Teil 3: Theorietechniken der Begriffsbildung

Fabian Anicker

Deep Theorizing:

The Conceptual Logic of Social Ontology and Theory of Society

Abstract: The discourse on theorizing in sociology is predominantly shaped by empiricist approaches that conceptualize theories as explanations of empirical phenomena. Although calls for greater theoretical pluralism are recurring, only causal-explanatory theories are sufficiently well understood to offer practical instructions for theorizing. Other forms of theorizing are frequently gestured toward but are usually not well defined. This article addresses this blind spot by explicating two fundamental forms of theory in sociology: social ontology and the theory of society. Both forms can be characterized by the theoretical problems they address and the conceptual logics they employ. The article retraces how social ontology and theory of society are developed, how they mobilize concepts for theoretical understanding, and what challenges arise when working within the respective forms.

Keywords: social ontology, theory of society, theorizing, concepts, conceptual logic

Deep Theorizing:

Zur begrifflichen Logik von Sozialtheorie und Gesellschaftstheorie

Zusammenfassung: Der Diskurs über das *Theorizing* in der Soziologie ist vorwiegend von empiristischen Ansätzen geprägt, die sämtliche Theorien als Erklärungen empirischer Phänomene konzipieren. Obwohl immer wieder eine stärkere Berücksichtigung des theoretischen Pluralismus angemahnt wird, sind bisher nur Theorien vom Typ der Kausalerklärung hinreichend klar bestimmt, um konkrete Anleitungen zum Theoretisieren zu bieten. Andere Formen des *Theorizing* werden zwar häufig angestrebt, bleiben aber vergleichsweise undefiniert – ihnen fehlt semantisches Selbstbewusstsein. Dieser Aufsatz adressiert diese Leerstelle, indem er zwei grundlegende Formen soziologischer Theorie expliziert: Sozialtheorie und Gesellschaftstheorie. Diese Formen lassen sich nach den basalen Problemen, die sie adressieren, sowie nach ihren begrifflichen Logiken charakterisieren. Der Beitrag zeichnet nach, wie diese Theorien entwickelt werden, wie sie Begriffe für das theoretische Verstehen mobilisieren und welche Herausforderungen sich bei der Arbeit innerhalb der jeweiligen Formen stellen.

Schlüsselwörter: Sozialtheorie, Gesellschaftstheorie, Theoriebildung, Begriffe, Begriffslogik

Sociology rarely reflects on theory at a general level, independent of specific paradigms. While much is known about Foucauldian discourse analysis, the logic of rational choice explanations, or Bourdieu's field theory, little is understood about the structure of sociological theory as such. If authors like Luhmann, Habermas, or Parsons were to fall into obscurity, we would not only forget their material assumptions about the social world, but also everything they taught us about theory in general.

The awareness of general theoretical logic was not always so weak. The consolidation of sociology as a discipline was accompanied by impactful metatheoretical debates. The formative disputes in sociology about value judgments (Weber 1922b) or the so-called "positivism dispute" (Adorno et al. 1969) brought the self-understanding of different strands of sociology to the fore, but the insights from these disputes came at the cost of polemical distortions and focused on the philosophy of the social sciences rather than the actual practice of theory. More recent attempts to synthesize theoretical knowledge at a level *above* specific paradigms were mostly short-lived. This also applies to the German debate on systematic theory comparison (see Greshoff et al. 2016), as well as the debate on theory construction (Stinchcombe 1987; Zhao 1996) that aimed at consolidating theoretical skill and knowledge about theories independent of particular paradigms. While the theory construction movement was too closely aligned with a Popperian, hypothetico-deductive method of theory development and testing,[1] the predominantly German debate on theory comparison failed to establish enough common ground between theories to be really useful.

The debate on *theorizing* is the latest attempt to establish metatheoretical knowledge in sociology by aiming at the practical side of theory construction. It currently seems to be slightly more successful in producing sustained interest in the professionalization of theory development in sociology than its predecessors. It is more ambitious than the literature on heuristics, which largely consists of practical, hands-on advice for doing theory without any systematic intent (Mills 1959; Becker 1998; Abbott 2004). Theorizing aims to understand theory-building as a research practice that can be systematized and developed, similarly to methods in empirical research. This is a somewhat new angle on metatheoretical knowledge in sociology because it is impartial regarding different theoretical traditions and is intended to be directly practical and relevant to material work in social (or sociological) theory. Indeed, if there is a chance to anchor non-partisan and general knowledge about social theory in the field, it is probably by showing how this knowledge is *actually useful for doing social theory* – just like knowledge about core ideas of quantitative or qualitative methods is useful for doing empirical research. The theorizing discussion

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1 This seems to be the case so far with "Analytical Sociology", too. Unlike its namesake in philosophy, it shows little interest in clarifying the general conditions of theory and conceptual work. It relies on a Popperian theory of science and its mainstream supports a specific research paradigm, the social mechanisms approach (Hedström 2005; Hedström/Swedberg 2010).

could make the knowledge of competent social theorists explicit, thereby making it easier, especially for incoming scholars, to learn and teach social theory, to develop good habits of theoretical thinking, and to avoid getting lost in the labyrinth of author-specific discussions.

1. How can theoretical plurality be incorporated into theorizing?

However, several authors have pointed out that theorizing, in its present form, is not yet a systematic study of theory-building techniques. Currently, it is strongly influenced by an empiricist understanding, championed by Richard Swedberg (2012; 2014). The core assumption of empiricist theorizing is that theorizing ought to proceed from concrete, empirical observations to find new concepts for understanding and explaining data (not unlike *Grounded Theory*, Glaser/Strauss 1967). Therefore, theorizing is heavily focused on just one kind of theoretical structure: quantitative or qualitative *explanations* of given phenomena (Krause 2016b; Carleheden 2016; Anicker 2019). However, the practice of theory shows that there are more ways of doing theory than this monolithic picture of theorizing suggests (Anicker/Armbruster 2024). Andreas Schmitz and Christian Schmidt-Wellenburg recently analyzed empirical data on methodological and theoretical skills of German social theorists (Schmitz/Schmidt-Wellenburg 2024). The ideal-typical styles of theoretical thought that they distill from the data – for example, theorizing that is guided by and directed to analytical clarity, emancipatory theorizing, critical de- and reconstruction, practical-relational theorizing, and others – offer a vivid impression of the diversity of theoretical thought. There is increasing awareness that this theoretical diversity should be incorporated into the notion of theorizing. Recently, Sina Farzin, Michael Guggenheim, and Monika Krause called for a broader perspective on the different "elements of theorizing" (2024). The call to pluralize the idea of theorizing is also present in two recent articles by Mikael Carleheden and Sebastian Büttner. Independently, they present a similar idea: the theorizing discourse should become more pluralistic by systematically taking into account different kinds of theory (Büttner 2024; Carleheden 2024). Both use Gabriel Abend's typology of different meanings of theory to argue that there are not only different types of theory, but also different ways of theorizing. However, it is not yet sufficiently clear what these ways of theorizing look like. The appeal to pluralism in theorizing remains too abstract to serve as practical guidance.

I will take Carleheden's article as my main point of departure. He argues that the seven different meanings of theory, as distinguished by Abend (2008), can be mapped onto just three substantive kinds of theory: *social ontology, theory of society,* and empirical theories of concrete social phenomena (usually discussed under the heading of *explanation*). This distinction is often traced back to Simmel's formal sociology (2013) and has been developed as an analytical distinction, especially by Gesa Lindemann (2009; 2024). Social ontology (in German usually called "Sozialtheorie") is a set of interlinked propositions about the basic building

blocks of the social. It is about the "stuff" the social is supposed to be made of, like practices, communication, or rational actors. The *theory of society* is best understood as an attempt to formulate a comprehensive view of modern society that encompasses empirical findings, as well as social-ontological propositions about interrelated social structures. It is the characteristic form of encompassing theories, like those of Bourdieu,[2] Habermas, or Luhmann, but the claim to a very general perspective on modernity is also shared by theories that do not develop a theory of society (e.g., Foucault). Empirical theories (the Mertonian label "middle range theories" is frequently used, but epistemologically misleading – Schmid 2010) are theories of specific phenomena that sociologists encounter, such as deviance, schools, or migration. Such theories restrict their claims to these specific phenomena. Carleheden shows in his article that different meanings of theory can be traced to these different theoretical forms of sociology, and convincingly suggests that these imply quite different ways of doing theory. Yet, the practical differences between doing one type of theory rather than another remain more assumed than explicitly spelled out. What does it actually mean to do social ontology? What set of techniques is required to construct a theory of modern society?

