

Modern Social Theory

An Introduction

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Introduction. What is Social Theory?

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TOPICS DISCUSSED IN THIS INTRODUCTION

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Social theory can be defined as the study of scientific ways of thinking about social life. It encompasses ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity and 'civilization', revolutions and utopias, and numerous other concepts and problems in social life. This Introduction addresses some of the leading questions that arise when we start to think about the very idea of a 'science of society'. We begin by discussing the meaning of the word 'theory' and its various implications for 'method' and 'methodology' in social research. We also consider questions about the relationship of social theory to 'common sense', about the role of 'facts', 'values', and 'objectivity' in social research, and about the relation of sociology to other disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities such as political theory, psychology, anthropology, history, and philosophy.

The meaning of 'theory'

As a term of art, 'social theory' is a distinctly recent invention. No such term exists in English or in any other language before the twentieth century, and even in the twentieth century it is not common before about the 1940s. Auguste Comte coined the term *sociologie* in France in the 1840s, but 'sociology' too did not gain widespread currency as a term until after 1900. However, the two separate words 'social' and 'theory' are very ancient in origin. An initial look at their etymologies will give us some clues to their meaning as a conjoined pair.

Our words 'social' and 'society' derive from the Latin words *socius* and *societas*. For the Romans, a *socius* was a member of a trading partnership. A *socius* was a merchant cooperating with other merchants as a partner, fellow, or 'associate'. A partnership or 'association' between merchants was a *societas*, which is the origin of our modern English word 'company' or 'business firm', as well as our keyword *society*. The commercial meaning of *societas* is directly preserved in other modern European languages such as in the French and Italian *société* and *società* and the German *Gesellschaft*. In this sense we can say that sociology and social theory are concerned with relations of 'sociation' between 'members' or 'partners', including not only business partners but a great many other kinds and processes of 'sociation' and 'socialization' between individuals.

Our modern word 'theory' derives from the ancient Greek word *theōria*. *Theōria* for the Greeks meant 'contemplation'. In the writings of the philosopher Aristotle, *theōria* referred to contemplation of the cosmos. It contrasted with *praxis*, from which our word 'practice' derives. *Praxis* for the Greeks referred to human beings' way of acting and conducting their lives on this earth, in the immediate everyday world. Clearly, this ancient Greek understanding of *theōria* differs from most common uses of the word 'theory' today. The Greek word *theōria* had a different set of connotations from most modern linkages of theory with 'scientific construction'. Today we tend to think of 'a theory' as being a 'scientific construct' or a 'scientific model'. In contrast, *theōria* for the Greeks did not itself mean science. Rather, it meant reflection on science: reflection on the value of science, as one mode of contemplating the cosmos among others—alongside art, myth, religion, and the most general discipline of thinking that the Greeks called 'philosophy', or 'love of wisdom'.

The ancient Greek meaning of *theōria* might not seem particularly relevant to us in the present day. It might seem to reinforce the rather widespread view that theory lacks relevance to daily life. Yet this would be to fail to appreciate the significance of the idea. *Theōria* for the Greeks was an indispensable aid to making sense of their lives in the ordinary world of society, in the world of the 'city' or what they called the *polis*, from which our word 'politics' derives. They believed that people who did not pause to engage in contemplation and reflection had no points of orientation for conducting their lives in practice, in the political world of actions and interactions with other people. Thus *theōria* for the Greeks remained indispensable to everyone who sought wisdom, happiness, and the good life in the realm of *praxis*.

It can be said that a recurrent tendency of modern times has been for theory to be equated with scientific knowledge per se and to lose its original additional connotation of critical reflective questioning about the value and meaning of science—in the context of

politics, in the context of other modes of understanding, and in the context of the finitude and mortality of human life. The neglect of *theōria* in modern times was a particularly important concern for the Jewish-German philosopher Edmund Husserl, founder of the movement of philosophical thought known as *phenomenology*. Writing in the 1930s, Husserl argued that unless the sciences recollected their sources of origination and meaning for everyday life, in the ‘lifeworld’ as he called it, they would be doomed to extinction (Husserl 1936). Either the sciences would become wholly absorbed into the production of technologies of mastery over nature or they would dissolve in a wave of revolt against all rational thinking *tout court*. Unfortunately, the rise of fascism and militarism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s confirmed Husserl’s fears, and the only remaining role for science in European society in this period remained as an instrument in the production of machines of war and persecution.

