

**CONTEMPORARY  
SOCIAL  
THEORY:  
AN  
INTRODUCTION**  
**ANTHONY ELLIOTT**

**SECOND EDITION**

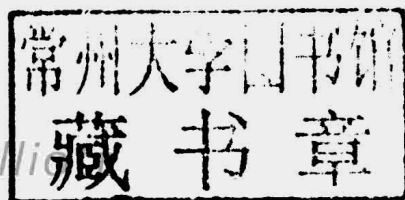
**ROUTLEDGE** 

# Contemporary Social Theory

## An Introduction

Second edition

Anthony Elia



First published 2014  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Elliott, Anthony, 1964–

Contemporary social theory : an introduction / Anthony Elliott. — Second Edition.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sociology—Philosophy. 2. Social sciences—Philosophy. 3. Sociology—Philosophy—History—20th century. 4. Social sciences—Philosophy—History—20th century. I. Title.

HM447.E55 2013

301—dc23

2013026316

ISBN: 978-0-415-52136-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-52137-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-51992-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Scala Sans

by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

# Contemporary Social Theory

In this comprehensive, stylish and accessible introduction to contemporary social theory, Anthony Elliott examines the major social theoretical traditions. The first edition set new standards for introductory textbooks, such as the far-reaching sweep of social theorists discussed – including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Manuel Castells, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Giorgio Agamben and Manuel DeLanda.

From the Frankfurt School to globalization, from feminism to the network society, this new edition has been fully revised and updated, taking into account the most recent developments in social theory. The second edition also contains a completely new chapter on classical social theory, allowing students to contextualize the modern debates.

Like its predecessor, the second edition of *Contemporary Social Theory* combines stylish exposition with reflective social critique and original insights. This new edition will prove a superb textbook with which to navigate the twists and turns of contemporary social theory as taught in the disciplines of sociology, politics, history, cultural studies and many more.

**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 *Mobile lives* (2010, with John Urry), *On Society* (2012, with Bryan Turner), *Concepts of the Self* (2013) and *Reinvention* (2013).

## Praise for the first edition

"It is very hard to write an outstanding introduction to any subject and particularly hard to do so for a subject as demanding as contemporary social theory. Anthony Elliott succeeds superbly. His book offers a reliable guide to the big debates in social theory while never glossing over the difficult questions."

**Professor David Held** *Co-Director, Centre for the Study of Global Governance, LSE, UK*

"Magnificent. Elliott visits a vast range of theorists and shows how they reveal the beautiful complexity of everyday social life. He makes social theory relevant and meaningful, simple, sexy and exciting."

**Tom Inglis** *Professor of Sociology, University College Dublin, Ireland*

"No one I know is better able than Anthony Elliott to get to the heart of complex theories, then to write of them clearly yet critically.

*Contemporary Social Theory* is exceptional for the range of the authors presented. Students and teachers will treasure this exciting travel guide through the thickets of social theory today."

**Charles Lemert** *Andrus Professor of Sociology at Wesleyan University and author of 'Thinking the Unthinkable', USA*

"This is an amazingly fluent analysis of contemporary social theory. It should be widely read for its careful and insightful dissection of the main theories and of their particular strengths and weaknesses. It will be a must-read on many 'theory' courses around the world."

**John Urry** *Distinguished Professor, Dept of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK*

"Intelligent and lucid, Anthony Elliott's introduction to contemporary social theory provides a remarkably complete overview of thinkers and themes. In exploring the organizing question – what is society? – he skilfully guides the student through a galaxy of major figures, including such luminaries as Bauman, Butler, Chodorow, Foucault, Giddens, Habermas, Lacan, and Lemert. Incorporating many valuable pedagogical aids, Elliott makes social theory highly accessible. *Contemporary Social Theory* bristles with insights into our troubled world."

**Bryan Turner** *Alona Evans Distinguished Visiting Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College, USA*

"This is quite simply the best introduction to contemporary social theory that I have read. Profound and subtle in its judgements, yet very easy to read, Anthony Elliott has done much more than rehearse familiar debates or identify key thinkers. He has brought contemporary social theory to life by placing it within everyday experiences, troubles, and dilemmas. And he has done so with a remarkable breadth of theoretical virtuosity covering everything from sexuality to globalization, language to political institutions and governance. This book will be invaluable to students and teachers alike."

**Professor Robert Holton** *Fellow of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*

"Anthony Elliott is without question one of the leaders in the younger generation of sociologists. *Contemporary Social Theory* provides an overview of various recent

sociological theories and is an essential text for anybody interested in sociological theories, including Japanese students and faculty."

