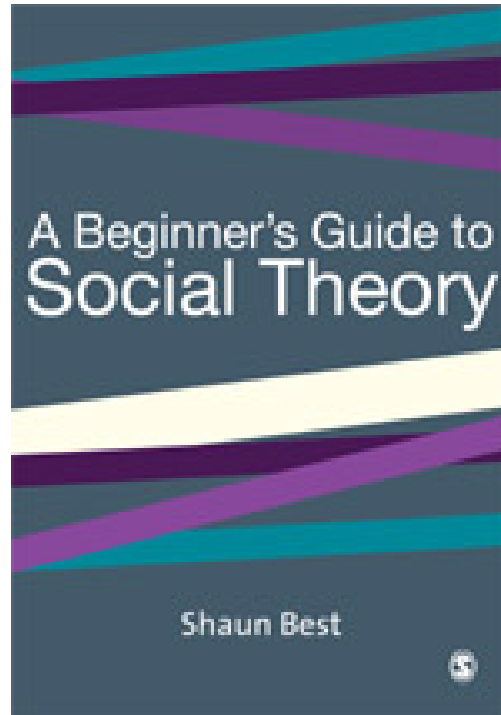


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## A Beginner's Guide to Social Theory

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# Dedication

To Jane, Jessica and Jonathan

# Introduction: The Theoretical Self

## Chapter Contents

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Many people will look at this book because they need to have a knowledge of social theory so they can successfully complete assignments or attempt exams. I hope to change the perception that many such readers have of social theories as mere obstacles that they have to overcome in an effort to get better marks. I want this book to assist the reader in finding their *theoretical consciousness*. We are *theoretical beings*: we theorise about everything most of the time. Very often because the assumptions we make about the world are so closely tied to the events that surround us and our role within such events, we tend not to view this activity as theorising; but it is.

### Activity

This is the first of many activities in the book. The purpose of each activity is to give you an opportunity to reflect upon the theory under discussion. You may be asked to draw upon your personal experience to find examples that support or refute some aspect of a theory, or perhaps to consider strengths and weaknesses of a given theory in an effort to enhance your evaluative skills.

Ask yourself the following questions: What is a 'theory'? Are theories ever of any value in helping you to understand your everyday life? Share your answers with fellow students.

You might want to return to this activity at the end of the chapter and again at the end of the book and reflect upon any change in your answers.

As individuals we seem to be unable to experience the world directly; our experience of what goes on around us is mediated by theory. Most of us do not regard our personal explanations of how and why things happen to us as *theory*, but it is. Whenever we have cause to reflect on how or why things happen in the way that they do, we are theorising. Most of us do not write down our reflections on how and why things happen as they do around us. However, many people *do* write down such reflections, and this book is a beginner's guide to such writing.

At some time or another every teacher, whilst outlining their favourite social theory, will have been faced by students who, with a glazed look on their face have said, 'It's boring, it's boring, this.' As a teacher how do you react? One approach is to justify the choice of theory by referring to future assignments or exams where the theory can be used to good effect. In essence, this approach is one of agreeing with the students. In effect you are saying: 'I know this is a boring theory, I find it boring myself, and what is more I found it boring when I came across it as a student, but we have to do it because you may fail without a knowledge of it.'

An alternative approach is to attempt to identify why some people find some theories 'boring'. This book is built upon the assumption that we find only tedium in some theories and 'turn off from them because they have little to say about the things that are relevant to our everyday lives. Everybody has a theory that fascinates him or her. Reflect for one moment on your favourite social theory and why you like it. People are thinking beings and our thought is related to society, politics, economics and history although this may not be expressed in terms of the universal categories or formal structures that one finds in textbooks. We theorise about our relationships at work, our personal relationships, the soaps we watch, the sports we enjoy, and the future. We constantly reproduce the world inside our heads and play out imaginary situations over and over again, introducing various factors in an effort to explore possible consequences. Such predictions are built upon theoretical assumptions that we make about the world and how it works. The vast majority of people make use of this theorising to manage practical situations that they find themselves in and then discard the theory, or adapt it for future guidance. A tiny minority of us write down our theories and publish them for other people's consumption. As individuals we can make use of published theories to make sense of our lives, and I am sure that many readers already do this. The application of labels to people, for example, provides ample

evidence of people drawing upon a theoretical consciousness in an effort to make sense of the world. Some examples are obvious: people who describe others as 'sexist' draw upon notions of patriarchy. Other examples are less obvious; when an adult asks a child, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' is the adult drawing upon Alfred Schutz's notion of the *life project*?

