

Introduction

Rethinking Social Theory with Anthropology

In this book we wish to reopen the dialogue between anthropology and social theory. We aim to revitalise the social sciences by renewing social theory through anthropology. So do we pretend to offer another fresh start? Another unprecedented effort to question all received wisdom? Another new and improved social theory? This is not really our intention; or, rather, this is *just* what we would *not* like to do. Our aim is rather the opposite: to problematise the very idea of generating a radical break, the urge to escape current problems in thinking by running further forward. Instead, we suggest a renewal of thinking by explicitly calling for a look backward, and a return to the basics via concepts developed by a series of ‘maverick anthropologists’ to be discussed in the following chapters. Such concepts, we argue, are helpful or even necessary for understanding better the rise and the dynamics of the modern world, including the development of the social sciences, in particular sociology and anthropology.

But in what exact ways can anthropology contribute towards social theory that have not already been explored? Has not everything been said that needs to be said? Alas, no. For sure, in the post-war period social theory drew much inspiration from anthropological and linguistic theories that came to underpin the structuralist paradigm, much via the work of Lévi-Strauss. The inspiration continued most directly via Bourdieu’s famous critique of structuralism, leading to a process approach (Bourdieu 1977). During the 1960s and ’70s anthropology had itself become deeply influenced by theoretical currents developed elsewhere in the social sciences, as in psychological approaches, neo-Marxism and world system theory. From the 1980s anthropology went through a long period of self-reflexivity and ‘crisis of representation’, in some cases leading to a complete abandoning of the very idea of theorising. This went alongside a long and sustained critique of ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ anthropology and its alleged lack of ‘reflexivity’. It also – once again – involved a search for inspiration from outside the discipline, which now came mostly from (literary) deconstructivism, postmodernism in philosophy and various branches of critical theory.

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Taken together, these developments still seem to frame the current situation, where possible dialogues between anthropology and social theory mostly became restrained to questions of methodology: anthropology and the ‘ethnographic method’ (used by almost everyone in the social sciences today) represents a ‘view from below’ or through the prism of the ‘other’ and a concern with meaning-formation, subjectivity and practice. It is this view that, for example, sustains the argument in Ortner’s (2006) book, *Anthropology and Social Theory*. Anthropology can provide the kind of ‘thick description’ that no one else can offer.

The elevated status of anthropology within the social sciences has led to very little engagement with the theoretical luggage and the history of concept formation that emerged from within the discipline of anthropology, from its early beginnings up through the twentieth century. We wish to turn this perception on its head: the ‘anthropological method’ based on participation and direct and sustained human interaction was indeed never just an anthropological privilege, but belongs just as much to sociology (as evident in the work of Simmel or Tarde and the Chicago school of sociology) and to the wider interpretative social sciences inspired by experiential methodologies, from Dilthey onwards (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987). The fieldwork approach is no secret mystery; it belongs to everyone, and anthropologists need not worry so much about it. At the same time, and contrary to common wisdom, anthropology has much to offer exactly as concerns theory formation. It is our argument that anthropological insights represent conceptual and theoretical perspectives of *fundamental* relevance to social theory, perspectives which have so far remained peripheral to the dialogue between anthropology and social theory, but even within the history of anthropology and anthropological theory itself.

The need to revitalise the social sciences, and in particular social theory, implies that there is something wrong with it. In our view there is indeed something quite seriously, fundamentally and even foundationally wrong with social theory, even with the very idea of a social ‘science’, as it came to be understood, much connected to the academic institutionalisation of the social sciences. Without going into detail, let us indicate the nature of the problems we are facing, in order then to situate what this book tries to put on offer.

