

Staying With the Trouble of Social Theory

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Are we dealing with a crisis?

By ‘theory’ we usually mean a speculative abstract construction or a reasonable interpretation and explanation of facts and events. A theory is first of all a ‘gaze’ – a particular way of looking at something – related to the capacity to theorize. Etymologically, the Greek notion of *θεωρία* is an act of contemplation, of seeing and knowing, and it is closely related to the notion of *thauma* (*θαύμα*), astonishment, anxiety, and concern about what is seen and known. In Greek thought, the ability to theorize arises not only from wonder and amazement, but also from apprehension and fear due to the need to understand experience. It stems from the restlessness that induces people to find reasons, in the awareness that what is already known is not enough. Thus, theorizing is an essential necessity of knowledge: that is, the necessity to search for and to make sense of the incontrovertible against the solace of the *doxa* (Severino, 2016).

With modernity and secularism, this necessity has become evident for social knowledge as well, and it is at the core of the research by the classical and contemporary founding fathers and mothers of social thought (Seidman, 2013). By ‘social theory’ is meant the constellation of analytical frameworks used as a grid to interpret social phenomena characterized not only by internal differences of perspective but also by the alternation of core themes. A social theory can have a more analytical and speculative setting, with a more explicit ethical or critical stance, or it can be a range of explanatory approaches and heuristic devices with which to interpret empirical data. The notion of ‘theory’ is used to refer to paradigms developed by individual scholars, as well as to refer to a wider ensemble of perspectives accumulated by a single issue, for example, gender, race, technoscience, or Anthropocene. While theories associated with a scholar can have mixed fortunes in the internationalized and specialized academic debate, theories associated with a theme can have greater or lesser socio-political visibility, federating different and even conflictual perspectives, and they may sometimes have a high degree of interdisciplinarity encompassing philosophical, anthropological, political, historical or technoscientific approaches.

Indeed, a social theory is always closely intertwined with the socio-historical context in which it has been developed, as well as with its cultural orientations. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the complexity and connectivity characterizing current globalization have boosted the cross-fertilization of different social theories developed in the last century. This merger of theoretical frames arising from different cultural and philosophical traditions can be fostered by single scholars or by areas of discussion, such as feminism and gender, or ecology and environmental crisis. As a result, the toolbox of social theory expands to include a mix and a variety of languages and concepts fostering the ability to understand complex phenomena in the different situations in which they occur and are analysed, but also fostering a certain fragmentation of the discipline.

This situation has been frequently described as a crisis of social theory, in terms of the dissolution of schools of thought and of their political influence on public debate and social life, rather than as a historical transformation of the way in which theorizing is conducted. Arguably, this is more evident in the discussion about the role of Marxian thought in social sciences, at least after the Frankfurt School (Giddens, 1979, 1981; Kellner, 1990); but it is also related to an alleged crisis of social theory as a creative means to analyse social change, because of the separation of sociological discourse with political and ethical concerns, and the disconnection of local empirical research with overarching theoretical apparatus (Wardell and Turner, 1986; Hage, 1994; Sica, 1998; Savage and Burrows, 2007; Gane, 2011; Burawoy, 2021).

Such analysis in terms of crisis was originally conducted by Alvin Gouldner half a century ago in his book *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), and even before by Charles Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) which was primarily a cultural critique of the role of social sciences in American society, and an extensive critique of the fetishization of grand theories in methodological and epistemological terms. At that time, in the USA, social theory mainly referred to the work of Talcott Parsons and to the fading hegemony of functionalism, but also to the abstract empiricism of Paul Lazarsfeld. Critical observers like Wright Mills and Gouldner considered the sociology of knowledge to be the core element of social theory. Especially the analysis of Wright Mills on the academization of the discipline, or on liberalism as a ‘theory of society’, was attuned with the analysis of the Frankfurt School (Wright Mills, 1963). Similar analyses on the crisis, or even on ‘the end’ of social theory, continued in America in the following years. They were conducted by influential scholars such as Randall Collins, who saw in the end of systematic explanatory theories an inevitable weakening of sociology as a discipline, especially when compared to kindred ones like economics or history (Collins and Waller, 1994).

