Routledge Handbook of Social and Cultural Theory

Edited by Anthony Elliott

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

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If today students of social theory read Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens, then proper regard to the question of culture means that they should also read Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Slavoj Žižek. The *Routledge Handbook of Social and Cultural Theory* offers a concise, comprehensive overview of the convergences and divergences of social and cultural theory, and in so doing offers a novel agenda for social and cultural research in the twenty-first century.

This *Handbook*, edited by Anthony Elliott, develops a powerful argument for bringing together social and cultural theory more systematically than ever before. Key social and cultural theories, ranging from classical approaches to postmodern, psychoanalytic and post-feminist approaches, are drawn together and critically appraised. There are substantive chapters looking at – among others – structuralism and post-structuralism, critical theory, network analysis, feminist cultural thought, cultural theory and cultural sociology. Throughout the *Handbook* there is a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity, with chapters drawing from research in sociology, cultural studies, psychology, politics, anthropology, women's studies, literature and history.

Written in a clear and direct style, this *Handbook* will appeal to a wide undergraduate and postgraduate audience across the social sciences and humanities.

Anthony Elliott is Director of the Hawke Research Institute, where he is Research Professor of Sociology at the University of South Australia. His recent books include *Reinvention* (Routledge, 2013) and *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Japanese Social Theory* (Routledge, 2012, ed. with Atsushi Sawai and Masataka Katagiri).

For those who are looking for a comprehensive guide to modern social and cultural theory, this is the place to start. Informed, comprehensive, invaluable; the book really is a milestone.

—*Professor Nigel Thrift, Vice-Chancellor, University of Warwick, UK*

In a world in which different societies and cultures crisscross constantly, making an impact on each other, what we need is a navigator to instruct where we are and where should we go. This book will be a great guide, providing students and scholars with remarkably helpful and wide-ranging tools to gain an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural realities which we daily encounter in our contemporary globalized world.

—*Atsushi Sawai, Professor of Sociology, Keio University, Japan*

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Contemporary social theory

The trajectories of social and cultural theory

Anthony Elliott

The question of the relation between society and culture is paramount in the writings of most social and cultural theorists. The complex, contradictory balance of this relationship, however, has been interpreted, analysed and critiqued for the most part by privileging either society over culture, or culture over society. To work on the question of the relation between society and culture – its interconnections, referrals, disconnections and displacements – has thus involved studying, highlighting and accentuating one term at the expense of the other. What matters in much social theory are the philosophical dimensions and conceptual consequences of defining the 'social' – ranging variously across 'social practices' and 'social forces' to 'social structures' and 'social systems'. Among students of society, an interest in culture appears all too quickly sidelined to the margins of analysis. Conversely, an understanding of society in much cultural analysis is often downgraded in favour of a fascination with, say, ideology, hegemony or discursive formations. So there is usually something missing, something lacking, from these analytical approaches in social and cultural theory. It is as if there is a troubling remainder when a cultural analyst speaks of ideological indeterminacy, and something equally absent when social theorists dismantle everyday life in terms of categories such as globalization and cosmopolitanism.

Much contemporary social theory has arguably shifted the focus of analysis from society to culture to society again – often enough, it is true, under the fashionable banner of 'the social'. 'Society' is a term that is fundamental to public political discourse, yet it is not one with any definitional consensus in the social sciences (see Elliott and Turner 2012). In general terms, society has often been used to denote value consensus, and as such has served as a kind of sorting device for grasping connections and differentials of social norms between different social groups. It has elsewhere been used to signify generalized social association. Certainly, because society has been cast as largely a universal affair in much traditional social analysis (from structural-functionalism to modernization theory), it was not until a significant period of social upheaval and cultural discord in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the western notion of the social as ordered and structured fell on hard times. This dismantling of the concept of society was, in turn, intensified by various theoretical currents – including feminism, multiculturalism and postcolonialism – as well as massive social transformations such as the advent of globalization and new information technologies. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the discourse of society received a radical deconstruction and reconstruction from within the disciplinary confines of sociology itself. For instance, structuration theory, as advanced by Anthony Giddens in the UK and Pierre Bourdieu in France, unearthed how the structured

features of social action are, by the performance of action itself, constitutive of structured social contexts. Others argued that the idea of structured society is simply dismissive of the infinite social differences that shape global realities.

