

Theorizing Society: The Logic of Placement¹

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Contribution to the Ad-hoc Group »Theorie-Empirie-Verhältnisse in transitiven Zeiten? Zur Strapazierfähigkeit ›Theoretischer Empirie«

The core structure of social theory and the difference between theory types

Georg Friedrich Lichtenberg famously claimed that the language of everyday life is the most general philosophy, and that “all philosophy is a correction of the use of language” (Lichtenberg 1998, p. 197–198). I suggest adapting this sentence slightly: All sociological theory is the attempt to correct the lay sociology of everyday language. Despite frequent complaints about the inaccessibility of sociological language, one of the most obvious but rarely explicitly acknowledged facts about sociological theories is that they are mostly built from the words of everyday, vernacular language. Unlike the mathematized sciences, sociological theory frequently employs terms that are either easily explained in everyday language or directly adopted from it. Many concepts, like class, gender, social structure, interaction, or society, go back and forth between public discourse and disciplinary uses. We can understand sociological theory as an attempt to guide our thinking about the social world into paths that allow for a more coherent perspective on the social world than everyday consciousness, structured by lay concepts.

So, why is this correction of thought even necessary? Indeed, a non-theoretical sociology would never find itself in the situation of having nothing to say about its subject matter. In everyday life, we are never at a loss for words when faced with social inequality or the pressures of presentation in interaction situations. However, if sociology were purely oriented towards everyday language, it would not be able to commit to distinctions with binding consequences for others, nor could it cast its insights in a readily transferable and memorable form. Agreement in everyday life is not generated through the clarity of speech, but through the vagueness of expressions that allow for different contextual interpretations. Everyday language is insufficient, not because of a lack of expressive means, but because it is so abundantly rich in possibilities that controlled theoretical reflection becomes impossible. As Ludwig Wittgenstein notes, “our grammar lacks transparency” (2003 §122). According to Max Weber, it is necessary to clarify concepts, as otherwise neither readers nor the writer will know what exactly they

¹ This article is a slightly adapted excerpt from my paper: “Deep Theorizing: The Conceptual Logic of Social Ontology and Theory of Society”. In J. Brichzin, F. Anicker, & T. Kern (Eds.). 2026. *Begriffe als Werkzeuge der Soziologie: Sonderband der Zeitschrift Soziale Welt*, S. 213–241. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

mean (cf. Weber 1922a, p. 209). Theories and theoretical concepts in sociology establish *control* over our meanings. However, theories only work because they are not entirely closed off to everyday concepts. The associative and implicative connections between theoretical vocabulary and vernacular language form the silent infrastructure that affords meaningful theorizing (for a more detailed account, see the introduction to Brichzin et al. 2026 and Anicker 2024).

This allows for a quite general and abstract account of *all* social theory. Social theory needs to clarify the meanings of phenomena that are already preconstituted in the vocabularies of everyday language and the sediments of past theoretical approaches. It fulfills this function essentially by two means: First, it focuses on a certain *problem* and develops its theoretical vocabulary as an answer to this problem. While there are material problems, like “how should we conceive of social inequality?” or “what is modernity?”, there are also metatheoretical and epistemological problems, like: “How can we talk about the social in a way that sociology can be a science?” (Max Weber’s problem in the “Grundbegriffe” and his writings on objectivity). Second, it reorganizes phenomena² that are always preconceived in lay concepts by restructuring them with scientific concepts. This is the *concept-logical infrastructure* of sociological theories. Different *kinds* of theory result from posing different problems, and from employing different strategies of conceptual restructuring.

These metatheoretical considerations allow for a preliminary sketch of the theoretical forms. *Social ontology*, *explanation*, and the *theory of society* offer *different* solutions to the same fundamental problem of controlling what we say without losing touch with everyday language. Their theoretical forms can be explicated in terms of the more specific metatheoretical problems they address and their different conceptual logics. The metatheoretical focus problem of social ontology is the question: What is the social made of? Its conceptual logic is geared towards providing concepts for dividing up the social in such a way that phenomena can be transformed into objects of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, both explanation and theory of society deal with the relation between social phenomena. They strive to shed light on some phenomena by determining their relations to others.

