

An interview with Hans Joas

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This interview took place at Lund University on January 18, 2017. In the interview Joas talks about the continuities and orientations of his own work, explains some of his key conceptual and theoretical insights, and comments on the state of sociology today.

Keywords: Hans Joas; Social theory; Pragmatism; Axial age; Sociology of religion

Hans Joas torde vara välkänd för svenska sociologer, och inte bara genom sina skrifter. Han har gästat Sverige många gånger genom åren; tillbringat längre perioder vid SCAS i Uppsala och gästföreläst på flera svenska universitet och högskolor. För närvarande innehar han Ernst-Troeltsch-honorärprofessuren vid teologiska fakulteten på Humboldt-universitetet i Berlin. Han är gästprofessor i Sociology and Social Thought vid University of Chicago och har tidigare varit Permanent Fellow vid Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, samt under flera år föreståndare för Max-Weber-Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies i Erfurt. Den följande intervjun med Hans Joas genomfördes i samband med en gästföreläsning vid Lunds universitet den 18 januari 2017. En tanke med intervjun var att försöka fånga upp de långa linjerna i Joas författarskap och verksamhet som sociolog, såväl kontinuiteten som nya teman. Efter intervjun återfinns en förteckning över Joas bokpublikationer, samt en artikel som omnämns i intervjun. Intervjun har transkriberats av Uzma Kazi, bearbetats av Carl-Göran Heidegren och Hans Joas.

Carl-Göran Heidegren [CGH]: Among your early work is a very well known book on Mead. You followed up with books on the creativity of action and the genesis of values. Your main research topics in the new century have been war, religion and human rights. Can you say a little about the continuities and new orientations in your own work?

Hans Joas [HJ]: The book on Mead as you know was my doctoral dissertation. I finished the manuscript in 1979, so for me that's a long, long time ago. It often takes a long time until an English translation comes out, in this case until 1985. I mention that

because I do not really consider the things you mention as so recent. Actually I would say that war and religion have been my main empirical topics in the last 25 years at least. But nevertheless I should say a few things about the continuity and discontinuity here, since that seems to be your main interest.

It is true, in an early phase there was a strong emphasis on American pragmatism in my work and on the relationship between American Pragmatism and other currents of thought, some of them typically German, namely the hermeneutical tradition and so-called Philosophical Anthropology, and then also in *Pragmatism and Social Theory* on the reception of pragmatism in Durkheim for example and in the figures of the Frankfurt school and so on. But in the 1980s, I developed the ambition not just to write about pragmatism and its vicissitudes but to spell out what a systematic social theory based on pragmatism would mean today. My book *The Creativity of Action* is that attempt in the area of sociological action theory. I added a last chapter to it that was intended to draw some conclusions from such a revised theory of action, let us call it: a neo-pragmatist theory of action, for other main areas of sociological theorizing, namely the understanding of social order and the understanding of social change. But in retrospect I find this fourth part of the book rather insufficient. I would still defend the first three parts, however, although I could probably make them much better today, 25 years later, but in the basic assumptions I am still there, so there is no conversion away from my version of pragmatism. But the last part is clearly not perfect in terms of an adequate theory of social change, and by adequate I mean a theory of social change that is neither evolutionist nor teleological.

I think the two areas you mentioned: history of religion and history of war, are particularly important for that purpose because wars in the evolutionist perspective are seen as just momentary detours from a path of ongoing evolution. I think that is totally inadequate. I see wars as constitutive of many processes that happen after them, as possibly real ruptures. And in the history of religion you can certainly identify absolutely unexpected eruptions and breakthroughs. The emergence of Christianity and the emergence of Islam are not things you can simply derive from the social conditions of the time when these new religions came into being. I think it would be ridiculously reductionist to say that under the conditions of ancient Palestine a figure like Jesus Christ had to come onto the scene.

