LATE MODERNITY IN CRISIS

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Why We Need a Theory of Society

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Introduction

We first met in early 1997, at a doctoral seminar held by the German Academic Scholarship Foundation in a monastery in Münsterland. One of us (Hartmut Rosa) was finishing his dissertation on Charles Taylor, while the other (Andreas Reckwitz) was just beginning his doctoral research on cultural theories. At the seminar, there were lively discussions about the cultural turn and the importance of social constructivism to the social sciences and humanities. It was the 1990s. In Germany, the wall between East and West had fallen (a great deal of dogmatism had fallen away along with it), and such questions were typical of the time. This seminar also marked the beginning of a conversation between us – a conversation about academic, professional, and personal matters – that has not stopped since.

After we had received professorships in the mid-2000s and pursued various avenues in our books and research projects – on the topics of acceleration, resonance, and controllability for one of us, and on the topics of the subject, creativity, and singularization for the other – our life trajectories often went their separate ways, but they continued to cross as well. An example of this is the 2016 Congress of the German Sociological Association, which took place in Bamberg. There, one of us (Hartmut Rosa) gave a presentation about his book on "resonance," while the other (Andreas Reckwitz) served as the respondent to this paper. It was after this conference that we first devised the idea of writing a book together, in order to juxtapose and create a conversation between our quite different – yet in many ways related – theoretical perspectives on modern society and on what sociology can and should do.

Our idea remained latent for a long time. Inspired by recently enflamed and lively debates within and beyond the discipline of sociology concerning the question of how sociology should be practiced, what it can and cannot accomplish, what need there

is for a theory of society, and what society might expect from such a theory, we ultimately decided to take on the task. The final impetus behind this decision came from the insight that we share a common motivation that would make such a book meaningful and perhaps even seem necessary: the motivation of emphasizing that the task of formulating a theory of society (and thus also a theory of modernity) should be the central objective of sociology. This conviction has characterized the work of both of us since the 2000s.

Such an understanding of the discipline is far from obvious when one examines the present landscape of the social sciences in Germany and abroad – indeed, it faces resistance from many fronts. There is, instead, a curious discrepancy within this intellectual sphere. On the one hand, there is a clear and growing public interest in comprehensive theories of contemporary society (and of human society and history as a whole); among sociologists, on the other hand, there is a conspicuous lack of desire (and perhaps courage) to produce such theories of society. In other words, while the "demand" for a theory of society has been growing, the corresponding "supply" – expected from the international discipline of sociology – seems to be diminishing.

Regardless of what the field of sociology has been willing to supply, public interest in such a theory – in comprehensive analyses and interpretations of contemporary society, but also in the long-term transformation of human society from its beginning and into the future – has, if anything, been intensifying during the second decade of the twenty-first century. This is true not only in Germany and in other so-called "Western" societies (in Europe and North America especially), but also beyond: in China, India, Brazil, and in the Arabic-speaking world as well. This is perhaps surprising. After all, as long ago as 1979, Jean-François Lyotard famously argued in his book *The Postmodern Condition* that we had reached the end of the "grand narratives" of modernity and modernization.[1] According to Lyotard, the grand theories about social development that had characterized classical modernity had lost credibility, and what was needed instead were "minor narratives" and specific analyses – limited in time, space, and subject matter. Lyotard's critique of the legacy imposed by the philosophy of history and its (from today's perspective) naïve and one-sided stories of progress was certainly justifiable, but his prognosis that overarching theoretical interpretations were superfluous was ultimately false. As we have learned in the meantime, such large-scale interpretations are precisely what we need.

In the two decades between 1985 and 2005, social scientists could have complained with good reason about the public's waning

interest in social analyses, but at least since 2008 there has been a noticeable revitalization of public interest in the big picture. "What sort of society are we really living in?" "In what direction is society headed?" These are the sorts of questions that are (once again) being asked. The public discussion is no longer satisfied with small-scale empirical analyses of special issues, and it is certainly no longer content with "minor narratives." What has crystalized instead is a sense of curiosity and a rather urgent desire for comprehensive analyses of the social condition. Over the past few years, and each in our own way, both of us have experienced this at first hand. Our own attempts at producing a theory of society have each received surprisingly widespread attention, not only within but also outside of the academic sphere: in the media, in politics, in business, in the worlds of art and culture, in ecclesiastical and social organizations, and not least among university students. Moreover, we have received numerous reactions from people highly interested in society and politics, from sympathetic and critical private readers alike, whose thirst for knowledge and impressive powers of observation make any member of the academic establishment who sneers at the alleged simple-mindedness of so-called "laypeople" seem conceited.