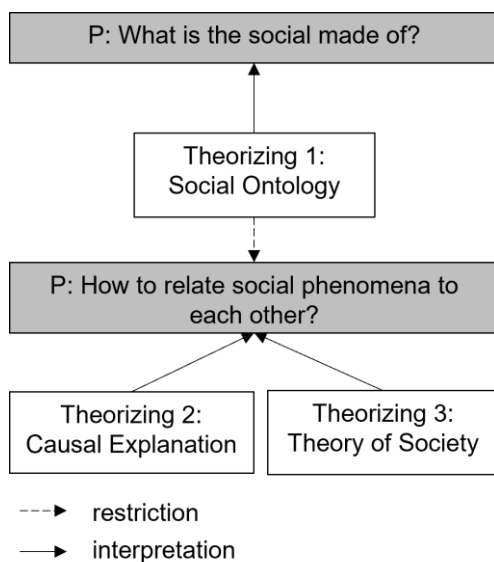


Figure 1: Theorizing Types

The three forms of theory are asymmetrically linked, as social ontology is implied in the other two forms (see figure 1). Explanations need to make assumptions about the identity of the basic entities that are related as cause and effect. Theories of society rely on assumptions about what the central processes and structures are that shape society. They both depend on social ontology, as they presuppose that phenomena are already constituted as scientific objects. Social ontology is, therefore, a logical prerequisite for other theoretical forms that are about the relations of social entities. However, while it is widely recognized that all explanations have ontological presuppositions (Popper 1935; Abbott 1992; Hirschman and Reed 2014; Lindemann 2009; Pacewicz 2022), many researchers who are engaged in explanations do not spell out their social ontological commitments (see the critique of Hartmut Esser 1996). Because sociology is embedded in the common-sense ontology of everyday life, it is possible to get away with this

– we are always good at ‘filling in the blanks’ of insufficiently theorized explanations by bringing in

² I use “phenomenon” in a nontechnical sense, just denoting the interpretanda of social theory. A phenomenon is anything that is not in its final conceptual shape yet and needs to be theorized to become clearer.

everyday language, common sense, and our own experience to make sense of them. The price to be paid for this is that non-theoretical explanations are only superficially easy to understand (because they use well-known terms), but the meaning of the concepts ultimately remains vague and open to mutually incompatible interpretations. The postulated asymmetry between the theory types is, therefore, partly normative – a thesis about how we *should* theorize, and not just an explication of the existing theorizing practice. The relation between the theorizing types is captured in Figure 1.

Now, we turn to the second axis of difference between kinds of theory: their conceptual logic. *Social ontologies* bracket common sense and aim at developing a basic theoretical vocabulary that affords a conceptually clarified perspective on the social. *Explanations* treat many everyday concepts as given, but they may draw on social ontology to clarify the concepts of *explanans* and *explanandum*. Against the backdrop of an already constituted social world, they ask for some law, mechanism, or narrative that accounts for a given phenomenon. *Theories of society* are also about the relation of objects, but, unlike explanations, they account for phenomena by relating them to all of the relevant social and historical context. This makes theories of society ‘deeper’ than explanations, as social ontology and theory of society operate on the assumption that the social can be decomposed into components and processes that can be more or less fundamental for one another. In this paper, I will focus on the conceptual logic of the theory of society, the form of theory that has so far received the least analytical attention.

Theorizing society

The theory of society was long considered the royal discipline of sociology. It aims to construct a theory that makes sense not just of a special part of social life, but also specifies how all the different areas of the social hang together. The theory of society takes the proposition very seriously that *everything* social that happens, happens *in society*. What this ‘in society’ means has been subject to very different interpretations. Strong holistic interpretations of this idea, like Karl Marx’s historical materialism or the early Frankfurt School, suppose that society is a totality that determines everything that happens, the same way a principle organizes secondary notions. Weaker conceptions interpret the wholeness of society in such a way that everything social stands in the *context* of society and, in a certain way, depends on this context. There are different theories of how societal context shapes particular events: for example, because the simultaneity of other social processes is always presupposed (Niklas Luhmann), or because social processes draw on societal resources like meanings, norms, and expressive forms (Jürgen Habermas), or because actors orient towards a relational social order that is neither conscious nor visible but tacitly enacted in all social interaction (Pierre Bourdieu).

What is the problem of the theory of society?

Niklas Luhmann once wrote a short definition of the concept of society for a handbook: “Society is the most encompassing system of human coexistence. There is no consensus on further defining properties” (Luhmann 1978, p. 267, my transl.). This lack of conceptual agreement in the theory of society is still as true as it was in 1978, when this parody of a definition was written. However, *on the level of orienting problems*, there seems to be more common ground. For a compact formulation, I suggest the following specification of the task of the theory of society: “What are the distinguishing features and most relevant structural logics of modern society?”