Paradoxically, the end of grand theories such as the functionalist paradigm paved the way – not only in the USA but also in Europe and in non-Western countries – to a free interpretation of different theoretical references and to reciprocal influence among the most popular scholars. However, this pluralism of

perspectives and focuses of analysis was still implicitly interpreted as a lack of 'true' social theory, and hence as a useless fragmentation and hyper-specialization of the discipline – a sign of the internal 'disagreement over where the emphasis should lie' (Collins and Waller, 1994: 16).

At this juncture, the sensation of collapse was mainly related to the crisis of the notions of *society* and *social* brought about by the end of functionalism (Touraine, 1981), but also by the emergence of a plurality of critical perspectives rooted outside the Western world in gender and colour gazes, in material and environmental issues, rather than in the abstract and Western idea of society. While, on the one hand, this brings to mind a sort of 'metatheoretical civil war' (Collins and Waller, 1994: 17), on the other hand, it is a sign of effervescence and opportunities.

Unexpectedly, the title of the aforementioned book by Gouldner sounded like a dark prophecy at a time of high dynamism of sociology, closely connected to social movements and to the social change of post-industrial societies. This was an exciting time for social theory: on the one hand, there were attempts to develop encompassing systemic theoretical frames able to overcome the limitations of Parsons' functionalism, such as Luhmann's system theory or Habermas' theory of communicative action; on the other hand, there were the attempts to overcome the classical dualism of objectivism and subjectivism, as in the case of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, not to mention the development of new sections of social theory based on thematic gazes, such as women's studies, African-American studies, cultural studies or postcolonial studies.

And yet, some sort of crisis of social theory – perhaps not in the way prefigured by Gouldner – arrived by the end of the century, together with the crisis of sociology as a whole. The latter was evidenced by material effects, especially in the UK and the USA, such as the closure of social sciences departments due mainly to the decrease of students. Sociology was in trouble and it seemed to have lost its theoretical rationale. Actually, the crisis of sociology prefigured by Gouldner was mainly a cultural crisis. As we shall analyse later, this phase is related to the origin of the discipline within the history of industrial societies and their transformation in recent decades. Moreover, the association of sociology as an academic discipline with political engagement during the 1960s and 1970s is a clear example of this cultural connection, with a more evident emphasis in the English-speaking countries than in continental Europe or elsewhere. The pessimism of American sociologists about the future of social theory usually relates it to the political fortune of sociological issues, and to the political role of social movement cycles. For example, according to Burawoy (2021), nowadays it is no longer appropriate to speak about a crisis of sociology because of a renewal of interest in sociological issues related to the new wave of international mobilizations such as Occupy, Arab Springs, Indignados, Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, and so on.

From this perspective, social theory and sociology as a whole have, or no longer have, the wind of history to blow in their sails according to the political moment. Moreover, this analysis reduces the entire history of social theory to its effects in America, from the end of World War II to the end of the wave of social

movements and leftist culture on campuses. Certainly, the weakening of interest in sociology in the USA had an international influence, but its effects were less important in Europe and most of all in the non-Western world, where social sciences continued to be more deeply engaged with the analysis of social change and social inequalities, and where the reference to social theory as critical theory remained vigorous.

Nevertheless, the crisis of the attractiveness of sociology – and especially of social theory – is not just related to a lack of interest in critical analysis or in the individualist instrumental reason of the students, today more professionally oriented and less accustomed to theoretical debates. Moreover, the destiny of social theory, and with it of sociology, cannot be analysed solely in contingent terms; and also ‘the wind of history’ influencing theorization has to be grasped in its broader and recursive circulation. Hence, we may consider the end of grand theories in Parsons’ style, as well as the end of personalized schools of thought like those created by the founders of contemporary social theory of the second half of the twentieth century, as an opportunity to regenerate social theory and especially its capacity to furnish tools for critical reflexivity.

