

Introduction: If it is not mysterious, it is not social theory

As long as there is any life in society, as well as suffering, trouble and unease, there will also be the desire for methodical, sustained, critical inquiry into its nature, dynamics, contradictions and – as yet – unfulfilled possibilities: *social theory*. Social theory takes many forms. In the academic context, it mediates between social science and societal practice: social theory is the self-reflection of social-scientific practice on its societal backgrounds, functions, aims and purposes. Social theory asks *why, how and what for?* It is only through theory that research can become practical: reflection on the *why, how and what for* turns a heap of data and observations into a purposeful practice, a kind of doing that has a relation and a relevance to society. Perhaps one can go even further: without at least a vague idea of the *why, how and what for*, no heap of data and observations would ever have been assembled in the first place. This is the importance of theory in the academic context.

All this applies similarly, however, if ‘social science’ is understood in its most fundamental, generic sense: ‘methodical, sustained, critical inquiry’ (i.e., *science*) into that most familiar but at the same time most alien thing, *society*. Such inquiry does not exclusively take place at universities. It is conceivable even that it might increasingly migrate elsewhere, upwards to specialized institutions of ‘higher learning’ or ‘think tanks’, and downwards to self-organized discussion circles formed by those who really feel the need. In the university, social theory has nowadays a strangely ambiguous standing: it is considered to be ‘difficult’ and carries quite a bit of prestige for that, but at the same time it is looked at with some suspicion.

Theorists are seen as hard-working scholars only about as much as chess players are seen as hard-working sportspeople: not quite, really. No sweat there, like in an honest game of rugby or a good old feast of data-crunching. The hard-working contemporary university tends to think of a more than cursory acquaintance with the big, theoretical questions as a luxury that should not distract from the steady production of ‘deliverables’: concrete, quantifiable ‘outputs’. Asking conceptual questions is still fine, though, as long as it results in downloads and citations.

On reflection, however, not even the busiest practitioner of applied social science would want to deny that discussing questions of *why, how and what for* makes datasets and deliverables more acute and relevant. Furthermore, it increases what many now think is the main purpose of university study, the students’ expected ‘employability’. Many employers assert that they want their workforce to be good at critical and conceptual thinking – on the assumption and under the condition, however, that ‘thinking outside the box’ serves profitability. It is good to hear this, but at least some of the ‘employers’ might have second thoughts on this matter: in an economic order that is shaped by a hierarchical division of labour, *some* jobs do indeed require a critical and experimental imagination, and a capitalist society that fails to nurture it will be savaged by the competition. Only an inquisitive mind invents new technologies and products. At the same time, however, a majority of jobs continue to result in the ‘torpor of [the] mind’ that the division of labour produces in the worker, as described by the Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776: for most people, to be ‘employable’ means being able to do as you are told. You must be disciplined rather than critical and imaginative, however boring and stultifying the job may be. Critical thinking can therefore lead to *un*-employability as well, because reflection on societal purposes may increase one’s unwillingness to be ‘employed’ by another person or agency for purposes that are not necessarily one’s own. And where is the employer who invites the employees to have an open-ended discussion of the purposes of the company?

The pragmatic and very sensible counter-argument is, of course, that even the most beautifully autonomous and critical individual needs to eat, and that ‘employability’ is therefore a good thing to

have, as long as society makes eating conditional on ‘being employed’. The hint is in the passive voice: I am *being employed*, rather than employing my own faculties to some purpose that I have willed to commit to. There’s the rub: the survival of the *autonomous* individual (‘autonomous’ meaning self-directed, self-governing) is based on his or her acceptance of the *heteronomous* order (‘heteronomous’ meaning other-directed). The conflicting claims of autonomy and heteronomy are mediated only through the concept of ‘society’ – which happens to be just what this book is chiefly about. I have dwelt on the issue of ‘employability’ for a bit because it illustrates – I hope – how a social-theoretical perspective can turn an apparently straightforward, benign phenomenon into something not quite so benign and surely a lot less straightforward. Therefore – BUY THIS BOOK!