To say that the domain of the theory of society is to spell out the “most relevant structural logics” needs further elaboration. In fact, not all theories of society use the concept of “structure”, and to say

that there is a “logic” to its reproduction must be understood metaphorically. But this is currently the best problem formulation I can provide to express that the perspective of the theory of society *requires* an understanding of society as characterized by certain regularities, some of them being more relevant for its reproduction than others. For example, for Jürgen Habermas, the main structures of modern society are lifeworld and system. Both are responsible for the structuring of society at the highest level. The logics of systems and lifeworld are considered to permeate every facet of the social, as both structures are fundamental for all communication in society (Habermas 1985b). Luhmann assigns a weaker explanatory role to the concept of society. He sees society as characterized by its form of social differentiation and the infrastructure of communication (mass media and language), while most of the actual work of structuration that determines the goings-on in society is done by function systems and organizations (Luhmann 2012). However, both Habermas and Luhmann are clearly interested in determining structures that are central for the reproduction of society, and in distinguishing them from structural forms that are less relevant (in the sense that they can vary without causing repercussions in all the other parts of society). In very different ways, all theories of society try to spell out the massive inertia of ‘large’ social structures that, from the perspective of individual human beings, seem to be ‘over their heads’, removed from the realm of direct interference, and delineating the boundary conditions of what one can even conceive to do (e.g. Luhmann 2011).

The historically most important structures of societal reproduction can be grouped into two main strands. The first focuses on structures that enable domination and inequality in society, typically with special attention to the unequal distribution of resources and the (capitalist) logic of their accumulation. Second, there are approaches that center on functional differentiation (on these and further axes of differentiation see Marc Mölders 2023; Seth Abrutyn 2021; Stefan Hirschauer 2023). In the following, I will refer to these as domination theories and differentiation theories of society. Differentiation theories determine how distinct parts of modern society emerge and how they relate to each other. Domination theories also decompose society into parts, but they assume that the ‘parts’ of society need to be seen as antagonistic groups whose identity is rooted in the logic of the social power struggle (e.g., Marxist and conflict theories, capitalist theories, or Bourdieusian “social space”). Usually, the nature of their object induces theorists of society to take a stance on the following subsidiary problems:

- a) Difference between modern and premodern societies
- b) Problem of society’s wholeness
- c) Relationship of differentiation and integration OR the relationship of conflict/competition and integration

Sometimes, the aforementioned problem of structural reproduction and change is added to this list (Bongaerts 2008, p. 244; Renn 2006, pp. 29–63), but actually, it is better thought of as the overarching problem of the theory of society. The other problems are subsidiary because they mark different ways of saying *how* the structural logic of modern society is to be understood.

The problem of the difference between modern and premodern societies

Theorizing the *difference between modern and premodern societies* is important because theories of society use this contrast to provide evidence that certain social structures are indeed of special importance for modernity. Comparisons with historical societies serve as a heuristic to see what separates modernity (or postmodernity) from society’s prior stages. These differences challenge the theory of society to provide some kind of explanation for the structural transformation to modernity that separates it from its antecedents. For example, domination theories of society that assume capitalism as the central structure explain the advent of modernity by analyzing the enforcement of capitalist modes of production. Differentiation theories contrast modernity with other epochs by pointing to changes in the primary form of differentiation (e.g., functional differentiation as opposed to stratifi-

catory differentiation, for Luhmann, or the disembedding of function systems, for Habermas). This logic of theory development does not change for theorists who think that modernity was superseded by something else – they will always need to explain how the structuration principles of modernity got replaced by those of a “next society” (Baecker 2007). Whether theories take the theoretical problem of the “modernity” of the modern seriously *on the level of empirical data* distinguishes theories of society from other forms of theorizing, especially diagnoses of the times. The latter do not engage much with historical research, but use a combination of current trends and a stereotypical way of describing the past to produce “new societies” or “new eras” (Osrecki 2011).

