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## **Theory as engagement**

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This volume presents a selection of full papers from the 20th International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) conference, held in 2024 at the University of Belgrade, Serbia, under the theme Theory as engagement. The theme challenges the often tacit assumption that theorising is something we do at a distance from the world—as if theory would begin there where life ends, or as if conceptual work was a luxury reserved for moments of stability. At the same time, this theme is an invitation because it insists on the opposite: that theorising becomes most necessary precisely when the world is complex, unsettled, and demanding our attention.

A call for engaged theorising has a long history in psychology and its neighbouring disciplines. Yet it feels particularly timely today. Psychology continues to be shaped by internal fragmentations and by external pressures to deliver fast answers, effective interventions, and measurable outcomes. At the same time, we are confronted with escalating political polarization, ecological crisis, widening inequalities, forced displacement, and the everyday institutional arrangements through which human lives are enabled and constrained. In such conditions, it is tempting to treat theory as secondary – something to be postponed until after “real problems” have been solved. The premise of this volume is that it is precisely because we take the world seriously – people’s complexity, institutions, cultures, histories, and relations of power – that we need to theorise. Theorising is one of the ways we remain answerable to the world. Seen as such, it thus becomes more than a scholarly exercise and turns into an ethical demand: the world, to which we belong, speaks to us; we are related to it, and we respond by stopping and thinking. Because it requires distancing from immediate action, it becomes part of how individuals and communities can orient themselves within complex environments, name contradictions that would otherwise remain naturalised and open space for alternative forms of understanding and action.

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To speak of theory as engagement is therefore to foreground theorising as a form of practice: inclusive, time-demanding, and always relational. Engaged theorising does not happen in isolation, even when it is conducted alone. It emerges through encounters – with texts and traditions, with others in dialogue and disagreement, and with the world to which we belong and the futures we imagine as possible. In this sense, theorising is never merely an individual achievement. It is a communal and collaborative interaction with and for the world that generates new possibilities – whether it takes the form of critique, reconstruction, creation, or an integrative account. At the same time, the beauty of theorising lies in its capacity to transcend national, historical, social, and linguistic boundaries while also serving as a tool for their critical examination. This is not a claim about theory’s universality – rather, it is a reminder that theoretical work can travel, translate, and connect – provided that it remains respectful, honest, transparent, dialogical, and reflexive. Engagement, in this sense, is not only about what theory addresses “out there,” but also about how theory is done: how it acknowledges its own conditions of possibility, how it handles difference and disagreement, and how it remains open to being transformed through dialogue.

In the four decades of ISTP’s existence, none of its conferences had previously been held in South-eastern Europe. Hosting the 2024 conference in Serbia was more than a geographical novelty – it was an opportunity to widen participation and to strengthen dialogue across regions that are not always equally represented in international academic gatherings by offering an opportunity for new intellectual, institutional, and personal encounters. ISTP is truly international, and the Society has a commendable commitment to alternating conference locations across global North and South, West and East. Yet academic mobility remains unevenly distributed. For many scholars – especially PhD students and early-career researchers – travel to distant destinations or stays in expensive capitals can be difficult or impossible. Bringing ISTP to Belgrade was therefore also an effort to make participation more accessible to colleagues, especially those from the region. One of the most encouraging aspects of the conference was precisely the presence of many younger scholars who joined the event and contributed to its energy, questions, and conversations.

Belgrade also offered more than practical accessibility. The region’s complex history – often positioned at the crossroads of Eastern and Western influences – invites reflection on the relationship between theory, politics, and social change. The legacy of socialist Yugoslavia includes progressive values and critical traditions in philosophy and social theory, while the historical role of the country in the Non-Aligned Movement resonates as a reminder of neutrality, dialogue, and the possibility of refusing forced polarizations. In a time marked by hostility and fragmentation, this legacy can serve not as nostalgia, but as inspiration for sustaining spaces of disagreement without foreclosure – spaces where engagement remains possible.

The conference programme reflected this plurality. It brought together participants from more than thirty countries across all continents and featured a rich variety of theoretical and critical traditions in psychology and beyond. This IRTTP volume grows out of this broader intellectual landscape. While the papers selected here represent only a small part of the conference, they capture its spirit: theorising as a situated practice that takes the world seriously and remains open to transformation through encounter.

## Overview of the issue

The contributions collected in this issue emerge from a diverse set of submissions, yet across all sections there is an implicit shared claim: psychological phenomena cannot be adequately theorised without sustained attention to context, relationality, historicity, and the socio-material conditions of life. In different ways, the papers suggest that theory is not a detached representation, but a situated form of engagement – one that makes explicit the assumptions, values, and institutional conditions through which psychological knowledge is produced and put to work.

