The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory

EDITED BY BRYAN S. TURNER

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Bryan S. Turner

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Introduction

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The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory intends to provide a comprehensive and contemporary introduction for a general audience to major developments in social theory. It is specifically a twentieth-century guide to social theory with an emphasis on the most recent developments, changes, and issues facing social theory. It is therefore not a rehearsal of classical social theory and does not attempt to provide an overview of the founding fathers of classical social philosophy or social theory. Such a rehearsal would be counterproductive and largely redundant. Of course there is a cogent argument for defending and elaborating classical social theory (Alexander, 1982). However, in this *Companion* there is an attempt to provide a justification for continuity from the classics to contemporary issues in social theory that is somewhat different from the repetitive defence of classical social theory which has been common in foundation textbooks in the social science disciplines. Chapter 1 is the only one which self-consciously seeks to provide an overview of classical social theory – that developed by Robert Holton. It is difficult to understand contemporary social theory without some grasp of the historical origins and classical foundations of social theory. However, Holton's chapter provides a number of fresh approaches to the topic, specifically in his close understanding of the intimate relationship between economic theory and social theory. Holton's chapter is also unusual in the sense that it has a clear understanding of the competitive conflict between North American and European social philosophy from the very foundations of contemporary sociology.

Classical social theorists appear at various points in the *Companion* where they continue to be relevant to the most contemporary developments in social theory. For example, it is clear that Max Weber's sociology of action has a direct relevance to the formulation of rational choice theory. In a similar fashion, Georg Simmel's analysis of concrete cultural practices and forms continues to have a significance for modern cultural studies and, indeed, for the emergence of postmodern cultural analysis. Roy Boyne notes the relevance of Emile Durkheim to structuralist social theory in chapter 7. However, the emphasis of the *Companion* is on contemporary developments in social thought.

The breadth of the *Companion* is also indicated by the choice of the phrase "social theory" rather than a more specific reference to sociological, cultural, or

political theory. Social theory broadly encompasses the general concern with the nature of the social in modern society. The *Companion* thus provides general introductions to social theory in the broadest sense, covering political theory, sociology, feminism, and cultural analysis. Each chapter attempts to provide a broad overview of major issues, perspectives, and topics which have dominated theoretical debates in the twentieth century.

The very title of this collection of essays does, however, indicate a number of specific commitments. Clearly the *Companion* takes theory construction, criticism, and accumulation to be major activities within the social sciences. A number of chapters in this book, specifically William Outhwaite's chapter on the philosophy of the social sciences, indicate the peculiar significance of theory in sociology and related disciplines. Whereas natural science in general pays relatively little interest to philosophy and the growth of theory, theoretical speculations have always been highly prominent in sociology. As we will see, this commitment to theory is closely related to the problematic nature of the social as a topic. The *Companion* is also committed to the continuity of theoretical traditions in the humanities and social sciences. I shall shortly turn to the issue of theoretical accumulation as a specific goal of successful theory, noting, however, the relative failure of a number of perspectives in social theory to sustain continuity of analysis through the twentieth century.

In approaching these broad questions of analytical significance, the *Companion* has avoided, where possible, chapters or debates concerned with the sociology of X or the sociology of Y. The chapters and sections of the *Companion* are concerned with broad analytical perspectives and issues rather than the sociology of specific areas or topics. The principal exception to this is John Urry's analysis of the sociology of time and space. However, this particular chapter could equally have been called "Spatial and temporal analysis in the social sciences," but the topic of the sociology of space is a more precise way of stating the issue. The *Companion* provides the reader with a succinct overview of themes and issues rather than discipline specialisms.

