Social Theory

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Abstract: In the last two decades, social theory in German-language sociology saw the rise of a number of “umbrella enterprises” such as analytical sociology, relational sociology, or practice theory that are not part of universalistic grand theories but extract basic assumptions about the structure of social reality from a plurality of approaches and combine them into competing integrative programs. The present article outlines the most significant of these umbrella enterprises and key aspects that they have defined in the discussion on social theory in German-speaking countries. Moreover, it deals with the question of how the larger of these enterprises in particular manage to present themselves as uniform approaches despite their many internal differences.

Keywords: Analytical sociology, explanatory sociology, Weber paradigm, relational sociology, practice theory, communicative constructivism

1 On the Dominance of Umbrella Enterprises in Social Theory

In the last twenty years, independent social-theory enterprises that are no longer embedded within specific universalist grand theories such as those of Parsons, Luhmann, or Bourdieu pushed themselves to the forefront of German theoretical debates.¹ Instead these enterprises focus on the basic elements and structures of the social without connecting them to more specific assumptions about particular forms of social order and appear as “umbrella enterprises” that extract social-theoretical assumptions from various theories and integrate them in a comprehensive research program. A number of these social-theory umbrella enterprises have struck a significant chord with German-speaking researchers. The *analytical sociology* proclaimed by Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, for instance, which aims to uncover causally explanatory social mechanisms, was sympathetically received in German sociology by exponents of a rational-action theory that defines itself as *explanatory sociology*. Likewise, the *practice turn* proclaimed by Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny was taken up in German sociology early on by Andreas Reckwitz and

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¹ “Enterprises” does not refer here to organizations but to more fluid social constellations that know nothing of membership roles and are instead ordered according to center and periphery, resembling social movements in many respects.

has since been broadly influential. Further enterprises of this type include *relational sociology*, which picks up from Harrison White and Mustafa Emirbayer and displays selective affinities to Luhmann's systems theory; the *Weber paradigm*, which has emanated from Heidelberg; and the *communicative constructivism* propagated by Hubert Knoblauch, Rainer Keller, and Jo Reichertz—whereby the latter two enterprises are on a smaller scale and anchored primarily in the German-language context. By defining relevant topics, these newcomers in the field of social theory have had a lasting influence on the more recent German-language discussion and have also given exponents of other approaches cause to position themselves in response.

2 Key Aspects of Social Theory Defined by Recent Umbrella Enterprises

Analytical sociology (AS) was christened as a social-theory umbrella enterprise with the publication of a conference anthology by Hedström and Swedberg (1998) and codified by Hedström's monograph *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology* (2005). Hedström describes the aim of AS the causal explanation of social phenomena by "theories of the middle range" (Merton) with the help of *social mechanisms* and supported by a foundation in action theory (cf. Hedström, 2005: 8f.). Social mechanisms presuppose a "causal agent," as Hedström and Swedberg (1998a: 11) note with reference to Bhaskar (1978). They assume that "the elementary 'causal agents' are always individual actors" (ibid.), thus committing AS to methodological individualism. As far as the mechanistic explanation of macro-social structures is concerned, this means they cannot be explained by direct reference to other macro-social structures (Ma1→Ma2); rather, explanation must always proceed by way of the micro-social level of individual actors. According to this approach, actors appear in their action to be (1) influenced by a macro-social constellation Ma1, which (2) shapes their motivation to perform specific actions in a way that can be explained by action theory, the aggregation of which then (3) generates a macro-social constellation Ma2. This model of explanation, which has become known as the "Coleman boat," forms the common basis of analytical and explanatory sociology. In Esser's account (1993), the explanatory steps of this model operate under the well-known titles (1) the "logic of the situation," (2) the "logic of selection," and (3) the "logic of aggregation."

