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Wolfgang KNÖBL, *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte*  
(Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2022, 316 p.)

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The social history of social science, so long as it is also considered as a science of the unconscious, [...] is one of the most powerful means of distancing oneself from [...] the grip of an incorporated past which survives into the present.

Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>

Wolfgang Knöbl's new book critically examines the attempts of sociologists to make sense of history. The German title means something like "sociology facing history," as the author explains [302].<sup>2</sup> This book appeared at a moment when concepts designating broad, linear macro-social processes had become less compelling [9]. Knöbl's central thesis is that social scientists have struggled to find an adequate way to access the past. Knöbl takes for granted that historical processes are contingently determined, discontinuous, and heterogenous. The ongoing stream of events results from an interaction between "decisionistic and existentialist" practices and the obdurate constellations of the inherited past. The contingency and openness of social practice is suppressed by concepts of macrosocial process such as democratization, individualization, industrialization, modernization, and secularization. Such "-ization" (*-isierungen*) concepts, according to Knöbl, function as an intellectual iron cage, channeling history into orderly, linear molds. The book's central argument traces these macroprocess concepts to the legacies of *Geschichtsphilosophie* (the philosophy of history). The book excavates this philosophical formation and the various attempts that have been made to overcome it over the past two centuries.

What exactly are the problems inherited from the philosophy of history, according to Knöbl? The first problem, raised by Kant and restated by Droysen, is "the question of historical relevance (and arbitrariness): Which historical data are really important, how to choose?"<sup>3</sup> Hegel's philosophy of history offered a powerful template for organizing

<sup>1</sup> Pages 177-198, 178 in Pierre BOURDIEU, 1990. "A Lecture on the Lecture," in P. Bourdieu, *In Other Words. Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford, Stanford University).

<sup>2</sup> All page references in the text refer to KNÖBL, *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte*.

<sup>3</sup> Pages 79-96, 83, in Wolfgang KNÖBL, 2015. "The Origins of the Social Sciences and the problem of Conceptualizing 'Modernity'/'Modernities,'" in S. Trakulhun and R. Weber, eds, *Delimiting Modernities. Conceptual Challenges and Regional Responses* (Lanham, Lexington Books).

historical material. A “genuine historical sociology,” however, would have to avoid taking such ordering concepts as its starting point [50]. It would have to develop a less arbitrary approach to theorizing processes, one that acknowledges “accident and contingency” [96] as well as “the role of creativity in history” [95–96]. A second, related problem is that social structures and processes are not sufficiently powerful to determine social practice completely. Sociologists need to weigh the relative contributions of social structure and human agency, or, put differently, to acknowledge the weight of the past and the openness of the present. Knöbl advocates a sociology focused on practice, specifically a “decisionistic and existentialist concept of practice,” emphasizing “the role of creativity in history” [39, 95–96] considered against a constellation of historical and social givens. Sociology faces daunting epistemic problems, which it shares with history as a discipline [302].

Knöbl begins his investigation with an anecdote. Raymond Aron and Talcott Parsons, two giants of sociological theory, met for breakfast in Rome in 1973. The gulf between the two sociologists’ basic assumptions became clear in the course of their conversation, leading Parsons to stand up and leave abruptly.<sup>4</sup> Knöbl uses this episode to sharpen his distinction between a historical version of sociology and Parsons’ science of order” [30]—a science of lawlike social regularities, teleological progress, and social actors guided by homogenous norms. Aron’s approach, by contrast, understands humans as living in historical situations and being compelled to base their actions on interpretations of the past, despite the epistemic insecurity of those interpretations. Historical reconstruction was therefore, for Aron, an epistemic and political imperative for all actors, including sociologists. At the same time, Aron was critical of conventional approaches to writing history, which generate an illusion of historical fatality that contradicts the contingent openness of the present and the past. Aron posed the problem of finding a way to write sociology that could acknowledge the weight of historical and social pressures on the present while avoiding the sense of implacable social necessity. Sociology should not take social order or homogenous human agents as its starting point but should try to reconstruct actors’ decisions in the face of the presence of the past—a presence consisting of pressures and barriers but also possibilities. Aron developed these arguments in his twin doctoral theses which he defended on March 18, 1938, just after

<sup>4</sup> Pages: 137–139, in Giovanni BUSINO, 1985. “Souvenirs suisses,” *Commentaire*, 28–29.