To sum up: this book is for students who are lucky enough to be required within their university studies to immerse themselves in some theory, or those who want in their own time to compensate for not being required to do so, or anyone else who simply feels an appetite for open-ended and unpredictable reflection on society – social theory.

Those with little time for introductions to introductions may want to skip to the first chapter proper, as I have made my principal point. On the following pages I will explore what these two words, ‘social’ and ‘theory’, mean. This is probably the most abstract and difficult part of the entire book and can be read just as well at the end – as you wish. You must be warned that I take pride in making existing questions *more complicated* and *more numerous* rather than simply answering them. In social theory, to have many questions – more than many answers – counts as a form of wealth. At least in this sense, I hope you will find this book enriching.

Society and the social

Social theory is the theory of society. But what is society?

– *Society is a social relation.*

But what is a social relation, and to what kind of social relation does the concept of ‘society’ refer?

– *Well, the search for an answer to that question is in fact one of the things that social theory is about.*

Geologists have it easy: they study rocks, and they start their research with a pretty clear idea of what a rock is. They will make this idea more complex in the course of their research, but they do not need to ask themselves all the time, *now, what actually is a rock?*

It is different for social theorists. The question ‘what is society’ is one of the things that never stop occupying the minds of those practising social theory. That’s why our strange discipline never really comes to a conclusion on anything ... and quite proudly so: that is exactly the beauty of it. With its object, it also reinvents itself all the time. ‘The social’ and ‘society’ cannot be defined, and this is an important part of what defines them. I will keep my thoughts on how to define ‘society’ by not defining it rather short for now because this entire book is really dedicated to exploring a range of different answers to this question.

Society is a mystery, but of young age. Although social theorists are in no agreement on what exactly it is, we can say with reasonable certainty that society came into existence some three to four hundred years ago, as part of a package of related conundrums called ‘modernity’. When we talk about ‘society’ in the context of social theory we usually mean ‘modern society’. When it arrived, anonymously at first, people started talking about it immediately: that is how we know about it, of course.

– *But if we do not know what it is, and it did not have its name yet, how do we know when it first arrived?*

Well, this is a very good objection. The discourse on ‘society’ is a bit like the reconstruction of a murder mystery and involves some projection from the present into the past: we start with a certain idea of what it is *in the present* that we refer to as ‘society’, and then we try to clarify what ‘it’ is by tracing its emergence and development *over time*. We tend to look for evidence of its existence mostly in written texts, as – at least in the modern period – it is through texts that humans most explicitly try to give an account of social relationships.

One of the most celebrated early documents of the arrival of society is a perplexing, in fact very humorous poem that made a lot of people very angry when it was first published in 1705. It was written in London, a place with a good claim to being the birthplace of modern society. The author was an immigrant – unsurprisingly, as immigrants often make the sharpest observations – who had gone

to London (from the Netherlands) for love of the buzz, the dirt and the chaos, and of an Englishwoman, apparently. Our witness (a medical doctor) took a rather dusty old metaphor, comparing society to a beehive. The special twist of his poem was that he used this old image to highlight and celebrate some very un-bee-like behaviour patterns that were typical in his exciting and much-loved modern environment. The doctor – by the name of Bernard Mandeville – diagnosed that the beehive in question (London) was a good place to be because its inhabitants did *not* behave like actual bees (Mandeville 1989). How then did they behave?

Mandeville's beehive was as crowded as it was productive: there were 'Millions endeavouring to supply/ Each other's Lust and Vanity' (note the rhyme!). Lust and Vanity, traditionally associated with the seven deadly sins, are treated in this satire as rather respectable. The poem tells us that society (alias the beehive) is full of dodgy characters – 'knaves' – who try to get rich without 'down-right working', exploiting the labour of others, including 'Sharppers, Parasites, Pimps, Players,/ Pick-Pockets, Coiners, Quacks, Sooth-Sayers'. Remarkably, though, Mandeville does not propose a dichotomy between 'knaves' and honest, hard-working folk, but argues quite to the contrary that 'The grave Industrious were the Same' as 'the knaves': 'All Trades and Places knew some Cheat,/ No Calling was without Deceit'. From a moral perspective, the place was rotten to the core. But, rather scandalously, from here Mandeville went on to formulate a shocking celebration of this 'beehive':

Thus every Part was full of Vice,
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise; ...
Such were the Blessings of that State;
Their Crimes conspired to make 'em Great ...

