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Contemporary Social Theory

Simon Susen

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To provide you with a brief introduction to key issues and major currents in contemporary social theory.
- To introduce you to a range of debates and controversies in late-20th and early-21st century social theory.
- To demonstrate the relevance of social theory to studying the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality.
- To enhance your understanding of the connections between empirical, methodological, epistemological, terminological, and theoretical concerns in contemporary sociology.
- To reflect upon the main challenges faced by social theorists in the early 21st century.

Framing Questions

1. What is social theory?
2. Why should we bother with social theory?
3. What is the place of social theory in contemporary sociology?
4. What are the main challenges faced by social theorists in the 21st century?

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide you with a brief introduction to contemporary social theory. To this end, the chapter is divided into seven parts. In the first part, you will learn about the *concept* of social theory. This part argues that, while the history of social theory is inextricably linked to the rise of modernity, in the early 21st century its status vis-à-vis the social sciences has been called into question. In the second part, you will find out about the *relevance* of social theory, notably in terms of the central place it occupies in the contemporary social sciences. In the third part, you will be invited to grapple with the *knowledge-seeking spirit* of social theory, which, as you will see, obliges us to examine the epistemic differences between ‘ordinary’ and ‘scientific’ ways of engaging with the world. In the fourth part, you will be made aware of *key dimensions* that should be taken into account when studying social theories – notably their historical situatedness, their principal contributions to human knowledge, and their strengths and weaknesses. In the fifth part, you will acquire some basic insights into the *scope* of social theory, including the distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘contemporary’ approaches. In the sixth part, you will be presented with an overview of different *versions* of social theory, recognizing that its contemporary variants are far more diversified than their classical predecessors. In the seventh part, you will benefit from a synopsis of noteworthy *trends and developments* in contemporary social theory, emphasizing its heterogeneous nature and pluralistic outlook.

The Concept of Social Theory

You may have asked yourself what **social theory** actually is. You may find the following shorthand definition useful: *in the most general sense, social theory is the attempt to provide a conceptually informed – and, in many cases, empirically substantiated – framework designed to (1) describe, (2) analyse, (3) interpret, (4) explain, and (5) assess the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality, in a more or less systematic fashion* (see Susen, 2015a: 5; cf. Susen, 2020a: 313–14).

Historically, the emergence of social theory cannot be dissociated from the rise of modernity. To be precise, social theory is both a product and a carrier of modernity. As a product of modernity, it is an epistemic endeavour exploring the numerous structural transformations that have led to the consolidation of modern *formations* of society. As a carrier of modernity, it is a discursive vehicle contributing to critical debates on modern *conceptions* of society. In other words, social theory is an integral component of both the *real* and the *representational* constitution of the modern world (see Susen, 2015a: 5).

By definition, social theory is characterized by a ‘general concern with the nature of the social in modern society’ (Turner, 1996: 1). Its *raison d’être* is to grasp the complexity of the social in its key dimensions (cf. Susen, 2016c):

- *actions and behaviours* (what people do), *beliefs and ideologies* (what people think), and *traditions and institutions* (how people’s performative and cognitive ways of engaging with the world result in relatively solidified forms of sociality);
- *objectivity* (‘the’ world of facts), *normativity* (‘our’ world of conventions, habits, and customs), and *subjectivity* (‘my’ world of experiences, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions);
- *foundational* elements (which – in terms of their specificity – are indispensable to the emergence of social order), *contingent* elements (which are potentially significant for, but – in terms of their specificity – not indispensable to, the emergence of social order), and *ephemeral* elements (which are relatively short-lived and – in terms of their specificity – largely irrelevant to the emergence of social order).

Social theory plays a pivotal role in equipping social scientists (especially sociologists) with useful conceptual frameworks, capable of strengthening their understanding of empirical data. It is no accident, then, that both classical and contemporary versions of social theory continue to occupy a central place in social research (Appelrouth and Edles, 2011 [2006]; Baert and Silva, 2010 [1998]; Calhoun et al., 2012a [2002], 2012b [2002]; Delanty, 2017; Inglis and Thorpe, 2019 [2012]; Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014 [1988], 2018 [2003]); Susen, 2015a, 2020a, 2020b). And yet, the question of what social theory can (or cannot) achieve is a major source of dispute. Traditionally, social theory has been associated with the task of delivering reliable conceptual tools for (1) describing, (2) analysing, (3) interpreting, (4) explaining, and (5) assessing the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality. On this account, it is committed to examining the social practices, structures, and arrangements by which human forms of life are not only constructed and sustained but also, potentially, reconstructed and transformed.

In recent decades, however, social theory has undergone a 'legitimacy crisis', in the sense that 'a deep uncertainty about the development of modern society' (Turner, 1996: 5) has been accompanied by a decline in confidence in the epistemic authority of the humanities and social sciences. Consequently, 'the status of social theory vis-à-vis the social sciences has [...] become increasingly uncertain and needs to be reassessed' (Baert and Silva, 2010 [1998]: 285). This is not to suggest that social theory is now widely regarded as an entirely pointless undertaking. This is to recognize, however, that more and more contemporary social theorists have abandoned the notion that their mission is to engage in conceptual 'system building', epitomized in the defence of '**metanarratives**':

A metanarrative is a set of more or less logically interconnected assumptions made in order to provide a coherent and comprehensive account of the underlying mechanisms that shape, or are supposed to shape, both the constitution and the development of human existence in a fundamental way. (Susen, 2015a: 140, emphasis in original.)

From a historical point of view, five types of metanarrative have been remarkably influential (see Susen, 2015a: 140–3; cf. Susen, 2020a: 12, 35, 49n113, 158, 173, 292, 331n19):

1. *political metanarratives* (such as anarchism, communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism as well as nationalism, feminism, and environmentalism);
2. *philosophical metanarratives* (which are frequently conceived of in terms of diametrically opposed epistemic frameworks – such as idealism vs. materialism, constructivism vs. realism, interpretivism vs. positivism, subjectivism vs. objectivism, relativism vs. absolutism, particularism vs. universalism, utilitarianism vs. deontologism, contextualism vs. foundationalism, or voluntarism vs. determinism);
3. *religious metanarratives* (for instance, faith-based interpretations of existence in general and history in particular – notably within Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism);
4. *economic metanarratives* (which are commonly conceptualized in terms of diametrically opposed economic models – such as capitalism vs. socialism, monetarism vs. fiscalism, or laissez-faire liberalism vs. Keynesian interventionism);
5. *cultural metanarratives* (as illustrated in the anthropological classification of human forms of life in terms of definitional antinomies such as 'premodern' vs. 'modern', 'primitive' vs. 'complex', 'undeveloped' vs. 'developed', 'tight' vs. 'loose', 'horizontally structured' vs. 'vertically structured', 'control-based' vs. 'freedom-based', or 'collectivist' vs. 'individualist').

