Human Action, History and Social Change: Reconstructions of Social Theory in Three Contexts

Acción humana, historia y cambio social: reconstrucciones de la teoría social desde tres contextos diferentes

Björn Wittrock[*]

Abstract

This text appeared in German in a Festschrift —a collection of essays written to honour and in celebration of an eminent Scholar— to Professor Hans Joas on the occasion of his 60th birthday in 2010. It compares Stuart Hughes' (1958) monograph *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* with *Die Kreativität des Handelns* [*The Creativity of Action*] by Hans Joas (1992). Since Hughes's development can be paralleled with Talcott Parsons's contributions (especially the conviction that the reflection on human action is fundamental for a new social theory) and given that Joas's critique of Parsons is key to his view on

[*] Professor Emeritus at Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden. Chair of the Social Sciences Section and Vice-President ex officio of the Academia Europaea. Founding Director of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and its principal leader from 1996 to 2018. He has also served as President of the International Institute of Sociology. Correo electrónico: bjorn.wittrock@swedishcollegium.se | Código ORCID: COMPLETAR

http://dx.doi.org/10.22529/sp.2025.65.07

STUDIA POLITICÆ Número 65 otoño 2025 pág. 126-158
Recibido: 15/10/2024 | Aceptado: 04/12/2024
Publicada por la Facultad de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales
de la Universidad Católica de Córdoba, Córdoba, República Argentina.

social theory, this paper points out a promising dialogue between Joas and Hughes that is not straightforwardly developed in former's work. It starts out by analysing the basic structure of two of the most outspoken and polemical versions of a naturalist and an anti-naturalist account of human action that appeared in the years Hughes published his book. It then moves on to consider how the dilemmas, which were identified in the wake of the debates at mid-century, stand out in our own era in two versions of social theorizing and thought that have emerged out of an analytical-empiricist and a linguistic-interpretive tradition respectively. It argues both these current orientations have successfully overcome several of the shortcomings characteristic of earlier positions. These present-day orientations mark genuine scholarly advances in elaborating an action-based social science. In this context, It also repeatedly calls attention to works by Hans Joas and tries to indicate that they are characterized by strategic choices that hold out the promise for a social science that will be more consistently action-based but also more consistently historically reflective than anything that has existed since the age of profound reconstruction of social thought that forms the subject of Hughes's *Consciousness and Society*.

Keywords: Hughes - social - theory - action - Joas - naturalism

Resumen

Este texto apareció en alemán en un *festschrift* al profesor Hans Joas —una colección de ensayos escritos en honor y celebración de un investigador eminente— con motivo de su cumpleaños número sesenta, en 2010. Compara la monografía de Stuart Hughes (1958) *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* [Conciencia y sociedad: La reconstrucción del pensamiento social europeo, 1890-1930] con *Die Kreativität des Handelns* [*La creatividad de la acción*] de Hans Joas (1992). Dado que el desarrollo de Hughes puede equiparse con las aportaciones de Talcott Parsons (especialmente la convicción de que la reflexión sobre la acción humana es fundamental para una nueva teoría social) y dado que la crítica de Joas a Parsons es clave para su perspectiva teórico-social, este artículo señala un diálogo fructífero entre Joas y Hughes que no se desarrolla directamente en la obra de Joas. Comienza analizando la estructura básica de dos de las versiones más francas y polémicas de un relato naturalista y antinaturalista de la acción humana que aparecieron en los años en que Hughes publicó su libro. A continuación, pasa a considerar cómo los dilemas, que fueron identificados a raíz de los debates de mediados de siglo, se destacan en nuestra propia época en dos versiones de la teorización social y el pensamiento, que han surgido de una tradición analítico-empirista y lingüística-interpretativa, respectivamente. Sostiene que estas dos orientaciones actuales han superado con éxito varios de los defectos característicos de las posturas anteriores. Estas orientaciones actuales marcan auténticos avances académicos en la elaboración de una ciencia social basada en la acción. En este contexto también llama repeti-

damente la atención sobre los trabajos de Hans Joas y trata de indicar que se caracterizan por opciones estratégicas que prometen una ciencia social basada en la acción, pero que también abordarán la reflexión histórica con mayor profundidad, en relación a todo lo que ha existido desde la era de intensa reconstrucción del pensamiento social que constituye el tema de *Consciousness and Society* de Hughes.

Palabras clave: Hughes - teoría social - acción - Joas - naturalismo

Introduction

The introduction to this volume starts out by highlighting a book published half a century ago, namely H. Stuart Hughes' (1958) monograph *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*. It was advertised as "the first book in any language to survey the new social thought that shaped the twentieth century mind." It came to play a path-breaking role.

This was so not only because the author was able to trace thematic analogies between the series of scholars who, not least due to Talcott Parsons' (1937) historical and analytical majestic research programme *The Structure of Social Action* two decades earlier, had come to be regarded as the classics of sociology and social thought. Rather it was, again as emphasized by the editors of this volume, because Hughes went beyond an earlier tradition of writing intellectual history and the history of social thought and social science from the vantage point of individual nations. Instead he adopted a European-wide perspective or, more precisely, a perspective in which intellectual developments on the European continents, specifically in the German-speaking world, in France, and in Italy, were treated in thematically, rather than nationally, structured chapters.

Hughes (1958) wrote the history of social science and social thought in a way that emphasized the contextual nature of these types of inquiry in three senses. Firstly, instead of lining up a number of predecessors, who lay the foundations for later achievements and successes of social science, Hughes emphasized the fragile and tentative nature of the works of the classics. Secondly, he avoided to neatly assign the classical thinkers to singe disciplines that only later have consolidated and solidified into well-established professional denominations. Thirdly, he consistently analyzed social thought and social science within a wide landscape of various intellectual and literary

pursuits, thereby to some extent antedating the form of writing the intellectual history of social thought that Wolf Lepenies (1985) was to excel in some decades later in his masterpiece *Die drei Kulturen*.

Again as pointed in the introduction to this volume, the mountains of articles and books which have appeared in the last half century have added and revised our understanding of intellectual history in general and of the classics of social thought in particular. In particular, some of the accounts have tended to emphasize both the pre-disciplinary history of the social sciences even more strongly but also the intricate interplay between societal and intellectual conditions in the growth of social thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, even after decades of scholarship, the emphasis in Hughes' book on conceptions of societal change and of human consciousness and action in such historical processes in the reconstruction of social thought remains an important focus for any analogous exercise. This is true also of the present volume on historicism and pragmatism.

1. Social Thought in the Classical Age: The Continued Relevance of Hughes' Perspective

The editors of the present volume are correct in arguing that the general character of Hughes' perspective, while still relevant, may to some extent entice a reader to underestimate the reciprocity of intellectual relations between Europe and North America. When discussing American pragmatism, Hughes (1958) takes knowledge of its basic representatives more or less for given and tries to shed additional light on European thinkers by pointing out similarities in their conceptions to those of American pragmatists rather than to engage in an exposition of the achievements of American philosophy *per se*. However, this should not really be seen as a fault in Hughes' account but rather a possible, and unfortunate, effect of an overall perspective that by and large correctly identifies main sources of intellectual innovation and the relative asymmetry that still obtained between Europe and North America and the former turn of a century and perhaps also for some time thereafter.

Hughes himself expresses his basic stance in similar terms:

> I hope to establish that it was Germans and Austrians and French and Italians —rather than Englishmen or Americans or Russians— who in general provided the fund of ideas that was to come to seem most characteristic of our own time. (1958, p. 13)

In that sense *Consciousness and Society* forms an impressive backdrop for the third volume in Hughes' informal trilogy, namely *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965* which is an analysis of the intellectual migration of the 1930's from continental Europe to Britain and the United States and of its long-term consequences (Hughes, 1975).

