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A. Salem and Chris Till

## Sociology and Contemporary Critical Theory

**Abstract.** *This editorial summarises a series of eight papers for the Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai special issue, 'Sociology and Contemporary Critical Theory', the impetus for which came out of a symposium held in April 2017 at Leeds Beckett University, entitled 'Critical and Philosophical Issues after Post-Structuralism'. The event was organised by the Critical Theory Research Group, its members' intellectual interests spanning social and cultural theory, political theory, visual culture and social psychology; their aim was and is to reflect upon various tactics for politically engaged and socially active theoretical writing in the wake of a fundamental questioning of knowledge and certainty, and also more recently of the rise of cultural and political developments that would deny the rights of the Other.*

Today, culture and politics seem to be suffused with confusion. Scholars, politicians and media commentators have all been wrongfooted by the outcomes of general elections and popular referenda, and by the return of single-minded and reductive narratives, most dangerously of nationalism, racism and xenophobia, to the forefront of mainstream cultural and political discourse. The perceived irrationality of these developments, alongside what has been widely assumed to be the inability or unwillingness of many to take proper account of the facts, have brought about a great deal of fear and frustration. But more than this, there is a growing sense that truth itself, and the search for truth, are considered simply irrelevant in political debates. In present circumstances, plainly, it could easily be argued that some political figures and allied movements, especially those of a parochial and

reactionary cast, may benefit more than others from the effects of the destabilisation of truth – whether or not they have been actively engaged in this process themselves.

The idea that a single viewpoint could in any way express objective, eternal truth is of course anathema to critical theory, which has long warned of the dangers of representing single viewpoints as universal truths while taking no account of the position of the observer. But the consequences of a lack of absolute reference points, and of the linked issue of arriving at the truth, stretch well beyond the realms of intellectual culture and the political life of a country. Michael Betancourt (2015) has argued that our contemporary form of capitalism, that is digital capitalism, is highly dependent on the fostering of ambiguity (through for instance the loss of context and

with it of meaning) – in short, contemporary capital relies on breeding continual confusion in order to function successfully. If we accept that extreme relativism in moral terms, and interpretive indeterminacy in epistemological ones, have become important tools of capital accumulation and political control alike, then it is hardly sufficient to respond with powerless and futile hand-wringing.

This complex of problems was a central theme of the event that formed the basis for this special issue of *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas* held in April 2017 at Leeds Beckett University, ‘Critical and Philosophical Issues after Post-Structuralism’ was a symposium organised by the Critical Theory Research Group, the aim of which was to reflect upon various tactics for politically engaged and socially active theoretical writing, while holding to the premise that the deconstruction of meaning and truth cannot be left to those who would deny the rights of the Other. The papers and dialogues which resulted repeatedly demonstrated the importance of extended, detailed and careful study, especially before falling into instinctive and indiscriminating value judgements. Indeed, the papers went beyond anyone’s expectations in terms of their level of detail and organisation, and it was felt that they should be published so as to encourage new and wider groups of readers to engage with their contents.

In describing the resulting articles here, our purpose is only to give a flavour of their major themes and concerns; of course thumbnail sketches such as those which follow are in no way equivalent to what the authors actually

say – for this readers need to turn to the articles themselves. We would like to start with Conrad Russell’s article, which bears on the problem of the status and the possibility of scientific truth most directly. Some have placed the blame for the ‘alternative facts’ used in our current ‘post-factual’ politics at the door of intellectual trends that have raised radical doubts about the nature of scientific knowledge. For Russell, the meaning of scientific facts cannot be understood without considering their relationship both to their social context in the broadest sense and to the much narrower intellectual context of scientists themselves. Drawing on the ideas of Bruno Latour, Maurizio Ferraris and Gaston Bachelard, among others, Russell emphasises the role of the social in the material realisation of scientific facts: for instance, many elements or materials have never existed in a ‘pure’ state outside of a laboratory – which is itself a product of human civilisation. Russell’s point is that scientific facts operate independently of particular actions by particular people, but are divorced neither from the observations of scientists nor from those of the social world at large. Facts of this sort, then, are culturally rather than naturally constructed but, once established, nevertheless present themselves as an external, natural force beyond their creators’ control. From György Lukács’s ‘second nature’ onwards, where active agents become passive objects of their creations, this is very much the territory of critical theory, though Russell is willing to grant science a privileged position *vis-à-vis* other forms of knowledge, which few of the thinkers working in Lukács’s

