

Social Theory, History, Theory of Society

Wolfgang Knöbl, *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte. Zur Kritik der Sozialtheorie*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2022, 316 pp.

Joachim Fischer, *Tertiärität. Studien zur Sozialontologie*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2022, 313 pp.

French Theory is an odd entity which nevertheless do exist. It came into being as the result of a “creative misunderstanding between French texts and American readers” (Cusset 2008, 5). To my knowledge there exists, luckily, no such thing as German Theory. This does of course not mean that no interesting work is done in Germany in the fields of social ontology, social philosophy, social theory, theory of society and sociological theory. The two internationally most well-known German sociologists today doing social theory and theory of society are probably Hartmut Rosa and Andreas Reckwitz. In this review, I will take a look at two interesting publications by German sociologists who probably are a little less well-known outside the German-speaking context. What unites the two books is that they try to *theorize* important fields of sociological research: social processes and the category of the Third. Following the lead of Richard Swedberg, there has been a growing interest in Sweden in how to go about theorizing in the social sciences, how to develop new social theory (Swedberg 2015; Carleheden 2024). The two reviewed books provide suggestions and clues about how to theorize important areas of sociology.

Wolfgang Knöbl’s *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte. Zur Kritik der Sozialtheorie* is a rich and stimulating book. The main title is not easy to translate into English. Perhaps the best try is *Sociology Before History* (or in Swedish: *Sociologin inför historien*). Its topic is the troubled relationship between sociology and history, and especially the philosophy of history. The discipline of sociology is continually operating with large-scale and long-term social processes termed rationalization, modernization, individualization, secularization, globalization, etc. Through these concepts sociology still has, so Knöbl’s argument goes, one foot in the philosophy of history. How to theorize such processes? How to construct historical epochs? Hans Joas has more than once issued a warning against quasi-teleological concepts describing processes assumingly linear and irreversible (see for example Joas 2017, 355–373). Operating with such large-scale

and long-term process-concepts seems to be part of sociology's comfort zone, being widely in use rather than reflected upon and theorized.

The subtitle of Knöbl's book is *On the Critique of Social Theory*. As far as I can see the concept of social theory is never really clarified, but in a joint publication he and Hans Joas argue that social theory "range from empirical generalizations to comprehensive interpretive systems which link basic philosophical, metaphysical, political and moral attitudes to the world" (Joas and Knöbl 2009, 17–18). Thus, social theory is a very broad field.

Knöbl begins by retelling an exciting story. Talcott Parsons and Raymond Aron meet at the breakfast table during a colloquium in Rome in October 1973. When Aron starts to question if social action really should be the starting point for sociological inquiry, the reaction of Parsons is to stand up and leave the table.¹ Already in his two dissertations from the late 1930s, Aron had argued that sociology needs to clarify its relation to history if it wants to avoid being stuck in the heritage from the philosophy of history. What he had in mind was the need to develop a theory of social processes.

In the following chapters Knöbl discusses how social theory, in its search for a broader perspective on social change, came to have a place somewhere in between the philosophy of history and historicism. How to select and order available historical data and social facts? Is it possible to discern long-term tendencies? How to connect a multitude of actions and events into social processes and historical epochs? From what position does the historian theorize history? In the inter-war period this search gave rise to a kind of undertakings that Knöbl characterizes in the following way: "A diagnosis of the present is formulated that *in some way* is derived historically; the present age is new in a radical way and to be clearly distinguished from the past; the following historical steps have led to the present situation (which is seen as positive or as problematical); some very general historical driving forces are mentioned, which have pushed the stages of development forward." (Knöbl 2022, 124–125) Knöbl mentions Alfred Weber and Hans Freyer as representatives of this way of doing social theory. The question is how far from this the approaches of for example Andreas Reckwitz and Hartmut Rosa are today. In their respective theoretical endeavours they elaborate on large-scale and long-term processes that connect actions and events that in time and space are very distant from one another.

The post-war era saw the rise of American-style modernization theory, as an alternative to historical materialism, describing a master process of historical and social development. Since its demise a focus on in time and space more delimited social processes is discernable as well as an interest in narrative theory. In this connection the work of for example the French sociologist Michel Dobry and Andrew Abbott are discussed, but also and in a more critical vein that of Niklas Luhmann. Especially Abbott has directed attention to the question: *How* to present a social process? This is also the remedy that Knöbl advocates: a vitalization of social theory with the help of narrative theory.

1 The story stems from Giovanni Busino, "Souvenirs suisses", *Commentaire* 8 (28–29), 1985, pp. 137–139.

The narrative approach has several advantages. A narrative connects actions and events into a process whose story is told. In doing so the narrative also provides explanations for what happens: how actions and events are connected. In this way narratives transform “wild contingency” (ibid., 261) into ordered contingency. It also directs attention to what remains stable in all change. Furthermore, narratives have a plotline which gives actions and events a direction, and they also have a beginning and an end. Narratives are also always rooted in a socio-political context, drawing on specific cultural resources, i.e., a narrative is never value-free. Knöbl concludes by indicating how processes of industrialization, democratization and individualization may be problematized and illuminated with the help of a narrative-theoretical approach. Doing sociology involves storytelling. Thus, there are good reasons to engage with narrative theory, with the problems and possibilities of telling a good story.

