

# CALL FOR PAPERS: SPECIAL ISSUE OF *ACTA ACADEMICA*

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## *Social Theory, Human Rights and Philosophy*

Guest Editor: André Keet

1. If Marcuse<sup>1</sup> is right in that philosophy “devolved upon social theory” because Hegel (1770-1831) facilitated the “transition from philosophy to the domain of state and society”, then what is at stake is precisely that which is captured in Adorno’s question: “Why Still Philosophy?”<sup>2</sup>; or that of Habermas: “Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?”<sup>3</sup>. We can extend this line of questioning and ask: Is Sociology Still Useful? or What is wrong in the Humanities and the Social Sciences? These are justified probes given the scholarly ‘crises’ of the humanities and social sciences<sup>4</sup>, internationally and nationally.
2. The intellectual ‘stagnations’ in philosophy and social theory seem to hinge on the weaknesses of its contemporary scholarly work<sup>5</sup>. There is widespread concern that philosophy and social theory nowadays are incapable of providing productive interpretive schemes for making sense of or to study present-day social challenges. Stephen Turner makes this clear in relation to social theory<sup>6</sup>; Ulrich Beck<sup>7</sup> refers to the central ideas of social theory as “zombie concepts”; Bernard Williams alerts us to how little we can “expect from philosophy” if we ask how one should live<sup>8</sup>; and Catherine Malabou charges that the humanities and the social sciences in general have lost their ‘plasticity’<sup>9</sup>, and thus their capacities for *transformations*. In *Philosophy as Social Research*<sup>10</sup>, Axel Honneth argues that political philosophy has become so distant from reality as to be of little value. He suggests that philosophy, to be of any use, must begin to image itself as social research where standards of empirical enquiry apply. Conceptual frames and theories must be able to empirically indicate that their “normative standpoints have some basis in social reality”<sup>11</sup>. In spite of these discouraging patterns, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Marcuse, H. (1955). *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. p.251.

<sup>2</sup> See Zuidervaat, L. (2007). *Social Philosophy after Adorno*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p.5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> See the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). (2011). *Consensus Study of the State of the Humanities in South Africa*. Pretoria: ASSAf; and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2011). *Final Report: Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences*. Pretoria: DHET.

<sup>5</sup> Bell, D.A. (2010). Reimagining the Humanities: Proposals for a New Century. *Dissent*, Volume 57, Number 4, pp. 69-75.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, B.S. (2009) Introduction: A New Agenda for Social Theory? In Turner, B.S. (Ed). *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. pp. 1-16.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, S. (2009). The Future of Social Theory. In Turner, B.S. (Ed). *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, A.W. (2006). Foreword in Williams, B. *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. p.xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Malabou, C. (2013). The Future of the Humanities. [www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/voir\\_pdf/28](http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/voir_pdf/28). [accessed on 7 January 2014].

<sup>10</sup> Honneth, A. (2012). *Philosophy as Social Research*. In *The I in We*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 119-134.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*. p.69.

indications that social theory has survived productively outside social sciences and philosophising appears to be more insightful external to the discipline of philosophy itself, conventionally understood.

3. Outside the Western cannon, most notably postcolonial studies, there have been a number of theorisations that emerged as responses to the interpretive limits and pitfalls of Western social theory and philosophy to engage with “the other”. Yet there is already a strong critique of postcolonial social theory for its mystification of ‘race’<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the debates on African philosophy and social theory within the academy have scarcely begun, which gives rise to increasing calls for the ‘decolonising of the postcolonial discourses’<sup>13</sup>. These developments have implications for social theory in general and Southern social theory in particular.
4. Exploring the challenges of social theory and philosophy and the interplay between them are massive intellectual undertakings which require ‘steering notions’ for pragmatic and intellectual considerations. For this special issue we propose, for various reasons, the notion of *human rights* to play this role.
  - a. First, ‘human rights’ has emerged as the dominant moral, political and social language of our time. On the one hand it is viewed as an opposing discourse to neo-liberalism; and on the other, it is accused of providing a legitimating language for capitalist exploitation. ‘Human rights’ is in favour of and against human rights markets. It serves democrats and despots within the same logic, and is a conduit for disciplinary power, so it is argued.
  - b. Second, one can hardly imagine a contemporary understanding of the ‘social’, ‘the commons’, ‘the public’, and ‘politics’ outside the interpretive schemes of rights. In fact, it seems that the diagnosis of social pathologies, which is the starting point for social philosophy and social theory, requires the codes and genres of human rights violations as justification, overwhelmingly so. Nevertheless, these schemes are contested in both social theory and philosophy.
  - c. Third, despite Habermas’s<sup>14</sup> and Sen’s<sup>15</sup> attempts, philosophical and social theoretical groundings of ‘rights’ have been tenuous because of the tensions between an “individualistic rights-based philosophy [and] the assumptions of a

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<sup>12</sup> Acheraïou, A. (2011). *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Habermas, J. (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>15</sup> Sen, A. (2004). Elements of a Theory of Human Rights, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*; Volume 32, Number 4.

substantive human rights philosophy”<sup>16</sup>. Other tensions and interplays reside between *law* and *rights*; juridical and non-juridical rights; *rights* and *politics*; *justice* and *rights*; *rights* and *solidarity*; *power* and *rights*; *rights* and *ethics*, and *democracy* and *rights*.

- d. Fourth, the dominance of human rights as adjudicatory and meaning-making frames has generated industrious critiques. The work of Mutua and Brown<sup>17</sup> serve as examples. Human rights critiques, it appears, provide superior interpretive schemes for engaging the social than standard human-rights-friendly analyses.
5. Against this backdrop, we invite rigorous research papers that generate new interpretive insights along the following lines:
- a. The renewal of the interplay between social theory and philosophy in relation to:
    - i. The demands of social research;
    - ii. The crisis in the humanities and social sciences; and
    - iii. The discourse on human rights, politics and real-existing capitalist democracies.
  - b. The idea and prospects of Southern social theory; and the relation between politics, rights and philosophy.
  - c. Philosophy, social theory, human rights and socially useful research.
  - d. Human rights, philosophy, social theory and the pathologies of the social<sup>18</sup>.
  - e. Rights-based sociologies, social theory and human rights critiques.

**Closing Date:** Please submit all contributions to [actaa@ufs.ac.za](mailto:actaa@ufs.ac.za) . The closing date for receiving submissions is **30 July 2014**.

**Information for contributors:** Instructions for submitting contributions to *Acta Academica* appear on the journal’s website: <http://www.ufs.ac.za/templates/journals.aspx?journal=19>.

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<sup>16</sup> Blau, J. and Moncada, A. (2009). Sociological Theory and Human Rights: Two Logics, One World. In Turner, B.S. (Ed). *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p. 504.

<sup>17</sup> Mutua, M. (2002). *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; and Brown, W. (2004). “The Most We Can Hope For . . .”: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:2/3.

<sup>18</sup> Phrase borrowed from Honneth.