In recent decades, social theorists have engaged in the critique of metanarratives, shedding light on their substantial (and, on several levels, detrimental) impact on human history and reminding us that '[g]reat crimes often start from great ideas' (Bauman, 1997: 5). Expressing their 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]: xxiii, xxiv; cf. Susen, 2015a: esp. Ch. 4), social scientists are required to be attentive to the historical specificities of social constellations, which – because they are relationally constructed and, thus, spatiotemporally variable – are irreducible to the deceptive certainties provided by 'catch-all' theoretical frameworks. This takes us to the relevance of social theory to inquiries in the social sciences, which is the focus of the next section.

Pause for Thought

What is social theory?

- Why should we bother with social theory?

Try to think of some examples that illustrate the importance of the central points made in this section. Please reflect on their relevance to your own life and, when doing so, try to answer the following questions:

1.
 - What are the main forms of *action* and *behaviour* you perform on a daily basis?
 - What are your main *beliefs*? Are these beliefs part of a *belief system*? If so, do you subscribe to an *ideology* or, indeed, to several *ideologies*?
 - What are the main *traditions* and *institutions* that shape your life? Can you imagine life without traditions and institutions? Give reasons for your answer.
2.
 - Consider the concepts of 'time' and 'space'. What is *objective*, what is *normative*, and what is *subjective* about 'time' and 'space'?
 - Ask yourself the same question in relation to key sociological variables – such as 'class', 'ethnicity', 'gender', 'age', and '(dis)ability'. In other words, to what extent are these sociological variables *objective*, *normative*, and/or *subjective*?
3.
 - Consider the following social fields: the economic field, the political field, the cultural field, the linguistic field, the artistic field, the religious field, the sexual field, the judicial field, the scientific field, the technological field, the military field, the journalistic field, the field of social media, the field of fashion, and the field of sport. Which of these fields do you regard as *foundational*, which ones do you regard as *contingent*, and which ones do you regard as *ephemeral*?
4.
 - Reflect on the previous list of *metanarratives*. Which of these metanarratives are (still) important in the 21st century? Are any of these (or other) metanarratives important to you on a personal level? If so, why?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *the concept of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Inglis, D. and Thorpe, C. (2019 [2012]) *An Invitation to Social Theory*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.
- Susen, S. (2015) *The 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (esp. pp. 1–39, 140–3).

The Relevance of Social Theory

In one way or another, most forms of social-scientific research involve a combination of (1) **empirical**, (2) **methodological**, (3) **epistemological**, (4) **terminological**, and (5) **theoretical** dimensions. (The role of scientific research is explored further in Chapters 9, 10 and 26.)

1. At the *empirical* level, social scientists deal with real-world problems and phenomena. For the right or the wrong reasons, these are often characterized in terms of sociological dichotomies, such as the following: material vs. symbolic, structural vs. agential, stable vs. volatile, objective vs. subjective, factual vs. value-laden, micro vs. macro, local vs. global, private vs. public, normal vs. deviant, cultural vs. natural, active vs. passive, conscious vs. unconscious – to mention only a few.
2. At the *methodological* level, social scientists grapple with the question of how social reality can and/or should be studied. For instance, some researchers rely solely on primary data, some resort exclusively to secondary data, and others draw on both primary and secondary data. Some researchers prefer quantitative approaches, some favour qualitative approaches, and others employ mixed-method strategies, combining different – but arguably complementary – modes of gathering information.
3. At the *epistemological* level, social scientists subscribe to particular conceptions of knowledge, regardless of whether they do so consciously or unconsciously. Paradigmatic dichotomies – such as **positivism** vs. **interpretivism**, materialism vs. idealism, **realism** vs. constructivism, objectivism vs. subjectivism, determinism vs. voluntarism, collectivism vs. individualism, inductivism vs. deductivism – reflect crucial intellectual divisions in the social sciences, all of which are, to a greater or lesser extent, informed by philosophical assumptions about the nature of being, knowledge, and logic.
4. At the *terminological* level, social scientists employ specific words, expressions, and labels to capture the phenomena they study. Indeed, different traditions of thought (which may be defined in disciplinary, ideological, and/or cultural terms) generate different vocabularies, which their users tend to take for granted. Yet, these vocabularies – which, effectively, serve as conceptual toolboxes – are constantly being reinvented, permitting researchers to account for behavioural, ideological, and institutional changes taking place in society.
5. At the *theoretical* level, social scientists endeavour to provide conceptually informed – and, in many cases, empirically substantiated – frameworks designed to (a) describe, (b) analyse, (c) interpret, (d) explain, and (e) assess the constitution, functioning, and **development** of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality, in a more or less systematic fashion. Without these frameworks, there would be no point in gathering and processing empirical data, creating and applying sophisticated methodologies, generating and distributing authoritative knowledge, or inventing and reinventing useful terminological devices.

The aforementioned dimensions, which are intimately interrelated, are integral elements of social-scientific research. One may wish to focus on class, **ethnicity**, gender, **age**, (dis)ability, or any other key sociological **variable**. (These topics are covered further in Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14.) It is hard to say anything authoritative about their stratifying influence, however, unless one's approach is empirically substantiated, methodologically rigorous, epistemologically reflexive, terminologically precise, and theoretically informed. Social research without **social theory** would be tantamount to a pre-scientific

venture, lacking any serious ambition to grasp the complexities of social reality by uncovering its underlying constituents. Most forms of social-scientific research involve a combination of (1) empirical, (2) methodological, (3) epistemological, (4) terminological, and (5) theoretical dimensions. At the same time, they depend on five vital modes of engaging with the world in an epistemically oriented – that is, knowledge-seeking – manner: (1) description, (2) analysis, (3) interpretation, (4) explanation, and (5) evaluation. As shall be elucidated in the following section, this multilayered epistemic orientation is reflected in the knowledge-seeking spirit of social theory.

