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978-0-521-87063-4 - Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures  
Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl  
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## SOCIAL THEORY

Social theory is the theoretical core of the social sciences, clearly distinguishable from political theory and cultural analysis. This book offers a unique overview of the development of social theory from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to the present day. Spanning the literature in English, French and German, it provides an excellent background to the most important social theorists and theories in contemporary sociological thought, with crisp summaries of the main books, arguments and controversies. It also deals with newly emerging schools from rational choice to symbolic interactionism, with new ambitious approaches (Habermas, Luhmann, Giddens, Bourdieu), structuralism and anti-structuralism, critical revisions of modernization theory, feminism and neo-pragmatism. Written by two of the world's leading sociologists and based on their extensive academic teaching, this unrivalled work is ideal both for students in the social sciences and humanities and for anyone interested in contemporary theoretical debates.

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TWENTY INTRODUCTORY  
LECTURES

HANS JOAS AND WOLFGANG KNÖBL

Translated by  
ALEX SKINNER



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## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521690881](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521690881)

Originally published in German as *Sozialtheorie. Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen* by Suhrkamp 2004, © Suhrkamp 2004

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 2009 as  
*Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*  
 © Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009

English translation © Cambridge University Press 2009

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First published 2009  
 8th printing 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Joas, Hans, 1948–

[*Sozialtheorie*. English]

Social theory : twenty introductory lectures / Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, Alex Skinner.  
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-87063-4 (hardback) 1. Social sciences–Philosophy–History–20th century. 2. Sociology–Philosophy–History–20th century.

I. Knöbl, Wolfgang, 1963– II. Skinner, Alex. III. Title.

H61.15.J6313 2009

300.1–dc22

2009015141

ISBN 978-0-521-87063-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-69088-1 Paperback

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For Björn Wittrock

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is based on lectures originally conceived by one of the authors (Hans Joas) for a visiting professorship at the University of Chicago in 1985 and which he has held regularly since then. The first attendees, towards the end of the 1980s, were students at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, followed, for more than a decade, by students at the Free University of Berlin, along with their counterparts at various American and European universities during certain semesters. The younger of the two authors (Wolfgang Knöbl) contributed to the planning and constant improvement of these lectures at various stages of his academic career: as a student in Erlangen, as junior and assistant lecturer in Berlin and New York, and subsequently as a colleague at the University of Göttingen.

It goes without saying that the precise character of this lecture series has changed considerably over the course of time – not only because of the obvious necessity of keeping them constantly up to date, but also in response to students' needs and the imperative of clearing up points they struggled to understand; the authors' own ongoing theoretical projects have also had an important impact. We have now reached a point at which we feel confident enough in our basic approach and in the validity of our overview to sally forth from the lecture theatre and present our ideas to the reading public. We hope our survey will satisfy the needs of both students in the social sciences and those of non-specialist readers keen to understand international developments in the field of social theory since around the end of the Second World War.

To aid intelligibility we have largely retained the characteristic style of the oral lecture. Outstanding works of philosophy such as Ernst Tugendhat's *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language* and Manfred Frank's lectures, published as *What is Neostructuralism?*, served as templates. A comparable work also exists in a subject area closer to our own: Jeffrey Alexander's *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II*. We follow Alexander's example not only as regards the number of lectures, but also in the inclusion of an initial chapter on the philosophy of science. We also agree with Alexander that the development of theory after 1945 may be divided into three major phases: first, a period in which the dominant forces were the work of Talcott Parsons and a modernization theory now considered overly conventional; one which saw this dominance come to an end and sociology disintegrate into rival, sometimes feuding 'approaches' whose political and moral arguments also clashed, mainly in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and the subsequent rise – as Alexander puts it – of a 'new theoretical movement',



that is, the burgeoning of ambitious theoretical syntheses, partly anchored in the rival approaches, partly inspired by novel motifs.