On the shoulders of giants

For the advocates of the crisis of social theory, the main current problem seems to be a lack of clarity about the issues that social theory should address and the related credibility of its critical perspective. The theoretical approaches of the golden age generated a constellation of debates – the role of individual action, the ambivalences of social order, the structure of communication processes, the opportunities for social mobility and so on – that framed the discipline and its critical force of interpretation of major social problems such as social inequalities or democratic processes. Today, on the contrary, such theoretical debates seem more confused, scattered, together with the instability of public forms of social criticism.

The fragmentation of social theory, the loss of legitimacy of grand theories, the production of continuous commentaries on the classics, are usually perceived as a trivialization and a path towards the uselessness of theorizing in social sciences. This attitude is perhaps more frequent among those who identify strictly social theory with critical theory. The core idea is that social critics need a strong social theory, a large-scale narrative about the social world (Walzer, 1993). In this case, the notion of critical theory refers usually to the multidisciplinary social critique conducted by the Frankfurt School, and especially by Adorno and Horkheimer, whose work was rooted in the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic. Other forms of critical social thought, like that of Michel Foucault, as well as of postmodern scholars like Jean-François Lyotard or Jean Baudrillard, are often considered to be ineffective forms of critical theory, mainly because of their internal nihilism and relativism, together with their radical critique of the Enlightenment (Habermas, 1987). Compared to the critical apparatus coming from Kant, Hegel, Marx and Frankfurt

School, French post-structural and postmodern approaches with their emphasis on the scattering and dissolving of modern certainties are not considered as real alternatives to social critique or as useful analyses of post-industrial societies. Furthermore, the critical social theorising from these approaches is more clearly opposed to any attempt to produce a unified critique from a single theoretical perspective, such as a theory of capitalism as a socio-historical process. Thus, on the one hand, social theory and social criticism are distinguishable projects; on the other hand, the alleged crisis of social theory can be associated with the crisis of critical theory, since social theory is potentially a critical knowledge of society and of its pathologies (Honneth, 2008).

Still, both classical Critical theory and ‘French theory’ mark the passage from an economistic Marxian critique to a more attentive cultural critique. They both insist on reflexivity, share the aspiration for the unification of theory and practice, are moral critiques of capitalism, and they are focused on privileged objects, of analysis, like consumption and culture industries, communication, or institutional ways to produce individuals. Furthermore, also social theory based on empirical research has frequently adopted a critical tone, even though it does not explicitly describe itself as a critical theory. This is the case of some of the main sociological theoretical apparatuses of the last half-century, like that of Pierre Bourdieu, certainly critical of the neoliberal turn, the weakening of the democratic public space, or the consequences of domination through consumerism (Bourdieu, 1987); this is as well the case of more recent attempts to analyse critique as individual capacity (Boltanski, 2011), or as a way to overcome a merely economic approach to capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). With different focuses, every social theory involves a gaze on society, a prioritizing source of knowledge; and when such a gaze wants to be critical it also implicitly offers an idea of a possible ‘good society’, less dominated, less individualistic, less unequal.

In this book, we shall see that, besides the already classical debate among Critical theory, French theory, Foucault and Bourdieu, other social theories have arisen in recent decades, giving new life to the intertwinement of social theory and critical perspectives. Intersectionality and coloniality are good examples of this. Intersectionality (see Chapter 5) has been proclaimed as a form of critical social theory (Hill-Collins, 2019) because of its intrinsic capacity to investigate, in manifold dimensions, the complexity of domination in current societies, and to explore how oppressed actors produce a self-defined oppositional knowledge. Rather than developing an all-encompassing theory of society – usually associated with the presumption of universal truth – the intersectional approach is based on a methodology of bottom-up theorizing which starts from the experience of subordinated social actors, such as black women, indigenous people or refugees, and on their own capacity to produce critical knowledge. The same applies to Coloniality (see Chapter 4), where critical knowledge and social theory intertwine in the historical analysis of colonialism as a concrete – economic and cultural – basis of modernity, transcending the Western-centric production of social theory, whose

critical stances too often forgot the colonial imprint of most of Enlightenment thought (Bhambra, 2015; Lugones, 2010).