Hughes' (1958) volume is path-breaking, but it also marks an endpoint. This is so in at least three ways.

Firstly, it is one of the last works by a major American intellectual which takes continental European intellectual superiority in the history of social science and social thoughts for granted. Even if the leading American university reformer of the first decades of the twentieth century, Abraham Flexner, may have been more pronounced in the articulation of such a position from his earliest writings at the turn of the century up until the early 1930's, there would have been few if any leading American thinkers who at that time would have seriously questioned the validity of Flexner's basic view of the intellectual leadership of Europe in social thought and high culture more generally. In this sense, Hughes is one of the last representatives in a long line of leading American university scholars. Even if respect for European achievements persisted long after the publication of *Consciousness and Society*, few Americans propounding such a view would have felt comfortable or competent to adopt the overarching perspective of Hughes but would rather have limited themselves to discussions of the importance of individual European or smaller circles of such scholars. Ten years after the publication of *Consciousness and Society* the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* appeared in 1967. It broke with —what for want of a better word might be termed— the historicist nature of the first, 1934, edition of the same encyclopaedia. The new edition manifested the triumph of American social science and marked the highpoint of the influence of Parsons and of an American version of social science as a systematic rather than an interpretive-conceptual and historical domain of inquiry.

Secondly, it is "an essay in intellectual history" that belongs to a long tradition in terms of its methodological stance (Hughes 1958, p. 3). The focus is not on "popular ideas and practices — with the whole vast realm of folklore and community sentiments" (p. 9). Nor is it on "the activities and aspirations of ruling minorities or the rival minorities striving to supplant them" (p. 10). Rather it is "the history of ideas that eventually will inspire such governing elites" (p. 10). It is "the study of major ideas in their pristine form on higher levels" (p. 11).

Already at the time of writing such a position was implicitly being challenged from three quarters. There were, firstly, a growing interest among historians precisely in popular practices and beliefs, in the history of everyday life, often accompanied by a critical view of the notion of ideas "on higher levels". Furthermore, a few years later the renaissance of interest in macro historical accounts of the development of basic production patterns and systemic forces on a global scale was just about to begin. In such a perspective, the ideas, which Hughes' chose to analyze, might appear to be of relatively minor importance or perhaps as but one additional source of power to those of capital, political domination and military power.

Thirdly, Hughes (1958) emphasized the provisional, some might say contingent, nature of the philosophical commitments of the generation of the 1890's: "The generation of the 1890's had done no more than to deny the tenets of naturalism ... They were content to dwell in a twilight zone of suspended judgment — open to metaphysical possibilities, yet wary of dogmatic assertion", a position Hughes himself embraced as "the most valid philosophical position for the student of human society" (p. 32). This position, which seemed so reasonable to Hughes, was not necessarily incompatible with the prominent research programme of the so-called behavioural revolution in American social science at the time but it was a relationship at least potentially filled with antinomies and tensions; it was perhaps not coincidental that the title of the chapter immediately following the lines where Hughes declared his sympathies for the philosophical orientation of the generation of the 1890's was "The Decade of the 1890's: The Revolt against Positivism".

In other words, Hughes wrote his book in a decade, the 1950's, that involved an unprecedented growth of positivism in American social science, closely associated with the so-called behavioural revolution. The book itself marked not a "revolt against positivism", to quote the title of one of the chapters of his book, but it was a call for reflection and caution in the adoption of a neo-positivist research programme. Hughes book was largely written during his residence at an institution, which had been created as part of the behavioural revolution of American social science, namely the famous Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto.

The book shares some important thematic concerns with Talcott Parsons (year) path-breaking *The Structure of Social Action*, namely a focus on social action and social order against the background of an analysis of works by late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars. This also means

that both Hughes' and Parsons' analysis have important thematic parallels in common with one of the books that constitutes an early cornerstone in the research programme elaborated in the course of the last two decades by Hans Joas (1992), namely his foundational volume *Die Kreativität des Handelns*. *Die Kreativität des Handelns* in fact starts out by a critical examination of Parsons' effort to provide a theoretical synthesis with the category of social action as a cornerstone. Hans Joas' own proposal is to historicize the conceptualisations of both social action and societal change — and in this sense Joas shares many of Hughes' concerns. However, an historical and contextual analysis of this sort does not for Joas mark an endpoint but instead the starting point for a renewed engagement with the programme of elaborating an action-based social theory.

However, despite some similarities, Hughes' book also differed from Parsons' work in major respects, most significantly perhaps the following ones:

Firstly, its main focus was, as just mentioned on continental European developments at large, not on Anglo-Saxon plus German authors. Secondly, Hughes' volume may perhaps be said to constitute an important historical contextualisation of the analysis provided by Parsons. Thirdly, however, if there was an interest in both books in questions concerning the explanation and understanding of social action, then they differed in their basic philosophical and action theoretical perspective. In the end Parsons' analysis had its basic sympathies with causal forms of accounts and had little sympathy for an interpretive and intentional account of action. Hughes' predispositions were exactly the opposite ones.

At the time of publication of Hughes' book, accounts and explanations of social action and the view that social action constituted perhaps the most central problem underlying any social theory and social science, had become greatly elaborated since the time of the classics of social science that were treated both by Parsons and by Hughes. The theme had become directly linked to developments within philosophy of science but also to a profound restructuring of the whole field of the social and behavioural sciences. What might have previously been broadly labelled a positivistic and naturalistic account of human action had now been given an expression that was philosophically more articulate and sophisticated by also more radical and far-reaching than at any time earlier. Simultaneously, anti-positivist and anti-naturalist positions were also being expressed in a sharper and more polemical way than had earlier been the case.

I shall start out by analysing the basic structure of two of the most outspoken and polemical versions of a naturalist and an anti-naturalist account of human action that appeared in these years. I shall then move on to consider how the dilemmas, which were identified in the wake of the debates at mid-century, stand out in our own era in two versions of social theorizing and thought that have emerged out of an analytical-empiricist and a linguistic-interpretive tradition respectively. I shall argue both these current orientations have successfully overcome several of the shortcomings characteristic of earlier positions. These present-day orientations mark genuine scholarly advances in the elaboration of an action-based social science. In this context, I shall also repeatedly call attention to works by Hans Joas and try to indicate that they are characterized by strategic choices that hold out the promise for a social science that will be more consistently action-based but also more consistently historically reflective than anything which has existed since the age of profound reconstruction of social thought that forms the subject of Hughes's (1958) *Consciousness and Society*.

2. Social Thought in a Neo-Classical Age: Reorientations at Mid-Century

In the sequel, I shall highlight how historical change and its relationship to human action was conceptualized not in the formative period 1890-1930, which is discussed in Hughes' book, but in the period, in which his book itself appeared. I shall focus on two important examples of such conceptions as they appeared in widely discussed treatises at the time.

I have chosen two examples, each of which illustrate the writings of a distinguished and sophisticated scholars but also marks a position that is a particularly outspoken, no to say, extreme one within two broad tradition that might perhaps be called a naturalist-empiricist one, an anti-naturalist, linguistic philosophical one.

Firstly I shall treat works by a leading analytical philosopher of science in an empiricist, some would so positivist, and naturalist tradition, Carl Gustav Hempel. I will outline his famous explication of a then dominant conception of explanation within analytical philosophy of science. Hempel was perhaps the most articulate and sophisticated proponent of a naturalistic scheme of explanation that, so he argued, was in principle equally applicable to the explanation of natural phenomena and of human action and history. He also

tried to demonstrate that this scheme could be made compatible with the type of functional analysis which had come to play a dominant role in American social science in its analysis of historical and societal change (Hempel, 1942, 1959, 1965).

