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Foundation of a Theory of Social Association, by Otaka Tomoo, Oxford, UK, Peter Lang, 1932, pp. i–xii, 1–344, € 52,36 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-78997-749-3

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Special Issue on Otaka's  
*Foundation of a Theory of Social Association* (1932)  
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## On the Ontology of Social Association: Between Ideality and Reality

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**Foundation of a Theory of Social Association**, by Otaka Tomoo, Oxford, UK, Peter Lang, 1932, pp. i–xii, 1–344, € 52,36 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-78997-749-3

### Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on central issues examined in Tomoo Otaka's *Foundation of a Theory of Social Association* [*Grundlegung der Lehre vom sozialen Verband*] (1932).<sup>1</sup> To this end, the following remarks focus on Otaka's 'Introduction'<sup>2</sup> to this work. As shall be demonstrated below, it not only contains useful insights into the ontology of social association but also illustrates the relevance of his *Grundlegung* to the critical study of contemporary societies.

### I.

All elements of the social world – including social associations – pose not only the *ontological* question of the relationship between (noumenal) 'essence' and (phenomenal) 'reality' but also, by extension, the *epistemological* question of the relationship between 'essentialism', 'positivism', and 'realism', on the one hand, and 'relationalism', 'interpretivism', and 'idealism', on the other.<sup>3</sup> Uncovering the (noumenal) 'essence' of social association is as difficult as grasping its (phenomenal) 'reality'. If the ontological distinction between (noumenal) 'essence' and (phenomenal) 'reality' is sound, then the world (with respect to both its natural and its social realms) is divided into 'substances' and 'appearances'. The former may be described as 'hidden', 'core', and/or – ultimately – 'true' and 'genuine' levels of existence; the latter refer to 'overt', 'peripheral', and/or – at least potentially – 'deceptive' and 'misleading' levels of existence. The former is independent of our experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, whereas the latter is dependent on them. While these two levels of existence are almost certainly at odds with each other, the analysis of the latter may provide us with clues about the constitution of the former.

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Owing to our sensory capacities, we can access the ‘phenomenal world’ (that is, the world that we perceive and experience); owing to our rational capacities, we can make assumptions about the ‘noumenal world’ (that is, the world in-itself or the world of things as they really are). While (phenomenal) ‘realities’ are observable and knowable, (noumenal) ‘essences’ are only inferable and derivable. The most sophisticated epistemologies (including their most subversive versions) will struggle to bridge the gap between the noumenal and the phenomenal, which permeates every human actor’s immersion in reality.

## II.

It is hard to define the ontological status of *observable* objects (notably physical ones). It is even harder to define the ontological status of *non-observable* forms of existence and states of affairs (notably those that are relationally, socially, and/or mentally constituted). In the social sciences, there is a large vocabulary for denoting non-observable forms of existence and states of affairs, whose ontological status is uncertain – or, perhaps, even unfathomable. Foundational sociological concepts (such as ‘society’, ‘the social’, and ‘social association’) are among the most obvious candidates. Yet, in terms of their ontological status, other – arguably, co-foundational – concepts (such as ‘social class’, ‘social inequality’, ‘power’, ‘community’, ‘language’, etc.) are just as intricate. Although most social scientists (and social philosophers) would not deny the existence of these vital elements of social life, the question of their *exact* ontological status remains unanswered (and may, in fact, be unanswerable or at least not answerable in a conclusive manner).

It may be true that – by definition – social constituents are culturally constructed, performatively produced, relationally constituted, historically situated, and spatiotemporally contingent. A significant problem with constructivist, performativist, relationalist, historicist, and contextualist approaches, however, is that they tell us little about the ontological status of social constituents (apart from their cultural, processual, relational, historical, and contextual contingency). A central question that needs to be addressed, then, is whether social constituents exist *simultaneously* on different ontological levels (that is, *both* phenomenally *and* noumenally, mentally *and* physically, symbolically *and* materially, experientially *and* independently, relationally *and* substantially, normatively *and* factually, subjectively *and* objectively).

