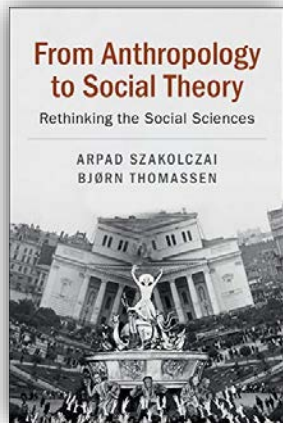


NEWS & OPINIONS

An Anthropological Interpretation of Modernity: Interview with Arpad Szakolczai and Bjørn Thomassen

Michael Jindra



Introduction and Interview by Michael Jindra

Over the last two decades, sociologist Arpad Szakolczai (University College Cork, Ireland) and anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen (Roskilde Universitet, Denmark) have written articles and books on social theory from a unique perspective. Their just-released book, *From Anthropology to Social Theory: Rethinking the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press), sums up much of their past writing. Beginning with a strong critique of social theory, they then highlight neglected “maverick” anthropologists as the key to an alternative social theory that interprets the broad trajectory of cultural and political histories.

Their approach—critical of modernity and post-modernism, Marxism and neoliberalism—doesn’t fit any neat category. In sum, their social theory harks back to basic human processes through the insights of several anthropologists, including those who drew on Christian and broadly spiritual themes. In a key passage from their book, their “anthropological framework suggests that a schismogenic turn in liminal moments is the

outcome of machinations by trickster figures, setting in motion a trickster logic that can work, proliferating schisms, almost automatically once set in motion, no longer requiring specific tricksters.” The trickster figure is found throughout culture and history, and one could easily see it in contemporary political figures. Schismogenesis can perhaps be used to explain political polarization.

Szakolczai and Thomassen’s take on modernity is not new, but their particular explanation is, so let me compare them to a few other significant thinkers. The French sociologist (and Reformed Christian) Jacques Ellul, for instance, fingered the *technique* way of thinking as problematic. Historian Christopher Lasch also defied left/right categories with his criticism of both progressivism and libertarianism. More recently, Catholic political philosopher Patrick Deneen sees internal contradictions in our political system and culture, resulting in the “failure of liberalism.” Szakolczai and Thomassen offer a unique analysis rooted in anthropological processes, more like Rene Girard (discussed below). Though these thinkers have quite varied influences, Max Weber echoes to a certain extent in many of them.

This email interview is meant to introduce Szakolczai and Thomassen’s work and unpack some of their concepts.

Questions

In the introduction of your book, you take a rather scathing tour of contemporary social theory. Is this what inspired you to write the book? What is the main problem with these works?

There are two important things we would like to stress very clearly. First, one should never engage in polemics for the sake of engaging in polemics. Yes, we

write “against”, but first of all we write “for”: our book was not primarily inspired by the idea of going up against mainstream currents in social theory. That particular part of the Introduction you refer to was one of the last pieces of the book written. Our book was primarily inspired by our belief that there are extremely valuable, indeed irreplaceable, contributions in past scholarship that has almost—fortunately almost—gone lost. Our main inspiration was a task of revalorization.

Second, we do sincerely believe that social theory has arrived at a cul-de-sac, and that it cannot be reignited from within. And yes, we find the problems all the more evident in the work of those currently considered the flagship figures in social theory—and not only in social theory, in fact, but in the social sciences as such. Our book is motivated by a long-matured experience that a systematic counter-selection is going on in social theory, amounting to something like a Gresham’s law (a metaphor we actually quote, through Bateson, in the book), where the ‘bad’ theories—ideological, demagogic, aggressive, or simply empty, banal, trivial, commonplace—are systematically displacing the ‘good’ ones, and where even the greatest thinkers, like Max Weber, Marcel Mauss or Michel Foucault, are remembered or used in a manner going completely against the spirit of their work. This recognition was quite a shock for us, especially for Arpad, who grew up beyond the Iron Curtain, in its grotesque, boorish (un)reality, and was hoping for something completely different as he moved to the “West”. We still do not fully understand this absurd situation of social theory, where the most basic need for thinking is continuously betrayed within the bastions of academic life. But we are evidently not alone in our assessment. In his book of interviews with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres offered an assessment of French academic life after WWII that is quite similar to our assessment—*mutatis mutandis*—of the post-Cold-War period. We simply think that the current state of social theory is a dead-end, and we fully stand by our assessment. We also try to account for this development, tracing its roots back to the founding moments of the modern social sciences and their institutionalization.