Pause for Thought

Think of a topic in which you are particularly interested. Let us assume you decide to study this topic from a social-scientific perspective:

- What are the main (1) *empirical*, (2) *methodological*, (3) *epistemological*, (4) *terminological*, and (5) *theoretical* dimensions that you would have to take into account when studying your topic?
- To what extent does your theoretical perspective *influence* the way you (1) *describe*, (2) *analyse*, (3) *interpret*, (4) *explain*, and (5) *assess* the key aspects of your topic?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *the relevance of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Baert, P. and Silva, F. C. da (2010 [1998]) *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.
- Inglis, D. and Thorpe, C. (2019 [2012]) *An Invitation to Social Theory*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.

The Knowledge-Seeking Spirit of Social Theory

There would be no point in pursuing social science if, as researchers, we did not aspire to go beyond – and, hence, to challenge – the epistemic realm of everyday preconceptions. In order to undertake this ‘epistemological break’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 334–5; Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992: 117; Robbins, 1998; Susen, 2007: 135–7, 261–2; Susen, 2016a: 62–6; 2016b: 217), we need to draw a distinction between **ordinary knowledge** (generated and used by laypersons) and **scientific knowledge** (produced and employed by researchers and experts). Considering the distinction between ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’, we are confronted with three main options:

- *Option 1*: The former is superior to the latter, because it is based on the ‘genuine’ (individual and/or collective) experiences of human actors in ‘real life’. On this view, the former provides a degree of perspectival authenticity that the latter, due to its socially detached constitution, fails to embrace, let alone to convey.

- *Option 2:* The latter is superior to the former, because it is – at once – empirically substantiated, methodologically rigorous, epistemologically reflexive, terminologically precise, and theoretically informed. On this view, the latter guarantees a degree of epistemic certainty that the former, owing to its inevitable reliance on everyday preconceptions, fails to strive for, let alone to achieve.
- *Option 3:* Little is to be gained from constructing a rigid epistemic hierarchy between the former and the latter. Although ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’ are qualitatively different, they reflect equally legitimate types of epistemic engagement with the world. Rather than opposing ‘ordinary’ and ‘scientific’ ways of attributing meaning to and acting upon reality, we should seek to cross-fertilize these – arguably complementary – modes of relating to the world. As *laypersons*, we can navigate our everyday lives *and* – whether we do so consciously or unconsciously – draw on scientifically established insights. As *experts*, we can study objective, normative, and/or subjective aspects of the world *and* take ordinary people – including their conceptions, as well as their misconceptions, of reality – seriously.

Without developing *theories* about the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or of particular aspects of social reality, it is difficult, if not impossible, to engage with the world in an enlightening manner (cf. Swedberg, 2016). Social theory, in this sense, can be regarded as a systematic attempt to make sense of reality in a simultaneously (1) descriptive, (2) analytic, (3) interpretive, (4) explanatory, and (5) evaluative fashion. Rather than simply *describing* the surface level of social phenomena, social theorists take on the challenge of *analysing, interpreting, explaining, and making value judgements* about their underlying constitution and (actual or potential) development. To be clear, this is not to posit that social reality (either as a whole or in its multiple parts) is coherently structured. This is to contend, however, that the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality, can be *more or less* (1) adequately described, (2) systematically analysed, (3) insightfully interpreted, (4) convincingly explained, and (5) critically assessed by virtue of robust (that is, empirically substantiated, methodologically rigorous, epistemologically reflexive and terminologically precise) theoretical frameworks. In the next section, we shall consider some of the key dimensions that should be taken into account when researching these frameworks.

Pause for Thought

- What are the main similarities between *ordinary knowledge* and *scientific knowledge*?
- What are the main differences between *ordinary knowledge* and *scientific knowledge*?
- To what extent are the boundaries between *ordinary knowledge* and *scientific knowledge* blurred?
- What role does *ordinary knowledge* play in your everyday life?
- What role does *scientific knowledge* play in your everyday life?
- Are *ordinary knowledge* and *scientific knowledge* (1) equally important, (2) equally insightful, (3) equally biased, (4) equally interest-laden, and (5) equally power-laden? Give reasons for your answer.
- What is the role of *reason* and *rationality* in generating different types of knowledge?
- What is the role of *affect* and *emotion* in generating different types of knowledge?
- What is the difference between *knowledge* and *opinion*?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *the knowledge-seeking spirit of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Bourdieu, P. and Eagleton, T. (1992) Doxa and common life. *New Left Review* 191: 111–21.
- Susen, S. (2007) *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*. Oxford: Bardwell Press (Ch. 5, esp. pp. 133–7).

Key Dimensions of Social Theory

When examining the works produced by social theorists, it is useful to focus on three dimensions: (1) historical context, (2) central issues and contributions, and (3) strengths and weaknesses. Thus, we are confronted with the threefold challenge of (1) shedding light on the *historical circumstances* in which particular paradigmatic approaches have emerged and developed, (2) explaining the essential *issues* at stake in specific intellectual traditions as well as the principal *contributions* made by different scholars, and (3) drawing attention to the most significant *strengths and weaknesses* of rival conceptual frameworks (see Susen, 2013: 81).

This tripartite approach enables us to pursue the following objectives:

1. To grasp the historical conditions under which particular social theories emerged, as well as the biographical trajectories of those who developed them;
2. To identify the central themes covered, issues discussed, and contributions made by particular social theories, while uncovering their underlying assumptions;
3. To offer balanced accounts of particular social theories – not only by scrutinizing their respective strengths and weaknesses, but also by assessing their relevance and usefulness for the study of specific elements of human forms of life.

Having taken into consideration the aforementioned dimensions, it is possible to evaluate whether or not a particular social theory succeeds in (1) describing, (2) analysing, (3) interpreting, (4) explaining, and (5) assessing the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality, in a convincing manner. Arguably, this judgement call depends on the extent to which the approach in question makes significant claims whose epistemic **validity** is substantiated by empirical evidence, sustained by methodological rigour, informed by epistemological **reflexivity**, sharpened by **terminological** precision, and conducive to conceptual innovation.