My interest in war and my interest in religion are certainly not exclusively determined by such theoretical problems. My interest in war goes back to the German Peace movement of the 1980s in which I was very active, and it led me to investigate what exactly sociology can contribute to the questions of the stabilization of peace, causes and consequences of wars and conflicts. And the topic of religion, of course, has very much to do with me as a person and not just with some scholarly concern. So there is an interaction between what happens out of a certain logic of development of my work and theory and other biographical dimensions.

CGH: Beside American pragmatism you also mention German historicism and hermeneutics as a second major influence. Could you elaborate on that?

HJ: Yes, of course. Let me start by emphasizing that I am not American and I did not become a follower of American pragmatism because I grew up in an environment in which I was taught that, not at all. I didn't even have a high school year in the US or a German academic teacher who was enthusiastic about American pragmatism, nothing of that kind. There is a book, the title is *The Disobedient Generation*, with autobiographical texts of 20 internationally prominent sociologists of my generation, and I am one of them, and my chapter I called "A pragmatist from Germany". In it I gave a lengthy answer to the question you are asking right now. The context in which I discovered pragmatism as a student I would describe as consisting of three different things, three vital traditions in German intellectual life that all attracted me and also to some extent repelled me. One of these three was the German tradition of historicism and hermeneutics certainly, and I even say in the introduction to my book on Mead that the kind of model I had in mind was Dilthey's book on Schleiermacher, a biographical study of a crucial intellectual figure, because the biographical framework allows one to really contextualize the thinking of a thinker and to see the thinking in a genetic way as being developed over time, and not as being there at one time fully systematic and finished. But I should perhaps also mention the two other currents.

I have been kind of politically on the Left all my life, which means that I have always found Marxism rather important and the whole Social Democratic tradition in terms of social equality and justice, and since I am Catholic also the Catholic intellectual tradition. When I was 20 I had the feeling that I am becoming totally eclectic, taking something from social democracy and from Catholicism and let's say from Wilhelm Dilthey, but all this doesn't fit. Please bear in mind that at the time at least most Leftists and most social democrats were very anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, and most Catholics were opposed to the social democrats. All this didn't fit and I would really say that in 1970 when I was a student in Munich and read George Herbert Mead, that I had a moment of revelation, so to speak, namely that pragmatism allowed me to bring these very different things together. Marxism or Catholicism are not exclusively German, but from the traditions as I had encountered them I would say all of them were not sufficiently democratic in my eyes. The German hermeneutical tradition was mostly devoted to interpreting the deeds of great actors in history. The Catholic tradition was deeply hierarchical and authoritarian, and the German social democratic tradition I would say, I mean in its German version (maybe in the Swedish version also), was too much state oriented. Today we make a distinction between Civil Society and the State, but that distinction was much less common among social democrats at the time. I experienced an author like John Dewey then as being much more skeptical with regard to the state and seeing a tension between democratization and strengthening of the state, so I had the feeling if I turn to these pragmatists I can keep what is relevant from the three other traditions and somehow synthesize that, and that was an intuition, it was not something I had done yet.

I originally had a different plan for my doctoral dissertation and I switched to this plan to write about George Herbert Mead. The original plan had been a history of Marxism criticizing Marxism; everyone was talking about Marxism at the time in Germany and I planned to criticize Marxism from the early Marx on throughout its history for its insufficient understanding both of human intersubjectivity and of democracy. I started with a re-interpretation of Marx's reception of Feuerbach. That then became a part of the book that I wrote with Axel Honneth in 1980, also in German. And I went on criticizing Lukacs' *History and Class-Consciousness* from that viewpoint. But then I realized that in every one of those chapters I end by saying this is bad in Marxism and the solution is in Mead and Dewey. So I thought as a book this will be terribly boring because the readers will be able to anticipate after a few chapters that my message is always the same. I remember how I went to my advisor and said I don't want to finish that, I would prefer writing about this guy Mead instead, but unfortunately I cannot really write an excellent dissertation about him because there is so much unpublished material and it is in the United States. And I tell you honestly, at that point I hadn't even had the idea, I come from a very poor background you know, that one could go to the US and read these things. But my advisor responded: What is the problem, you go there and read those things in the Library of Congress or in Chicago and so on. And then I said how should I afford going there? You get a scholarship and you go. And he and above all Wolf Lepenies, who was an influential person in the German Foundation Thyssen, helped me to get a scholarship and then I went. And that really changed my life.