This increased interest in theory and in the "big picture" – in a theory that goes beyond the heterogeneous threads of everyday experience and presents a scientifically supported, meaningful whole – has identifiable causes. The most important of these is certainly the fact that, over the last ten years, the accumulation of social crises has jolted Western societies into reflecting critically about themselves. The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 raised awareness about the structural features of post-industrial capitalism and its social consequences, not least among them the intensification of social inequality. Insight into the threatening consequences of climate change has attracted massive attention to ecological questions about the history of the relationship between humankind and the natural environment, and about what characterizes the Anthropocene epoch. That the geology of the earth itself can be altered by human activity has, for many people, led to a profound sense of ontological uncertainty. Finally, the international rise of right-wing populism has sparked a broad discussion about its structural causes and about the winners and losers in modernization. In general, whereas the 1990s seemed to have brought the world to the "end of history" – to the threshold of a *posthistoire* in which there were apparently no alternatives to the Western model of stable free-market democracies – and to have ushered forth a promising new era of globalization, digitalization, and the knowledge society, the horizon of progress seems to have shrunk rather rapidly since

then. On the geopolitical level, in fact, the "Western model" is in retreat. All these moments of crisis are linked to new social and political movements, ranging from Attac and Fridays for Future to the French *gilets jaunes*, Black Lives Matter, and indigenous movements. The self-reflection that all these crises have induced, however, remains at least implicitly reliant on a theory of society, or on other large-scale models of social development: How can the phenomena under discussion be classified, how can they be explained, and what consequences should be expected from them? What alternatives are conceivable, and which of these would be desirable?

The second reason for this intensified public interest in comprehensive syntheses is obviously related to the fact that the public itself has changed. There are many indications that this change is a reaction to the explosion of information and opinion outlets brought about by digitalization over the last decade. In the world of digital media, information about social issues and critical commentary on these issues follow each other endlessly, to an extent that is now beyond our capacity to absorb. An unmanageable amount of heterogeneous and fragmented bits and pieces of information and opinion is churned out in an endless stream: political events, social statistics, human-interest journalism, interviews, scandals, personal commentaries. At the same time, the Internet is an affective medium that can effortlessly link information to states of emotion – not least to negative emotions such as indignation or hate – or, conversely, provides the information – the necessary "fuel" – for every new outrage. In light of this mixture of ever new, atomized information and short-lived emotions, however, the need to comprehend the overarching contexts of social and historical developments becomes all the more urgent. Sufficiently large numbers of citizens are weary of mere snippets of information and wish to understand broader social contexts in an academically grounded, empirically informed, and theoretically sophisticated manner. This process of social self-understanding thus requires holistic, integrated formats of analysis and explanation; these formats are expected, desired, and demanded by the intellectual milieu. However, if sociology, despite its potential and competency in this very field, refuses to supply these desiderata, it shouldn't be surprised when other "providers" step in to fill the gap.

There has been no shortage of such interpretations, and they have been well received internationally. Prominent in the field of history, for instance, are the books by Yuval Harari, who has written no less than a total history of the human species from prehistoric times to the present and has drawn political conclusions on the basis of this

panorama.[2] Noteworthy, too, are proponents of Big History such as David Christian, who has attempted to integrate natural history and cultural history.[3] The field of economics has recently produced several incisive and comprehensive syntheses of social developments, and these works have found an international audience. This is true, for instance, of Thomas Piketty's books about the transformation of the economy, the state, and the distribution of wealth; of Branko Milanović's work on global inequality; and of Shoshana Zuboff's work on the consequences of digitalization.[4] In addition, there have been successful works of more general nonfiction – albeit firmly supported by scholarly research – that provide synthetic overviews and have been discussed intensively by the public. Such books include Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger*, which explains today's global culture of resentment, and Maja Göpel's *Unsere Welt neu denken*, in which the author reflects on the political consequences of climate change.[5]

