world but also how we engage with it. It also reveals what we think is important to know—i.e., why we theorize. I will illustrate the difference between light-touch and heavy-handed theorizing with respect to two competing efforts to understand the plight of the urban poor in Manila in the 1970s, one a Chicago School-style ethnography and the other an analysis in terms of dependency theory.

Marco Garrido is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Patchwork City* and currently working on a new book about the imbrication of corruption, politics, and the politics of knowledge in the Philippines tentatively titled *Bad Words*.

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12:30-1:50pm

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