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**Citation:** Susen, S. (2013). Comments on Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva's 'Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond' – Towards a 'Hermeneutics-Inspired Pragmatism'?. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 14(1), pp. 80-101. doi: 10.1080/1600910X.2012.690772

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## REVIEW ESSAY

### Comments on Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva's *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* – Towards a 'Hermeneutics-Inspired Pragmatism'?<sup>1</sup>

Simon Susen

*Department of Sociology, City University London, United Kingdom*

This essay provides an in-depth discussion of Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva's *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics; knowledge; modernity; pragmatism; social theory; society; sociological theory

Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva's *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*<sup>2</sup> is undoubtedly one of the most comprehensive, intellectually stimulating, and up-to-date introductions to contemporary social theory. The authors deserve to be congratulated for providing one of the few introductory handbooks that allow both academics *and* non-academics, both scholars *and* laypersons, both conceptually *and* empirically oriented social researchers, and both sociologists *and* other social scientists to appreciate the relevance of contemporary social theory to almost any kind of critical engagement with the social world.

It is one of Baert and Silva's great achievements to have illustrated, in an extraordinarily clear and intellectually challenging fashion, that social theory can and should be regarded as a *sine qua non* of critical social research. As the authors convincingly argue, social theory plays an increasingly pivotal role not only in sociology but also in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, notably in philosophy, history, anthropology, psychology, economics, and political science. Hence, rather than confining the relevance of social theory to the epistemic realm of sociology, Baert and Silva rightly insist upon its *transdisciplinary spirit* in three respects: first, in terms of the *origins* of contemporary social theory (different social theorists have diverging intellectual backgrounds and draw upon a large variety of sources); second, in terms of the *themes* examined in contemporary social theory (social theory touches upon multiple elements of the human world – in particular, sociological, philosophical, historical, anthropological, psychological, economic, and political dimensions – and it does so on three main levels, namely on the micro-level of the individual, the meso-level of community, and the macro-level of society); and, third, in terms of the *influence* of contemporary social theory (the debates that have shaped the development of social theory in recent decades have impacted not only upon empirical research undertaken in sociology but also upon the ways in which

social-scientific problems are studied and conceptualized in neighboring disciplines). In short, social theory should be conceived of as a transdisciplinary enterprise. Given its mission to overcome disciplinary boundaries and thereby challenge the counter-productive effects of scientific tribalism, 'it makes more sense to talk about *social* theory rather [*sic*] than *sociological* theory' (p. 287).

Before examining the weaker aspects of Baert and Silva's excellent book, let us briefly consider the key strengths of *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. At least five positive qualities of this volume are especially worth mentioning.

(1) *Structure*: The entire book is well organized, both in terms of its overall structure and in terms of the internal structure of each chapter. What is particularly useful for those with no, or very limited, knowledge of social theory is that each chapter has an underlying *tripartite structure*, which is aimed at covering the following aspects: (a) historical context, (b) crucial issues and contributions, and (c) strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the authors make it remarkably easy for the reader to make sense of contemporary social theory (a) by shedding light on the *historical circumstances* in which unique paradigmatic approaches have emerged and developed, (b) by explaining the essential *issues* at stake in specific intellectual traditions, as well as the principal *contributions* made by different scholars, and (c) by drawing attention to the most significant *strengths and weaknesses* of rival conceptual frameworks. This tripartite analytical structure, which is rigorously applied in each chapter, permits the reader to acquire an understanding of the most influential currents and controversies in contemporary social theory on the basis of three types of knowledge, which are fundamental to critical social science: (a) descriptive, (b) explanatory, and (c) evaluative knowledge. In their analysis, then, Baert and Silva accomplish three things. (a) They accurately *describe* the historical contexts and biographical itineraries which need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the emergence of idiosyncratic traditions in social theory. (b) They clearly and systematically *explain* the central themes, presuppositions, and contributions of different modern social theories. (c) They offer balanced accounts of these theories, not only by *examining* their respective strengths and weaknesses, but also by *assessing* their general relevance and usefulness. In addition, each chapter provides a section with recommended readings, covering both essential primary sources and informative texts that can be found in the secondary literature.

(2) *Scope*: Anybody who has taught social theory at university level will have been confronted with the following two questions: 'Where should we start, and where should we end?' In this volume, which contains nine chapters, Baert and Silva are concerned primarily with contemporary, rather than classical, social theory. Hence, instead of beginning their journey by reminding us of the main contributions made by the founding figures of modern social thought, the authors focus largely on social theory in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is not to suggest, however, that they consider the works of classical sociologists to be irrelevant to contemporary forms of social and political analysis; on the contrary, throughout the book, they remind us of the continuing relevance of classical sociological thought by tracing the roots of contemporary social theory in the writings of influential thinkers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead. Who, then,

are the social theorists whose works are examined – that is, *contextualized*, *explained*, and *assessed* – in this book? The coverage is impressively wide-ranging, illustrating that Baert and Silva have an exceptionally profound and comprehensive knowledge of the history of modern social thought.

Chapter 1 gives a useful overview of developments in twentieth-century *French* social theory, ranging from Émile Durkheim's positivist functionalism and Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism to Pierre Bourdieu's genetic structuralism and Luc Boltanski's pragmatism. Chapter 2 explores the most significant contributions made by influential *functionalist and neo-functionalist* thinkers, that is, by 'early' functionalists such as Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, as well as by 'late' functionalists such as Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Niklas Luhmann, and Jeffrey Alexander. Chapter 3 presents a lively and spirited account of the conceptual and methodological tools developed by *micro-sociological* theories. The relevance of the systematic study of everyday life, notably its pivotal role in the construction of social order, is demonstrated by reference to George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, as well as Randall Collins's and Russell Hardin's various studies of the role of rituals, emotions, and trust in the day-to-day functioning of social life. Chapter 4 supplies an introduction to *rational choice and game theories* as well as to *neo-institutionalist* approaches, focusing on the writings of Jon Elster, Martin Hollis, David M. Kreps, Gary S. Becker, Paul DiMaggio, and Walter W. Powell. Chapter 5 is concerned with the *sociology of modernity*, in particular with Giddens's structuration theory, but also with the works of historical sociologists such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann, and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt. Chapter 6 provides a remarkably clear and accessible account of Michel Foucault's *archaeological and genealogical* studies, enabling the reader to grasp the impact of structuralist and post-structuralist thought on contemporary social theory. Chapter 7 confronts the difficult task of offering a succinct summary of one of the most intellectually challenging approaches in modern social thought: *critical theory*. In this chapter, Baert and Silva concentrate on the writings of Jürgen Habermas, but they also consider the recent contributions made by Claus Offe and Axel Honneth. Chapter 8 stands out as one of the most exciting sections of this volume. This is due not only to the captivating language in which it is written, but also to the cutting-edge relevance of its thematic focus: late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century social theories that seek to account for the alleged distinctiveness of the contemporary age, to which Baert and Silva provocatively refer as a '*Brave New World*' (p. 248, italics added). With this, immensely difficult, analytical task in mind, the authors examine the theoretical frameworks of five prominent contemporary scholars: Manuel Castells's 'network society', Ulrich Beck's 'risk society', Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid modernity', Saskia Sassen's 'global society', and Richard Sennett's 'fall of the public man'. In the concluding chapter, Baert and Silva make a case for the continuing importance of social theory in the twenty-first century. More specifically, they propose an outline of a '*hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism*' (p. 292, italics added), which forms the presuppositional basis of their own theoretical perspective.

