

RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL  
THEORY, HISTORY  
AND PRACTICE

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY  
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# RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL THEORY, HISTORY AND PRACTICE

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In addition, I welcome the new Commissioning Editor, Kimberley Chadwick, whose tenure began in January of this year, along with her Editorial Assistant, Charlotte Hales, as well as Emma Stevenson, Associate Commissioning Editor since summer 2015. I am looking forward to a period of productive collaboration with *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*'s Emerald team, to further strengthen and solidify the series' place in the landscape of social theory as an outlet that continues to enable authors to publish excellent, innovative, and important work. This is especially so, as the need for the kinds of analytical and interpretive frames and tools that social theorists labor to develop, refine, and provide to a public concerned with the challenges of the present age appears to keep intensifying rapidly.



# INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last three decades or so, developments in social theory have been accompanied and influenced by persistent efforts at *deconstruction*, in a multiplicity of ways. Strictly speaking, deconstruction was introduced as a mode of analysis by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, to delineate the need to illuminate the relationship between text and meaning (Derrida, 1973, 1976, 1978). It was not until the 1980s, however – after the 1970s’ “discovery” of French theory, especially poststructuralist and post-modernist approaches – that deconstruction spread and revolutionized the humanities disciplines, particularly in the United States; less so and at a slower pace, the social sciences (see Cusset, 2008). Influenced by Derrida’s writings on deconstruction, even if only by acknowledging their existence and the increasing attention being paid to them, social and political theorists, social philosophers and critics working in different traditions of social and critical theory – such as neo-Marxist critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial studies, queer theory, science studies, and other approaches – expanded the use and application of *deconstruction*. In social and critical theory, deconstruction thus began to play a role in efforts to illuminate the entwinement between social structures, institutions, practices, processes, on the one hand, and political and cultural traditions and interpretations of modern societies, on the other (e.g., Agger, 1993, 2013; Calhoun, 1995).

In one way or another, all these traditions and approaches have in common a critical stance with regard to western modernity, and more or less explicitly with the darker side of modernity (e.g., Alexander, 2013; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002 [1947]; Mignolo, 2011). In particular, such efforts have been directed at identifying the latent as well as manifest ideological aspects and precepts of both historical and meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]). Social and critical theorists have made explicit and scrutinized assumptions about the purported inherent superiority of modern western societies over other forms of social organization and forms of collective life (Allen, 2016; Bhambra, 2007, 2014; Jalata & Dahms, 2015). Such efforts also have identified and criticized the social, political, and cultural costs that must be squared with the benefits, desirability, and

inevitability of capitalist enterprise and market processes (Larsen, Nilges, & Robinson, 2014; Reichelt, 2001, 2008). Finally, they have questioned the single-minded fixation on liberal democracy as the best, or singular, legitimate form of political organization and institutional context for making just laws and for defining rights (Jappe, 2014; Kurz, 2012). In addition, theories pursuing and influenced by deconstructive agendas have revealed and highlighted the class, race, and gender biases at work in the construction and maintenance of social, political, and economic structures, institutions and processes. As a consequence, since the 1980s, social theories that have been oriented normatively, diagnostically, or analytically, increasingly have recognized, explicated, and integrated viewpoints and/or standpoints into the canon, purview and outlook of social thought that previously had been excluded. The central, overriding concern within traditions influenced by deconstruction may well be “critique,” in the sense of critical epistemology, literary criticism, and normative political and social critique (Kilminster, 2013).

By contrast, the thrust and impetus of mainstream approaches in sociology and philosophy never ceased to be inspired and guided by positive agendas of construction and *reconstruction*. In their efforts to technically refine theories and analyses of delimited scope, mainstream sociologists and philosophers often neglected, ignored, or dismissed hermeneutically and critically-oriented scholarship. For instance, there is a long tradition of rejecting references to the concept of “totality” or to social “totalities” on the basis that they are intangible and “unknowable,” with critics of qualities of modern social life that *totality* refers to in turn running the risk of being criticized as illogical, “unfalsifiable,” and elitist. Further, controversial discussions over deconstruction in the social sciences were and continue to be in perpetual danger of being drawn into the wider “culture wars” in the context of which humanities disciplines were being charged with contributing to the demise of Western culture at the hands of postmodernist academics bent on studying themselves (esp. Bloom, 1987). At the same time, Marxist critics challenged the ideological role deconstruction and related approaches played within “late capitalist” modernity (esp. Harvey, 1991; Jameson, 1991).