Thus, the question of ‘the very authenticity and actuality of social association’<sup>4</sup> concerns not only its cultural, processual, relational, historical, and contextual *contingency* but also – at a more fundamental level – its *ontology*, which may contain layers of complexity that go beyond the received wisdom of merely sociological imaginaries. The claim that the ontology of social association *is* its (cultural, processual, relational, historical, and contextual) contingency is as insightful as the assertion that all social phenomena are situated in space and time. A truly critical ontology, rather than relying on sociological platitudes, needs to shed light on *the being of being*.

## III.

It is far from clear whether there has been a paradigm shift ‘from the individualistic view of the nineteenth century towards a collectivist orientation’<sup>5</sup> in the twentieth century, culminating in a concerted effort to combine both positions in the twenty-first

century. In any case, the antinomy between the paradigm of *methodological individualism* (or *social atomism*), on the one hand, and the paradigm of *methodological collectivism* (or *social holism*), on the other, serves as a compass for (quasi-ideological) positioning in the social sciences:

- The former tends to be associated with approaches such as ‘rational choice theory’, ‘rational-actor theory’, ‘resource mobilization theory’, and ‘analytical Marxism’ – but also, rightly or wrongly, with interpretive frameworks (such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, and micro-sociology), focusing on the meaning-generating, rational, and purposive faculties of individuals (and, by implication, the intentional states motivating their actions).
- The latter tends to be associated with approaches such as ‘structuralism’, ‘functionalism’, ‘systems theory’, and ‘complexity theory’ – but also, rightly or wrongly, with relational(ist) frameworks (such as actor-network theory, figurational sociology, critical sociology, and macro-sociology), centring on the structural power and functional mechanisms of social systems, networks, institutions, and entities (and, by implication, the large webs of interconnections, background resources, and historical contexts shaping human actions).

In practice, most social-scientific endeavours, even if they tilt to one side or the other, are located *on a continuum* between methodological individualism and methodological collectivism:

- Even those accounts that emphasize the socio-ontological significance of *the individual* tend to acknowledge the structural (and, arguably, agential) power of relationally constituted forces in terms of contributing to the production, reproduction, and transformation of society.
- Even those accounts that stress the socio-ontological significance of *the collective* tend to recognize the pivotal role played by individuals in terms of bringing about productive, reproductive, and transformative processes (including the different meanings attached to them by different actors).

There is no society without individuals, just as there are no individuals without society. Social associations are the ultimate expression of human interdependence.

#### IV.

The ontological status of social associations may be explored from different angles. Depending on one’s epistemological framework, methodological strategy, and conceptual apparatus, one may interpret, study, and define social associations in one way or another. If, for instance, one regards *human association as a mental construct* (that is, as a product of mental projections performed by meaning-generating actors), then the inquiry into its constitution and development is the task not only of the social sciences but also of the ‘mental sciences’ or ‘sciences of the mind’.<sup>6</sup>

Even if social association is possible only as a network of mental projections and even if, unlike its numerous empirical manifestations, ‘[t]he true being of this interpersonally

constructed wholeness<sup>7</sup> is not perceptible through sensory experience, it is (or at least appears to be) ‘out there’. In the human world, social association – the uncertainty concerning its ontological status notwithstanding – *cannot not* exist, given that all behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning are embedded within, and framed by, it. Different human actions and behaviours, beliefs and ideologies, as well as traditions and institutions are situated in, and shaped by, different forms of social association. Social association is both a producer and a product of what we – as subjects capable of action, reflection, and organization – do, think, and construct.