In brief, the study covers a wide range of currents and controversies that have shaped the development of social theory throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

(3) *Depth*: The information provided in each chapter is not only authoritative and reliable but also highly useful and relevant to central debates in the contemporary social sciences. In this volume, key controversies in modern social theory are contextualized, analyzed, and discussed in an eloquent and thought-provoking fashion. The authors' willingness to engage not only with the secondary literature but also, closely and extensively, with primary sources makes this a particularly worthwhile book at a time in which 'the social' has been prematurely pronounced dead. One of the principal challenges when writing a comprehensive introduction to a conceptually dense and thematically diverse area of research, such as social theory, is to present complex ideas and sophisticated explanatory frameworks in an accessible language that encourages the readers to engage with the issues in question, rather than making them feel intimidated by the intricacy of the task that lies ahead of them. It is one of the major accomplishments of this volume to have achieved precisely this. Baert and Silva manage to simplify complex ideas without presenting them in a simplistic manner. More importantly, their analysis succeeds in separating essential arguments from less essential ones. To be sure, when giving an overview of the works of influential social theorists – such as Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Talcott Parsons, Jeffrey Alexander, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Manuel Castells – it is impossible to do justice to the entire complexity of their writings. Nonetheless, by virtue of their aforementioned tripartite analytical approach, Baert and Silva succeed in fleshing out the historical backgrounds, thematic foci, as well as the original contributions and noteworthy pitfalls of the countless works produced by twentieth-century social theorists.<sup>3</sup>

(4) *Language*: Anyone who has taught social theory at different academic levels and to diverse student bodies will have noticed one thing: social theory, along with social research methods, is one of the most unpopular ingredients of the sociology curriculum. The main reason for this is that social theory is often perceived as hopelessly abstract and unnecessarily complex, that is, as a conceptually sophisticated way of making relatively simple points in a remarkably difficult language. As a result, many students – at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels – find it difficult to relate to, and easy to feel intimidated by, social theory. Over the past eight years, I have put the first edition of this book on the top of the reading lists of the social theory modules I taught; in the future, I shall continue to do so with the second edition. The reason for this is rather straightforward: at institutions as diverse as Cambridge, Goldsmiths, Newcastle, Birkbeck, and City University London – the places at which I have taught and which have distinct research and teaching cultures with rather dissimilar, albeit internally heterogeneous, student bodies – the vast majority of my students would praise this volume as one of the most enjoyable and stimulating introductions to social theory. One may indeed suggest that the fact that this book tends to be amongst the most popular introductions to contemporary social theory is indicative of the *pragmatist spirit* in which it is written.<sup>4</sup> For one of the main objectives of the pragmatist project is to overcome the epistemological gap between scientists and laypersons. This is not to assert that Baert and Silva claim that the divide between scientific and ordinary forms of engaging with the world is entirely artificial and necessarily a bad thing; rather, this is to acknowledge that critical social scientists should seek to cross-fertilize these two spheres of cognition and interaction.

(5) *Contemporary relevance*: A few words have to be said about the contemporary relevance of this volume. As the authors point out in the ‘Preface to the Second Edition’ (pp. viii–ix), ‘[t]he first edition of this book appeared more than a decade ago’ (p. viii), and hence it seemed necessary to update the first edition in order to account for the new paradigmatic trends that have shaped social theory at the dawn of the new millennium. Apart from taking note of the most obvious difference, which consists in the fact that the second edition is a co-authored, rather than a single-authored, volume, one has to congratulate Baert and Silva for having produced a truly updated version of this book based on *three major amendments*.

First, literally all chapters have been *substantially revised and coherently expanded*. This is especially important with regard to the following chapters: Chapter 1, which now contains a useful section on *Luc Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology*; Chapter 3, which, in the new edition, includes a discussion of the works of *Randall Collins and Russell Hardin*; Chapter 4, which comprises a section on *neo-institutionalism* and its relation to rational choice theory; Chapter 5, which provides a detailed discussion of *historical sociology*, covering the works of renowned scholars such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann, and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt; and Chapter 7, in which, in addition to the oeuvre of Jürgen Habermas, the writings of *Claus Offe and Axel Honneth* are considered, thereby taking on board more recent developments in critical theory.

Second, an entirely *new chapter* (Chapter 8) *on current trends in social theory* has been added to the book; this penultimate chapter may be regarded as a sign of the scholarly seriousness and intellectual rigor with which this volume has been updated. One could hardly think of a more ambitious and timely challenge than the task of accounting for the distinctiveness of the contemporary age. Baert and Silva’s analysis of Castells’s ‘network society’, Beck’s ‘risk society’, Bauman’s ‘liquid society’, Sassen’s ‘global society’, and Sennett’s ‘post-Fordist society’ is an impressively skillful and intellectually convincing attempt to attend to this task.

Third, the *concluding chapter* (Chapter 9) has been completely rewritten. In this chapter, the authors succeed not only in arguing for the contemporary relevance of modern social theory, but also in developing a thought-provoking outline of an alternative theoretical program, which they characterize as a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ (p. 292). In short, the authors have made a sustained effort to update this volume by expanding the scope of each chapter, covering cutting-edge forms of social theorizing, and making their own contribution to the field.

Let us, in the remainder of this review, examine some of the most significant weaknesses of *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. I shall limit myself to making (1) three critical remarks concerning the entire book, (2) three brief observations on the new chapter which deals with current trends in social theory, and (3) a number of comments on the concluding chapter, in which the authors defend their own – hermeneutics-inspired – version of pragmatism.

### **1. Three critical comments on the book**

One of the first things that may strike the reader about this volume is that it contains remarkably few reflections on the impact of *classical sociology* on contemporary social theory. Of course, one may legitimately argue that, as stated in the title, this study is concerned primarily with social theory in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries. Furthermore, one may point out that Chapter 1 comprises an entire section on Durkheim's contributions and his influence upon French social theory and other intellectual traditions. Yet, the impact of the works of Marx, Weber, and Simmel on contemporary forms of social and political analysis is given relatively little consideration. This is particularly true with regard to the continuing significance of Marxist thought: although its importance is cursorily mentioned in relation to existentialist,<sup>5</sup> structuralist,<sup>6</sup> and post-structuralist<sup>7</sup> approaches, as well as with respect to critical theory<sup>8</sup> and network theory,<sup>9</sup> overall it is given only marginal treatment. If the authors decide to publish a third edition within the next decade, my suggestion would be to include an introductory chapter on the continuing relevance of Marxist, Weberian, Durkheimian, and Simmelian thought.<sup>10</sup>

A second point that will have caught some readers' attention is the fact that, as is clear both from the 'Table of Contents' and from the chapters themselves, the book contains hardly any information on non-mainstream approaches in contemporary social theory, some of which have become so influential that, by now, they may be regarded as fruitful elements of established, or indeed conventional, ways of social theorizing. Amongst these approaches are the following: *feminist social theories* (e.g. Lisa Adkins, Michèle Barrett, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Sandra Harding, Beverley Skeggs, Liz Stanley, Sylvia Walby); *social theories of ethnicity and 'race'* (e.g. Les Back, David Theo Goldberg, Caroline Knowles, Robert Miles, John Solomos); *social theories of space* (e.g. David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, Georg Simmel, Edward Soja); *post-modernist social theories* (e.g. Jean Baudrillard, Mike Featherstone, Mike and Nicholas Gane, Fredric Jameson, Douglas Kellner, Scott Lash, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Maffesoli, Steven Seidman, John Urry); *post-structuralist and deconstructivist theories* (e.g. Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Félix Guattari, Slavoj Žižek); and *actor-network theories* (e.g. Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law, Donald MacKenzie). Whatever one makes of these approaches, all of them have had, and are likely to continue to have, a substantial impact on key debates in the social sciences. An introduction to contemporary social theory that claims to be comprehensive cannot possibly ignore their respective contributions.<sup>11</sup>

The third issue, which ties in with the previous criticism, concerns a major limitation of this book, a limitation which – in defense of the authors – one may consider to be a central problem of both classical and contemporary social theory: the 'white theory-boys syndrome', that is, the *ethnocentric, Anglocentric, androcentric, and heteronormative* nature of mainstream social theory. In other words, despite the significant influence of feminist, post-colonial, and post-modern research agendas on the contemporary social sciences, social theory continues to be very much of a Eurocentric, predominantly Anglophone, white, middle-class, and male-dominated language game.