In a similar spirit, the Jewish-German émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that theory in the modern age comes to be increasingly subordinated to the search for technological control over physical and social life (Arendt 1958). Writing in the 1950s, Arendt suggested that where the original *vita contemplativa* or ‘contemplative life’ of the ancient Greeks had been intimately bound up with what the Greeks saw as the *vita activa* or ‘active life’ of public political participation, the ‘active life’ of the modern age no longer has the sense of practice and deliberation informed by contemplative reflection. Instead, modern consciousness of the world becomes increasingly oriented to control and productivity, where science serves the development of technology and where theory and philosophy serve at most as ‘handmaidens’ to science. In contrast, Arendt wanted to see a world in which theory and philosophy not only assist science but also remind science of its moral and political responsibilities, in the face of the fragility of the earth’s resources and the mortality of human life.

Science and social science

This ancient context of *theōria* suggests clues for ways of thinking about the relationship of social theory to science today. If social theory is the study of ways of thinking about society scientifically, we can also say that it is a way of thinking about how far it is possible to study society scientifically. We can say that social theory is a practice of thinking about what science and ‘being scientific’ mean with respect to the social world.

The word ‘science’ in English has close connections with the natural sciences and is often used synonymously with them. However, the natural sciences are not the only disciplines of human enquiry with a claim to the title of science. In a general sense, to think scientifically is to apply a method or methods to the study of something and to follow these methods consistently and transparently. Usually, it involves an effort to distinguish systematically between things that exist independently of the person observing them—what we call ‘data’ or ‘evidence’—and ideas that are supplied by the person observing them as a way of ordering what he or she observes. Defined in this general sense, it is clear that physics, chemistry, or biology are not the only subjects of enquiry with a claim to the title of being sciences. Other subjects of study, such as history, archaeology, or art criticism, can also be sciences. In

French, the subjects known in English as the 'humanities' are called *les sciences humaines*, while in German the humanities are known as the **Geisteswissenschaften*—'sciences of the mind', or 'sciences of the works of the human mind'.

The particular association between science and natural science in English reflects a series of developments in early modern European history in which a number of precedents were set by the emergence of physics and astronomy in the seventeenth century and the emergence of chemistry and biology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From around the late eighteenth century, a variety of attempts were made to emulate the achievements of these natural sciences with the establishment of disciplines devoted to the study of human social and historical affairs. These included economics, philology and linguistics, history and art history, and notably 'sociology'. For a long time, it was believed that the new disciplines were only sciences if they copied or imitated the methods of the natural sciences. According to Auguste Comte, who is the originator both of our word 'sociology' and of the concept of 'positive science' or **positivism*, only one fundamental principle of science existed, and all particular sciences had to be unified under this principle. This principle was set by the science of physics, which Comte believed to proceed by pure observation, undistorted by any prior conceptions of the observer.

Virtually all social theorists and philosophers reject this nineteenth-century positivist conception of science today. Almost all commentators accept today that human affairs cannot be studied by imitation of the natural sciences, and they also reject Comte's rather simplistic characterization of the natural sciences themselves. Sociology is not a science in the sense in which physics is a science. The 'human sciences'—the humanities and the social sciences—study meanings, values, intentions, beliefs, and ideas realized in human social behaviour and in socially created institutions, events, and symbolic objects such as texts and images. These embodied meanings, values, intentions, beliefs, and ideas are products of contexts of intentional agency by human actors in definite cultural and historical situations. Therefore they cannot be subsumed under general principles of regular cause and effect relations in the way that physical elements are treated by natural scientists, through repeatable experiments. Although natural scientists also, up to a point, deal with symbolic constructs that require 'interpretive skills of various kinds, a scientific way of proceeding in biochemistry remains significantly different from a scientific way of proceeding in a subject such as literary criticism or religious studies.