I don't want to continue in this autobiographical way, but the more I got into the empirical study of the history of war and the history of religion in the last 25 years, the more relevant the historical hermeneutical tradition has again become for me. Because very often the pragmatists are not so good with regard to history, and I would say that someone like Ernst Troeltsch, for example with regard to the history of Christianity, is so much superior compared to Dewey and Mead that it would be ridiculous if I defined myself as a pragmatist in the same sense, neglecting what I can learn from the background I was familiar with before I encountered pragmatism.

CGH: You prefer to speak of an age of contingency, rather than of modernization and secularization (indicating overarching and irreversible processes). Could you elaborate on this?

HJ: I am a little bit skeptical with regard to the whole notion of modernity. Modernization can have two different meanings. One of them is innocent, the other is not. If we mean by modernization, let's say, scientific and technological change and economic growth, I find it relatively innocent. But there has always been technological change for example; I mean there was a revolution in agricultural technology in archaic civilizations or you could say there was modernization in the European Middle Ages. The not so innocent version is when you mean by modernization a transition to an epoch called modernity, because then the question is what exactly defines this epoch

of modernity and since when, for example, have Germany or Sweden been in this age of modernity. For some people modernity starts in the Reformation or in the 18th century, or after the First World War, or after the Second World War, or in 1968, or after 1989 or whatever. I mean everybody can of course define his or her understanding of modernity. But in the collective usage of the term there clearly is no consensus. And the other problem with it is not so much the irreversibility, but the holistic character, or the homogenizing character of the notion of modernity. The notion of modernity treats different social changes as being necessarily tied to each other. Is secularization a necessary component of modernization? I say no. Is democratization a necessary component of modernization? I am very skeptical. Classical modernization theory says when China introduces marketization that will sooner or later lead to democratization, but I personally don't buy that. I mean it may but it also may not. There is not such a close causal connection here. So what I am saying is that we should identify different dimensions of social change that have become overly homogenized in the conception of modernity, for example democratization, secularization, marketization or bureaucratization, pacification of inter-societal relations. Let's distinguish these and then really ask what exactly are the causal connections between them. What is the connection between democratization and secularization, is there one? What is the difference between marketization and democratization, what do we know about that in different cases?

That's the first meaning of the term contingency: I see these connections as highly variable and in that sense contingent, there is no necessity of the one always leading to the other. But in my book *Faith as an Option* I play with a second meaning also, namely the growth in individual options of action. That it is so easy for us to travel from one place to another or to choose our friends or our marriage partners or whatever, that's not so much predetermined by clear societal norms or by a simple lack of options. I think we can say we live in an age now in which so many things that were predetermined for earlier generations have become a matter of individual decision making, and if things are a matter of individual decision making this has all sorts of effects that are not implications of the act of individual decision making as such. This sounds very abstract, but in the book and in other places, I refer to the example of the traffic jam. When there are only train connections you have only a restricted number of options when to go, you look it up, you see you can go now or two hours from now, or whatever. When you have a car you can decide whenever you want to go. But there are other individuals who also make free decisions. For example when West Berlin was still surrounded by a wall and vacations began everybody wanted to leave and go somewhere to spend days of vacation, which means no one could leave the city because there were miles of cars waiting at the checkpoints. And that is funny because then everybody decided next time not to leave in the morning of the first day but already shortly after midnight of the night before. Which means next time you had an enormous traffic jam shortly after midnight. And you realize that there are perverse effects of the increase in individual options. So all this I try to cover with this formula that we live in an age of contingency.

Actually the place where I first presented this idea of the age of contingency is Lund. Margareta Bertilsson – I am not totally sure about the year, but around 2000 – invited me to come here and to give a series of lectures partly in Lund and partly in Copenhagen. I called that series of lectures “The Age of Contingency”. I never published those lectures, but they somehow influenced the middle chapters of the book *Faith as an Option*.