Parsons had published *The Structure of Social Action*. Knöbl understands Aron's principal thesis, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*,<sup>5</sup> as a touchstone for a coherent program in historical sociology. Indeed, the confrontation between two sociological poles that Knöbl sets up is reminiscent of Aron's differentiation between the formalist and historical tendencies in German sociology in his 1935 book *La Sociologie allemande contemporaine*.<sup>6</sup>

The first half of the book is entitled "Social Theory between the Philosophy of History and Historicism." The author begins by returning to the Hegelian *Ur-Szene* of sociology's tendency to reorganize historical complexity into simplified concepts of social process. The author then explores some of the critiques of *Geschichtsphilosophie* offered by historicists such as Ranke and Droysen. A central problem with Hegelian *Geschichtsphilosophie*, according to these historians, is that it brackets accidents and contingencies and downplays "historical individuals," ordering historical facts around some central idea evolving inexorably toward a telos. Yet even the historicists tended to fall back on some eternal concept orienting history [74].

Part One culminates in a discussion of neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert and several Weimar social theorists and historical sociologists who responded to the historicist critique of *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Knöbl argues that most of these most authors reintroduced arbitrary metaconcepts in an attempt to master history's "wild contingency" [261] and heterogeneity. Heinrich Rickert introduced "objective culture" as an instrument to overcome relativism and provide structure to historical facts. Max Weber tried to prevent history from dissolving into details by deploying hard, inexorable macrohistorical concepts such as rationalization [89-93]. Ernst Troeltsch had a "less fatalistic approach" and emphasized creative practice, but also had recourse to an ordering category, "European values" [94-95]. Max Horkheimer sought a "non-historicizable anchoring point for history" in a universal "human will to freedom and justice" [128].

Karl Mannheim offered the most sustained reflections on the questions raised by the historicist critique of the philosophy of history. Knöbl criticizes Mannheim, however, for structuring his sociology of knowledge around "epochal" totalities. Although this epochal approach interrupts the teleological thrust of history, it reintroduces a simplifying sense

<sup>5</sup> Raymond ARON, [1938] 1961. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity* (Boston, Beacon Press).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond ARON, 1935. *La Sociologie allemande contemporaine* (Paris, Alcan).

of unified order within each individual epoch and sidelines Mannheim's earlier construction (in the "Historismus" essay from 1924) of "history as permanently in flux" and as characterized by "developments that span epochs" [105]. Knöbl qualifies this critique of Mannheim in an illuminating discussion of the latter's 1928 essay on "the problem of generations." The concept of the generation allowed Mannheim to break up the cultural homogeneity of a given "epoch" via the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous [110, 125-126]. Knöbl suggests that Ernst Bloch reintegrated Mannheim's idea into the assumptions of *Geschichtsphilosophie* by characterizing the nonsimultaneous as a "subjective" factor coexisting with "objective" elements of the simultaneous [121]. Norbert Elias introduced a promising revision of Mannheim in his *Habilitation* thesis, "Die höfische Gesellschaft," which detailed the specific mechanisms by which a singular historical culture was inculcated in specific subjects at a particular moment in time. Elias fell back on *Geschichtsphilosophie*, however, by extending this analysis into an all-encompassing theory of the "civilizing process" [118-119]. Only Siegfried Landshut and Walter Benjamin broke decisively with the conceptual patterns associated with the philosophy of history [130-136]. Yet the ideas of Mannheim, Elias, Landshut, and Benjamin had little immediate resonance in sociology in the decades between the Nazi seizure of power and the postwar refounding of sociology. We should be particularly grateful to Wolfgang Knöbl and Rainer Nicolaysen for reintroducing us to Landshut, whose *Kritik der Soziologie* [1929] has still not been translated into English.<sup>7</sup>

The second half of *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte* is called "Liberation from Historicism and the Philosophy of History—One Way or Another." This section first turns to the surreptitious reemergence of the philosophy of history within postwar social theory. Knöbl begins with modernization theory, which he has previously analyzed in detail.<sup>8</sup> The modernization framework and the language of "modernity" appears here as a relatively simplified and hugely influential restatement of *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Knöbl argues that the central concepts of modernization theory and the "epochal concept"—modernity—prevented any veritable conceptualization of historical change [140]. Many of the alternatives to modernization theory effectively reasserted the tradition-modernity dichotomy and thus the assumptions of *Geschichtsphilosophie*.