With or without a critical statement, in the spirit of the founders of the discipline, constructing a theory of the social was first of all an endeavour to conceive the social as a new analytical space. It was a way to make possible ‘a connection between individual and society, and it even made possible a conception of how social systems might be shaped by human will’ (Coleman, 1986: 1310). With modernity, values, habits and institutions were understood as human products, and they needed a science capable of studying them. The social theorist was born not as a philosopher but as a public intellectual, someone with the role of shedding light on the doxa. This was the aim from Montesquieu to Marx, from Weber to Bourdieu, who all considered – in the words of the latter – renouncing this committed role to be a sort of ‘failure to provide assistance’ (Bourdieu, 1993). In this view, social theory is the only way to achieve reliable knowledge about the social-scientific knowledge different from both philosophical and journalistic analyses (Martuccelli, 1999).

As again Bourdieu noted, the social space is the basic metaphor of sociology and a core element of social theory, expressed as a system, a structure, as a situated result of social relations or conflicts, as an ensemble of forms of practical know-how; the problem is the nature of the ‘social’. While for Bourdieu the space of the social is mainly a site of hierarchical relations, the degree of abstractedness and constraint of the conceptualization of the ‘social’ is very variable in the landscape of social theories. For example, in an article of 1981 Alain Touraine already suggested to remove it along with the notion of ‘society’ as derivative of it (Touraine, 1981).

Hence, the first historical phase of social theory was characterized by the search for overarching knowledge about the social and by a strong link between scholarship and commitment. The rationale of social theory was not speculative but to make sense of the collective world and of its contradictions, possibly imagining a better future. This was still the legacy of the historical origins of social theory in the philosophies of the Enlightenment and in their ethical and political purposes. From the founding thinkers of the discipline until the 1970s, this was the main *raison d’être* of social theory on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in the non-Western world. This explains why the critical side of social theory was so important, especially among post-war sociologists, and why a theory of the social sought to grasp the intrinsic processes of the social even while observing a specific element of it, such as education, communication or consumption. Such intrinsic processes were those of social action, of social order and domination, or the dispute between micro and macro perspectives on the social.

The crisis that Wright Mills or Gouldner observed was mainly related to the end of this phase, and to the beginning of a specialization of the theory of the social focused on more specific fields of analysis, methodologies and analytical key-notions. This was as well characterized by a self-referential expert culture,

usually nationally or continentally based, with very few scholars engaged in the public debate (Beck, 2007). Reduced to expert knowledge, social theory was a sort of exegetical – or at best hermeneutical – sector of analysis in which classical and contemporary theorists were discussed and commented on. Again, especially American scholars saw this as related to the cultural turn of the 1980s, which is usually considered as a phase of backflow and stasis of the critical attitude characterized by the triumphs of neoliberal ideologies and negative judgements on the ‘excesses’ of the previous years (Seidman, 2013). However, this is only one part of the story.

Whilst in the USA social theory seemed to suffer from this atmosphere, in Europe, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the success of the theoretical proposals of scholars like Bourdieu, Giddens, Touraine, Habermas, Latour, who initiated the renovation of social theory by discussing its long-standing ambivalences such as actor/structure, subjectivism/objectivism, nature/culture. With some exceptions – for example, Luhmann’s system theory or Habermas’ theory of communicative action – these were no longer attempts to discover the overarching principle of the social order or social action – that is, a general theory of society. Rather, they were ‘middle range’ theoretical frameworks, to use Merton’s (1949) term: that is, working hypotheses that evolve during empirical research and the observation of particular aspects of social change, although without renouncing the effort to develop a unifying theory. In this case, some mediating theoretical principles – such as structuration, habitus, historicity or practice – could guide social research. Meanwhile, the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, also successfully imported into the USA, were not only stimuli for social theory discussion; they also fostered reflection internal to social movements of women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans, immigrants and postcolonial actors as they explored the topics of identity, body, sexuality, domination and cultural processes; and above all, as they challenged the claims of universal validity of social theories framed by Western, male and middle-class scholars.