In the second part of our book, especially in Chapter 8, we argue that much of contemporary social theory merely mirrors the developments in modernity, acting as a cheerleader of modernity ‘as such’, or as a ‘potential’. We follow the tradition of those great thinkers, from Tocqueville and Max Weber through the ‘reflexive historical sociologists’ or ‘political anthropologists’ who had the courage to genuinely *think* modernity. Central for this is the idea that the great ‘values’ of modernity do not bring unquestionable benefits to each and everyone, but are rather idols and sacred cows which—especially together—are simply set

to destroy the planet, our home. The central idols are indeed *the* economy and technology, but also mass democracy and the public sphere. Our position is not ideological and nihilistic, dismissing every single aspect of technology, or being hostile ‘in principle’ to democracy, but holds that something is fatally wrong with the current (self-evident, taken-for-granted) understanding of the economy, technology, and democracy. This is why we need *thinking*, and not some kind of ideological stance for ‘progress’, ‘democracy’, or ‘human rights’.

Let us just add a comment on the term ‘critique’ or ‘critical’. Central to our work is a problematisation of the very idea of ‘critique’, as it is also discussed increasingly (for example, by Richard Kilminster, or Peter Baehr), and is resumed in an excellent manner by Tom Boland’s 2019 book, *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony*. In our view the centrality of ‘critique’ plays a significant role in what is wrong in social theory, so we try to do something different from a ‘critique of critique’, which is still nothing but critique. We rediscover, reconstruct, and give our own reading. This said, of course we had to offer a concise diagnosis about what, in our view, is patently wrong in contemporary social theory. But we forcefully and definitely rejected the idea of doing a ‘critique’ of social theory.

You turn to “maverick anthropologists” for wisdom. What are their chief insights?

In continuation of the above question, this is exactly the reason why we turned to the ‘maverick anthropologists’ and their *wisdom*—this is indeed the right word. Let us put it as strongly as possible: modern knowledge *as* knowledge is simply institutionally and constitutionally deprived of wisdom; it is based on the deprecation of wisdom. In a very important terminology, propagated by Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin, it is ‘gnostic’: is based on naïve, unlimited belief in the saving power of mere ‘knowledge’. This is of course not only dangerous but also completely absurd, as our entire cultural tradition, from the first chapters of the Book of Genesis through Plato and the fight of philosophers and Church Fathers against Gnostics and Sophists is based on the problematisation of mere ‘knowledge’; yet here we are, in modernity, proudly proclaiming the ‘knowledge society’, and marching forward into a brave new world dominated by the relentless pursuit and political application of *context-free, universalistic knowledge*.

The problem, the outlier, is modernity, and its reliance on Gnosticism, Sophistry, and similar kinds of alchemic (all-dissolving) universalizing tendencies, that destroy every cultural value—as everything that is worthwhile in life is always based on something

concrete, especially something living, growing—and loving.