And sociology? Here we encounter the aforementioned discrepancy. As desirable as interdisciplinarity may be, and with all due respect to the explanatory powers of other disciplines, the whole point of sociology is to work on the "big picture" of a theory of society and to provide a comprehensive theory of modernity. Since its beginnings as a scientific discipline, the project of sociology has been to reconstruct the structural features and structural dynamics of modernity – or even of societal models in general – and thus to investigate the context of economic, technological, cultural, political, and social change. The disciplinary project of sociology therefore also, in a sense, consists in analyzing the crises of any given present; it is a crisis science. The theoretical and empirical foundation of sociology, which is constantly being renewed and enriched by other disciplines, is indeed lavishly endowed. We are convinced that sociology has the empirical, conceptual, and theoretical means to function as a systematic science *of* society in its totality.

Although sociology seems to be in a very good position to produce a theory of society, the discipline is nowadays oddly reluctant to fulfill this task. This is true in particular at the international level, where English-language sociology continues to be dominant. At sociology departments in the United States and Great Britain, the willingness to produce a theory of society and to formulate theories of modernity or late modernity has, in our opinion, noticeably declined over the past two decades. This is rather remarkable, because things used to be otherwise. As recently as the 1990s, social scientists from the Anglophone sphere published an abundance of influential and much-discussed contributions to the theory of society, and these studies resonated deeply in the international

discussion. One only need think of Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and Ambivalence*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Scott Lash and John Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space*, Anthony Giddens's *The Consequences of Modernity*, or Manuel Castells's magnificent trilogy *The Information Age*.[6]

What explains this unwillingness among sociologists to formulate a theory of society? The first and most important reason is certainly the push toward more and more empirical specialization in the social sciences. This trend has been reinforced by the expectations of a competitive scientific world in terms of quantifiable research findings, publications in peer-reviewed journals, and the acquisition of third-party funding. The radical differentiation of sociology into a bunch of hyphenated subfields, each with its own qualitative and quantitative data and studies, has undoubtedly led to more productivity, but it has also meant that there is now less room for work on broader theoretical syntheses within the institutionalized field of sociology. Any ambition to work across these hyphenated subfields, to subject their findings to theoretical analysis, and to unify them has thus been restricted on an institutional level. Moreover, within a system oriented toward rewarding empirical research – a system governed by the "new public management" of universities – it has become increasingly unattractive to write books (which are still the preferred format for theory). According to this system, a whole book often "counts" no more (if not less) than a single article published in a top-tier journal, which is now the gold standard of empirical research. An ambitious project such as that proposed by Niklas Luhmann in the late 1960s at Bielefeld – "Topic: the theory of society; Duration: 30 years; Costs: none" – would seem highly anomalous in today's academic environment.

A second cause of the rather weak status of the theory of society within contemporary sociology lies in the effects of the aforementioned postmodern critique of science that has been widespread, especially in the Anglophone sphere, since the 2000s. In its current iteration, this critique can be summarized as follows: In light of the interpretive and selective nature of science, and in light of the heterogeneity and plurality of discursively produced realities, doesn't every holistic theoretical claim, every effort to comprehend "the whole" seem futile – or, even worse, necessarily one-sided and biased? Is it even possible to write about modernity or late modernity as *singular* concepts? This way of thinking has considerably discouraged and restricted theoretical work, even though, upon closer inspection, it is unconvincing. In the end, all scientific research – from a single case study of certain statistical correlations to an entire theory of society – is selective, regardless of whether it deals with "minor" or

"major" phenomena. While it is undoubtedly true that scientific self-reflection is a good thing – this is one of the important conclusions of the postmodern critique of science – it would be unproductive to abstain from working on comprehensive theories for this reason alone. Nowadays, the fact that any effort to present an overview of society's formations as a whole immediately provokes considerable – and apparently a priori – opposition from so many different camps, each of which is quick to point out the theorist's inevitable "gaps" and "blind spots," seems to deter many social scientists from engaging in theory at all. In Anglo-Saxon sociology, the confluence of empirical specialization (modeled after the natural sciences), postmodern fragmentation, and the "new public management" of universities has brought us to this point. With respect to theory, the implications are clear: it is under pressure and in danger of disappearing entirely.