The second example stems from the same year in which Hughes' book work out, i.e., in 1958, when a book was published that launched a head-on attack on positivism, naturalism, and on behavouralism in social science. This was a small, polemical volume written by the British philosopher Peter Winch (1958), with the title *The Idea of a Social Science*. It came to serve as a focal point for discussions and critique of the growing dominance of a purely behavioural and positivist version of social science. It was an effort to outline a notion of society from the vantage point of ordinary language philosophy. Its primary objective was to challenge a positivist conception of social science but indirectly it also entailed a critical view of traditional intellectual history.

Peter Winch (1958) tried to demonstrate that the increasingly prominent behavioural conception of human society and human action rested on a fundamental misconception and that a meaningful social science should not use the appearance of numerical regularities as its focus but rather the language games in which our own ordinary lives proceed and are made intelligible and meaningful.

As for intellectual history, the challenge would be most explicitly articulated somewhat later by scholars in history and political theory, most notably Quentin Skinner, in confronting themes raised by but taking a highly critical stance against Winch, although drawing, as did Winch, on the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein, and in Skinner's case also most directly on the philosophy of speech acts as developed by John Austin. This group of scholars, sometimes labelled the Cambridge School, were to exert a profound influence and reshape the nature of intellectual history later in the century.

These two examples are elaborated in texts that have been of importance in their own right and in their own time. However they are also texts of a programmatic nature that have exerted a profound influence on subsequent discussions on human action and historical change in human society. Each of them provides an exemplary answer to the question how historical change should be analyzed and what role human action plays in such processes. Each of them, however, also exemplify dilemmas and pitfalls associated with the philosophical position that they portray.

In a following section of the essay I shall then continue the discussion beyond the two examples by an indirect assessment of their long-term importance against the background of own contemporary age. I shall do so by indicating how in recent years other solutions proposed to the dilemmas encountered by the neo-classical examples that have been proposed from within and beyond the broad traditions represented by Hempel and Winch.

In the section I shall focus on works by Peter Hedström (1998, 2005, 2009) and Quentin Skinner (1978, 1996, 2002). In that context I shall also indicate how Hans Joas' research programme points to fruitful avenues to reach a solution to what for a long time has stood out as major stumbling blocks in research on historical change and human action.

3. Analytical Philosophy and Social Thought: An Empiricist Approach

In the years around the middle of the twentieth century, a leading analytical philosopher in the tradition of logical empiricism, Carl Gustav Hempel (1965), published a series of essays, later collected in a volume with the title *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* on the nature of scientific explanation both in the natural and the human sciences. Some of these dealt directly with problems in the historical and social sciences, perhaps most notably "The Function of General Laws in History" and "The Logic of Functional Analysis", originally published in 1942 and 1959 respectively but others were also of relevance to these fields of inquiry, including "Deductive-Nomological vs. Statistical Explanation" published in 1962.

At the peak of empiricism within the social sciences in the form of the seemingly irresistible rise of the behavioural revolution, logical empiricism within philosophy of science has long ceased to be a coherent school and taken the form of a series of contributions by individual philosophers from within a broad tradition. Carl Gustav Hempel's essays constituted perhaps the most sophisticated defence, which was articulated in the middle of the twentieth century, of a conception of scientific work in the tradition of logical empiricism. To be of relevance to the social and human sciences, it then had to address key problems within these sciences. In particular it had to provide an account of how explanations of processes of historical change might be construed. It also had to pass verdict on the scientific validity and usefulness of what at the time had emerged as the most important effort from within a

broad empiricist tradition to provide a scientific explanation of societal and historical change, namely the paradigm of functionalism and functional explanation. Carl Gustav Hempel took up both these challenges.

A basic idea behind the approach advocated by Hempel (1965) but echoed in writings by other empiricist philosophers was that explanations could and should be reconstructed as valid arguments; the phenomenon to be explained, the *explanandum*, could be described by a statement that followed from other statements, that constituted the premises of the argument, the so-called *explanans*, and the truth of which jointly implied the truth of the *explanandum* statement. The *explanans*-statements were in principle of two types, namely statements, which expressed general laws or at least had a law-like character, in the simplest case imagined in the form of general implications, and singular statements that asserted the truth of particular conditions, sometimes called initial conditions, referred to in the premise of the general implication that asserted a law-like relationship. If both the general statements, referring to a law-like relationship, and the singular statements referring to the initial conditions of the law-like statements, were true, then, by implication, so was the concluding statement referring to the *explanandum*. This general model of explanation, sometimes referred to as the deductive-nomological model of explanation was inspired by advances in the natural sciences. Hempel, and many others including his disciple Richard Rudner (1966), argued that it was equally applicable in the historical and social sciences.

Objections to the effect that the cultural and human sciences were orientated towards individual events and actions and had a focus on the unique nature of individual human actions in their specific context and had little use for or interest in more general and law-like phenomena, were countered along two lines. Firstly, empiricist philosophers could point out that even if this was a correct description of the practices of humanistic scholars, even such scholars tacitly assumed the existence and validity of a number of more general relationships. In this perspective, the humanistic sciences were not so much characterized by their idiographic as opposed to nomothetic character. Instead they tended to use short-hand descriptions in their accounts and explanations rather than to spell out the full and binding set of premises leading up to an account of the phenomenon to be explained. This was essentially the line of argument taken by Hempel (1942) in his early essay on the role of general laws in historical explanations.

Secondly, empiricist philosophers argued that the argument about the distinct nature of the cultural and social sciences in having the task of describing

unique events rested on a misperception of the role of scientific practice in the first place, on a so-called reproductive fallacy. Neither the natural, nor the cultural sciences could possibly and in detail reproduce each and every feature of their domain of inquiry. No matter how idiographic in its orientation, every study of a set of phenomena depends on an ability to make a selection of relevant features and to demonstrate relationships between these different features. In this sense, the cultural sciences are no more focused on individual cases than the natural ones, no more entitled than the natural sciences not to state the nature of the more general relationship by virtue of which different phenomena can be related to each other in a comprehensible way, open to challenge by others on the basis of empirical evidence that might question or further strengthen our beliefs in the more general relationships.

Arguments in defence of an empiricist conception of historical change along these two lines could by virtue of their character as programmatic statements not be disproved. They could however be questioned in terms of their practical usefulness. Perhaps the most simple but also the most embarrassing objection of such a practical nature was the one that concerned the demand for true, or at least empirically well-founded, scientific laws, or at least law-like general statements, as the key element in the premises of the argument leading up to an explanation of the phenomenon to be explained, the *explanandum*. The very notion of a scientific law raised a bundle of intricate philosophical problems about what constitutes a law and how merely accidental generalizations might be distinguished from the necessary connections characteristic of a scientific law. Most efforts to tackle this problem tended to lead to further problems concerning the nature and truth conditions for counterfactual statements, thus posing problems also about the nature of different systems of logic.

From the point of view of the social and human sciences, most of these problems appeared to be both intractable and impractical, since their most obvious problem was the lack of anything resembling a scientific law and the difficulty to provide anything much beyond assertions of some correspondence between variables defined in broad statistical terms and allowing for only statements about very general tendencies among sets of large numbers of data. The essays by Hempel (1942, 1959, 1962, 1965) constituted perhaps the most sophisticated defence that was articulated in the middle of the twentieth century, of a conception of scientific work in the tradition of logical empiricism. However, even he was not really in a position other than to specify desiderata eventually to be fulfilled by practicing social scientists.

The actual types of explanations provided by social scientists seemed to be far away from the deductive-nomological ideal type explicated by the logical-empiricists.