But this is where our agreement with Alexander ends. *Thematically*, only our first eight lectures overlap with his book. Alexander's work is thoroughly America-centric and seeks to justify in quasi-historical fashion his own attempt to produce a neo-Parsonian synthesis (for a critique, see Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, pp. 188–213, esp. pp. 209–12). But given that the focus has shifted dramatically towards Europe since 1970, particularly in the field of theory, with the most ambitious and productive projects coming from Germany (Habermas, Luhmann), France (Touraine, Bourdieu) and Britain (Giddens, Mann), Alexander's account was already inadequate when it appeared (in 1987); it is even more so now. We have done our best to avoid reproducing such partiality in inverse form. We examine how proponents of modernization theory and Parsonianism have attempted to revise and develop these traditions and we scrutinize the renaissance of pragmatism and the rise of communitarianism – all largely intellectual products of North America.

The claim to completeness, proportionality and fairness expressed in these remarks points to the fact that we have one eye on the book's potential use as a tool of academic teaching. Yet it is not strictly speaking a textbook. This is not a neutral presentation of secure knowledge. As in philosophy, there is no certainty in social scientific theory, particularly when it goes beyond the empirical and explanatory, levels at which claims to certainty also frequently come to grief. As far as neutrality is concerned, in this field all one can aspire to do is to argue one's case fairly and comprehensively; it is impossible to forgo one's own theoretical perspective. By no means do we shrink from criticism and judgement. On the contrary, we very much see this book as part of our attempt to produce a comprehensive social theory capable of meeting contemporary needs; this it does by getting to grips with the achievements, problems and tasks germane to the field.

Unlike most of the lectures on which it is based, we have chosen not to call this book 'modern sociological theory'. While this title was well suited to university sociology curricula, it has always failed to capture the inclusion of ideas and stocks of knowledge (such as structuralism and pragmatism) whose intellectual home essentially lies outside of sociology. Rather than disciplinary affiliation, we have always been guided by how an author or movement has contributed to theories of the social. But what exactly do we mean when we speak of 'social theory'?

We lack a history of the use of the term 'social theory'. It seems to have been deployed, without further justification, in the late nineteenth century at the latest. On the one hand, much like the term 'social thought', it was used, in the absence of a more precise definition, for a field of thought to which sociology later laid claim: it referred to generalized statements about social realities or the regularities of social life. On the other hand, however, scholars applied

it to a way of thinking, whether their own or that of others, which assailed 'individualism' or which aspired to transcend it. 'Social theory' thus ran counter to key premises of economic, political and psychological thought in the Anglo-Saxon world; implied here was a specific theoretical perspective on cultural and social processes. This was a work in progress marked by persistent theoretical clashes. A similar tendency to criticize individualism and the specific approach to social facts to which this critical stance gave rise influenced the discipline of sociology as it became institutionalized. As a result, the tension between the different meanings of 'social theory', one referring to specific empirical realities and one to a specific perspective on these phenomena, seems at first to have gone largely unnoticed.

However, as the subject became established and above all as it was increasingly professionalized, this tension inevitably became ever more apparent. From the point of view of professional sociology, with its orientation towards the empirical, theory largely meant 'empirical theory', that is, explanatory statements at a high level of generality (see Lecture I for further clarification). This *narrow* conception of theory tended to discourage the production of normative statements and interpretive templates. Even when such views held sway, however, scholars continued to engage in theoretical work *more broadly conceived*. Theory understood in this way was always regarded as useful, at least as a source of hypotheses and as a means of shoring up the discipline's historical identity. It is to this conception of theory that our lectures are dedicated. There are good reasons for this.

Not only has the understanding of the role of theory in the sciences in general changed substantially over the last decades (more on this too in Lecture I). New rivals have also emerged in neighbouring fields. The field of 'political theory', for example, which has become well established, discusses normative issues relating to communal life in good, just and well-organized polities; work in this field often achieves substantial public attention. And the humanities have generated a 'cultural theory', albeit a very nebulous one, at least as a field of discourse, which also tackles issues of significant normative interest, relating to gender relations or intercultural relations, for example. Were sociological theory to become fixated on its purely empirical, explanatory dimension it would inevitably fall behind these competitors.