One needs only to look at the 'Table of Contents' of *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*<sup>12</sup> to have this suspicion, once more, confirmed.

- *Overall*: The 'Table of Contents' makes (implicit or explicit) reference to at least 34 social theorists.<sup>13</sup>
- *Gender*: 32 out of these 34 social theorists are male, and only two of them are female (the exceptions being Saskia Sassen and Theda Skocpol, although, occasionally, other female theorists – such as Margaret Archer, Seyla Benhabib, and Ève Chiapello – also enter the scene).

- *Nationality*: 15 are North/US-American,<sup>14</sup> 5 are German,<sup>15</sup> 5 are French,<sup>16</sup> 3 are British,<sup>17</sup> 1 is Francophone Swiss,<sup>18</sup> 1 is Spanish (but Anglophone),<sup>19</sup> 1 is Israeli (but Anglophone),<sup>20</sup> 1 is originally Polish (but Anglophone),<sup>21</sup> 1 is originally Dutch (but Anglophone)<sup>22</sup>, and 1 is Norwegian (but Anglophone).<sup>23</sup>
- *Language*: All of them speak and write in Western European languages, that is, in the three languages that have dominated the development of the social sciences over the past two hundred years, namely *English, French, and German*. To be exact, 23 of them (that is, most of them) write and publish primarily in English,<sup>24</sup> 6 of them write and publish primarily in French,<sup>25</sup> and 5 of them write and publish primarily in German.<sup>26</sup>
- *'Race'*: All of them are white.
- *Class/education*: All of them were educated at university level, and most of them have obtained their university degrees from prestigious institutions.
- *Sexual orientation*: It may be inappropriate to make any assumptions about their sexual orientation, but, given the heteronormative nature of their writings, one may suspect that most of these theorists would regard themselves as heterosexual.
- *Age*: None of the contemporary social theorists considered in this book is under forty years of age.
- *Ability*: To my knowledge, none of the contemporary social theorists included in this study suffers from a major physical or mental disability.

It would not make much sense to take these observations too far, but they do illustrate a main issue that needs to be addressed: *social theory reproduces most of the negative '-isms'* (ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, Anglocentrism, neo-colonialism, racism, sexism, elitism, classism, ageism, ableism, etc.) *that its critical advocates denounce and seek to overcome*. Let us just consider the problem of ethnocentrism in social theory: What about Asian, Australian, Latin-American, or African social theory? Do they actually exist? And, if so, why does hardly anybody seem to take them seriously in the Anglo- and Eurocentric world of contemporary academia? Does this prove the existence of Luhmann's autopoiesis or Bourdieu's self-referential fields? If there is ever going to be a third edition of this volume aiming to break out of the ethnocentric straitjacket of modern social theory, the authors will have a huge task on their hands: namely, to cover hitherto unexplored territories of a non-Eurocentric social theory, thereby avoiding the trap of reproducing at least some of the aforementioned '-isms' in their book.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. Observations on Baert and Silva's account of current trends in social theory

First, the authors announce at the end of the introductory section of Chapter 8 that '*contemporary social theory* is less a common enterprise than a discursive medium through which *different perspectives* account for our world today' (p. 249, italics added). This assertion is potentially confusing for two reasons: to begin with, it appears to downplay the importance of the significant *commonalities* between recently formulated social theories, in particular with regard to their increased skepticism towards the promises of the Enlightenment project<sup>28</sup>; more significantly, however, this statement seems to ignore the fact that social theory, including its *classical* variants, has *always* been a discursive conglomerate of *diverging* – that is, competing and often contradictory – approaches.

Second, on various occasions in this chapter (as well as in other chapters), Baert and Silva rightly criticize some of the social theorists whose work they examine for failing to present *empirical evidence* – or at least the right kind of empirical evidence – in support of their claims. They make it clear that, from their point of view, '[s]ocial theory needs to be supported by carefully designed empirical research' (p. 268) and affirm that some social theorists, such as Bauman, fail in this respect. This may be considered as a valid point, but it must also be said that Baert and Silver themselves hardly supply any empirical evidence to corroborate their arguments.<sup>29</sup> Put differently, they commit the very fallacy they denounce in their analysis of the writings of other scholars: *theoreticism*. One may legitimately object that the purpose of a comprehensive introduction to social theory is *not* to provide the reader with empirically substantiated material, such as quantitative or qualitative data. Yet, given the centrality of this repeatedly made accusation, 319 pages should suffice to deliver at least a minimal amount of empirical evidence, in particular in relation to current trends in social theory (Chapter 8) and to the outline of their own theoretical model (Chapter 9). Otherwise, one gets the impression that *the authors fail to practice what they preach*.

Third, directly related to the previous point, one wonders why the authors in the second part of the title of Chapter 8 refer to 'The *Empirical Turn* in Social Theory' (italics added).<sup>30</sup> This title seems inappropriate for two reasons. First, no explanation is given as to *why* contemporary approaches in social theory should be associated with a paradigmatic shift worth describing as an 'empirical turn'. In fact, if anything, the theorists discussed in this chapter endorse anti-empiricist positions, as expressed in Beck's 'reflexive turn', Bauman's 'post-modern turn', and Sennett's 'cultural turn'.<sup>31</sup> Second, what is more perplexing is that several scholars in this chapter are criticized for their *failure to provide appropriate empirical data* in support of their arguments, notably Beck, Bauman, and Sennett. Hence, it is contradictory to entitle this chapter 'The Empirical Turn in Social Theory'.

### **3. Comments on the concluding chapter**

First, on various occasions the authors emphasize the *central role* that social theory plays not only in developing useful conceptual tools but also in setting constantly changing research agendas in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular. Most social theorists will sympathize with this view, as it gives legitimacy to the very process of social theorizing, underscoring the fact that, because of its capacity to supply both explanatory and evaluative frameworks for critical analysis, social theory is a cornerstone of social science. One may well agree with this perspective, but Baert and Silva's assertions that '*social theory is an increasingly important intellectual endeavour in the social sciences today*' (p. 285, italics added) and that, therefore, '*the need for social theorizing has only increased*' (p. 274, italics added) are more questionable. Has this need really increased? And, if so, why? As far as I can see, the authors fail to explain *why* we should be inclined to believe that the task of social theorizing has gained in significance. Social scientists have a tendency to defend the legitimacy of their endeavors by insisting upon the cutting-edge relevance of their research. The point is not to deny the centrality of social theory for the pursuit of a critical social science, but the authors need to *explain* why we should assume that social theory is more vital than ever before.