The situation was equally problematic when it came to an analytically philosophical explication and assessment of the then dominants effort within empiricist social science to establish a theoretical framework for the explanation of societal phenomena and historical change, namely the paradigm of functionalism. Hempel (1959) took up this task in an essay on the nature of functional explanation published just shortly after H. Stuart Hughes's analysis of the reorientation of social thought in the classical period. The tone of the essay can perhaps best be characterized as polite and constructive. Hempel adopts a perspective in which functional explanations are seen as falling short of the criteria of adequacy of a proper scientific explanation. However, a functional explanation could, Hempel argued, be seen as a partial explanation, as involving some steps on the way towards the spelling out of a full-fledged explanatory argument. There were however major problems with functional explanations from the perspective of analytical philosophy in an empiricist tradition.

First of all, explaining a phenomenon by stating that it fulfilled some function relative to a social system or subsystem, meant that the phenomenon was not described as the conclusion, the *explanandum*, of a valid argument with true premises. On the contrary, the phenomenon might at best refer to something that might be contained in part of the premises of an explanatory argument. Such an argument would then presuppose that a social system was identified and that necessary conditions for the maintenance of that system in general or of some state of stability of that system could be specified. It might for instance be stated in theoretical terms that some function had to be performed for the system to be preserved or to remain within some boundaries critical for its long-term stability. However, in addition, the role of a particular institutional practice for the performance of that function would have to be specified. Normally several different practices might conceivably contribute to that and at least to some extent to be able to substitute for each other. There would in other words be a series of so-called functional equivalents, not all of which would normally even be identified.

Furthermore, the set of conditions for the maintenance of the system in such a state would often only be specified at a very general level, whereas the set of empirically meaningful conditions tended to be vague or open-ended. If some empirical phenomenon could be said to constitute to contribute to the

maintenance of a system within critical boundaries, it might be argued that such a phenomenon fulfilled a function relative to the system at large. Such a phenomenon would then not be, as should be the case with the *explanandum* of a proper explanation, the necessary conclusion of an argument. It would, however, form part of a set of conditions that might be jointly sufficient for, in this case an *explanandum* in the form of the stability or maintenance of a social system. To have identified some conditions of this type would be an important contribution, but it would be far from a scientific explanation of the phenomenon itself.

However, even in this modest interpretation, the value of the functional explanation would depend on further assumptions that it might be quite difficult to ascertain. Normally, functional explanations in the social sciences tended to be *ex post* and often also *ad hoc*. With the benefit of knowledge of what had actually happened, some events or institutional practices could always be said to have led to the downfall or preservation of a system. Furthermore functional explanations in the social and human sciences tended to depict a world of systemic properties and necessary consequences of processes, but it was normally a world where human actions were derivative relative to higher systemic needs rather than constitutive of the social world as such.

The fact that social and human scholarly practices in an empiricist tradition turned out to be unable to meet the requirements for a proper scientific explanation, as specified by analytical philosophy in the empiricist tradition, when it came to the study of historical and societal change had two consequences:

Firstly, empiricist social science at the time when it became the predominant mode of scholarly self-understanding in the social and human sciences had access to a growing wealth of techniques for data collection and the statistical methods used for their analysis. However it remained unable to explicate what theoretical connections and mechanisms brought about changes in the statistical patterns discerned.

Secondly, even if broad patterns were discerned, there was often no convincing way of relating these patterns to ideas about human action and social change. The long-term result was a social science that possessed neither an idea of what law-like mechanisms brought about social change, nor a conception of the wider relevance of human action to the formation of modern societies. As a result historical change in societies continued to be analyzed in terms not of actions but in terms of macro-societal phenomena, normally in the form of either of societal functions and needs or in terms of broad processes more or less directly related to a conception of such needs.

4. An Idea of a Social Science: On Origins and Consequences of a Linguistic Turn

In the same year in which Hughes' book came out, i.e., in 1958, another publication launched a head-on attack on positivism, naturalism, and on behavouralism in social science. This was a small, polemical volume written by the British philosopher Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*. It came to serve as a focal point for discussions and critique of the growing dominance of a purely behavioural and positivist version of social science. This book was an effort to outline a notion of society from the vantage point of ordinary language philosophy. Its primary objective was to challenge a positivist conception of social science. I have chosen to focus on this book by Winch because it takes a particularly outspoken and polemical stance and because it came to give rise to several important debates.

Perhaps the most important and sophisticated elaboration of the implications for the social and historical sciences of the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein occurred from the mid 1960's and onwards in the writings of Quentin Skinner. Skinner was also influenced by the late Wittgenstein but drew most directly on the philosophy of speech acts as developed by John Austin and often also took the 1946 book by Robin Collingwood's *The Idea of History* as a point of departure and of critique. Quentin Skinner confronted many of the themes raised by Winch but took a highly critical position *vis-à-vis* Winch. The group of scholars, inspired by Skinner and other Cambridge intellectual historian, were sometimes labelled the Cambridge School. They came to exert a profound influence and reshape the nature of intellectual history later in the century. I discuss this in the next section but start out with the influential book by Winch, which through its very radicalism, came to occupy an anti-positivist position, inspired by ordinary language philosophy, that was as extreme and as the empiricist counter position that it launched an all-out attack on.

Peter Winch was an Oxford-trained philosopher. He took his point of departure in the type of linguistic philosophy which had evolved mainly at Oxford and which was inspired by the philosophy of the late Wittgenstein (Winch, 1969). It had made important advances in the analysis of ordinary language and of the speech acts constitutive of language but also of non-linguistic human action. Winch's book is an engaged inquiry into what we mean we term certain phenomena social and how an understanding of such phenomena is at all possible.

His basic answer to the question what makes human behaviour intelligible is that it expresses and is governed by rules that specifies appropriate types of action but also makes it possible to break a rule. The rules provide criteria of identify for classes of action. If we just were to analyze the statistical frequencies of a number of bodily or verbal movements on the basis of external similarities without having grasped what type of actions they belonged, what rules they were embodying and what notion of meaningfulness had prevailed when they were embarked upon, we would not really have understood anything of their social meaning.

We would have disregarded their character of being social relations between human beings who have formed concepts that make rules and human actions meaningful. In that sense there is, Winch argued, a crucial difference between natural and social phenomena:

> An event's character as an act of obedience is *intrinsic* to it in a way which is not true of a clap of thunder ... There existed electrical storms and thunder long before there were human beings to form concepts of them. But it does not make sense to suppose that human beings might have been issuing commands and obeying them before they came to form concepts of command and obedience. (Winch, 1958, p. 125)

However, Winch (1958) adopts a stronger position than that. He argues for the constitutive role of concepts:

> A man's social relations with his fellows are permeated with his ideas about reality. Indeed, 'permeated' is hardly a strong enough word: social relations are expressions of ideas about reality ... the social relations between men and the ideas which men's actions embody are really the same thing considered from different points of view. (p. 23)

Of course it might be retorted that not all forms of action are "permeated" in this sense; many could perhaps best be seen as mere bodily reactions or habitual imitation. Winch, however, rejects such objections. He admits that his analysis primarily refers to so-called discursive ideas. However, he then immediately extends the domain of validity for such ideas and subsumes all types of notions under this encompassing concept:

> But there is no sharp break between behaviour which expresses discursive ideas and that which does not; and that which does not is sufficiently like

> that which does top make it necessary to regard it as analogous to the other ... our language and our social relations are just two different side so of the same coin. (1958, pp. 123, 129)

Constellations of linguistic expressions, concept and actions jointly constitute the different form of life. Winch (1958) explicitly draws on a famous statement by Wittgenstein: "What has to be accepted, the given is —so one could say— forms of life" (p. 40).