The problem of society's wholeness

The *problem of society's “wholeness”* requires clarification of how society is considered a whole. This has, *first*, the straightforward sense of determining whether society is thought to mean “nation society” (a frequent, tacit assumption in many classical theories of society, see Strecker 2017, p. 361), or, much more commonly now, larger entities like culturally modulated “modernities” (Eisenstadt 2017), “world system” (Wallerstein 2004), or “world society” (Luhmann 1997b). *Second*, there is also a less obvious, but theoretically crucial, aspect to the question of holism. This concerns the explanatory relation of the whole (society) to the social structures it contains. Some form of holism is a constitutive feature of theories of society. However, there are weaker versions that assume society unifies all social processes merely for analytical purposes, and stronger ones that treat society as a macroscopic entity with real causal force on ‘lower-level’ social processes (e.g., the Hegelian tradition and its Marxist extensions into the Frankfurt School). Strongly holistic theories that assume a single, dominant logic of society on the macrolevel (say: patriarchy or class conflict) struggle to provide insights into areas of social life that are hard to reconstruct from this basis (e.g., the emergence of egalitarian love relationships in modernity). Recent theories of society are mostly weakly holistic, in a sense to be explicated further below.

The problem of relating opposing structural principles

The third problem is different for differentiation and domination theories of society. While the first ask about the relation between integration and differentiation (Mölders et al. 2024), the latter ask about the relation between conflict (or competition) and integration. The way this question is answered determines the assumed logic of social reproduction. The challenge for both types of theories is to explain how principles that appear divisive – such as specialization, functional differentiation, or class struggles – can nonetheless produce “one” society, rather than leading to as many societies as there are function systems or conflictual factions. Classical answers are Émile Durkheim's thesis that specialization produces a new type of ‘organic’ morality that allows normative integration, or Talcott Parsons' claim that integration is built into every system as a necessary function at every level of abstraction, or conflict theorists' assumption that conflicts also serve integrative functions.

Many theories of society emphasize one of these problems over the other, or omit one entirely, such as the problem of society's wholeness. Nevertheless, these problems remain valuable as interpretive frameworks, both for theorists developing a theory of modern society and for their readers, since the answers given to them mark crucial points of divergence in the theory's overall perspective.

The relation of social ontology and theory of society: two kinds of universality

How does the conceptual logic of theories of society work? The easiest way to grasp the logic of the theory of society is to compare it to social ontology. We have introduced social ontology as a base vocabulary of elementary building blocks that is used to make sense of other phenomena by constructing or ‘building’ them from the social ontological base. Theories of society, like all other social

theories, presuppose ontological commitments. All theories of society have a social ontological basis that is used to construct the empirical object: society. But, as society is not simply a 'phenomenon' to be reconstructed, but the most complex object known to social theory, we need to take several additional aspects into account.

The relationship between the two types of theory is perhaps best elucidated by drawing on an analogy to physics. Social ontology fulfills similar functions for sociology as the standard model does for physics. Just as the standard model spells out the fundamental forces and the types of elementary particles that are assumed to be the building blocks of everything we see in the universe, social ontology spells out the basic entities and relations that are supposed to underlie the social. But physics also has a subdiscipline that deals with the 'whole' of the universe: cosmology. Cosmology is the study of how the universe came into being and the processes that led to its development, from the Big Bang to its contemporary form. Everything that happens in physics happens "in" the universe. It would, in principle, be possible to look at every physical event from a cosmological perspective, to locate the event in spacetime (for physics, this is mostly irrelevant because background conditions can be ignored). The cosmological picture of the universe needs to be compatible with the standard model; it must be formulated in its vocabulary.

The theory of society is related to social ontology like cosmology is to the standard model: It is based on social ontology, but it does not simply aim to describe *any* possible social phenomenon (like the standard model would for all possible interactions of particles, matter, and forces), but *all* social phenomena – in their synthetic relations of structuration and their development over time. Thus, a theory of society must, in principle, be able to situate any empirical social phenomenon within society by determining its relations to other structures, especially to 'large' structures considered central to the reproduction of society. Two different types of universality are at work in the two forms of theory. Social ontological universality is a universality of *potential* application – anything social should be constructible from the base vocabulary. The universality of the theory of society is a universality of *actual* relations. A perfect theory of society would be able to determine for all empirical phenomena where they are located in society and how they are related to each other. One can think of this *placement* operation as answering the questions of the 'where' and 'when' of phenomena in society, in the specific sense of relating them to the history and shape of social structures. Of all relevant empirical social processes, a theory of society would be supposed to answer the questions: In what way do these processes contribute to the reproduction of (larger) social structures? What structures do they depend on, and which other structures depend on them? A theory of society is thus a relation of relations. It is more *specific* than social ontology, as it is a theory of a particular historically situated object. But it is also *more comprehensive than social ontology on the level of empirical reference* as it constructs all phenomena in their societal context. Given the enormous diversity of social phenomena that need to be placed (think of bullying in schoolyards, financial crises, birthday parties, wars, social media, changing gender relations, religious sects ...), this is an extremely challenging task. *Every* assumption about general societal structures serves the function of context-building for *all* specific social processes and phenomena. As a result, theories of society typically exhibit a multi-level structure and must carefully balance different levels of generality (Klüver 1991).