The State of the Art in Social Theory

In order to indicate what is wrong today with social theory, let us cast a quick look at the ‘manifesto’ or ‘mission statement’ of contemporary social theory through the 2017 *Sociology Catalogue* by Polity Press. It might seem an anecdotal entry to the debate, but the catalogue is indeed a paradigmatic example of the current state of affairs. The authors represented, and their

main ideas, are the ones that fill the pages of our textbooks and social theory course syllabi around the world. Polity was established in 1984 by Anthony Giddens, one of the central figures of sociology and social theory for almost half a century and the first professor of sociology in Cambridge. After the first few pages devoted to textbooks, pp. 5–19 of the 50-page catalogue are devoted to social theory, including new books by some of the most influential social theorists over the last couple of decades, presented as ‘new and improved’ theories.

These start by presenting, and prominently, the most problematic aspects of our reality as the bright new future, offering hope. This is the message of the very first entry, introducing a May 2017 book by Jeffrey Alexander, one of the main figures of social theory for four decades, entitled *The Drama of Social Life*. The central claim of Alexander is that it is wrong to argue that modernity ‘suppressed authenticity’, given that we as ‘social actors’ can indeed play and perform social dramas (*Sociology Catalogue*: 5). As we shall see, Victor Turner indeed invoked the notion of social drama, and the concept is certainly not without potential. However, one genuine problem of our days, aggravated by social media, is exactly the fact that we are constantly induced to ‘spontaneously’ playact in our everyday life (see Chapter 6 on play); but this is presented, through a strange turn of the screw, as a liberating achievement by Alexander. Calling for playing ‘dramas’ as a solution to a world, where 11–13-year-old kids wired to social media call the turbulences caused by risky online behaviour ‘dramas’, courts irresponsibility.

The catalogue continues with a sheer celebration of nihilism, irony and the void. An example is a new book by Lacan, in which the celebrated postmodern post-Freudian star ‘amuses himself, improvises, and lets himself go’ (*Sociology Catalogue*: 13). Such a mode of behaving is appropriate for a *Commedia dell’arte* actor, except that even they practised hard to look relaxed – but this is the wrong way to pursue for a serious academic, especially if these talks are given in the Sainte-Anne hospital, a mental asylum where Michel Foucault also worked as an intern – and who would never have given seminars by ‘letting himself go’, *especially* not there. A similarly thorough nihilism exudes from a new book of Alain Badiou, *Black*, and its celebrating the void, or ‘pitch dark’, by taking the readers ‘on a trip through the private theatre of his mind’, combining ‘[m]usic, painting, politics, sex, and metaphysics’, and in this way making black, or the (non-)colour of the void, ‘more luminous than it has ever been’ (15).

Such flirting with the ‘public sphere’ through theatricality and the void, two closely connected non-things, mostly serves to produce a smoke to hide the frightening emptiness and lack of originality behind the ‘new’ entries. Thus, on the second page of the social theory section, Slavoj Žižek boldly raises the flag of ‘back to Marx’, confidently proclaiming that through a ‘fresh, radical

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reinterpretation of Marxism’ we can meet the challenges of the day, thus ‘lay [ing] the foundations for a new emancipatory politics’ (*Sociology Catalogue*: 6). Is this really what we need today? Another widely acclaimed contemporary social theorist, Axel Honneth, even manages to surpass this, by offering us nothing else than *The Idea of Socialism* (11) as a means of redemption. In her blurb Judith Butler acts a willing cheerleader: through the book Honneth ‘makes a unique and compelling case for renewing the utopian impulse of the early Marx in the context of the present’, demonstrating nothing less than ‘how the ideal of socialism can orient our thought and action in the contemporary political world’.

The rejuvenated revolutionary impulse is combined with the inciting of the young, luring them – here again with Badiou, but now with his *The True Life* – into the belief that they, the youth, stand ‘on the brink of a new world’; they thus need not feel ‘constrained by the old prejudices and hierarchical ideas of the past’, need not follow the ‘paths already mapped out to them’; rather, they can truly ‘create something new’ and ‘propose a different direction’ (*Sociology Catalogue*: 15). One should only go out on a Thursday night in any university town, and find out for oneself exactly how much our ‘youth’ needs courageous and frank advice about not being ‘condemned to obey social customs’ – unless by ‘social customs’ Badiou means binge drinking and mindless sex; but his other entry, *Black*, published just a few months before, had already shown that this is likely not what he had in mind. But there is a world outside university students, though avant-garde intellectuals, rarely having children, hardly know about it. Young teenagers, way before being 15, not to say 18, are not simply on the brink but fully inside a ‘brave new world’, with smartphones giving them infinite access to visual sex, even online dating, not simply as a possibility but, even worse, as a new norm by peer-group pressure – with predictable consequences for maturation and mental health.