Anthropology and ethnography have a role to play here, helping us to move outside the destructive Gnosticism and Sophistry of modernity. The maverick anthropologists' tool-kit helps us recognize the short-sightedness of our “modern” values, while it is at the same time also aligned with the most basic, indeed foundational, values of European culture, including of course Christian spirituality and classical philosophy. Our book is indeed an attempt toward revalorizing ideas and even ‘visions’ for the social sciences that were either ignored or pushed to the margins, and for all the wrong reasons. Examples include Arnold van Gennep, Marcel Mauss, Paul Radin, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Gregory Bateson, Victor Turner, Colin Turnbull, but also Alfred Gell, Johan Huizinga, Gabriel Tarde or René Girard. Taking their ideas seriously invites a fundamental—even foundational—rethinking of the history and present of the social sciences. In each their way, these thinkers all broke with what we recognize as the *modern-centric* foundations of social theory. The problem with social theory, we argue, is not at all ‘ethnocentrism’, but rather the deeper ways in which our thinking about the world has become entrapped in the very language of modernity: *modernocentrism*.

Why is the trickster figure key to understanding today’s world?

Because we live in a world increasingly dominated by trickster logics. Full stop. That statement, of course, warrants qualification. Our argument is that along with liminality, imitation and schismogenesis, the trickster is one of the most important and useful concepts developed by anthropologists to understand our contemporary reality.

We are aware that many anthropologists hesitate to use the notion of the trickster outside its specific cultural domain. There are trickster-like figures in folktales and myths around the world, but are we dealing with the same “type”? It is a legitimate question. And one could argue, of course, that the trickster is a figure of mythology, not of this world.

We think otherwise. Until now, the trickster has been considered a figure of folktales and comic books, perhaps useful to analyse films and novels, but certainly irrelevant for the serious study of modern politics or economics. Yet it is just within these realms that we need to recognize the doings of the trickster. The idea that the trickster figure serves to identify power mechanisms of huge relevance to the political and social sciences was first developed by Agnes Horvath. She originally used it for analysing political communications of Communist leaders. Yet in her work on political communication, Horvath became increasingly

unsatisfied with discussions in political science that routinely classified Communist leaders as ‘charismatic’. So what was their “trick”?

It is important to remember, as we discuss in the book, that Paul Radin, who developed the trickster concept in his ethnographic works, came into close contact with C. G. Jung and K. Kerényi in Lugano. The trickster was a life-long preoccupation for Radin. He considered the figure a genuine ‘*speculum mentis*’ (mirror into the mind). Thus, though he did not coin the term in anthropology, he rightly became identified as its classic proponent. So, we more or less agree with Radin that the trickster is a kind of “psychological type” that can be recognized across cultures. In fact, the “gnostic” and the “sophist”, along with the Pharisee, the sorcerer, the alchemist, or the sacrificial priest are all modalities of this “trickster” figure.

The challenge is that the trickster figure is per definition elusive and thus hard if not impossible to trace. This is his “essence”—a lack of essence. Tricksters don’t have cults, are not celebrated by rituals, and do not perform a function, thus simply do not fit the categories of Durkheim-Parsonian structural-functional analysis; they are rather connected to a particular *situation*, a situation of transition or crisis, in which they can present themselves as saviours. From an *exclusively* structuralist-functionalist perspective the trickster simply becomes invisible. This is a major shortcoming for such a framework in a kind of situation, or ‘world’, where trickster logic becomes rampant—like in our global modern world.

You argue that Mauss’s concept of “gift-giving” is more fundamental to forming culture than Girard’s argument highlighting sacrifice and scapegoating (which you state should be limited to crises). Why?

This is quite a crucial question, and it relates very much to the question of the trickster. There is no doubt that the work of Girard merits attention. His theory of mimetic rivalry stands the test. It is highly unfortunate that his work is used mostly by more narrow circles of followers; and in a sense the situation is even worse in mainstream anthropology, where he is not even considered a worthy conversation partner because he does not build his theory on ethnographic work in the classical sense. However, we do indeed signal that there is a problematic aspect of Girard’s work found at the heart of his theoretical approach to crisis. Putting it simply, Girard argues that the origin of culture is a dissolution of order, represented by a sacrificial crisis—but this does not explain how order emerged in the first instance, leaving it as a paradox. (Problematically, this is why Derrida and his disciples liked Girard’s ideas.) But the origin of culture, just as the origin of language, is not a paradox, but rather a mystery, in a quite