Society is something that – rather miraculously – turns a mess of crimes and vices into paradise. (Mandeville uses the word 'state' rather than society, but he means the same thing – the modern separation of state and society had not yet been followed through.) Virtue and Vice became friends, 'And ever since/ The worst of all the Multitude/ Did something for the common Good'. Although every individual member of society complains about it all, society

turns all those complaints and moans into something like musical harmony, where opposed things serve each other. Envy and Vanity become ‘Ministers of Industry’ to the effect that ‘the very Poor/ Lived better than the Rich before’, something that defenders of capitalist development have claimed countless times ever since.

The most hilarious twist comes in Mandeville’s description of how this paradise perished: disaster struck when the members of society, rather than enjoying these wicked modern ways, ‘barb’rously’ called for honesty and *condemned cheating!* Foolishly, they tried to have their cake and eat it – but as Mandeville reminds his readers, the idea of a convenient but also virtuous life is ‘a vain/ Eutopia seated in the Brain’: ‘Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live;/ Whilst we the Benefits receive’. Whereas in any number of classical and pre-modern political and moral theories, and still today in the view of many people, society falls apart when morality weakens, in Mandeville’s modern beehive, society is destroyed by *invoking* morality. No surprise that Mandeville landed in some hot water.

Incidentally, scholars are still debating whether Mandeville *himself* was intending us to take his poem literally as an attack on the idea of morality: did he really mean we should take pride in subordinating virtue to wealth-production? Probably not, but this need not bother us here. Although it is in the form of a humorous poem, the ‘Fable of the Bees’ exhibits a wonderfully dark realism. Whatever the author’s intentions, his text pointed its many readers rather brutally to the paradoxical character of this new thing that was not yet universally called ‘society’ at the time. For three centuries now he has reminded us that the traditional discourses of morality are not quite sufficient to talk about it. Hence the need for *social theory*. All modern social theory tries – with generally very good success – to translate the paradoxical point made by Mandeville into less poignant language. One could probably write a pretty good history of social theory by looking at all the authors who have commented on Mandeville’s satirical poem.

In order to counter-balance the gospel according to Mandeville, I would like to quote briefly from another classic comment on the concept of ‘society’, by another wonderful writer, another London-

dweller, writing two hundred years later, also polemical but quite different in attitude:

The very word ‘society’ sets tolling in memory the dismal bells of a harsh music: shall not, shall not, shall not. You shall not learn; you shall not own; you shall not – such was the society relationship of brother to sister for many centuries ... Inevitably we ask ourselves, is there not something in the conglomeration of people into societies that releases what is most selfish and violent, least rational and humane in the individuals themselves? ... Inevitably we look upon society ... as an ill-fitting form that distorts the truth; deforms the mind; fetters the will. Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially ... (Woolf 1998, pp. 307–8 and 313)

This is from Virginia Woolf’s splendid diatribe *Three Guineas* (the same text that also contains the famous line ‘as a woman, I have no country’), first published in 1938. (The quote is from the ‘Third Letter’.) Although there are similarities to Mandeville’s account – such as the account of the selfishness of people in society – the perspective on society is contrary: where in Mandeville, society composes out of the selfish behaviour of modern ‘knaves’ a wondrous, wealth-creating, multi-part harmony, for Woolf society turns perfectly decent people into childish, irrational, brutal monsters.