Apart from Marx, socialism, theatrical play and sex, the vanguard theoreticians unsurprisingly return to critique as a way to solve the crisis and safeguard democracy, autonomy and freedom (*Sociology Catalogue*: 5–6, 14). This is an omnipresent concern, and it almost seems to go without saying that we must cherish such values. But exactly this concern has repeatedly proven meaningless, if not positively counterproductive, and just like Marxism, points towards a problem to tackle rather than a value to cherish.

The value of critique is reasserted, together with polemics, by Lacan (*Sociology Catalogue*: 13) – two activities that Foucault found problematic decades ago, much connected to Foucault’s problematisation of our Marxist and Freudian legacies. As if to make up for this, Polity offers another attempt at erasing, denigrating and intellectually besmirching Foucault, in a book outright associating him with neoliberalism, posing the innocent-looking question ‘Could Foucault have been seduced by neoliberalism?’ (12). The question

hardly makes any sense, as neoliberalism *in the sense in which we understand it today* is a phenomenon that came to dominance in the 1990s, while Foucault died in 1984; and whatever he *could* have meant by neoliberalism in his 1979 lectures cannot be judged *as if* it meant the same thing as for us today.¹

Having lost the spirit of Foucault, we can quickly move beyond him. Thus in May 2017 we are offered another set of essays by Habermas, entitled *Postmetaphysical Thinking II (Sociology Catalogue: 10)*. After post-industrialism, post-materialism, post-modernism, post-Fordism and post-secularism, to name only a few,² one would think only a new titan from the end of the world would come up with another ‘post’ term. Jürgen Habermas, in person, proclaimed on the same page by Ronald Dworkin ‘the world’s most famous living philosopher’ is ready to blow our mind off with a stunning peace of originality, arguing that the *real* answer to ‘the crisis of metaphysics’ is in “‘postmetaphysical thinking’” – a statement that gives new depth to tautological reasoning; just before making us privy to the earth-shaking admission that ‘philosophy does not have a privileged access to the truth’ (10).

Another recent book by Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy (Sociology Catalogue: 10)*, claims to offer EU leaders ‘a way out of the current economic and political crisis, should they choose to follow it’. It takes quite some guts to *pretend* to be able to solve such questions from a philosophical armchair position. The cover image of the book is quite revealing here, as the fingers of a hand, moving with strings the stars below, were probably conceived for the EU leaders trying to manipulate member countries; but it can easily be applied to the *pretence* of Habermas, a would-be philosopher-king, trying to pull the strings by which the ‘stars’, or the leaders, of the EU can be moved – though in Plato’s *Laws* (644D-5C) it was the demiurge who was moving humans as puppets, on a golden string, and not the ‘philosopher-king’.

The most problematic but also most telling aspect of what the catalogue puts on offer is how its flagship figures pretend to stand above the common lot of mankind, recycling standard claims about ‘populism’ and ‘conservatism’, recalling university managers who cannot stop talking about how ordinary academics are ‘conservative’, meaning that they keep wanting to read and write books and teach students, instead of jumping onto the bandwagon of the more and more recent innovations championed by PR, HR and IT offices. Thus, we are facing *The Great Regression*, argue a series of thinkers in a new edited collection, including, among others, Arjun Appadurai, Nancy Fraser, Donatella della Porta and Slavoj Žižek (how could he be left out?). Thus, the same vanguard intellectuals who with their one hand extol the ‘people’, alpha

¹ Evidently enough, Foucault basically meant the German ‘mixed economy’ of the immediate post-World War II period.