traditional sense of the word. Otherwise, we are left with the idea—which Girard unfortunately came to endorse—that humans are fundamentally violent, and so the origin of human culture is violence. Palaeolithic archaeology by no means supports this idea, and is closer to the Platonic vision about the fundamental goodness of man. Christian spirituality also accepts this, except that it adds the idea of an original sin, as a ‘mythological’-historical event; by the way, and central to our argument, original sin is much connected to the search for ‘knowledge’—connected to the still unsolved puzzle of human settlement, at the end of the Palaeolithic (Horvath and Szakolczai 2018).

Returning to the trickster, a decisive aspect of trickster knowledge concerns the role of the trickster as inventor of sacrifice, as stressed also by Radin. While tricksters are identified with sacrifices in many traditions, with the prominence of human sacrifice in cultures where somehow trickster figures gained the position of leading deities (like pre-Columbian America), here again Greek tradition offers particularly precious insight. It starts with the connection to fire, as the Greek word for sacrifice, *thuein*, implies burnt offering, and continues with the two great mythological trickster figures, Prometheus and Hermes, both associated with the invention of sacrifices. What this means is that the Greek tradition evidently preserved particularly well its central, *non*-trickster religious tradition, which was based on grace, beauty and gift-giving and not the gory practice of violent sacrificial offerings, identifying these as the alteration of religiosity through the trickster. This is what Girard overlooks, even from his self-identified Christian position.

You focus on “participation” and “experience” and use Gregory Bateson, Colin Turnbull and Victor Turner as paragons. Why are these themes and figures so important?

In one sentence: the kind of approach we identify is indeed an experiential kind of social “science”, and the main quality of any social “scientist” must indeed be the capacity to participate. Concerning experience, the work of Victor Turner is indeed central, especially through his encounter with the work of Dilthey, thus ‘solving’ the problem concerning the nature of experience, central for modern philosophy, though ignored completely in analytical philosophy—which, in our reading is their problem: the problem of a minor academic sect which came to ignore the central, foundational questions of philosophy, becoming entrapped in an agenda designed a century ago, in fin-de-siècle Vienna—the sorry birthplace of “hyper-modern” thinking.

Concerning participation, we draw on the work of two extremely important maverick anthropologists,

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Colin Turnbull—the outcasts of the outcasts in anthropology (and this stigmatizing of two such important figures, let us put it clearly, is in and by itself a scandal).

Lévy-Bruhl entitled the second to the last section of his precious Notebooks a “passage to participation”; while Colin Turnbull, through the Oxford tradition in anthropology, mediated by Evans-Pritchard and Rodney Needham, somehow became the heir of Lévy-Bruhl’s thinking. Participation in this sense is the ultimate experience, indeed the condition of possibility of experience—as anything we do starts with the ‘fact’, or rather the givenness, the *datum*, that we belong somewhere, that we exist, we live, as a kind of gift—and which indeed can be best conceived of as a graceful gift. The idea that our life was gifted by some kind of deity, which basically every culture in the planet holds as a primary truth, is much truer, *whether it is actually the case or not*, than our ‘secular’ (non-)belief in nothingness, which can only end up—as it is now almost bound to—in utter destruction, or—as a performative speech act—in nothingness. *Pascal’s wager has never been more relevant than today.*

We moderns might possess the most extensive ‘knowledge’ of all cultures, but this notwithstanding, or perhaps exactly *because of this*, we are also the most stupid ones, as we happily deprived ourselves of wisdom. Thus, we need to learn from the anthropological wisdom of the whole of humankind—just as we have much to learn from animals, as among others, Walt Whitman—the archetypal American poet and bard—realized at a time when “American democracy” was little more than ludicrous ideological nonsense. This is because the famous, archetypal liberal saying—“power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”—is actually not true, being only valid for “second power”, or power *identified with* position within an established organization; thus the power of a “placeholder” (etymologically, a *lieu-tenant*); but not true for the ‘first power’, as theorized by Agnes Horvath (close in a way to Weber’s charisma). However—and here we reach the genuine limit of *any* liberal vision of the world—money indeed corrupts, and the more so the more one has: this statement is true without any statutory limitation, as money is universal, empty, void, thus has unlimited destructive power.