Winch articulated his position in explicit opposition to the idea that the social sciences "must follow the methods of natural science rather than philosophy if we are to make significant progress". This is so because "human society involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kind of explanations offered in the natural sciences" (p. 72). In his critique Winch implicitly accepted the appropriateness of an account of natural science along the lines of analytical and empiricist philosophy of science. He assumed that natural science explanations depend on covering laws and that theory construction proceeds in an inductive way by generalizations from large numbers of observations.

In the case of social science, this is however impossible because the social scientist

> has to take seriously the criteria which are applied for distinguishing 'different' kinds of actions and identifying the 'same' kinds of action within the way of life he is studying. It is not open to him to impose his own standards from without. In so far as he does so, the events he is studying lose altogether their character as *social* events. (Winch, 1958, p. 108)

If a researcher nevertheless were to disregard such criteria intrinsic to the way of life been studied, the ensuing results would be trivial and meaningless:

> A man who understands Chinese is not a man who has a firm grasp of the statistical probabilities in the Chinese language. Indeed, he could have that without knowing that he was dealing with a language at all ... 'Understanding' in situations like this, is grasping the *point* or *meaning* of what is being done or said. (Winch, 1958, p. 115)

In a weak interpretation this statement may be seen merely to require that social science must take human actions and the meanings imputed by human

beings to their actions seriously. Such an interpretation would not exclude the identification of social mechanisms and the explanation of social outcomes in terms of the unintended consequences of the purposeful actions of a large number of individual human beings.

There is however also a stronger interpretation that would entail that no explanation of a social phenomenon or a process of social change could be meaningfully undertaken unless is was performed with exclusive recourse to concepts and rules which exist within a given form of life and which would be familiar or at least meaningful to the members of such a form of life. Such a position is still defensible. But it does not constitute a social theory. Rather it is a methodological programme, which might guide empirical research undertakings. As a methodological programme it combines advocacy of a particular epistemological basis for the social sciences with a strong commitment to a very particular form of methodological individualism, distinct from the well-known positions advocated from within a broad popperian, and basically naturalist, tradition.

The programme of Winch (1958), despite its skeleton character, has —perhaps also because of its polemical and uncompromising nature— stimulated lively debate in a several disciplines. In its early stages this debate involved both philosophers and representatives of social science disciplines. Among the participants in this debate were Alfred Louch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Edmund Leach and Ernest Gellner. Several of these and other scholars, including Georg Henrik von Wright (1971) in his famous book on *Explanation and Understanding* later elaborated a position either in explicit opposition to Winch, as did Ernest Gellner, or used Winch as one significant reference point, as did von Wright and Macintyre.

For all its brevity and programmatic character, echoes of Winch's argument can be discerned in many of the debates about the linguistic turn, the constitutive role of language, and in efforts to understand societal institutions and practices, including practices of writing, in terms of an analysis of speech acts in given contexts. In this sense, the book and the debate around it to some significant extent came to serve as an early impetus to a whole range of later debates that came to crystallize around ideas about the constitutive role of language and of the need for conceptual, anthropological and contextual forms of understanding as opposed to a naturalistic study of behavioural patterns.

5. Social Action and Social Mechanisms

In a preceding section, I argued that in the mid-twentieth century there existed a disjuncture in the relationship between empiricist philosophy of science and empiricist social sciences practiced in the wake of the so-called behavioural revolution. On the whole empiricist philosophy appeared to be too stringent for empirical social science to be able to comply with its requirements. Hence these requirements tended at best to be rhetorically invoked but practically neglected or, more commonly, to be regarded as more or less irrelevant for the practices of social science.

There also existed a disjuncture between the growth of quantitative, normally survey-based, research on social trends and general social theory in a Parsonian tradition, in which the category of social action was central but largely unrelated to empirical concerns. At the same, there was from the mid-1950's onwards and accelerating in the 1960's a growing use in the social sciences at large of rationalistic models that had previously been largely restricted to the domain of the economic sciences. A path-breaking book form the mid-1950's was characteristically called *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs, 1957).

In consequence and as asserted above, sociologist by and large continued to analyze societies not in terms of action but in terms of macro-societal phenomena, whether interpreted as exemplifying societal functions or being broadly related to societal processes of modernization.

This situation, with a series of disjuncture's, gradually came to be regarded as largely inevitable. It is only in the course of the last two and half decades that the situation has begun to change. One important reason for this is the rise of a new type of analytical social science that addresses both the problem of scientific explanations and the problem of human agency and its role in processes of social and historical change. This type of social science, sometimes labelled the analytical turn, has emphasized clarity and the need to "dissect" societal phenomena in their constituents and analyzable parts (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998; Hedström, 2005; Hedström & Bearman, 2009).

Analytical social science of this type has a strong empirical orientation linked to its preference for a mode of theorizing that embraces rather than avoids formalization. It proceeds by distinguishing the relevant background conditions for an action, then tries to discern individual beliefs, desires and opportunities ushering in an individual action that, in conjunction with a large number of analogous actions, will contribute to emergent social outco-

mes, in the sense that social outcomes tend to be unintended consequences of the actions of a large number of interacting individuals.[1]

The analysis will involve an analysis also of aggregate patterns, including spatial distributions of inequalities. It will often rely on an analysis of social processes in terms of topologies of networks and of social norms and informal rules that impinge on the actions of members of a community. An important ambition of this type of analytical social science has been to identify an increasing number of general social mechanisms.

These mechanisms tend to be on the level of middle-range theory and to avoid broad historical accounts but they may be the closest social science has come to the kind of law-like statements that Hempel and analytical philosophers in an empiricist tradition saw as indispensable for a proper scientific explanation. Social mechanisms are cast in terms of human action and rely on assumptions of the conventions governing such action but also on assumptions that how human may form justified belies of their potentials to realize their desires. The idea of mechanisms therefore also serve to link an understanding of what constitutes rational action in given circumstances to an interpretation of large amounts of data about social and spatial developments.

As a consequence, there are a number of efforts underway to build bridges across the chasm that used to exist between empiricist philosophy of science with its demand for explanations in terms of covering laws and empirical social science with its masses of data. The advances made have meant that for the first time in decades there is a situation when a significant group of contemporary social scientists seems confident that these scholarly practices in due course can realistically and increasingly operate in a mode analogous to practices adopted within the natural sciences. In fact, several of the key representatives of this type of social science have also entered in collaboration with natural scientists and embarked on joint empirical projects.

However even so, neo-empiricist analytical social science faces two significant problems: firstly the social mechanisms, which have been identified and which form the backbone of this movement, may well be characterized as being law-like. However, it is a social science that has decided to focus on middle-range theory. It remains to be explored and specified what the con-

[1] For a succinct statement of this position see Peter Hedström (2009) "The Analytical Turn in Sociology" in Peter Hedström and Björn Wittrock (Eds.), *Frontiers of Sociology* (pp. 331-342).

textual boundaries are of middle-range social mechanisms. In particular both the relevance and accuracy of middle-range social mechanisms in research with a broad historical orientation is by necessity an open one. The same is true for the explanation of large-scale historical change.

Secondly, in its analysis of the role of human action, it starts out from assumptions of typical actions, beliefs and desires. They provide crucial elements in the operation of social mechanisms. The results are processes where more or less rationally conceived human beings through their actions produce a social outcome that is often quite different from the intentions of the human beings themselves as an early stage in a process. In the words of perhaps the most prominent representative of analytical sociology, Peter Hedström, "actors make society 'tick', and without their actions social processes would come to a halt" (2009, p. 333). Desires and beliefs provide reasons for human beings to act. However in constructing such constellations of beliefs, desires, reasons, and actions, the focus in analytical sociology is on what me be considered typical constellations.