In German-language sociology, the up-and-coming AS program was greeted by representatives of the older explanatory sociology (ES) as an ally, although their different emphases were freely acknowledged. The most important difference pertains to the theory of action applied at the micro level. Whereas Hedström takes as his basis the so-called DBO theory—which posits that actors choose a particular action on the basis of their desires (D), beliefs (B), and perceived opportunities (O) but does not assume utility maximization in the sense of rational-choice theory (RC)—ES insists that a theory of rational action (however modified, expanded, or inclusive of variable levels

of rationality) must serve as the foundation (cf., among others, Esser, 2001; 2010; Maurer, 2010; Maurer and Schmid, 2010; Schmid, 2011; 2017; Kroneberg, 2011; Opp, 2013). In this vein, Esser's *model of frame selection* (MFS) can be considered one of the most fully developed approaches (cf. Esser, 2001; Kroneberg, 2011: Ch. 5). It is set out as an integrative action theory that purports to explain not only rationally calculated (i.e., purposive-rational) action but also other forms, such as automatic-spontaneous and value-rational action in accordance with the principle of utility maximization.²

Furthermore, in ES the foundational action-theoretical component is assigned the function of rescuing the concept of deductive-nomological explanation by displacing the nomological foundation from the macro level—at which it has not yet been possible to identify generally valid laws—to the micro level and employing action theory to formulate a universally valid law of selection (cf. Esser, 1993: 94ff.; Maurer and Schmid, 2010: 40ff.; Kalter and Kroneberg, 2014: 97).

Rather than strive for an action theory that can serve as a generally valid basis of explanation, Hedström looks at the micro level for specific action-formation mechanisms that form the desires, beliefs, and opportunities of actors and can link them in various ways. Thus, wishful thinking, sour-grapes syndrome, and the adoption of others' beliefs in states of insecurity are treated as mechanisms at work on the level of individual actors, but without asking to what extent they derive from an overarching theory of action.³ From the perspective of ES, the criticism is that without a general anchoring in action theory, the assumed action-formation mechanisms must in the end be introduced as ad hoc hypotheses (cf. Maurer, 2010: 176ff., esp. 180).

If AS puts less emphasis on the detailed analysis and unified theoretical grounding of action-formation mechanisms, this is because its primary interest is to uncover the *transformational mechanisms* that explain the macro-social effects that are generated from the combination of a plurality of individual actions.⁴ Kalter and Kroneberg (2014: 103) see this shift of emphasis from the modeling of bridge hypotheses and the fleshing out of action-theoretical assumptions to the development of more complex models of aggregation/transformation as one of the significant impulses AS provides for ES. Kalter and Kroneberg (2014: 102f.) hold ES' primary fixation on working out a general theory of action responsible for the fact that its mechanism-based explanations still make relatively seldom use of formal generative models to explain the micro→macro transformation in a mechanistic way. AS is in turn criticized from the perspective of ES for proceeding too selectively with the reconstruction of this transformational step by favoring (empirically calibrated) agent-based com-

2 On the discussion of Esser's integrative enterprise in comparison to Luhmann and Weber, cf. Greshoff and Schimank, 2006.

3 In this regard, Schimank (2000; 2010; further developed in Kron, 2005: Ch. 8 and in Schimank, 2011) proceeds in a similar way in distinguishing four different actor models (homo oeconomicus, homo sociologicus, emotional man, identity asserter) and conceives the question of which of these models should be seen as adequate in a given action context as an *empirical* one.

4 This is equally true of Schimank.

puter simulation models to the neglect of other possibilities of modeling, such as game theory, decision theory, market models, laboratory experiments, network analysis, and so forth (Kalter and Kroneberg, 2014: 108), and concentrating above all on the modeling of coordination problems (Schmid, 2017: 418f.).

A number of questions remain controversial in analytical and explanatory sociology: How precisely are we to define social mechanism? What ought an action-theoretical explanation of macro-social phenomena look like? Is a reductive explanation that extends all the way down to the level of individual action always possible? Must we perhaps, and if so to what extent, start from the premise of emergent social structures that cannot be traced back to individual action?⁵ In light of these open questions, the inflationary use of the concept of mechanism suggests a greater degree of agreement than in fact exists. It should nonetheless be noted that the shared goal of developing causal explanations on the basis of social mechanisms, and the acceptance of the Coleman boat as a schematic foundation for distinguishing and relating various explanatory problems and types of mechanisms, provide a basis for routing disparate positions into a *coordinated disagreement*. Although the remaining differences cannot be dissolved in this way, they can be ordered by relating the various positions to a series of basic problems that are predefined by the micro-macro schema. Thus, the Coleman boat functions as a *semantic coordinating mechanism* for structuring debates within AS and ES. It furthermore serves to set this discourse apart from outside positions that do not appear to aspire to the deep mechanistic explanation of macro-social facts in the sense of methodological individualism, such as Luhmann's systems theory or the practice theories. Finally, deployed as a *metatheoretical* schema, the Coleman boat enables a determination of how other positions—under the aspect of selective agreement and difference—stand in relation to AS and/or ES, which can be seen in two further recent approaches that have established themselves as social-theory umbrella enterprises in German-language sociology since the turn of the millennium: the *Weber paradigm* and *relational sociology*, the latter of which is derived from network analysis.