In order to pursue the aforementioned objectives, it is important to draw on both **primary sources** and **secondary sources**. Primary sources are texts produced by major scholars, whose contributions are typically examined and discussed by commentators in the secondary literature. Secondary sources usually involve systematic descriptions, analyses, interpretations, explanations, and evaluations of primary sources. Primary sources are often more difficult to comprehend than secondary sources – especially if they were produced in a different historical context and/or written in a different language, but also if they are marked by a high degree of conceptual abstraction. Secondary sources may be useful not only in terms of making primary sources more accessible, but also, crucially, in terms of permitting readers to familiarize themselves with key debates and controversies surrounding the works of prominent thinkers. Having considered key dimensions of social theory, let us turn to reflecting on the scope of its main intellectual and thematic developments.

Pause for Thought

- Pick a particular social theorist and reflect on their work in terms of (1) *historical context*, (2) *central issues and contributions*, as well as (3) *strengths and weaknesses*.
- Why is it difficult, if not impossible, to examine level '2' (*central issues and contributions*) without knowledge of level '1' (*historical context*)?
- Why is it difficult, if not impossible, to discuss level '3' (*strengths and weaknesses*) without knowledge of level '2' (*central issues and contributions*) and, arguably, at least some knowledge of level '1' (*historical context*)?
- Why is it important to cover *both primary and secondary sources* when exploring the contributions made by seminal social theorists?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *key dimensions of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Baert, P. and Silva, F.C. da (2010 [1998]) *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.
- 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: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 14(1): 80–101.

The Scope of Social Theory

It is common to draw a distinction between '**classical**' and '**contemporary**' **social theory**. Although the **boundaries** between the two are often blurred, they can be distinguished as follows: the former generally refers to influential social theories developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, whereas the latter usually designates social theories developed from the mid-20th century onwards.

Arguably, the three most influential *classical social theorists* are Karl Marx (1818–83), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920). Notwithstanding the question of whether or not they deserve to be regarded as the 'founding figures' of **sociology**, the far-reaching significance of their legacy is undeniable. Among other scholars who, owing to their lasting impact on the discipline, are frequently considered 'classical sociologists' are intellectual pioneers such as Auguste Comte (1798–1857), W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Norbert Elias (1897–1990), Harriet Martineau (1802–76), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Georg Simmel (1858–1918), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904).

With regard to the intellectual landscape formed by *contemporary social theorists*, the picture is more complex and, arguably, far more diverse. Among the most prominent thinkers who fall into this category are the following:

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), Jeffrey C. Alexander (1947–), Margaret S. Archer (1943–), Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), Ulrich Beck (1944–2015), Luc Boltanski (1940–), Pierre

Bourdieu (1930–2002), Judith Butler (1956–), Craig Calhoun (1952–), Manuel Castells (1942–), Randall Collins (1941–), Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009), Donatella della Porta (1956–), Paul DiMaggio (1951–), Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923–2010), Michel Foucault (1926–84), Nancy Fraser (1947–), Anthony Giddens (1938–), Erving Goffman (1922–82), Jürgen Habermas (1929–), Stuart Hall (1932–2014), Sandra Harding (1935–), Axel Honneth (1949–), Hans Joas (1948–), Krishan Kumar (1942–), Bruno Latour (1947–), Henri Lefebvre (1901–91), Niklas Luhmann (1927–98), Steven Lukes (1941–), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98), Michael Mann (1942–), Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), Robert Merton (1910–2003), Talcott Parsons (1902–79), Hartmut Rosa (1965–), Nikolas Rose (1947–), Edward Said (1935–2003), Saskia Sassen (1947–), Richard Sennett (1943–), Charles Taylor (1931–), Alain Touraine, (1925–), and Bryan S. Turner (1945–).

Despite significant differences between these (and other) scholars, most classical and contemporary social theorists share several key concerns. Let us mention just two of them:

1. They share a deep concern with the extent to which *relations of power and domination* shape the constitution of human forms of life (Clegg and Haugaard, 2009; Susen, 2014a, 2015a: esp. 117–18, 2018). Different social theorists emphasize different types of power: social power, cultural power, economic power, political power, judicial power, sexual power, physical power, mental power, military power, technological power, ideological power, religious power, scientific power, epistemic power, or noumenal power – to mention only a few. Moreover, they often attach dichotomous meanings to the concept of power, notably ‘soft power’ vs. ‘hard power’, ‘power to’ vs. ‘power over’, and ‘power for’ vs. ‘power against’. ‘Optimistic’ social theorists tend to assume that it is possible to subvert, if not to eradicate, relations of power and domination. Their ‘pessimistic’ (or, arguably, ‘realistic’) counterparts, on the other hand, tend to maintain that relations of power and domination represent an inevitable part of social life. According to the former, the construction of emancipatory forms of life is both viable and desirable. According to the latter, the pursuit of human emancipation is a futile endeavour to the degree that ‘the will to power’, which manifests itself in the construction of systems of domination, is an anthropological constant – that is, an essential element of the human condition.
2. They share a deep concern with the *historical* constitution of social reality. On this view, it is crucial to examine the past, in order to obtain an accurate understanding of the present and/or to speculate, in an informed way, about the future. Put differently, in one way or another, most social theorists take, so to speak, ‘the long view’: they reject ‘presentist’ accounts of social reality (which aim to explain particular aspects of the present without taking the trouble to study their past) as short-sighted and reductive. It is far from clear, however, to what extent a ‘strong consciousness of historical complexity’ (Inglis, 2014: 100) is gradually being undermined (and replaced) by the increasing popularity of ‘presentist’ accounts of social reality. Part of this apparent paradigm shift is a collectively shared pre-occupation – if not obsession – with ‘*the new*’, rather than a sustained engagement with the degree to which the present is profoundly shaped by behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns transmitted from the past.

Pause for Thought

- Should we draw a *distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘contemporary’ social theory*? Give reasons for your answer.
- Why are most social theorists interested in *relations of power and domination*?
- Why are most social theorists interested in *the historical constitution of social reality*?

- Is a social theory that ignores (1) *relations of power and domination* and (2) *the historical constitution of social reality* a contradiction in terms? Why (not)?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *the scope of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Appelrouth, S. and Edles, L.D. (eds) (2011 [2006]) *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era: Text and Readings*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.
- Ritzer, G. and Stepnisky, J. (2018 [2003]) *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics*, 5th edition. London: Sage.