## V.

Over the course of intellectual history, there have been numerous attempts at drawing *analogies between the natural world and the social world*, notably when seeking to explain key elements of the latter by reference to the former (rather than the other way around). From Durkheim onwards, systematic efforts to provide an ‘organic’<sup>8</sup> social theory have been on the agenda of sociological discourse, especially within (or in relation to) functionalist approaches. The ambition ‘to clarify the structure of being of social association through a comparison with the biological organism’<sup>9</sup> is no exception. It is motivated by the conviction that human communities are units of life, composed of interconnected and interdependent parts, each of which serves a specific function comparable to that of an organ. Regardless of whether ‘this interpersonally constructed wholeness’<sup>10</sup> of human association is ‘sensibly perceptible’<sup>11</sup> or not, it is hard to overlook the fact that its distinctive parts are functionally differentiated, rendering its emergence and development (mental, physical, or otherwise) possible. There is no social association without a division of social roles.

## VI.

The concept of ‘social association’ may be interpreted in holistic, psychological, and performative terms (à la Othmar Spann). Such a ‘universalist’ theory is based on three central assumptions:

1. Social association constitutes an *interactional whole* composed of a group of individuals, who – as members of a unit larger than themselves – are capable of constructing a sense (and reality) of community by relating to each other through shared modes of action, interpretation, and organization.
2. Social association – unlike most, if not all, of its equivalent configurations in the natural world – possesses a *mental quality*. In contrast to the wholeness resulting from the interconnections, interactions, and interdependence between merely biological organisms, social association – as it emerges and evolves in the human world – represents a community of interrelated minds. Insofar as humans are both social and conscious animals, they are (meaning-seeking) members of mental communities. No individual consciousness can come into being without the connective power of collective consciousness, just as no collective consciousness can develop without the projective power of individual consciousness(es).

3. Social association can be described as ‘an *active wholeness* because its life consists of human actions<sup>12</sup> and interactions – whether these be *purposive* (that is, teleological, instrumental, or strategic), *normative* (that is, moral, political, or ideological), *expressive* (that is, dramaturgical, affective, or artistic), or *communicative* (that is, oriented towards reaching understanding). The performative nature of social life is such that human association is possible only as a conglomerate of purposive, normative, expressive, and communicative actions and interactions.

If the aforementioned assumptions are correct, then the ontology of social association – far from being conceptually reducible, empirically measurable, and scientifically dis- or uncoverable in external domains of human life – is tantamount to an *interactional and ‘really existing mental wholeness’*<sup>13</sup>, whose presence pervades its members’ ways of relating to, making sense of, and engaging with the world.

## VII.

When reflecting on the demonstrability of the existence of a social unit, one is confronted with three options: (1) *direct demonstrability*, (2) *indirect demonstrability*, and (3) *indemonstrability*. One may, or may not, agree with Otto von Guericke’s contention that both the existence of the *social unit of life* (including social association) and the existence of the *individual unity of life* (including the self) escape the parameters set by scientific inquiries – or, indeed, by ordinary experiences – for the possibility of direct demonstrability. In any case, the reality of social association can, at best, be demonstrated indirectly (by inferring its existence from its numerous manifestations) or, at worst, not be demonstrated at all (by suggesting that it has no clearly assignable manifestations).

To establish the existence of something or somebody, one may rely on the rational power of logic and argument (rationalism), the empirical power of experience and observation (empiricism), or a combination of the two (transcendental idealism). One may assert that something or somebody is, above all, objectively constituted (as part of ‘the’ physical/factual/empirical world), normatively constituted (as part of ‘our’ social/value-laden/symbolic world), or subjectively constituted (as part of ‘my’ individual/personal/inner world).

Arguably, the existence of social association (similar to other social units) rests on the *confluence* of objective, normative, and subjective dimensions. If this is the case, then it is neither *merely* objective nor *merely* normative nor *merely* subjective. Rather, in accordance with all constitutive components of human reality, it is the result of the interplay between objective, normative, and subjective factors (and, hence, an expression of every human actor’s *simultaneous* immersion in the – experientially overlapping – realms of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity).

The (direct or indirect) demonstrability of a social unit depends on the (direct or indirect) demonstrability of its objective, normative, and subjective dimensions.