While it is quite well established how to construct an explanation because we know more or less precisely what it looks like (classically, Hempel/Oppenheim 1960) and have methodical standards for establishing causality, these other forms of doing theory are far less clearly delineated. While many scholars agree that not all forms of theory are adequately captured by the notion of "explanation", we still lack an explicit account of how these non-explanatory forms of theorizing actually work. So far, there is not yet a clear path from the diagnosis of theoretical plurality to identifying different, practical ways of theorizing.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to transform this theoretical *know-how* into a *know-that* by spelling out two forms of social theory: social ontology and theory of society. These theoretical forms are, in a way, to be explored, further, *deeper* than explanations, because they involve a multi-level construction of phenomena. To look at this topic from a theorizing perspective boils down to the question: *How to do different kinds of social theory with concepts?* In what way do researchers need to handle concepts for their theories to be social ontologies or theories of society? The forms will be characterized in terms of their constitutive *problems* and their *conceptual logic*. The guiding assumption is that theories and theoretical forms are best understood as specific ways of using concepts to transform empirical phenomena into objects of scientific inquiry. I will show that the different techniques of theorizing associated with these forms of theory can be traced to their distinct *conceptual logics*. We can understand how different types of theory work—how they

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2 It will be controversial to say that Bourdieu developed a theory of society. I think this is justified due to his attention to many of the classical focus problems of theories of society (see below), that make it possible to read Bourdieu as engaged in a project that he himself frequently regarded with explicit skepticism, see Bongaerts 2008.

are methodologically composed—by tracking the use of concepts, especially the function that theoretical concepts have in dealing with empirical phenomena. In the following, I lay out some assumptions about the structure of social theory in general and offer a preliminary characterization of the relation between social ontology, explanation, and the theory of society. The remainder of the article describes social ontology and theory of society in terms of their fundamental problems and their conceptual logic, with special emphasis on how to theorize in these forms.

2. The core structure of social theory and the difference between theory types

Theoretical vocabularies in sociological theory do not form a self-sufficient system. Georg Friedrich Lichtenberg famously claimed that the language of everyday life is the most general philosophy, and that "all philosophy is a correction of the use of language" (Lichtenberg 1998: 197–198). I suggest adapting this sentence slightly: All sociological theory is the attempt to correct the lay sociology of everyday language. Despite frequent complaints about the inaccessibility of sociological language, one of the most obvious but rarely explicitly acknowledged facts about sociological theories is that they are mostly built from the words of everyday, vernacular language. Unlike the mathematized sciences, sociological theory frequently employs terms that are either easily explained in everyday language or directly adopted from it. Many concepts, like class, gender, social structure, interaction, or society, go back and forth between public discourse and disciplinary uses (see Beregow in this volume). We can understand sociological theory as an attempt to guide our thinking about the social world into paths that allow for a more coherent perspective on the social world than everyday consciousness, structured by lay concepts.

So, why is this correction of thought even necessary? Indeed, a non-theoretical sociology would never find itself in the situation of having nothing to say about its subject matter. In everyday life, we are never at a loss for words when faced with social inequality or the pressures of presentation in interaction situations. However, if sociology were purely oriented towards everyday language, it would not be able to commit to distinctions with binding consequences for others, nor could it cast its insights in a readily transferable and memorable form. Agreement in everyday life is not generated through the clarity of speech, but through the vagueness of expressions that allow for different contextual interpretations. Everyday language is insufficient, not because of a lack of expressive means, but because it is so abundantly rich in possibilities that controlled theoretical reflection becomes impossible. As Wittgenstein notes, "our grammar lacks transparency" (2003 § 122). According to Max Weber, it is necessary to clarify concepts, as otherwise neither readers nor the writer will know what exactly they mean (cf. Weber 1922a: 209). Theories and theoretical concepts in sociology establish *control* over our meanings. However, theories only work because they are not entirely closed off to everyday concepts. The associa-

tive and implicative connections between theoretical vocabulary and vernacular language form the silent infrastructure that affords meaningful theorizing (For a more detailed account, see the introduction to this volume and Anicker 2024).

This allows for a quite general and abstract account of *all* social theory. Social theory needs to clarify the meanings of phenomena that are already preconstituted in the vocabularies of everyday language and the sediments of past theoretical approaches. It fulfills this function essentially by two means: First, it focuses on a certain *problem* and develops its theoretical vocabulary as an answer to this problem. While there are material problems, like "how should we conceive of social inequality?" or "what is modernity?", there are also metatheoretical and epistemological problems, like: "How can we talk about the social in a way that sociology can be a science?" (Max Weber's problem in the "Grundbegriffe" and his writings on objectivity). Second, it reorganizes phenomena[3] that are always preconceived in lay concepts by restructuring them with scientific concepts. This is the *concept-logical infrastructure* of sociological theories. Different *kinds* of theory result from posing different problems, and from employing different strategies of conceptual restructuring.

These metatheoretical considerations allow for a preliminary sketch of the theoretical forms. *social ontology*, *explanation,* and the *theory of society* offer *different* solutions to the same fundamental problem of controlling what we say without losing touch with everyday language. Their theoretical forms can be explicated in terms of the more specific metatheoretical problems they address and their different conceptual logics. The metatheoretical focus problem of social ontology is the question: What is the social made of? Its conceptual logic is geared towards providing concepts for dividing up the social in such a way that phenomena can be transformed into objects of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, both explanation and theory of society deal with the relation between social phenomena. They strive to shed light on some phenomena by determining their relations to others.

The three forms of theory are asymmetrically linked, as social ontology is implied in the other two forms. Explanations need to make assumptions about the identity of the basic entities that are related as cause and effect. Theories of society rely on assumptions about what the central processes and structures are that shape society. They both depend on social ontology, as they presuppose that phenomena are already constituted as scientific objects. Social ontology is, therefore, a logical prerequisite for other theoretical forms that are about the relations of social entities. However, while it is widely recognized that all explanations have ontological presuppositions (Popper 1935; Abbott 1992; Hirschman/Reed 2014; Lindemann 2009; Pacewicz 2022), many researchers who are engaged in explanations do not

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3   I use "phenomenon" in a nontechnical sense, just denoting the *interpretanda* of social theory. A phenomenon is anything that is not in its final conceptual shape yet and needs to be theorized to become clearer.

spell out their social ontological commitments (see the critique of Esser 1996). Because sociology is embedded in the common-sense ontology of everyday life, it is possible to get away with this – we are always good at 'filling in the blanks' of insufficiently theorized explanations by bringing in everyday language, common sense, and our own experience to make sense of them. The price to be paid for this is that non-theoretical explanations are only superficially easy to understand (because they use well-known terms), but the meaning of the concepts ultimately remains vague and open to mutually incompatible interpretations.[4] The postulated asymmetry between the theory types is, therefore, partly normative – a thesis about how we *should* theorize, and not just an explication of the existing theorizing practice. The relation between the theory types can be captured in the following scheme:

Figure 1: Relation of theorizing types

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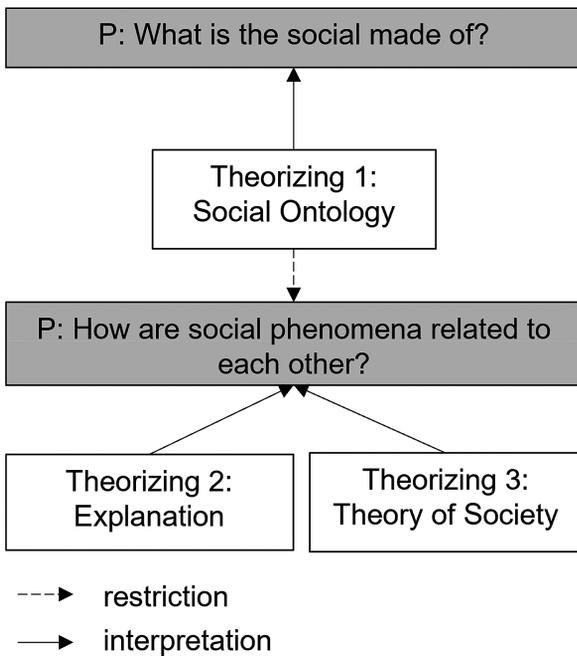
4 Among the towering figures in 20th century sociology, Pierre Bourdieu in particular under-stood theoretically controlled language in contrast to everyday language. He saw the entangle-ment of vernacular and theoretical vocabularies as highly problematic, as he considers everyday language as laden with lay–sociological idealizations, values, and moralistic terms that reflect and reproduce societal domination (Bourdieu/Chamboredon/Passeron 1991).

Now, we turn to the second axis of difference between kinds of theory: their conceptual logic. *Social ontologies* bracket common sense and aim at developing a basic theoretical vocabulary that affords a conceptually clarified perspective on the social. *Explanations* treat many everyday concepts as given, but they may draw on social ontology to clarify the concepts of *explanans* and *explanandum*.[5] Against the backdrop of an already constituted social world, they ask for some law, mechanism, or narrative that accounts for a given phenomenon. *Theories of society* are also about the relation of objects, but, unlike explanations, they account for phenomena by relating them to all of the relevant social and historical context. This makes theories of society 'deeper' than explanations, as social ontology and theory of society operate on the assumption that the social can be decomposed into components and processes that can be more or less fundamental for one another.

This orienting sketch of the theories' problem orientation and their conceptual logic needs to be explicated further in terms of theorizing. In this article, I will not talk about the conceptual logic of explanation, as there is much work on this topic in the philosophy of science and the social sciences already (Hempel/Oppenheim 1960; Nagel 1961; Glynos 2007; Mahoney/Kimball/Koivu 2008; Krause 2016a; Abend 2020). Also, as argued above, the discourse on theorizing has tended to identify 'theory' with 'theoretical explanation', so that the notion of how to theorize explanations is quite well developed. Instead, I will focus on the other two types of theory: social ontology and theory of society and spell out their constitutive problems and the conceptual logics that direct the practice of theorizing in these forms in more detail.

3. Theorizing social ontology

Social ontologies define the categories in which phenomena are to be interpreted (e.g., as action/communication/practice). Compared to the polyvalent language of everyday life, social ontology is more selective—and thereby more restrictive—in what can (and cannot) be said about phenomena. As argued above, social ontology is invariably a part of all theoretical work. We only have the choice between doing social ontology consciously, or resorting to the diffuse ontological implications of everyday concepts. Despite this central importance, ontologies are, so far, an "overlooked element" in the discourse on theorizing (Farzin/Krause/Guggenheim 2024: 140). While the problem of social ontology is more or less clear, there is no established conceptual logic of social ontology. In the following, I will try to shed light on this by further interpreting the basic problem of social ontology, exploring its function for understanding the social, explicating how to do it and what to avoid while doing it.

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5 It may be worthwhile to point out that the logical primacy of social ontology does not imply temporal primacy. It is perfectly reasonable to start with an explanatory problem and to then ask 'backward' what kind of social-ontological assumptions would be needed to get a clearer grip on the phenomena in question.

3.1 The problem of social ontology and its implications

Social ontologies (sometimes also referred to as conceptual frameworks, or as social theories in the meaning of the German "Sozialtheorie")[6] address the constitution of the social and its comprehensibility within theory (Lindemann 2009). They specify how empirical phenomena can appear as theoretical objects. They try to answer the question, "What is the social made of?". Known answers are: "social actions", "communication", "ensembles of practices", "mutually coordinated bodies", "social systems", "discourses", and many more.

The purpose of social ontology is to help researchers reconstruct the multitude of observable sociological phenomena with a limited number of concepts. All social phenomena are required to pass through the same coherent and unified conceptual grid (cf. Göbel 2001: 92). Social ontologies name and describe certain elements and relations that are meant to be, in some sense, to be explicated further, fundamental constituents of the social.

A quite intuitive, but misleading idea, about the purpose of social theory is that it is already fulfilled by saying what phenomena are "made of" or what class of things they belong to. Indeed, social theory *can* be used to decompose an object into the "stuff" or the constituent elements, that make up the phenomenon. For example, from the perspective of Luhmann's systems theory, the elementary school in my neighborhood could be classified as an organization. Organizations are composed of decisions that can, in turn, be classified as a special kind of communication. We end up decomposing the phenomenon, going all the way down to the core, social-theoretic relations that are definitive of the social for this theoretical paradigm. Thus, we could confidently claim that the elementary school is made of communication. Unfortunately, we have not learned much about the elementary school just from this operation. The procedure we followed is analogous to asking "what is a table made of" and then learning from a chemist that it is made of molecules and from a physicist that these are made of atoms. But sociologists, just like chemists and physicists, are not particularly interested in contemplating the substance of 'the social'. They want to know how the things they are interested in *work*; e.g., why it occurs, which functions certain elements of it fulfill, what exerts causal influences on it, what is caused by it, and so on.

It would be misleading to see social ontology just as a collection of stipulations about what categories phenomena can belong to. We do not just construct collections of logical classes. In addition to the classificatory function of social ontological

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6 The German term "Sozialtheorie" is a bit wider than the English "social ontology"; it applies to theories with primarily ontological and primarily epistemological basic concepts alike (the latter do not need to presuppose that their basic terms correspond to real 'beings', e.g., Weberian ideal types). We can ignore these subtle differences for the purpose of this article because the conceptual logic is largely the same for epistemic and straightforwardly ontological basic concepts.

concepts – and, far more important, for their orienting purpose – they contain material assumptions about the inner structure and the dispositions, or typical effects, that we ascribe to social-theoretic entities. The purpose of social ontology, to be useful in understanding *how* things are rather than *what* things are is captured quite well in the widespread metaphorical talk of social ontologies as "perspectives". Also, other visual metaphors like, "lens", "prism", or "map", are frequently used to describe their function. These metaphors emphasize that social ontology is not resting in itself; it is there to make something else clearer. Social ontological concepts are helpful if and only if they orient us by guiding our expectations about the likely behavior of certain objects (see Stekeler-Weithofer 2014: 45). The non-classificatory, constructive function of social-theoretical concepts can be explicated in the form of *inferential rules*. All concepts – social, ontological ones are just at the most basic level for sociology – do not only classify phenomena as belonging to certain classes and subcategories – the logic of *genus* – but also contain inferential rules about the implications for other concepts – the logic of material inference (Brandom 1994).[7] Therefore, a better wording for the problem of social ontology may be: "What are the basic building blocks of the social?" This is what communication theory, action theory, practice theory, and other paradigms try to achieve: They try to provide tools for reconstructing phenomena in such a way that we are equipped with good, helpful inferences. While genus-classification frequently deals with necessary inferences (if Leo is a lion, we can infer with necessity that he is also a mammal), most sociological concepts are generalizations about the typical "behavior" of entities (e.g., causal, constitutive, or functional relations to other entities) – all these assumptions are part of the inferential role of the concept in the language game of sociology. For example, if we classify the elementary school as an organization, we can infer that it should clearly distinguish between members and nonmembers. We should be able to use this assumption to organize our expectations about the elementary school – and may start puzzling about the hybrid position that parents have, who are sometimes addressed as members and sometimes as clients.

