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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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SOCIETY IN FLUX: TWO CENTURIES OF SOCIAL THEORY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

In an essay published as the “programmatic introduction” (Dahms, 2008; also Dandaneau, 2009) to volume 25 of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* – the first volume published under my editorship – I contended that critical theory distinctively fills a key position and fulfills an important role in the wider field of social theory. Both the position and role of critical theory are related to the need to acknowledge and examine the *gravity concrete sociohistorical circumstances exert on social research*, as well as on theoretical projects and traditions in the social sciences. Absent such acknowledgment and focused examination, both social research and social theories are imminently in danger of reinforcing and perpetuating especially the problematic aspects and developments at work in modern societies in general, and in specific modern societies in particular, emphasizing aspects where the conflict between prevailing norms and values and material circumstances is most pronounced. Although much has been written about how education and educational institutions have been penetrated and altered due to corporate and political influence (including the trend for universities and colleges to be run like corporations), 13 years later, not much has changed, as far as critical reflexivity with regard to this gravity is concerned. Modern societies in general have been undergoing many major changes, and are continuing to do so, possibly at an accelerating rate, and at higher levels of intensity. Nevertheless, many social scientists and theorists continue to endeavor to illuminate what appears to be a growing number of phenomena in – and dimensions of – modern social life in the 21st century, often with ever more sophisticated tools and techniques, but without also making the effort to contemplate how both interest in particular phenomena and dimensions, and the tools employed to study them, may be influenced or shaped by the specific changes that have been occurring in politics, culture, economy, and society, and how research interests and tools may be prone to replicating and reproducing – and even amplifying – certain patterns and characteristics that ought to be illuminated rigorously. By implication, the concepts, methods, and frames relied upon may be in danger of concealing rather than revealing and drawing attention to those changes, without social scientists and theorists being fully (or sufficiently) cognizant of this fact. Among many changes that have been occurring since 2008, the spread and deepening of *neoliberalism* as an ideology, a generic mindset, and an organizational principle, have played a central role. Neoliberalism also has been the subject of extensive and focused attention, and indeed does have the potential of serving as a suitable lens to highlight the need to scrutinize the impact a changing world is having on our knowledge and understanding of this world, and how we are increasingly responsible for how this world is changing.

The first essay of this volume revisits the programmatic introduction of 2008, considers neoliberalism as both a very useful frame and a lens through which to discern how the underlying logic of modern societies manifests itself today, while recognizing that this frame and lens at the same time may be a symptom rather than a cause of this logic. The purpose of the essay is to pose the question of how social theorists should respond to the proliferating crises we are facing today and in the foreseeable future. What is the burden we must recognize and be willing to take on? To address this, I will employ as a foil – but not develop or discuss in detail – three concepts put forth by the classical critical theorists of the early Frankfurt School: *racket*, *authoritarian personality*, and *administered world*. Their purpose is to identify an important link between the last two centuries that saw the emergence and spread of modern societies, effectively transforming the face of our planet and threatening its future, and the *heteronomous* forces that have propelled and sustained these transformations, as they are pointing toward the possible termination of life on Earth – what is I am referring to as the prospect of *vitacide*.

The chapters in this volume are dedicated to three types of social theory: critical theory, classical theory, and systems theory.

The first chapter in Part I, by John Levi Martin, who has published in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* before (see vols. 32, 35), is entitled “Critical Theory, the Imagination, and the Critique of Judgment: Horkheimer’s Vision Reconsidered.” A key feature of Critical Theory was the commitment to keeping alive the idea of alternatives to the existing cognitive order, partly in response to the contingent (and irrational) order of mature capitalism. As one of the first-generation critical theorists, Herbert Marcuse attributed to the Imagination the power to destroy the illusion of absent alternatives to existent reality, in the process developing an aesthetic social theory and a social theory of aesthetics. Yet, Max Horkheimer, the founder of critical theory, harbored suspicions as far as the Imagination was concerned, since it appeared to him to be a reproductive, rather than productive faculty – thus strengthening the power of existing reality over us. Martin contends that aspects of Horkheimer’s interpretation of the role of the Imagination related back to his early writings on Kant’s Third Critique, while he studied with Gestalt psychologist Hans Cornelius, in effect suggesting that the link between Horkheimer’s early Gestalt-influenced thinking and his later work may be stronger than has been recognized, and pointing toward possible directions for a post-Freudian critical theory.