Deconstruction has informed, deepened, and refined our understanding of the role of discourse, difference, and expertise in determining and sustaining relations of power and inequality, and amplified our ability to recognize related patterns, especially inasmuch as they are problematic and fraught with myriad kinds of social costs, from the individual to the national level, and even comprising the global level. At the same time, there appears to be

a baffling disjuncture between the high level scrutiny applied in academic discourse to ever more subtle forms of injustice and discrimination, and the intensifying resistance in the social and political world to confronting related issues and phenomena. On the one hand, the understanding and analyses in academia of forms of marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, and deprivation are becoming ever more sophisticated, focused, and sensitive to the pathologies hidden in everyday practices and large-scale transformations.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, efforts to translate such understanding into the social world appears to incite growing segments of populations in many modern societies to intensify their resistance to continue practices of respect and recognition of difference represented by less powerful segments of those populations, from minorities to women. This mounting resistance not only appears to be directly detrimental to the goals of those who try to transpose and apply growing sensitivity and awareness to social, political, and cultural life, but to the pursuit of other forms of qualitative social change as well, for example, with regard to rising economic inequality as described by Thomas Piketty, and strategies to slow or combat climate change. This despite what appeared to have been levels of economic justice, tolerance, and progress reached years or decades ago that many assumed could be taken for granted, expanded further, and solidified.

This growing tension between theoretical refinement and sensitivity and the conspicuous empirical erosion (if not active rejection by growing segments of the population in various countries) of corresponding standards for how to interact with, treat, and relate to “others,” presents both theorists and practitioners with a major problem. Evidently, greater refinement “in theory” does not necessarily or directly translate, “in practice,” into greater willingness among growing numbers of people, for example, in Europe or the United States, to recognize and treat respectfully those not considered as equals or as part of “mainstream” society. It may not be coincidental, then, that at the current historical juncture, reconstruction is taking on a different, additional meaning.

Is it possible that deconstruction has gone as far as the present constellation of social structure, power politics, and neoliberal economics is capable of taking it? Would further deconstruction necessitate the vision and construction of a different kind of society, a different kind of modernity? Are we reaching a point where pushing for further deconstruction of the interpretations and ideologies that have been sustaining the stability of societies, including especially modern societies, along with greater sensitivity across different groups of people, could threaten the achievements that

have been made in recent decades, in terms of social justice, political participation, and economic opportunities? Are there limits to the deconstruction project, and have these limits been reached? What are the possibilities for the “reconstruction” of narratives of long-term historical change? Is it possible to include and integrate the insights and contribution of various critiques of knowledge, while at the same time developing new forms of knowledge? Can, or *must*, we submit the project of deconstruction itself to deconstruction?

Essential to such a project of “deconstructing deconstruction” would be a return to history – acknowledging its continuing importance as a social-theoretical category and frame, considering its persistent utility after decades of sobering realizations about the nature of social, political, and cultural life, and the entwinement of the latter with capitalist processes and forms of organization. Such an acknowledgment would entail acceptance of the fact that, according to various accounts, history neither has stopped, nor reached its end, although it may be at the cusp of going into reverse, at least in some regards (Fukuyama, 1992; Ghitis, 2016; Taylor, 2016). How would social science disciplines – for example, economics – benefit from new understandings of long-term change? What might a new philosophy of history, subsequent to so many “turns,” look like? What are the possibilities for practice in addressing social justice, with and without long-term historical consciousness?

In this volume, different kinds of tension between social and critical theory, on the one hand, and sociological and analytical approaches, on the other, as well as the well-established practice of social diagnosis that is located between both, are on display. Most of the papers compiled in this volume are based on papers that were submitted for and/or presented at the annual conference of the International Social Theory Consortium at Cambridge University, UK, on June 17–19, 2015. The title of this volume is identical with the theme of the conference. The essays that were based on conference papers are book-ended here by papers written independently of the conference, but closely related to its theme. The papers in this volume are organized into three parts addressing projects of reconstruction in social theory, in history, and in practice. In addition, the final paper is an essay on a recently published book on one of those turns alluded to earlier – the postmodern turn.

The first part, on reconstruction in history, begins with a paper by John Levi Martin, two-time recipient of the American Sociological Association’s Theory Section’s book award, on the origins of the triad of “the True, the

Good, and the Beautiful,” before it became one of the underpinnings of social-theoretical development in Europe. As it turns out, this triad early on began to play a key role in the rise of Neo-Platonism, alongside an emerging interest in analyzing “taste.” Relating to the latter, “the Beautiful” became associated with “the True” and “the Good,” in a manner that became linked with the notion that tripartition applied to the soul. In terms of social theory, the link between patterns at work in the triad and the soul prepared the later interest in values. In the second paper, Hegelian philosopher Andrew Buchwalter provides an assessment of Honneth’s (2014) work on Hegel’s theory of normative reconstruction. Comparing Honneth’s approach to Hegel’s reconstructive project in terms of methodology, the underlying logic of the *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel, 1952 [1821]) and analyses of modern market societies as delineated in Hegel’s rendering of civil society reveals that Honneth’s normative reconstruction reworks modes of social rationality that are embodied in modern institutions, whereas reconstruction according to Hegel conceives of social rationality as engendered in the process of reconstruction itself. Compared to Honneth, Hegel’s approach to normative reconstruction thus turns out to be on more solid ground in both regards – reconstructively and normatively. The third paper, by philosopher Raymond Aaron Younis, is dedicated to providing a deeper and clearer understanding of the dichotomy between *aporia* and *euporia*, by showing how Derrida’s and other deconstructive readings, for example, with reference to Plato and Aristotle, are in need of rigorous scrutiny. In the process, it becomes apparent that we need to reconstruct our perspective on aporetic and euporetic thinking if we are to recognize it more clearly in its classical manifestations and contexts.

