
Introduction

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Topical keywords and thematic nodes

Books devoted to social theory are usually a collection of scholarly essays and classifications of theoretical positions. Sometimes they explain legacies, genealogies and affiliations, especially if they focus on a specific theoretical frame; more frequently, they move forward by comparing and contrasting analytical perspectives. The aim of this book is different, and it is twofold. Firstly, more than resuming theoretical traditions, it intends to highlight eight current topical keywords as analytical notions by conducting a transversal theoretical discussion that extends beyond specific scholars and legacies. Secondly, avoiding a simple encyclopaedic list of popular notions in social sciences, the book aims to frame them by highlighting possible connections, bridging common epistemological approaches.

The choice of eight keywords – Agency, Anthropocene, Coloniality, Intersectionality, Othering, Singularization, Technoscience, Uncertainty – is not random, reductive or related to the temporary popularity of a notion. Certainly, the list could be different, but these keywords have been chosen for their capacity to enable a wider discussion more innovative for social theory; that is, for their capacity to intercept different theoretical traditions and frame them in a new way. This is, for example, the case of a notion such as ‘Anthropocene’ whose meaning, use and criticism as discussed in the literature include different epistemological and methodological references from Marxian materialism to post-anthropocentrism. Even more so, it is the case of the analytical notion of ‘agency’ whose meaning has expanded in recent decades to embrace opposed references such as subjectivation theory and non-human action. By means of these keywords, the book aims to convey the complexity of the current remixing of social theory traditions and the emergence of new theoretical paradigms.

Some of these notions are older and more well-established than others; some are reciprocally related; and others are epistemically more counterposed. The aim of the book is to ‘stay with the trouble’ of social theory, avoiding sealed boundaries and epistemological self-references. Consequently, it adopts each theoretical perspective that deals with this as a problem, as a trouble, not as a solution.

Each of the eight keywords selected represents a potential entry or exit point for the interpretation and understanding of social reality. They are crucial in current theoretical debate not only for their capacity to shed light on specific and important current social issues, but also and especially for their capacity to suggest connections, to enable shifts from one term to the others, to constitute not only a vocabulary with which to talk about the social but also an epistemological and empirical ‘toolbox’ with which to analyse the social.

Indeed, social theory is not a purely speculative exercise; it is always related to social contexts and their social, historical and material transformations. Classic paradigms are today rediscovered in terms of their eurocentrism, androcentrism or anthropocentrism, and they are integrated with the analysis of new areas of research, such as the environment and non-human actors, as well as with the transformation of more classic theoretical frames, such as the critique of neoliberalism or the mechanisms of ‘othering’.

Rather than mapping and reconstructing the landscape of past and contemporary social theories as an ensemble constructed by scholars or grand theories, the book tries to navigate through the constellation of theories by framing them in terms of some emerging keyword and thematic nodes. The aim is to trace the encounter and cross-fertilization between social theories within the frame of a topic notion and thereby shed light on the current merging of theoretical apparatuses formerly kept separate or even treated as conflicting. We consider this as a historical process involving the transformation of theoretical apparatuses as they intertwine with the transformation of social life in its cultural and material aspects, in a world where the experience of complexity, connectivity and instability cannot but concern also the theorization of the social. The keywords selected are certainly not exhaustive, but they are all catalysts of a cluster of different theoretical perspectives highlighting the pluralism, the mutual relationships, and the capacity to look beyond classic dichotomies of modernity.

Outline of the book

The first chapter states the analytical purpose of the book. It explores the current troubles of social theory: that is, the way in which classic theoretical frameworks of the twentieth century are today more frequently reinterpreted and mixed together rather than being counterposed in well-identified schools of thought. Classic authors and different epistemological perspectives can converge to furnish new interpretations of the onset of new issues, such as the environmental crisis, the everyday encounter with difference or the escalation of social inequalities. Starting from a discussion of the alleged crisis of social theory, the chapter explains how working with keywords rather than specific singular theoretical schools is a way to generate and intersect theoretical debates and furnish new grids for the analysis of social change.

The second chapter presents a critical cartography of the notion of agency, of its current transformations, and interdisciplinary intertwining. Whilst in modern

social sciences, agency used to be conceptualized as a property of the subject, and the discussion was focused on the extension of such properties, such as intentionality, more recently agency has been expanded to include other actors and theoretical approaches beyond the boundaries of the humanities and social sciences. The chapter identifies different cultures of agency originating from different theoretical debates and research fieldwork. ‘Agency’ is a concept widespread in social sciences, and it is usually evoked to refer to autonomous action, capacity of choice, human freedom as traditionally opposed to actions determined by structural constraints or interiorized forms of *dressage*. However, although we are accustomed to anthropocentrism, we are still uncomfortable with the evidence that we are losing control of the material and social environment, as highlighted by notions such as Anthropocene and Technoscience. The chapter analyses the intersecting trajectories of these epistemological and theoretical traditions and the new social issues that they highlight.

