

# A social theory that vindicates the centrality of religion in understanding the transformations of modernity

## Central aspects of the work of Hans Joas

This special issue of *Studia Politicae* presents a set of papers by regional and international researchers with an analytical and critical approach regarding central subjects of the work of German sociologist and philosopher Hans Joas. Taking into account the value and originality of his contributions for a novel understanding of contemporary social reality, this dossier proposes an inquiry into his ideas, as a key insight for specialized social and political theory.

If we compare the influence that those thinkers with whom Joas himself has established fundamental debates – such as Habermas, Taylor, Honneth and Bellah – have, it becomes clear that the dissemination of Joas' works in our regional context and in the Spanish-speaking world is still insufficient. A brief overview of his fields of interest provides us with a guideline to some of his contributions and facilitates a better acquaintance with his main

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ideas. Among the issues addressed by Joas' work, we find some fundamental topics for discussion in the current public domain – such as violence, war, Human Rights and democracy, the origin of values and religious experiences of self-transcendence –, with a perspective based on a fruitful approach that links American pragmatism and German historicism.

Joas's numerous publications over four decades of intellectual development have allowed not only updating the analysis of these fields. They also question some influential ideas that were long time undisputed, for instance about the origin of Human Rights, the relationship between secularism and freedom, the questioning of the role of moral universalism or sacralization in modernity, among others. It is worthwhile to enumerate and briefly describe some of his central contributions as a framework for the issues addressed by the contributions in this volume.

*1. Renewal of social theory:* From his early works, Joas reassess social theory by appealing to the pragmatist theory of action. He pursues this strategy by focusing on creativity to account for social change, vindicating the conception of action in terms of “practical intersubjectivity”, following Mead and Dewey; but also making room for the contingency and fallibility of the historical creations of values, as well as the attempts at their universalization, elements that he particularly takes from Troeltsch's work. A key element to understand Joas' work is his methodological contributions to social theory, which allows a series of results that have repercussions on the social sciences, especially his rejection of the sociological dichotomy between functionalist theories and normativist theories, proposing the creativity of action as a third way of social analysis. As a part of his project for a renewed understanding of modern society, he offers an alternative to a widespread understanding of modernity that goes from Weber to Habermas, according to which the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere and the understanding of human life itself is the condition of possibility for the consolidation of values which are central to liberal democracy.

*2. His understanding of secularization and values:* Joas rejects an influential version of modern secularization, insofar as he finds that there are persisting forms of sacralization. These refute the traditional version - derived from the Hegelian left and from a “liberal” interpretation of Luther - of a supposedly progressively growing connection between modernity and the fall of religion, and that this connection is a condition for autonomy and freedom. On this point, we see his critique of the narrative that the historicist and fallibilist experience of values necessarily entails a denial of moral universalism.

Joas provides a historical reconstruction of notions such as Human Rights, whose origin he finds not in philosophical arguments but in a sensibility born out of the experience of witnessing the suffering of others (particularly slavery, torture, and the death penalty); or as those overwhelming experiences of self-transcendence that relate to and include other persons, or that notion of freedom that is concretely located and conscious of not being its own origin. These are all elements that lead him to rethink central aspects of democracy and the role of values - including religious experiences - in them. In this regard, he echoes a sensibility that is at the very origin of modern sociological studies, which sees the role of values and sacralization in societies not as a particular chapter of sociological research but as a central element for an integral analysis and understanding.

*3. The appraisal of religion as an indispensable source of social theory:* In recent years, Joas has focused more strongly on religion and its role for understanding social practices. He is interested in the empirical basis of the religious phenomenon and its normative implications for thinking about political philosophy and defending universalistic ethics. Hence, his project of a “historical sociology of religion” highlights and reassesses previous and contemporary studies, such as the works of R. Niebuhr, Koselleck, Taylor and Bellah, among others. His original articulation between action theory and social theory, on the one hand, and between social theory and philosophy of religion, on the other, are precisely the two axes with which he critically reviews the canonical interpretations of modernity and the process of secularization.

In our present context, in which political science and social practices are shaken by the often perverse reappearance of the religious in public life, and in the face of secularist options that voluntarily seek to annul this presence or reduce it to a type of discourse without commitments, the study of Joas’ work provides a pragmatic alternative to these dead ends and a viable experience for analyzing contemporary social reality.

### **The contributions to this issue**

This special issue opens with Alejandro Pelfini’s text, “Hans Joas as a global thinker.” Written from a sociological perspective, this paper analyzes the role of universalism and the global as an object of inquiry for social theory. Pelfini’s analysis of world religions, as in the case of Catholicism, the genea-

logy of Human Rights and their present situation in an unequal world, allows him to return to Joas' approach of the global, but from a perspective usually absent in his work: Latin American reality.