The *Weber paradigm* canonized by Schluchter conceives of itself as a further development of the Weberian research program that revolves around the understanding and causal explanation of human action (cf. Albert et al., 2003; Schluchter, 2003; Albert et al., 2006; Albert, 2009). From this perspective, the macro-micro schema, with its linking of methodological individualism and multilevel analysis, appears in principle well suited to adequately reconstruct Weber's research practice (cf. Schluchter, 2003: 60ff.). As compared to rational choice or explanatory sociology, the following differences or emphases do, however, need to be highlighted: (1) The Weberian action types function as the action-theoretical foundation. (2) Rather than a

⁵ For discussion of the emergence problem, which cannot be dealt with here, cf. Greve and Schnabel, 2011, and Lindner and Mader, 2017. The ontological, methodological, and metatheoretical aspects of the micro-macro model of sociological explanation are furthermore laid out comprehensively in Greve, Schnabel, and Schützeichel, 2008.

monistic concept of rationality, it is assumed—in accord with the distinction between a purposive-rational orientation towards success and a value-rational orientation towards the immanent value of an action—that there are two different forms of action rationality. (3) The action types as well as the more specific hypotheses for interpreting human action do not have the status of law-like hypotheses but of ideal types in Weber's sense. (4) Particular emphasis is placed on worldviews and ideas, their socio-structural anchoring at the level of classes and estates, their role as a basis for the societal differentiation of spheres of value and orders of life, as well as how they impact the formation of personality types.⁶

Relational sociology (RS) has evolved from the analysis of social networks into a fully-fledged approach in social theory.⁷ Discussed in American sociology as early as the 1990s,⁸ a broader engagement with it did not begin in German-language sociology until well after the turn of the millennium.⁹

The reception of RS in German was initially based above all on Harrison White's (1992) theoretical approach. Only very recently did the conception proposed by Mustafa Emirbayer also come to the fore, whose 1997 *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* conceives of RS as an umbrella enterprise.¹⁰ The question of the extent to which the role of networks can be represented within the Coleman micro-macro schema is assessed in varying ways in the German-language literature. Similar to Emirbayer (1997: 295f.), and with explicit reference to Weyer (2000), Trezzini (2010: 196f.) interprets networks as the “mesoanalytic link” between the micro level of the actor and the socio-structural macro level. But when it is hypothesized, in the sense of a radical relationism, that actors are formed by relationships and that therefore the (minimally dyadic) relationships represent the foundational level compared to actors, one can ask to what extent this can be properly apprehended by the micro-macro schema's subdivision into levels (cf. Schmitt, 2017: 83). This immediately gives rise to the further question of the elementary processual unit through which social relationships reproduce themselves and thereby simultaneously define actors in a certain way. Intentional actions are explicitly rejected as a candidate for this role (cf. Abbott, 2007: 6f.); the concepts of interaction and transaction that are commonly used instead are analytically still insufficiently defined. Here, Fuhse (2009) identifies a conceptual lacuna in RS and shows, focusing on White's network theory, that Luhmann's concept

⁶ As an implementation of the differentiation-theoretical program as delineated here, cf. Schwinn, 2001.

⁷ In this respect, cf. the detailed account in Häußling, *SOCIAL NETWORKS*, this volume.

⁸ Cf. esp. White, 1992; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Emirbayer, 1997.

⁹ Cf. Holzer and Schmidt, 2009; Fuhse, Lindemann and Band, 2012; Fuhse and Mützel, 2010; Schmitt and Fuhse, 2015; Löwenstein and Emirbayer, 2017. For more comprehensive accounts of network research overall, cf. Holzer, 2006; Stegbauer and Häußling, 2010; Holzer and Stegbauer, 2019.