tradition would countenance, except in a very qualified way.<sup>1</sup>

Several of the papers in the volume engage with the theories of Niklas Luhmann. While for him all forms of knowledge are necessarily relative, contingent and partial, precluding recourse to a single perspective of truth, the 'blind spot' necessarily associated with any one viewpoint does allow for a particular, singular vision, and can be made manifest when seen from a different perspective, posing a threat to its cultural authority or supremacy. Irina Chkhaidze explores these issues in her analysis of the film *Leviathan*, which documents industrial fishing in the Atlantic from very different viewpoints, including those of sea creatures, the fishers, their trawler and the sea. Drawing on Luhmann and also the work of Cary Wolfe, Chkhaidze shows how the process of making meaning is in no sense specific to people, being equally a property of many kinds of complex systems, and how the social world in Luhmann's terms does not necessarily imply the primacy of human subjects at all. Yet Chkhaidze also argues that Luhmann's flattening of cultural distinctions between different systems, whether they are machines, people, animals or social structures, plays down the power relations at work across and between them. *Leviathan* confronts this issue head-on in its oscillation between the viewpoint of the fishermen and that of their catch, where the

silent slaughter and death of marine fauna for commercial purposes is contrasted with scenes depicting the fishers' arduous manual labour, in a way that stresses the effects of intense atomism and alienation. For Chkhaidze, then, *Leviathan* fills in the gap left by Luhmann's theories, exposing power relations carried to the extreme of control over life as such, but also control over those active in this slaughter.

A. Salem, in comparing Luhmann's views with those of György Lukács and Georg Simmel, seeks out tactics and techniques for the continuation of social criticism in our climate of epistemological uncertainty. While all three thinkers, in different ways, pose deep problems about the objectivity of knowledge, and while all warn against the dangers of privileged points of vision, for Salem the lack of an absolute, universal grounding for critique does not spell the end of critics' pronouncements and judgements about their objects, but nor does it mean that debates on the inseparability of observation and interpretation can simply be ignored. Salem's own response is to move towards a critical and ethical writing that is non-foundational and non-essentialist, and in relation to this effort his claim is that an exchange between Simmel, Lukács and Luhmann, together taking in certain elements of Marxism, post-humanism and post-structuralism, can yield quite a number of positive recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Lukács himself, for instance, also claims a special status for science, but in purely derogatory terms, since its classifying, deterministic and instrumental aspect has such an intimate relation with capitalist culture: 'When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie' (Lukács 1990; 10 cited in Salem 2016; 8).

In an essay subtitled 'Reflections on Marx, Adorno and Utopia', Samuel Coe critically explores some of the claims to universality surrounding our current system of production and consumption. For him Karl Marx's ideas, especially when coupled with the Adornian sense of negative dialectics, can provide an antidote to the view that the production process as it currently exists is the best of all possible ones, to the point of being all that one might expect, and all that one may hope for. While ideas about what constitutes, say, 'labour power' or 'exchange value' can appear autonomous and timeless and therefore difficult or impossible to move beyond, Marx's materialist account serves to reveal how their meanings are bound to and constrained by social relations at a particular historical moment. The problem for Coe, then, is not whether those meanings, and the system of exploitation accompanying them, may be changed for something better, but that current economic and social structures tend to weaken attempts at action and critique by those caught up in them. If the 'exchange society', as Coe puts it, seems inevitable and inescapable, it is partly because it tends to foster among its inhabitants a type of 'epistemological naivety', to an extent relying on this for its very existence.

A demystifying analysis of the inevitability of our economic order is also a feature of Tom Driver's essay on the politics of the neoliberal view of freedom, in which rational, 'free' individuals are those who absorb entrepreneurial attitudes, who take the economic system as it is for granted, and whose abilities and qualities must always and can only be tested against the

market. Yet markets and economic value are, as Franco Berardi (2012) reminds us, inherently (and increasingly) unstable, and subject to the whims and emotional impulses of, for instance, 'confidence' and 'depression'. The freedom from political and cultural constraints (or as Driver points out, 'negative freedom' in Isaiah Berlin's sense) that is very much tied to the operation of neoliberal capital has recently come under attack from increasingly authoritarian governments that, at least in their rhetoric, seek to give priority to national economies and cultures. The tensions in this situation lead Driver to ask how long the neoliberal worldview may continue to be taken both as a fixed and constant reference point that can express 'facts' about the self and reality, and as a truism requiring no further explanation.

