

Preliminary Program: 01/31/26

The Future of the Social Sciences (*Sixth*)

Theory, Prediction, and Confirmation

New York City
Friday–Saturday, February 13–14, 2026

Center for the Study of Economy and Society (CSES), Department of
Sociology

Cornell University

Friday, February 13

Co-sponsored with Russell Sage Foundation, location 112 East 64th Street, New
York City

Day's Theme (webinar enabled for CSES Fellows, Faculty Affiliates, and general
audience, which includes your university. We will provide digital posters with iphone
webinar login)

Why Prediction Is Hard in the Social Sciences

When prediction can work
Why explanation is fragile
Why context, variation, and institutional instability matter

Russell Sage Foundation Library

112 East 64th Street, Manhattan (Park Ave and East 64th St)

11:00 – 11:30 AM | Arrival and Reception in the RSF Library

Conference advisory committee: Brett de Bary and Barnaby Marsh

CSES conference coordinators, Mark Sibley (questions onsite in NYC, email Mark: mas868@cornell.edu). Both Mark and Aaron Zhibin Ye can help with logistics onsite.

Department of Sociology staff: Marcus May (email: mmm493@cornell.edu), Carrie d'Aprix (email: cmd294@cornell.edu)

11:30 AM to 11:45 AM | Welcome and Framing

OPENING THE CONFERENCE

Victor Nee (Cornell University)

Bruce Western (Russell Sage Foundation)

Session I — Explanation, Prediction, and Cognitive Limits

11:45 AM – 12:30 AM

Chair: Paul DiMaggio (New York University)

Duncan Watts (University of Pennsylvania)

Integrating Explanation and Prediction in Computational Social Science

Abstract:

Computational social science is more than just large repositories of digital data and the computational methods needed to construct and analyze them. It also represents a convergence of different fields with different ways of thinking about and doing science. In this talk, I discuss how these approaches differ from one another and propose how they might be more productively integrated. First, I propose a schema for thinking about research activities along two dimensions—the extent to which work is explanatory, focusing on identifying and estimating causal effects, and the degree of consideration given to testing predictions of outcomes—and how these two priorities can complement, rather than compete with, one another. Second, I advocate that computational social scientists devote more attention to combining prediction and explanation, which I call “integrative modeling,” and describe a concrete case study involving cooperation in public good games to illustrate how integrative modeling can be implemented.

12:30 – 2:00 PM | Lunch (Russell Sage Foundation)

Session II — Variation, Experiments, and Policy Implication

2:00 PM – 4:10 PM

Chair: Brett de Bary (Cornell University)

2:00 – 2:40 PM

Eldar Shafir (Princeton University)

The Problem of Context

Abstract:

We all know that “context matters,” yet both intuitively and in the social sciences we fail to appreciate its impact and to take the effects of context sufficiently into account. Research and observation, starting with groundbreaking studies in the 60’s and extending to the present, have uncovered the overwhelming power of context, or of “the situation.” Context – the water in which we swim -- profoundly influences our behaviors, preferences, capabilities, and beliefs, including our attributions of credit and responsibility, often in ways that we fail to recognize when trying to make sense of things. It remains a challenge for the social sciences to better incorporate context into our theorizing. Interestingly, AI seems built to be more sensitive to context. The extent to which that might help us think about context in new ways remains to be seen.

Chair: Forrest Briscoe (Cornell University)

2:45 to 3:25 PM

Delia Baldassarri (New York University)

Harnessing Variation: Rethinking Experimental Research for Middle-Range Theorizing

Abstract:

Sociology has long been concerned with explaining variation rather than identifying universal laws that apply across all contexts. Yet experimental research in sociology is often criticized for limited external validity and weak scalability. In this talk, I argue that these criticisms mischaracterize the potential of experiments for sociological theory-building. Rather than aspiring to universal generalization, experimental designs can be leveraged as powerful tools for middle-range theorizing—if variation is explicitly incorporated into research design. Drawing on

three research programs, I illustrate this approach. A lost-wallet field experiment in New York City demonstrates how informed sampling can uncover contextual variation. Lab-in-the-field behavioral games among Ugandan farmers reveal systematic differences in public goods provision. Survey experiments on partisanship and social selection show how situational variation shapes decision-making. Together, these examples show how experiments can identify scope conditions and clarify when and where sociological theories apply. The talk reframes experimental research as a method for theorizing about variation itself, directly engaging the conference's core concerns with explanation, prediction, and confirmation.