If social theory throughout the 1980s was turning in on itself, largely preoccupied as it was with issues of interpretation, justification and critique, the same cannot be said of cultural theory. There was a general celebratory sense during the final decades of the twentieth century that cultural theory had reached beyond its distinctively British beginnings, anchored as it had been in the path-breaking works of Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, and was now in the business of going global. The whole sensibility of cultural theory during this time was one of transformation and possibility, as both the theoretics and analytics of culture spread throughout the curricula of colleges and universities from San Francisco to Sydney. The topic of culture moved centre-stage across various disciplines and fields in the social sciences and humanities. Culture was increasingly the place to try out competing theories of the world and try on various approaches to grasping everyday life, as the process of interpretative 'reading' was applied to cultural texts, events and objects – all the way from the reading of women's magazines to the study of subcultures. Not that this meant that the term 'culture' was any easier to understand than the term 'society'. Indeed, the doyen of cultural theory Raymond Williams developed the argument that culture was one of the most complex words in the English language.

By the 1990s the underscoring of a general transformation of culture in cultural theory was not only about a transformed relationship to the social sciences and humanities, however. The enhancement of disciplinary knowledge and enrichment of interdisciplinary fields of research was certainly still significant, but many practitioners of cultural theory were seeking an engagement with the wider world reaching well beyond the academic goal of disinterested inquiry. The new cultural theories had ambitions that lay deep in politics and the public sphere. This involved, in effect, a translation of cultural theory, one which connected texts to social transformations, interpretative readings to political interests, and libidinal desire to democratic deliberation. Such is the pitch of the major writings of cultural theorists as diverse as Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, Michel de Certeau, Terry Eagleton, John Fiske, Dick Hebdige, Laura Mulvey and Lawrence Grossberg.

One aim of *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Cultural Theory* is to introduce readers to contemporary debates around society and culture. Another aim is to ponder and discriminate the different meanings of these terms. Why 'society' has been elevated over 'culture' in social theory, and why 'culture' often comes at the cost of a rudimentary grasp of 'society' in cultural theory, are fundamental questions explored throughout the volume.

The horizons of social theory: self, society and solidarity

If it is true that classical social theory had in a sense been founded upon the emergence of industrial society, and been associated with questions of the transition from feudalism to early market capitalism, then contemporary social theory has been largely concerned with transitions to post-industrialism, multinational capitalism and advanced modernity. Contemporary social theory, for the most part, has seen itself inaugurate a shift in analytical attention in the social sciences and humanities from institutions to ideology, from class to colonialism, and from economics to ego identity. What perhaps has been most striking is the sheer diversity, indeed the exceptional range, of social theory and its astonishingly abundant traditions of thought. From the 1920s and 1930s onwards, social theory was preoccupied with, among other things, political unrest, power and psychodynamics. By the 1950s and 1960s, however,

social theory was also coming to denote semiotics, signifiers and sexuality. The foundational social-theoretical ideas of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud were still of immense significance, but they now needed to be supplemented, or 'reread', in the light of new intellectual and political interventions from Germany and France. The terrain of cultural theory was to undergo another of its periodic transformations some decades later, for example during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when postmodernism and debates about postmodernity became all the rage. Today, by contrast, the intellectual and political landscape has changed again, with a whole range of new vital issues ranging from globalization to governance. Even so, what remains evident is that few areas of academic enquiry remain as interdisciplinary, diverse and politically engaged as cultural theory.