Indeed, also outside the western world, postcolonial thought was a fundamental resource for social theory renovation and for a new sociology of knowledge (see Chapter 4). From this vibrancy, new *area studies* boosted reflection on the keywords of social theory. Simultaneously, the correspondence of society with the nation-state was called into question by the emerging discussion on globalization and the transformation of geopolitical equilibriums (Castells, 1998; Beck, 2005). Social theory and its critical range could no longer be based on a national perspective.

This relativization of social perspectives and the pluralism of issues is a ‘crisis’ mainly in the sense of an opportunity for renewal. After the mourning for the all-encompassing grand theories of industrial societies, a new opportunity could be federating the resources and the insights of different theoretical perspectives towards the analysis of themes and topics, which relevance appeared as historically paramount. Social theory is today increasingly multidisciplinary as it reassembles scholars and perspectives beyond sociology, while federative issues, such

as uncertainty, technoscience or Anthropocene, are no longer exclusively sociological. In our opinion, it is mainly across the focus on some topics – such as those discussed in this book – that it is possible to bring social theory back into the public debate, restoring its original social purpose and capacity to discuss the future. This could also be a way to remedy the problem of the too professionalized, and sometimes arcane, language of social theory – today completely marginal in the public discussion – by bringing the ethical vocation of social theory closer to public concerns.

Federating themes and vocabularies

The shift of the accent from the author and the school, much more frequently created by – Western – male rather than female authors, to federative themes introduces new spaces for the expression of social thought. Authors and schools often imply the ability to construct a unitary language, an innovative lexicon within which to selectively frame the phenomena analysed. Within this self-referential vocabulary, social reality acquires a new coherence that allows for specific knowledge. For example, this is the case of the grid of mediating concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu to frame his interpretation of social inequalities and social structure, or the even more all-inclusive analytical apparatus of Niklas Luhmann.

The theory of the single author and of the single school consists of ‘closing’, ‘bordering’ and ‘delimiting’ social reality within an interpretative framework defined by an innovative vocabulary of interpretative notions, such as ‘habitus’ or ‘system’. It is in the knowledge and capability to articulate this specific and specialized language that the space opens up for the interpretation and understanding of social reality. We could say that an authorial and scholastic social theory aims to redefine reality within a specific linguistic and conceptual setting in which the multiplicity of experience is rearranged according to the words and concepts developed ‘within’ the intellectual college of the school itself, and usually under the leading figure of the founder. At first glance, the theoretical thought of the author and of the school is necessarily somewhat exclusive and esoteric: it implies the assumption of a specific vocabulary, only within which social reality manages to appear ordered and understandable.

This typical structure of twentieth-century social theory has profoundly changed in recent decades, with the transformation of sociology as an academic profession and with the generational passage internal to the main schools of thought which expressed the principal currents of social theory from the 1950s onwards. Such transformation seems characterized by the emergence of a social theory focused on federative themes rather than on the author and his school. This suggests a possible transition to a ‘polyglot’ social theory, where key notions originally produced within a specific school and socio-historical context can be used and combined with others to frame and interpret new social problems.

Various contemporary phenomena – from the intensification of globalization processes to the centrality of knowledge and information – reveal a new

contradiction at the basis of contemporary theoretical knowledge: on the one hand, the exponential growth of knowledge implies hyper-specialization; on the other hand, the complexity generated by this growth requires knowledge and communication skills that traverse disciplinary boundaries. The development of separate languages hinders communication rather than increasing the ability to understand. It is often useful to encourage cross-fertilization, that is, the capacity to switch from one language to another, rather than sectorization. Social scientists working in or from peripheral or southern societies increasingly question the reliability of the toolbox offered by mainstream sociological theory – often the result of Western sociology and of insights rooted in Western contexts – for understanding a diverse and plural social world (Arjomand and Reis, 2013; Go, 2016; Santos, 2016; Araujo, 2021).

This new phase, characterized by the focus on federative themes – such as those selected in this book – allows complexity to emerge. It does not consider complexity to be a stumbling block, a noise to be eliminated. Rather, it seeks to understand it as a constitutive element of contemporary social reality. The analytical gaze centred on federative themes stems from the perception that the main challenges faced by contemporary global societies require the construction of a social theory ‘capable of accounting for the interconnectedness of social actors and social structures across time and space’ (Susen, 2020: xv).