Versions of Social Theory

When teaching social theory at university level, one is inevitably confronted with the following two questions: Where should we start? Where should we end? In this respect, it is common to draw the aforementioned distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘contemporary’ social theory. In one way or another, most – if not all – versions of the latter will draw on the works produced by the founding figures of the former. In other words, it is difficult to grasp the key trends, developments, and controversies in contemporary social theory without a solid, or at least a basic, understanding of its classical predecessors.

Within contemporary social theory, one finds a large variety of rival approaches, which converge and diverge to different degrees and on different levels. In fact, given the multiplicity of social theories that have emerged ever since sociology came into existence, it is hard to do justice to all of them in an introductory chapter. It *is* possible, however, to categorize at least the most influential currents of thought that have shaped, and continue to shape, the development of social theory.

Classical Social Theory

Three main ‘classical’ traditions of social theory have emerged out of early-modern sociology. These approaches are also discussed in Chapters 5, 7 and 26:

- *Marxist* social theory, associated with ‘historical-materialist sociology’;
- *Durkheimian* social theory, associated with ‘**functionalist** sociology’;
- *Weberian* social theory, associated with ‘interpretive sociology’.

Marxist and *Durkheimian* approaches tend to be linked to *social holism*, in the sense that they conceive of the constitution, functioning, and development of **social practices**, structures, and arrangements in terms of a ‘social whole’. On this view, social forces operate ‘behind people’s backs’, influencing – if not determining – the interplay of relationally interconnected actions and constellations.

Weberian approaches tend to be linked to *methodological individualism*, in the sense that they seek to comprehend the constitution, functioning, and development of social practices, structures, and arrangements by considering 'individual actors' as the ontological foundations of society and the epistemological starting point of social inquiry. On this account, human beings are capable of drawing on different (notably practical, theoretical, formal, and **substantive**) types of rationality, permitting them to make reason-guided decisions and, by implication, to shape the course of history.

The epistemic spirit of *Marxist* and *Durkheimian* approaches is pervaded by the **paradigm** of *explanation* [*Erklären*], suggesting that it is the mission of social scientists to shed light on the underlying structural forces whose determining power escapes people's common-sense perceptions of the world. By contrast, the epistemic spirit of *Weberian* approaches is permeated by the paradigm of *understanding* [*Verstehen*], positing that social scientists need to engage with actors' ordinary ways of interpreting reality, since the human world is a universe of meaning-laden practices.

Contemporary Social Theory

Directly or indirectly influenced by these 'classical' traditions of thought, numerous currents of contemporary social theory have emerged. These can be categorized according to different criteria. Among the most influential branches of contemporary social thought are the following:

- *'early' functionalism* (Émile Durkheim, Bronisław Malinowski, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Herbert Spencer) and *neofunctionalism / systems theory* (Jeffrey Alexander, Niklas Luhmann, Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons);
- *linguistic structuralism* (Ferdinand de Saussure), *anthropological structuralism* (Claude Lévi-Strauss), *sociological / genetic structuralism* (Pierre Bourdieu), and *poststructuralism* (Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva);
- *philosophical and sociological pragmatism* (Patrick Baert, Luc Boltanski, Hans Joas, Joseph Margolis, Louis Quéré, Richard Rorty, Cédric Terzi);
- *critical theory, both 'within and beyond' the Frankfurt School* (Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse; and – more recently – Robin Celikates, Rainer Forst, Rahel Jaeggi, Hartmut Rosa, Martin Saar, Simon Susen);
- *micro-sociology and the sociology of everyday life* (Herbert George Blumer, Randall Collins, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Russell Hardin, George Herbert Mead)
- **conflict theories** (Randall Collins, Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf, Gene Sharp);
- **rational choice theories, game theories, social exchange theories, and neo-institutionalist approaches** (Gary S. Becker, Peter M. Blau, Paul DiMaggio, Jon Elster, Richard Marc Emerson, Martin Hollis, George C. Homans, Harold H. Kelley, David M. Kreps, John W. Thibaut, Walter W. Powell);
- *social theories of **modernity** / modernities* (Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Gerard Delanty, Anthony Giddens, Krishan Kumar, Michael Mann, William Outhwaite, Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Bryan S. Turner, Peter Wagner);
- *social theories of late modernity, second modernity, and reflexive modernity* (Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Christoph Lau);
- *social theories of postmodernity / postmodern social theories* (Perry Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells, Luce Irigaray, Fredric Jameson, Douglas Kellner, Scott Lash, Jean-François

Lyotard, Michel Maffesoli, Linda J. Nicholson, Saskia Sassen, Steven Seidman, Richard Sennett, Simon Susen, Keith Tester, John Urry, Gianni Vattimo, Robert Venturi, Wolfgang Welsch, Iris Marion Young, Slavoj Žižek);

- *social theories of **globalization*** (Martin Albrow, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Donatella della Porta, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Mike Featherstone, Anthony Giddens, David Held, Paul Hirst, Robert J. Holton, Ankie Hoogvelt, Elizabeth King, Scott Lash, Charles Lemert, Michael Mann, Marjorie Mayo, Anthony G. McGrew, Lydia Morris, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, George Ritzer, Roland Robertson, Chris Rumford, Saskia Sassen, Leslie Sklair, Grahame Thompson, Bryan S. Turner, Linda Weiss);
- *social theories of **cosmopolitanism*** (Anthony Appiah, Daniele Archibugi, Ulrich Beck, Seyla Benhabib, Carol A. Breckenridge, Craig Calhoun, Roland Dannreuther, Gerard Delanty, Robert Fine, Jürgen Habermas, David Held, Kimberly Hutchings, Chris Rumford, Bryan S. Turner);
- *social theories of **space*** (David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, Saskia Sassen, Edward Soja, Nigel Thrift, John Urry);
- *social theories of **gender / feminism*** (Lisa Adkins, Judith Butler, Raewyn Connell, Nancy Fraser, Lynn Hankinson-Nelson, Donna J. Haraway, Sandra Harding, Luce Irigaray, Linda Nicholson, Beverley Skeggs, Sylvia Walby, Iris Marion Young);
- *social theories of **class and stratification*** (Daniel Bell, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Breen, Rosemary Crompton, Gøsta Esping-Andersen, John Goldthorpe, Mike Savage, Erik Olin Wright);
- *social theories of **'race' and ethnicity*** (Michael Banton, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Patricia Hill Collins, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Richard Jenkins, Tariq Modood, John Rex, John Solomos, Cornel West, William Julius Wilson);
- *post- and decolonial theories* (Homi K. Bhabha, Gurinder Bhambra, Raewyn Connell, Julian Go, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Anibal Quijano, María Lugones, Walter Mignolo, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak);
- *social theories of **power and domination*** (Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Craig Calhoun, Randall Collins, Raewyn Connell, Ralf Dahrendorf, Michel Foucault, Nancy Fraser, Stuart Hall, Sandra Harding, David Harvey, Mark Haugaard, Barry Hindess, Steven Lukes, Michael Mann, Gianfranco Poggi, Nikolas Rose, Martin Saar, John Scott, Gayatri Spivak, Simon Susen);
- ***science and technology studies / actor-network theories*** (Karen Barad, Wiebe Bijker, Michel Callon, Andrew Feenberg, Steve Fuller, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Donald Angus MacKenzie, Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler, Langdon Winner, Steve Woolgar).