So, this is what it means to use social ontologies as "perspectives": It means to understand some phenomenon as a certain social-ontological 'thing' (classification) and to ascribe to it the typical behavior of this type of object toward other things (inference). In the following, I will try to show how this works in practice, to gain a better understanding of how social ontological concepts are applied and shaped in research.

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7   I think it is useful to distinguish the logic of mereological classification from the logic of inference, even if class membership can be reconstructed in inferential terms. For example, we could not understand metaphors if we could not distinguish both kinds of conceptual logic. To say metaphorically that a particular person is a lion is a wrong classification, but we can make sense of it by transferring some of the inferences from being a lion to this person.

3.2 How to do social ontology

Social ontology is not a contemplative enterprise, it is the business of theoretically oriented social researchers who want to understand a phenomenon by 'seeing it' as "organization", "interaction", "discourse", or as a "practice" – and who want to be clear about what they say when they apply these concepts. The methodological stance of the social ontologist is (re-)constructive. She asks herself: How can the observable social phenomena with their many relations, and the infinite possibilities of talking about them, be understood as a product of underlying, ontologically presupposed social entities (keeping in mind that these conceptual 'entities' are really just collections of classificatory and inferential rules)? I propose to describe the application of social-ontological categories to other concepts as one of "building". Social-theoretic categories can be used to build a model of a phenomenon that makes certain aspects of it comprehensible (Fine 2012; Bennett 2017; Rosen 2010; Wilson 2014). To apply social ontology means to construct phenomena from the basic categories of social ontology. Social ontology spells out basic social beings and relations that are considered to "underlie" phenomena, which "depend" on these "more fundamental" social-theoretic categories. This implies a layered or 'deep' picture of reality in which some entities are used to make sense of others.

Going back to the elementary school in my neighborhood: Let's assume the school has just appointed a new director. Even before the new director arrives, pupils and teachers seem excited. Important decisions about the plans for the next school year are postponed. After the appointment, teachers seem to show less initiative in proposing extracurricular activities, and become more conventional in their teaching methods. To make sense of this, the theorist needs to reconstruct the phenomenon in terms of the theory and look for possible ways to explain these patterns. A systems theorist could analyze this as a typical problem in organizations that arises when formal structures remain the same, but informal ones need to be readjusted (cf. Luhmann 1962). This helps to make sense of the phenomenon; it is an answer to the question of "why" the teachers are uncertain of how to behave: They are uncertain whether their informal routines will be accepted and how relations between different subgroups in the school will be influenced by the new principal. Social ontology helps understanding why things are the way they are, in virtue of being a certain type of thing that stands in (causal, functional, constitutive…) inferential *relations* to other things and that may consist of elements which are also related. The empirical phenomenon can thus be understood as a specification of the general assumption that formal and informal structures need to be balanced in organizations. Thus, surface dynamics of phenomena can be made sense of by referring to underlying base dynamics in theoretical entities.

All social theories share the general aim of constructing entities that are known from everyday language, like schools, supermarkets, museums, people, criminals, love declarations, arguments, and wars, as somehow 'grounded in' social-theoretic

categories. If you declare that the social consists of rationally calculating actors, or self-referential communication or practices, or networks of actors, you thereby do *not* deny that supermarkets, love declarations, or wars exist. Rather, you implicitly claim that they should all be, in principle, treatable *as* instances of communication or rational actors or actor-networks, and so on. You claim that they could be analyzed as being based on and built from these fundamental social-theoretic categories. Thus, social theory is more like a tool kit than a filing box. To apply social theory to a more specific phenomenon (like a supermarket or a love declaration) does *not* simply mean to classify it as a case of "communication", or "practice", or "discourse". To construct the object theoretically means to put some effort into showing how its surface properties can be understood as a result of the underlying social-theoretic assumptions. It means to treat it as a leaf on a twig, sitting on a branch, that can be traced back to the stem of your fundamental social theory, and that somehow 'grows out' of it, according to the theory's inner logic. Thinking social-theoretically about a love declaration could mean treating it as depending on a historically and culturally variable romantic vocabulary that allows actors to relate their bodily feelings to cultural meanings. Such a reconstruction proves its usefulness by helping researchers discover new aspects about real, empirical love declarations – e.g., that it needs to balance different cultural notions of what love means, or that romantic repertoires depend on the cultural capital of the lovers (see Illouz 2006).

The conceptual logic of social ontological grounding is the same for all kinds of material assumptions about the social. It is indifferent between bottom-up, actor-based explanations, network theory, or macroscopic, structuralist ontologies. Also, social-theoretic entities that are the fundamental basis in one theory can be the theoretically derived entities in another theory. While action theory explains how actors create social systems through their actions, systems theory or symbolic interactionism explain how actors are produced by communicative systems. Also, many notions will not be reconstructed at all. In the practice of theorizing, a social ontological reconstruction is usually limited to central phenomena that are the focus of a study. In most cases, the ontology of vernacular language is used as a supplement on the presumption that this is somehow compatible with the social theory.

3.3 The empirical task of social ontology

As argued above, the general function of social ontology is to provide research with some perspective by challenging the theorist to build the phenomenon of interest from social-theoretic categories. Social ontologies reconstruct and deconstruct phenomena, typically expressed in the ontology of vernacular language, using fundamental social relations. This fundamental building relation restricts and directs the view of a phenomenon. Social theory suggests what is to be assumed about the object, what needs to be explained, what could be relevant in dealing with a

phenomenon, and what can be neglected. Different social theories may highlight very different aspects of the same phenomenon (see Bonacker et al. 2008).

It is important to note that the ontological basis of social theory can neither be directly refuted nor confirmed by empirical data. It is just not possible to compare the 'raw object', stripped of all interpretation, with the categories that are used to interpret it (Sellars 1956). Also, a commonly assumed relation of theory and empirical data—hypothesis testing and falsification—does not apply to social ontology. As social ontology's function is to specify what kinds of things could even appear as empirical data, it operates on a different level from causal theory, which can be disproven by falsification (cf. Lindemann 2008).[8] Thus, the relation of social theory to empirical data is indirect and depends on the way social ontology is specified to account for a given phenomenon. Of course, empirical data can be collected to substantiate or challenge social-theoretical interpretations – but there are hardly any knock-down facts about the social world that provide sufficient reason to abandon a theory, or that would give it a decisive advantage over its rivals. This does not amount to '*anything goes*' (Feyerabend 1984), as there are broadly accepted facts about the social that no social ontology can afford to brush aside, but social ontology remains empirically underdetermined.

Empirically supported critique of social ontologies questions the *adequacy* of the construction of empirical phenomena. To give an example from my own theorizing: It is possible to question whether the sociology of technology is well equipped to talk about the agency of complex AI systems. While classical sociologies of technology treat technical artifacts as mere causal mechanisms, approaches in the tradition of Actor–Network Theory or of Barad's Agential Realism assign agency to *any* element that influences a process. The result is that both do not have a social ontological basis to distinguish between the agency of complex AI systems and the toaster in your kitchen (Anicker et al. 2024). The critique does not prove that the established social theories are wrong, but it shows that they cannot be used to reconstruct a common-sense distinction that one would like to use when talking about the phenomenon. Thus, social theories are rarely judged as being right or wrong, but rather by how fruitful they are for conducting research. Fruitfulness is context-bound; it always means useful for a given purpose and, in many cases, for specific phenomena, like explaining deviance, social inequality, the role of the economy, and so on. If a social theory proves unhelpful in thinking about a given topic, this can be used to criticize and revise the social theory (Lindemann 2008). Experience-based criticism of social theories questions the adequacy of the space of possibilities spanned by the basic social-theoretical vocabulary.

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8   Rational Choice Theory stood out as the only social theory explicitly formulated to allow for its own falsification – and was indeed rewarded with being falsified. Since then, it has been supplanted by various adaptations that no longer permit such direct refutations (Boudon 2003; Wittek/Snijders/Nee 2013).