The task of universal theoretical comprehension frequently leads theorists of society to adopt *multiple* social-ontological vocabularies, and to seek ways of combining or theoretically integrating them. Bourdieu, for instance, argued that the theory of class conflict (a domination theory) had to be complemented by a theory of fields to account for functional differentiation. He seeks to ground both social ontologically in a general theory of practice and aims to reconcile bifurcated societal structures through the concept of the field of power (see Schmitz et al. 2017; Kieserling 2008). A similar integrative enterprise can be found in Luhmann's coupling of differentiation theory, evolutionary theory, and media

theory – all usually coming with their own social ontology – and uniting them with very abstract concepts of systems theory (Jahraus et al. 2012; Luhmann 1997a). The case of Habermas, who combines systems theory and communicative action theory in the macro-concepts of lifeworld and system, has already been mentioned. All these are cases of multiple social ontological grounding. Theorists aiming for a somewhat unified theory of society find it necessary to explain how different social logics are interconnected. Other theorists, such as Michel Foucault, who are interested in large-scale, structural transformations of modernity but do not aim to develop a theory of society, also use different social-theoretic ontologies (discourse, dispositive, subjectivation, and so on), but they do not theorize the relation between these ontologies or their relative importance for the structuration of society. The integration of different social-ontological vocabularies is *one* aspect of the conceptual logic of theories of society; the other can be explicated by examining the relation of theories of society to empirical phenomena.

The conceptual logic of applying the theory of society to empirical phenomena

The relationship of theories of society to empirical phenomena is quite complex. Uwe Schimank points out that theories of society operate at different levels of abstraction: They have to be able to take into account concrete historical events and transformations, but their interest in generality forces them to abstract from contingent events all the way down to the level of the social ontology of society (Schimank 1996, p. 17ff.). This coincides with Jürgen Habermas's claim that the level of abstraction of theories of society only allows for a very indirect relationship between theoretical core assumptions and empirical findings (Habermas 2024, p. 53). But how does this "indirect relationship" work?

Gesa Lindemann thinks that theories of society can be understood as a "metainterpretation of middle range theories" (2009, p. 24, my translation). This is not wrong, but it still lacks a clarification of how exactly the theory of society makes sense of empirical data. Surely, the theory of society is not simply an extrapolation of many local findings of special sociologies to one or several macro-trends. If such trends can be found (let's say: a trend across many areas of social life of substituting physical violence with disciplinary techniques), this is, of course, an important finding for the theory of society. But such macro-trends are rare, and the dynamics of social life are seldom adequately captured by proclaiming linear developments. Instead, most theories of society function as *frameworks* that account for diverse – even contrary – developments, while providing boundary assumptions about what is considered possible, given the society's basic structure.

This *framing function* of theories of society can be thought of as a combination of *building* and *placement*. First, it is important to notice that the theory of society can work just like any social ontology – it can construct an interpretation of the empirical phenomenon out of basic social relations, e.g., by interpreting something as a Bourdieusian field or a Parsonian system. However, the theory of society is not only a theory of a certain phenomenon, but also the theory of its context. This allows understanding the phenomenon by *placing* it in society, establishing relations to other societal structures. If I understand an elementary school social-ontologically, I understand it 'from within' or 'from the ground up' – e.g., by seeing it as an ensemble of formally framed interactions embedded within an organizational context. But, from the angle of a theory of society, it is also possible to see the elementary school as something that can be understood 'from without', by interpreting its relations to the rest of society. This could mean to see the elementary school as merely the first stage in legitimizing the reproduction of stratification through the education system (Bourdieu et al. 1996; Meyer 1977), or that elementary schools are necessary because families can no longer provide adequate socialization in complex modern society (Bales and Parsons 1956). Both represent different ways of placing the elementary school in its societal context. Placement requires looking at the empirical case from its margins and

making sense of it by relating it to other structures. Placement can put things into perspective by removing the natural presupposition that phenomena exist by virtue of their own, particular reasons. Durkheim's famous study on suicide is revelatory precisely because it does not understand suicide 'from within', as a personal tragedy with unique causes, but 'from without', as a social regularity that can be understood by placing it in the context of different societal structures and degrees of normative integration (Durkheim 2002).