To reflect this plurality while maintaining a coherent editorial arc, the issue is organized into three sections: I Reclaiming Theoretical Foundations in Psychology; II Theorising Lived Meaning and Subjectivity; III Theorising Institutions, Culture, and Contemporary Challenges.

The first section revisits psychology's theoretical foundations by asking what the discipline presupposes when it explains human action, cognition, and experience. Rather than treating theory as a neutral instrument, the contributions foreground theorising as a practice embedded in historical, epistemological, political, and institutional conditions – and, in some cases, also as a lived and situated form of engagement. Across diverse traditions such as critical psychology, phenomenology, metatheory, and cognitive science (e.g., Maiers; Brill; Doner, Damnjanović), the papers share a concern with the often implicit assumptions that guide psychological knowledge production. Together, they argue that reclaiming theoretical foundations requires moving beyond reductionism, rethinking agency and power (e.g., Busch-Jensen), and developing conceptual frameworks capable of integrating plurality (e.g., Piekkola; Gülerce). The section closes by returning to the discipline's contemporary tensions through a reframing of the replication crisis as a symptom not only of methodological problems but of deeper epistemological and institutional contradictions in psychology (Nielsen).

The second section brings engaged theorising into close contact with lived experience, examining subjectivity as something produced and transformed through relations with others, through time, and within sociopolitical contexts. Rather than treating meaning as private mental content, these papers approach lived experience as dialogical, intersubjective, and historically saturated. Drawing on qualitative case studies, ethnography, and critical-theoretical reflection, the authors theorise how desire, hope, humour, disability identity, and articulation emerge within concrete social situations shaped by asymmetries of power and recognition (e.g., Camincher; Young; Rodriguez-Paniagua; Kaulertz; Tagaki). Across these contributions, meaning-making appears as relational and mediated, temporally structured (from micro-events to collective histories), and politically situated – showing how subjectivity unfolds through the conditions under which experience becomes speakable, shareable, and contestable.

The third section brings theoretical psychology into direct contact with institutional life, sociotechnical arrangements, and contemporary crises. The papers demonstrate how inequality, participation, and sustainability are not abstract “contexts,” but are actively produced through everyday practices, institutional conditions, and material infrastructures. Through practice research, cultural-historical approaches, and critical analyses of technology and mobility, the authors show how institutions both enable and restrict possibilities for action (e.g., Røn-Larsen & Højholt; Sylvest-Berg & Tybjerg; Kirkegaard Jensen & Szulevicz). Across different empirical domains – schools and professional

practices, urban commoning and cultural institutions, automobile arrangements and climate apps (e.g., Popović; Kernahan; Wrbouschek & Hametner; Gaßner & Slunecko) – the section highlights how theoretical concepts can illuminate the dynamics through which problems are individualized, conflicts are managed, and forms of engagement are recuperated or redirected. In doing so, the papers show that theorising remains practically consequential: it shapes what becomes visible, what counts as a problem, and what kinds of futures can be imagined and pursued.

Taken together, the three sections articulate engaged theorising as an orientation rather than a single method or tradition: a commitment to remain accountable to the world in its complexity, to treat psychological knowledge as historically and institutionally situated, and to keep open the possibility that theory can contribute – through critique, reconstruction, and imagination – to personal and social transformation.

Carefully reading and reviewing these contributions was an inspiring and enjoyable process, but also challenging and we would like to warmly thank the other members of the editorial team – Ernst Schraube (Roskilde University, Denmark), Paul Stenner (Open University, UK) and Ana Đorđević (University of Belgrade, Serbia) – for their generous support throughout the editorial process and their help with reviewing the submissions. We would also like to thank our editorial assistant, Isidora Popović (University of Belgrade, Serbia), for her efficient and meticulous preparation of the manuscripts for publication.

Finally, this issue is also an invitation – not only to read these papers as finished products, but to treat them as openings for further discussion. If theorising is a dialogical endeavour, then the conversations that began in Belgrade should not end here. We warmly invite colleagues to meet again and continue these discussions at our next ISTP conference, to be held at Pratt Institute in New York (June 8-12, 2026) under the theme *Theorizing in Dark Times – Art, Narrative, Politics*. In a historical moment that often feels defined by urgency, uncertainty, and polarisation, we hope that this next gathering will once again affirm theorising as engagement: as a shared intellectual practice through which we can resist closure, sustain critique, and imagine more liveable futures.