## Activity

In this activity you are asked to suggest a possible explanation as to why some people choose to stay in their homes on Friday evening and watch gardening programmes, while other people go out drinking and clubbing for the evening.

Once you have thought of a possible explanation ask a fellow student to suggest assumptions that you are making about the people involved in these activities. You might consider if older people are more likely to be involved in one activity rather than another; are people without gardens more likely to be involved in one activity rather than another; are affluent people more likely to be involved in one activity rather than another?

What is the purpose of this activity? To show you that you are a theorist who makes assumptions about the world, which are always open to question.

Whenever you read a theory ask yourself, what does this theory say about me and how I choose to lead my life? Attempt to identify what it is about the theory that makes it inadequate as an explanation of your life. What assumptions does the theory make about the circumstances you find yourself in? What assumptions does the theory make about how people interact with others, about intersubjectivity? What assumptions does the theory make about the abilities you have or may not have as a person? Do forces outside your control push you about or do you have complete control? Perhaps like the character Neo in the film *Matrix*, all you need to keep in mind is that there is no spoon! If you attempt to identify the assumptions upon which theories are built and apply these assumptions to your own experiences, evaluating the adequacy of the theory to your experience of the world, then you are well on the way to evaluating social theory. The starting point for a thorough evaluation of any social theory has to be our own personal knowledge.

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## Personal Knowledge: From *Knowing That* to *Knowing How*

A human being cannot make sense of information without it becoming personal, without having feelings about the information. We have to know how the things we are interested in work in order to function as a person. We may have the knowledge that ‘things’ work in a particular way, but we may not have a complete knowledge of the underlying theoretical principles of how ‘things’ work in the way that they do. This personal knowledge has no obvious form of measurement, because it is based upon feelings and an understanding of oneself as a person: likes, dislikes, prejudices and the underlying motivation for these choices. This knowledge may be ambiguous and/or partially based upon intuition and be gained without formal reasoning, but all of us have a perception of why things happen to us in the way that they do. This perception may not be based upon systematically gathered research findings, but it is based upon the personal observation of causes and consequences that are real to us. We all have a need to know on a need to know basis and it is this which provides us with the personal motivation to discover a reality beyond our safe subjectivity. This process of moving from our personal knowledge *that* to a more objective knowledge of *how* may bring us into conflict with widely shared conceptual frameworks – such as sociological perspectives or political ideologies. When we construct knowledge of a situation or event and can justify the validity of our perceptions we can escape the pressure to conform and as learners escape the mere memorization of concepts that hold no personal value for us as learners. We have to relate personal knowledge from our own interactions to theories. This book is intended to help you inform your prejudices and justify your personal knowledge.

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## Social Theory and its Recent History

What makes social theory distinctive? The purpose of social theory is not simply to describe the social world – this has already been done by individual people themselves. Social theory is concerned with going beyond uncomplicated description and attempting to answer the humble question: ‘How is society possible?’ It is one of the most interesting questions that can be asked. Some social theorists attempt to answer the question in a scientific fashion, suggesting that research should be built upon forms of measurement and logic that one would expect to find within the natural sciences. For these people, who are commonly lumped together as ‘the positivists’, social research is about gathering facts and figures to test explanations. In contrast, other social theorists suggest we answer the question by making use of the techniques developed by poets and novelists,

or by becoming like an investigative reporter, searching for meaning and understanding of what people do, why and how they do it.

