

Book Review: British Social Theory: Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950 by John Scott

In British Social Theory: Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950, John Scott revisits the history of social theory and explores the works of many obscure, overlooked or neglected theorists born in Britain, with a particular focus on Patrick Geddes, Robert Maclver and Leonard Hobhouse. This is an enlightening book, finds Yves Laberge, not only for students in the social sciences, but also for scholars interested in social epistemology and the history of (sociological) ideas.

British Social Theory: Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950. John Scott. SAGE. 2018.

They are casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families (Margaret Thatcher, 1987)

Since the late twentieth century until the present, the research relating to social theory has intensified, with the publication of numerous anthologies, handbooks, companions and readers dedicated to social theory and the theoreticians who wrote about individuals, socialisation, social reproduction and the main sociological paradigms (see, for example, [George Ritzer and Barry Smart, 2001](#); [Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner, 2011](#); and [Sandro Segre, 2014](#)). We are sometimes left with the impression that social theory is a relatively recent phenomenon, at least in Great Britain. In fact, theories about social life have been described by thinkers such as Karl Marx since the nineteenth century, and even earlier by the precursors of sociology like Adam Smith, both of whom did not identify themselves by the term 'sociologist', although they analysed and theorised the social systems in which they lived.

'Not a history of British Sociology but of British social theory' (1), warns John Scott right from the first paragraph of *British Social Theory: Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950*. In the book, we revisit three centuries of sociological thinking and (re)discover many obscure or long-forgotten theorists who were born in Britain. But why, apart from for historical matters, should we (re)consider these overlooked thinkers nowadays, when there are so many current thinkers in the UK and elsewhere who aptly interpret our contemporary world? One possible answer would be the fact that the ways British scholars conceive society, sociology and social theory today are often derived from previous, earlier (mis)conceptions of social life.

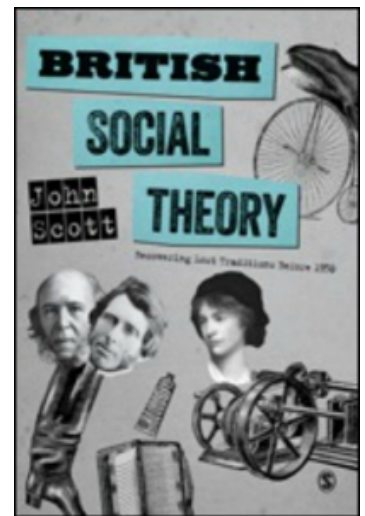


Image Credit: 'By living, we learn...', Patrick Geddes Centre for Learning and Conservation, Edinburgh ([Tom Parnell CC BY SA 2.0](#))

In the opening chapter, Scott begins with a diagnostic he wants to contest regarding the early days of British sociology: here, he dauntingly opposes Perry Anderson's severe verdict, in which he 'made the claim that British writers are legitimately absent from historical accounts of social theory because they simply do not exist' (2). As Scott notes, Anderson finally reconsidered his peremptory assessment from the 1960s in his later works and acknowledged his misjudgments about the British contribution to sociology (2). Nevertheless, Anderson's initial observations and conclusions about the thinness of British social theory from the early twentieth century were simultaneously symptomatic, influential and far from uncommon or isolated (2). Many social scientists in Great Britain drew the same verdict at that time (144). As Scott explores chronologically until the mid-1950s, the following pages revisit from a British point of view the early years of sociology and some of its precursors, such as Adam Smith (1723-90), explaining how social thought, individual sentiments and the study of shared values—for example, sympathy—emerged from mainstream philosophy to be considered as solid social facts by the pioneers of sociology: 'Sympathy provides people with a sense of well-being and of identification with a wider community of others' (11).

In this web of influences, two thinkers were pivotal, for different reasons, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Herbert Spencer and Marx (2). Even notable British social thinkers argued that there was no genuine sociological tradition in the UK during this period simply because Marx's books were not yet circulating within British academic circles: 'The absence of a classical British sociology was explained by Anderson as reflecting the absence of a strong Marxist tradition in Britain' (2). According to many authors, the absence of Marxism and the ignorance of Marx's writings among some UK sociologists between the late 1880s and the early 1930s had immense consequences on the ways the first British sociologists could conceive and explain conflicts, ideologies, social status and class. Regarding Spencer, Scott deplores the fact he was often deprecated by historians of sociology and social theorists, even in the UK, and not only by Anderson, who ignored Spencer in his first overview (2), and later 'maintained that Spencer was a second-class thinker whose work was incomparable with that of either [Emile] Durkheim or [Max] Weber' (3).

The central chapters focus on the contributions of three lesser-known British thinkers from the Classical period of the early twentieth century: Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), Robert Maclver (1882-1970) and Leonard Hobhouse (1864-1929). Those unfamiliar with these names should not worry: none of these social scientists are mentioned in the comprehensive book edited by Heine Andersen and Lars Bo Kaspersen on *Classical and Modern Social Theory* (first published by Blackwell in 2000), although the three have individual entries in the extensive *Dictionary of Sociology*, edited by Scott and Gordon Marshall. Following this useful mapping proposed by Scott, we can understand how each of these sociologists gained their worldview in a context where there was as yet no real 'national tradition' of sociology within Great Britain. Their ideas are not without merit. For example, Scottish biologist Geddes conceived of culture as a 'social heritage' (99) and a tradition of 'ideas, values, and imaginings into which people are born and from which they learn' (99).

In the following pages about Scottish sociologist Maclver, we learn how his conception of sociology (but also culture) was constituted and influenced by certain social scientists, mainly within the emerging symbolic interactionist paradigm inspired by German authors like Weber and Georg Simmel:

He rejected the view that he ascribed to Durkheim and Spencer, that a society is a substantial entity or collective mind that exists separately from its individual members. Echoing Simmel, he contended that society comprises nothing more than the relations or interactions that individuals establish with each other and through which their actions and thoughts are shaped (106).

The (too short) final chapter cleverly links all these influences—past and recent—to describe how these British pioneers' initial conceptions have evolved and reappeared in contemporary works of sociology. This is perhaps the most rewarding portion of the book because it aptly actualises everything that has been seen in the previous pages. For example, we follow how Smith's writings about a person's self-image influenced pragmatist founders such as William James, Charles Horton Cooley in the US, and then George H. Mead and, later still, Erving Goffman (145). Another forgotten thinker from the nineteenth century, Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923), wrote about social roles and had a similar influence on twentieth-century social scientists such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann who authored the classic book from 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (3).

More than a mere enumeration of theories or theorists, *British Social Theory: Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950* is an enlightening book, not only for students in the social sciences, but also for scholars interested in social epistemology and the history of (sociological) ideas. It reconfirms there were some interesting theorists in the UK in the early twentieth century: although they are now mostly forgotten, it does not imply they were irrelevant or disconnected from their society. Quite the contrary. Even non-sociologists will learn from this reading, written in clear language and without jargon. Finally, this unique book reminds us that without the use of social theories, completed by the effective work of theorisation, sociology as a science would be incomplete and could be seen as just a dry collection of data and statistics.

Dr. Yves Laberge is a Canadian sociologist affiliated with the University of Ottawa where he teaches Social Sciences, Canadian and American Studies and Aesthetics. He is Associate fellow at the Centre de recherche en éducation et formation relatives à l'environnement et à l'écocitoyenneté – Centr'ERE, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Yves Laberge is a member of the Editorial Board for seven academic journals: *The Electronic Green Journal* (UCLA); *The European Legacy. Toward New Paradigms*; *The Canadian Review of American Studies*; *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*; *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*; *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*; and *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*. [Read more by Yves Laberge](#).

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