Second, in a similar vein, it is surprising that the authors fail to back up seemingly central statements about the alleged *uncertainty* of the role and status of social theory in the contemporary world. The authors declare, for instance, that ‘*the precise role of theory in empirical research has become increasingly uncertain*’ (p. 285, italics added) and that ‘[t]here is *growing uncertainty* as to what social theory can or should achieve, especially in relationship to the various social sciences it is supposed to serve’ (p. 288, italics added). They go on to maintain that ‘[i]ronically, there was *more of a consensus on these matters during the period preceding the prominence of social theory*’ (p. 288, italics added). These assertions regarding the alleged *uncertainty* of the role and status of social theory in the twenty-first century are problematic for a number of reasons. First, the authors may be entirely right in making these judgments, but they need to *substantiate* them. Second, there seems to be a tension between the aforementioned assumption that social theory is an *increasingly important* intellectual endeavor and the view that there is *growing uncertainty* about its mission and objectives. How can we claim that social theory is *ever more important* and at the same time affirm that it is *increasingly unclear* what it is supposed to achieve? We cannot possibly contend that social theory plays an increasingly pivotal role in the social sciences if we are unclear about its general purpose and overall function. Third, it is highly questionable whether or not the authors are right to suggest that there was ‘*more of a consensus on these matters*’ (p. 288, italics added) *before* social theory came into full swing. We need only to look at the ‘methodological dispute’ (*Methodenstreit*), the enduring importance of which manifests itself in epistemological divisions such as positivism versus interpretivism, materialism versus idealism, objectivism versus subjectivism, and realism versus constructivism. These paradigmatic antinomies make evident that, if there has ever been a universal agreement about the role of social theory, it is the consensus that there is no such consensus. Baert and Silva are right to point out that the social sciences in general and social theory in particular are both intellectually and institutionally diversified, but this does not mean that, for this reason, there is now less of a common understanding about its purpose and mission than there was in the early modern period.

Third, the authors go so far as to state that ‘social theory is *the main vehicle* through which intellectual debates occur’ (p. 286, italics added) and that ‘it *sets the agenda* for what is to be studied, and how it should be studied’ (p. 286, italics added). In support of this claim, they argue that ‘[t]his can be easily demonstrated by the way in which intellectual developments within social theory have *preceded* and *framed* debates in the social sciences’ (p. 286, italics added). There is no point in downplaying the agenda-setting power of social theory, but the examples given by the authors to validate this are far from convincing.<sup>32</sup> For instance, what is questionable in this context is their reference to Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, which in Germany, at least in the period following its publication, was discussed as a major contribution to *political sociology* and *historical sociology*, rather than to social theory. In brief, we must not overestimate the agenda-setting influence of social theory.

Fourth, Baert and Silva draw an interesting distinction between *social* theory and *sociological* theory (p. 287). They favor the former over the latter, because, as they explain, the term ‘social theory’ implies a *transdisciplinary* mode of engagement with the social sciences in general, whereas the term ‘[s]ociological theory suggests a *discipline-bound* form of theorizing [. . .], theory for sociological research’ (p. 287,

italics added). This is an important point, as it illustrates that Baert and Silva are firmly committed to conceiving of social theory as a transdisciplinary undertaking. They could have gone one step further, however, by pointing out that the term ‘social theory’ is based on a *broad understanding of social theorizing* in three respects:

- (a) Social theory is a *transdisciplinary* endeavor whose epistemic journeys can lead to fruitful forms of knowledge production only insofar as it is capable of transcending self-referential comfort zones of social research (‘social theory’, rather than ‘sociological theory’).
- (b) Social theory is a *reflexive* project whose relative success depends on its ability to recognize the socio-historical contingency of all cognitive claims to epistemic validity, including the assertions made by social theorists themselves (‘social theory’, rather than ‘theory of society’).
- (c) Social theory is a *holistic* project whose aim is to provide explanatory accounts of the relational functioning of the social world on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (‘social theory’, rather than ‘theory of the individual’, ‘theory of community’, or ‘theory of society’).

A key aspect which appears to be missing from Baert and Silva’s account is a *self-critical* reflection on the fact that they remain largely focused on social theory as an *Anglophone construct*. One does not even need to look beyond Europe to become aware of this limitation. In France, the concept *théorie sociale* is not generally on the agenda of established teaching or research institutions in the social sciences, nor is there anything like a *Revue de théorie sociale*. The same appears to apply to Mediterranean countries such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece. In Germany, concepts such as *Sozialtheorie* and *soziale Theorie* are used rarely; the term *Gesellschaftstheorie* is employed more frequently, but it puts the emphasis on the macro-sociological aspects of social theory (particularly common amongst Marxists, functionalists, and systems theorists), thereby excluding micro-sociological concerns, which fall into the area of *Gemeinschaftstheorie* (a term that is hardly ever used). In light of Baert and Silva’s fascination with pragmatist (and, hence, largely Anglophone) approaches in the social sciences, their lack of critical reflection on the *Anglocentric* nature of social theory, including their own perspective, does not come as a surprise.

Fifth, at the heart of Baert and Silva’s own program, which they describe as a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ (p. 292), lies their critique of two alternative models, which they consider to be obsolete: the ‘*deductive-nomological model*’ and the ‘*representational model*’ (pp. 288–92). The former ‘conceives of theory [...] as a set of laws and initial conditions from which empirical hypotheses can be derived’ (p. 288); by contrast, the latter regards theory ‘as providing the conceptual building blocks for capturing or picturing the empirical world’ (p. 288). Their characterization of these two models, however, is problematic on several counts. First, they claim that these two views ‘are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and some authors subscribed to both’ (p. 288). Yet, they do not tell us *why* and *to what extent* these two perspectives may be regarded as mutually complementary, not to mention the fact that the reader is left in the dark as to *who* exactly subscribes to both accounts. Second, they affirm that ‘[u]ntil recently the deductive-nomological model and its realist alternative were dominant ways of thinking about the relationship between theory and empirical research, but both have *now* been shown to be problematic’ (p.

285, italics added). The suggestion that these two epistemological models have only *recently* lost credibility disregards the fact that both approaches have been under attack since the early days of the *Methodenstreit*. Third, they assert that, '[i]n the latter part of the twentieth century, the deductive-nomological view came under intense scrutiny, and gave way gradually to the representational model' (p. 290), when actually the opposite is true: most of the various paradigmatic 'turns' proclaimed in the social sciences over the past three decades are associated with *fierce opposition to the representational model*, because of its alliance with different – increasingly unpopular – forms of epistemological objectivism, realism, and correspondence theories of truth. This move away from the representational model is reflected in paradigmatic shifts such as the 'interpretive turn', the 'perspectivist turn', the 'discursive turn', the 'cultural turn', the 'contingent turn', the 'performative turn', the 'pragmatic turn', and the 'post-modern turn'.

Finally, we need to reflect upon the nature of Baert and Silva's own perspective, to which they refer as a '*hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism*' (p. 292, italics added). Let us consider only a few, particularly problematic, issues.

- (a) My first comment regarding the authors' proposal for a 'hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism' concerns a *terminological* problem. Baert and Silva repeatedly emphasize that one of their principal aims is to combine hermeneutics and pragmatism (see especially pp. 292–3). On one occasion, however, they affirm that, '[b]y integrating American *neo-pragmatism* and *phenomenology*, [they] will demonstrate not only the bearing of pragmatism on contemporary philosophy of social science, but also the fruitfulness of a continued dialogue between the two traditions which on the surface look so different' (p. 293, italics added). The point is not to deny that useful insights may be gained from cross-fertilizing pragmatist and phenomenological or hermeneutical thought; the point is to be aware of the fact that *phenomenology* and *hermeneutics*, although they are obviously historically and intellectually related, constitute two *different* philosophical traditions. The former is concerned primarily with the study of consciousness and experience, whereas the latter is interested mainly in the nature of meaning and interpretation. In other words, Baert and Silva should be careful not to use the terms 'phenomenology' and 'hermeneutics' interchangeably, even less so if they lie at the heart of their own theoretical model. A 'hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism' and a 'phenomenology-inspired pragmatism' are *not* the same thing. Furthermore, when insisting upon 'the fruitfulness of an ongoing dialogue between *American neo-pragmatism and continental philosophy*, which, for far too long, *have been regarded as addressing irreconcilable intellectual concerns*' (p. 304, italics added), the authors fail to specify *who* has considered them as incompatible traditions and, more importantly, *why* this has been the case. The passive voice is symptomatic of the vagueness of this claim.
- (b) It is striking that the authors' plea for a 'hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism' is weakened by a considerable degree of *epistemic relativism*. This relativist tendency is reflected in various statements, such as the following:

[. . .] we will argue that the key to social research is not that it captures a previously hidden reality, but that it presents new innovative readings of the social. What is novel or innovative is *relative* to the common views which are currently held in the academic community and beyond. (p. 291, italics added)

[. . .] what precisely do we gain from learning that a particular social setting can be *rephrased* in terms of a given theory [. . .]? The answer is remarkably *little*. (p. 291, italics added)

As illustrated in these assertions, the authors appear to take a *relativist* stance, inspired by a mixture of *Rortian pragmatism*, *Kuhnian contextualism*, and *Gadamerian hermeneutics*. Due to their somewhat one-sided emphasis on the respective merits of pragmatist, contextualist, and hermeneutical approaches to knowledge, the authors overlook the fact that, in both the natural sciences and the social sciences, invaluable insights *can* be gained from the search for universally valid forms of knowledge. Of course, similar not only to pragmatist thinkers, such as Rorty, but also to post-modernist and post-structuralist thinkers, such as Foucault and Derrida, Baert and Silva are deeply suspicious of the view that both the natural sciences and the social sciences have an ‘uncovering mission’, which enables them to shed light on underlying causal mechanisms that are not immediately visible to ordinary actors. One may legitimately object, however, that there is *not much left of science* if we disregard one of its most empowering features: its capacity to *disclose* underlying causal relations that *escape* the doxic horizon of both immediate experience and common sense.<sup>33</sup>

- (c) Another considerable weakness of Baert and Silva’s proposal for a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ is its *failure to make a genuinely new contribution*. They make a case for various views that have been defended for almost two hundred years by other philosophers of social science. Even if one is inclined to sympathize with their proposal for a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’, one may have doubts about the originality of some of the most fundamental assumptions upon which it is based. Let us consider three examples:

First, the authors complain that, ‘[f]or too long, the dualism between *theory and practice* and its attendant preoccupation with accurate representation has led Western philosophers to ignore the practical difference knowledge can make’ (pp. 296–7, italics added). Moreover, they stress that ‘[p]ragmatism breaks with this *dualism* and takes seriously the notion of scientific engagement’ (p. 297, italics added). Yet, the ambition to overcome the antinomy between theory and practice is as old as social science itself. We need only to remind ourselves of Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach or of the various Enlightenment-inspired attempts by social scientists to ‘make a difference’ by having a direct and positive impact upon the organization of the social world. Second, the authors rightly attack the ‘*mirror view of knowledge*, which, as they point out, ‘conceives of knowledge in terms of *passive and accurate recording* of the essence of the external world. In this view, the *external world* is taken to be *independent of human experience*, waiting to be discovered’ (p. 296, italics added). This is a pretty accurate description of what we may call the ‘correspondence theory of truth’, based on the positivist belief in the representational capacity of objective knowledge and the Enlightenment trust in the civilizing power of modern science. It is erroneous, however, to suggest that ‘[t]he *mirror view* is *widespread* both in philosophical and [in] scientific circles’ (p. 296, italics added). One may agree with Baert and Silva’s claim that the ‘mirror view’ of knowledge tends to reproduce the theory/practice dualism, as it fails to account for the practical—and, hence, socio-historically situated—constitution of all forms of epistemic production.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that,

in this case, Baert and Silva are flogging a dead horse, since there are hardly *any* contemporary thinkers, let alone current sociologists, who would seriously defend the ‘mirror view’ of knowledge and share its flawed presuppositions.

Third, the authors insist upon the hermeneutical nature of all knowledge, reminding us that ‘social researchers should realize that [. . .] their cultural presuppositions are a *sine qua non* condition for the research they conduct’ (p. 297) and that ‘[a]ny knowledge of the social world relies on a set of presuppositions’ (p. 299). Once again, however, this is a position which has been defended by hermeneutically inspired philosophers and social scientists for at least two centuries, that is, certainly since the *Methodenstreit*. Indeed, it would be difficult to identify any contemporary scholars who would seriously disagree with this perspective. Even the more ambitious idea that ‘self-referential knowledge brings these presuppositions to the foreground’ (p. 299) and that ‘self-referential knowledge acquisition entails a critical stance’ (p. 298) is a view to which most contemporary – particularly critical – social scientists would comfortably subscribe. Hence, it is far from clear where the contribution of this proposition, which is as old as social science itself, actually lies.

- (d) A further problematic dimension of Baert and Silva’s ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ is its *conception of culture*. In this context, it may be useful to distinguish two levels of culture: culture as a *socio-ontological condition of everyday existence*, and culture as a *presuppositional condition of knowledge*. With regard to the former, the authors make the interesting claim that ‘[r]ich, vital cultures are confident enough to exhibit openness towards uncomfortable experiences’ (p. 296). In connection with the latter, they assert that ‘social researchers ought to be expected to be aware of the categories and assumptions that accompany their research and to make that knowledge publicly available’ (p. 297). There are good reasons to share the authors’ supposition that the conscious experience of culture can have an enlightening or emancipatory value, especially in situations in which actors, in the face of exposure to unfamiliar social settings, are obliged to question the norms and conventions they habitually take for granted. As Baert and Silva eloquently put it, ‘[b]y being exposed to different forms of life, individuals are confronted with the ethnocentricity and locality of their views, expectations and perceptions’ (p. 298); and, ‘[t]hrough confrontation with difference, people are encouraged to reflect on and put discursively their previously unquestioned assumptions’ (p. 298). Yet, this notion of culture is problematic for the following reasons.

First, the authors fail to *define* what exactly they mean by the term ‘culture’. Given that the concept of culture plays a pivotal role in Baert and Silva’s pragmatist account of the social, they need to spell out which particular understanding of this term underlies their theoretical framework. The concept of culture can be given radically different meanings: for instance, in sociology (culture as a social construction), anthropology (culture as a collective life form), pedagogy (culture as education or *Bildung*), philosophy (culture as an existential source of species-constitutive transcendence), and the arts (culture as an aesthetic experience).

Second, the assumption that *dynamic cultures are open to change*, even if this involves unsettling experiences, appears *overly optimistic*, since most cultures – notably majority cultures – constitute *power-laden* modes of social

functioning. Although cultures are by definition in a constant state of flux, because the most rigid form of codified interactions cannot eliminate the unfolding capacity of human agency, they are sustained by processes of *inclusion and exclusion* as well as through the hierarchization of legitimate and illegitimate forms of *symbolic capital*.

Third, the authors' enthusiasm for *cultural diversity*, which stands in line with recent trends in the social sciences, underestimates the complexities involved in the construction of multicultural realities.

- (i) On the *micro-level*, the formation of multicultural identities is far more complex than the authors seem to acknowledge. An actor's capacity to 'commute back and forth' between different cultural identities can be both empowering *and* disempowering, enlightening *and* confusing, enriching *and* destabilizing. Just as the formation of multicultural identities can encourage the cosmopolitan exercise of perspective-taking, it can trigger personality disorders suffered by culturally confused human actors, who are constantly haunted by questions such as 'Who am I?', 'Where do I belong?', and 'Which is my (favorite) cultural home?'.
- (ii) On the *meso-level*, the formation of multicultural communities is also much more fraught with difficulties than the authors appear to accept. Anybody who has been immersed in (ephemeral or stable) multicultural communities will have asked themselves practical questions such as 'How should I interact with these people?', 'How am I expected to eat my food?', 'How can or should I express my sexuality?', and 'What language are we supposed to speak?'.
- (iii) On the *macro-level*, the formation of multicultural societies is by no means less complicated. Anybody who has lived in multicultural societies – such as Britain, France, or Germany – will be aware of the immense difficulties involved in organizing ethnically diversified settings on a large scale. 'What are the agreed moral standards upon which everybody can agree?', 'How do we reconcile different norms and conventions with each other in a society with a majority culture and various minority cultures?', 'Why is there, by and large, little communication between culturally defined micro-worlds, which may exist peacefully side by side, but which in practice do not mix with one another?'.