Without falling back on either an essentialist view of what it is to be human or a morality determined by *a priori* rules, Joseph Backhouse-Barber examines the ideas of Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas with the aim of bringing out their potential for resistance to the depersonalising effects of commercial and administrative structures. If for him neither of these thinkers considered in isolation can offer an immediate answer, this is because Luhmann's vision of society underplays the importance of power and privilege, while Habermas's concern with marking off a sphere of discourse where non-instrumental interaction reigns is too idealistic. In response, Backhouse-Barber works towards a more synthetic account based on an exchange of views between the two, sketching out an ethical practice that might break with structures imposed by instrumental rationality,

but only in accepting an open-ended, provisional morality that can never be grounded on solid foundations.

David Morgan, in discussing psychoanalytic theory and the ideas of Jacques Lacan in particular, bears on the issue of their relation to, and uses for, Leftist critique. While the appropriation of Lacan by Left-wing thinkers (including Charles Wells and Slavoj Žižek) has often fixed on the Lacanian 'real' as a tool of oppositional culture, for Morgan this particular focus amounts to a dead end for Leftist politics. The reason is that while the real can certainly have destructive consequences for dominant cultural meanings, which explains its appeal to Leftist critics, it can offer no basis for political action, being beyond all rational control, and thus all forms of collective decision-making. Instead, Morgan argues, such critics would be better served by dwelling more insistently on the issue of the relation of 'the symbolic' to 'the imaginary' in Lacan's terms – and this may mean focusing more on the failures of language and imagery in the capitalist cultural realm, on the tensions or contradictions between, on the one hand, the conventional meaning of signs and symbols, and, on the other, their perceptual meaning. These considerations become more urgent in a cultural and political climate currently running in the direction of a new and very dangerous compact, particularly but by no means only in the US and the UK: an ideologically neo-capitalist vision, but one which is coupled with nationalist, isolationist paranoia.

Gary Hazeldine traces Axel Honneth's theories about 'recognition' back to their diverse sources, among them Hegelian and Kantian

concepts, and the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and Max Horkheimer. The aim is to make explicit the various ways in which (in Honneth's view) underlying all our relations with others is mutual recognition, or rather the lack of it, at the level of such identity categories as ethnicity, class and gender, and how this bears both on our capacity for self-realisation, and gives the impetus for social struggle. Hazeldine goes on to explore some of the relations and tensions between the twin processes of recognition and reification, how these are linked together under a capitalist economy and its complementary culture, and how Honneth's theories offer possibilities for resistance. However, the author also argues that through an idealisation of recognition Honneth, in a similar way to Habermas, produces his own forms of abstraction and misrecognition, and is thus complicit in the very processes that he seeks to criticise: reification, instrumentality and exploitation.

While the contributions to this issue of *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas* take in many diverse views and topics, what they have in common is the extent of their political engagement, whether with animal-human relations, the ethics of human action, the prospects for socio-cultural criticism, forms of resistance, or different futures. There is also general agreement that the conceptual tools can be found to make sense of our present situation, and to begin to move beyond it. The hope is that some of the ideas and opinions offered here can serve in a modest way as a resource in this process, by initiating conversations, and opening up possibilities for a wider set of critical and conceptually informed perspectives on the present.

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## SANTRAUKA

## SOCIOLOGIJA IR ŠIUOLAIKINĖ KRITINĖ TEORIJA

Specialus *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai* numeris skirtas kritinei sociologijai ir teorijai. Jame publikuojami aštuonių autorių tekstai, kurių idėjos pristatytos ir aptartos seminare „Filosofinės ir kritikos problemos po post-struktūralizmo“, įvykusiame Leeds Beckett universitete 2017 m. balandį. Seminarą surengė Kritinės teorijos tyrinėjimų grupė, jungianti labai plačių interesų mokslininkus, besidominčius socialine ir kultūrine teorija, politine teorija, vizualiąja kultūra ir socialine psichologija. Svarbiausias įvykusio sambūrio, o sykiu ir šio numerio užmanymas buvo siekis apmąstyti taktikas, kaip plėtoti politiškai angažuojantį ir socialiai reikšmingą teorinį kalbėjimą šiandienos visuomenėje, kai iš esmės kvestionuojamas bet koks žinojimas ar tikrumo pamatai ir kai stiprėja kultūriniai bei politiniai judėjimai, neigiantys Kito teises. Kviestinių redaktorių A. Salemo ir Chriso Tillio parengtame įvade trumpai pristatoma numerio idėja ir jame publikuojami tekstai.

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