Because today's historical and cultural situation has generated so much demand for social theory, at least some sociologists – given the aforementioned fragmentation of their discipline – ought to stand up and take on the challenge. Because the Anglo-Saxon social sciences still set the pace on the international level, the impediments discussed above have affected the entire European continent, the German-speaking world included. It is no coincidence, however, that this book has been written by two German sociologists, for it is also true, in general, that social theory tends to be pursued more vigorously here than in the United States or Great Britain, for example. There are reasons for this as well. In Germany, from a historical perspective alone, there has long been a stronger connection between sociology and social philosophy (particularly in the theories of the Frankfurt School). Because of this, the question of social context has remained an important issue in German sociology. In addition, there is also the tradition here of understanding sociology in terms of lifestyle patterns and their historical transformations. This tradition goes back to Max Weber and Georg Simmel, and it encourages sociologists to view "the whole" from the perspective of cultural theory. Beyond this, one can also point to the approach of systems theory, which is still viable, and to the theory of modernity associated with it (as developed by Niklas Luhmann). Finally, there is the fact that the German-speaking world is more welcoming to public intellectualism than the Anglophone world. Here, public intellectuals – sociologists among them – are respected and given a voice, not only in the media but also in the broader realms of politics, culture, and even business, which helps to explain why it is somewhat easier here to develop systematic theories of (late) modernity than is the case in the international mainstream.[7]

Were this not the case, this book would probably not exist in its present form.

All national differences aside, it remains the case that, within modern sociology as a whole, social theory does not occupy a secure position. Instead, such a position has to be fought for. The present book seeks to respond to this situation by asking "What is achieved by a theory of society?" In doing so, it seeks to explore the *conceptual means* with which a theory of society can operate in order to accomplish what is expected of it. It is no surprise that, despite the many commonalities between us, we ultimately reach very different conclusions in our respective answers to this question. In order to examine the possibilities, difficulties, and limits of working on a theory of society from our different perspectives in a systematic way – and in a way that facilitates comparison between our views – we have each composed our opening text so as to present our approaches in a step-by-step manner: First, we present our views on what is meant by "theory" and how social theory (*Sozialtheorie*) and the theory of society (*Gesellschaftstheorie*) differ from one another. Next, we develop our specific perspectives on modernity in general and on late modernity in particular. Finally, we each discuss the implications of the relationship between a theory of society and its object, and why this relationship should be of a critical nature. It is our common belief that the theory of society should ultimately serve to diagnose the crises of the present. We each consider late modernity to be in a state of crisis, and we are convinced that determining the manifestations, causes, and consequences of this crisis is the central goal that a modern theory of society can and should achieve. We have endeavored to do so in this book.

The condensed presentations of our two perspectives form the bulk of the text, but they are also the starting point for the final section of the book, which contains an intensive conversation about our approaches. This conversation, which took place in March of 2021 at the Suhrkamp Verlag in Berlin, was moderated by Martin Bauer, to whom we owe considerable thanks for taking on this task (which was far from simple) and for presiding over the event with such aplomb. Even though theoretical work remains dependent on the medium of writing, orality is still the best medium for speaking not *about* one another, but *to* one another in a constructive interaction. Even theory cannot do without face-to-face encounters if it is to be debated and remain resonant. For it is only in this form that it is set in motion and brought to life, that it loses its abstract rigidity and begins to take on color and create sparks.

Andreas Reckwitz and Hartmut Rosa

Part I

Andreas Reckwitz

The Theory of Society as a Tool

1
Doing Theory

Theory is itself a practice or, to be more precise, it is an ensemble of practices. One would have to conduct a detailed sociology of the social sciences to gain a full picture of all the practices that are used in what we call "doing theory." Practices of reflecting on and trying out concepts, collecting and juxtaposing empirical material, excerpting, assembling card indexes and databanks, discussing ideas, visualizing arguments, and, not least, writing and composing texts – whether by hand or with a computer – are all important in this regard. Relevant too when doing theory is the struggle between orthodoxies and heterodoxies that takes place in the field of social science. The personal experiences of theoreticians, moreover, influence their questions and basic intuitions, while current political debates, historical sensibilities, and contemporary cultural problems are also reflected in theoretical work. Theory inevitably develops within a social context. The word *theoria* – literally the "observation" of reality from a distance – suggests that this activity takes place from a neutral standpoint, or that it is the expression or result of "pure thinking." In fact, however, theory is a thoroughly practical and interpretive affair – in a sense, it is a cultural technique for producing a generalized understanding of the world. The productive practices of theory, for their part, are tied to variable practices of reception: to working through theories as part of one's academic socialization, reading for the sake of furthering one's education, reading freely out of a desire to understand the world or effect political change, or reading with the aim of bringing about a subjective transformation, after which "one is no longer the person one used to be."