¹⁰ For an anthology containing this manifesto as well as further essays by Emirbayer and two co-authors in German translation, see Löwenstein and Emirbayer, 2017; for a comparison of White and Emirbayer, see in that volume Schmitt, 2017.

of communication and the notion of the attribution of communication as action is suited to fill the gap.¹¹ The question of whether networks are to be understood as the basic structural form of sociality, or as just one specific form among others in which the social is ordered, is answered differently. White chooses the first position; Luhmann (1995) and others who draw on his systems theory the latter (cf. Holzer and Schmidt, 2009a: 235). A further question concerns the entities to which actions can be attributed. “Actors” (or in White’s formulation, “identities”) cannot simply be equated to human individuals. The question of what can be considered an entity capable of action is not one that is answered by the scientific observer but is itself decided by social attribution. This question also marks a docking point at which, in the German-language discussion, connections are drawn between RS and other theoretical approaches such as neoinstitutionalism, which deals with the cultural construction of social agency and names individuals, organizations, and nation states as acting entities (cf. Meyer and Jepperson, 2000), and likewise between RS and systems theory, which applies the concept of *social address* and emphasizes the evolutionary variability of the entities to which the ability to participate in communication is socially attributed (cf. Fuchs, 1996; 1997).¹²

An intensive engagement with RS and the concept of network can be observed in the context of Luhmannian systems theory (cf. esp. Holzer and Schmidt, 2009; Bommers and Tacke, 2011). As is well known, systems theory replaces the micro-macro division with the division into the system-building levels of interaction, organization, and society, which has recently once again become an object of discussion and has elicited suggestions for expansion (cf. Heintz and Tyrell, 2015). Against this background, the question arises of the extent to which networks should be grasped as an autonomous kind of social system. This question has been answered in different ways within systems theory. In one widely received essay, Veronika Tacke (2000) analyzed networks as an autonomous type of social structure that reproduces through the communication of reciprocal expectations of achievement between individuals as social addresses. In a later essay co-authored with Michael Bommers, she took this

11 On linking Luhmann’s concept of communication with White’s network theory, cf. White, Fuhse, Thiemann and Buchholz (2007: 545). See also Schützeichel (2012), who bemoans RS’ lack of a time-theoretical foundation and recommends the concept of action as elementary temporal unit, as formulated by Luhmann prior to the “autopoietic turn,” as suitable for addressing this problem.

12 Gesa Lindemann (2012) places this problem at the center of her theory of the social world’s contingent borders, which she adopts from Plessner (cf. among others Lindemann, 2009 and 2010). According to this theory, which she characterizes as “relationist,” the question of whether an entity in general is recognized as a social person and thus as a potential participant in communication depends on rules for the attribution of person status. For Lindemann, the social validity of these rules is necessarily tied to an at least triadic constellation, for which reason the triad (and not the dyad) ought to be considered the elementary form of sociality. Joachim Fischer ascribes a similarly fundamental meaning to the “figure of the third.” On this and other attempts to attribute to the figure of the third a more or less central role in social theory, cf. the two volumes by Bedorf, Fischer and Lindemann (2010) as well as Esslinger, Schlechtriemen, Schweitzer and Zons (2010).

position even further, arguing that networks are their own type of system (cf. Bommers and Tacke, 2006). However, whether networks can be defined as social systems is controversial. Diverging from Bommers and Tacke, Holzer (2006: 97, 104) remarks with reference to White that networks have no boundaries and that it therefore does not make sense to conceptualize them as social systems. Irrespective of how this question is decided, it is assumed that the role of networks varies according to the form of social differentiation (cf. Holzer, 2011; Schneider and Kusche, 2011: 173f.). In particular, the relationship between networks and functional systems has been investigated in greater detail (cf. Bommers and Tacke, 2011). There is broad agreement that networks under modern conditions ought to be analyzed as social entities that establish themselves within or between functional systems and/or organizations. Under certain conditions, they reproduce as “parasites” (in the meaning proposed by Serres, 1981) of these systems (cf. Luhmann, 1995; Japp, 2011; Tacke, 2011; Schneider and Kusche, 2011; Schneider, 2015).