This question of differences between the human sciences and the natural sciences raises a more general question about the role of what is called 'method' and 'methodology' in social research. It is to this that we now turn.

Method and methodology in social research

To be 'methodical' is to be systematic in the pursuit of something. To apply a 'method' or 'methods' is to use some particular technique or techniques in the pursuit or study of something. In social science we speak of 'qualitative methods', such as a programme of interviews, and of 'quantitative methods', such as the use of statistics. To have a 'methodology' is to follow a rationale that justifies one's selection of these particular methods for a given

topic of study. Methodology thus refers to a theoretical principle or principles governing the application of a set of methods. The '-ology' in 'methodology' refers to a *theory of methodical practice*.

The central issue for any group of researchers who want to think about the methodology of their research project concerns *the relationship between the pieces of evidence or data at their disposal and the theories governing the way in which they apply methods in order to produce and analyse this evidence or data*. Here the word 'theory' is used in its more modern and familiar sense of 'scientific model' or 'scientific construction'. Two very general and basic questions we can ask in this connection are the following. What would research be like if it consisted *only of acts of data collection and no theories*? And conversely, what would research be like if it consisted *only of theories and no data collection*?

Let us look at the second question first. *If research consisted only of theories, it would lack reference to the real world. Researchers would have no reason to go out into the field and interview people or analyse sources. If research consisted only of constructions in the imaginations of researchers, it would be empty of content; and it would be incapable of being validated or tested in any way. Any piece of speculation would have to be deemed as good as another.*

But now let us look at the first question. *If research consisted only of data collection, it would lack all order and sense. If research consisted only of heaps of information, it would be no more than a chaotic bundle of statements, impossible to decipher or evaluate or to apply to any meaningful purpose. It would be useless and pointless.*

We can conclude from this that *theory is impossible without 'empirical observation, and equally that empirical observation is impossible without theory*. To paraphrase a famous statement in the thought of the eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel *Kant, we can say that *theories without data are empty; data without theories are blind* (Kant originally wrote: 'Concepts without perceptions are empty; perceptions without concepts are blind') (Kant 1781: edition B, para. 76).

In reality, it never happens that a researcher's theoretical reflections entirely lack empirical content or that a researcher's empirical observations entirely lack theoretical construction. In every actual instance of research, a researcher's theoretical reflections are guided towards finding out some piece of evidence about an object of experience, and a researcher's observations of this object are always structured by his or her theoretical reflections. *We can say that theories ought not to dictate or dogmatically constrain a researcher's field of observations; but we have to accept that theoretical thinking of some kind always underlies the researcher's observations.*

Theoretical thinking supplies criteria for selections and discriminations of things that deserve investigation, and it is the only way in which researchers can produce ordered accounts and evaluations of their data. Thus theoretical thought is always presupposed in research; there are no observations that are not 'theory-laden'. There is no such thing as pure observation or pure reception of data. *At a most basic level, theoretical thought refers simply to any ordinary person's mental ordering of his or her sense-impressions in everyday life.*

One key implication of this connection between theoretical thought and ordinary everyday thought is that *social theory relates in an important way to what is called common sense*.

Social theory and 'common sense'

Social theory is trained reflection on ways of knowing social life. But it is not only this, and it never begins purely as trained reflection. Social theory arises first and foremost from everyday life from an enormous variety of contexts of conversation, discussion, and interaction between ordinary people. These are the same contexts that lead to the formation of such things as social movements, political parties, trade unions, and organized mass actions such as strikes and revolutions. Social theory emerges from these contexts and is only a more reflective expression of the disputes and agendas that dominate ordinary communication about social and political issues. It is itself a social product with a multitude of everyday contexts of origination.

The Italian Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci once wrote that every ordinary person is, in principle, a theorist. Writing under imprisonment by the Italian fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s, Gramsci wrote that 'everyone is a philosopher' (Gramsci 1926–37: 323). Gramsci meant that social theory is not something reserved for experts. Social theory is, and ought to be, the organic extension of social debates in which every ordinary person has a say and a capacity to contribute—and in the cases where it ceases to be the organic extension of such debates, it loses touch with its roots and is not worthy of its name. Gramsci's remark has its origins in the ideas of the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who exercised a major influence on the early Karl Marx. Hegel held that all philosophy develops progressively out of ordinary everyday consciousness, by a process of reflection on lived experience. A further source of inspiration for Gramsci was the eighteenth-century Italian historical philosopher Giambattista Vico, who argued that all human beings have a capacity for understanding history because human beings *make* history. Vico held that where God made nature, man alone makes history, and that it is man's *making* of history which gives him his power to *understand* history. In this sense we can say that it is our action and participation in the social world that is the source of our ability to gain knowledge of history and social processes.

It can be said that the only important difference between social theory and common sense is that social theory seeks to systematize and clarify debate about goals and problems of social life through well-defined concepts and techniques of analysis. Building on common sense, social theory tries to draw distinctions between different ways of reacting to social life. It tries to distinguish emotional and moral ways of reacting from impartial reactions. It tries to discern reliable observations in contrast to prejudices and stereotypes, and it tries to untangle attitudes of detachment from attitudes of partisanship and vested interest.

In this sense, a thesis in social theory tries to do more than the typical lead article or editorial of a tabloid newspaper. In the tabloid article, information, emotions, moral judgements, and prescriptions for change are very frequently mixed up together. Similarly, a thesis in social theory tries to distinguish itself from a party-political manifesto or a state ideology or a nationalist myth or an interest-group platform. Although its motives of inception are frequently overtly political, social theory differs from political activism in an important sense. While many schools of social theory retain close links to political protest, the activity of theorizing and researching problems such as labour exploitation,

environmental destruction, or sexism or racism remains a different activity from the activity of campaigning for policies to abolish them. The two kinds of activity depend on each other in very real and practical ways; but they remain distinct from each other. Social theory is not activism and cannot be turned into activism; it depends on practice and is guided by practice but is not the same as practice. This is at once its strength and its limitation.

To appreciate these ways in which social theory entails both an attitude of *involvement* in social life and an attitude of *detachment* from social life, we need to turn now to a range of issues bound up with the role of 'facts', 'values,' and 'objectivity' in social science.

'Facts', 'values', and 'objectivity'

On one level, all social science is a search for facts, for 'social facts'. The Latin root of our word 'fact' means 'something made' or 'something done', from *factum*, the participle of the verb *facere*, 'to make'. In addition, our modern sense of the word 'fact' refers to any state of affairs that is *real*, *definite*, and *incontrovertible*.

In these two senses of the word 'fact', it is a *fact* that six million Jews died in the Holocaust; and it is also a *fact* that ten thousand Palestinians died in the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. What is important in these two historical facts is less the exact numerical statistic than the fact that something real, definite, and incontrovertible happened and was made to happen by human agency. The Shoah and the Nakba (the evacuation of Palestine) are not legends, myths, or fantasies; they are facts. They did not happen of their own accord or by the agency of supernatural forces or spirits; they were done and made by real human actors acting in definite social-historical conditions which can be documented, observed, analysed, and interpreted.

However, the problem of facts for social science is that facts only ever appear to us laden with values. The Shoah and the Nakba are significant to us from the standpoint of moral and political values: they stand out to us precisely because they are an affront to human values. They concern us because they are events involving sufferings and crimes which ought not to have occurred. Here the difference between facts and values can be understood as the difference between the world as it *is*, or was, and the world as we *would like it to be*, or not to be. How the world *is* is one thing; how the world *ought* to be, or how it might be made better, is another. One way of responding to the world is 'descriptive': the other way of responding is 'prescriptive'.

But the problem for social science in the real world is that facts cannot be *separated* from values. If we had no values, if we had no interest in value in the world, we would not be interested in any particular facts. We would not be struck by any particular facts as calling out for attention and demanding investigation. Although we are generally able to distinguish statements that claim to 'describe' how the world is from statements that 'prescribe' how the world ought to be, we cannot extract facts from values in any pure way. We cannot put all our values to one side in order to observe the world purely as a set of facts, undistorted by our frames of perception and feeling about what is right and wrong with the

world. Social facts are meaningful to us only insofar they are value-laden, and we only come to be engaged with these facts insofar as we have values about how the world ought to be or ought not to be.

This explains why researching social facts almost always produces a diversity of points of view, which compete and often conflict with one another. Different social parties have different and often conflicting values about how the world should be, and different parties struggle with one another for the most authoritative account of the events and issues of the day. In the case at hand, numerous accounts exist of the causes of the Holocaust, and a broad spectrum of contested views reign about the causes and consequences of the founding of the state of Israel. Social science therefore has to consider a diversity of accounts, which very frequently turn out to be backed up by different sets of reasons worthy of consideration in their own right. In consequence, it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to speak of any one 'right answer' in the study of social affairs.

This raises a profound problem. If all research is possible only from value-laden points of view, how can research be 'objective'? How can there be agreement about the accuracy, validity, or insight of any particular piece of research?

There are ways of answering this question which need not lead us to think that value conflict is fatal for the possibility of validity in research. If facts cannot be separated from values, it does not follow that evidence about social life cannot be collected, analysed, and interpreted in transparent and methodical ways. The events of the Holocaust and the Nakba are both capable of being submitted to transparent techniques of scrutiny—for example: techniques of analysing documents and statistics, interviewing of witnesses, and the like—and although many different accounts of these events still remain, and are still bound to remain, it does not follow that no valid knowledge can be established about them. Furthermore, the impossibility of separating facts from values does not mean that researchers cannot realistically aim to work out procedures by which disagreements can be hammered out and rationally debated. If I am able to show you how I arrive at my position, giving reasons for each step and explaining to you how I believe these reasons to account for the matter under consideration, and if you are able to do the same, we at least have a minimal basis for discussion, which we can develop further through continued critical communication. Value conflict need not therefore entail that any statement by a party to a discussion has to be deemed as good as another, or that no agreement or no mutual critical discussion of any kind is possible. And it certainly does not follow that someone who denies that the Holocaust or the Nakba took place maintains as valid a position as someone who demonstrates that they did, by adducing evidence and methodically examining and explaining this evidence.

Objectivity therefore remains a realistic and rationally desirable goal for research. But it is important to emphasize that objectivity need not be seen as the only or ultimate goal or motive of research. Different schools of social theory take differing views about the purpose and relative importance of objectivity. Some schools view it as an end in itself, while others tend to view it as a means towards other, more practical ends—such as social justice and *emancipation, or liberation from oppression. In general, schools that emphatically subordinate objectivity to the pursuit of moral and political ends of social life are usually described as having a *normative orientation of thought. The word 'normative' here refers to attitudes that give priority to the 'ought' above the 'is', to determining how the world

should be made better, rather than solely to observing how it is. We will encounter many examples of such attitudes in the course of this book. But it should be stressed that numerous midway positions exist between the attitude of normative engagement on the one hand and the attitude of objective detachment on the other hand. All schools of social theory in fact advocate combinations of involvement and detachment, of both practical moral-political dedication and scientific distance. Social theory remains distinct from political activism but it is not a purely disinterested affair of reflection. As the German theorist Norbert Elias (1983) counsels, pure involvement without detachment would be dogmatic and moralistic; but pure detachment without involvement would be pointless and meaningless.

Social theory and other domains of theory

We have now discussed a range of issues with a broad general relevance to all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. These issues are particularly prominent in sociology and social theory but they are not, in principle, ones that *only* social theorists and sociologists are concerned with. The remaining sections of this Introduction will therefore try to provide some further characterization of the specific subject matters that social theorists and sociologists are concerned with. We end by looking at three main areas of overlap and difference between social theory and other domains: first, social theory and *political theory*; second, the relation of social theory to *psychology*; and third, the relation of social theory to *humanities disciplines*, such as anthropology, history, literary and art criticism, philosophy, and theology.