Chair: Shaun Nichols (Cornell University)

3:30 – 4:10 PM

Henry Farrell (Johns Hopkins University) & Margaret Levi (Stanford University)

RCTs and Democratic Experimentalism

Abstract:

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have become a dominant method for policy evaluation, promising credible causal inference and evidence-based governance. However, their value depends on institutional and political conditions that are often unstable or absent. This paper examines the limits of RCTs and argues for an alternative framework rooted in democratic experimentalism. Rather than treating policy interventions as fixed treatments applied to passive populations, democratic experimentalism emphasizes iterative learning, institutional feedback, and participation by affected actors. Drawing on insights from political economy, institutional theory, and pragmatist philosophy, we explore how experimentation can remain informative even when generalizability is limited and environments are changing. The argument connects methodological debates about external validity to broader questions of governance, accountability, and learning under uncertainty. By situating experiments within institutional contexts, the paper clarifies when experimental evidence can support prediction and when it should instead inform adaptive policy design.

4:10 – 4:20 PM | Coffee

Session III — Foundations: Theory and Confirmation

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Introduction: J. Håkan Holm (Lund University)

4:20 – 5:20 PM

Oliver Hart (Harvard University)

Citizen Investors

Abstract:

Companies do many good things in the world, but they also cause pollution, contribute to global warming, and provide unsafe and unhealthy products. Many people decry this bad behaviour without realizing that they own these companies, through their pension plans or holdings of index funds. They/we benefit from the profits these companies make but we also have the power, through our votes, to stop these companies behaving badly. Most people invest through mutual funds (like BlackRock or Vanguard) and currently these intermediaries do the voting and engagement for us (most people don't even realize this).

My co-authors, H el ene Landemore, Luigi Zingales, and I propose a novel way to give mutual fund investors a voice. Based on the experience of citizen assemblies in the political sphere, we propose allocating the power to decide how to cast mutual funds' votes in corporate ballots on environmental, social, and political issues to a randomly drawn assembly of their investors. We analyze the advantages and limitations of such an approach and discuss various implementation issues.

Session IV — Integrative Discussion

5:20 – 6:20 PM

Chair: Paul DiMaggio (New York University)

Why prediction is hard
Why explanation is fragile
Why context, variation, and institutional instability matter

Saturday, February 14

When prediction *can* work
Emergence mechanisms
Confirmation via big data and experiments
Extension to organizations, health, and geopolitics

Cornell - ILR Conference Center (All Day – Webinar Enabled)

12th floor, 570 Lexington Ave, Manhattan (Lexington Ave and East 51st St)

Nearest subway station: Lexington Avenue/51st Street (Line 4, 6, E, and F)

Day's Theme

When Prediction Works: Theory, Emergence, and Confirmation

8:30 AM – 9:30 AM | Breakfast & Arrival

Session V — Conceptual Foundations

Chair: Brett de Bary (Cornell University)

9:30 – 10:10 AM

Shaun Nichols (Cornell University)

The Social Science of Philosophy: On the Presumed Necessity of Explanation

Abstract:

One of the ways in which the social sciences have changed over the last 20 years is an increased focus on trying to understand how people think about matters of interest to philosophers. This is best illustrated by the fluorescence of work in moral psychology. Moral psychologists have explored both what people think about morality, and the psychological foundations for those beliefs. In this talk, I will pursue a new strand of inquiry focused on ordinary presumptions about explanation.

According to a simple version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), for every fact, there must be an explanation of that fact. The PSR has been influential in philosophy for centuries. Do ordinary people presuppose something like the PSR in their explanatory judgments? We find that they do, based on studies with adults and children in the US as well as adults in India with little formal education. These empirical results promise to reflect back on philosophy. The intuitiveness of the PSR might help explain why, even in the absence of adequate evidence, philosophers are attracted to views like determinism and reductionism.

Session VI — Predictive Theory and Global Confirmation

10:15 AM– 12:10 PM

Chair: Gautam Ahuja (Cornell University)

10:15 – 10:50 AM

Victor Nee (Cornell University)

A Theory of Emergence: Knowledge Spillover × Network Rewiring → Innovation

Abstract:

This paper presents a mechanism-based theory of emergence explaining how new economic institutions and innovative activity arise in regional knowledge economies. The core mechanism links knowledge spillover with purposive network rewiring, generating sustained innovation over time. In a paper co-authored with Sirui Wang, we used longitudinal data of behavioral trace of knowledge spillover and network rewiring in a comparative regional analysis to show how these mechanisms operate across different institutional contexts, focusing on the United States and Sweden. The analysis shows that innovation is not simply a function of agglomeration or human capital, but of agentic networking under uncertainty. By identifying measurable mechanisms and tracing their dynamic interaction, the paper advances a mechanism-based theory capable of both explanation and conditional prediction. The findings illustrate how emergence can be empirically studied using large-scale data while remaining grounded in institutional theory.