The two statements are, in spite of saying opposite things, equally true. They shine a light on two principal perspectives on society that one finds in the tradition of social theory: the more optimistic one answers the question what are the patterns or mechanisms that allow society to survive or even to flourish, whether one deplores or celebrates it. After all, given how *rare* riots, revolutions and high school shootings really are, society seems to function, by and large, most of the time! The more pessimistic perspective answers the question why and how society produces patterns of behaviour in humans that are far more horrible than humans would be (presumably) in a state of nature, i.e. outside or before (or after) society.

The meaning of 'theory'

So much for 'social' and 'society'. Let us turn now to 'theory'. Here the waters are even muddier, as the word 'theory' has quite a range of overlapping and related meanings, some more generic and some more specific. A sense of its complexity can be gleaned from the following statement by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the man who did most to bring the word 'sociology' into circulation:

For, if on the one hand any positive theory must necessarily be based on observation, it is equally true on the other that, in order to make observations, our minds require a theory of some sort. If, in considering phenomena, we did not relate them immediately to some principles, not only would it be impossible for us to connect these isolated observations, and in consequence to make any sense of them, but we should be quite incapable of remembering them; and, most often, the facts would remain unperceived. (Comte, quoted in Elias 1978, p. 34)

Comte makes a distinction here between what he calls 'positive theory' and more indistinct varieties of theory: 'theory of some sort'. By 'positive theory' he means a theory that is in keeping with the doctrine of 'positivism', i.e. the endeavour to formulate plans for the reform of society based on its systematic empirical observation. 'Theory of some sort' is involved in making perceptions and observations, relating these observations to 'some principles', connecting them, making sense of and remembering them. Whereas 'positive theory' is made and applied by (in Comte's conception, positivist) scientists and policymakers, 'theory of some sort' is made and applied by everyone all the time.

A more recent theorist has proposed a similar distinction. Percy Cohen called 'systematic theories' the kind of theories that a reader would expect to be covered in a book on social theory: 'general ideas consciously formulated for some purpose or purposes' (Cohen 1968, p. 2). In a textbook on social theory of 1968 that was of great influence in British sociology, Cohen distinguished four types of 'systematic theories' that I will discuss later on. For now, I would like to stick a bit longer with the garden variety of theory, 'theory of some sort' or *non-theory theory*, as it were: the mud from which 'systematic theories' somehow emerge, which they leave behind and negate, and to which they also return. Cohen said the following:

The most elementary theories, which we use unconsciously, are those embedded in our language; for, all language must use certain universal categories; and to use a universal category is, in effect, to use a theory. (Cohen 1968, p. 2)

Cohen's example is the sentence 'This typewriter is heavy': it implies a theory of what 'heaviness' is. If we did not have a theory of heaviness, the sentence would be of no relevance. Our spontaneous theory of heaviness is responsible for certain practical implications, such as better make sure it does not drop on your foot. Cohen's suggestion that there is a theory of 'heaviness' is reminiscent of the famous examples given by the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf. Drawing on his work experience as an insurance clerk, Whorf examined the implications of our using such phrases as 'empty drums of gasoline' or 'waste water': the former are not actually empty but tend to contain highly explosive vapours. The spontaneous application of emptiness theory to these not-so-empty drums cost his insurance company dearly: after all, why should I not light my cigarette next to an 'empty' drum? Industrial 'waste water' may be called 'water', but it can also be highly flammable: uncritical and unconscious application of water theory proved fatal when someone threw a cigarette end into it (Whorf 1956, pp. 135–7). From this kind of practical experience Whorf learned that the most innocent-looking everyday language can be a rather dangerous affair, as it is loaded with 'theories of some sort'. Similarly, when some talking head on TV mentions 'free markets', it might be a good idea to keep in mind that they are in fact about as free as those gasoline drums are empty – and about as explosive. Another example would be the humble statement 'I think'. We might be tempted to believe that our language uses two different words when there are two different referents of some sort, such as in this case, a subject 'I' and an activity 'think'. We assume spontaneously that the structure of the sentence 'I think' reflects the structure of a reality where there exists an 'I' that just happens to be engaged in an activity called 'think'. This implies logically that this activity 'think' likewise exists somehow independently from this particular 'I' and might attach itself to some other 'I' – you, for example – the next moment. Wrong: there may well be unthinking 'I's, but there is no 'think'