Social theory is directly linked to the practice of research: the two should be inseparable. Social theory is about developing and understanding the 'social', which is the foundation of contemporary society. This is suggested by some of the key concepts used by theorists whom we shall look at in this book, for example:

- Durkheim – 'social facts'
- Marx – 'social relations'
- Weber – 'social action'

Individual people are unique and have both the skills and the ability, in most cases, to do whatever they wish. However, you will have heard phrases such as 'Man is born free yet everywhere he is in chains' and 'Men make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing'. In other words, as people we seem to spend most of the time doing things that we may not want to do; behaving in ways that are 'appropriate'. As individuals, we experience the world as a place that contains a great many rules and other forms of constraint. If you walk down any crowded city street you will come into contact with a great many people you have never met before, and yet there are 'appropriate' ways of behaving with these strangers: avoiding eye contact and avoiding any physical contact such as bumping into each other. In addition, there are 'appropriate' statements such as 'I'm sorry' if you do break such 'rules'. The constraint we are talking about is part of what sociologists refer to as 'the social'. Sociology was invented in the nineteenth century to make sense of the modern industrial society that contained ways of behaving and ways of relating to others that did not exist in pre-industrial societies. Sociology was born then in the transition from the traditional to the modern society. People wanted to make sense of the emerging 'new world' after:

- the Enlightenment
- the Great Reform Bill of 1832
- the French Revolution of 1789
- Chartism
- the Industrial Revolution
- Urbanisation
- the 1848 revolutionary movements

As Anthony Giddens explains:

Sociology is concerned with the comparative study of social institutions, giving particular emphasis to those forms of society brought into being by the advent of modern industrialism. There might be differences of opinion as to how modern societies should best be studied, but to suggest that such societies are not worthy of systematic enquiry seems more than faintly absurd. (Giddens, 1987: 1)

In the nineteenth century the social was believed to shape our lives and our individual experience of the world. It was said to affect our life chances, help us to shape and form our individual identity and for many sociologists it is still the source of our thoughts, culture and ideas. The social mediates our relationships with others and at the same time we as individuals produce it. However, there is much discussion and much disagreement as to the nature of 'the social' and its origins. Whatever theories sociologists invent, and whatever methods they use to find out about the world and how it works, they are concerned with attempting to make sense of the nature of constraint. In most sociology texts, this issue of the nature of constraint in society is referred to as 'The problem of order'.

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## What is a Social Theory?

Although the following points are a crude generalisation that you might want to take issue with, my view is that all social theories are made up of four elements. If you want to evaluate any theory it is a good starting point to identify the assumptions that the theorists make about these four elements and state if you agree with the assumptions or not, giving the reasons you have for why you agree or disagree.

All social theories contain:

- an epistemology – this is a theory of knowledge and it attempts to answer the question 'How do we know what we know?' All social theories make assumptions about how we know what we know.
- an ontology – this is a theory of what reality consists of. All social theories make assumptions about the nature of reality.
- a historical location – all social theories were written at a particular point in time, and reflect something of the historical period in which they were produced.
- a set of prescriptions – all social theories give the reader some advice on how to behave in everyday life. Again you may want to take issue with the advice that is suggested.

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## What Do Social Theorists Do?

Social theorists are people who step back and attempt to identify, outline and explain what 'the social' is and how it works. To do this, they invent theories about the nature of 'the social' and attempt to discover how people endeavour to recreate the social in their everyday lives. As an activity, doing social theory can give people an opportunity to invent concepts, as well as analyse and clarify the concepts and theories of other people. However, as the sociologist C. Wright Mills suggested in the 1950s, more importantly than the analysis and clarification of theories and concepts, doing sociology allows a person to discover if what were previously considered to be 'personal problems' might in fact be 'public issues'. Consider the following example. During the winter a person cannot afford to buy a warm coat or a pair of winter shoes, or cannot afford to buy a birthday card for a friend. We can say that such a person is inhibited from participating fully in society because they have little money. Moreover, that person experiences the exclusion from doing things that the rest of us take for granted, as a personal problem. However, what we are also looking at here is the 'public issue' of poverty, which may be caused by factors that are outside the control of the individual. For some social theorists the causes of many personal problems are to be found within the social, outside of the control of the individual person experiencing them.

How do social theorists view the nature of constraint? Social theory appears to be both chaotic and incoherent, but some of the most common theories do deal with this:

- **Marxism** sees constraint as emerging from class relationships, and the issue here is how people can overthrow those who impose the constraint.
- **Feminism** views constraint as 'patriarchal': in nature constraint was invented by men to control the behaviour of women, and again the issue here is how people can remove the constraint.
- **Structuralists** believe that there is a structure within society which is external to the individual, outside of the control of the individual and which shapes the life experience of the individual.
- Those social theorists who take their lead from Anthony **Giddens** view structures as the product of a process of 'structuration' in which people actively create structures within society. Here constraint is both a 'medium' and an 'outcome' of the activities of individual people. If we take the example of the social class structure, parents make every effort to give their children the skills and abilities to get 'good' jobs in later life. Parents endeavour to secure advantages for their children because they love their children, but the unforeseen consequence of this parental love is to reproduce the class structure. Parents from middle-class backgrounds secure places for their children within the middle

class of the future.