As conveyed by way of Pierre Bourdieu (cf. Emirbayer, 1997: 304; Hillebrandt, 2009: 113ff.; Mützel and Fuhse, 2010: 10), RS maintains connections to a further umbrella enterprise that has expanded significantly in the last two decades and is therefore considered especially successful: the *practice theories* (PT). In an essay that has had a lasting influence on the German-language debates concerning practice theory, Andreas Reckwitz (2003) brought together an array of “foundational elements of a theory of social practices” in a “programmatic synthesis” (ibid.: 284), which he sees embodied in various theories that for him constitute “the field of practice theories” (ibid.: 282). The notion of practice thereby functions as a foundational concept to which all other concepts are traced back. Practices consist of a “routinized ‘nexus of doings and sayings’ (Schatzki) [...] held together by an implicit understanding” (Reckwitz, 2003: 290; see also 294). They are based primarily on collectively shared implicit knowledge and practical abilities that are expressed in behaviors that include the use of artifacts,¹³ which function as parts of practices. Practices are guided not by “professed intentionality” but by “knowledge-dependent routinization,” and yet they are interpretable and open to creative transformation; they are not oriented towards “discrete ‘purposes’ or ‘interests’” but formed by “socially conventionalized, implicit motive/emotive complexes” that are inherent to the practices themselves and “into which individual actors ‘enlist’ and which they may subsequently redefine as ‘individual interests.’” Likewise, the “‘normativity’ of action” is supposed to be understood primarily as an alignment with the implicit normative criteria of socially appropriate behavior, which must be distinguished from the “explicit as well as formalized catalogs of norms” that also exist (ibid.: 293f.). Discourses (in Foucault’s sense) should not be opposed to practice but analyzed as discursive practices in their own right (ibid.: 298). The figure of the subject is “praxeologically dissolved in historically specific

¹³ Here the discussion ties in with the embodiment and materiality of action and with the agency of artifacts in the sense of Latour’s actor-network theory.

practice complexes”; subjects “exist only within the performance of social practices” (ibid.: 296). Macro-social contexts such as institutions, organizations, social fields, or functional systems are to be analyzed as larger complexes of associated and mutually aligned practices (ibid.: 295); the micro-macro distinction (Schützeichel, MICROSCIOLOGY, this volume) is not to be understood as a difference of levels but should be reformulated as a distinction merely in magnitude between practices and practice bundles (cf. Schatzki, 2016: 38f.). The concept of practice is thereby totalized; all other concepts are traced back to it and all social contexts ultimately subsumed under it.

The methods of practice sociology include ethnographic, ethnomethodological, and discourse-analytic procedures (cf. Schäfer and Daniel, 2015: 40, 52), which are, however, closely tied to individual approaches and the particular questions they pose; compared to the intense *theoretical* debate about practice theory, the desideratum of a basic general discussion of the *methods specific to practice theory* is bemoaned, also in recent times, as still unfulfilled (ibid.: 40). Pragmatism and the newer pragmatic theory of creative action advanced by Joas (1996) are seen as related approaches.¹⁴

The diversity of authors and positions that are subsumed under the label of “practice theories” raises the question of the extent to which it can be considered a uniform social-theory enterprise. This question has only recently come clearly to the fore with the progressive establishment of the praxeological approach. This can be seen with exemplary clarity in an anthology edited by Schäfer (2016). The theoretical contributions to this volume assume a plurality of practice-theory approaches; they interpret their differences, however, as *internal* differences within a *uniform* research program.¹⁵ Several authors explicitly pose the question of the unity of practice theory and answer it almost unanimously by means of a forced dissociation from the outside combined with the promise to dismantle the one-sidedness and the false dichotomies of non-practice-theoretical approaches.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Reckwitz, 2003: 283, fn. 2; Schäfer, 2012: 28f. It should also be noted that while Joas’ action theory is mentioned and cited again and again, it is seldom used as a fundamental theoretical foundation; cf., for example, the volume edited by Göttlich and Kurt (2012) on *Kreativität und Improvisation* (*Creativity and Improvisation*), in which, despite numerous mentions of Joas (1996), only Göttlich’s essay on media-effects research takes up his action theory in this way.

¹⁵ In a 2004 anthology edited by Hörning and Reuter, this is not yet the case. The question of the extent to which a clearly delimitable practice theory or a corresponding family of theories exists, and/or how its outer limits should be drawn, does not appear to have been answered decisively in most of the volume’s theoretical essays, which discuss different possibilities and restrictions of combining a practice-analytic perspective with other theoretical perspectives.