3.4 How to develop social ontologies

Most of the innovations in social ontology come from challenging established social ontological paradigms on empirical grounds. While doing research, certain basic distinctions of social ontology are tweaked to better account for empirical phenomena. This fits the fact that most of the known social ontologies are variants of (inter-)action theory, systems theory, or network theory, and position themselves by accepting or declining certain base distinctions (described as "fractal differentiation" by Abbott 2001). However, we may also still be interested in the question of how social ontologies are constructed in the first place, and what the guiding principles might be for building them.

Wolfgang Ludwig Schneider demonstrated that many basic social ontologies are arranged around a central problem of constitution (Schneider 2008; Schneider 2009a; Schneider 2009b). Social ontology is frequently introduced as an ontology *for* something: the categories of the social ontological base vocabulary build a solution to a central social-theoretical problem. Thus, the grammar of social-theoretical questions can frequently be expressed in the Kantian form: "How is X possible?", where "X" can be replaced by fundamental problems such as "social order", "intersubjectivity", or "rationality" (cf. Schneider: 2008, p. 291). For example, Alfred Schütz does not just give a list of assumptions about mind, body, and tacit assumptions individuals make about the social world. He tries to reconstruct what everyone must practically know to behave as a competent member of society. This means that the base vocabulary of social phenomenology is developed by asking, "how is intersubjective meaning possible?" Thus, social ontology is not constructed by giving a list of assumptions about things that may be useful for understanding empirical phenomena, but introduced as a solution to a problem – that is, as a reconstruction of a central social-theoretical notion. Parsons's action theory is another example. The social ontology of the action frame of reference is geared toward grounding the possibility of social order. He claims that the base vocabulary of individual behavior must already contain the assumption that actors orient toward shared norms to solve this problem (Parsons 1937). So, one way to criticize and develop social ontology is to ask: Does it really solve the problem it apparently tries to solve? Does the theory offer a satisfactory account of how a certain part of social reality is constituted?[9] If the solution is unsatisfactory, this is a reason to change the theory.

This problem-oriented way of developing social ontology is not strictly necessary, and indeed, in the so-called social-theoretic "turns" (to language, to practice, to culture, and so on), we find social ontologies without a clear problem orientation. However, without a reference problem, social ontology, like all ontology, is a game without rules. If a social ontology is just a set of assumptions about the 'stuff' that

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9 See the contribution by Wolfgang Ludwig Schneider in this volume on Parsons's strategies for including the apparently excluded into his theory.

makes up the social and does not show how basic aspects of the social are to be reconstructed from these components, there is not even an internal standard to measure the usefulness of the social ontology.[10]

3.5 Typical pitfalls of social ontological theorizing

There are typical problems associated with social ontological theorizing. In the absence of direct empirical checks on social ontology, many competing versions of social ontology are proclaimed, and many adaptations are made by researchers to account for different empirical purposes. Thus, sociology is characterized by abundant social ontological pluralism. Some argue that the resulting richness of different perspectives is a strength of sociology, but probably no one would deny that ontological pluralism also leads to serious problems in coordinating research, creating the endless task of trying to figure out in what relation social theories and different variants of them stand to each other and whether their seemingly contradictory statements about the same research objects are indeed incompatible or can be seen as complementary. Unrestricted social ontological theorizing causes semantic hiccup.

A second problem of social ontology is the inherent danger of leading from methodological to theoretical fundamentalism. Using the same social-ontological foundation to reconstruct a great number of different phenomena tempts researchers to confuse universal applicability – it is always possible to see a phenomenon from the angle of a theory of practice, or action, and so on – with the perspective being exclusively true. Social ontology can take on aspects of a *Weltanschauung* that tacitly structures ways of thinking. Once intellectuals' homes are furnished with all their favorite concepts, they will not be evicted.

4. Theorizing society

The theory of society was long considered the royal discipline of sociology. It aims to construct a theory that makes sense not just of a special part of social life, but also specifies how all the different areas the social hang together. The theory of society takes the proposition very seriously that *everything* social that happens, happens *in society*. What this 'in society' means has been subject to very different interpretations. Strong holist interpretations of this idea, like Marx's historical materialism or the early Frankfurt School, suppose that society is a totality that determines everything that happens, the same way a principle organizes secondary notions. Weaker conceptions interpret the wholeness of society in such a way that everything social stands in the *context* of society and, in a certain way, depends on

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10 This may be one of the reasons why proponents of new social ontologies like to write their treatises in the form of a "manifesto" (Emirbayer 1997; Reed/Weinman 2019). If there is little objective reason to adopt a new ontology, the subjective expression of its urgency may take its place.

this context. There are different theories of how societal context shapes particular events: for example, because the simultaneity of other social processes is always presupposed (Luhmann), or because social processes draw on societal resources like meanings, norms and expressive forms (Habermas), or because actors orient towards a relational social order that is neither conscious nor visible but tacitly enacted in all social interaction (Bourdieu).[11]

4.1 What is the problem of the theory of society?

Niklas Luhmann once wrote a short definition of the concept of society for a handbook: "Society is the most encompassing system of human coexistence. There is no consensus on further defining properties" (Luhmann 1978: 267, my transl.). This lack of conceptual agreement in the theory of society is still as true as it was in 1978, when this parody of a definition was written. However, *on the level of orienting problems*, there seems to be more common ground. For a compact formulation, I suggest the following specification of the task of the theory of society: "What are the distinguishing features and most relevant structural logics of modern society?".

To say that the domain of the theory of society is to spell out the "most relevant structural logics" needs further elaboration. In fact, not all theories of society use the concept of "structure", and to say that there is a "logic" to its reproduction must be understood metaphorically. But this is currently the best problem formulation I can provide to express that the perspective of the theory of society *requires* an understanding of society as characterized by certain regularities, some of them being more relevant for its reproduction than others. For example, for Jürgen Habermas, the main structures of modern society are lifeworld and system. Both are responsible for the structuring of society at the highest level. The logics of systems and lifeworld are considered to permeate every facet of the social, as both structures are fundamental for all communication in society (Habermas 1985b). Luhmann assigns a weaker explanatory role to the concept of society. He sees society as characterized by its form of social differentiation and the infrastructure of communication (mass media and language), while most of the actual work of structuration that determines the goings-on in society is done by function systems and organizations (Luhmann 2012). However, both Habermas and Luhmann are clearly interested in determining structures that are central for the reproduction of society, and in distinguishing them from structural forms that are less relevant (in the sense that they can vary without causing repercussions in all the other parts of society). In very different ways, all theories of society try to spell out the massive inertia of 'large' social structures that, from the perspective of individual human beings, seem to be 'over their heads', removed from the realm of direct interference,

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11 There are other theories, mostly action theoretic or interactionist perspectives, that refer to society as the sum of everything social. Yet these should not be regarded as theories of society in the proper sense, as society for them is just the name of a container that does not change its contents.

and delineating the boundary conditions of what one can even conceive to do (e.g. Luhmann 2011).

The historically most important structures of societal reproduction can be grouped into two main strands. The first focuses on structures that enable domination and inequality in society, typically with special attention to the unequal distribution of resources and the (capitalist) logic of their accumulation. Second, there are approaches that center on functional differentiation (on these and further axes of differentiation see (Mölders 2023; Abrutyn 2021; Hirschauer 2023). In the following, I will refer to these as domination theories and differentiation theories of society. Differentiation theories determine how distinct parts of modern society emerge and how they relate to each other. Domination theories also decompose society into parts, but they assume that the 'parts' of society need to be seen as antagonistic groups whose identity is rooted in the logic of the social power struggle (e.g., Marxist and conflict theories, capitalist theories, or Bourdieusian "social space"). Usually, the nature of their object induces theorists of society to take a stance on the following subsidiary problems:

a) Difference between modern and premodern societies

b) Problem of society's wholeness

c) Relationship of differentiation and integration OR the relationship of conflict/competition and integration

Sometimes, the aforementioned problem of structural reproduction and change is added to this list (Bongaerts 2008:244; Renn 2006:29–63), but actually, it is better thought of as the overarching problem of the theory of society. The other problems are subsidiary because they mark different ways of saying *how* the structural logic of modern society is to be understood.