without a subject that does the thinking. Lewis Carroll illustrated this issue when he wrote about the grin of the Cheshire-Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*: in the absurd dream-world of this book, the grin still hung in the air for some time after the cat had disappeared (Carroll 1992, p. 53). In a more complex sentence such as ‘I do research on this’, whereby ‘this’ might be, for example, ‘society’, we encounter the same problem: ‘I’, ‘do research’ and also ‘this [society]’ are *in the sentence* different things that just happen to find themselves in the same sentence, but *in reality* they are not different things. The ‘sort-of-theory’ that is embedded in language structure is contradicted by proper (systematic) social theory which tells us that ‘I’ and ‘this’, namely society, are neither entirely different, nor identical things: I am part of society, and society is very much part of what I am. My doing research is part of what I am as well as of what society is. Mediated through my person, society does research on itself. By doing research on society, I research myself.

Large areas of sociological research, under different names and with differing trajectories, are dedicated to the description and analysis of those ‘theories of some sort’ that we use in everyday life. These areas of sociological research lead into ‘systematic theorizing’ only if and when they inquire critically *which* ‘spontaneous theories’ (world-views, ideologies, imaginaries, patterns of culture etc.) emerge in *what kinds of* social constellations or types of society, and *why*. The latter are among the questions asked by systematic theory: they aim to move from spontaneous, automatic sort-of-theorizing to conscious, critical theorizing, and it is as a first step towards the latter that producing theory includes describing and analysing sort-of-theories. Systematic theory works its way out of the messy given-ness of spontaneous theorizing; the latter’s description and analysis are its self-reflection, self-clarification and self-criticizing. Social theorists differ from their contemporaries ‘only’ by committing themselves to *systematically* examining a situation shared by all.

Spontaneous and systematic theories

Max Horkheimer, a Marxist philosopher who became one of the pioneers of systematic empirical social research in the middle third of the twentieth century, famously suggested that theory could be

either ‘critical’ or ‘traditional’, whereby the latter meant as much as ‘affirmative’ or uncritical (see Chapter 12 on this.). Horkheimer illustrated what was to him an all-important distinction with a formulation by the idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814): ‘in constructing the world, one is not conscious of constructing, as it is done by necessity rather than out of freedom’ (quoted in Horkheimer 2002, p. 245). This sentence, written more than two hundred years ago, needs some unpacking:

1. We – subjects, individuals, maybe also individuals constituted as groups – construct the world. Fichte meant that we construct it *in our minds*, through our intellect, imagination, speaking, writing, acting and so on. Without us doing all this, there is in fact no world – or at least no world that we know of: surely the world that we relate to and that we act on is the one we ‘construct’. Whether there is another one we cannot know, and it does not really matter much in practice.
2. We do this constructing ‘by necessity’ – we do not *choose* to do it, it just happens: it is almost as if the world constructs itself through us, using us as its instrument or medium. If on first reading, the idea that we humans construct the world seems to turn us into mighty god-like creatures, this second point is quite a downer!
3. Because it is done ‘by necessity’, we are not conscious of it – which makes it sound even less glorious. *However:*
4. There is an implication, albeit only in the negative, that the constructing *could* perhaps also be done ‘out of freedom’, and would then be conscious. There seems to be some kind of link between *consciousness* and *freedom*.

And this is really why, according to Horkheimer, we need consciously developed theory. Theory is conscious – and thereby linked to freedom – when it is negative and critical of anything that obstructs freedom. Being conscious, negative and critical, however, does not occur spontaneously. Again for illustration, think of Snoopy’s ‘dog superiority theory’: Snoopy famously had to address the essay question, ‘Why dogs are superior to cats’, and did so in only one sentence: ‘They just are, and that’s all there is to it!’ (Schulz 2008, p. 158). Snoopy is so firm in his theoretical beliefs

that he does not need many words to express what in his universe is blatantly obvious. To adapt Fichte, Snoopy constructs the world unconsciously and ‘by necessity’ – unthinkingly, spontaneously, automatically, organically. In this dog’s mind, theory follows from and reflects societal practice – his own, anyway – in perfect harmony, undisturbed by any negative thoughts, easily stated ‘short and to the point’, as Snoopy himself comments in the last panel of this classic strip. Not being dogs, we need less convenient and comforting theories.