As usual, there are more questions than answers, but unfortunately Baert and Silva do not even seem to raise these questions when putting forward their – naïvely optimistic – view that the experience of cultural difference, if accompanied by critical reflection, is essentially empowering. Multicultural citizens and multicultural social scientists will be only too aware of the fact that the construction of normatively codified realities is vastly more complicated and power-laden than Baert and Silva appear to concede.<sup>35</sup>

- (e) Let us consider the cornerstone of Baert and Silva's 'hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism': the concept of *self-referential knowledge acquisition* or, as they also call it, *self-knowledge* (see especially p. 298). As they explain, this particular mode of knowledge entails four key epistemological components:

*conceptualization, critique, edification, and imagination* (see especially pp. 298–9). I shall confine myself to making three critical comments in this regard.

First, a semantic point: the authors make a case for an alternative, ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’, based on what they conceive of as ‘*self-referential* knowledge acquisition’. In this context, ‘self-referential’ is a slightly misleading term, as it evokes largely negative connotations captured in synonyms such as ‘self-sufficient’, ‘self-indulgent’, ‘monological’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘closed-minded’, ‘provincial’, ‘parochial’, ‘insular’, or – using a systems-theoretic concept – ‘autopoietic’. Ironically, the authors seek to make a case for an idea which is diametrically opposed to these negative meanings of the term ‘self-referential’; what they have in mind is a ‘self-critical’, ‘self-reflexive’, ‘open’, ‘dialogical’, and ‘undogmatic’ attitude. In brief, Baert and Silva’s ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ is founded upon the notion of *self-critical*, rather than self-referential, knowledge acquisition.

Second, Baert and Silva’s plea for a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’ is weakened by the fact that there is considerable *overlap* between the four main epistemological components of their program. This is particularly the case with regard to the first two elements: ‘conceptualization’ and ‘critique’. As they state, the former ‘implies a process of [...] discursive formulation’ (p. 298) which ‘enables individuals to *make explicit a number of presuppositions* which they took for granted hitherto’ (p. 298, italics added); the latter ‘entails a critical stance’ (p. 298) which ‘encourages individuals to *examine and question their hitherto unquestioned presuppositions*’ (p. 298, italics added). As is obvious from these quotations, the two epistemological tasks are almost identical. Something similar applies to the remaining two aspects: ‘edification’ and ‘imagination’. In this context, the former is used to indicate ‘the process of self-formation [*Bildung*] that accompanies genuine knowledge acquisition’ (p. 298) and that allows people, through their exposure to cultural difference, to *question ‘the ethnocentricity and locality of their views, expectations and perceptions’* (p. 298, italics added), which they thereby cease to regard ‘as natural, fixed or universal’ (p. 298); the latter ‘implies the broadening of our imaginative scope’ (p. 298), a process whereby ‘people become aware of the existence of alternative socio-political scenarios’ (p. 299), enabling them ‘*to think beyond the frameworks and practices that are currently in operation*’ (p. 299, italics added). Again, the similarity between these two epistemological tasks is striking. One may share the view that these undertakings are essential to the pursuit of social-scientific research, but the somewhat repetitive nature of Baert and Silva’s argument weakens, rather than strengthens, their plea for a ‘hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism’.

Third, one may have legitimate doubts about the *originality and viability* of Baert and Silva’s program. They state that ‘the *ultimate aim* of the research which we are propagating is to *become aware of, conceptualize, and possibly unsettle the presuppositions* that make possible knowledge in the first place’ (p. 299, italics added). Apart from the fact that this overall objective has been on the agenda ever since hermeneutics and critical social sciences have come into existence, it seems rather ‘thin’ – that is, *insufficiently ambitious* – to declare that the ultimate aim of one’s research program is the unsettling of taken-for-granted assumptions. In a way, this illustrates one of the key weaknesses of

pragmatist programs in the humanities and social sciences generally: their lack of normative aspiration, which essentially derives from their – entirely legitimate – distrust vis-à-vis grand narratives. The insufficiently ambitious spirit underlying the pragmatist attitude is reflected in formulations such as the following: ‘[t]he ultimate aim of this type of research is to encourage a *Gestalt* switch so that people think very differently about things’ (p. 301). Not only do these statements demonstrate a *lack of commitment to first-order normative standards* that may transcend cultural specificity, but they are also remarkably *vague* when urging actors to ‘think very differently about things’ (p. 301). Almost anybody could subscribe to the above statement: anarchists, communists, socialists, social democrats, liberals, conservatives, and probably even fascists. The ideological elasticity of pragmatist programs is a sign of their *lack of substantive content*, rather than of their ability to make a case for context-transcending normative standards based on a strong notion of value rationality. Seduced by the comfortable advantages of the pragmatist position, reflected in the pluralist vocabulary of ‘openness’, ‘dialogue’, ‘mutual understanding’, and ‘imagination’, Baert and Silva’s normative stance is limited to the playful attitude of the liberal ironist *à la* Rorty.

- (f) This brings us to one final point of criticism, which ties in with the previous one. Unsurprisingly, the authors follow other pragmatist philosophers in rejecting what they consider to be pointless forms of scholastic – that is, practically insignificant – forms of theorizing. This pragmatist conviction is expressed in the following statement:

Pragmatism is sceptical of *intellectual disputes* if taking one or another position has no *practical consequences* for anyone [...]. For pragmatists, questions about *inner essences or ontology* are such *scholastic enterprises* because answering them in one way or another makes no practical difference. (p. 294, italics added)

This passage sums up five fundamental presuppositions of philosophical pragmatism: (i) anti-intellectualism, (ii) anti-theoreticism, (iii) anti-transcendentalism, (iv) anti-essentialism, and (v) anti-foundationalism.

- (i) According to the *anti-intellectualist* position, we need to be suspicious of intellectuals’ capacity to invent ‘private languages’ for themselves to which non-intellectuals do not have access and from which they are largely excluded. In practice, intellectualism leads to self-referential snobbism and cultural elitism, reflected in the paternalist hierarchy between ‘the enlighteners’ and ‘the to-be-enlightened’.
- (ii) According to the *anti-theoreticist* position, we need to be critical of scholars and academics who specialize in developing ‘theories of practice’ merely on the basis of the ‘practice of theorizing’, that is, without substantiating their arguments by virtue of empirical evidence. Just as empirical social research without a serious engagement with theoretical concerns runs the risk of being conceptually naïve, mere analytical speculation without a genuine commitment to substantive investigation tends to produce sterile and self-referential explanatory frameworks removed from embodied social practices.
- (iii) According to the *anti-transcendentalist* position, we need to be wary of cognitive, moral, and aesthetic frameworks that claim universal validity

and thereby neglect the relativity of their own socio-historical determinacy. Relevant to the course of individual and social development are not so much abstract principles and categorical imperatives, but the spatio-temporal contingency and practical consequences of our reflections and actions.