To relate this to your previous questions, and as a sort of conclusion, our argument is that the modern world is an outcome of a series of liminal crises leading to schismogenic developments and ending up by placing imitative trickster logic at the very heart of modern life, undermining participatory life and gift relations. Far from reaching the pinnacle of progress, the modern world is rather entrapped in a paradoxical state of “permanent liminality”, where change for its own sake has become the official ideology of nihilistic

destructiveness, animated by the connected (un-)realities of the market (rather fairground) economy, scientific (rather alchemic) technology, and the democratic (rather theatrical) public sphere, undermining any stability, which is the condition of possibility of any meaningful life.

What are you for, or do you have suggestions to move forward? You seem to have some similarities with other critics of modernity, such as agrarians, communitarians, localists, new monastics or other political movements. Are there other “normative” works you would point us to?

This is a big question that we are probably not able to answer. That is, however, maybe not a bad starting point: nobody is on his or her own able to answer such a question. In the terminology we propose, the question would be how to move outside permanent liminality, which must somehow mean to regain stability or perhaps with a better word, balance. The term permanent liminality might be particularly fortunate as it helps us to realize that the problem is not simply a matter of “transition” (in the sense of Durkheim or Giddens) to the “fully mature modernity”, rather it is due to our very “modern values”. The cult of unlimited creativity and change does not lead anywhere. Meaningful human life can only be based on stability and concreteness. This is again an absolutely simple and ageless piece of wisdom, which is revitalized and relived every time a child is born—which is one of the most evident facts of life and at once the greatest of mysteries. A child needs the warmth of a home, a family, especially a mother and a father, and their mothers and fathers, and siblings, relatives and friends, all part of a series of concrete, personal human relations, but also part of what Agnes Horvath came to call ‘linear transformation’ and matrixing, the way in which human lineages are transmitted from eternity to eternity—not as an endless flux, and not where single “individuals” can “reinvent themselves” at every second, as the ludicrous ideals of modernity proclaim, but where we humbly accept the mystery of life and being, and take up our role and task in this truly eternal lineage. Human beings around the world have been aware of this, unless they somehow became entrapped, in some liminal moment, by imitative processes, proliferated by tricksters, leading to schismogenic processes, just as in the case of the modern world—but this is the anthropologically based storyline we try to outline in the book.

Your book is timely because recent political events around the world have people seeing a downside to democracy, as you indicate. While you don’t totally oppose democracy, technology or human rights, you argue for “stability.” People concerned about “justice”

may fear you are too conservative or reactionary. How can we oppose injustices while aiming for stability?

“Justice” of course is an eminently important word, central among others to Plato’s whole philosophy. Justice is also a fundamental aspect of stability, so we don’t see an opposition here. However, what we do oppose is the envy- and revenge-motivated, radical and strict egalitarian vision of justice, which feeds into a widespread politics of resentment from both Left and Right. The central reference point of “justice” cannot be an abstract, geometric equality of “all”—this has no sense or meaning; it is this Enlightenment inspired ideal which we indeed wish to problematize. To problematize this ideal does of course not mean to be “against democracy”.

If we move the term “conservative” outside the sphere of political ideologies, and make it refer to the human need for some degree of stability—that not everything can change all the time—then we have no problem with the “conservatism” label, or perhaps better, “conservism”: that there are things in life that merit being conserved. This is close to the spirit of Plato’s ideas about the need for “guardians”—which of course can easily be misunderstood or abused, as can be every word and especially every theory.