10:50 – 11:30 AM

Paul Ingram (Columbia University)

Global Confirmation of the Theory of Emergence

Abstract:

Building on the theory of emergence, this paper provides robust empirical confirmation using comparative data across multiple global regions. The number of threshold-crossover events, from below to above \$1 billion in recorded personal wealth, per year per urban center provides the basis for our evaluation of innovation activity. The change in count, rather than total wealth, was chosen to limit the effects of fluctuations such as the rapidly changing market capitalizations of many billionaires' public companies. Further, this distinction centers the creation of a new billionaire as a distinct sociological event rather than a piece of an aggregate wealth in each urban center. The results demonstrate consistent patterns across diverse institutional environments, supporting the generalizability of the emergence framework while clarifying its scope conditions. The paper contributes to debates about prediction and confirmation by showing how mechanism-based theories can travel across contexts without relying on universal laws. Instead, prediction is framed as conditional on identifiable social processes.

11:30 AM – 12:10 PM

Sirui Wang (CSES and McKinsey & Co)

A Cross-National Confirmation of the Theory of Emergence

Abstract: We examine how ecological conditions conducive to knowledge spillover and rewiring interact with the rule of law to generate extreme entrepreneurial wealth. Our empirical strategy uncovers robust three-way complementarities: countries that simultaneously support knowledge spillover, facilitate network rewiring, and enforce strong legal institutions exhibit disproportionately higher levels of founder and entrepreneurial wealth. The state shapes the institutional framework that determines whether innovative activity translates into privately captured entrepreneurial wealth. These findings illuminate cases such as China, where disruptive innovation, creative destruction and the rise of billionaire entrepreneurs coexist with a single-party state.

12:10–1:30 PM | Lunch

Session VII — Organizations and Institutional Change

Chair: Paul Ingram (Columbia University)

1:30 – 2:10 PM

Forrest Briscoe (Cornell University)

Feeling the Vibe? A Theory of Social Movement Resonance in Distributed Workplace Communications

Abstract:

Much has been written about how social movements change organizations and society, and we're certainly seeing it today. Normal-science theory and testing of this influence tended to focus on how movements change concrete structures, such as organizational policies and state laws. Now, with new computational text-analysis tools, we have the potential to systematically measure social movement influences on the language and culture of organizations and societies. Our first study pursuing this type of research quantifies how a major social movement changed workplace communications. In this talk I will share early findings from that study and reflect on challenges that arise in developing and testing theory for this purpose—and in bridging between the rich legacy social science literature and an emerging world of large-scale communication data and limited-transparency computational tools.

Session VIII — Experimental Confirmation Under Real-World Constraints

Chair: Delia Baldassarri (New York University)

2:15 – 2:55 PM

J. Håkan Holm (Lund University)

Lab-in-the-Field Experiments: Rationale and Applications in China with CEOs

Abstract:

Lab-in-the-field experiments occupy a middle ground between laboratory studies and full-scale field experiments. This talk explains the rationale for using such designs to study theoretically relevant populations, focusing on experiments conducted with CEOs in China. The results show systematic deviations from standard economic predictions, including higher levels of trust and cooperation, that are nonetheless patterned and meaningful. The findings underscore the importance of subject selection for theory testing and demonstrate how lab-in-the-field experiments can improve both explanatory relevance and empirical validity.

Coffee break: 2:55 – 3:15 PM

Chair: Margaret Levi (Stanford University)

3:20 PM – 4:00 PM

Erik Wengström (Lund University)

Behavioral Surrogates: Measuring and Predicting Long-Run Impacts of Vaccination Incentives

Abstract:

Evaluating public health interventions often requires predicting long-run outcomes from short-run behavioral responses. This paper examines whether commonly used behavioral measures can serve as reliable surrogates for long-term effects. Drawing on a large-scale field experiment on vaccination incentives in Sweden, I assess which short-term responses predict sustained behavioral change and which do not. The findings speak directly to debates about prediction, measurement, and external validity in experimental research, with implications for policy design and evaluation.

Chair: Eldar Shafir (Princeton University)

4:05 PM – 4:45 PM

Kai Quek (University of Hong Kong)

Dynamics of Reconciliation: Dyadic Experiments in China and the United States

Abstract:

This paper studies the dynamics of reconciliation using dyadic and parallel experiments conducted in China and the United States, with a focus on U.S.–China relations. The experimental design captures interactive processes between sender and receiver governments, allowing analysis of how conciliatory signals and responses shape domestic political costs. The results show that reconciliation outcomes depend critically on mutual reactions, revealing political “sweet spots” where cooperation is most likely to succeed. By combining experimental methods with international political analysis, the paper illustrates how controlled designs can illuminate complex strategic interactions under geopolitical rivalry.

Session IX — Concluding Reflections

When prediction *can* work
Emergence mechanisms
Confirmation via big data and experiments
Extension to organizations, health, and geopolitics

Theory, Prediction, and Confirmation Revisited

4:50 PM – 5:50 PM

Chair: Victor Nee (Cornell University)