But this is rushing ahead. We need to return to social theory, and consider the transition from traditional to contemporary social thought. The early architects of contemporary social theory, working as it happened in Germany, set out by seeing their work as not confined to the province of any one intellectual discipline. Social theory, according to the early critical theorists, needed to include the insights of sociology, philosophy, political science, economics, psychology, in fact the whole stock of formal intellectual disciplines. The term 'critical theory' refers to a series of core ideas worked out by the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt (the 'Frankfurt School') in the 1920s and 1930s. Pre-eminent among the first generation of Frankfurt critical theorists were Max Horkheimer (philosopher, sociologist and leader of the institute), Theodor Adorno (sociologist, philosopher and musicologist) and Herbert Marcuse (philosopher and political theorist). While there were many other significant scholars associated with the Frankfurt School, including the literary critic Walter Benjamin and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, it is in the writings of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse that the cultural-theoretical project of linking philosophy and the human sciences, of interweaving theoretical critique with empirical research, most strongly emerges.[1] Among the core issues central to the first generation of critical theorists were the following. What are the core cultural and political dimensions influencing the trajectory of twentieth-century history? What psychological and political factors underpinned the rise of fascism and Nazism? Why are tendencies towards bureaucracy, rationalization and authoritarianism increasingly prevalent throughout developed societies? And how might theoretical critique keep alive hope for alternative political possibilities, or social utopias? All of these issues remain important in contemporary critical theory, especially in the work of its key exponent, Jürgen Habermas. Others who have contributed to the contemporary recasting of critical theory include Axel Honneth, Albrecht Wellmer and Claus Offe. The tradition of critical theory is examined in this handbook by Jordan McKenzie in Chapter 2; these ideas from Germany, so influential throughout social theory and its various applications, are further analysed by many other contributors to the handbook. There is, for example, an especially insightful consideration of Habermas's account of ideology provided by John Cash in Chapter 7. In order to adequately grasp the core continuities and differences between the first and second generation of critical theorists, however, I want now to examine briefly the critique of power structures developed in this Frankfurt tradition of social thought.

Dialectic of Enlightenment, a book written by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s and a foundational text of the critical theory canon, retraces the social-historical character of reason, from its first appearance in Genesis via the Enlightenment through to its institutionalization in the capitalist world economy. With the mass destruction and human tragedy of the Second World War firmly in mind, Horkheimer and Adorno sought to develop a critical perspective on the application of reason to social life and politics. To do this, they coupled Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy with Marx's critique of political economy. At the level

both of theory and of politics, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the Enlightenment, in the form of means-end or instrumental rationality, turns from a project of freedom into a new source of enslavement.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the overall trend of development in western society is that of an expanding rationalization, an instrumental ordering of life in which there is a loss of moral meaning at the levels of society, culture and personality. In the analyses of the first generation of critical theorists, this loss of meaning is captured by the term 'totally adminis-tered society', a term that Adorno gave further analytical clarity to when he spoke of a socio-psychological process of fragmentation, or 'logics of disintegration'. Linking Freudian psychoanalysis with Marxism, Horkheimer and Adorno propose a self-cancelling dynamic in which all identities and rationalities are constituted through a violent coercion of inner and outer nature. The broad argument is that, in the early phases of modernization, individuals repressed unconscious desires through the imposition of certain Oedipal prohibitions, resulting in a level of self-control that underpinned and reproduced asymmetrical relations of capitalist power. But this is not so in the administered world of post-liberal industrial socie-ties. In post-liberal societies, changes in interpersonal structures mean that the family is no longer the principal agency of social repression. Instead, human subjects are increasingly brought under the sway of impersonal cultural symbols and technological forms, as registered in the rise of the culture industries (popular music, television and the like). The shift from liberal to post-liberal societies involves a wholesale destruction of the psychological dimen-sion of experience: there is, according to Adorno, a socialization of the unconscious in the administered world that comes at the expense of the mediating agency of the ego itself. The Janus-face of this process reveals itself as the repression of inner nature as the price of domi-nating external nature. 'Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood', write Horkheimer and Adorno,

> is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken; for the substance which is dominated, suppressed and dissolved through self-preservation is none other than that very life as a function of which the achievements of self-preservation are defined; it is, in fact, what is to be preserved.
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> *(1970: 54)*