CGH: You have developed an approach that you name affirmative genealogy. What is this?

HJ: As you know the author who invented the term genealogy, not in the regular sense, but in the sense of a specific philosophical approach, was Friedrich Nietzsche in his book from 1887, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. In addition to Nietzsche the notion has become associated with Michel Foucault. Now I praise Nietzsche in my book *The Genesis of Values* for asking the question how do new values come into the world. Nietzsche did that in the book with regard to two extremely important historical processes of the emergence of new values, namely, and now in his language, the Jewish discovery of the value of justice and the emergence of the Christian ethos of love. I think Nietzsche’s way to ask this question was really pioneering, and one can reflect on the question why no earlier author had come to that point, and I think the reason is that Nietzsche, more than any other thinker, with one exception, William James, realized that teleological philosophies of history, and evolutionism, and of course a kind of Platonist understanding of an ahistorical character of the good, had all lost their credibility. And if that is the case then you ask how do new values come into being. And the method Nietzsche used for this reconstruction of the emergence of new values he called genealogy. Up to that point I am all with him, and I simply use genealogy as Nietzsche did it. Now comes the major difference.

Nietzsche connected this idea of genealogy, that I would paraphrase as the reconstruction of the emergence of new values in a perspective that allows for the contingency of these processes, with the message that if you study the genealogy of a value, this has a destructive effect on your commitment to that value. If you see that this could just as well not have taken place, you can no longer feel so unconditionally committed to it. And I deny that. Nietzsche did that of course because he considered individuals to be truly free only if they develop beyond inherited value commitments, if they establish freedom with regard to the traditions that have nourished them, and I think some people today read that as a kind of radical liberationist perspective. I think it was deeply elitist in that he did not think that every human being can reach that point, only very few can, and others should be happy to act as their servants so to speak, just to enable the few great individuals to reach that point. Now I say, this is, although there are many, many things involved here, in principle simply not true. We can study processes of the emergence of values in a perspective that allows for the contingency of these processes and still feel strengthened, confirmed and reinforced in our commitment to that value, and that I call affirmative genealogy. I take the

“affirmative” from Paul Ricoeur, who distinguished a hermeneutics of suspicion from an affirmative hermeneutics.

Let me mention two things that make the picture more complex here. One is, I do not mean affirmation as a counter-notion to criticism or critique; I mean it as a counter-notion to destruction. You cannot affirm any value without criticizing for example the insufficient realization of that value, maybe in your own tradition. If I as a Christian affirm fundamental values of Christianity, I can only do that honestly if I also criticize parts of the history of Christianity, where these values were used for the legitimation of things I wouldn't find justifiable. So critique is part of affirmation, affirmation is not affirmation of given total conditions at any time, but affirmation of a value, for example that it is good to live in a just social order, that it is good to love your neighbor. That does not mean you justify a certain power constellation. The second thing is of course, and that will play a role in the book I have in mind but have not yet written, all the things Nietzsche is paying attention to, like the psychological sentiment of resentment, or the role of power constellations in these processes of the emergence of values, have to be taken into account in this non-Nietzschean framework. But these are long stories.

May I briefly add one thing? I wrote the book *The Genesis of Values* in 1996 and early 1997, in the US actually. My own view when I wrote it was, this is the last thing I am writing about pragmatism in my life. Just to conclude the series of books so to speak. But what came out of it was a totally new series of books on processes of the genesis of values. If human rights and the belief in universal human dignity is a value, the history of human rights as the history of the emergence of that value is enormously relevant. So it is strange that sometimes your own intention is very different from what you yourself do when you write books.

CGH: Trying to take a bird's eye view of the field of sociology today, what positive and negative tendencies do you discern? And perhaps you can say something about your impressions of Swedish sociology.