## VIII.

It used to be common to ascribe agency exclusively to individual actors. Over the past century, however, broader conceptions of agency have gained prevalence across the

natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. With this shift in perspective, *agency* can be assigned not only to *individual actors* but also to *structural and social* (including cultural, linguistic, ideological, political, economic, demographic, etc.) *forces* as well as to *non- and/or transhuman* (including natural and/or technological) *forces*.<sup>14</sup>

The strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to agency notwithstanding, sociology – ever since it came into existence – has challenged traditional conceptions of the subject, especially those prevalent in philosophy, by arguing that ‘human activities and effects proceed not only from individuals but also from communities’.<sup>15</sup> On this interpretation, community represents ‘an active something’<sup>16</sup>, which, as such, exerts agency not only over *its* own agents (that is, *within* the community) but also, crucially, over *other* agents (*outside* the community).

As much as human actors may seek to construct ‘an individual unity of life’<sup>17</sup> for themselves, they all ‘belong, as parts, to higher units of life’<sup>18</sup>, which are collectively constituted, reflecting the core nature of human co-existence. From the perspective of *methodological collectivism* (or *social holism*), ‘the whole has logical [and empirical] priority over its parts’<sup>19</sup> (and the former is preponderant over – and, hence, sets the structural and agential parameters for – the latter). From the perspective of *methodological individualism* (or *social atomism*), each individual part has logical [and empirical] priority over the whole (and the former is preponderant over – and, hence, sets the structural and agential parameters for – the latter).

There is, however, a third perspective worth mentioning – one that mediates between these two positions: instead of establishing an ontological asymmetry by attributing more structural and/or agential (and, ultimately, causal) power to one or the other (that is, *either* to social wholes *or* to their individual parts), we need to account for *both* their (logical and empirical) interdependence *and* their (logical and empirical) irreducibility. Social wholes cannot exist without the individual parts of which they are composed, just as individual parts cannot exist without the social wholes to which they belong. At the same time, social wholes are irreducible to individual parts (and vice versa).

## IX.

Hans Kelsen can be credited with exposing the limitations of crude versions of realism.<sup>20</sup> Both in the natural sciences and in the social sciences, these manifest themselves in naïve forms of objectivism, positivism, and empiricism. Far from having acquired a postmetaphysical status, epistemological realism may serve as a ‘dogmatic-metaphysical foundation’<sup>21</sup> for the analysis of natural and social phenomena, ascribing a certain (transhistorical) ‘essence’ to them, which – presumably – transcends space and time.

According to Kelsen’s approach (and in line with Kant’s transcendental idealism), *the mind* plays a pivotal (that is, active, if not proactive) role in the *human construction of reality*. On this view, the ontology (or ‘real being’<sup>22</sup>) of the state cannot be localized in ‘natural reality’<sup>23</sup> (and, by implication, ‘in material, perceptible facticity’<sup>24</sup>). Rather, it constitutes both an ‘ideal mental construct’<sup>25</sup> and a ‘real being of socio-historical determination’<sup>26</sup> (as pointed out by Rudolf Smend). In other words, it exists both in our heads and in our social environment – that is, as a configuration of both ideality and reality.

In a somewhat counterintuitive move, the importance of the distinction between ‘ideality’ and ‘reality’ can be illustrated with reference to the dynamic relationship



between ‘reality’ and ‘realization’. On the one hand, social association can be regarded as ‘an *ideal mental construct*’<sup>27</sup>, which is not only *generated and experienced* (as a common-sense category) by ordinary actors (in their everyday lives) but also *defined and explored* (as an ideal type) by researchers (in the humanities and social sciences). On the other hand, social association is part of human *reality* through a continuous process of *realization* – that is, ‘it realizes itself again and again in the factual process of social life’.<sup>28</sup>

If there is any ultimate foundation to social association as ‘an ideal mental structure’<sup>29</sup>, it is its *realization* (that is, its simultaneous production, reproduction, and transformation) in the empirical realm of ‘social facticity’<sup>30</sup>, which, at the same time, forms a symbolically mediated (and, hence, value- and perspective-laden) *reality*. While the ‘reality’ and ‘realization’ of social association can, and should, be *conceptually* separated, they co-exist *empirically* – that is, they ‘exist together in an essential connection, that of “founding”’.<sup>31</sup> In short, no social association can exist in reality without being realized (both mentally and physically) by those who form part of it.