This can be justified by the reasons given by Peter Hedström (2009), namely that it has to be so because "the focus on actions is merely an intermediate step in an explanatory strategy to understand change at a social level" (p. 333). However, it could also be argued that for this very reason it would be valuable to have a differentiated theory of different forms of human action, where human action and its different forms, including rational-deliberative actions as well as habitual actions but also constitutive and ground- and rule-breaking forms of action, were systematically conceptualized.

It is precisely when it comes to these two points of major historical transformations and of human action conceptualized in a rich and diversified framework that Hans Joas has made some of his and contemporary sociology's most important contributions. In the concluding part of the essay, I shall come back to the last two points above.

6. Meanings and Contexts: The Reconstruction of Political and Social Thought

Already in *The Idea of a Social Science* itself but also in the debates around it, three deep-seated problems became visible and were not given any real solutions (Winch, 1958).

Firstly, despite the emphasis on human actions and their meanings, the

book did only provide an analysis of one special type of action, namely that drawing on so-called discursive ideas, and then reduced other forms to this particular form. Much of later work in the tradition of linguistic philosophy and speech act theory has resembled Winch in this respect. Thus even the type of contextual analysis of political ideas that has reshaped the field of history of political thought has explicitly rejected any effort to hermeneutically understand the mind, the intentions and beliefs of the individual author of a text. Instead the action involved in a speech act is interpreted with reference to the linguistic rules of a given language and to what constituted dominant texts in a field at the time of writing and to which any new intervention into the field had to relate but also to the wider social and political context in which the writing of the text took place. Jointly assumptions of these types of normalized forms of conditions external to the text itself serve to give an interpretation of the meaning of a text and of the possible intentions behind writing it.

Secondly, this also means that for all its polemical verve, the book may exhibit a clear idea what social science is not. However, it is less clear what its own idea of social science and human action really is. This is exemplified by its tendency to lump together a number of phenomena that are all described as vitiating the very idea of a rational or a causal explanation and that are referred to with terms such as beliefs, desires, intention and several others.

Thirdly, it is unclear how Winch wants to analyze situations when human beings provide radically different interpretations of interactions in which they are involved. Sometimes Winch seems to suggest this is not a real problem. Even in situations of war, human beings are involved in an activity which "is governed by conventions". But of course different parties in such a situation may have drastically different interpretations of how different kinds of actions should be described and understood and whether they jointly constitute something sufficiently close to a convention accepted by both parties to be labelled a war (Winch, 1958).

Modern history is filled with such examples of radical disjuncture of interpretations. On the whole, Winch seems to make far-reaching assumptions about a shared conceptual apparatus and a shared form of historical and societal consciousness. He concedes, drawing on what he calls "the jargon of social psychology", that there might be differences between 'in-group attitudes' and 'out-group attitudes', but this seems to weak a conceptual part to make sense of the series of disasters, ethnic cleansings, and genocides characteristic of parts of the twentieth century. Here we are at the limit when the

insistence on performing the analysis within the context of one set of linguistic and, by implication, social rules may be upheld but at the price of yielding no information about the meaning of what is happening in terms that are meaningful also to the members of the life forms concerned. It is precisely here that traditional historicism would have provided answers and where the careful contextualism of Quentin Skinner and his colleagues provides some clear answers as does the historical phenomenology of Karl Jaspers. It is also precisely here that a series of works by Hans Joas in the last decade and a half open up avenues both for empirical research and analytical reconstruction.

However concerning all the three problems just highlighted it seems clear that a much more cogently argued anti-naturalist position, inspired by the works of the late Wittgenstein and the speech act theory of Austin, has been articulated in the course of the last three decades by Quentin Skinner and a number of scholars around him.

Let me first only briefly point to the *oeuvre* of Quentin Skinner. There can be little doubt that nobody has contributed more than Skinner in the last three decades to a profound rethinking of what it means to write the history of political thought. Furthermore, no one in the course of the last century has been able to provide such a cogently and carefully argued analysis of the history of late medieval, renaissance and early modern political thought. Nor has probably anybody in the course of the twentieth century written on the history of political thought in an equally philosophically and methodologically both informed and guided way. First of all, Skinner (1978) already in his early *magnum opus*, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, broke decisively with an earlier predominant tradition of seeing the writings of the great political philosophers as timeless and their works as trans-historical ideational units to be considered elevated from the contexts in which they occur.

Skinner expressed this in the preface of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* in the following way:

> To study the context of any major work of political philosophy is ... to equip ourselves ... with a way of gaining greater insight into its author's meaning than we can ever hope to achieve simply from reading the text itself 'over and over again' as the exponents of the 'textualist' approach have characteristically proposed... It enables us to characterise what their authors were *doing* in writing them. (p. xiii)

More precisely, this procedure allows for an interpretation of the text and for stating what the intention of the author might have been in writing it:

> For to understand what questions a writer is addressing, and what he doing with the concepts available to him, is equivalent to understand some of his basic intentions in writing, and thus to elicit what he may have meant by what he said — or failed to say ... we are not merely providing historical background for our interpretation, we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself. (Skinner, 1978, pp. xiii-xiv)

This type of recovery of intentions is at the heart of a contextually sensitive analysis of the history of political and social thought, but it is also of immediate relevance for the study of behaviour: "in order to explain why ... an agent acts as he does, we are bound to make reference to this vocabulary [i.e. normative vocabulary], since it evidently figures as one of the determinants of his action" (1978, p. xiv). In other words normative vocabulary is not an instrumentally available resource. It also has a constraining and partly constitutive effect "upon behaviour itself". However, the general argument of Skinner has implications far beyond the realm of history of political thought. In the last instance it concerns our potentials for understanding and explaining human action. This in turn is only possible if we take the illocutionary force of speech acts into account. We have to understand what an agent was doing in writing or uttering some words:

> Acts ... embody conventional meanings which, when we know the language involved —whether a natural language or a language of gesture— we can hope to read off. When we claim, that is, to have recovered the intentions embodied in a text, we are engaged in nothing more mysterious than this process of placing them within whatever contexts make sense of them. (Skinner, 1996, p. 151)

This position has important implications that may not be immediately obvious, in particular the following ones:

Firstly, intentions cannot be recovered through processes of empathic imagination but through a careful analysis of the linguistic and ideological conventions that obtain in a society at a particular point in time. It is necessary to capture the nature of such linguistic and social conventions since it is only relative to norms inherent in such conventions that actions are at all interpretable, whether the norms are being followed or broken.

Secondly, it is only relative to such normative conventions and sets of beliefs obtaining at a particular time and place that it is possible to judge whether particular forms of behaviour or belief can be deemed rational or rather rationally acceptable within a form of life (Skinner, 1996, p. 153).

Thirdly, by focusing on "the range of things that writers and speakers may be capable of doing in (and by) the use of ... words and sentences", it is possible to speak of the meaning of linguistic expressions in a way that easily avoids the kinds of criticisms that deconstructivists have labelled: "recent anti-intentionalist theories of interpretation have given us scarcely any reason that we must abandon the quest for authorial intentionality in the sense in which Collingwood and Passmore are interested in it" (Skinner, 1996, p. 147). The type of intentionality in which Skinner is interested has to do with the fact that in order to understand a proposition we have to see it "as a move in argument. To understand it, we may need to grasp why it seemed appropriate to make just that move, and hence to issue just that utterance" (1996, p. 148). This in turn is only possible if we are able to understand also the illocutionary force of a speech-act, i.e., to take an example from Austin often quoted by Skinner, we have to understand that a policeman calling to a skater on a pond saying in saying "The ice over there is very thin" should be taken to be not just a descriptive statement but to involve a warning to the skater.

In sum, we have to grant that it is impossible "to think other people's thoughts after them" (1996, p. 150). However, we may still speak of the meaning of an utterance and of the intention involved in such an action in the more restricted sense of understanding the conventions that have governed language use in specific contexts and that any speaker or writher within that context has had to relate to in making in argument.