- In contrast to all the above approaches, **postmodernists** argue that the social, and the constraint associated with it, are dissolving.

In course of this book we shall show why social theorists have such very different theories of the 'social'.

Doing social theory is not like solving crossword puzzles; it is about learning to think about a range of issues and problems from a number of different perspectives. All social theory is about your relationships with others. It is about the nature and meaning of our existence as human beings; it is about understanding the organising principles of the society that you live in. I know it sounds pompous but I would argue that by refusing to engage with social theory you impoverish your own life.

Over the course of this book we examine how social theorists have engaged with issues of:

- compliance-resistance
- difference-togetherness
- agency-structure
- individual-totality
- the person-the people
- gay-straight
- public-private
- male-female
- equality-inequality
- change-stability
- whole-part
- within-without
- involvement-detachment
- modernity-postmodernity
- macro-micro
- inside-outside

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## The Limits of What Social Theory Can Do

Social theorists tend to look for and find general patterns within social life. Doing social theory is about dis-

covering *how 'the social' operates*. In addition, social theorists spend a great deal of time inventing theories that attempt to explain how 'the social' operates. This book gives you an opportunity to become acquainted with such theories, and shows you how to interpret and evaluate them. It cannot explain why you have no friends, why nobody wants to fall in love with you. In other words, it is important to make a distinction between 'doing theory' and 'needing therapy'. This is not to say that social theorists avoid issues such as love; Anthony Giddens, for example, has written a very full account of why people fall in love, seeing it as part of our need to feel secure in an increasingly uncertain world. The approach to issues is not simply to base everything upon our own personal experience, but to show how our personal experience also has a general quality to it. Many people may experience what we may have experienced as a personal problem, in the same way and for very similar reasons. It is the role of social theorists to identify and describe that general quality of so-called unique personal experiences, which make up social life.

What makes this activity of 'doing social theory' doubly difficult is that why people behave in the way that they do may not be fully understood by them, and in addition, the nature of the social is not static. The social is constantly changing, and the actions and reactions of the individual people, who shape the social, are themselves to be found within a social framework.

One of the assumptions I make is that all social theorists are concerned with understanding the nature of power relationships. The exercise of power is concerned with the ability of people to make others do things they may not want to do. For me, one of the central issues within social theory is to identify the resources that individuals and groups can draw upon to make others do what they want them to do. All social action – all actions carried out by people with intentions – involves drawing upon resources of power. All social actions involve making changes in the world, even if the changes are small. When you bring about a change in the world, you have to combat other people's vested interests. If you wish to turn on the television set, you have to combat the vested interests of the people who do not want to watch it. If you want to live in one place rather than another you will have to combat the vested interests of the people who live there.

In summary, what is social theory all about?

- It is concerned with the problem of order, it is searching for an answer to the question 'How is society possible?'
- It is about understanding the nature of 'social action', attempting to identify the social nature of the reasons people have for why they behave in the way that they do.
- It is concerned with the relationship between the individual and the society, attempting to explain

whether people are pushed about by forces outside of their control or whether they construct the constraints within society.

- It is concerned with describing and explaining the nature of power relationships.
- It is concerned with attempting to describe and explain the changing nature of 'the social'.

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## Social Theory and the Search for Truth

You may ask yourself, is social theory simply the search for 'truth'? The problem here is that many social theorists have questioned what we mean by 'truth'. Each social theory has its own notion of truth, and its favoured methods of finding that 'truth'.

### Activity

How do people know if something is 'true'? Given that news programmes on radio and television often ask for expert opinion from scientists, it is reasonable to assume that many people will accept that a statement is true if it is supported by 'scientific' evidence. Apart from science what other possible sources of truth can you identify? Religion? Information from political leaders? Information from parents?

'Truth' is difficult to achieve in the social sciences. The following discussion is complex, but what you should draw from it is the idea that we cannot take it for granted that the assumptions you and I make about the world and how it works are true. We should question all assumptions, including our own, about the world and how it works.