If this were allowed to happen, two negative consequences would result. First, within the discipline of sociology itself, an overly narrow conception of theory would isolate theoretical from empirical work, which can only be to the detriment of both and puts disciplinary cohesion at risk. Second, the enormous potential inherent in the sociological tradition since Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead, both within a broader public context and within interdisciplinary dialogue, would likely remain untapped, squandering the prospect of being taken seriously as an overarching conception incorporating political and cultural dimensions. The term 'social theory'

certainly aspires to such overarching status – which is not to say that our book realizes this ideal entirely. Our concern here is with where we direct our intellectual gaze rather than with making definitive statements.

Given its precarious position within the lattice of academic disciplines, some scholars have recently called for ‘social theory’ to be institutionalized as a discipline in its own right; it already has, they suggest, the requisite intellectual maturity in nascent form (see Stephen Turner’s appeal in ‘The Maturity of Social Theory’). We do not share this view; quite the contrary. Such a separation would do nothing but cement the state of mutual ignorance that risks emerging between social theory and empirical social science. In any case, in the absence of empirical substantiation and scrutiny, social theory would lose the very aspect which distinguishes it from philosophy and the mere exchange of ideas.

A word on the distinction between the term *social theory* and the German term *Gesellschaftstheorie* (‘theory of society’) which carries problematic connotations. *Gesellschaftstheorie* has often implied a more normative stance, of a left-wing, ‘critical’ hue, than is characteristic of sociological theory. Yet, as we argue in greater detail in Lecture XII, the concept of *Gesellschaft* or society is so implicitly bound up with that of an order based on the nation-state, with a clearly defined territory, that it has always been laden with conceptual baggage. Contemporary scholars are now so aware of this baggage that the concept of *Gesellschaft* has finally become problematic. Our understanding of societies constituted as nation-states, like that of all societies, must first be anchored in a theory of the social.

The present work is essentially concerned with the development of social theory since the end of the Second World War. Our point of departure is a book published a few years before this great historical turning point, Talcott Parsons’ *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). We refrain from in-depth treatment of the classical figures of sociology, whose tremendous potential we have just underlined. Those wishing to learn about them will have to turn to other books. As will soon become apparent, however, this certainly does not mean that their thinking is ignored in this book. Its presence is constantly felt both in Parsons’ work, which of course aspired to synthesize the classical figures’ ideas, and in the writings of all subsequent authors who have incorporated more specific aspects in their work. The classical figures have attained this status precisely because their oeuvres have proved unceasingly productive – inexhaustible in fact. But those who believe that elements of their work remain untapped ought not merely to draw upon the classical figures; they must reflect on how much time has elapsed since their heyday and strive to tap their potential for present-day theoretical work. It is the work being done on contemporary problems and scholars’ unceasing and productive recourse to older theories that generates the dynamism of ‘social theory’; it is this dynamism for which we aspire to rouse interest in the present work.

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We are tremendously grateful to all the friends and colleagues who read and provided critical comments on an initial draft of the manuscript. We have done our best to carry out the suggested improvements. Thanks are owed to Frank Adloff, Jens Beckert, Sibylle Kalupner, Christoph Liell, Nora Lindner, Katja Mertin, Gabriele Mordt, Florian von Oertzen, Hans-Joachim Schubert, Peter Wagner, Harald Wenzel, Patrick Wöhrle and Heinrich Yberg. The most outstanding services were rendered by Bettina Hollstein (Erfurt), who unearthed internal inconsistencies with extraordinary precision and whose suggestions helped resolve them. We are also immensely grateful to the University of Chicago (Albion Small Fund) and the University of Göttingen for funding the translation of our book into English.