From antiquity, it was philosophy that first provided an institutional home to the practice of theory in Europe. With the gradual differentiation of the modern sciences, however, interest in theory has moved into specialized academic disciplines, the social sciences included. Because the latter, like all modern disciplines, regard

themselves as sciences of reality that derive their propositions from real-life experiences, this raises the question of the precise place of theory in relation to empiricism. In order to understand the specific value of theory for sociology, however, that which is subsumed in Germany under the category of "sociological theory" must be distinguished from what is called "social theory" in the English-speaking world. Within social theory, in turn, there is a central distinction between social theory and the theory of society.[1] Essentially, sociology as a science of reality focuses primarily – in terms of everyday research – on what Robert K. Merton called "middle-range theories," that is, on sociological theories. Within the framework of sociology's internal division of labor, these theories pertain to specialized questions and individual social phenomena, and they rely on a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. In general, it can be said that such theories demand the immediate empirical validation of their descriptions and explanations; at the same time, and as the name implies, the range or scope of their statements is limited.

By comparison with the numerous middle-range sociological theories, social theory operates on a more abstract level. Here we are dealing with theory in the stricter sense, and this is true of both of its branches. Both social theory and the theory of society provide the general and fundamental vocabulary for answering two elementary questions. Social theory asks: "What is the social?" and "From which perspectives can it be analyzed?" The theory of society asks: "What are the structural features of society and particularly of modern societies?" and "What are the concepts with which these societies can be investigated?" To answer its questions, social theory has developed basic concepts such as action and communication, norms and roles, power and institutions, the order of knowledge, practice and discourse. Max Weber's *Basic Concepts in Sociology* and Émile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* are classic works that seek to establish the vocabulary of social theory; more recent books of this sort include Niklas Luhmann's *Social Systems*, Anthony Giddens's *The Constitution of Society*, and Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*. The theory of society, in contrast, formulates basic assumptions about overall societal structures, phenomena, and mechanisms as they have unfolded in the course of history. It is interested above all in the structures of modernity, which it examines via theories of capitalism, functional differentiation, individualization, or aestheticization (for example). Karl Marx's *Capital* and Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* are two classic examples of books that present such approaches to the theory of society, while more recent examples include

Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* and Manuel Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society*.

The twin contexts of the question of sociality, on the one hand, and the nature of modern society, on the other, were constitutive of the emergence of sociology in the nineteenth century. They guided the authors of the founding generation – Marx, Weber, Simmel, Durkheim – who are still influential today. Despite the gradual fragmentation of the discipline, these problems also remain significant to sociology in the twenty-first century – and, from my perspective, they *should* remain foundational, given that they provide the framework that holds together sociology's numerous and multifarious empirical analyses. Without social theory, sociology would lose itself in the extreme specialization of its undoubtedly necessary detailed studies. The tools of social theory and the theory of society maintain a reference point to the totality of the social or to society in its entirety – a reference to the whole, to the big picture traditionally cultivated by philosophy. At the same time, social theory and the theory of society provide the cultural and political public sphere with comprehensive and incisive interpretations that lead society toward self-enlightenment.

In this chapter, I intend to explain more precisely what social theory and the theory of society mean, what distinguishes them from one another, and to whom they are directed. In doing so, I will emphasize my understanding of theory as a tool. In my second chapter, I will outline the particular version of social theory that I use as a toolkit for analyzing society: the theory of social practices. The third chapter will work through the three dimensions of modernity that are central according to my perspective on the theory of society: the dialectic between opening and closing contingency; the rivalry between a social logic of the general and a social logic of the particular, and between rationalization and culturalization of the social; and, finally, a paradoxical temporal structure characterized by a regime of novelty, a dynamic of loss, and a hybridization of time. In light of these categories, I will explain, in my fourth chapter, a model of historical transformation and how it pertains to modernity: from bourgeois modernity through industrial or organized modernity up to late modernity. Here, the causes of the specific crises of present-day late modernity will also be made clear. In the fifth chapter, I will elaborate the ways in which, in my view, theory should pursue a critical orientation, without becoming "critical theory" in the narrower sense. The project in question could be called "critical analytics." Finally, in a coda, I pose the question of how one can best work with theories, and I argue in favor of engaging with them in an experimental manner.