## X.

The age-old debate about the distinction between ‘facts’ (‘what is’) and ‘values’ (‘what ought to be’) is central to the emergence of the three main branches of inquiry – that is, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. In these spheres of investigation, the distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ is blurred – both epistemologically and ontologically.

### 1. *Epistemological level:*

- All descriptions, analyses, interpretations, explanations, and assessments of ‘facts’ are *value-laden*, in the sense that they are shaped by the (positionally acquired and dispositionally assimilated) beliefs, assumptions, and interests of knowledge-seeking subjects.
- At the same time, all descriptions, analyses, interpretations, explanations, and assessments of ‘values’ are *fact-laden*, in the sense that they are situated in, and articulate an experiential relationship to, the multilayered realities (whether these be objective, normative, or subjective) inhabited by human beings.

### 2. *Ontological level:*

- All ‘facts’ are *value-laden*, in the sense that, although their phenomenal *Überleben* is inextricably linked to their noumenal *Unterleben*, both levels of existence are constantly being interacted with and acted upon by human beings in pursuit of their (competing) *interests* – whether these be individual or social, local or global, species-constitutive or species-transcendent.
- At the same time, all ‘values’ are *fact-laden*, in the sense that they arise from the objective, normative, and subjective realms in which they are embedded, while – through their direction-giving power – permeating and influencing the production, reproduction, and (potential or actual) transformation of these realms, thereby illustrating that, in the human world, the dialectic of *Vorgänge* (processes) and *Sachzwänge* (constraints) pervades all *handlungsfähige Alleingänge* (that is, solo actions that *appear to be* indicative of individual agency).

One need not be a Humean to concede that it is impossible to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, as the naturalistic fallacy would have it. Even if this were possible, however, ‘a penetration of party-political emotion into the field of pure scientific research’<sup>32</sup> would be problematic. Granted, every scientific venture is driven not only by ‘facts’ (that is, by the ambition to dis- or uncover truths in an objective and dispassionate manner) but also by ‘values’ (that is, by the – conscious or unconscious – mobilization of underlying presuppositions, preconceptions, and prejudgements as well as biases, agendas, and interests). Scientific undertakings that are committed to conducting serious (that is, methodologically rigorous, empirically substantiated, epistemologically reflexive, conceptually sophisticated, terminologically precise, and theoretically insightful) research, however, seek to minimize, although not to eliminate, the negative (and, in several respects, distortive) impact of these perspective-generating variables.

Arguably, the most significant difference between the (Anglophone and Francophone) concept of *science* and the (Germanophone) concept of *Wissenschaft* is that the latter is considerably more inclusive and wide-ranging than the former. The former tends to be limited to empirically oriented research, whereas the latter comprises both empirical and non-empirical types of investigation. Literally, the concept of *Wissenschaft* designates the scientific ideal of ‘*Wissen schaffen*’, referring to the systematic creation and organization of knowledge across an extensive range of disciplines – not only in the natural and social sciences but also in the humanities and beyond.

It is in this – broad – sense of *Wissenschaft* that the ‘progress of science’<sup>33</sup> reflects ‘the constant further development of an objective mind’<sup>34</sup>, which emanates from ‘the infinite abundance of individual and subjective mental activities’.<sup>35</sup> These activities are ‘welded together in the strong interconnection of generations and nations into one united whole’.<sup>36</sup> This transgenerational and transnational – as well as transdisciplinary and transhistorical – enterprise, however, constitutes not an *Einheitswissenschaft* (that is, a ‘unified science’, which is static, mono-perspectival, and homogenous) but, rather, a *Netzwerkwissenschaft* (that is, a ‘network science’, which is constantly evolving, multi-perspectival, and heterogenous). Scepticism, criticism, and refutation – along with perspectival (that is, methodological, empirical, epistemological, conceptual, terminological, and theoretical) plurality – are integral components of genuine *Wissenschaft*. Competition and contradiction are no less significant than collaboration and confluence, providing socio-epistemic engines of cognitive and moral learning processes.