**Professor Masataka Katagiri** *Chiba University, Japan*

"Here is the latest example of what Anthony Elliott does best: He brings his readers in on the key social, personal and political issues of our time. Always readable and interesting, *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction* includes a wide range of modern social thought, from structuralism, to feminism, to globalization, and engagingly demonstrates these theories' relevance in our own lives. As importantly, Elliott provides us a way to think critically, making the reader a more thoughtful reader of social theory as well as a participant in contemporary social debates. A book that is stimulating to both teacher and student alike and that enlivens the classroom experience."

**Professor Jeffrey Prager** *Sociology, UCLA, USA*

"Anthony Elliott has written a wide-ranging and appealing book, setting new standards for introductory texts in social theory. *Contemporary Social Theory* is clear in style and accessible in presentation. It is sure to stimulate students and beginners in the field whilst proving of considerable interest to their teachers. It will also strike sparks with those with a professional research interest in social theory."

**Professor Paul du Gay** *Organisational Behaviour, Warwick University, UK*

"Extraordinary in scope, *Contemporary Social Theory* takes the reader on a world tour of social theory since the Second World War and offers the student clear and accessible guidance around what are often complex and obscure theoretical edifices. More than this, Anthony Elliott provides not just description but evaluation and critique, and the originality of his mind will make this a pleasure to read for all thoughtful people engaged with the politics of living."

**Professor Paul Hoggett** *Director of the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies, UWE, UK*

"The renewal of the teaching of social theory can now take place! For in Anthony Elliott's scholarly, thorough and limpid volume, teachers of theory have the perfect support text, one guaranteed to bring students fully into the exciting drama that it lays out: the drama of contemporary social life as social theorists from the Frankfurt School to Giorgio Agamben have mapped it out."

**Professor John Lechte** *Higher Degree Convenor (SOC) Macquarie University, Australia*

"Social theory gives us the building blocks to make sense of our lives and explore how they link to the processes which shape what we can do and how we live. But it takes a master of the craft to turn the blocks into a building in which it is possible to live and flourish. This book shows that Anthony Elliott is a master of the craft."

The house that is built within the pages of this comprehensive book is one of many rooms, in which all students will find a place in which they can think and, moreover, in which they will be given in an exceptionally accessible and well-informed style the resources which that thinking needs if it is going to succeed.

I have little doubt that thanks to its encyclopaedic spread, authoritative content and keen eye for the excellent illustration, this book will be valued highly by everyone who wants or needs to think – and live – with social theory. And ultimately that means all of us."

**Professor Keith Tester** *Cultural Sociology, University of Portsmouth, UK*

"Elliott provides a sweeping survey that is both accessible and sophisticated. Organised in thematic chapters that make excellent use of vignettes from the lives of everyday people to draw the reader into the issues, Elliott elegantly summarises the main points of each theorist's work, provides some discussion that stretches the reader's understanding, and rehearses the main criticisms. The book weaves together the disparate strands of social theory, including psychoanalysis, feminism, (post)structuralism, and critical theory alongside the issues of globalization and postmodernity. This book will set the agenda for many university courses in contemporary social theory."

**Professor Douglas Ezzy** *Head of School, Sociology and Social Work,  
University of Tasmania, Australia*

"For the last twenty years, Anthony Elliott has been bringing his unique personal and intellectual insights to the major debates of our time in an impressively wide-ranging series of texts on social theory and psychoanalysis. More recently, he has produced a provocative series of works on risk and globalization, the allure of celebrity and plastic surgery, and the trials and terrors of the new individualism. Here, in his new introductory text, Elliott returns with new insights to some of the classics of social theory and charts a path through the most interesting and important contemporary social theorists. I can think of few writers better equipped to carry off this task and Elliott has done it here magnificently. Elliott combines his deep knowledge of social theory, his lightly worn erudition, and an engaging style that is a pleasure to read. The personal stories that begin most chapters are a highlight and manage to bring home what is at stake in the theories and ideas that follow. What he has achieved here should win over a generation of new students to social theory."

**Anthony Moran** *Lecturer in Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Australia*

"Covering an impressive range of theories and theorists, and presenting them in an accessible and elegant fashion, reading Anthony Elliott's text is an ideal way to navigate the often complex terrain of modern social thought."