The idea of the self-destructive character of reason – that is, of a rationality that turns back on itself and creates a new realm of universal domination – is central to the tradition of Frankfurt critical theory, and also receives support, in various guises, from post-structuralist and post-modernist currents of social thought. It is also a core preoccupation of Habermas. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas is concerned to explore the interrelations between the conditions of social rationalization and the ways in which administrative structures and economic markets come to dominate the lives of human subjects. However, unlike the first generation of critical theorists, Habermas seeks to move beyond the conceptual limitations of a subject-centred conception of rationality by deploying the notion of 'communicative action'.[2] According to Habermas, the first generation of critical theorists developed a fatalistic vision of reason as self-mutilating since it was assumed that instrumental rationality is writ large in all spheres of social action. By contrast, a conception of communicative rationality – which emphasizes the interactions *between* human subjects – prepares the way for a more differentiated social-theoretical analysis of human action and social systems, or so Habermas proposes.

In his major statement from the 1980s, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas returned to the functionalist systems theory of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. He

considered the ways in which functionalism permits an analysis of social rationalization, and considers the limitations of such a purely objectivistic approach to social systems. The theory of communicative action, as elaborated by Habermas, draws from systems theory in order to analyse the financial and bureaucratic imperatives impinging upon the economy and state, and how these systems become increasingly self-reproducing through the impact of the objective steering media of money and power. According to Habermas, the analysis of systemic mechanisms that underpin the institutional complexes of modern culture is not the only methodological basis for social theory. For the reproduction of social life also involves personal identity, social integration and cultural tradition, and it is for this reason that Habermas introduces the notion of lifeworld. For Habermas the lifeworld refers to both the public and the private spheres, to those domains in which meaning and value reside, of deeply layered communicative interactions between subjects, such as the family, education, art and religion.

Habermas thus argues for a dualist theory of society in which he interweaves the concepts of system and lifeworld, without reducing one to the other. Habermas claims however that one can trace a *progressive uncoupling of system and lifeworld* with the shift from traditional to modern forms of social organization. This differentiation or uncoupling is a structural necessity of advanced modern societies: the operation of systemic mechanisms, such as state apparatuses and the market economy, uncoupled from interpersonal relations (that is, operating behind the back of individual agents) is a crucial feature of modernity. But there are also disturbing or pathological features arising from modern social development, and for Habermas these principally stem from the expansion of economic and political steering mechanisms into the interpersonal bases of the lifeworld: the destructive impact of capitalist reification upon interpersonal communication, the weakening of the public sphere through media homogenization, the increasing reliance of individuals upon expert knowledge (scientific, technological, psychotherapeutic) for self-understanding and the fostering of communal bonds. All of these forces threaten autonomous sociability, says Habermas, as the communicative and consensual foundations of the lifeworld come under the increasing pressure and insidious influence of rationalization. Indeed, systems integration in modernity has become rationalized to such an extent that Habermas speaks of an 'inner colonization of the life-world'. Such a colonization can be resisted only through communicative reason. The critical involvement and political participation of individuals within the public sphere – in, for example, ecological, peace and feminist social movements – is regarded by Habermas as an attempt to check and correct the current imbalances between lifeworld and system forces. New social movements, says Habermas, are primarily defensive in character, since they seek to defend the relentless colonization of the lifeworld against the systems.

Habermas's attempt to rethink the *interdependence* of socio-political grids and intersubjective communications has been crucial to the development of contemporary critical theory. According to Axel Honneth (1991), however, Habermas's critical theory of society fails to give adequate recognition to the complex dynamics of social conflict which are, in fact, vital to any reconquest of the lifeworld through communicative action. Against Habermas's tendency to see systems integration processing the moral orientations of individuals, Honneth wants to recover a notion of *praxis* for rethinking domains of intersubjective communication. In particular, the concepts of struggle, conflict and recognition are of core significance to understanding the restructurings of system and lifeworld in the contemporary era. Thus, Honneth adopts a number of psychoanalytic motifs and techniques in order to interpret anew intersubjective pathologies that result in instrumentally one-sided relational patterns of self-development. Honneth's adoption of psychoanalytic theory is, in some respects, a return

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