4.1.1   The problem of the difference of modern and premodern societies

Theorizing the *difference between modern and premodern societies* is important because theories of society use this contrast to provide evidence that certain social structures are indeed of special importance for modernity. Comparisons with historical societies serve as a heuristic to see what separates modernity (or postmodernity) from society's prior stages. These differences challenge the theory of society to provide some kind of explanation for the structural transformation to modernity that separates it from its antecedents. For example, domination theories of society that assume capitalism as the central structure explain the advent of modernity by analyzing the enforcement of capitalist modes of production. Differentiation theories contrast modernity with other epochs by pointing to changes in the primary form of differentiation (e.g., functional differentiation as opposed to stratificatory differentiation, for Luhmann, or the disembedding of function systems, for Habermas). This logic of theory development does not change for theorists who think that modernity was superseded by something else – they will always need to explain how

the structuration principles of modernity got replaced by those of a "next society" (Baecker 2007). Whether theories take the theoretical problem of the "modernity" of the modern seriously *on the level of empirical data* distinguishes theories of society from other forms of theorizing, especially diagnoses of the times. The latter do not engage much with historical research, but use a combination of current trends and a stereotypical way of describing the past to produce "new societies" or "new eras" (Osrecki 2011).

4.1.2 The problem of society's wholeness

The *problem of the "wholeness"* requires clarification of how society is considered a whole. This has, *first*, the straightforward sense of determining whether society is thought to mean "nation society" (a frequent, tacit assumption in many classical theories of society, see Strecker 2017: 361), or, much more commonly now, larger entities like culturally modulated "modernities" (Eisenstadt 2017), "world system" (Wallerstein 2004), or "world society" (Luhmann 1997b). *Second*, there is also a less obvious, but theoretically crucial, aspect to the question of holism. This concerns the explanatory relation of the whole (society) to the social structures it contains. Some form of holism is a constitutive feature of theories of society. However, there are weaker versions that assume society unifies all social processes merely for analytical purposes, and stronger ones that treat society as a macroscopic entity with real causal force on 'lower-level' social processes (e.g., the Hegelian tradition and its Marxist extensions into the Frankfurt School). Strongly holistic theories that assume a single, dominant logic of society on the macro level (say: patriarchy or class conflict) struggle to provide insights into areas of social life that are hard to reconstruct from this basis (e.g., the emergence of egalitarian love relationships in modernity). Recent theories of society are mostly weakly holistic, in a sense to be explicated further below.

4.1.3 The problem of relating opposing structural principles

The third problem is different for differentiation and domination theories of society. While the first ask about the relation between integration and differentiation (Mölders et al. 2024), the latter ask about the relation between conflict (or competition) and integration. The way this question is answered determines the assumed logic of social reproduction. The challenge for both types of theories is to explain how principles that appear divisive – such as specialization, functional differentiation, or class struggles – can nonetheless produce "one" society, rather than leading to as many societies as there are function systems or conflictual factions. Classical answers are Durkheim's thesis that specialization produces a new type of 'organic' morality that allows normative integration, or Parsons' claim that integration is built into every system as a necessary function at every level of abstraction, or conflict theorists' assumption that conflicts also serve integrative functions.

Many theories of society emphasize one of these problems over the other, or omit one entirely, such as the problem of society's wholeness. Nevertheless, these

problems remain valuable as interpretive frameworks, both for theorists developing a theory of modern society and for their readers, since the answers given to them mark crucial points of divergence in the theory's overall perspective.

4.2   The relation of social ontology and theory of society: two kinds of universality

How does the conceptual logic of theories of society work? The easiest way to grasp the logic of the theory of society is to compare it to social ontology. We have introduced social ontology as a base vocabulary of elementary building blocks that is used to make sense of other phenomena by constructing or 'building' them from the social ontological base. Theories of society, like all other social theories, presuppose ontological commitments. All theories of society have a social ontological basis that is used to construct the empirical object: society. But, as society is not simply a 'phenomenon' to be reconstructed, but the most complex object known to social theory, we need to take several additional aspects into account.

The relationship between the two types of theory is perhaps best elucidated by drawing on an analogy to physics. Social ontology fulfills similar functions for sociology as the standard model does for physics. Just as the standard model spells out the fundamental forces and the types of elementary particles that are assumed to be the building blocks of everything we see in the universe, social ontology spells out the basic entities and relations that are supposed to underlie the social. But physics also has a subdiscipline that deals with the 'whole' of the universe: cosmology. Cosmology is the study of how the universe came into being and the processes that led to its development, from the Big Bang to its contemporary form. Everything that happens in physics happens "in" the universe. It would, in principle, be possible to look at every physical event from a cosmological perspective, to locate the event in spacetime (for physics, this is mostly irrelevant because background conditions can be ignored). The cosmological picture of the universe needs to be compatible with the standard model; it must be formulated in its vocabulary.

The theory of society is related to social ontology like cosmology is to the standard model: It is based on social ontology, but it does not simply aim to describe *any* possible social phenomenon (like the standard model would for all possible interactions of particles, matter, and forces), but *all* social phenomena – in their synthetic relations of structuration and their development over time. Thus, a theory of society must, in principle, be able to situate any empirical social phenomenon within society by determining its relations to other structures, especially to 'large' structures considered central to the reproduction of society. Two different types of universality are at work in the two forms of theory. Social ontological universality is a universality of *potential* application – anything social should be constructible from the base vocabulary. The universality of the theory of society is a universality of *actual* relations. A perfect theory of society would be able to determine for all empirical phenomena where they are located in society and how they are related to

each other. One can think of this *placement* operation as answering the questions of the 'where' and 'when' of phenomena in society, in the specific sense of relating them to the history and shape of social structures. Of all relevant empirical social processes, a theory of society would be supposed to answer the questions: In what way do these processes contribute to the reproduction of (larger) social structures? What structures do they depend on, and which other structures depend on them? A theory of society is thus a relation of relations. It is more *specific* than social ontology, as it is a theory of a particular historically situated object. But it is also *more comprehensive than social ontology on the level of empirical reference* as it constructs all phenomena in their societal context. Given the enormous diversity of social phenomena that need to be placed (think of bullying in schoolyards, financial crises, birthday parties, wars, social media, changing gender relations, religious sects…), this is an extremely challenging task. *Every* assumption about general societal structures serves the function of context-building for *all* specific social processes and phenomena. As a result, theories of society typically exhibit a multi-level structure and must carefully balance different levels of generality (Klüver 1991).

The task of universal theoretical comprehension frequently leads theorists of society to adopt *multiple* social-ontological vocabularies, and to seek ways of combining or theoretically integrating them. Bourdieu, for instance, argued that the theory of class conflict (a domination theory) had to be complemented by a theory of fields to account for functional differentiation. He seeks to ground both social ontologically in a general theory of practice and aims to reconcile bifurcated societal structures through the concept of the field of power (see Schmitz/Witte/Gengnagel 2017; Kieserling 2008). A similar integrative enterprise can be found in Luhmann's coupling of differentiation theory, evolutionary theory, and media theory – all usually coming with their own social ontology – and uniting them with very abstract concepts of systems theory (Jahraus et al. 2012; Luhmann 1997a). The case of Habermas, who combines systems theory and communicative action theory in the macro concepts of life world and system, has already been mentioned. All these are cases of multiple social ontological grounding. Theorists aiming for a somewhat unified theory of society find it necessary to explain how different social logics are interconnected. Other theorists, such as Foucault, who are interested in large-scale, structural transformations of modernity but do not aim to develop a theory of society, also use different social-theoretic ontologies (discourse, dispositive, subjectivation, and so on), but they do not theorize the relation between these ontologies or their relative importance for the structuration of society. The integration of different social-ontological vocabularies is *one* aspect of the conceptual logic of theories of society; the other can be explicated by examining the relation of theories of society to empirical phenomena.