² There was even a conference held in Amsterdam entitled ‘The Post prefixes’, 31 August–1 September 2017.

and omega of political life *in principle*, with their other hand deprecate them as just another bunch of xenophobic nationalists, making an ‘unprecedented assault on the liberal values and ideals associated with cosmopolitanism and globalisation’ (*Sociology Catalogue*: 6). Would the real people please stand up! In fact, they are already standing, and in various ways – though, we should say, they would be much better *walking* (Horvath and Szakolczai 2018a); except when they sit in front of the television, listening to various modes of liberal and cosmopolitan brainwashing; or, even worse, when they change the channel and, adding insult to injury, become captivated by anti-liberal anti-cosmopolitan brainwashing. Welcome to the ‘cacophony of critique’ (Boland 2018).

It is sad to notice, given the importance of his previous works and the esteem we had towards him as a person, that Zygmunt Bauman takes up a prominent place in illustrating what is problematic with social theory. To begin with, p. 9 contains six books by him, five of which were published between February 2016 and January 2017 (he died on 9 January 2017). Two of the books belong to the ‘liquid’ series, a term which has its own importance, as a modality of liminality, a term Bauman helped to bring into sociology; the ‘liquidity’, however, which was supposed to identify a problem or a challenge, has increasingly become not simply a slogan, but a justification of the present as void of stable reference points, resigning to the inevitability of a development which eliminates the very possibility of a meaningful life – offering further support for social engineering.

Thus, in *Babel*, it is claimed that the very values and principles that guided ‘our behaviour and our lifestyles’ so far ‘must be radically revised because they no longer seem suited to our experience of a world of flux’ (*Sociology Catalogue*: 9). But what principles and modes of behaviour is Bauman talking about? Of the ‘modern’, in contrast to the ‘postmodern’, or the ‘fluid-modern’? We have to escape the values of the ‘previous’ modernity, as the ‘new’ modernity requires something else, always something ‘new’ and ‘improved’? Or – and this is the more likely and sinister element of the idea – ‘we’ have to give up more and more of what we *always* believed in, and respected, as fundamental features of *any* meaningful existence, because they are no longer compatible with the ever new manias of modernity; old-fashioned and untenable ideas, such as doing something meaningful, and not being resigned to the idea that the horizon for our children is that, with a bit of luck, they can obtain a zero-hour contract in a call centre?

Thus, the only meaningful answer to this ‘modernity without restraint’ (Voegelin 2000) is to measure it up to something stable, which inevitably includes a respect for the past – not some kind of idealisation of a definite past as an unattainable golden age, but standing firm against the winds of change and looking for *measure, meaning* and sober *judgment* in something *concrete*. Unfortunately, this is exactly what Bauman explicitly rejects, in his

last, sole-authored, and thus inevitably testament-like book, *Retrotopia*, which is a bashing of the past as comparable to utopian thinking. What Bauman fails to consider is that the past actually *is*. Whatever happened and existed always remains present, and it is *this* presence that cannot be liquefied and *thus* liquidated, as it remains stable forever. *This* was the great teaching of the communist experience: that people simply refused to accept the wholesale destruction of their past by the regime, no matter what its promises were. It is revealing that in autumn 1989, when things were not yet fully decided, the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in Romania was sparked by the effort of the communist authorities to destroy some cemeteries in ethnic Hungarian areas. While the much-suffering citizens so far had accepted or put up with everything the communists did with their *lives*, they simply refused to accept the destruction of their *dead*. It is quite sad that Bauman, who really should have known better, came to ignore this experience at the end of his long and productive life.

What Polity offers as social theory in 2017 is clearly a representative collection. It indeed represents something, even simply presents it: the utopian impulse of Marxism that can always be rejuvenated towards a finally realised socialism, liquification of the past in a constantly faster-moving present, post-meta-post ideologies, inciting youth with an invitation to transgress the threshold into a brave new world loosened from restricting norms, a relentless insisting on the Enlightenment values of autonomy and freedom to safeguard our liberal democracy. This is indeed a catalogue; a sort of war damage report of the most serious problems that plague our times. What we need is not a brand new social theory, as any step forward from here would just exacerbate the situation. We simply cannot go on like this. What we need is a proper stock-taking of this cul de sac, and a reassertion of what went lost along the road.

