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Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl, Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 618 pp.

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Book reviews

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Two decades ago, the last of Jeffrey Alexander's celebrated *Twenty Lectures* on "Sociological Theory since World War II" [Alexander 1987, 374-380] characterized the most recent theoretical trends as attempts at a new synthesis, the "overriding systematic, or analytic, issue" of which was "to reintegrate subjective voluntarism and objective constraint." Within that new wave of theorising, Alexander mentioned an "important German reconsideration of Mead" [*ibidem*, 376-377]. Its author was Hans Joas. Joas, now one of the world's leading sociologists, has recently published his own *Twenty Introductory Lectures* on "Social Theory," written in collaboration with Wolfgang Knöbl. Reading the 560 pages of this book is a rewarding experience, precisely in that it allows to get a clear view about where that "new wave of theorising" has led sociology. Such a question sounds particularly intriguing, after twenty years witnessing major social changes, ranging from the fall of the Soviet empire to the outburst of a world's civilizational and economic crisis.

Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures is a book that challenges readers in many respects. First, it provides a comprehensive and updated overview of the development of social theory after World War II, encompassing an impressively wide range of authors, theories, paradigms, and geo-cultural contexts, in which arguments and controversies are thoroughly reconstructed with keen sociological insight and conceptual precision. Such a critical exposition includes both European and American contributions, rightly pointing to the dramatic shift of social theory towards Europe since the 1970s, and thereby marking a difference with respect to Alexander's reconstruction, which was more focussed on American authors. Therefore, it is perfectly safe to praise this work as unmatched in the contemporary sociological landscape, one displaying meticulous, amazingly broad scholarship. Furthermore, the text offers more than a general introduction to sociological theory, living up to the ambition of keeping together teaching purposes and systematic enterprise. The complexities of analytic issues and the approach adopted by the authors also involve a strict connection between sociological and philosophical themes. Finally, the authors highlight the close relationship between the endogenous development of social theory and the constant effort to provide substantive interpretations of society.

As a consequence, doing full justice to the complexity articulated in this volume would require a much longer essay than this. I have thus chosen not to take issue at the single chapters and interpretations of the various authors. I will leave it for readers to assess the way Joas and Knöbl treat each particular contributor to social theory, and will analyse their text following the three main insights running throughout its pages, namely 1) its definition of social theory, and its main lines of thought concerning 2) the conceptual frameworks to be applied in social analysis, and 3) the diagnoses of the present state and future trends of society. My aim is to show that the book presents a

consistent, often compelling view of social theory precisely by articulating its discourse into these internally connected aspects.

1. Let us first deal with the way Joas and Knöbl conceive of theory in the social scientific domain [chapter I]. Through the label of *Social Theory*, the authors wish to convey a twofold idea. On the one hand, sociology and its theoretical core should not be confined to empirical generalizations and strictly explanatory programmes, which is typical of what they call “sociological” theory. They insist that sociology should not shy away from philosophical, normative, or political issues, but must engage in systematic relationships with its metaphysical environment. Rejecting to meet this task would amount to losing any public relevance in the face of competitors like political theory or the humanities at large. On the other hand, social theory remains a quite specific activity, three fundamental questions distinguishing it from other disciplinary fields. In a classical formulation, the authors indicate that these basic questions concern what is action, what is order, and how social change occurs.

Such a statement about the task of social theory involves a precise option as regards the very nature of theory. The authors take a thoroughly anti-empiricist and anti-positivist stance, rejecting to identify theory with explanatory systems based on universal statements referring to empirically observable variables. In fact, there is no theory-free, unmediated form of observation, and therefore it is ultimately impossible to draw any sharp dividing line between empirical and theoretical knowledge. Relying upon Alexander’s work, Joas and Knöbl emphasize that social scientists do not have to do with a polarity, but with a continuum. Social scientific knowledge is a process occurring within the context of an empirical vs. metaphysical environment. Therefore, theory is also made of presuppositions, definitions, concepts, that is of elements which cannot be empirically tested. Here Joas and Knöbl apply to the social sciences Kuhn’s general thesis, according to which scientific paradigms are incommensurable with each other, and there is no unambiguous criterion by which to ascertain when a theory should be considered empirically falsified. But they immediately point out that a correct interpretation of Kuhn’s work does not lead to relativistic conclusions [pp. 16-19]. Lack of empirical criteria for falsification does not mean that there can be no rational dialogue between different theories, or reasons to decide among them. I agree with this interpretation, but the rational standards through which theories can be compared are then left relatively inarticulate in the text. This raises two questions. First, would the authors agree with Kuhn’s 1969 postscript to his famous book on scientific revolutions, where he indicated the capacity to formulate and solve puzzles as the chief way to make sense of the difference among theories? Second, do Joas and Knöbl also share Kuhn’s scepticism toward any possible ontological interpretation of what theories can grasp about “what really exists,” or some of its real properties?