¹⁶ In his introduction, Schäfer (2016a) writes that practice theory is a “heterogeneous but nonetheless definable theoretical movement” (ibid.: 9), whose achievement consists generally “of overcoming established social-theoretical dichotomies” (ibid.: 14). Hirschauer (2016: 45) remarks: “It is true that animosity towards rationalistic action theories is part of the brand essence of all practice theory—everyone agrees what action is *not*—but, beyond that, the paths diverge very quickly, especially those of poststructuralism and praxeological microsociology.” Alkemeyer and Buschmann (2016) find: “A unifying bond that brings these heterogeneous approaches together is determined first and foremost *negatively*: practice theories are directed against objectivistic (collectivist, holistic, structuralist) as well

The practice theories face an integration problem also from the additional turns that followed the turn to practice. Following the general strategy of dismantling dichotomies, they are likewise internalized in that the newer turns (such as the material turn, the body turn, the spatial turn, the iconic turn, the emotional turn, etc.) are defined as mere shifts of attention to particular, previously neglected dimensions of social life (Kaldewey and Schatzki, 2015: 117) and therefore as turns within the practice turn (Reckwitz, 2016: 165f.).

Greater demands are placed on the praxeological dissolution of opposite pairs when their poles are associated with the positions of canonized authors of practice-theoretical works. As it then becomes necessary to address open contradictions, this endangers the premise of the unity of the practice theories. If neither of the conflicting positions is to be excluded, possibilities must be sought for producing compatibility. An exemplary case of this can be seen in the question—which is a particularly meaningful one for the practice theories—of the relationship between the hypothesis that social practices are primarily routinized and reproductive, as attributed to Bourdieu, and the emphasis put by Judith Butler on their capacity for subversion and innovation.¹⁷ Reckwitz (2004) dissolves this conflict by pointing to the difference between the contextualized practices that Bourdieu and Butler investigated. He thus deems that both are right, locates the mistake in the overhasty universalization of context-specific practices, and derives from this the conclusion that practice theory needs to be “as *thin* as possible in its general conceptual requirements” in order to be “*strong*” (ibid.: 52). To be sure, contradictions can in this way be harmonized or preemptively avoided. But thinning out the social ontology recognized by practice theorists simultaneously weakens its unity as a social theory, for it shrinks the number of shared social-theoretical premises.

In the course of the surge in social-theory umbrella enterprises, exponents of the hermeneutics of the sociology of knowledge, of the social-constructivist sociology of knowledge that draws on Schütz, Berger, and Luckmann, and of the knowledge-sociological discourse analysis following Foucault have merged into such an enterprise under the name of “communicative constructivism” while at the same time professing their proximity to practice theory (cf. Keller, Knoblauch and Reichertz, 2012; Reichertz and Tuma, 2017: 18ff.; Knoblauch, 2017: 224ff.). In contrast to practice theory, they of course do not view practices but rather communicative action as the “core of social theory” (Knoblauch, 2017: 14); whereby communicative action does not necessarily have to be put into language but is defined as bodily action oriented toward others, that is to say as “operational action” (*Wirkhandeln*), which enables “the reference to the materialities and resources of action” (Knoblauch and Tuma, 2016: 231). Emphasis

as subjectivistic (individualistic, atomistic, intentionalistic) explanations of the social” (ibid.: 116). Schulz-Schaeffer (2017: 290) in his discussion of this volume is markedly critical of this pattern of schematic and forced dissociation by means of distancing oneself from positions that no one (any longer) defends.

17 Cf. Schäfer’s (2013) detailed treatment of this question.

is placed on the notion that communicative constructivism is therefore also in a position to comprehend the materiality and corporeality, the routinization and performativity of the social (cf. Knoblauch and Tuma, 2016: 229). To mark a clear difference to practice theory, the latter is characterized as a “subjectless, indeed antisubjectivist theory,” a trait it supposedly shares with Luhmann’s systems theory; it thus perceives actors only as unreflective “executors of a practice” (Knoblauch and Tuma, 2016: 230). Exponents of communicative constructivism see decisive advantages over practice theory in their integration of actors as reflective subjects and in their ability to “explain processes of routinization, habitualization, and institutionalization”—which practice theory considers central—“by drawing on their own theoretical apparatus” (Knoblauch and Tuma, 2016: 231). A further advantage consists in communicative constructivism’s close relationship to the hermeneutics of the sociology of knowledge and to discourse analysis, which enables it to establish a more direct link between social theory and methodically controlled empiricism. Its disadvantage is that it is not nearly as widely spread. The aforementioned emphasis on far-reaching agreement with practice theory, which almost resembles an offer of accession or fusion, could be a suitable means of helping compensate for this handicap.