- (iv) According to the *anti-essentialist* position, we need to be distrustful of ambitious scientific attempts to uncover underlying essences and ontologies. What is crucial is to understand how social realities, far from being simply determined by ahistorical properties or context-transcending ontologies, are shaped by the contingent *relations* between spatio-temporally situated actors.
- (v) According to the *anti-foundationalist* position, we need to be skeptical about the philosophical search for epistemic and normative foundations. Time and again the experience of modernity has shown that the obsession with foundations tends to result in the monological imposition, rather than the dialogical negotiation, of cognitive and normative standards.

While all of the above objections reflect legitimate concerns based on powerful arguments against the common pitfalls of modern social thought, the pragmatist stance is by no means less problematic.

- (i) *Anti-intellectualism*: The pragmatist aim to overcome counterproductive divisions between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, scientists and laypersons, legitimate voices and voiceless voices is, surely, something to be applauded. In practice, however, it seems that most pragmatist social theorists reproduce the very mechanisms to which they are opposed: the communities to which they belong and through which they engage in rational debates are largely made up of other intellectuals. Only a tiny proportion of non-academics on this planet will have ever heard of philosophical pragmatism. Most pragmatist social theorists are situated in the same intellectual and institutional ivory towers as their anti-pragmatist counterparts.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Baert and Silva seem to forget that we must account not only for the negative and patronizing elements but also for the positive and empowering aspects involved in the epistemic division of labor between expert knowledge, generated by intellectuals, and common-sense knowledge, relied upon by ordinary actors.
- (ii) *Anti-theoreticism*: The pragmatist conviction that the gulf between theoreticist and empiricist modes of engaging with the social world needs to be overcome is another objective that is to be welcomed. It must be acknowledged, however, that both classical pragmatists (e.g. Dewey, James, Mead, and Peirce) and contemporary pragmatists (e.g. Bernstein, Davidson, Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty, but also Baert and Silva themselves) rarely back up their views with empirical data. Moreover, there are not many *empirical* social researchers, not even in the Anglophone world of social science, who claim to be inspired by pragmatist thought.
- (iii) *Anti-transcendentalism*: The pragmatist attack on the modern – for example, Kantian – obsession with the rational defense of context-transcending standards has received, and will continue to receive, a lot

of sympathy in an intellectual climate shaped by the late-modern – or, as some may argue, post-modern – vocabulary of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘the politics of difference’. If there is one significant positive contribution made by both pragmatist and post-modernist thought it is the suggestion that, while cosmopolitanism may end up embracing a sterile, hegemonic, and power-reproducing intellectual posture, multiculturalism can work only as a constant, and in many ways contradictory, perspective-taking exercise. Yet, if we turn our back on the possibility of distinguishing between *first-order principles*, to which everybody should adhere regardless of their cultural background, and *second-order principles*, which are by definition socio-culturally contingent, we find ourselves immersed in an ocean of *cognitive and moral relativism*, in which we function in accordance with opportunistic considerations of parochial localism and situationist short-termism and in which we make both individual and collective decisions in merely context-specific terms.

- (iv) *Anti-essentialism*: The pragmatist rejection of the scientific ambition to uncover underlying essences and ontologies sounds compelling in that it permits us to account for the fact that the constitution of the social world depends on the *relations* established between actors, rather than on ahistorical substances or context-transcending ontologies. Put differently, as critical social scientists we should be interested in the construction of human realities in terms of ‘relations between actors’, rather than in terms of ‘entities in themselves’, if we aim to make sense of the relatively arbitrary and inevitably power-laden contingency of all forms of sociality. The problem with this anti-essentialist – that is, relationalist – position, however, is that it does not take us very far, if we categorically deny the impact of both *bio-ontological* and *socio-ontological* forces upon the development of human existence. Regardless of whether we seek to maintain or abolish the distinction between the natural world and the social world, biological and sociological determinants, and ‘given’ and ‘fabricated’ realities, a pragmatist program can succeed only to the extent that it is prepared to accept that reality is a conglomerate of interrelated *beings*.
- (v) *Anti-foundationalism*: The pragmatist assault on all forms of cognitive and normative foundations is not only one of the most powerful but also one of the most problematic aspects of a philosophical position that refuses to subscribe to a specific set of shared rational or moral presuppositions. The vagueness of this relativist stance is reflected in Baert and Silva’s definition of humanism: ‘By humanism, we refer to a particular perspective according to which cognitive, ethical and aesthetic claims, including claims about those claims, are intertwined with human projects and are predominantly human creations’ (p. 295). This definition of humanism is useful in that it illustrates one of the most problematic aspects of pragmatist thought: its unwillingness to defend a set of universalizable values and context-transcending standards, let alone a philosophical program *explicitly* based on normative foundations. As it stands, almost anybody, with any kind of ideological conviction, could support the above definition of humanism: not only anarchists, communists, socialists, social democrats, liberals, or

conservatives, but even fascists would claim that their ideology is concerned with ‘human creations’ and ‘human projects’. To be sure, pragmatists are caught up in what Habermas would describe as a ‘performative contradiction’, since, at least *implicitly*, they *do* subscribe to a set of – however vaguely defined – values, such as ‘openness’, ‘dialogue’, ‘mutual understanding’, and ‘imagination’. More debatable, however, are the pragmatists’ reluctance to endorse a clear set of categorical principles and their hesitation before the possibility of grounding them in a coherent cognitive or normative framework. Empowering human projects cannot dispense with justifiable principles mobilized in consideration of the socio-ontological conditions underlying emancipatory life forms. The key elements of an emancipatory society are not to be ‘discovered’ in the foundations of intellectual thought, but to be constructed, and constantly reinvented, by exploring the empowering conditions of human existence, that is, by realizing both the species-constitutive *and* the species-empowering potentials that have allowed us to raise ourselves out of the natural world by creating, and immersing ourselves within, the social world.

## Notes

1. An abridged version of this paper was presented on 10 September 2011 in Session 8 of the Meet-the-Author Events at the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Sociological Association (Geneva, Switzerland, 7–10 September 2011). I would like to thank Patrick Baert for his thoughtful, perceptive, and constructive response to the issues raised during our discussion. In addition, I am grateful to Sandro Cattacin (Université de Genève) for organizing this session. Last but not least, I am indebted to Richard Armstrong for his pertinent comments on a draft version of this article.
2. Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva, *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010 [1998]) [ISBN: 9780745639802, ISBN 9780 745639819 (paperback); 319 pp.]. In this paper, all page references (both in the body of the text and in the notes) are to this edition.
3. Some skeptics may criticize Baert and Silva for failing to make a major contribution to the literature, but it seems to me that an objection of this kind misses the point for three main reasons: first, because we are dealing with a book that provides an *introduction* to twentieth-century social theory; second, because each chapter contains original *evaluative* reflections on the respective approaches under scrutiny; and, third, because in the final chapter (Chapter 9) the authors make a significant contribution to the literature by proposing an outline of a ‘*hermeneutics-inspired pragmatism*’.
4. The entire manuscript is extremely well written. I stumbled upon very few (minor) formal or grammatical issues that the authors may want to take into account if they ever intend to publish a third edition. An additional comment: ‘America’/‘Americans’/‘American’ should read ‘North America’/‘North Americans’/‘North American’ (or ‘US-American’ or ‘Anglo-American’). This is not a mere issue of political correctness. Given Baert and Silva’s emphasis on the importance of intercultural understanding, I think Latin-American scholars are right to point out that we should avoid reproducing the self-referential and hegemonic language of Anglocentric social science.
5. See pp. 24, 28, and 35–6.
6. See pp. 24, 28, and 35–6.
7. See pp. 196–7.
8. See pp. 216–22 and 229.
9. See p. 250.
10. To be fair, most publishers expect their authors to adhere to a particular word limit policy, and this may be one of the main reasons why Baert and Silva pay marginal attention to the impact of classical sociology on contemporary social theory.