Marcos Breuer's contribution: "Hans Joas' Theory of Religion and the Foundations of the Modern State" reconstructs Joas' theory of religion and its fundamental anthropological features. The essay shows how this anthropological experience gives rise to both particularistic and universalistic social configurations to criticize the thesis that the modern, secular state requires for its sustenance a kind of experience of value comparable to that provided by religious experience.

Germán Arroyo's "Between 'Democratic Ethicality' and the 'Sacredness of Democracy'. John Dewey's pragmatism in Axel Honneth's theory of justice and Hans Joas' theory of religion", proposes a revision and reinterpretation of the debate between Honneth and Joas, based on the tension between two uses of Dewey's philosophy: On the one hand, the Hegelian notion of justice, recreated by Honneth in his reading of Dewey, and on the other, the response to the thesis of the "spell of freedom" proposed by Joas. According to this article, making explicit these opposing readings allow us to better understand the reason for various tensions among them, insofar as Joas' contingent framework is closer to Dewey's pragmatist presuppositions and diverges from the teleologism that persists in Honneth.

On his part, Jesus Conill's article "Hermeneutical Genealogy of Secularization. Joas' Critique of the Rationalizations of Weber and Habermas", offers an analysis of the traditional idea of secularization as a constitutive feature of modernity. Starting from Joas' critique and his interpretation of sacralization, Conill researches its social role and its function in the formation of idealizations and values. At the same time, he identifies a shortcoming: the empirical identification of the formation of universalist ideals and the gestation of an "affirmative genealogy" require also a hermeneutic task, as a model capable of including and rooting these ideals in social configurations.

The article by Enrique Muñoz Pérez, "The Evidence of the Believer. Hans Joas' reading of Max Scheler" focuses on a relevant chapter of Joas' recently published book in Spanish, *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit*, in which the notion of evidence in Max Scheler regarding belief takes on a significant role. This article provides a reconstruction of this notion, beginning with Husserl's previous epistemological approach to belief as a source of Scheler's interpretation. In this way, the article establishes an interesting dialogue with Joas, as

it reconstructs Scheler's sources and positions on the feeling of evidence of belief and its phenomenology.

Subsequently, two texts written by Professor Björn Wittrock are published for the first time in English in this volume. They were tribute contributions for Joas on his 60th and 70th birthdays. The first of these, "Human Action, History and Social Change: Reconstructions of Social Theory in Three Contexts", presents a comparison and possible interaction between Joas and another great reference of the new social theory of the middle of the last century: Stuart Hughes. Hughes, like Joas, questions Talcott Parsons' theory of action as the central basis for articulating a new vision of sociality. However, until this essay, the rapprochement between Hughes and Joas had not been systematically addressed. The article sets out as the beginning of this dialogue the analysis of two accounts of human action, naturalistic and antinaturalistic, and then shows the dilemmas that arise in this debate. The essay points out how Joas renews these positions based on his analysis of action, whose advantage, besides conceptual precision, is a solid historical reflection.

Wittrock's second text is "World Religions and Social Thought: From Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas". This paper highlights the contributions of Joas's social philosophy to a dialogue with the main positions of the scientific study of world religions. In addition to analyzing their constitutive features and confronting them with other expressions considered as religious, Wittrock provides an analysis of the axial era in which the interpretations of Joas and Habermas tend to converge. This dialogue, reconstructed in this essay, is valuable to understand the tensions and possibilities of both interpretations in light of the current manifestations of secularization and religiosity.

Next, the dossier offers the reproduction of the essay "Creativity and action theory. Hans Joas, Recovering John Dewey" by Professor Cristina di Gregori, originally published in 2010. Cristina was one of the first recipients of Joas' work in the Spanish-speaking world, to the point that the editors consider her a necessary contributor to this issue. Her death, while we were preparing the call for papers, impeded us from inviting her to update this text, which has not lost its relevance for the issue at stake. The essay summarizes the main pragmatist theses in Joas, particularly in relation to action and creativity. Then, it analyzes the Deweyan inheritance of the notions of experience and action. Finally, it presents suggestions regarding the notion of 'transaction' in Dewey, for a better articulation of the ideas of action and creativity that are still productive in Joas's work.

The dossier includes a review of the recent translation of *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit* Martina Torres Criscuolo, which provides an accurate description of the different parts of the text and details its main conceptual cores. The review also emphasizes the concluding study by the translators, as a contribution to systematize the main elements of Joas' work for Spanish-speaking readers, whether specialists in these fields or those beginning in its study.

This special issue includes an incisive response from Joas to the texts that compose it — a contribution that fittingly crowns this issue of *Studia Politicae*. With his characteristic sharpness and meticulous style, Joas reviews each article and its main arguments, reframing them within the broader context of his own work and programmatic aims. In doing so, he opens up a number of particularly fertile lines for further discussion.