This entails the ability to handle a complex, differentiated, not necessarily highly homogeneous theoretical toolbox. It also entails a rethinking of the entire organization of university knowledge: from a ‘disciplinary’ knowledge, which is consolidated in the ability to create distinct scientific disciplinary sectors, to a ‘transversal’, ‘ecological’, ‘border’ knowledge, which favours translations from one disciplinary vocabulary to another which mixes languages to create new communication possibilities. The focus on federative themes fosters a border positioning of the researcher. While the positions of academic power are still firmly linked to the ability to place oneself at the ‘centre’ of a (often self-created) discipline, the cognitive practice oriented to the analysis of federative themes induces researchers to place themselves on the margin, in a ‘dynamic’ position which enables them to better follow the complexity of what is being analysed.

Moreover, the logic of the disciplinary construction is often binary: it defines one’s existence by contrast with what it is not, thus creating an identity distinction (us/them). It involves dichotomous thinking. By contrast, attention to federative issues implies polysemic thinking. However, this does not exclude or nullify the relevance of a theoretical perspective centred on the author and his/her school. These are two different ways to make sense of the term ‘social theory’ (Abend, 2008). Attention to the author and the school tends to consider social theory as oriented to providing a specific *Weltanschauung*, a coherent image of the world that allows one to look at empirical reality from a specific perspective and, thus, illuminate specific aspects of social phenomena. Attention to federative themes, instead, points out a hermeneutic logic; it aspires to providing ‘an original “interpretation”, “reading”, or “way of making sense” of a certain slice of the empirical

world. [It] may shed new light on an empirical problem, help one understand some social process, or reveal what “really” went on in a certain conjuncture’ (Ibid. 178). It does not aim to determine the final ‘causes’ of a phenomenon, but shows, in detail, how it ‘is’, how it ‘works’, how it ‘is produced’, its ‘effects’ and its ‘consequences’.

The current focus on federative themes sheds light on the low plausibility of an all-encompassing social theory – a grand theory – but at the same time, it shows the necessity and relevance of social theory. In this case, theory does not bother to circumscribe what it studies in a well-defined linguistic-conceptual field, but it tracks its own object in its connections, relations, translations and border crossings. It is an invitation to renounce a totalizing theory without renouncing the theory. It is more oriented to highlighting the ‘practical’ relevance of the theory than to expressing fidelity to a specific interpretative orientation.

To obtain this result, a perspective focused on federative themes is necessarily ‘hybrid’. It makes use of different tools to account for the complexity of its field of analysis. Hybridity does not mean incoherence or opportunistic mixing; rather, it constitutes a way to advance generalizations and theoretical interpretations which highlight the complexity and internal variability of the field studied, and which put multiplicity in the foreground rather than attempting to synthesize the multiple into an all-in-one unit.

The orientation towards the analysis of federative themes is configured as a particular space of social theorization, not because it aims to provide a new and updated list of fundamental categories of social thinking, but because, starting from bottom-up themes of contemporary debate, it aims to outline the epistemic and socially problematic space of current social experience, highlighting its connections and complexity. It is, therefore, a question of showing how social thought develops in relation to the need/ability to give meaning to complex experience starting from a set of problems – or federating themes – that impose themselves, in contemporary Western societies, as relevant and significant. In our opinion, Agency, Anthropocene, Coloniality, Intersectionality, Othering, Singularization, Technoscience and Uncertainty are among the crucial issues, but the list could be longer or different. This is a set of issues that represent focal points where different analytical traditions intersect to generate new theoretical debates and furnish a new grid for the analysis of social change.