11. On the limited scope of Baert and Silva's analysis, see p. 286: '[...] the golden generation of twentieth-century European social theory. We are referring to a generation of intellectuals and academics, born between the world wars, that includes, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, Niklas Luhmann, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens.' Again, to be fair, the word limit policy imposed upon the two authors by the publishers may have been a noteworthy obstacle.
12. In light of the above criticism, cynical commentators may suggest that a more appropriate title for this book would have been something along the lines of *White, Western, Malestream Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. It seems to me that this would be a somewhat unjustified criticism, because modern social theory is largely 'white', 'Western', and 'malestream'. The more interesting question is to what extent twenty-first century social theory will be able to break out of the ethnocentric and androcentric straitjacket of modern intellectual thought.
13. The list reads as follows: *Chapter 1*: Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski. *Chapter 2*: Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Niklas Luhmann, Jeffrey Alexander. *Chapter 3*: George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, Randall Collins, Russell Hardin. *Chapter 4*: Jon Elster, Martin Hollis, David M. Kreps, Gary S. Becker, Paul DiMaggio, Walter W. Powell. *Chapter 5*: Anthony Giddens, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt. *Chapter 6*: Michel Foucault. *Chapter 7*: Jürgen Habermas, Claus Offe, Axel Honneth. *Chapter 8*: Manuel Castells, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Saskia Sassen, Richard Sennett.
14. Jeffrey Alexander, Gary S. Becker, Randall Collins, Paul DiMaggio, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Russell Hardin, David M. Kreps, George Herbert Mead, Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons, Walter W. Powell, Richard Sennett, Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly.
15. Ulrich Beck, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Niklas Luhmann, Claus Offe.
16. Luc Boltanski, Pierre Bourdieu, Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss.
17. Anthony Giddens, Martin Hollis, Michael Mann.
18. Ferdinand de Saussure.
19. Manuel Castells.
20. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt.
21. Zygmunt Bauman.
22. Saskia Sassen.
23. Jon Elster.
24. Jeffrey Alexander, Zygmunt Bauman, Gary S. Becker, Manuel Castells, Randall Collins, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Jon Elster, Harold Garfinkel, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Russell Hardin, Martin Hollis, David M. Kreps, Paul DiMaggio, Michael Mann, George Herbert Mead, Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons, Walter W. Powell, Saskia Sassen, Richard Sennett, Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly.
25. Luc Boltanski, Pierre Bourdieu, Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure.
26. Ulrich Beck, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Niklas Luhmann, Claus Offe.
27. In defense of the authors, one may legitimately argue that this task goes beyond the scope of this book and would, therefore, require embarking upon a different kind of journey, primarily and explicitly aimed at breaking out of the various (above-mentioned) '-istic' straitjackets. One may add a few more minor criticisms to the list, but, to my mind, they are less significant. An additional point worth considering is the following issue: in various contexts, the authors make reference to 'classical' sociological variables such as 'class', 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'gender'. It would have been useful to consider sociological questions arising from 'sexual orientation', 'age', and 'ability', since they are immensely important in the daily reproduction and transformation of power relations.
28. In all fairness, the authors do examine some of these commonalities, for instance, in their pertinent, and elegantly written, comparison of Bauman and Beck on pp. 262–3.
29. To give only one example, when assessing Beck's work on p. 261, Baert and Silva maintain that 'empirical research does not back this up', but they fail to provide us with

any (substantive) counter-evidence in support of their claim. In a possible third edition of the volume, it would be useful if the authors could provide examples to substantiate assertions such as the following: (a) 'It is a common mistake amongst social researchers to consider or debate methodological issues without specifying what they want to achieve' (p. 297). Is this really a common mistake amongst social researchers? If so, Baert and Silva need to provide examples to demonstrate that this is actually the case. (b) '[. . .] the orthodox view that modernity and the Holocaust are antithetical' (p. 303). I do not think that, amongst contemporary historians and social scientists, modernity and the Holocaust tend to be regarded as antithetical. On the contrary, most historians and historical sociologists who specialize in the analysis of the multiple factors that led to the rise of fascism in Germany are willing to accept (or indeed insist upon) the fact that the Holocaust was possible only within modern society, that is, within the parameters imposed by its instrumental forces, notably functionalist rationality, capitalism, and large-scale bureaucracies.

30. See p. 248: 'A Brave New World? The Empirical Turn in Social Theory'.
31. Moreover, if the authors, in their discussion of Castells, are right to state that '[t]he "old" urban sociology was [. . .] narrowly empiricist and lacked a proper "theoretical object"' (p. 249), then it may be more appropriate to associate Castells's work with the 'conceptual turn', rather than with the 'empirical turn', in social theory.
32. In addition, Baert and Silva are willing to concede that '[s]ometimes [. . .] developments in social theory are sparked by empirical research' (p. 286).
33. Furthermore, it should be noted that, on various occasions, the authors criticize some of the social theorists whose work they examine for failing to 'flesh out the causal mechanisms behind the plethora of phenomena' (p. 253; in this case, they refer to the work of Manuel Castells). As hermeneutics-inspired pragmatists, Baert and Silva are, at the same time, deeply critical of clear-cut separations between scientific knowledge and common sense (see, for example, pp. 295–6). Hence, it appears to be the case that we are confronted with a *contradiction*, which lies at the heart of Baert and Silva's analysis: on the one hand, they insist upon the notion that one of the main tasks of critical social scientists is to shed light on hidden structural forces and underlying causal mechanisms that shape both the nature and the development of the social world; on the other hand, they are distrustful of the view that social science has an 'uncovering mission' and that social scientists should be inspired by what Ricoeur famously called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. We cannot have it both ways.
34. See p. 296: 'it assumes an opposition between theory and knowledge, on the one hand, and practice and action on the other'.
35. An anecdotal remark: One thing I have noticed is that the vast majority of native Anglophone colleagues with whom I have had the pleasure to work over the years, and who embrace the discourse of multiculturalism, are monocultural and monolingual. With all respect, this makes me question their ability to appreciate the full complexity involved in the construction of multicultural realities, particularly on the personal level, that is, in terms of internally divided forms of selfhood. The idea of a multicultural, multiperspectival, and cosmopolitan social scientist sounds nice in theory, but it seems ironic that numerous social researchers generate academic discourses of multiculturalism from the hegemonic perspective of Anglocentrism. Pragmatist and post-colonial discourses may permit us to become aware, but not necessarily to break out, of the Eurocentric straitjacket of Anglophone social science.
36. In this respect, it is ironic that Baert and Silva criticize other social theorists (such as Beck, see especially p. 261) for underestimating the continuing importance of class and the numerous ways in which it converts 'reflexivity', 'individualization', and 'dialogic existence' (p. 261) into late-modern privileges of the middle and upper classes of society. One may wonder to what extent access to the empowering nature of the key ingredients of their own program – that is, *conceptualization*, *critique*, *edification*, and *imagination* – also remains a privilege of the well-off and well-educated members of society.

## **Note on contributor**

Simon Susen is Lecturer in Sociology at City University London. He previously held lectureships at Birkbeck College (University of London), Newcastle University, and Goldsmiths College (University of London). He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge and studied sociology, politics, and philosophy at a range of international universities and research centers, including the University of Edinburgh, the Colegio de México, the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is Associate Member of the Bauman Institute and Managing Editor of the *Journal of Classical Sociology*. He is author of *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology* (Bardwell Press, 2007). Along with Celia Basconzuelo and Teresita Morel, he edited *Ciudadanía territorial y movimientos sociales. Historia y nuevas problemáticas en el escenario latinoamericano y mundial* (Ediciones del ICALA, 2010). Together with Bryan S. Turner, he recently edited *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays* (Anthem Press, 2011).