Fourthly, Skinner does not use an all-embracing category to lump together all kinds of linguistic and mental phenomena, including beliefs, motives, purposes and intentions. On the contrary he makes a clear distinction between for instance intentions and motives. Intentions can be recovered via an understanding of existing conventions and appear in an internal relationship *vis-à-vis* forms of life. For this reason, intentions cannot be inserted as premises in causal explanations of the covering-law model required by empiricist philosophers of science, in particular Hempel.

The process of recovering the meaning and intention of an action through a process of grasping the context of conventions in which it has occurred constitutes, Skinner insists, not the identification of a cause but forms part of a process of interpretation and understanding that is necessary for any explanation, causal or not, to be possible However, contrary to the arguments of for instance Peter Winch and other radical anti-naturalists, this does not mean that no causal explanation may be given of human action. Nor does it preclude that phenomena such as motives, or phenomena gi-

ving rise to motives, may function in a causal explanation of human action (Skinner, 2002, p. 138). However, such causal explanations need not necessarily be of the covering-law model the empiricists and naturalists have tended to insist on.

Fifthly, the neo-classical philosophical debate on the nature and explanation of human action and societal change, both in its analytical-empiricist form as exemplified by Hempel and in its radical anti-naturalist form as exemplified by Winch, came to appear as increasingly irrelevant for the methodological and theoretical pursuits of practicing social scientists and historians. Skinner's position on the other hand, like that of Peter Hedström, has direct methodological implications and has served as a source of inspiration for scholars who have achieved what can only be labelled a revolution in the writing of the history of political thought, where a focus on context and meaning, has replaced an earlier tradition of focusing almost exclusively on texts and relegation other concerns to a diffuse realm of background factors.

Sixthly, on a theoretical level the position of Skinner, has entailed that the perennial question of rational action to some extent has been reconsidered and that an area has been opened up for fruitful interaction between philosophers, sociologists, and economists with a focus on decision theory on the one hand and on the other historians and anthropologists with a focus on grasping what courses of action may be characterized as rational given contextually prevailing conventions and acceptable sets of belief. This holds the promise of overcoming a traditional dichotomy between rationalism and relativism, and it is important to see that Skinner's position does not involve relativism either in epistemic or methodological terms. Rather his position is, as he himself, points out, reminiscent, in another context, of the one embraced by Max Weber (Skinner, 2002, p. 143).[2]

7. The Reconstruction of Social Theory: Social Mechanisms, Linguistic Contextualism, and the Creativity of Action

Theories of social mechanisms and theories of meaning and context may have different points of departure, analytical-empiricist in the one case, linguistic-interpretive in the other. However they have both entailed major advances in contemporary social theory or perhaps rather, following Hughes,

[2] See also Palonen (2003): *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, for a discussion of Weber and Skinner.

to an incipient reconstruction of European social thought, albeit in a different context than that of the period 1890-1930.

Both these two streams of scholarship and thought have contributed to a renewed interest in the relationship between philosophical-epistemic and empirical-methodological concerns. They are also both characterized by a focus on human action as the central category in social theory. Of course, Parsons' conceptualization of social action has been intensely debated ever since it was first proposed. However, scholars in these new, or rather renewed, traditions of social theory they have not only reopened debates that tended to become closed in the wake of the Parsons' proposal for a neo-classical synthesis. Such a reopening has taken place within social theory already decades ago. However, they have closely linked their focus on human action to empirical and textual research practices and may have thereby contributed to a re-examination of human action as a basic category of social science in a way reminiscent of the classical debates so elegantly discussed in Hughes (1958).

Furthermore, theoreticians both of social mechanism and of theories of meaning and context insist on the central role of intentions in accounting for actions. Within an analytical-empiricist tradition such an orientation has traditionally tended to be dismissed as being either superfluous or arbitrary or else circular. The concept of intention has been seen as superfluous since it allegedly inserts a category that is not amenable to systematic analysis or observation and simply adds a category that will make the explanatory framework more cumbersome without adding any explanatory force or information. It has been seen as arbitrary in the sense that the only way of assigning some explanatory role to the category of intention has allegedly been through a process of empathic imagination or introspection not subject to interpersonally controllable standards. It has been seen as circular since, barring this last procedure, the existence of an intention would only be something that could be inferred *ex post* from observing the very events that was to be explained.

As outlined above, scholars in both the tradition of neo-analytical theories of social mechanisms and those in the tradition of linguistic-interpretive analysis reject these standard empiricist objections to an analysis of intentions and actions. They do so by avoiding any effort to engage in an introspection into the inner deliberations of human beings. In the linguistic-interpretive case, the solution consists in an analysis of conventions governing the intelligibility of speech acts and their illocutionary force. These conventions are social and constitute necessary conditions for assigning meaning to speech acts.

They are neither arbitrary, nor superfluous. They constitute a necessary first step of interpretation of an action but do not preclude further steps involving other categories in the explanation of an action.

Neo-analytical scholars with a focus on social mechanisms admittedly focus on typical constellations of beliefs, desires, reasons, and actions. However, it is, they insist, human beings with their desires, beliefs and reasons who choose to act or not to act and take advantage or not of opportunities that exist. The concept of social mechanism constitutes the crucial link the actions of large numbers of individuals and social outcomes on a collective level. The identification of social mechanisms requires careful empirical research but the theoretical constructions depend on also on an analysis of conventions governing social life, including linguistic usage, in different contexts. Perhaps it can be said that this analytical research programme is thereby able to link up previously distinct research endeavours within rational choice theory, graph theory and survey and experimental research and to discover social mechanisms that operate in different societies and contexts.

Both the neo-analytical and the linguistic-interpretive contributions from recent years have been characterised by a focus on social and linguistic conventions in the analysis of social action. They have also chosen to concentrate on a limited number of key aspects of action and have abstained from efforts at elaborating an overarching typology of action. In the case of so-called analytical sociology there has also been a clear focus on empirical social phenomena on a middle-range level rather than, say, on a macro-historical scale.

By these strategic choices both neo-analytical and linguistic-interpretive analysis have achieved significant scholarly advances. They have also been able to reconstitute some of the close links between philosophy, empirical research practices and the reconstruction of social thought that forms the focus of H. Stuart Hughes (1958) volume *Consciousness and Society* on European social thought in its classical period. It against this background that the scholarly contributions of Hans Joas must be seen. In this respect there are six major contributions that should, in a few concluding statements, be highlighted.

Firstly, Hans Joas has, together Jürgen Habermas, probably contributed more than anyone else to overcome the intellectual divide between European and

American social thought that forms a theme across the volumes of H. Stuart Hughes' trilogy. In particular, from his earliest works onwards he has been able to demonstrate that intellectually seminal links can be established between pragmatism and classical European social theory and philosophy of action.

Secondly, Hans Joas has already in early works but in a distinct and unique way from *Die Kreativität des Handelns* onwards elaborated the outlines of a comprehensive theory of action.

One key characteristic of this book is that it refuses to reduce the problem of action to a technical problem of analyzing and extending one specific class of actions, for instance in the form of means-ends-rationality, and then delineate it from all other forms that are assigned to a residual category. There are few parallels in contemporary social theory to this move and to taking equally seriously rational-deliberative actions, norm-guided action and the specific but foundational form of transformative action that Hans Joas (1992) has analyzed in terms of the creativity of action. This strategy seems to be an intellectual pursuit in the spirit of Max Weber.

