

Wolfgang Knöbl, Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte. Zur Kritik der Sozialtheorie, Berlin (Suhrkamp) 2022, 316 S. (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft, 2375), ISBN 978-3-518-29975-3, EUR 22,00.

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The title of Wolfgang Knöbl's recent book is challenging: »Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte« can mean »Sociology before History« in the sense that sociology precedes history, yet that cannot be the case since Knöbl believes that history as a discipline preceded sociology. The title is more likely to be intended to be read in the sense that »Sociology stands before History«; that is, sociology is being judged by history. If this is indeed the case, Knöbl makes a compelling case for summoning sociology to the tribunal of history. But this sense of history is not a monolithic discipline (»die Geschichte«), but an ongoing process. Knöbl set himself the task to try to tell the lengthy tale of how history intersected with sociology and then sociology tried to emancipate itself from history – he insists that sociology cannot exist divorced from temporal processes – and he succeeds.

The book is composed of four parts: an introduction and a conclusion and two main sections: the first main section is on social theory between philosophy of history and historicism. Knöbl begins chapter 2 with an account of a breakfast meeting between Raymond Aron and Talcott Parsons in Italy in 1973. By that time, Aron had become as famous as Parsons and Knöbl points out the fundamental differences in sociologies that the two scholars had: Aron had recently published his work on the stages of sociological thinking whereas Parsons' fame rested on his structural sociology. This opposition between Aron's contention that sociology was infused with history and Parsons' insistence that sociology was formal and atemporal is the story of Knöbl's book. Knöbl draws attention to the two dissertations that Aron wrote in the late 1930s. The first was rejected but the second one was accepted after much discussion. Aron himself later wrote that neither were among his best works, but there is no doubt that both dissertations grappled with the relation between philosophy of history and sociological thinking (p. 52–54, 61).

Knöbl devotes the lengthy chapter 3 to the changes in the notion of history from roughly the time of Kant until around the end of the First World War. This includes Kant and Hegel and how they differed regarding the significance and importance of history – Kant tended to minimize it whereas it is well-known that Hegel emphasized it. But both seemed to embrace the idea that history was linear and that meant it was progressive (p. 67). Knöbl also discusses the influences that William von Humboldt, Leopold von Ranke, and Gustav von Droysen exerted in their philosophies of history and how some of them seemed to conjoin German Idealism



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with Romanticism – that is to understand the historical importance of Reason and the »accidental« (»Zufall«). This leads to Knöbl's investigation of the Southwest School of neo-Kantianism and its proponents Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. This also includes those thinkers who were not »members« of the Southwest School of Neo-Kantianism but were influenced by it; namely Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch in particular plays a prominent role in Knöbl's book; not only did he attempt to develop a »universal history of European Culture«, he also intended to overcome »Historismus« (p. 93–95).

»Historismus« is the focus of chapter 4 and Knöbl takes up Karl Mannheim's concept of »Historismus«. Knöbl reminds us that Mannheim's earlier philosophical focal point was the »analysis of ›Weltanschauung«« (»Weltanschauungsanalyse«, p. 105-108, 114-117). Knöbl concludes the first part with some observations about Aron's philosophy of history but his larger focus is on Siegfried Landshut. Landshut did not intend to throw the discipline of sociology out of the German university faculties but he did demand an answer to the two questions »Why sociology?« and »What is it essentially?« (p. 132–135).

If the first part of »Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte« was devoted mostly to history, the second part is focused more on sociology. Furthermore, the first part was confined mainly to Europe whereas the second part includes America. The problem that Knöbl sees about America is that it is entirely focused on the present and the future, and it has no use for the past. It is as if Kant and Hegel's linear history was transformed into something that only valued something new. One part of the problem with thinking in the United States after 1945 is that it is too preoccupied with a theory of modernization. Another part is the claim that modernity was a total break from all that came before; hence, there is no need to think historically. Once again, Knöbl complains that Aron's dissertations could have helped rectify this myopia (p. 147–153). Instead, too many people were entranced by the concept of »the modern« – not just Americans but also Europeans. Some of sociology's greatest thinkers were also enthralled by »modernity« – Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and others (p. 154–160).

It was only in the 1970s that some Germans began to dismiss the insistence that there have been only two historical periods: the pre-modern and the modern. Knöbl points out that Reinhart Koselleck specifically took issue with this dichotomy, suggesting there was an intervening period (p. 163–167). Yet there remains the idea that history is a type of theodicy – a justification of how things are and how they should be. Knöbl suggests that some of this can be attributed to Darwin's theory of evolution: a »Teleology of the History« (p. 172).

In the 1980s sociology began to be more interested in temporal phenomena, but it was often driven by sociologists with an interest in anthropology. It is partially because some of these thinkers were concerned with colonialism and post-colonialism (p. 183–188). But

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some of this is because there were some thinkers who did not have a high opinion of the modern world. Here, Knöbl points in particular to Carl Schmitt's influence on Koselleck. This influence might not be noticed by too many observers but it is evident in the decades-long conflict between Schmitt and Hans Kelsen (see p. 188–190).

The final two chapters are devoted to Knöbl's discussions regarding processes. These are complex and difficult to summarize. They revolve around the notions of individualization and industrialization and involve the notion of narrative. Knöbl rejects the claim there is a »view from nowhere« just as he dismisses the possibility of a »placeless« narrative (p. 269). In Knöbl's view, we are temporal beings and history does matter – even and especially in sociology. Not the history, but a historical process.

»Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte« is not an easy book to read. Knöbl's account covers more than three centuries and he references almost three hundred thinkers. While many names in the first half will be familiar, many of those in the second half will be unfamiliar. Knöbl's book is not easy to understand; the richness of his ideas sometimes clouds their meaning and obscures their significance. Yet, there is no denying the importance of this book. Wolfgang Knöbl challenges our notions of sociology as an atemporal discipline and argues persuasively that sociology, like history, must be considered as a study that is a process. Anyone interested in the relationship between sociology and history should read »Die Soziologie vor der Geschichte«. It is that good.



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