Having identified some of the most influential branches of contemporary social thought, let us consider some key trends and developments that have marked, and continue to mark, social theory in the 21st century.

Pause for Thought

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of *categorizing* influential currents of thought?
- What are the main similarities and differences between *Marxist*, *Durkheimian*, and *Weberian* approaches in the social sciences?
- Are all *'contemporary' social theories* simply *a series of footnotes to their 'classical' predecessors*? Give reasons for your answer.
- Which contemporary social theories (and theorists) do you find particularly interesting? If possible, try to figure out *why* you find some contemporary social theories (and theorists) more interesting than others.

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *versions of social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Calhoun, C., Gerteis, J., Moody, J., Pfaff, S., and Virk, I. (eds) (2012 [2002]) *Classical Sociological Theory*, 3rd edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Calhoun, C., Gerteis, J., Moody, J., Pfaff, S., and Virk, I. (eds) (2012 [2002]) *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, 3rd edition. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Trends and Developments in Social Theory

As indicated above, contemporary social theory is marked by a large variety of rival approaches. Despite the substantial differences between these perspectives, it is possible to identify a number of trends and developments in contemporary social theory (see Susen, 2015a: 6–11; cf. Susen, 2020a).

1. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as an *interdisciplinary* endeavour. The ‘advocacy of social theory’ (Seidman, 1994b: 119), which is inspired by the ‘critique of sociological theory’ (p. 119), is based on a commitment to interdisciplinary research. When communicating across disciplinary boundaries, it becomes clear that a lot is to be gained from cross-fertilizing the knowledge generated within different realms of inquiry. A commitment to interdisciplinary research – cutting across traditional epistemic boundaries within and between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences – is motivated by the conviction that there is no analytic approach that can claim to capture the entire complexity of human reality.
2. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *foundationless* endeavour. More and more researchers in the social sciences take the view that ‘the quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory of society’ (Seidman, 1994b: 119) is not only pointless, but also potentially dangerous (cf. Baert, 2005: 126–45, 146–69; Baert and Silva, 2010 [1998]: 285–307). In the face of inescapable sociocultural diversity, it seems impossible to provide context-transcending standards of epistemic validity. In a world characterized by multiplicity and heterogeneity, the system-building task of grasping the complexity of society by virtue of ‘grand theories’ (cf. Skinner, 1985) and ‘big-picture ideologies’ (cf. Susen, 2014b) appears to have lost credibility.
3. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *directionless* endeavour. In this context, ‘directionless’ does not signify ‘meaningless’, ‘pointless’, or ‘clueless’. Rather, it indicates that we, as critical researchers, should resist the temptation to invent conceptual apparatuses that lead to the ‘false closure’ (Seidman, 1994b: 120) of theoretical frameworks, preventing us from ‘prying open present and future social possibilities’ (p. 120) and from ‘detecting fluidity and porousness’ (p. 120), rather than discovering determinacy and eternity, in the daily construction of human reality. A social theory without guarantees ‘carries no promise of liberation [...], of a society free of domination’ (pp. 119–20), thereby rejecting the teleological spirit underlying some classical accounts of human emancipation (cf. Susen, 2015b).
4. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *public* endeavour. As such, it cannot make any major claims about the constitution of society without engaging with the everyday processes that shape the development of reality. It will lose its wider ‘social and intellectual importance’ (Seidman, 1994b: 119) if ‘it is disengaged from the conflicts and public debates’ (p. 119) taking place on a daily basis. The ‘plea

for a “public sociology”, which uses expert knowledge to promote debate with and amongst various non-academic publics’ (Baert and Silva, 2010 [1998]: 302), is aimed at recognizing the following: to the extent that sociological analysis ‘has turned inward and is largely self-referential’ (Seidman, 1994b: 119), it runs the risk of degrading itself to an elitist language game, whose autopoietic conceptual frameworks are disconnected from everyday concerns and experiences. Not only do we need to avoid a scenario in which ‘[s]ociological theory [...] is produced and consumed almost exclusively by sociological theorists’ (p. 119), and not only do we need to discard mainstream notions of ‘professional sociology’ and ‘policy sociology’ (see Baert and Silva, 2010 [1998]: 302), but, moreover, we need to take on the challenge of *cross-fertilizing academic and non-academic discourses*. This can be achieved by doing away with the traditional **division of labour** between the ‘scientific enlighteners’, who direct and control their epistemic inferiors ‘from above’, and the ‘ordinary to-be-enlightened’, who follow and obey their epistemic superiors ‘from below’.

5. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *situationist* endeavour. Owing to its interest in the spatio-temporal specificities of locally experienced realities, it ‘speaks the language of particularity’ (Seidman, 1994b: 121), rather than obeying the logic of the search for lawfulness and universality. In this sense, it is driven by ‘the more modest aspiration of a relentless defence of immediate, local pleasures and struggles for justice’ (Seidman, 1994b: 120, quotation modified), instead of aiming ‘to uncover a logic of society’ (p. 120), ‘to discover the one true vocabulary that mirrors the social universe’ (p. 120), and ‘to find a universal language, a conceptual casuistry that can assess the truth of all social languages’ (p. 121) and thereby ‘articulate humanity’s universal condition’ (p. 121). If we abandon the futile project of defining ‘our principal task as providing foundations for sociology’ (p. 122), as ‘giving ultimate reasons’ (p. 122), and as delivering ‘a universal epistemic rationale that provides objective, value-neutral standards’ (p. 122), then we are in a position to recognize that the complexity of materially and symbolically differentiated realities cannot be captured in terms of the context-transcending frameworks and principles of grand sociological theories.
6. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *pragmatic* endeavour. This tendency ‘suggests that the search for ultimate or universal grounds for our conceptual strategies should be abandoned in favour of local, pragmatic justifications’ (Seidman, 1994b: 123, quotation modified). Such a pragmatist approach to social existence is interested in discursive processes accomplished by ordinary actors capable of mobilizing their cognitive resources in relationally constituted – and, hence, sociologically diverse – contexts. A ‘pragmatic turn’ (p. 125) in social theory has various significant advantages, notably that ‘[i]t expands the number of parties who may participate more or less as equals in a debate about society’ (p. 125) and, therefore, permits us to do justice to the fact that human actors – that is, both experts *and* laypersons – are equipped with reflective, critical, and moral capacities (Blokker, 2011; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Susen and Turner, 2014). In short, the ‘pragmatic turn’ in sociology draws attention not only to multiple ways in which *human practices* allow for the construction of social reality, but also to the pivotal role that *human capacities* play within performative processes.
7. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as an *ethno-conscious* endeavour. To be aware of the cultural specificity of one’s epistemic claims to validity requires recognizing that the attempt to overcome ethnocentrism is fraught with difficulties. All modes of knowledge generation – irrespective of whether they are scientific or non-scientific, academic or non-academic, based on expertise or guided by common sense – represent *culturally specific* practices performed by spatiotemporally embedded entities. If we accept the sociocultural particularity underlying all epistemic claims to validity, then we are obliged to face up to the structuring power exercised by the ineluctable weight of historicity. To be ethno-conscious means to be aware of the fact that all modes of cognition – including the most reflexive ones – are influenced by context-dependent prejudices, preconceptions, and presuppositions.

8. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *socio-conscious* endeavour. As such, it insists not only upon the cultural specificity that shapes epistemic communities, but also, in a broader sense, upon the *relational contingency* underlying the seemingly most liberating forms of human agency (cf. Susen, 2020a: 10–11). Indeed, it is due to this relational contingency that the human condition is permeated by radical indeterminacy: highly differentiated societies produce intersectionally constituted actors expected to take on multiple roles, develop plural identities, and carry various coexisting – and, often, conflicting – selves within themselves. A socio-conscious perspective has major implications for our conception of knowledge: the question of whether we consider a statement right or wrong depends not only on *what* is being said, but also on *who* says it *when*, *where*, and *to whom*. For *objectivity* ('What?') is – inevitably – a matter of *social authority* ('Who?'), *spatiotemporal contextuality* ('Where and when?'), and *interactional relationality* ('To whom?'). The idea of abstract epistemic universality evaporates when confronted with the multi-layered constitution of normative – that is, value-laden, meaning-laden, perspective-laden, interest-laden, power-laden, and tension-laden – realities.
9. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *pluralist* endeavour. Highly differentiated societies are centreless formations in the sense that they lack a structural, ideological, or behavioural epicentre from which all institutions, discourses, and practices derive and upon which peripheral areas of interaction, or derivative forms of existence, are parasitical. In the global jungle of flows, networks, and diversified local events, the human actor is '*a self with multiple identities and group affiliations, which is entangled in heterogeneous struggles with multiple possibilities for empowerment*' (Seidman, 1994b: 136, emphasis added). Given both the real and the representational complexity of materially and symbolically differentiated societies, we need to abandon the modern project of developing big-picture ideologies and to face up to the existence of situation-laden normativities created in response to relationally constituted realities. In the global **network** society, there is no such thing as an overriding agenda that can justifiably declare to possess a normative monopoly in the landscape of decentred and diversified subjectivities.
10. Increasingly, social theory is regarded as a *historicist* endeavour. One of the main limitations of classical sociological thought, undermining its applicability to the study of highly differentiated forms of sociality, is its 'quest for foundations' (Seidman, 1994b: 119, 127; cf. Seidman, 1994a: 12), which is expressed in 'the project of creating a *general theory*' (Seidman, 1994b: 127, emphasis added), understood as 'an overarching totalizing conceptual framework that would be true for *all times* and *all places*' (p. 127, emphasis added). In this respect, three issues are particularly worth mentioning:
 - a. *Ethnocentrism*: '*Human history* in these modernist tales really meant *Western history*' (Seidman, 1994b: 129, emphasis added; cf. Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Spivak, 1988, 1990). Their capacity to conceal 'the mark of their own national origin' (Seidman, 1994b: 129) permits them to present their explanatory insights into social developments 'as if their particular pattern were of world-historical importance' (p. 130, quotation modified).
 - b. *Evolutionism*: In classical sociological thought, '[n]on-Western societies [are] relegated to a marginal position in past, present, and future history' (Seidman, 1994b: 129; Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Spivak, 1988, 1990). Following this modernist logic, historical events and trends can be measured against the teleological benchmark of 'progress' (cf. Allen, 2016), which can be defined in numerous – notably, social, cultural, political, economic, technological, scientific, religious, demographic, and civilizational – terms. '*The grand narratives of industrialization, modernization, secularization, democratization*, these sweeping stories that *presume to uncover a uniform social process* in a multitude of different societies [...] should be abandoned' (Seidman, 1994b: 130, emphasis added).

- c. *Dichotomism*: Teleological metanarratives are ‘stories with [...] simplistic binary schemes’ (Seidman, 1994b: 130), such as *Thesis vs. Antithesis* (Georg W.F. Hegel), *Gemeinschaft vs. Gesellschaft* (Ferdinand Tönnies), *Kapitalismus vs. Sozialismus/Kommunismus* (Karl Marx), *Wertrationalität vs. Zweckrationalität* (Max Weber), or *solidarité mécanique vs. solidarité organique* (Émile Durkheim) – to mention only a few examples (cf. Seidman, 1994b: 130; see also Jenks, 1998). Universalist evolutionary and binary categories artificially homogenize the heterogeneously constituted constellations of historical realities. If, however, we acknowledge the socio-historical specificity underlying all epistemic claims to validity, then we are obliged to expose the spatiotemporal relativity permeating the symbolic authority asserted by universalist accounts of history.