Although the *Companion* attempts to be comprehensive in its coverage of issues, it is inevitably and necessarily selective. For example, I have chosen not to include a general discussion of the contribution of anthropology to social theory. Anthropological fieldwork has in many ways transformed our understanding of philosophical problems in the analysis of meaning, but anthropology has not been involved in a broad transformation of social theory as such. In a similiar set of arguments, it is unfortunate that there is not space to include in the *Companion* a deeper discussion of the interaction between economic theory and social theory. Social theory as a theory of action has been profoundly shaped by the analytical problems of economic analysis (Holton and Turner, 1986). This topic is indirectly addressed by Peter Abell in his comprehensive analysis of rational choice theory and by Robert Holton's chapter. The *Companion* does include a chapter on psychoanalytical theory, by Anthony Elliott, on the grounds that psychoanalytical theory has been significant for feminist theory, cultural analysis, political studies, and social

theory as a whole. It would therefore be difficult to write the history of twentieth-century social theory without the inclusion of an analysis of developments in psychoanalytical theory from Freud through Marcuse, Lacan and broadly the post-Freudian theorists.

Finally, we may note that this study is a companion to social theory rather than to theorists. In general there is a plethora of texts on specific social theorists, but the *Companion* has attempted to provide a guide to social theory as such. This approach to themes is inherently more satisfactory than the focus on specific figures which often results in a form of sociological hagiography. In any case the conclusion of the sociological approach to knowledge is that theory is collectively constructed in response to shared problems and opportunities in understanding social life.

The Nature of the Social

In this introduction I am generally concerned with two rather obvious issues, namely what is the nature of the social, and what is the nature of theory? In the *Companion* there is a broad and continuous theme in which all of the authors have, often indirectly, attempted to discuss the nature of the social. In chapter 1 Robert Holton considers the rise of the notion of the social in classical sociology. In the nineteenth century the social often appeared in scientific debate in contrast to the idea of nature or the natural. Social change had transformed, or so it was believed, the natural condition of human beings. The state of nature was very different from that of society. In classical sociology there was a growing awareness of the separation of the social from other spheres and dimensions of activity with the evolution of industrial capitalist society, or more generally, with the spread of modernization. Modern industrial society was not a natural community in the sense that it dealt with needs and the satisfaction of wants in a wholly revolutionary and unique fashion. Natural communities were bound by tradition and by the traditional or conventional satisfaction of wants and needs. As Karl Marx noted in his treatment of capitalism, capitalism created a revolution in both the production and satisfaction of wants within civil society. Contemporary industrial capitalism was regarded, in some respects, as an artificial creation of the economy. Out of the traditional enlightenment notion of civil society (or bourgeois society) there evolved the idea of the social dimension as a unique and specific product of modernization. Equally there was the idea that sociology was uniquely a discipline developed in the nineteenth century to analyze this new phenomenon of a separate and autonomous world of the social. The figure of Robinson Crusoe fascinated the traditional political economists because he stood at the moral boundary between the natural world of the natives and the new economy.

In sociological theory this notion of the social was expressed in a famous distinction by Ferdinand Tönnies, namely the contrast between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and association (*Gesellschaft*). The sociological tradition, as Robert Nisbet (1967) has expressed it in an influential study of the history of sociology, was specifically concerned with a range of contrasts which was the

product of industrial modernization, namely a set of oppositions between the sacred and the profane, individual and society, authority and power, status and social class, and preeminently community versus association. Sociological accounts of modernization such as Talcott Parsons's notion of the pattern variables (Robertson and Turner, 1991) explicitly employ this contrast between traditional community and modern association. The original distinction made by Tönnies was eventually developed into a profoundly nostalgic view of loss of real community relationships with the evolution of secular association. This implicit contrast between authentic community and artificial association continues to influence much of social analysis, for example in the area of social class theory (Holton and Turner, 1989).