Moving Behind the State of the Art

Let us stress it again: we are not claiming that ‘everything’ is wrong, requiring a fresh start – an approach that in our reading is simply deprived of any meaning. What we do claim is that certain highly problematic ideas and methods have become systematically and deeply institutionalised at the heart of our disciplines. Without excising them thinking cannot move forward, but remains blocked and disabled, repeating, like a broken disk, the same old clichés. A basic impasse of thinking is perceptible not only in the social sciences; we only have to mention the manner in which the same old commonplaces of liberalism, socialism and nationalism are repeated, generation after generation, as purported solutions to the problems they themselves generated. This impasse, we argue, can be traced back to the blockage of thinking that is characteristic of the way the social sciences became institutionalised, a point to which we will return in Chapter 8.

A crucial element of this impasse is indeed the obsession with the ‘new’, the idea that somehow it is possible and desirable to cancel and get rid of the entire past, everything that belongs to ‘tradition’, paving the way for a new arrangement that offers, on the basis of a void and *tabula rasa*, a new social order of free and equal ‘citizens’, moving forward together and forever, on the path of progress and development, through the growth of knowledge and enlightenment, sharing the benefits of science and technology through the free market and the open public sphere, available actually or potentially to everyone – while leaving this ‘potentiality’ open to interpretation.

This mentality is not just a marginal feature of some kind of utopianism, but indeed the way mainstream modernity imagines and presents itself, since the successive and mutually reinforcing stages of the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, Manchester economics and so on. Social theory has, despite several rounds of reflexivity, failed to gain the necessary distance to modernity.

The situation, actually, is even worse. Pointing out the problems with ‘modernity’ usually entails a *critique* of modernity, thus, paradoxically, indicating another break, calling for a ‘new’ and ‘improved’ version of ‘critical theory’.³ Such an idea, a version of ‘hyper-modernity’ (Szokolczai 2017a), actually cements the case of modernity by proclaiming any dissent from the permanent escape forward, into the ‘finally’ and ‘really’ new and redemptive, as being conservative, reactionary, traditionalist and ultimately simply absurd, as the benefits of modernity, again whether actual or potential, in terms of increased knowledge, living standards, life expectancy, democratic openness and so on, presumably or evidently simply cannot be called into question.

Let us be explicit here. We find the term ‘critical theory’, but even the very idea of ‘thinking critically’, extremely problematic. Of course, we do not propose to accept and never question any kind of intellectual dogmatism – this whole book is a testimony against it. However, it takes quite a lot of effort to be able to offer a ‘critical’ remark to any major thinker. Anthropology students are to a striking extent taught to be ‘critical’ about existing approaches in the social sciences and ‘critical’ indeed also with respect to previous approaches within their own discipline. We are often quite struck how our colleagues ask introductory sociology students to write a ‘critical essay’ about Weber or Foucault, when they hardly have a clue what Weber or Foucault were writing about. Often enough, what they *really* mean is to criticise these master thinkers from the perspective of (sometimes openly ideological) positions they have invited the students to engage in class. Simultaneously teaching our students to be ‘self-critical’ is in a sense even worse, risking to produce a

³ On the paradox of critique, see Baehr (forthcoming), Boland (2013, 2018), Kilminster (2011) and Szokolczai (2012).

split mind, as one can hardly say something and be critical of it at the same time. Genuine ‘self-criticism’ means what the thinkers discussed in this book practised, returning over and again to their earlier ideas, not only polishing them, but in an honestly searching manner, reflexively trying to move deeper into the problem that animated their search.