Wordy restatements of the obvious vs. theory as revelation

But there is also a lot of truth in another definition of social theory: ‘endless pages of long words which, when we translate them, tell us the obvious’ (Craib 1992, p. 13). Craib continues to say, however, that although the bulk of the output of social theorists might well be described as wordy restatements of the blatantly obvious, there are exceptions about which the opposite is true. They are what he describes as ‘good theory’. Good theory ‘tells us something we didn’t know and couldn’t discover by looking’ (Craib 1992, p. 13): something that is not obvious, and that we cannot get to by way of some short cut. No amount of even the most highly organized data-crunching can discover or construct it. Theory is revelation.

Craib’s point is that theory expresses things of which we have no direct experience. This goes for all sciences: few people have direct experience of the fact that the earth is round and travels around the sun. This idea (‘heliocentrism’) had to be argued for in the mode of theory, which is what Nicolaus Copernicus did in his book of 1543. It took about another century, due to a whole range of changing societal conditions, until it was generally accepted as true. Likewise, we have no direct experience of ‘society’ – is there such a thing? As was the case with heliocentrism, some people deny it. Those of us who believe it exists argue that without assuming its existence, a range of experiences could not reasonably be accounted for; this presupposes communication of and some amount of agreement on what those experiences (‘data’) are, and also on what should count as a reasonable way of interpreting them. The same goes for ‘patriarchy’ and ‘class’: social facts or just some interesting ideas? As theoretic-

cal concepts properly speaking, they are revelatory tools that make visible a reality that is otherwise not visible. Once we accept the theory, we will find that the data point to and confirm it. Without the context of a theory, however, the data do not point anywhere at all. Raw data *conceal* the reality ‘behind’ the data (patriarchy, class) which only theory can reveal.

Theory is about revelation of something mysterious, often the attempt to get to grips with something beyond our control. For social theory, this something is *society*, a something that is beyond the control of individuals, of course, but – perhaps increasingly so – also beyond the control of the totality of all those who constitute society. As Craib describes it, the process of producing theory in science – social or otherwise – is quite similar to that in everyday life (Craib 1992, p. 7): I try to explain something, so I look for patterns in my own experience or that of someone I know, or both. Then I also include some general ideas that I have picked up somewhere, perhaps consciously, perhaps not. I try to be systematic about it, and to reach some clarity in order to present the case to myself or to someone else. I do this through the use of logic which brings experiences and ideas into certain relationships, such as ‘causality’ or ‘contradiction’. *Voilà*: theory. Every social theory ‘makes some propositions which are counter to our immediate experiences and beliefs, and this is, in fact, the way in which we learn from them’. Craib uses the following two examples:

The punk might believe that she is in full rebellion against the culture of her parents and authority, yet for the functionalist theorist she is setting in motion a series of adjustments by means of which that culture and society continue to survive in a smoother-running way than before. The worker might believe she is getting a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, but for the Marxist she is being systematically exploited. (Craib 1992, p. 7)

These examples show why theory can at times be unpleasant. The punk might tell the sociologist (her father, perhaps?) where to stick his functionalism, and indeed this sociologist seems to be missing something: the rebellion is surely not *only* a cunning mechanism by which society reproduces itself (to the tune of ‘the more it changes, the more it stays the same’), but it does also constitute a moment