Be that as it may, the important conclusion they draw is that the plurality of paradigms in sociology is here to stay, and there is no point in interpreting the social scientific enterprise as a quest for unification. However, paradigms partially overlap, and are connected by meaningful “corridors” that make rational dialogue possible. There is fairly wide consensus about what should be regarded as the central problems of social theory, plus empirical and theoretical statements exist that are unanimously endorsed beyond the boundaries of paradigms. Such a conclusion consistently inspires the way the

authors lead their discussion of the wide array of theories they examine throughout the text, in the attempt to show how plurality does not necessarily lead to fragmentation. Regardless of whether such an endeavour can ever be completely successful, following up such connections constitutes one of the main intellectual pleasures a reader can extract from this book.

2. This leads us to our second point, concerning the current state of social theory. The authors devote three chapters [II to IV] to Talcott Parsons, whose classical synthesis they regard as a classical achievement, since it originally brought the theory of action in sociology on an unprecedented level of complexity. The following chapters deal with neo-utilitarianism [V], interpretive approaches [VI and VII], and conflict theory [VIII]. After this sequence, the text comes to revolve around two main foci. First, the great post-Parsonian syntheses are examined. The pendulum here shifts mainly to Europe, with Habermas [chapters IX and X], Luhmann [XI], Giddens [XII], and Bourdieu [XV]. Other lines of thought, like structuralism and poststructuralism [XIV], the French anti-structuralists [XVI], feminist social theory [XVII], and neo-pragmatism [XIX] also come into the picture. The other focus is on modernization theory, which I will treat below. The last lecture [XX] draws some conclusions about the most recent developments and problem areas. The authors discuss all theories at length, and highlight what particular connections obtain between them, thereby providing sound knowledge as well as fruitful indications for future developments. We may, however, be tempted to ask a more general question. Is there an emergent trend in social theory today that can be regarded as prevailing? Is any common conceptual framework resulting from the impressively complex bundle of theoretical work that has kept sociologists busy for the last decades? The authors stick to their pluralist view of social theory with careful sensitivity for all conceptual nuances. Yet they do come up with a proposal, which unravels gradually throughout the text. Alexander's central issue concerning the connection of subjective voluntarism and objective constraints is still with us, but his advocated "new synthesis" failed. Nevertheless, Giddens's resigned view of a "hopeless fragmentation" is no accurate account of the current state of things. In fact, "the widespread desire to produce synthesis" [p. 529] remains, but cannot succeed if it does not surrender its overly unifying spirit. What we have is common problems, situational, stepwise processes of convergence, and some mutual translation between different paradigms on particular points. This entails accepting pluralism as a permanent situation and learning to work with it. But then, on the authors' view, even such a prudent reconstruction tends to reveal a deep core. Within different paradigms, a theory of action seems to be the rising tide, entailing a strong emphasis on the interpretive dimension of social interactions and sharp criticism of neo-functionalist and neo-utilitarian approaches. Finally, the authors go on to specify such a trend further. And it is here that Joas's own neo-pragmatist approach comes to the fore [pp. 512-528], together with other recent contributions, particularly within French theory. Joas develops a theory of action which incorporates the idea of non-teleology and breaks free from the means/ends schema. His main goal is to do away with Cartesianism, and its distinctions between *i*) goal (mental) vs. action (physical) and *ii*) perception (cognition) vs. action (performance). The key point here is to deny that actions and decisions, as well as organizations, institutions, and macro-social phenomena can simply come as a result of pre-conceived aims, universal norms, or automatic mech-

anisms, and to emphasize human creativity in responding to situational challenges as the crucial factor in social life. This is why such often taken-for-granted presuppositions as purposive action, body control, and autonomy are called into question. The concept of *situation*, with the related contingency, challenges and problem-solving activities becomes theoretically pivotal.