In short, it appears that most social theorists in the 21st century, irrespective of the significant differences that may exist between them, have abandoned the ambitious pursuit of providing ‘catch-all’ conceptual frameworks, designed to offer once-and-for-all explanations of both the agential and the structural forces shaping society. Social theory is not dead, but its contemporary versions tend to be far less interested in uncovering the alleged determinacy of social reality than its classical variants.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, in the early 21st century, social theorists face major challenges. These comprise a range of issues: social, cultural, political, economic, technological, military, epistemic, scientific, philosophical, religious, organizational, demographic, and environmental – to mention only the most salient ones. It is one thing to diagnose the various problems with which humanity is confronted in the 21st century; it is quite another to come up with viable solutions. Social theory has played, and will continue to play, a pivotal role in the battle of ideas for building a global society capable of determining its own destiny in a way that addresses the interests shared by all, rather than just some, members of humanity.

Pause for Thought

- What are the main trends and developments that have shaped social theory in the late 20th and early 21st centuries?
- What, if anything, do these trends and developments tell us about the constitution of contemporary societies?
- Which of these trends and developments do you consider particularly important?
- Can you think of any significant trends and developments (in society in general and in the social sciences in particular) that are *not* included, but – in your view – *should* be included, in the above account?

Expand Your Knowledge

To learn more about *trends and developments in contemporary social theory*, you may consult the following sources:

- Inglis, D. and Thorpe, C. (2019 [2012]) *An Invitation to Social Theory*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.
- Susen, S. (2020) *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to contemporary social theory. To this end, it has covered a number of central issues that need to be addressed when grappling with the task of studying, or indeed producing, theoretical frameworks in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular. The main points made in this chapter can be summarized as follows:

- Social theory may be defined as the attempt to provide a conceptually informed – and, in many cases, empirically substantiated – framework designed to (1) describe, (2) analyse, (3) interpret, (4) explain, and (5) assess the constitution, functioning, and development of social reality, or particular aspects of social reality, in a more or less systematic fashion.
- Most forms of social-scientific research involve a combination of (1) empirical, (2) methodological, (3) epistemological, (4) terminological, and (5) theoretical dimensions. At the same time, they depend on five vital modes of engaging with the world in an epistemically oriented – that is, knowledge-seeking – manner: (1) description, (2) analysis, (3) interpretation, (4) explanation, and (5) evaluation. Social theory permits us to make sense of their interconnectedness.
- Since, as critical researchers, we are expected to go beyond the epistemic realm of everyday preconceptions, we need to draw a distinction between *ordinary knowledge* (generated and used by laypersons) and *scientific knowledge* (produced and employed by researchers and experts).
- When studying the works produced by social theorists, we need to consider their historical situatedness, their principal contributions to human knowledge, and their strengths and weaknesses.
- Notwithstanding the large variety of ‘classical’ and ‘contemporary’ social theories, most – albeit not all – of them share a concern with (1) relations of power and domination as well as (2) the historical constitution of social reality.
- Directly or indirectly influenced by ‘classical’ traditions of thought, diverse currents of contemporary social theory have emerged over the past century, exploring key issues arising from the development of modern societies.
- Most social theorists in the 21st century have abandoned the ambitious pursuit of providing ‘catch-all’ conceptual frameworks, designed to offer once-and-for-all explanations of both the agential and the structural forces shaping society.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is social theory? In your answer, think about how it can be defined.
2. Why should we bother with social theory? In your answer, reflect on its main purpose and why it is important.
3. What is the place of social theory in contemporary sociology? In your answer, discuss its role in sociology and, more broadly, in the social sciences.
4. What are the main challenges faced by social theorists in the 21st century? In your answer, examine the extent to which these challenges reflect some of the principal problems with which humanity is confronted in the 21st century.

Go Further

Books

- Baert, P. and Silva, F.C. da (2010 [1998]) *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.

This book offers an easy-to-read but provocative account of the development of social theory, covering a range of key figures and influential schools of thought.

- Inglis, D. and Thorpe, C. (2019 [2012]) *An Invitation to Social Theory*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Polity.

Wide-ranging in scope and coverage, this book provides a concise, jargon-free, and thought-provoking introduction to social theory.

- Ritzer, G. and Stepnisky, J. (2018 [2003]) *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics*, 5th edition. London: Sage.

This volume comprises a useful survey of sociology's major theorists and theoretical approaches, covering the works of both classical and contemporary figures.

Journal Articles

- Delanty, G. (2017) The *European Journal of Social Theory* at twenty years. *European Journal of Social Theory* 20(1): 4–8.

This introduction to the 20th anniversary of the *European Journal of Social Theory* offers an opportunity to reflect on the current position of social theory in light of the past two decades, but with a view to the future.

- Susen, S. (2020) The resonance of resonance: Critical theory as a sociology of world-relations? *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33(3): 309–44.

This article explores recent developments in critical social theory, focusing on the work of the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. It provides an example of a social theory that claims that one central paradigm (in this case, 'resonance') can be considered 'a meta-criterion of the good life' – that is, a criterion by means of which it is possible to assess the quality of a particular set of social arrangements.

- Swedberg, R. (2016) Before theory comes theorizing or how to make social science more interesting. *The British Journal of Sociology* 67(1): 5–22.

The basic argument in this article is that, in the present context, sociology and social science more generally are severely hampered by the lack of attention being paid to theory. It suggests that one way to redress the current imbalance between 'methods' and 'theory' in the social sciences is to pay more attention to *theorizing* – that is, to the actual process that precedes the final formulation of a theory.

Websites

- <https://socialtheoryapplied.com>
This website provides an online space with useful ideas and resources on the numerous ways in which social theory can be applied to the study of central areas of social life.
- <https://globalsocialtheory.org>
Divided into three broad categories (that is, 'concepts', 'thinkers', and 'topics'), this website contains valuable resources for anyone interested in global social theory.
- www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qy05/episodes/downloads
This website offers a range of (BBC) 'Thinking Allowed' episodes, most of which draw on, and further develop, social theories in a critical, creative, and dialogical fashion.

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