The first question a theorist of society asks when confronted with a new phenomenon is not "What kind of thing is it?" but rather, "How is it related to the rest of modern society?" In terms of conceptual logic, we can see that the theory of society has a different grip on phenomena than social ontological concepts. While social ontology is always presupposed to say what kinds of things we assume to exist, and in what kinds of relations they *can* stand or typically stand (classificatory categories and inferential rules), a placement-explanation perspective explains something through the *actual* relations it has in a given society. These relations are contingent; they depend on the actual constitution of society and other empirically existing objects that form the context of a phenomenon. This also means that the societal function of the same phenomenon can be different in different societies: widespread distrust in the authorities can be a precondition for enlightened thought *and* for the spreading of conspiracy theories. While social ontological theorizing classifies phenomena and interprets them 'from within', using properties of the ontological category, the theory of society interprets objects 'from without' by relating them to other objects. Weber combines both logics in his famous study on the Protestant ethic. He reconstructs Calvinism and other Protestant sects from within (on the level of religious doctrine), only to then *place* the social consequences of believing in Calvinism in a relation that establishes a completely different (non-religious) societal significance: Calvinism's role in establishing a capitalist economy (Weber 1988). Calvinism is interpreted in terms of its enabling function for (early) capitalism.

The logic of placement makes the theory of society sensitive not only to the 'horizontal' relation of phenomena to social structures (the 'where' of the phenomenon), but also to the 'vertical' relation of structures to past societal formations (the 'when'). Most empirical phenomena interpreted by a theory of society change historically. This implies an interest in the historical origin and the social conditions of phenomena. In many cases, the characterization of changes will take the form of "formation stories" (Hirschman and Reed 2014) about the coming-into-being of phenomena and their place in society. Hirschman and Reed call this "historical ontology" (2014, p. 259). According to the conceptual logic of historical ontology, the historicity of social formations is not an additional feature that could be explored or left out, but a dimension of social formations that is analytically inseparable from their meaning (cf. Pacewicz 2022, p. 938) – we understand some social phenomena *only* by understanding how they came into being. The placement-interpretation that relates a phenomenon with its 'horizontal' (social space) and 'vertical' (time) societal context is, in most theories of society, not straightforwardly causal. Some of the contextual interpretation will be functional (a hypothesis about the function of the phenomenon for other structures, see Robert K. Merton 1968; Kurt Rachlitz et al. 2024), some will be historical explanations of the origin of a phenomenon (Abend 2020), some will be assumptions about the 'degrees of freedom' a phenomenon ought to have given its societal context. In most cases, a theory of society may not be able to predict which effects are likely to result from structural changes, but it can be helpful in dismissing unrealistic options and thereby guiding expectations in a certain direction. For example, it is easy to see from the standpoint of any decent theory of society that most conspiracy theories are likely to be untrue, because they overestimate the degree to which a small number of people could control a complex society. Another example of a 'negative' role of the theory of society in excluding unlikely options would be Jürgen Habermas' theory of the differentiation of the lifeworld. It is an excellent

explication of all the reasons why substantial consensus on most, if not all, political questions in society is highly unlikely (Habermas 1985b).³

Systematizing function of theory of society and comparisons

Among the most useful functions of a theory of society for the study of empirical phenomena is its ability to assess the *relative importance of phenomena*. It allows comparisons between structures that serve similar purposes, or that operate on a similar level of abstraction. This makes comparisons, e.g., between fields or systems, or between different types of legitimation of domination, the natural playing field of theories of society (Weller 2017). Assumptions about relations between structures can guide research into directions that seem counterintuitive from the standpoint of common sense. Why even bother to compare people's socioeconomic status with their answers to the question, "Can a photo of tree bark be beautiful"? This becomes plausible only if a theory of society describes latent mechanisms of the unequal reproduction of power through taste (Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, it becomes interesting to compare practices of salespeople, diplomats, and real estate agents when a theory of society (or a general theory of organizations) posits that all organizations need to manage their relations to different environments and frequently bundle these tasks in special roles (Kieserling and Weißmann 2023). A theory of society finds correspondences between superficially different cases and manages the level of generality of any sociological explanation that deals with these phenomena.