‘The connection between ideal mental construct and actual life process’<sup>37</sup> – which lies at the core of human learning experiences (individual or collective, ordinary or scientific, accidental or planned, random or systematic, unconscious or conscious, emotional or rational, short-term or long-term) – manifests itself in the intimate relationship between language games and forms of life. Social association is the result of the interaction between these two levels:

- On the one hand, ‘it actually belongs to the *ideal* sphere of mental construction and always remains an ideal mental construct’<sup>38</sup>, created not only by social scientists (aiming to grasp its constitution and function) but also by ordinary actors (contributing to its production and reproduction – as well as, potentially, to its transformation).
- On the other hand, ‘as *real* structure’<sup>39</sup>, it ‘necessarily entails the fluctuating life process – “integration” – as its “ground of reality”’<sup>40</sup>, from which it stems and

whose material and symbolic resources are mobilized by its members (that is, by those whose interconnections, interactions, and interdependence render social association possible).

In a more radical sense, to resist the temptation of a return to a ‘two-sided theory’<sup>41</sup>, we need to recognize that – strictly speaking – we are dealing not with an *ideality–reality opposition* but, rather, with an *ideality/reality unity*. In the human world (which is inconceivable without the power of social association), we cannot have one without the other. This insight – à la Hans Freyer – has not only ontological but also methodological, epistemological, and theoretical implications. Just as ‘ideality and reality are by no means irreconcilable’<sup>42</sup> in ontological terms (and, hence, in the construction of social life), “‘logical science’ is not opposed to ‘reality science’”<sup>43</sup> in methodological, epistemological, and theoretical terms (and, thus, in the construction of social-scientific ideal types). *Social association is both ideal and real, mental and physical, imagined and experienced, symbolic and material, potential and actual*. As such, it can, and should, be studied as a product of the interconnections, interactions, and interdependence between ideal mental constructs and actual life processes. We will continue to exist as long as we continue to co-exist. We do – and will continue to do – so as actors capable of inhabiting the world by constructing it, both in our heads and in our lives.

## Notes

1. See Tomoo Otaka, *Foundation of a Theory of Social Association* (edited by Derek Robbins, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023 [1932]).
2. Ibid., 51/1, 51/1–68/17.
3. Ibid., 51/1.
4. Ibid., 51/1.
5. Ibid., 51/1.
6. See ibid., 52/2.
7. Ibid., 52/2.
8. Ibid., 52/2.
9. Ibid., 52/2.
10. Ibid., 52/2.
11. Ibid., 52/2.
12. Ibid., 53/3 (italics added).
13. Ibid., 53/3 (italics added).
14. On this point, see, for instance, Simon Susen, *Humanity and Uncontrollability: Reflections on Hartmut Rosa’s Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 91–95.
15. Otaka, *Foundation of a Theory of Social Association*, 54/4.
16. Ibid., 54/4.
17. Ibid., 54/4.
18. Ibid., 54/4.
19. Ibid., 54/4.
20. See ibid., 55/5–57/7.
21. Ibid., 55/5.
22. Ibid., 55/5.
23. Ibid., 55/5.
24. Ibid., 55/5.
25. Ibid., 55/5.
26. Ibid., 56/6.

27. Ibid., 59/9 (*italics added*).
28. Ibid., 59/9–60/10.
29. Ibid., 60/10.
30. Ibid., 60/10.
31. Ibid., 60/10.
32. Ibid., 61/11 (*quotation modified*).
33. Ibid., 61/11.
34. Ibid., 61/11.
35. Ibid., 61/11.
36. Ibid., 61/11.
37. Ibid., 63/12.
38. Ibid., 64/13 (*italics added*).
39. Ibid., 64/13 (*italics added*).
40. Ibid., 64/13.
41. Ibid., 64/13.
42. Ibid., 68/17.
43. Ibid., 68/17.

## Disclosure Statement

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