Perhaps a good way to summarize what Joas is trying to achieve, and what he and Knöbl see as the underlying trend in current social theory, is to recall François Dosse's felicitous formulation, as the authors quote it in chapter XX. Social theorists are working, in their different ways, to articulate a version of social science which finds "the words and mental equipment to pursue its quest for meaning without teleology, to express its sensitiveness to historicity without historicism, and its taste for acting without activism" [p. 539].

I feel in perfect alignment with such a perspective. I would only point to one of the aforementioned "corridors" between paradigms, one that the authors do not presently explore. Joas's crucial insights on the concept of situation and of human creativity – and indeed the whole "spirit" of the intellectual enterprise as summarized in the above citation – might be fruitfully connected with a morphogenetic approach that provides a systematic conceptual framework to keep together social conditionings with their situational logic, human reflexivity within such situational constraints, and the process of emergence of complex social phenomena [see, for example, Archer 1995; Archer 2000; Archer 2003]. Moreover, this emerging way to conceive of "action" seems to me to be making the category of "social relationship" more central than ever, insofar as relationships and their inner structure can be considered to be the basic factors of situations, and of processes of social emergence [Donati 2010].

3. The text also offers an unusually articulated overview of modernization theories, thereby relating theoretical frames with interpretations of society. Chapters XIII and XVIII deal respectively with the renewal of modernization theory, often still in a Parsonian mood, and the more recent theories confronting the crisis of modernity, as well as of the sociological representation of its dynamics and structures.

These sections of the book nicely complete the complex picture the authors have drawn. Here the emphasis goes on those theories which fully appreciate the many tensions within Western modernity, as well as the contingency of social and cultural modernization processes, resulting in multiple modernities. On the authors' view, modernization theory is currently drawing the relevant consequences of both empirical facts and conceptual developments. On the one hand, the present historical situation suggests that all linear theories of modernization should be profoundly reconsidered, both in their emphasis on «progress» – see for instance the related idea of the end of war – and in their various predictions based on allegedly irresistible mechanisms – e.g. the process of secularization. On the other hand, the functionalist approach has revealed its weakness, and theories are more and more striving to grasp the way in which actors drive and shape social differentiation. Once again, the authors stress the impact of contingency, with its unpredictable possibilities for action.

Overall, it seems fair to say that Joas and Knöbl consider a "new" theory of action, as specified above, to be the task of a social science that can contribute to the self-understanding of Western, and indeed global society in what we might venture to call a post-

functionalist and post-nihilist fashion. The guiding idea of the book is that social theory must keep together normative stance and scientific rigour, universal values and cultural pluralism, regularity and unpredictability, without indulging in deterministic views, but also without annihilating the very possibility of theory.

What is at stake is the scientific status of sociology as a discipline, which goes hand in hand with its public significance. Embracing regularity and contingency in the inner constitution of social relationships and the making of social life means to understand the fragile, precarious state of all forms created, of all achievements, structural and cultural, that we have learned to regard as the unquestioned stuff of our individual and collective lives. Are the social and cultural achievements of modernity called into question? What are the conditions upon which they rest? And where is the normative stance of the social sciences to be found, if not in the belief in progress and modernity itself? These are the haunting questions sociology – and Western society – has to face in the contemporary era, and in this respect *Social Theory* can also serve as an outline of historical awareness. The big problem we are left with is whether it will prove possible to meet such challenges within an action frame of reference, and within the dual alternative of modernity (or even modernities) vs. post-modernity.

In any event, this fascinating book will provide a wealth of conceptual resources for a long time. I've tried to point to corridors that are still untrodden, doors to be opened and rooms still to be visited, as well as to illustrate the architectural beauty of the edifice Joas and Knöbl have designed for readers who wish to find their way in social theory, or to create new ones.

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