The third chapter focuses on the notion of Anthropocene. This appeared around the year 2000, quickly raising its status from a technical term and a scientific hypothesis to a keyword – or catchword – of major import in the public debate worldwide. It conveys the idea that humankind has acquired a capacity to intervene in the world which is on a par with – hence directly affects – the biophysical dynamics of the planet. The chapter addresses the Anthropocene as a result of a major transformation in late-modern accounts of reality and agency, largely coincident with the advent of post-Fordism in economics, neoliberalism in politics, complexity thinking in the life, matter and computational sciences, and post-foundationalism in the social sciences and humanities.

The fourth chapter discusses the issue of Coloniality, which is today a popular term in academic and activist circles around the world, albeit with different meanings and purposes. Overall, it is deployed to capture a vast array of contemporary political issues. It speaks, for instance, of the endurance of racism in modern societies; it helps to map the diverse and interconnected faces of oppression in terms of gender, class, race and forms of knowledge. Coloniality allows, as well, for recognition of the epistemic bias of institutions such as universities and cultural industries and to grasp the enduring legacies of colonialism beyond the familiar tropes of postcolonial studies, sharing similar traits with intersectionality and critical race theory. Yet, the more successful coloniality becomes in academic discussions, the more its theoretical specificity gets obscured. The chapter highlights the multiple meanings of this notion, mapping them and offering some interpretative keys.

Chapter 5 discusses the notion of Intersectionality, which today is a fundamental reference in the theoretical debate, far beyond gender studies, and is able to capture a transversal array of analytical issues. Intersectionality as a theoretical tool can be considered a ‘traveling theory’ in a globalized context even though it cannot be detached from its contexts of analysis or used as a free-floating signifier. This automatically involves appropriations, amendments and changes in response to the original meaning, as well as possible connections with other theoretical

discussions such as those on agency, coloniality or racialization. Hence, the chapter depicts some of the current debates engaging with the pros and cons of the global implementation of the concept by dealing with the controversy on master categories. In accordance with the overall purpose of the book, the chapter highlights themes and questions for future lines of inquiry.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the notion of Othering. It does so by starting from its intertwinement with the idea of whiteness. Long before they ventured across the oceans to settle the Americas, Europeans were formulating the foundations of Whiteness. Elite European males institutionalized, or established, Whiteness in an effort to control Blacks, Native Americans, women, and others. Gender-specific laws affecting all racial, ethnic, and class groups helped to sustain White privilege and White normative structures. Considering that philosophy, music, art, language, democratic structures and civilization begin in white space/heterosexual spaces, the chapter examines how this history is made not only by racialization but also by a process of othering people around the globe, particularly within the Americas, and how it resonates with the topic of Coloniality.

The seventh chapter resumes more analytical discussion in regard to the notion of Singularization. The chapter discusses the ways in which the structural processes of singularization at work in very different social spheres transform contemporary societies. It argues that a set of transformations – usually denoted with apparently different and disconnected terms – converges on and communicates with each other, becoming a sort of prism of the current era. This is for example the case of the changes that have occurred at the level of industrial production systems and in services, which break with the parameters given by the old mass society and favour increasingly differentiated goods and services. Or it is the case of the transformations that have occurred at the level of institutions (often analysed from the standpoint of individualization or biopolitics) that radicalize the call for singularity and personal responsibility in their interpellations. The chapter frames the topic of singularity against the background of historical transformations underscored also by other keywords discussed in this book.

Chapter 8 deals with the issue of Technoscience and Science and Technology Studies (STS). It starts with a discussion of the word ‘and’ in this now-classic formulation. Dropping the ‘and’ from the expression ‘science and technology’ therefore means rejecting the distinction between the two terms and affirming that they cannot be treated separately. Because technology is defined as the transformation of abstract scientific knowledge into applicative machines that work in the social context, it can be considered an inner part of society. Following the evolution of technoscience provides an opportunity to reflect on the contribution that this STS concept has made to much-debated issues like the problem of relativism and that of power. At the same time, technoscience has been a concept that feminist approaches and postcolonial studies have used to show how and to what extent science and technology are responsible for maintaining social inequalities. Moreover, technoscience is a concept situated within the ‘hybrids’ realm, another concept that has been introduced and much debated by STS. Consequently,

technoscience is a significant concept that sheds new light also on the fundamental problem of human identity, thus traversing many other sociological issues, some of which are discussed in other chapters of this book.

Finally, Chapter 9 discusses how Uncertainty has come to constitute, both in individual experience and in social research, one of the keys to understanding contemporary social reality. After placing the theme of uncertainty in the broader scenario of transformations related to the development of globalized society, the chapter considers how uncertainty, its effects, its representation, and individual and institutional responses to it, transform relationships and contemporary social institutions. Specific attention is paid to the idea of crisis and emergency, as well as to the rhetoric of threat and fear as guidelines for individual narratives of national biopolitics and, more generally, for contemporary governmental logic. Forms of adaptation and resistance to uncertainty and insecurity are analysed in light of everyday experience. Starting from this specific perspective, and in conversation with other keywords of this book, the chapter analyses how uncertainty and crisis produce new forms of individualization and singularization, new forms of belonging and exclusion, but also new forms of resistance, activism, participation and collective aggregation that indicate new forms of agency.