<sup>7</sup> Rainer NICOLAYSEN, 1997. *Siegfried Landshut die Wiederentdeckung der Politik; eine Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main, Jüdischer Verlag).

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang KNÖBL, 2007. *Die Kontingenz der Moderne. Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika* (Frankfurt a.M., Campus).

These include Reinhard Koselleck's *Sattelzeit* notion [167], Hartmut Rosa's theory of differentiation and individualization as quasi-irreversible processes [177], and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, which banned contingency and reintroduced transhistorical social processes [232].

The book's concluding chapters discuss several other approaches that conceptualize structured social processes without reaffirming a metatheory of process. These include Merton's discussion of unintended consequences, the discussion of autonomous processes (*Eigendynamik*) in German sociology (Renate Mayntz, Birgitta Nedelmann, Friedhelm Neidhardt), discussions of discontinuity and contingency by Georges Gurvitch and Georges Balandier, and the discussion of political crisis and disorder by the Bourdieusian social scientist Michel Dobry.

Knöbl then turns to a long discussion of narrative theory [255-289]. The relations between narrative and narrative theory and the philosophy of history are ambiguous. On the one hand, the powerful narrative templates that historians sometimes impose on their raw material play the role of "dangerous process concepts" [13], organizing and sorting events across long time spans. Narrative can serve as a strong schema for transforming contingency into structured sequences that communicate a sense of inevitability, as Aron already noted [261]. Knöbl cites Paul Ricoeur to the effect that "narratives can transform ... the wild contingency of sheer events into an ordered, causally structured and intelligible form of contingency" [261]. Indeed, this seems to broadly capture the way in which narrative is used nowadays by most practicing historical sociologists, who generally avoid "teleological conceptions" and "robust and hyper-stable processes" [183]. However, writers and scholars have also experimented with narrative forms that do not follow orderly plot structures; indeed, some narratives reflect a conception of reality as chaotic and aleatory.<sup>9</sup> Knöbl's concluding discussion crucially reopens the moribund discussion of narrative in sociology and poses important questions concerning the relations between writing styles and social science epistemologies.

Knöbl's discussion of *Geschichtsphilosophie* as it operates within social science overlaps with and diverges from the history of positivism in social science in fascinating ways. It is worth recalling that Troeltsch saw France, Britain, and the United States as the homeland of social science

<sup>9</sup> Hayden WHITE, 1987. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press): 1-25.  
in H. White, *The Content of the Form*

positivism and Germany as the heartland of historicism.<sup>10</sup> Starting, like Troeltsch, from the German standpoint, Knöbl demonstrates that *Geschichtsphilosophie* overlapped powerfully at times with sociological positivism (although Knöbl does not use that word). This is especially true in terms of the “dominant compulsion toward generalization” in the *Geschichtsphilosophie* tradition [183]. *Geschichtsphilosophie* and social science positivism should perhaps best be seen as two intellectual series (to use a term Aron and Bourdieu borrowed from Antoine Augustin Cournot) that intersect, merge, and separate at different moments, in different locations, and in different texts.

Some readers might balk at the suggestion that sociology today is still broadly characterized by the assumptions discussed here. It is certainly not obvious that these ideas characterize most of the historical sociology that has been produced in the United States since the 1990s. Most of the 37 books that won awards from the historical sociology section of the American Sociological Association between 1995 and 2015 seem quite remote from the epistemologies of *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Perhaps these philosophies of history are more prevalent in German sociology, and the positivist thread is the more powerful heritage in the United States.

This book opens the reader's eyes to an array of social thinkers who are rarely read today, or rarely discussed together. It will be extremely useful for historical sociologists interested in the genealogy of their subfield. It will help practicing historians and historical sociologists to identify and loosen the grip of a problematic intellectual heritage and to navigate among the alternative theoretical instruments. Wolfgang Knöbl's *Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte* is an extraordinary work of reflexive vigilance and methodological reflection.

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<sup>10</sup> Ernst TROELTSCH, 1922. *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 1, *Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr).