

*Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and
Beyond* by Patrick Baert and Filipe
Carreira da Silva

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Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond is an updated edition that includes—the ‘Beyond’ of the title—recent work on globalization and twenty-first century modernity.

In the introduction, Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva make a particular point of highlighting their agenda for the book. They suggest that many teachers and thinkers of social theory make one of four ‘fallacies’. The first, that of ‘explanatory reductionism’, expects theories to explain the social world. ‘Perspectivism’ is the second, in which theorists see differences between theories as simply effects of viewpoint rather than quality (2010, p8). The third, ‘externalism’ (2010, p8), evaluates theories on their success in achieving aims they did not set out to achieve, whilst the fourth, the ‘political’ fallacy, criticizes theories for effects on the socio-political world (2010, p10). Baert and da Silva attempt to avoid these fallacies. ‘Underlying this book’, they write, ‘is the pragmatist assumption that

knowledge can be connected to a variety of objectives, explanation being only one such objective' (2010, p9). They believe that theories can be judged qualitatively without resorting to perspectivism, and that theories should be criticized for their 'internal consistency' (2010, p10). In attacking the fourth fallacy, they call for the separation of the intellectual merits of a particular theory and its effects on the world.

This agenda is the subtext of the book. If it is firstly aimed as an introduction to twenty and twenty-first century social theory for undergraduates and early postgraduates, its second aim is to critique and re-think the way social theory is thought, distributed and taught. As well as providing a starting point for students of social theory, it aims to intervene in a debate about the importance of social theory and its dissemination to the academic and wider communities. This is echoed in the book's conclusion, in which the authors look at the role of social theory in the twenty-first century and call for the 'fruitfulness of an ongoing dialogue between American neo-pragmatism and continental philosophy' as part of a continued 'engagement with otherness' (2010, p304).

At the beginning of the introduction, Baert and da Silva set out their vision of social theory: it must be abstract, general and systematic. They distinguish between 'the abstract nature of social theory and the practical orientations of empirical sociology', suggesting that 'the main purpose of social theorists is obviously to theorize' rather than follow a strictly empirical methodology. They define generality as theories that aim to engage with different

temporal periods and societies, whilst systematic theories are those that distinguish themselves from 'mere opinions and beliefs' by being intellectually rigorous and coherent (2010, p1).

They also make the case for the study of twentieth century social theory as a separate—or at least markedly different—set of theorizations and preoccupations to that of the nineteenth. The reasons for this are again threefold: the rise of social theory as an academic field separate from empirical sociology, its professionalization, and its de-politicization. In addition, social theory of the late twentieth-century is markedly different from more recent formulations. The early twenty-first century sees an 'empirical turn', which they identify as abandoning certain efforts at universality in favour of a focus on more specific characteristics of recent modernity, a 'normative turn' in which theorists tackle more 'moral and political topics' such as 'justice, equality and democracy' (2010, p4), and a focus on globalization.

The introduction, in setting out in this way both the book's agenda and its *raison d'être*, anticipates the style of the individual chapters themselves. The majority are collected around a particular viewpoint or group of theorists (structuralism, functionalism and neo-functionalism, rational choice theory, structuration theory, Foucault's post-structuralist approach, Habermas and Honneth), whilst the remaining deal with specific issues. They begin by setting out clearly and succinctly the major points of a particular theorist or school's theoretical project, placing it in context with both contemporary and historical debates and highlighting notable aspects

of style or approach. They then show the main problems of that theory, from both their point of view and that of the wider theoretical community.

The newest chapter, titled “A Brave New World” asks just 'how distinctive is our age?' Baert and da Silva seem confident in asserting the marked differences between the early twenty-first century and the late twentieth. The new world order after the fall of Communism, terrorism and global warming 'seem to come together to announce a new era' (2010, p248). The chapter engages with work by Manuel Castells, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Saskia Sassen and Richard Sennett, evaluating their most popular works as well as the most recent, clearly laying out their key theories and connecting them to each other as well as their specific contexts. In so-doing, they are able to draw parallels between the network society of Castells and the risk society of Beck and link them to Bauman's concept of liquid modernity and Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* in the global city that is the focus of Sassen's work. It is an active, engaging approach that enables students to engage with both the particular emphases of individual theorists and how their work relates to that of others.

Baert and da Silva lay out very clearly a history of social theory, and how that history is being re-thought, updated and canonised by contemporary theories. In their new chapter, they link theories of the global city, globalization and modernity with their contemporary and historical contexts. As such it is a well-marshalled and accessible introduction to the subject. One caveat would be—and

the authors themselves implicitly acknowledge this by placing their agenda so obviously in the introduction—that this book presents a particular viewpoint on historical and contemporary social theory, and its agenda certainly influences their readings of the theorists covered. While this in no way compromises the validity of their readings or the clarity and usefulness of the book, it is a point to remember.

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