HJ: I think the situation is very different from country to country. And since I live in several countries I think I see a little bit how different the situation is. In the United States I would say, in the leading universities and their sociology departments, sociology is extremely professionalized with regard to methods. Both quantitative and also what is called qualitative. No doubt about that. It is not very professionalized and not even very productive with regard to theory, so much of the research that is being done in the US is method-driven and not theory-driven, which I find problematic. People think, oh, here we have new methods for network research, what can we use them for so to speak. But very often then the results – they may be relevant for certain audiences, or they are relevant for other people who do method-driven research – are not re-integrated into a kind of cumulative knowledge of the discipline, which was different in other phases. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, you had with Parsons and Merton to some extent a kind of clear theoretical core of the discipline that allowed

people who do, let's say, sociology of deviant behavior as it was called, to do studies that have an effect on theory and the theory has effect in all different sub-disciplinary areas. I don't see that at the moment and I find that problematical, although I would immediately relativize what I have said by saying there are some sub-disciplines in American sociology that are also theoretically relevant and where the research is partly theory-driven. Now the two I know of, because they are close also to my interests, are sociology of religion and historical sociology, and for both I would say my general statement is not true. So my general statement, I think, is true for the discipline as a whole, but the situation in some of the sub-disciplines is better than the situation in the discipline as a whole.

The problem in German sociology, in my eyes, is that the discipline is fragmented according to universities. Sociology is a different discipline from university to university, and that I find a disaster, to be honest. There are some places where everybody teaches and is oriented towards Bourdieu. In another place they are all into Max Weber or Luhmann. I think this is a disaster for a discipline, and one of my motivations for this big book *Social Theory* was to tell everybody that you cannot simply rely on Luhmann, you also have to know that there is this and that. And the book is very successful internationally. It has just come out in Russian and Spanish, and is now being translated into Chinese and Portuguese.

CGH: May I say I used it when I taught in China.

HJ: (Laughs) Is that so?

CGH: Yes.

HJ: You may be one of the reasons why the Chinese are interested! Well yes, I think it really helps in those countries, and there is no competitor in the market in that sense. But the original goal, namely to bring these different strands of German sociology together, that we haven't reached. Some professors remain locked in their own paradigm that they consider the only way to salvation (laughs), and that I think is a great problem.

Scandinavia: My impression is that too much is driven by the practical use of the research. That departments do not show a kind of internal cognitive structure of the discipline, but are structured along different fields of applied knowledge, which means that specialists in one field of applied knowledge sometimes don't see the point in talking to specialists in another field of applied knowledge. That was my impression in several Scandinavian universities.

And a last remark here, the International Sociological Association now, I have the impression, is firmly in the hands of leftist political activists, and that also is not good for a scientific discipline whatever you think of leftist political activism. I think an association of sociologists should be mostly driven by excellence in research and theory and should be very pluralist. I went to the European congress in Vienna just for two

days last summer, and I had the impression they are all on the same side in all political questions and that isn't healthy. You probably will not find one person who is for, let's say, a more restrictive immigration policy or something like that. But of course there are people who do not go to these congresses because they experience them as being in the hands of a certain political wing. These are things I would like to see changed. But I don't know how.

CGH: A final question. You discern a line of conflict today and in the years to come between universalism and anti-universalism (for example in the form of nationalism or racism), rather than a clash of civilizations. Could you elaborate on that?

HJ: This question goes to the heart of some of the things I am doing right now and in the near future. You may know, and that would be my point of departure, that I have in the past years done a lot about this topic of the Axial Age.¹ I became very close with Robert Bellah, the great American sociologist of religion, and I've expanded my own chapter in the book I edited with him on *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* into a small book in German. I see in the historical and social scientific research about the Axial Age an important possibility to get away from this idea of a necessary clash of civilizations. The reason is that one can study the genealogy of what I would call, like Habermas and others, moral universalism. When and where and how and why did the idea come up that there is one humanity, not just us vs. them, so to speak, but that others are human beings like us? That idea was not there since the beginning of human history. It is the emergence of an idea, you cannot yet say of a value, because this is a cognitive concept, humanity, but it is a cognitive concept that soon takes on great normative relevance when you ask yourself whether what we are doing is good not just for us but for all mankind. That's what I mean when I say moral universalism.