4.3 The conceptual logic of applying theory of society to empirical phenomena

The relationship of theories of society to empirical phenomena is quite complex. Uwe Schimank points out that theories of society operate at different levels of abstraction: They have to be able to take into account concrete historical events and transformations, but their interest in generality forces them to abstract from contingent events all the way down to the level of the social ontology of society (Schimank 1996: 17ff.). This coincides with Jürgen Habermas's claim that the level of abstraction of theories of society only allows for a very indirect relationship between theoretical core assumptions and empirical findings (Habermas 2024: 53). But how does this "indirect relationship" work?

Gesa Lindemann thinks that theories of society can be understood as a „metainterpretation of middle range theories" (2009: 24, my translation). This is not wrong, but it still lacks a clarification of how exactly the theory of society makes sense of empirical data. Surely, the theory of society is not simply an extrapolation of many local findings of special sociologies to one or several macro trends. If such trends can be found (let's say: a trend across many areas of social life of substituting physical violence with disciplinary techniques), this is, of course, an important finding for the theory of society. But such macro-trends are rare, and the dynamics of social life are seldom adequately captured by proclaiming linear developments. Instead, most theories of society function as *frameworks* that account for diverse – even contrary – developments, while providing boundary assumptions about what is considered possible, given the society's basic structure.

This *framing function* of theories of society can be thought of as a combination of *building* and *placement*. First, it is important to notice that the theory of society can work just like any social ontology – it can construct an interpretation of the empirical phenomenon out of basic social relations, e.g., by interpreting something as a Bourdieusian field or a Parsonian system. However, the theory of society is not only a theory of a certain phenomenon, but also the theory of its context. This allows understanding the phenomenon by *placing* it in society, establishing relations to other societal structures. If I understand an elementary school social-ontologically, I understand it 'from within' or 'from the ground up' – e.g., by seeing it as an ensemble of formally framed interactions embedded within an organizational context. But, from the angle of a theory of society, it is also possible to see the elementary school as something that can be understood 'from without', by interpreting its relations to the rest of society. This could mean to see the elementary school as merely the first stage in legitimizing the reproduction of stratification through the education system (Bourdieu et al. 1996; Meyer 1977), or that elementary schools are necessary because families can no longer provide adequate socialization in complex modern society (Bales/Parsons 1956), represent different ways of placing the elementary school in its societal context. Placement requires looking at the empirical case from its margins and making sense of it by relating it to other structures.

Placement can put things into perspective by removing the natural presupposition that phenomena exist in virtue of their own, particular reasons. Durkheim's famous study on suicide is revelatory precisely because it does not understand suicide 'from within', as a personal tragedy with unique causes, but 'from without', as a social regularity that can be understood by placing it in the context of different societal structures and degrees of normative integration (Durkheim 2002).

The first question a theorist of society asks when confronted with a new phenomenon is not "What kind of thing is it?" but rather, "How is it related to the rest of modern society?". In terms of conceptual logic, we can see that the theory of society has a different grip on phenomena than social ontological concepts. While social ontology says what kinds of things we assume to exist, and in what kinds of relations they *can* stand or typically stand (classificatory categories and inferential rules), a placement-explanation perspective explains something through the *actual* relations it has in a given society. These relations are contingent; they depend on the actual constitution of society and other empirically existing objects that form the context of a phenomenon. This also means that the societal function of the same phenomenon can be different in different societies: widespread distrust in the authorities can be a precondition for enlightened thought *and* for the spreading of conspiracy theories. While social ontological theorizing classifies phenomena and interprets them 'from within', using properties of the ontological category, the theory of society interprets objects 'from without' by relating them to other objects. Weber combines both logics in his famous study on the Protestant ethic. He reconstructs Calvinism and other Protestant sects from within (on the level of religious doctrine), only to then *place* the social consequences of believing in Calvinism in a relation that establishes a completely different (non-religious) societal significance: Calvinism's role in establishing a capitalist economy (Weber 1988). Calvinism is interpreted in terms of its enabling function for (early) capitalism.

The logic of placement makes the theory of society sensitive not only to the 'horizontal' relation of phenomena to social structures (the 'where' of the phenomenon), but also to the 'vertical' relation of structures to past societal formations (the 'when'). Most empirical phenomena interpreted by a theory of society change historically. This implies an interest in the historical origin and the social conditions of phenomena. In many cases, the characterization of changes will take the form of "formation stories" (Hirschman/Reed 2014) about the coming-into-being of phenomena and their place in society. Hirschman and Reed call this "historical ontology" (Hirschman/Reed 2014: 259). According to the conceptual logic of historical ontology, the historicity of social formations is not an additional feature that could be explored or left out, but a dimension of social formations that is analytically inseparable from their meaning (cf. Pacewicz 2022: 938) – we understand some social phenomena *only* by understanding how they came into being. The placement-interpretation that relates a phenomenon with its 'horizontal' (social space) and 'vertical' (time) societal context is, in most theories of society, not

straightforwardly causal. Some of the contextual interpretation will be functional (a hypothesis about the function of the phenomenon for other structures, see Merton 1968; Rachlitz et al. 2024), some will be historical explanations of the origin of a phenomenon (Abend 2020), some will be assumptions about the 'degrees of freedom' a phenomenon ought to have given its societal context. In most cases, a theory of society may not be able to predict which effects are likely to result from structural changes, but it can be helpful in dismissing unrealistic options and thereby guiding expectations in a certain direction. For example, it is easy to see from the standpoint of any decent theory of society that most conspiracy theories are likely to be untrue, because they overestimate the degree to which a small number of people could control a complex society. Another example of a 'negative' role of the theory of society in excluding unlikely options would be Jürgen Habermas' theory of the differentiation of the lifeworld. It is an excellent explication of all the reasons why substantial consensus on most, if not all, political questions in society is highly unlikely (Habermas 1985b).[12]

4.4 Systematizing function of theory of society and comparisons

Among the most useful functions of a theory of society for the study of empirical phenomena is its ability to assess the *relative importance of phenomena*. It allows comparisons between structures that serve similar purposes, or that operate on a similar level of abstraction. This makes comparisons, e.g., between fields or systems, or between different types of legitimation of domination, the natural playing field of theories of society (Weller 2017). Assumptions about relations between structures can guide research into directions that seem counterintuitive from the standpoint of common sense. Why even bother to compare people's socioeconomic status with their answers to the question, "Can a photo of tree bark be beautiful"? This becomes plausible only if a theory of society describes latent mechanisms of the unequal reproduction of power through taste (Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, it becomes interesting to compare practices of salespeople, diplomats, and real estate agents when a theory of society (or a general theory of organizations) posits that all organizations need to manage their relations to different environments and frequently bundle these tasks in special roles (Kieserling/Weißmann 2023). A theory of society finds correspondences between superficially different cases and manages the level of generality of any sociological explanation that deals with these phenomena.

This capacity of theories of society to theoretically coordinate comparisons and to generalize explanations is also helpful for integrating empirical findings from different origins. Ideally, a theory of society ought to make empirical findings from different special sociologies relatable to each other systematically – thereby also

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12 It is one of the tragic misunderstandings of his theory that he is, again and again, attacked for allegedly claiming the opposite.

making the societal relevance of these findings explicit. While it is usually impossible to deduce specific hypotheses about a sociology of economics, of religion, of changing family structures, or of suicide from a theory of society, the framing function of the theory ought to make it plausible to understand many findings of special sociologies as *specifications* of the basic assumptions of the theory of society – that is: as something that adds detail to an abstract characterization without being incompatible with its fundamental assumptions (it is about congruence and compatibility, not about logical stringency).[13] If a theory of society does this well, it can work like an usher, assigning places not only to phenomena, but also to the problems of special social science subdisciplines. One of the added benefits for researchers who have internalized the logic of a theory of society is that it also serves as a mnemotechnical device – it's always helpful to know 'where' things are to keep them in mind, even if this function may have partly lost its relevance in the age of Google.