The second part, on reconstruction in social theory, first presents a paper by Simon Susen on Erving Goffman’s work. (Susen will make a second appearance later in this volume, as it were, as the final paper is a review essay of his recent book on the postmodern turn.) In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971 [1959]), Goffman provided an account of the formation of social selves and a conception of personhood whose underpinnings and socio-ontological implications have been unduly neglected. His approach is widely regarded as an eclectic narrative that drew on different sociological traditions, which did attain the level of universal validity. Supporters as well as detractors of his work were inclined to agree that his numerous studies examining interaction between self and society did not amount to be a foundational framework for inquiry. Yet, Goffman did in fact present a rather systematic account of human

personhood that added up to an outline of a general theory of the human self. Stan J. Knapp's paper starts out from an examination of Weber's social theory as a basis for understanding suffering in modernity and an attempt to demonstrate that Levinas and Weber pursued numerous complementary concerns. Yet, both theorists differed in how they judged the status of ethical encounters with suffering and in their suggestions for how to confront the ongoing presence of suffering in human life and modern society. Following Levinas, Knapp advocates the need for reconstructing social theory in the interest of promoting knowledge as serving to enhance responsiveness to the persistent presence of suffering. An adequate appreciation of suffering as a problem for social theorists will be conducive to reaffirming both the need for a dynamic dialogue among competing viewpoints regarding the link between life and suffering, and the prospect of reconstructing the practice of social theory itself. In the paper by Justin Cruickshank, Habermas addresses and endeavors to solve the liberal problem of religion, regarding the putative opacity of religious arguments and the possibility of conflict stemming from marginalization or dogmatism. Habermas insisted that for religious citizens to be able to influence democratic legislation, their arguments must be "translated" into "generally accessible language." Presumably, incorporating religious citizens into politics will increase solidarity and thwart the dominance of instrumental rationality. By contrast, Rowan Williams provided a basis for conceptualizing religion so as to acknowledge the finitude of being, in order to encourage individuals to transcend the "imaginative bereavement" of objectifying and dehumanizing others as means. From this perspective, Habermas turns out to reinforce the prevalence of instrumental rationality, with religion being employed as a means rather than being understood on its own terms. Moreover, according to Gadamer's work, secular citizens are capable of recognizing their finitude, due to their embeddedness in traditions, and thus of engaging in dialogue with religious citizens speaking as religious citizens.

The papers of part three address issues relating to reconstruction and practice, again from a sociological perspective. E. Stina Lyon contends that theoretical reconstruction for the sake of practical political relevance is inherently resistant to theorizing a rigorous sociological discipline. Yet, especially during times of social and economic crisis, such theoretical reconstruction recurs when social reconstruction of damaged, fractured, and conflict-ridden societies was perceived to be urgently needed by applied sociologists and the general public. Toward this end, Lyon

examines the intellectual and political origins of the Swedish, egalitarian, democratic welfare-state ideology in the 1930s, and its theoretical definition in opposition to the dichotomy between “conservative” capitalism and “progressive” Marxist socialism. The “third” or “middle way” compromise between opposing interests has evolved over time and will continue to do so, for the sake of progress. Finally, how was the concept of social planning as a “third way” practical strategy employed by both neo-liberal and Marxist theorists as a means to attack “third way” democracy? In the other paper, William Outhwaite takes a step towards delineating the political philosophy of a united Europe. Toward this end, he examines how the ways in which Habermas’ model of reconstruction has been applied, by him and others, to the European Union, especially with regard to the development of EU law and European democracy. As it turns out, a metatheory of social science has the potential of illuminating and pertaining to political and constitutional legitimacy. Habermas’ model is conducive to discerning how the double character of EU citizenship, allowing citizenship both in the Union and in one of its member states, facilitates a creative tension between these two levels of governance.

The last paper of the volume is a review essay by sociologist and philosopher of science, Lawrence Hazelrigg, who also, once again, fulfilled the role of associate editor in exemplary fashion, not merely by providing a careful review of Simon Susen’s book, *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences* (2015), but also by reviewing most of the manuscripts submitted and providing helpful advice regarding the framing of this volume and organization of the papers, and by encouraging submission and inclusion of the lead essay.

Harry F. Dahms  
Eric R. Lybeck  
*Editors*

## NOTE

1. See, for example, the proliferation of social movements in recent years that have been dedicated, more or less explicitly, to the extirpation of controversial works, discussions, and themes from curricula in institutions of higher learning; for example, Novotny, Pham, and Schmidt (2016).

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