However, ‘critical theory’ tries to do something more, and ultimately impossible: to build an entire theory on the basis of a ‘critique’ – which, of course, amounts to the old problem of Samson pulling himself by his own hair; or the search for an Archimedean point of the universe. ‘Critical theory’, as the history of German university philosophy shows, has often meant to attack anybody outside your own ‘theoretical position’ in the name of an absolute truth (whether transcendental or socio-politico-ideological), and at the same time promote this position with the most ruthless possible political means, betraying collegiality and even friendship, within the university hierarchy. The Frankfurt school has created a legacy also in this sense. Of course, many contemporary critical theorists openly express their hesitance towards universal values, but then insist on the belief that critique can expose repression and social injustice and thereby help to make the world not a better but at the least a ‘less bad’ place to live. And who would not agree to critique injustice? And yet, even such a starting point is problematic, as it works from a double negation: the desire to eliminate something negative.

So, what do we mean by moving ‘behind’ the state of the art, as in a backward movement? The task is not to resurrect a mode of living and thinking that has disappeared, as this would certainly not make sense. It is, rather, to return to the basics, to the fundamental concerns of human existence. In our reading, this was what motivated the great, classic figures of sociology and social theory, about a century ago: how such foundational issues must be rethought, given the challenge of modernity – given that modernity came to challenge *exactly* such basic matters, the very tissue of meaningful social existence. Far from simply running forward with modernity, in an unthinking and unquestioning manner, the *basics* must be rethought anew; but this also means that it cannot ignore or reject past thinking about such basics. Rather, it must involve a joint rethinking and renewal of such modes of thinking without reducing such an exercise to syncretic or synthetic eclecticism.

The self-understanding of modernity as a radical break and the modern search for the ever new produced a particularly confusing situation in sociology. If the modern world is something radically different, and is always changing, then sociology, especially social theory, must follow this and change continually, reflecting the ever new aspects of modern life, while at the same time also respecting the motto of ‘thinking for yourself’, producing the at once objective (as the world changes) and subjective (as one must continuously reinvent oneself) imperative of basically rewriting everything every decade or

even year. This of course is impossible, and would result in a total cacophony, except for the unity provided by the canonisation of a watered-down version of the three classic founding fathers, and a certain mutual respect among the various ‘schools’ of independent would-be master-thinkers, who sort of recognise themselves in the manner of the churches during the early Reformation, in order to stop the generation of further schisms. Thus, in this way, the radical differences between the main classic figures, and in particular between the modernising and *non*-modernising classics are denied, in the name of a purported canon, while the similarity behind the seemingly radically different contemporary modernising approaches is denied.

So do we question that modernity inaugurated a break? Not at all. The rise of the modern world indeed marks a break, but understood as a crisis – the crisis of Europe (a civilisation) – and not as an autonomous and legitimate critique of anything that has ever happened or existed anywhere in the past. Modernity as a crisis is also a revelation, as it revealed, or rendered visible, whatever was invisible as hidden, the underlying fabric of social and human existence. This was as much of a threat as an opportunity: a threat to the continuity of normal human existence, but also an opportunity for better understanding its stakes, and indeed to overcome long-standing entrapments.

Such an opportunity was perceived by some of the most important figures of social theory in the past centuries; but it was this same opportunity that was betrayed or used in an opportunistic manner by the various prophets of modernity – whether as official high priests of modernisation, or as critiques of officialdom in the name of further revolutionary potentials. The aim of our book is also to show how and why this happened, and with what effects – in thought, but by implication, also in real life – and to indicate how a genuine opportunity can be regained and the codified and canonised errors rectified.

On the Interpenetrating Realities of Social Theory and Political History

This book is an engagement with intellectual history. However, we argue that this history runs parallel with the social and political history of modernity: mirrors this history, intersects with it, carries forwards and at times emphasises and brings forth some of the most problematic tendencies of modernity. In other words, this book will try to present a more thorough understanding of the interpenetration of reality and thought in moments of deep crisis with the help of anthropological concepts. Before further introducing the actual, substantive concepts and ideas to be treated in the following chapters, we need to provide a few further methodological specifications that sustain the analysis to follow.

First of all, concerning the interaction between political history and social theory in moments of crisis, we have to introduce two central, interrelated