**Professor David Inglis** *University of Aberdeen, UK*

"This is the best introduction to social theory we are ever likely to need. The writing is crystal clear, the arguments are complex but accessible and this is likely to become the best friend of every sociology undergraduate. This book has been especially written for those who want to know why social theory is so important to understanding the world right now. At last, we finally have a book we can recommend to our students with confidence."

**Nick Stevenson** *University of Nottingham, UK*

"This is the best contemporary social theory text currently on the market. It is highly accessible, explaining ideas in the clearest possible language without compromising depth and complexity. Accordingly, it is a book that would work well for students at all levels. Undergraduates with no background in social theory will be able to easily engage with this text, and this is something that cannot be said of any other contemporary social theory textbook that considers the range of theorists and complexity of ideas that this book does. More advanced students, including professional social theorists, will find that Elliott provides great clarity on some of the most difficult, yet most influential, ideas in contemporary social thought."

**Ann Branaman** *Associate Professor of Sociology,  
Florida Atlantic University, USA*

# Preface and Acknowledgements

There are few areas of academic inquiry as diverse, multidisciplinary and politically important as social theory. In writing this book, I have sought to develop a readable, comprehensive and critical introduction to the field of contemporary social theory. This, in itself, might be considered something of a tall order – given that social theory now manages to scoop up everything from self-identity, sexuality and signifiers to gender, globalization and governance. In seeking to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of contemporary social theory, I have tried to cover most of the major traditions of thought – from the Frankfurt School to postmodernism, from structuralism to post-feminism – along with overviews of many recent cutting edge developments. As such, the book includes detailed discussions of globalization and the global electronic economy, postmodernism, the rise of networks, the impacts of climate change – amongst other new topics of key importance.

At the outset, this is perhaps the place to briefly comment on recent developments in social theory which have influenced the cast of this book. Social theory emerged in the context of the European Enlightenment, and has for the most part remained a largely continental affair in its traffic with fundamental questions about the social dynamics of our lives and of our lives in the age of modernity. If contemporary social theory represents, among other things, a kind of academic shorthand for the intellectual contributions of, among others, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard and Luce Irigaray, this says something about not only the richness, diversity and esotericism of social theory itself, but also the ambitious critique it has developed of our current ways



of life. Contemporary social theory, as I argue throughout this book, is a kind of doubled enterprise: a resourceful, high-powered and interdisciplinary project of the social sciences and humanities on the one hand, and an urgent critique of ideological thought and the discourses of reason, freedom, truth, subjectivity, culture and politics on the other. At its best – and my argument is that the best is to be found in the writings of Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Judith Butler, Zygmunt Bauman, Giorgio Agamben and many others – contemporary social theory provides a sophisticated, scintillating critique of the arrogance of power as well as engaging the future of progressive politics.

I should like to thank various people and institutions that have assisted in the preparation of this second edition of the book. Three people have been vital to the book. Gerhard Boomgaarden, my friend and editor at Routledge, has played a critical role in shaping this book and I am grateful for the many ways in which he has assisted in its preparation. I was fortunate indeed to have Charles Lemert as my intellectual companion throughout the writing of the second edition, and I am indebted to him for many incisive comments and suggestions. Nicola Geraghty, again, has been marvellously helpful and I thank her for the many ways in which she has contributed to the book.

Writing and preparation of the second edition was undertaken at the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia. Eric Hsu, project manager of the second edition, assisted me throughout with admirable efficiency. I am very grateful for his labours and dedication. I should also like to thank Adam Henderson and Dan Torode for their splendidly scrupulous research and editing of the manuscript. Also at the Hawke I would like to thank: Jennifer Rutherford, David Radford, Daniel Chaffee, Maureen Cotton, Phoebe Smith and Lynette Copus. Finally, at Routledge, I would like to thank Emily Briggs.

With the publication of a second edition, this book has now been written, rewritten and rewritten over many years – penned and edited variously in Bristol, Dublin, Canterbury, London, Helsinki and Adelaide. In these travels, my family has been key. To the extent that our youngest, Niamh, is the newest budding social theorist of the family – the child's instinctive curiosity (as Freud argued) is disabling to the established adult world, and thus a suggestive model for social theory – the book remains dedicated to her.

Anthony Elliott  
Adelaide, 2013

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# The Textures of Society

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Natalie is a 26-year-old fashion designer living and working in London. Her design studio is located at Notting Hill Gate, where she spends part of her working week; for the rest of the week, she is regularly in Paris – attending to the business details of her fledgling fashion company. The routine air travel between London and Paris is something that now seems ‘normal’ to Natalie, after four years of flitting between cities. But the travel she undertakes to see her boyfriend Ross, who relocated to Finland last year, is more difficult for her to schedule. It is not the travel itself she finds difficult; rather it is finding the time to travel. Time is a resource that for Natalie is in short supply.