of change. Maybe it needed to produce overblown illusions about its own importance in order to get off the ground in the first place, but that does not mean it is *exclusively* functional, self-defeating and affirmative of the system. The rebellion might, however, learn something about its own limitations from fatherly sociology, and be the stronger for it. Craib's second example helps explain why workers who buy into the liberal rhetoric of 'a fair day's work for a fair day's wage' will not be easily impressed by Marxist critical theory: these nasty party-pooing Marxists destroy a soothing ideology that makes life more bearable. Craib neglects to say, however, that the Marxist notion of a reality of exploitation that takes on the appearance of the 'fair wage' relation can only have emerged from the groping, growing reasoning of workers who *did* notice that this kind of fairness left one class much better off than the other. One such reasoning worker was indeed that impoverished refugee and precariously paid journalist, Karl Marx himself, his petty-bourgeois family background notwithstanding. The history of the labour movement is full of *déclassé* middle-class intellectuals who are in fact workers, whether they like it or not.

Cohen's four types of systematic theories

When it comes to theorizing theory, the distinction between everyday theories, or else 'elementary theories', and 'systematic theories' – 'general ideas consciously formulated for some purpose or purposes' (Cohen 1968, p. 2) – is only the first, most fundamental distinction. Cohen further divides systematic theories into four types: analytic, programmatic, normative and scientific. This book (like others on social theory) deals mostly with the second type, 'programmatic theory', but it seems useful to briefly outline what the others are in order to gain a clearer idea what we expect social theories to do.

Analytic theories explore the logical connections between axiomatic statements and are often implicitly used in social theory, but rarely explicitly. (An 'axiom' or postulate is a statement that is presupposed to be true as the basis for an argument.) They might occur at a highly formalized level of theory-formation, when one tries for example to clarify what one means by 'causality', 'reciprocity' or 'dialectics'.

Normative theories aim to formulate norms, most often in the context of ethics or aesthetics: how something ought to be or ought to be done. Social theories often have normative aspects, but again, they are rarely explicit; when social scientists admit their normative commitments – which they should do much more often – then they typically point to a normative theory that sits outside social theory, formulated somewhere else such as in the contexts of philosophy or religion. Social scientists invoke these, but do not normally formulate them (and if they do, then they will be perceived as part-time philosophers when they do).

Scientific theories, in Cohen's definition, are usually 'theories of' something in particular (say, the theory of youth delinquency) and look at causal connections: when this happens, then that must follow, as long as a certain set of conditions is given. This kind of theorizing is in fact quite rare in the social sciences; it is generally admired, when it succeeds, and is the jewel in the crown of any good positivist. (Note, however, that in the social sciences we tend to deal with a weak form of causality only, which is really just statistical probability.) Scientific theories must be empirically testable and refutable, which presupposes that we know what a refutation would look like even though there has not been one so far.

This leaves us with the *programmatic theories*, which Cohen also calls 'metaphysical theories'. Those who want to model the social sciences very narrowly on the natural sciences (or what they imagine the latter to be like) do not usually have much time for programmatic theories as they are not testable and do not set much store by causality. Still, programmatic theories are subject to rational appraisal. (Rational appraisal, of course, presupposes in turn a specific understanding of what constitutes logical thinking, such as dialectical or non-dialectical logic. Such discussions are done in the area of 'analytic theory'.) Programmatic or metaphysical theories shape, direct and give purpose to the social-scientific enquiry. Cohen writes:

Some metaphysical theories ... constitute useful assumptions which have a programmatic or suggestive role: they may delineate a broad field in which more precise formulations can be made; they may provide ways of interpreting evidence which is used to test more precise theories; or they may sensitize an observer to the kind of factors

which are relevant to explaining a particular phenomenon. (Cohen 1968, p. 5)

Cohen names the theory of natural selection as an example, namely the idea that if a species survives for long, then it must possess characteristics that are well adapted to a particular environment. If the species disappears, then it must have been ill adapted. This is not a scientific theory, as it cannot be tested, verified or falsified; it does not even describe any kind of causality (or statistical probability) as on either side of the 'if – then' formula sits basically the same thing in a different formulation: disappearance points to a lack of adaptation, but 'lack of adaptation' can only be diagnosed since the species has disappeared. A is interpreted as B; there is not much point in claiming that A is *caused* by B because the concept of B already contains A. The theory is programmatic, however, in the sense that its 'value lies in directing the inquiries of the student of evolution' (Cohen 1968, p. 6): the theory invites the researcher to look at a set of phenomena in a particular way, and thereby directs the research. This it does very well, and therefore it is a good example of a programmatic theory.