3 Conclusion and Outlook

As we saw at the beginning of this essay, it was only in the recent past that social theory distinguished itself as an *independent type of theory* and established itself in a number of umbrella enterprises, each claiming a plurality of authors (some of them posthumously) to be its intellectual partners, despite manifold differences between their respective theoretical positions. It can be surmised that these enterprises satisfy a need for institutions of disciplinary integration that has been generated not only as a result of growth and its attendant increase in the heterogeneity of the social and cultural sciences but also by altered patterns of communication, cooperation, and career.

If research is increasingly conducted in the form of third-party-funded projects under the umbrella of large research associations and publications are addressed to the largest possible international audience, then having that research couched in demanding grand theories with copious theory-specific terms and assumptions becomes a hindrance to communication and cooperation. If, furthermore, scholarly careers are no longer viable on the basis of longstanding master-student relationships, academic discipleship, and the building of academic schools and their expansion by patronage but instead require shifting employment and the cultivation of one’s own “employability” in view of the hardly predictable academic job market, then the conditions for close attachment to individual theoretical enterprises and their exponents—no longer supported by structures of academic socialization and career strategies—cease to apply. What is then needed are theoretical (and/or methodological) contexts of orientation that would allow researchers to gear their own specific

scientific work towards wider-reaching nexuses of communication and cooperation. Social-theory vocabularies satisfy this need in a way that enables researchers to combine openness towards diverse object-related theories with a highly generalized social-theoretical profile. At the same time, the creation of an umbrella enterprise defines a new field for conceptual analyses and comparative studies dedicated to the scholars associated with this enterprise, thereby providing an uncharted territory for innovative theoretical research that is waiting to be occupied by a new generation of ambitious PhD students spearheading the new theoretical movement. It therefore seems probable that the trend towards social-theory umbrella enterprises will continue—and will simultaneously continue to exert a certain pressure that promotes structural isomorphism as well as the incorporation of individual or smaller collective enterprises.

This development comes at a price. Larger social-theory umbrella enterprises see themselves confronted with the problem of integrating internal heterogeneity and must prove themselves by how they solve it. As sketched above, analytical and explanatory sociology make use of the Coleman boat as a semantic mechanism that allows them to transpose internal differences into relationships of complementarity or coordinated disagreement and further utilize it to determine possibilities for selective combination with other enterprises such as the Weber paradigm and network analysis. Relational sociology and network research structure the problem of integration by drawing on the concept of the network and its distinction between knots and edges, which can be interpreted and theoretically contextualized in diverse ways and comes with a specific toolset of methods for the analysis of social networks. By comparison, the vocabulary of the practice theories, according to the current state of debate, appears less suited to serving as an instrument for the transformation of a number of divergent positions into a coordinated disagreement. Also, there is still a lack of specifically practice-theoretical methods that could compensate for this. The strategy observed here—of dissolving contradictions between various canonized authors by thinning out social-theoretical propositions that claim universal validity—is no doubt suited to preventing schisms within the practice-theoretical enterprise. But it simultaneously exacerbates the problem of theoretical integration, which is then dealt with in a compensatory way by schematically setting practice theory apart from other positions.

If one asks from an international perspective which particular highlights of German-language social theory could make an engagement with it appear worthwhile, then the answer will differ according to the theoretical enterprise. For analytical sociology, one can point to the particular efforts of explanatory sociology to develop a uniform action theory as the microfoundation for an action-theoretical explanation of social macrostructures. As regards the Weber paradigm, which does not share the action-theoretical basis of analytical and explanatory sociology but does in principle share their micro-macro model, what should be noted is above all its analysis of the social significance of worldviews and ideas, of their formative impact on actors, and of their social-structural anchoring at the level of classes and estates as well as their role

in societal processes of differentiation. In the German-language context, exponents of relational sociology encounter in Luhmannian systems theory a theoretical design that in essential respects bears an elective affinity to their own, offering selective opportunities for honing their conceptual precision and formulating theoretical hypotheses about how the structure and meaning of networks varies according to the form of societal differentiation. As far as German-language practice theory goes, at the moment I find it particularly interesting to observe how the virulent problem of integrating internal heterogeneity is being addressed and handled, as it is a problem whose solution could be of central importance to the further development of the practice-theory umbrella enterprise. Communicative constructivism, a smaller enterprise that is close to the practice theories in essential points, offers the advantage of greater homogeneity and direct methodological tethering to the hermeneutics of the sociology of knowledge and discourse analysis, such that here one can observe directly which form of methodically controlled empiricism is appropriate to this version of social theory.

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