Natalie, a daughter of Taiwanese immigrants to America, grew up in Brooklyn – where her parents still live. Her father worked as a waiter, and her mother worked long hours in a dry-cleaning store. Natalie's life has been remarkably different to that of her parents – largely the result of her parents' efforts to get a good college education for their only daughter. She keeps in regular touch through phone calls; she has also recently purchased a computer for her parents, to 'keep close' through email. In communication as they are, Natalie misses direct contact with her parents, and often feels worried that she lives so far away from them. These anxieties have been tempered somewhat of late, however, as Natalie is planning a holiday to the US. In addition to seeing her parents, she has also scheduled to meet Ross in Brooklyn – to introduce him to her family.

What might Natalie's life have to tell us about the world today? What might her professional and private life reflect about the changing direction of society? To begin with, it seems evident that Natalie lives a life – like many throughout the expensive cities of the West – which requires ongoing communication and travel across large distances. Natalie's professional success, as well as her private life, depends upon the routine use of systems of transportation (motorways, rail, air) as well as new communication technologies. Yet if technological innovation lies at the core of how Natalie traverses the large distances she has to cover in terms of travel and communication, these social developments are less evident in the lives of her parents – who rarely ever leave Brooklyn. Still, Natalie's parents travel in a kind of 'virtual' way – making use of email communication. Equally significantly, they traverse the different cultures and social landscapes of which they are part, or to which their lives connect – Taiwanese, American, British.

If we seek to broaden out these points, we might say that Natalie's life reflects the dynamic changes occurring within social, cultural and economic life today, and on a global scale. Think, for example, of how her use of new information technologies reflects the social changes now affecting how people and places interweave. There are today more than two and a half billion users of the Internet worldwide, to which Natalie's parents are merely some of the latest users. Or think about Natalie's carbon footprint across the globe, as she routinely travels between the UK and Europe, as well as across the Atlantic oceans. There are today more than nine hundred million international air flights undertaken each year, a figure predicted to pass one billion in the near future. If these statistics are suggestive of the increasingly complex 'border crossings' (at once geopolitical, communicational and virtual) lived by young women like Natalie in the expensive cities of the West, there are also other human migrations that predominate in our own era of globalization which receive less media attention, but which most certainly disturb. These are not the kinds of travel either Natalie or



her parents undertake, but are certainly of fundamental significance to the textures of world society today. It has been estimated by Robert Neuwirth, for example, that 70 million people each year leave rural villages for the promises of distant cities. These promises remain, for most, forever out of reach; living without the rights of place or citizenship, there are many tens of millions of refugees and asylum-seekers today roaming the globe, experiencing the social humiliation and bodily degradation that the Italian social theorist Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'. The notion of bare life might well be apt to describe the plight of illegal immigrant workers scrambling to earn a few dollars or displaced peoples living on the margins, yet it might equally serve to capture the political mood of a world in which three billion of its inhabitants receive the same total income as the richest three hundred individuals.

To raise the question of the 'textures' of society is thus to consider social trends that are intensely worrying on the one hand, as well as those of the most extraordinary potential on the other. However much Natalie might be aware of the global realities of bare life – of peoples living on the margins; of peoples dispossessed, displaced and humiliated – it seems unlikely that she could end up in any such situation herself. For the society to which she belongs is well insulated from too great an awareness of the shocking trends of enforced human migrations in these early years of the twenty-first century. The society to which she belongs, we might suppose, is that of the West – with its mesmerizing information networks, its dazzling digital technologies and its seductive consumer culture. But if we stop and pause for a moment, the question remains: to which society does Natalie actually belong? She was raised in the US. Yet her family immigrated to America from Taiwan when she an infant. She now lives in London, but works regularly in Paris. And her boyfriend is based in Helsinki. To which society does she belong?

## What is society?

One answer to the question 'to which society does Natalie belong?' derives from common-sense: she belongs where she lives, her homeland, her nation. In social theory as in everyday life, this answer emphasizes that social life must be constructed within the province of the nation and its assured rights of belonging – the entitlements and duties of citizenship. On this view, Natalie is an American citizen, one who now lives and works in the UK, and who holds a permanent British visa. Talk about the connections between nations and societies in the social sciences tends to be fairly general, and yet it remains the case that nations have been regarded as providing societal homes for a remarkably long historical period. Nations,