The case is similar with a sociological theory like this one: 'The various parts of a social system are necessarily interdependent.' This could also be expressed like this: if something is a social system, then its parts are 'necessarily interdependent'. Again, this is almost a tautology: a social system is *defined* as something whose parts are 'necessarily interdependent'. This is surely not scientific; perhaps it has some similarity to an analytic theory, as it clarifies the meaning of a concept, and perhaps it is also secretly a little bit normative: the author of this theory (Talcott Parsons) perhaps quite *likes* his social world to be 'a system' in this specific sense, but that is not what the theory is designed to say. Programmatic it is, however: it allows us to ask a meaningful question, namely, what conditions determine to what extent the parts of a system are in fact interdependent? *Voilà*, we have a research programme.

Another example: 'Social order rests on the acceptance of common values.' Most social scientists would probably spontaneously agree to this, but few would mistake it for a scientific theory: there is no causality here – order does not necessarily follow simply

from the fact that ‘common values’ are accepted. In British society, for example, this sentence is usually but not universally true. It contains perhaps a bit of wishful thinking, i.e., an unacknowledged normative element: it sounds like the kind of thing liberals *want* to believe about modern liberal society. But then again, liberals also call the police to restore order, either when common values are wanting, or when some subset of citizens maliciously misinterpret those values (liberty, equality, etc.) by taking them too literally, perhaps. The theoretical statement that ‘social order rests on the acceptance of common values’ is partly true, certainly one-sided, but makes a reasonably good sociological theory: it is useful to formulate questions with. And this is what we most want from a ‘programmatically theory’: it suggests problems, and points to where to look for solutions.

Theories are modified in the light of experience but ‘they do more to structure experience than experience does to test them’ (Cohen 1968, p. 10). From my own experience – or rather, from theoretically driven self-observation – I feel that I have only rarely, if ever, abandoned a theoretical idea because fresh data falsified it: I am quite resistant to data. It seems more likely to me that theoretical ideas are destroyed by other, more elegant or logically coherent theoretical ideas. But maybe that’s just me. The fundamental dialectic that rules this relationship has been classically expressed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): ‘Thoughts without contents are empty; perceptions without concepts are blind’ (Kant 1976, p. 95; this is at the beginning of the chapter on ‘transcendental logic’ in the 1787 edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, section B76). Knowledge and understanding are served neither by empty thoughts – concepts without experiential, perceptual, empirical contents – nor by blind, shapeless perceptions. *Concepts without empirical content are not really concepts, and perceptions that are not shaped by concepts are not really perceptions.* But what drives the constant to and fro between concepts and perceptions, theories and data? The Marxist theorist John Holloway suggested that

the starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle ... dissonance ... discontent ... frustration ... rage ... unease, a confusion, a longing ... a dissonance ... that divides us

against ourselves ... a tension between that which exists and that which might conceivably exist. (Holloway 2002, pp. 1, 5, 6)

He refers to this tension as the ‘dual dimension of reality’: there is the reality of what exists and the reality of what does not exist. Holloway rejects the separation between, on the one hand, a (positivist, scientific) theory of reality and, on the other hand, a (normative, philosophical) theory of what might or should exist: this separation is untrue to ‘dual reality’ because what does not (yet) exist already exists as a potential, expressed in ideas. Ideas exist: they are the perceptible reality of things that do not (yet) exist except as possibilities. Theory in this perspective is a means to have at least a furtive glance at that side of our ‘dual reality’ that does not actually exist (yet).

Did someone ask why we need social theory? There are only two reasons, really:

1. to be able to imagine and think about that which does not (yet) exist but might exist one day; and
2. to be able to perceive and think about that which does exist.

Two pretty strong reasons to give it some thought.

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