4.5 Historicity of theoretical categories and self-placement

Theories of society sensitize to the historicity and the social positionality of all knowledge, including their own. As the explanatory logic of theories of society is one of *placement*, it is a natural tendency of theories of society to, at some point or another, seek their own place in society. This implies taking society seriously as the empirical *a priori* of any theory. To put it somewhat paradoxically: before the theory starts, it has already begun. It is a part of society, partakes in certain traditions, and thereby depends on all the epistemic, institutional, media, and communicative conditions that made it possible in the first place. This has pushed some theories of society to understand their own ontology historically, in terms of their formation or the genealogy of their ideas. For Habermas, Bourdieu, and especially Luhmann, this is a central theme of their theory development. Habermas uses the history of ideas to locate and develop his thought. This self-reflection is mostly 'vertical' regarding the theory's place in time. It presents itself as a continuation of the philosophical discourse of modernity (Habermas 1985a). Luhmann thinks mostly 'horizontally' about the 're-entry' of systems theory into its own description, that is: its own place in society. Systems theory locates itself as a research program in "sociology as a subsystem of the subsystem science" (Luhmann 2013: 335), thereby assigning itself a modest place in one of the many function systems of modern society. Bourdieu likewise locates his research program in the field of academia (Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu 1990) and reflects on the social conditions of his personal development in terms of his theory (Bourdieu 2008b; Bourdieu 2008a).

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13 According to Habermas, "[c]oherence is the sole criterion of considered choice at the level on which mutually fitting theories stand to one another in relations of supplementing and reciprocally presupposing, for it is only the individual propositions derivable from theories that are true or false" 1985b: 399ff.

These theoretical self-reflections should not be seen merely as an aesthetic exercise or a philosophical ornament. It is a way of taking positionality seriously. What kinds of claims can be brought forward from the place in society from which the theory speaks? Theoretical self-placement can fulfill the function of epistemological self-reflection (as in the cases of Luhmann and Bourdieu). Like all self-reflection, self-placement orients its subject by clarifying its situatedness; its place in a specific context. This *ex-post epistemology* is a tool for reflecting on theoretical choices synchronically and diachronically. It helps to critically examine the origins and social conditions of one's own research interests, problem statements, and theoretical affinities. The guiding question is a genealogical one: Why does *this* society, and *this* scientific discipline within it, consider certain problem statements, theories, and methods as indispensable, while others are treated as outdated or 'unscientific'? And frequently, this type of reflection uncovers reasons for seeing things entirely differently (see, for example, the critical history of the social conditions of positivism in Habermas 1968).

However, even if this self-referential reflection is an important tool for clarifying a theory's status toward its object and thereby for consolidating a theoretical perspective, it is not central for its theoretical function for the discipline. The general purpose of theories of society is to guide and interpret empirical research by placing social structures and processes in a societal context. Theories that get lost in self-reflection may be justly criticized by empirical sociologists for turning their backs on the actual needs of the discipline.

4.6 Typical pitfalls of theories of society

In recent decades, theories of society with comprehensive ambitions have come under heavy criticism, and attempts to carry on this tradition have become rare. In the literature on sociological theorizing, this form of theory is usually treated only in passing remarks. According to Richard Swedberg, systematic theory building across a large number of subject areas is "old-fashioned" (2014: 24), and is thereby disregarded in the rest of his book. In Gabriel Abend's typology of the meanings of 'theory' (2008), theories of society do not appear. This declining importance of the theory of society, particularly in the Anglophone world, may be partly due to justified criticisms. Empirical insensitivity and a tendency towards hidden Eurocentrism are probably the most frequently repeated points (see Witte 2024). However, it should be clear from my reconstruction that the form of theory itself does not necessarily lead to these shortcomings. *Placing* the empirical object in society and *analyzing it contextually* are valuable contributions of theories of society that cannot be fulfilled by other forms of theory.

Other reasons that have led to a decline of the theory of society have to do with social factors in the field of contemporary sociology. As Omar Lizardo remarks, there are considerable changes in the "material conditions for the production

of theory as a cultural object" (2014: 1) that make it much harder to pursue systematic, time-consuming, and intellectually demanding forms of theory (see also Turner 2014). Doing a theory of society well requires an excellent overview of a multitude of sociological findings about society, but also a very deep grasp of history and the ability to theorize at the most abstract level. You need to be a historian-sociologist-philosopher to do it well – a rare combination of expertise that has become even more unlikely due to the ongoing differentiation of disciplines. In addition, accelerating publication cycles, quickly changing topics and projects, and a dependence on third-party funding make it hard to pursue a lifelong project like a theory of society – and to find engaged academic readers that put in the necessary effort instead of just hunting for a nice catchword to fluff up their next paper (see Anicker 2022).

Because the general social conditions for working on a theory of society are difficult, it is even more important to do it well, and to avoid typical pitfalls: A common mistake is to lose sight of the demands of empirical research while trying to solve the highly abstract, theoretical problems inherent in theories of society. This risks producing what Merton called "equivalents of the large philosophical systems of the past, with all their varied suggestiveness, their architectonic splendor, and their scientific sterility" (Merton 1949: 166). Whether theorists like it or not, in contemporary sociology, there is little patience for lengthy theoretical discussions that do not spell out their 'cash value' (William James) for empirical research. While, especially in theories of society, many theoretical problems exist that cannot be answered by pointing to data, the reverse is rarely true. The implications of (new) theories can be spelled out in the way they make us think differently about empirical research, and theorists should try to do this wherever possible. The lasting importance of Bourdieu's theory is perhaps an indication that theories of society can still be successful if they are closely tuned to the needs of empirical research.

While a lack of modesty might be required to even take on such a challenging project as a theory of society, it is important to acknowledge the limited nature of every such endeavor. The demands for the breadth of the perspective and its historical depth always exceed the capabilities of individual theorists. The need to generalize over large swaths of history, to take on difficult intellectual problems, and to be fluent in the history of ideas and a great number of special sociologies should never lead theorists to overestimate their understanding of society. The danger of particularism and ethnocentrism is always looming – and it is important to remain modest enough to see where one's knowledge and expertise do not suffice. These reasons for a 'not so grand' theory may also suggest that the theory of society needs to abandon a fixation on individual theorists and should try to develop theoretical forms that allow for collaborative theory development.

5. Conclusion

I argued that the core structure of sociological theory is determined at the conceptual level – more precisely, the intersection between theoretical vocabulary and everyday language. Different orienting problems and different ways to relate theoretical vocabulary to everyday language – the conceptual logics – give rise to different forms of sociological theory. It should be obvious that the two social-theoretic ways of theorizing distinguished in this article differ substantially from "explanation", the classical focus of the theorizing discourse. Doing social ontology or theorizing society calls for a distinct skill set compared to constructing causal explanations and requires more work on the constitution of phenomena. Both forms of theory are 'deeper' than causal explanation in the sense of presupposing a difference between base and surface or central and peripheral concepts. Social ontologies control sociological thought by *building* social phenomena from ontological base relations, while theories of society *place* phenomena in their social and historical context (see Table 1).

Table 1: Social Ontology and Theory of Society

	Focus problem for theorizing	Conceptual logic	Relation to empirical phenomena	Typical pitfalls
Social ontology	What are the basic building blocks of the social?	*Building* social phenomena from ontological base relations	Reconstructive interpretation "from within"	Conceptual fragmentation; Ontological fundamentalism
Theory of Society	What are the distinguishing features and most relevant structural logics of modern society?	*Placing* phenomena in their societal context	Relational interpretation "from without"	Philosophical detachment; Ethnocentrism

I hope that this, certainly incomplete, exercise in the conceptual logic of doing social ontology and theory of society contributes to a broader, more pluralistic notion of theory and theorizing. While sociological theories come and go, there are theoretical forms and ways of doing theory that remain largely the same throughout the discipline's history. Knowing these forms is vital for navigating the fragmented terrain of sociological theory.

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