Reasoning by federative themes does not aim to present a theoretical toolbox that includes the elements essential for sociological analysis. A theoretical reflection starting from the federative themes leads along paths partially different from the attempt to present a fundamental nucleus of ideas that would constitute the founding element of the sociological discipline. This is the exercise performed by other social theory texts, starting with the classic work of Nisbet (1966) which identifies the fundamental categories of sociology in the dichotomous contrapositions between community and society, authority and power, status and class, the sacred and the secular, and alienation and progress. The proposal to reflect on social theory starting from federative themes does not aim to capture the core

of sociological thought; rather, it suggests the usefulness of a way of theorizing that grasps the need for intersections, for translations and the necessity to follow connections. This is a suggestion to make sense of complexity not through the reduction or composition of dichotomous oppositions but by bringing an ecological style of thinking to the fore; a style of thinking that tries to grasp complexity by feeding on complexity and adapting its own set of theoretical tools to this task.

The federative themes in this book discuss inequality, neoliberalism, eurocentrism, androcentrism or anthropocentrism under a new light, looking beyond the classic divides of social theory, and beyond well-established polemics against modernity. Reflecting on social theory starting from federative themes makes it possible to highlight ‘a way of thinking’ as well as to understand complex phenomena and far-reaching transformations. It allows us to highlight a specific way of theorising that places relationships, processes, situations and interconnections at the centre.

Conclusion

We may say that we are not at all confronted by a crisis of social theory; rather, we are living in a promising phase of social thought, where the capacity to theorize is more necessary than ever, and the complex intertwining of social transformations that we witness require the resources of all the theoretical experiences that we have accumulated, also outside the Western world, in order to produce new analytical tools and new framing perspectives. On considering the complexity and the constitutive interconnectedness (Tomlinson, 1999) of current societies, it becomes evident that it is necessary and urgent to widen the field of social theory. Material objects, technology and biology need to be more fully incorporated into social theory so as to go beyond the idea of the purity and independence of the social that informed the early development of sociology as a discipline (Walby, 2021: 28). Voices and views from intellectual and experiential perspectives different from those of the Western tradition become an indispensable part of the social theory vocabulary, problematizing the provincialism of Western social theory and overcoming a too narrow positivistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal and individualistic tradition.

The federative themes – such as those proposed in this book – represent focal points where different analytical traditions intersect to generate new theoretical debates and to offer a new grid for the analysis of social change. They highlight the usefulness and necessity to develop more heterogeneous interpretative theoretical tools with which to analyse the plurality of traditions, practices and perspectives that constitute current, globalized social life. The theoretical tools used to analyse a specific federative theme acquire all their epistemological and hermeneutical force when used in reference to other tools used to analyse other federative themes, promoting a mobile and adaptable scaffolding constituted by the intersection of concepts with which to build better interpretative constructs of the complex and mobile contemporary global reality. This suggests the usefulness

of developing a rhizomatic mode of theorizing that recognizes the importance of interconnections, heterogeneities and multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This is a form of theorizing that recognizes the importance of textures and inter-relationships (Haraway, 2016); of the voice and legacy of reflections on the social developed in historical and social contexts other than Western ones (Viveiros de Castro, 2009; Bhambra, 2015; Santos, 2016; Go, 2016); and of an ecological thought (Bateson, 1972; Code, 2006) that overcomes an excessive anthropocentrism and places the correct emphasis on the role that nature, matter and technology play in defining human experience and existence itself (Latour, 2004; Descola, 2013).

A specific mode of theorizing emerges from what recurs between one federative theme and another, from intuitions that, generated by specific interests and needs, adapt to new interests and needs, from translations from one lexicon to another, from the intertwining and intersections between different research fields. Rather than being confronted by a crisis of the role and usefulness of social theory, we are dealing with a new way to theorize that, rather than focusing on the author and the all-encompassing effort of a school of thought, focuses on emerging and federating themes; it appropriates what can be useful for understanding or describing a specific situation. This is a polyglot and multisite mode of theorizing that tries to build, from the intertwining of some guiding concepts, a grid of intelligibility useful for the understanding of concrete practices and events. In regard to the current urgency of developing a theorizing capability – that is, far from any ‘exhaustion’ of social theory – this is a way to theorize the social with a more practical orientation which, rather than establishing whether the concepts used are right or wrong in ahistorical and universal terms, is interested in understanding what they allow us to understand in relation to contexts and situations, in relation to the problems of our time and our complex and pluralist societies.

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