Thirdly, few other scholars have extended such an ambitious theory of action also to include processes of the constitution and emergence of values and of commitments that come to identify the core of a human being. With the book *Die Entstehung der Werte*, Hans Joas (1997) has been able to strengthen and to provide increased plausibility to his analysis of creative action. But through this move he has also been able to open up a realm of research that both the neo-analytical and the linguistic-interpretive scholars have placed outside of their immediate concern and have had to treat as external to analysis of action proper. By refusing to treat values as something externally given, avenues are opened up to an understanding of processes of preference formation also within contexts where rational-deliberative forms of analysis may be the most immediately relevant ones.

Fourthly, the analysis of values and their processes of origination and emergence is relevant for several contemporary discussions in social theory, including interest in so-called cultural traumas but also in a field in which Hans Joas (2000, 2008) has played a pioneering role, namely that of bringing war and the experience of war into the core of social theory.

Fifthly, Hans Joas has extended his analysis of ways in which value commitments and solidified and contested on a collective level to research programme with a focus on processes concerning the emergence of new institutional

arrangements and the institutionalization of norms and thereby to an analysis of norm-guided actions. Hans Joas' major project on human rights and the articulation of such rights over long periods of time and in different contexts, has the potential to re-establish close links between social theory and legal theory of a completely new type.

Sixthly, this research programme of Hans Joas also explores and extends the role of social theory in the contemporary world, where, contrary to the world analysed by H. Stuart Hughes, the pre-eminence and intellectual hegemony of Europe is a phenomenon of the past. One key aspect of the programme on the so-called *Sakralität der Person* is that it involves empirical research on processes, involving agents from vastly different cultural, religious and political backgrounds, interactively articulating a commitment, expressed in universalistic terms albeit emerging out of particularistic processes of interpretation and contention. This research programme is also linked to Hans Joas' series of important publications on the cultural values of Europe and on world religions. These are projects of relevance for instance for an assessment of Max Weber's classical works on the world religions but also for an understanding of the contemporary world and what an action-based analysis of this world may amount to (Joas & Wiegand, 2005; 2007).

With this last-mentioned programme of research Hans Joas takes up the challenge, where neo-analytical and linguistic-interpretive forms of contemporary social theory stop short, namely to extend the action-based analysis also to processes of global change. With this step we once again touch upon themes at the core of the period of reconstruction of European social thought in the years 1890-1930, but themes that were also taken up again by mid-century. Specifically, the theme of understanding profound historical change in a global context re-emerges.

Much of the debate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries about the origins, the meaning and the nature of world history have as a reference point a small but highly influential book, namely Karl Jaspers' (1949) *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte,* translated into English in 1953. Jaspers' book remains till this day a powerful argument for the global nature of the emergence of, what might be termed, human second-order consciousness and reflexivity and thus also of the origins of a history of human consciousness as a common category beyond national or religiously demarcated narratives. It carries a further importance by virtue of the fact that its basic conceptions emerge out of a tradition that from the start, with Husserl as the towering figure, opposed historicist readings of human development.

In a sense Jaspers' book forms an effort to write the history of conscious humankind beyond historicist readings. In that sense it also stands in an interesting and intricate relationship to another work from the immediate postwar period, namely Friedrich Meinecke's (1946) *Die deutsche Katasrophe*. Meinecke was one of the relatively few leading German learned men who explicitly came to embrace a positive conception of historicism. His late work, *Die deutsche Katastrophe*, involves a re-reading of German history and an effort to critically examine precisely those features in German history during the last two hundred years which Meinecke had previously given such value appreciation as to justify the semantic relocation of historicism from a largely critical and negative valuation into a positive one. What Jaspers did was in a sense the opposite, namely to find categories sufficiently universal to serve as anchoring points for the writing of a common history of human consciousness and change beyond national and regional preconceptions.

In recent years the works of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (2005) and Robert N. Bellah (2005) have reinvigorated this discussion and have demonstrated its urgent relevance for any theorizing in the social and historical sciences. Hans Joas' current research in this area has already now left an important imprint that is likely to grow in the years to come. Hans Joas' contributions in this field have a triple significance. They extend and deepen an historical understanding of the role of human action in the constitution of some of the most fundamental institutional features of human history. They call attention to dilemmas of value and normative commitments in our own age. They finally also clarify some of the most significant prerequisites for the meaningful assignment of the category of action and for the assignment of intention beyond the intentionality of mere instrumentality within the immediate temporal and spatial region of an individual. In other words the highlight links between human action and experiences of a transcendental nature (Joas, 2004). Thus the further analysis of the theme of the axial age holds more promise than possibly that of any other theme in leading contemporary social theory to the core of what was at stake in the debates a hundred years ago at the time of reconstruction of social thought. This is likely to be focal point for an encounter of different interpretations of the role of historical transformations and crystallizations, of the nature of human action, and of experiences of self-transcendence.

References

Bellah, R. N. (2005). What is axial about the Axial Age*? European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, *44*(1), 69-89. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975603000012

Downs, A. (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper & Row.

Collingwood, R. G. (1946). *The Idea of History*. Oxford University Press.

Eisenstadt, S. N. (2005). Die Achsenzeit in der Weltgeschichte in H. Joas & K. Wiegand (Eds.), *Die kulturellen Werte Europas* (pp. 40-68). Suhrkamp.

Hempel, C. G. (1942). The Function of General Laws in History. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *39*(2), 35-48. https://doi.org/10.2307/2017635

Hempel, C. G. (1959). The Logic of Functional Analysis in L. Gross (Ed.), *Symposium on Sociological Theory* (pp. 271-307). Harper & Row.

Hempel, C. G. (1962). Deductive-Nomological vs. Statistical Explanation in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell (Eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Vol. III, pp. 98-169). University of Minnesota Press. https://hdl.handle.net/11299/184632

Hempel, C. G. (1965). *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*. Free Press.

Hedström, P. (2005). *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488801

Hedström, P. (2009). The Analytical Turn in Sociology in P. Hedström & B. Wittrock (Eds.), *Frontiers of Sociology* (pp. 331-342). Brill.

Hedström, P. & Bearman, P. (Eds.). (2009). *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford University Press.

Hedström, P. & Swedberg, R. (Eds.). (1998). *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511663901

Hughes, H. S. (1958). *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*. Knoft.

Hughes, H. S. (1975). *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965*. Harper.

Jaspers, K. (1949). *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Artemis.

Joas, H. (1992). *Die Kreativität des Handelns*. Suhrkamp.

Joas, H. (1997). *Die Entstehung der Werte*. Suhrkamp.

Joas, H. (2000). *Kriege und Werte. Studien zur Gewaltsgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Velbrück Wissenschaft.

Joas, H. (2004). *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*. Herder.

Joas, H. & Knöbl W. (2008). *Kriegsverdrängung. Ein Problem in der Geschichte der Sozialtheorie*. Suhrkamp.

Joas, H. & Wiegand, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Die kulturellen Werte Europas*. Verlag.

Joas, H. & Wiegand, K. (Eds.). (2007). Säkulariesierung und die Weltreligionen. Suhrkamp.

Lepenies, W. (1985). *Die drei Kulturen. Soziologie zwischen Litteratur und Wissenschaft*. Hanser.

Meinecke, F. (1946). *Die deutsche Katastrophe*. Europa Verlag.

Parsons, T. (1937). *The Structure of Social Action*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Palonen, K. (2003). *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rethoric*. Polity.

Rudner, R. S. (1966). *Philosophy of Social Science*. Prentiss Hall.

Skinner, Q. (1978). *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance*. Cambridge University Press

Skinner, Q. (1996). From Hume's Intentions to Deconstruction and Back. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *4*(2), 142-154. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.1996.tb00046.x

Skinner, Q. (2002). *Visions of Politics. Volume 1: Regarding Method*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790812

Von Wright, G. H. (1971). *Explanation and Understanding*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Winch, P. (1958). *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Winch, P. (Ed.). (1969). *Studies in the philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.