1.1 Social Theory

First, it is important to clarify that both social theory and the theory of society combine two functions, each of which addresses different audiences. On the one hand, they are oriented toward empirical research in the social sciences, which they process and to which they provide impulses; on the other hand, they circulate as comprehensive theories within the intellectual sphere and are thus addressed to the sciences as a whole and to the non-academic public.

I would like to demonstrate this first of all in the case of social theory. The latter poses elementary questions about the form of the social – that is, it asks about the concepts with which the social can be understood. Here, "the social" designates a collective level – a level beyond individuals, their individual action, and their particular interests. This assumption is the basic outlook of the sociological way of thinking. But what, exactly, are the elementary features of the social world? Sociology has never been able to agree on a single theory of the social; instead, it has developed a plurality of different perspectives on sociality. This is understandable, because a pluralistic (scientific) culture, which modernity has tended to produce, offers space for the development of various vocabularies for theorizing the social. In their understandings of the social, these theoretical languages can be culturalist or materialist, holistic or individualistic, structuralist or process-oriented, and they can revolve around various guiding concepts (action, interaction, communication, practices, structure, etc.).

In this way, social theories develop basic conceptual frameworks, and these essentially have the status of a heuristic that guides the empirical analyses of sociology. They also provide a basic conceptual orientation for the empirical research practices of other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, for instance history and cultural anthropology. Like so-called "sensitizing concepts," social theories point the way toward the phenomena and connections that empirical research ought to investigate – toward practices, communication, power dynamics, discourses, artifact structures, *dispositifs*, social systems, and so on. In the sense of a heuristic, they assume the role of a search-and-discover technique for empiricism. Without any social-theoretical perspective of this sort, empirical analysis would remain blind or would be based on unsophisticated assumptions about everyday life.[2] This also means, however, that a good social theory will have to meet certain standards of quality: it must provide the tools with which empirical researchers can analyze a variety of different phenomena from a rich perspective.

In addition to its heuristic function for empirical research, however, social theory also has its own autonomous significance – namely, that of social ontology. On this level, it acquires, as it were, its own "reflective value," which is independent of empirical research; it is the locus for reflecting about the social world in a fundamental way. Social theory thus provides the human sciences with an elementary vocabulary for understanding the human world as a sociocultural world by formulating a social ontology of action, culture, language, affectivity, materiality, structures, and processes. With respect to this task, it is engaged in an intensive exchange with philosophy, which, for its part, has also promised since its beginnings to develop a social ontology of the human world. Moreover, there are also close connections between the social theory of sociology and the social-theoretical considerations of other disciplines, such as the cultural theories formulated in the fields of cultural anthropology and media studies. In general, social theory – as a site for contemplating the sociocultural world – is thus an interdisciplinary undertaking of the human sciences, and it is only seldom constrained by disciplinary boundaries.[3]

As an ontology of the sociocultural world, social theory earns its independent reflective value not only from the inner sanctum of academia but also from the broader, non-academic public sphere. Secularized modernity, in which religion and theology have lost their monopoly on interpretation, is confronted with the challenge – chronically underdetermined and controversial as it is – of enlightening the *conditio humana*. Although philosophy has traditionally risen to this task, social theorists from John Dewey to Bruno Latour, from Helmuth Plessner to Jürgen Habermas, have also made fundamental contributions to this endeavor of self-enlightenment. In this regard, social theory competes especially with the natural-scientific approaches of the life sciences – evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, neurophysiology, etc. – to offer non-academic readers a basic vocabulary with which to understand themselves.

1.2 The Theory of Society as a Core Task of Sociology

In the social sciences, however, "theory" means not only social theory; it also means the theory of society. What distinguishes the two? The short answer to this is: the universality or historicity of their object. Admittedly, social theory often (though not always) conceptually reaches the macro-dimension of the social, the level of institutions, classes, orders of knowledge, or society as a whole. It can thus make claims about society, though in doing so it largely