The emergence of the social as a specific field of analysis has always been an essential part of the implicit set of relationships between economic and social theory. Economics as a science has a relatively precise and restricted set of theoretical issues and concepts, most of which revolve around the notion of the rational consumption of commodities for the satisfaction of individual needs. By contrast, the development of sociology and anthropology as disciplines has been significantly bound up with the critique of these fundamental economic assumptions. To some extent the concept of the social in sociology is often equivalent to the idea of not-economic, that is, sociology has addressed the question of values, the issue of non-rational action, the problem of social order in relation to egoistic drives, and the issue of building institutions in an environment of competition. It is for this reason that sociological theory has often been concerned specifically with the analysis and understanding of religion, which is preeminently non-rational, from an economic or utilitarian point of view. This view of sociology in relation to economics dominated the early work of Talcott Parsons, a sociologist who shaped much of the development of sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. Parsons's critique of economic theory was central to his idea of voluntaristic action in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Briefly, Parsons argued that the fundamental assumptions of utilitarian rationalism could not provide a coherent and satisfactory theory of society. For example, fraud and force are perfectly rational forms of utilitarian economic behaviour but fraud and force are incompatible with social order. Utilitarian economic theory always explained social order by drawing upon what Parsons called "residual categories" which were in fact not produced by the core assumptions of theory and were largely incompatible with these assumptions. Economic theory typically appeals to such concepts as the "hidden hand of history" or "sentiments and moral values" which cannot be deduced from or generated by utilitarian economic assumptions. Parsons appealed to Thomas Hobbes's political theory of the state to describe this issue as the Hobbesian problem of order. This conceptualization of social order based upon a criticism of utilitarian theory proved to be highly influential in the development of sociology as a discipline. Most sociologists, even when they are contemptuous of Parsons's later work, characteristically accept his underlying sociological assumptions about the importance of values and norms in guiding

social action. Parsons argued that without some minimal consensus about social values, society would be impossible. He went on to develop this approach through the concepts of socialization and internalization. These ideas eventually led Parsons into a structural functionalist account of social systems, for example in his classical study of *The Social System* (1951). This approach to the nature of the social is taken up in a provocative and interesting way by Peter Abell in his chapter on rational choice theory, where he argues that, while Parsons's early work was a significant criticism of some aspects of rational choice theory, Parsons failed to develop an alternative approach based upon a voluntaristic theory of action, because he ultimately turned towards a systems approach to the social. His approach to the social could not provide a solution to the relationship between micro and macro levels. Some of the problems of so-called structural functionalism are analyzed by Roy Boyne and Peter Hamilton in the *Companion*.

In contemporary social theory, while both symbolic interactionism and rational choice theory have adhered to a strong conception of the social, throughout the social sciences and the humanities there has been a profound change in the conceptualization of the social which in fact reflects a deep uncertainty about the development of modern society. In cultural studies, as Steven Connor points out, the social is now identified wholly with the cultural. The standard argument is that classical sociology, for example, had largely neglected the cultural sphere, concentrating instead on social structures and institutions which were conceptualized as separate from culture. Contemporary social theory, by contrast, has done an about-face in analytical terms by giving prominence and priority to cultural phenomena and cultural relations. This prominence of the cultural is associated with arguments presented by writers like Frederic Jameson to the effect that the transformation of modern society by consumerism has resulted in a massive expansion of a cultural field (Jameson, 1984). The preoccupation of social theory with the cultural is thereby largely an effect of significant changes in modern society with the growth of cultural consumption and cultural production. There has been, according to these theorists, an aestheticization of the social. In sociological terms, a post-Fordist economy, the growth of the leisure industry, the economic impact of multimedia technology and global tourism have given a prominence to cultural consumption and lifestyle.

In a similar set of arguments within postmodern theory, writers like Jean Baudrillard (1983a) have pronounced the end of the social with the growth and expansion of modern communication systems which have produced a deluge of signs in the social sphere, resulting in a paradoxical implosion of the social upon itself. Baudrillard as a result is skeptical about the possibility of traditional forms of social theory as a method or means of appropriating the nature of contemporary sign systems. In order to express this transformation, Baudrillard has developed a range of influential concepts to describe these changes. In particular he sees the modern world in terms of a series of simulations whereby everything is a representation of a representation of a