The Axial Age research deals with the historical emergence of moral universalism not only in ancient Judaism or ancient Greece, but also in ancient China and in ancient India. Maybe you can show that there are more cases, I mean some people say in ancient Persia or Iran. Karl Jaspers treated this as kind of mysterious coincidence. And I think we have reached a very good and important point now. What is the connection between the formation of archaic states and their expansionist tendencies and the kind of political universalism in the sense that we try to become an empire that rules the whole world, the whole known world, and the kind of counter-movement of an opposition to the formation of political empires that says: No, you should not rule us, but we tell you what authentic universalism means, for example religious forms of moral universalism. That helps us I would say to overcome European self-centeredness and

1 *Achsenzeit* is an expression coined by Karl Jaspers in 1949. It points to the period 800 to 200 BC, when all world religions apart from Islam emerged. During this period there was a breach with mythical worldviews. The idea of a transcendence of the worldly also occurs during this period, i.e., the notion of a higher order in whose name one could criticize the current order of things on Earth.

the idea of a clash of civilizations and turn these questions away from mere moralizing into a fruitful research program for historically oriented social science.

I am about to finish a book that has a lot to do with that (Joas 2017). It is called, I write it in German but I say it in English, “The Power of the Sacred. An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment”. Everybody takes from Max Weber the narrative of disenchantment, but from this Axial Age research I think that you have to revise him very, very fundamentally. Many things in Weber, I mean the more closely I have looked at them during the course of my life, the more I come to the conclusion that these constructions kind of collapse, and that I try to show but in a constructive manner, namely what is the alternative to Weber’s narrative of disenchantment. Weber’s disenchantment starts with the prophets, so his narrative of disenchantment is not about today, but about 2,500 years. The alternative is to be a different history of these 2,500 years and not something that may be true or not for our time. Weber did not speak about his own time, but saw the crisis of meaning as something like the end result of thousands of years of disenchantment. This process, I think, we have to see in a different light.

The “clash of civilizations” thesis treats civilizations as enclosed, internally homogeneous phenomena and says they have to clash because they cannot find a common denominator. When you argue as I just did with the idea of this moral universalism you find a tension between the potential of moral universalism and constant reductions of this potential in every civilization. Confucianism, for example, has a potential for moral universalism, but it can of course also be a state ideology. The same is true for Christianity. So instead of seeing the clash of civilizations, you see the tensions, I do not necessarily say the conflicts but the tensions between different understandings of one and the same religious or civilizational tradition. Then you see yourself, if you consider yourself a moral universalist, closer to the other moral universalists of other religious or secular traditions, than to the anti-universalist forces in your own civilization. I published a brief book “Are Human Rights Western?” (in German), where I try to show that there are very different justifications for slavery. There are Catholic justifications for slavery, there are Protestant justifications for slavery, there were even Enlightenment-oriented justifications for slavery in the 18th century. And so you cannot find the one innocent religious or secular tradition, but you learn that whatever your religious tradition is, it may have a potential for moral universalism, but may always also be in danger of falling back into the justification of things that cannot be justified from a moral universalistic viewpoint.

Francisco Franco in Spain was a Catholic like me, so religiously I am closer to Franco than I am to non-Catholics, but politically and morally I am clearly much closer to a secular moral universalist than to a Catholic fascist. And that’s why I think political and moral universalists of different secular and religious backgrounds should unite politically. They have to cooperate, they have to form coalitions and defend human rights for example, defend democracy, and they should not quarrel about the religions. You should accept everybody who is a defender of moral universalist principles whatever his or her religious or non-religious background is. That is why I find

discussions about Islam being compatible with this or not as nonsense. No religion is an abstract entity. There are human beings who draw conclusions from their religious traditions with regard to political questions and you have a very rich internal variety and plurality in all these religious traditions.

CGH: Thank you very much for your answers!

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