We would however distance ourselves from the very terminology of “reactionary”. The reactionary-/progressive (or reactionary/revolutionary) binary is internal to the language of modernity—it is *modern-centric*, as we would say—and hence lies outside the kind of analytical language we try to think with.

You end the book by talking about “returning to living in truth: living genuine, concrete lives in the planet that was gifted to us, by powers way beyond our control, as nature.” Can you discuss your own theological/faith commitments and if and how that influences your work?

We do have our “beliefs”, and perhaps do not even think that this is a purely “private” matter, but we both very much hesitate to “declare” ourselves, as that could constitute a self-entrapment in an identity, as Foucault recognized so well—or Michel Serres, who made a distinction between belongingness and identity. Perhaps another way to answer would be to refer to Agamben’s recent book, *Il mistero del male*, now translated into English (*The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*), which is about the ‘two sides of the church’, which can be extended into the ‘two sides of academic life’. Using the analogy, if we were to declare ourselves to be fully in line with the tradition of universities and academic life, we would accept all the nonsense going on here and now; but if we were to show dogmatic hostility towards “academic man”, a la

Bourdieu, we would only reveal self-hatred and a schismatic mindset. So we avoid both.

You have both published quite a bit before this book. Is the book a summation of most of your previous work, “bringing it all together” so to speak?

One could say that, although it is of course never possible to compress everything into one single book. But it is indeed true that this book brings together a series of interrelated themes and topics we have worked on for a couple of decades, together and individually. In particular, this book sums up a lot of the work we have done connected to the journal, *International Political Anthropology* (IPA), which was founded in 2008 by Agnes Horvath, Harald Wydra and Bjørn Thomassen. In subsequent summer schools organized by IPA, and at seminars organized at the University College of Cork, we have taken up the authors discussed in this book, trying to understand their ideas from within their life-work, and attempting to assess the relevance of their most important ideas for the contemporary condition. So yes, we bring together many threads that have come together due to the ideas and the work of people around us, not least Agnes Horvath, who has been the main person behind IPA, and whose ideas have pushed a lot of people to rethink cherished axioms. So one could say that what we present here is a conceptual toolkit that the scholars connected to IPA have been developing together in dialogue for quite some time. In this sense, this book is not really “ours”, but belongs to a larger collective effort, as almost all books do.

The book can also be related to a trajectory started by Arpad, going back to his programmatic book from 2000, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*. What we pursue in this book is the necessity of a reflexive historical sociology to be accompanied by what one might call, with a perhaps slightly clumsy formulation, a ‘reflexive anthropological sociology’; or, putting the stress on the approach we have been developing for some time, a ‘reflexive political anthropology’: a social theory inspired by anthropological insights. While it is becoming increasingly recognized—indeed, mainstream—that social theory needs history back to the axial age and beyond, the possible role of anthropology in theorizing modernity seems far less obvious. It is this debate we want to open—or open again. We argue that such a role goes much beyond simply representing a view from ‘below’, a politically correct appreciation of cultural diversity, or a taste for the exotic and marginal. It involves, we argue, attention towards key theoretical concepts developed within anthropology that uniquely facilitate a proper understanding of the modern world and some of its underlying dynamics.

On a more personal note, we can perhaps mention that Bjørn was a PhD student at the European University Institute back in 1998, when Arpad as a teacher there presented his ideas for his book, *Reflexive Historical Sociology* in a seminar course with that same title. Arpad was using a lot of anthropological theory already then, especially Victor Turner and René Girard. Bjørn came with a MA degree in anthropology, so we quickly realized converging interests. For Bjørn it was a funny experience, because he had consciously left anthropology to engage more directly with sociology and political theory (the department where Arpad was professor is called Political and Social Sciences). The approach taken by Arpad allowed Bjørn to “come back” to anthropology, but from a very different angle. So in a sense, as the title of the book goes, *From Anthropology to Social Theory*, one can indeed say that the book has been on its way for 20 years.

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