Social theory and political theory

Probably the closest cousin of social theory is political theory. Political theory has a long-standing position in the history of Western thought, reaching back to the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, as well as the Roman statesmen, the Christian medieval theologians, and the political philosophers of early modern Europe. Political theory is closely related to the equally long-standing discipline of jurisprudence, defined as the study of the just administration of law in civil affairs, or legal theory. And political theory is also the father of the discipline of economics, or 'political economy' as it was known in the eighteenth century.

Political theory tends to be concerned with questions of a more overtly normative character than those most often addressed in social theory. It is typically concerned with questions such as: which systems of government best sponsor freedom, justice, and equality in social life? Or: when is obedience to a ruling power justified, and when is obedience to a ruling power not justified? In contrast, social theory tends to be more interested in issues about how the kinds of people who ask such questions first come to be constituted as social groups. That is, it is more directly concerned with the social behaviour of such groups and their structures and dynamics of organization.

Some schools of social theory accord a more central place to political questions than others. Hannah Arendt is one writer who held that social thought has genuine value only

when it places political questions at the forefront of its agenda. Arendt emphasized the significance of the ancient Greek view of man as a 'political animal' (Arendt 1958). The philosopher Aristotle wrote: 'Man is by nature a political animal' (Aristotle, *The Politics*, c.335 BC, para. 1253a1–3). Arendt's writings demonstrate the continuing importance of the idea in Greek thought that human beings are not fully human unless and until they take part in the life of the *polis*, in the political space. ~~People who are excluded from the political space by privation of civil rights are prevented from realizing their human capacities, and by the same token, people who voluntarily exempt themselves from the political space by taking no interest in politics diminish their own human qualities of existence, at their peril.~~ (And we may also note the ancient Greek word for a private-minded citizen who takes no interest in public political affairs was *idiotes*—the origin of our modern word 'idiot'.) This insight remains a vital consideration for social theory, despite a general academic division of labour between the two domains. Social theory is nothing if it is not relevant to politics.

Social theory and psychology

A second discipline closely related to social theory is psychology. The history of social thought shows many examples of close cooperation between psychology and sociology. In addition, the sub-discipline of psychoanalysis founded by Sigmund Freud has been a pervasive source of influences in all the humanities and social sciences, as is discussed in Chapter 8 of this book.

But we must note some important differences between sociology and psychology. Psychology is mostly concerned with the emotional and affective behaviour of individuals, treated as physiologically conditioned actors who respond to sensory stimuli from an environment. ~~In contrast, social theorists and sociologists are mostly concerned with the structure of material and symbolic relations between individuals, treated as members of collective groups in definite cultural and historical contexts.~~ Although an important sub-discipline of psychology is 'social psychology', concerned with individual behaviour in social situations, psychology is generally less well equipped to deal with collectivities of actors and with the meaningful self-definitions of these collectivities in specific cultures. A further key difference in this connection is that unlike sociology, psychology retains close links with the natural sciences. ~~Up to a point, psychologists are capable of testing their hypotheses through repeatable experiments. This is not possible in sociology, except in a very limited way.~~

One of the strongest impulses of the French sociological thinker Émile Durkheim was to demonstrate that ~~society consists of a region of reality in its own right—a *sui generis* reality,~~ as he called it—which could not be explained entirely by the methods of psychology (Durkheim 1895). In his famous study of suicide, Durkheim (1897) sought to show that the reasons for people taking their lives could not be referred purely to psychological states in individual persons, such as a person's feelings of depression or despair. Psychological states necessarily depend on sociological factors, to do with the extent to which social collectivities provide resources of 'integration for their constituent members. Durkheim's vision of sociology is discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this book.

Social theory and the humanities

We have already mentioned several general commonalities between social theory and humanities disciplines. It is now worth looking at some more specific areas of interaction. A first important area is *anthropology*.

Anthropology means literally the 'study of man'. As a discipline today, anthropology usually encompasses the study of human cultures and societies variously described as 'primitive', 'tribal', 'agrarian', or 'non-Western' in origin. These adjectives are notoriously difficult to apply, not least because very few cultures still exist today that are not affected in some way by developed socio-economic forms, typically originating from the West. Nevertheless, the distinctive concern of anthropologists is usually with societies showing more or less direct forms of interaction with a natural environment or ecology, based on elementary practices of cultivation of natural resources. Social theorists and sociologists share these interests, but they mostly concern themselves with the social structures of more technologically developed urban societies, with more complex political and economic infrastructures. They are generally less concerned with relatively isolated agrarian communities. Later chapters of this book discuss links between social theory and anthropology in relation to *functionalist theory and its critics (Chapter 4), in relation to sociological *ethnography (Chapter 5), and in relation to French *structuralist theory (Chapter 9).

Interactions between *history* and social theory have always been central to sociology and were particularly important for classical social thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max *Weber. The key areas of difference and cooperation between history and sociology are discussed at length in this book in Chapter 6.

Interaction between social theory and the *arts* and *cultural criticism* has also been very prominent in modern Western intellectual culture. In recent decades, renewed investigation of the meanings of 'high culture' and 'popular culture' in the context of consumer practices and new media technologies has led to a flourishing of academic subdivisions such as cultural studies, film studies, and media and communications studies. Many of the informing theories of these studies are discussed in this book under the chapters for *Western Marxism (Chapter 7), *structuralism and *post-structuralism (Chapter 9), feminist social theory (Chapter 11), and *postmodernism and its critics (Chapters 12 and 13). For a detailed overview of debates about art and aesthetics in social theory, see Harrington (2004).

Another key conversation partner in social theory is *philosophy*. We have seen that social theorists share with philosophers a basic interest in critical thinking about the way things appear to be with the world. They share the same spirit of 'reflective wondering' that the Greek philosophers held to be the origin of all *theōria*. Reflection on the meanings of our lives as historical, social, and political beings is as important to social theorists as it has always been to philosophers. But social theory differs from the traditional central domains of philosophy, such as logic, *metaphysics, and *epistemology. Social theorists are more concerned with the contributions of empirical social research to our understanding of human ways of thinking, sensing, and behaving. They are not as centrally concerned as philosophers with the logical status and coherence of concepts, arguments, and belief systems.

Lastly, we should note some differences between social theory and *theology*. Theology is the study of the principles of belief in God. Sociologists certainly share with theologians an

interest in religion in society. But sociologists are not centrally concerned with the internal propositions of religious belief systems or with the ways in which religious beliefs express contexts of scripture and sacred writing. Mostly they are concerned with the ways in which religious beliefs interact with social and political institutions and powers. Consequently, social theorists and sociologists are not as well equipped as theologians to deal with questions of the meaning of ideas of the absolute or transcendental or infinite in human experience. The question of whether God exists, or of how God exists, or of why evil exists, or why the universe exists, are not questions that can be adequately framed or pursued (let alone answered!) from the standpoint of social-scientific enquiry alone.

Conclusion

We have seen that social theory is the study of ways of thinking about society scientifically. Further, we have also seen that it is the discipline of thinking about how far it is possible for society to be studied scientifically. Social theory is at once a source of explanatory concepts in social science and a source of ways of evaluating the point or use or meaning of such concepts. To theorize about social life is not only to develop scientific models of observable social processes, it is also to think critically about the conditions of possibility of scientific constructs. If all social analysis were purely theoretical, it would be merely speculative. But if all social analysis were purely empirical, it would be forgetful of its relationship to questions of meaning and practical purpose in human social life. In the most basic and ancient of senses, we can say that theory is reflection on the place and function of science in human existence.

■ QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 In what sense is there, or can there be, a 'science of society'?
- 2 How much does social science hold in common with natural science?
- 3 Are there any acts of social research that can be carried out without the aid of theories or theorizing?
- 4 If all facts relevant to social research are value-laden, what does it mean for social research to seek to be objective? Can there be any social research that does not seek to be objective?
- 5 How important are objectivity and detachment in relation to practical values of liberation and emancipation in social knowledge and social life?