This capacity of theories of society to theoretically coordinate comparisons and to generalize explanations is also helpful for integrating empirical findings from different origins. Ideally, a theory of society ought to make empirical findings from different special sociologies relatable to each other systematically – thereby also making the societal relevance of these findings explicit. While it is usually impossible to deduce specific hypotheses about a sociology of economics, of religion, of changing family structures, or of suicide from a theory of society, the framing function of the theory ought to make it plausible to understand many findings of special sociologies as *specifications* of the basic assumptions of the theory of society – that is: as something that adds detail to an abstract characterization without being incompatible with its fundamental assumptions (it is about congruence and compatibility, not about logical stringency).⁴ If a theory of society does this well, it can work like an usher, assigning places not only to phenomena, but also to the problems of special social science subdisciplines. One of the added benefits for researchers who have internalized the logic of a theory of society is that it also serves as a mnemotechnical device – it's always helpful to know 'where' things are to keep them in mind, even if this function may have partly lost its relevance in the age of Google.

Historicity of theoretical categories and self-placement

Theories of society sensitize to the historicity and the social positionality of all knowledge, including their own. As the explanatory logic of theories of society is one of *placement*, it is a natural tendency of theories of society to, at some point or another, seek their own place in society. This implies taking society seriously as the empirical *a priori* of any theory. To put it somewhat paradoxically: before the theory starts, it has already begun. It is a part of society, partakes in certain traditions, and thereby depends on all the epistemic, institutional, media, and communicative conditions that made it possible in the first place. This has pushed some theories of society to understand their own ontology historically,

³ It is one of the tragic misunderstandings of his theory that he is, again and again, attacked for allegedly claiming the opposite.

⁴ According to Habermas, "[c]oherence is the sole criterion of considered choice at the level on which mutually fitting theories stand to one another in relations of supplementing and reciprocally presupposing, for it is only the individual propositions derivable from theories that are true or false" (1985b pp. 399–400f.).

in terms of their formation or the genealogy of their ideas. For Habermas, Bourdieu, and especially Luhmann, this is a central theme of their theory development. Habermas uses the history of ideas to locate and develop his thought. This self-reflection is mostly 'vertical' regarding the theory's place in time. It presents itself as a continuation of the philosophical discourse of modernity (Habermas 1985a). Luhmann thinks mostly 'horizontally' about the 're-entry' of systems theory into its own description, that is: its own place in society. Systems theory locates itself as a research program in "sociology as a subsystem of the subsystem science" (Luhmann 2013, p. 335), thereby assigning itself a modest place in one of the many function systems of modern society. Bourdieu likewise locates his research program in the field of academia (Bourdieu 1990, 1998, 2004) and reflects on the social conditions of his personal development in terms of his theory (Bourdieu 2008a, 2008b).

These theoretical self-reflections should not be seen merely as an aesthetic exercise or a philosophical ornament. It is a way of taking positionality seriously. What kinds of claims can be brought forward from the place in society from which the theory speaks? Theoretical self-placement can fulfill the function of epistemological self-reflection (as in the cases of Luhmann and Bourdieu). Like all self-reflection, self-placement orients its subject by clarifying its situatedness; its place in a specific context. This *ex-post epistemology* is a tool for reflecting on theoretical choices synchronically and diachronically. It helps to critically examine the origins and social conditions of one's own research interests, problem statements, and theoretical affinities. The guiding question is a genealogical one: Why does this society, and this scientific discipline within it, consider certain problem statements, theories, and methods as indispensable, while others are treated as outdated or 'unscientific'? And frequently, this type of reflection uncovers reasons for seeing things entirely differently (see, for example, the critical history of the social conditions of positivism in Habermas 1968).

However, even if this self-referential reflection is an important tool for clarifying a theory's status toward its object and thereby for consolidating a theoretical perspective, it is not central for its theoretical function for the discipline. The general purpose of theories of society is to guide and interpret empirical research by placing social structures and processes in a societal context. Theories that get lost in self-reflection may be justly criticized by empirical sociologists for turning their backs on the actual needs of the discipline.

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