The lesson to be learned from Knöbl’s book, I take to be, is to avoid hastily jumping into a diagnosis of the present with the help of concepts of long-term and large-scale processes in some way leading up to this present. The historization of social theory, not to be mixed up with historical sociology, implies in this sense a critique of social theory, with the aim of sharpening its analytical tools. Thus, it may be argued that there are two overarching topics in sociology: one centered on social action and social order, another with a focus on historical processes and social change, and that the two are connected by social action not only reproducing existing structures but also bringing about social change.

Joachim Fischer’s *Tertiarietät. Studien zur Sozialontologie* (in English: *Tertiarity. Studies in Social Ontology*) comprises previously published articles, including one in English, as well as new texts. Fischer is the author of a major work on the German tradition of Philosophical Anthropology (see Fischer 2008).² In his new book he returns to what was his very first research interest: the category of the Third (the second Other) in the form of the third person singular: he, she or the Swedish gender-neutral *hen*.

Fischer makes a distinction between social theory and theory of society. Social theory investigates the basic building blocks of the social world and may thus also be called social ontology. He doesn’t explicitly talk about sensitizing concepts but argues that the social theoretical vocabulary decides on the “analytical qualities” (Fischer 2022, 54) of the theory of society, primarily being a theory of modern society. Furthermore, social theory forms according to Fischer the basis of the social and cultural sciences, providing them with an independent status among the family of disciplines.

What interests Fischer is the constitution of the social from below: the move from identity, via alterity and tertiarity, to plurality. Whereas the *dyad* makes possible social phenomena like cooperation, exchange, contract, imitation, dialogue and friendship, the *triad* makes possible the configurations of the mediator, arbiter and impartial, the messenger, translator, spy, voyeur and scapegoat, the *tertius gaudens* (the laughing Third), and the phenomenon of *divide et impera*. Thus, social life becomes much richer

2 For a review, see Heidegren 2009.

with the help of the Third. All in all, the dyadic and triadic configurations function as “social operators” (ibid., 178) making complex societal patterns possible.

Simmel and Freud are highlighted as the two founding fathers of theories of the Third. Of importance are also several French authors: Sartre, Lacan, Girard and Levinas. In recent German social theory, Fischer observes something of a turn to the Third. Furthermore, giving equal weight to the dyad and the triad is said to imply nothing less than a paradigm shift in social theory.

Fischer presents the Third as the missing link between dyadic interaction and institutions, between alterity and plurality, making possible new and more complex forms of interaction. In the final part of the book, societal sub-systems like law, economy, politics, media and family life are analyzed as configurations of the Third. The existence of dyadic conflicts for example necessitates the social invention of the impartial or the arbiter. Another important social invention is the Third as messenger or translator between *ego* (sender) and *alter ego* (receiver). The basic form of political democracy, as the social invention of majority rule, is two against one. In a free market economy, the buyer or consumer has the position of the laughing Third in relation to competing sellers. Furthermore, “the capacity to think in terms of triads” (ibid., 284) is developed within the family. The Third is even present in the dyadic love-relationship, where the excluded Third returns as the rival posing a threat to the relation.

Adding complexity to double contingency Fischer introduces triple contingency as well as society as the generalized Third. However, given his insistence on theorizing the Third as a person of flesh and blood, rather than as a transsubjective entity, I miss a notion of the significant Third (as the second significant Other). The rival, for example, is not an anonymous anyone but a particular person. The significant Third has its place between the significant Other and the generalized Third. Neither do I find it quite convincing that community is associated with the dyad and society with the triad, given that for Tönnies the family constitutes the nucleus of community life.

Fischer emphasizes that the move from *ego* and *alter ego* to the Third implies a shift of perspective from mutual understanding (or misunderstanding) to the *observation* of a relationship, establishing a new position in social epistemology. The Third may be interfering as well as observing, and, as a third possibility, be a participant observer. Following Peter Berger, the observing Third is associated with the sociologist as the professional voyeur who wants to open every door and overhear every conversation. The transcendent observing Third – God who sees everything – has been brought down to earth and turned into the immanent Third as spy, voyeur or sociologist.

A certain repetitiveness is probably unavoidable in a book that is put together out of previously published and new material. However, it is the question if not the whole book should have been written anew in order to present a more focused line of argumentation. Despite this critical remark, I found Fischer’s book to be really rewarding reading. It opened many new and interesting doors for me as voyeur-sociologist.

What connects the two books reviewed is that they throw light on how to theorize two arguably undertheorized areas of sociological investigation. In the case of Knöbl the suggestion is that overarching social processes may be theorized and presented with

the help of inspiration and loans from narrative theory, and in the case of Fischer that the social may be theorized and built up from below with the help of the category of the Third as the missing link between dyadic interaction and institution.

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