The second chapter in Part I, by Alexander Stoner, addresses a different issue relating to critical theory. The title of this chapter is “Marx, Critical Theory, and the Treadmill of Production of Value: Why Environmental Sociology Needs a Critique of Capital,” and it is concerned with the tendency in Marxist-oriented environmental sociology and treadmill of production (ToP) theory to domesticate Marx’s critique of political economy. Stoner’s goal is to clarify the theoretical resources that may be available for a rigorous critique of capital-induced planetary degradation. With regard to the conceptualization of capital and value, ToP theory is deficient for reasons that have to do with the need to reconsider key aspects of Marx’s critical theory of modern capitalist society. The chapter

demonstrates the continued relevance of Marx's critical theory for understanding the political-economic, social, and ideational dimensions of planetary degradation. The critical-theory approach advocated conceptualizes the acceleration of environmental degradation following World War II in terms of a ToP of value, with the value form continuously being established in the present – while ToP theory critically examines the production of wealth by counterposing finitude and limits against the expansionary tendencies of economic growth. Marxian critical theory is conducive to scrutinizing the growth of environmentalism and the concomitant spread of neoliberalism.

Part II on classical theories includes chapters on an early twentieth-century sociologist and two founders of the discipline. In “Emil Lederer's Theory of the New Middle Class: Historical and Current Relevance of a Key Sociological Concept,” Sandro Segre formulates a theory of the so-called New Middle Class (*Neuer Mittelstand*), drawing from the writings of this German sociologist. The chapter first situates contributions by other fellow German sociologists to this field of studies, to then contextualize Lederer's theory in connection to contemporary formulations in stratification theory, including those of Giddens, Parkin, Murphy, Goldthorpe, and Wright, in the process revealing both continuities and fundamental differences in theoretical formulations. Based on Lederer's work, Segre proposes an alternative theory of the *Neuer Mittelstand* in the form of a set of mutually consistent statements. This theory confirms Lederer's position by emphasizing the New Middle Class's expectations and requests of social honor as a status group. Moreover, its inner heterogeneity is a cause of its social and political weakness. Yet, the absence or scarcity of ownership of the means of production might carry more weight than insufficient social status for those members of the *Neuer Mittelstand* who aspire to social recognition and power.

The second paper in this part is by Tobias Schlechtriemen, entitled, “Figuring the Beginning: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer as Founding Figures of Sociology.” Critically reconstructing how Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer conceived of sociology as a new scientific discipline in the nineteenth century, the purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate how their founding ideas for sociology were creative responses to the challenge of inaugurating a new science. The resulting alternative perspective on two “founding fathers” provides a new strategy for reconceiving of sociology today. Schlechtriemen takes into account the theorists' self-descriptions and self-presentations as founders of sociology, considering also autobiographical texts. The resulting conceptual tension between the sociological subject matter, society as an ordered object, and the self-descriptions of the authors as exceptional scientists demonstrates how important the figurative elements are in this analysis. The result is a deeper understanding of the foundations of sociology. Figurative aspects can be found especially in the theorists' self-descriptions, and their textual and diagrammatical articulations can be understood as “founding figures” on which the idea of a figurative sociology is based.

Part III focuses on a more recent theorist whose legacy is still unfolding, potentially at an accelerating rate, even though he passed away more than two decades ago. The first chapter in this part is by Anthony J. Knowles, entitled, “Sociology as Social System: Luhmann, Enlightenment, and the Gap between

'Facts' and 'Norms,'" and is a critical analysis of how sociology presents itself as a vehicle for sociological "enlightenment." Recognizing that the roots of sociology as a science in the name of promoting social justice date back to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Luhmann's critiques of sociology and science are deployed to demonstrate how his systems approach exposes what is missing in sociology's current self-description and its "enlightenment" mission. The communication techniques and technologies of sociology, such as classes, conferences, and publications, engage in communication with and "irritate" other social systems. Knowles asks whether these tools enable sociologists to communicate sociological knowledge in ways that align with the humanistic goals the discipline sociology is pursuing, and concludes that sociologists might overcome an undeniable communicative inefficacy regarding its ambitious goals by taking seriously Luhmannian insights regarding communication and considering alternative forms of communication to reach new audiences.

The title of the second chapter in the third part, by Santiago Calise, is "Give Me an Operation and I Will Give You a System: The Psychic in Luhmann's Theory." The chapter explores, analyzes, and compares different solutions to a range of problems Luhmann identified over the course of his career, dividing them into two distinct periods. Regarding his pre-autopoietic writings, system/environment as inside/outside the system, and selectivity as the difference between process and system are at stake. During the autopoietic phase, the analysis focuses on operation and selection, medium and form, operation and observation, structural coupling and operational closure, and differentiation. This detailed chronological analysis of Luhmann's interpretation of the psychic element shows how he distinguished the personal aspect (a structural trait) from the operation of the system, presenting the problem of how to unify all the capacities of consciousness under one single operation. Distinguishing clearly between two main hypotheses and their shortcomings, the possibility of differentiation of consciousness is addressed.

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