There are at least two distinct theories of truth which the social sciences can make use of: the *coherence theory*, which looks at theorising about the world as a 'holistic' activity in which theorists/researchers make theoretical assumptions which are assumed to be both internally consistent, and consistent with the theorists'/researchers' own assumptions about the world and how it works; and the *correspondence theory* of truth, in which the theorist/researcher assumes that there is an objective reality out there beyond their person-

al impressions, and the task of research is to devise a set of categories that fully and completely reflect the contours of this external reality in an objective fashion. According to Donald Davidson (1969), these reflective links are built upon a set of principles or rules of inference that he terms 'Convention T'. The significance of 'Convention T' is that it allows us to deduce the truth content of any statement against a finite benchmark that we know to be true. 'Convention T' is based upon first order logic, hence we know that 'Convention T' is true because what links the statements we make about the world ('T-Statements') with the external reality of the world are the words we use, which by convention explicitly and fully describe the factual order that is the external world.

Davidson's theory of truth is then a theory of translation. We know that if a person says: 'The rain is wet' that this is true, because we know that rain is wet. Moreover, because the statement corresponds to the first order logic of 'Convention T', we also know the *meaning* of the statement. There must be such an automatic triggering of meaning from statements that conform to 'Convention T', otherwise such a statement would not appear to us to be so obvious. 'Convention T' assumes that we share the same assumptions about the world as the people who speak to us; because we take to be true what we interpret the statement to be saying is true, then it is true. However, we have to assume or guess that the person we are speaking to shares our assumptions about the world, shares our underlying logic about the world, and assume that we share the same meaning of the words we use to describe that world. In other words, correspondence theories of truth assume that we have the ability to know what goes on inside the head of another person, to the degree that we can make a judgement about the logic of their thought processes and make a factually correct assessment of the 'T content' of such thoughts and the logic of how such thoughts were arrived at. Even if we assume that such a procedure is possible, such a theory assumes a superiority of our own 'Convention T' and our own 'T-Statements' that I believe to be without justification.

As Davidson explains:

I suggest that it may be enough to require that the T-sentences be true. Clearly this suffices uniquely and correctly to determine the extension of the truth predicate. If we consider any one T-sentence, this proposal requires only that if a true sentence is described as true, then its truth conditions are given by some true sentence. But when we consider the constraining need to match truth with truth throughout the language, we realize that any theory acceptable by this standard may yield, in effect, a usable translation manual running from object language to metalanguage. The desired effect is

standard theory building: to extract a rich concept (here something reasonably close to translation) from little bits of evidence (here the truth values of sentences) by imposing a formal structure on enough bits. If we characterize T-sentences by their form alone, as Tarski did, it is possible, using Tarski's methods, to define truth using no semantical concepts. If we treat T-sentences as verifiable, then a theory of truth shows how we can go from truth to something like meaning – enough like meaning so that if someone had a theory for a language verified only in the way I propose, he would be able to use that language in communication. (Davidson, 1969: 85)

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## Conclusion

We are all involved in the process of making theory: we are theoretical beings, and you should be actively involved in theorising and evaluating the theorising of others. All sociological theories, for example, make assumptions about the nature of the self and its relationship with the social structure. Interactionists, and other theorists who place a great deal of emphasis on social action, argue that the self has the ability to make a difference in the world. Interactionists argue that the person is a human agent and, as such, the author of their own actions. Marxists, feminists and functionalists, in contrast, believe that people are pushed about by forces outside of the control of the self. For Marxists, feminists and functionalists the self has very little 'agency' – people are unable to control their own thoughts and have little or no ability to make a difference in the world. When evaluating any theory, outline the assumptions that the researcher is making about the human agent, and state if you agree or disagree with those assumptions, giving your reasons. In this book we shall look at a range of published theories. Rather than giving you a bland and superficial outline of theory from a distance, I have attempted to give an insight into how the chosen theorists think, what concepts they use and how they make use of them. I have tried to give a feel for the detail of each theory and to provide the opportunity for you to reflect upon what the theorist has to say, in order for you to have some ownership of your evaluation.

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- social theories
- truth
- Anthony Giddens
- personal experience
- sentencing
- theories
- social action

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