



In Conversation with Professor Hans Joas

Interviewed by Dr. Sarbeswar Sahoo (Indian Institute of Technology Delhi)

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Prof. Joas has edited six books in English, including *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (with Robert N. Bellah, Harvard University Press, 2012).

HJ: Hans Joas

SS: Sarbeswar Sahoo

SS: Thank you very much for agreeing to give this interview. I would like to start the conversation by asking you about your academic training. Could you please tell us something about your undergraduate and graduate training?

HJ: The terms undergraduate and graduate do not really apply to the German higher education system. I finished high school in 1968 and became a student first at the University of Munich and then from the spring of 1971 I was at the Free University in Berlin. I got my first so-called Diploma degree in Sociology in Berlin in 1972 and then got a teaching position in the Sociology Department of the Free University in 1973. I did my Ph.D. in 1979 with a thesis on George Herbert Mead that was later published as a book.

SS: What subjects did you study when you were in Munich?

HJ: From the outset, it was not absolutely clear to me whether I should become a sociologist or maybe a historian. So, I studied History and Sociology and some Philosophy and some German Literature. It is almost coincidental I would say, that I became a sociologist in that sense and not a historian because when I was

in my second semester in Berlin in the fall of 1971, one of the Berlin Sociology professors asked me whether I would be interested in becoming his research and teaching assistant. This is somewhat different from American Universities; it is a real position at the University. I said of course I would be interested in the position. But for that you need to have a degree in Sociology. So, I decided to go in this direction because it opened a kind of career perspective for me but I have retained this interest in history up to the present. At the moment, I am in a School of History and not in a sociological institute.

SS: Could you please tell us what kind of influence your family background had on your intellectual thinking?

HJ: I come from a lower class family, so I am the first person to have had any higher education. In that sense, there is no intellectual influence in the sense of let's say if your father is a professor or pastor or medical doctor. But of course a family, whether well-educated or not, is often a crucial influence for intellectual development and in my case I would say the most important element was that my father died when I was a child of ten years. This fact or experience was a very dramatic and traumatising event; it certainly was one of the crucial determining events in my personal, scholarly and religious biography.

SS: You mentioned that you spent your childhood in Munich and then moved to Berlin for higher education. What difference did you experience between the educational and academic life of Munich and Berlin at that time?

HJ: Enormous differences. You could say two things about Bavaria where I grew up: on the one hand it was very conservative but on the other hand very efficient – very much oriented to discipline, learning and high standards. This was also true, at least to some extent, for the University of Munich. But when I moved to Berlin, particularly under the influence of the student movement of 1968 and later, the situation at the Free University, particularly in the Humanities

and Social Sciences, was almost chaotic. You had sociology classes in which there was not so much discussion of topics by the means of contributions of individual students but there were spokespersons for political students' organisations. All of them were very radically on the left. I vividly remember that in a class on Sociolinguistics students got up and said that they speak for the Marxist-Leninist organisation and that Joseph Stalin wrote in his excellent work on language and so on... So, I was not sure whether I should stay on there.

SS: Did you also participate in the students' movement?

HJ: Yes, but I would have to say a lot of things on this topic. I became a kind of leftist very early in my life, before the students' movement and that has a lot to do with my lower class background. Not necessarily my family but the milieu in which I grew up was very deeply Catholic. I grew up in a kind of Catholic Co-operative; the houses that we lived in did not have a private landlord and was organised as a Catholic Co-operative. So my earliest, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old, intellectual development led me to a kind of Catholic left wing orientation. There was an important journal at that time in Germany called *Frankfurter Hefte* edited by some left wing Jesuits and that somehow until today in a certain sense is my background. So, when the students' movement set in, when I was still in high school in 1967, I was totally enthusiastic about it. But after 1968, large parts of the activists moved in the direction of Maoism, neo-Stalinism or in the direction of a totally apologetic attitude with regard to the Soviet Union or to the East German regime. I never became a Maoist or a Stalinist and I was immune against any enthusiasm about the Soviet Union because when the Soviet Union sent its troops to Czechoslovakia – that was in August 1968 – I was in Italy. I had won a scholarship from the University of Florence because I had learnt Italian. At that time large numbers of tourists from Czechoslovakia were, for the first time, allowed to travel to the West and many of them travelled to Italy. So when the military intervention of the Soviet Union took place, I

experienced with my own eyes how these tourists from Czechoslovakia responded to that and how totally depressed they were about what was happening and that made me immune against the students' idealisation of the Soviet model. So, in that sense I was a leftist but I felt rather alienated in the leftist milieu that emerged after the students' movement and that very much influenced my perspective at the Free University during my student days.

SS: So, what was the field of Sociology like that time and what kinds of questions or issues was German Sociology trying to address?

HJ: A very important polarising event in German Sociology was in the second half of the 1960s. So it happened before I entered the University but was influencing very much the debates among sociology students in the late sixties and early seventies. In German it is called the *Positivismusstreit* – the great controversy about positivism, first between Adorno and Popper and then the younger generation between Hans Albert on Popper's side and Jürgen Habermas on Adorno's side. That was a controversy about methodological and epistemological questions, which I think, in retrospect, was full of mutual misunderstandings and had a rather destructive influence. Many people on the left became very sceptical with regard to quantitative methods of empirical research. For example, Adorno tended to identify quantitative methods with a technocratic attitude and wanted to get rid of that. Then of course the whole reception of Marx and the feeling that if we study Marx closely enough we will find the right answer to every question; that certainly played an important role. Also, one of the most fashionable topics of the time was the debate about Socio-Linguistics; about linguistic features of the articulation of people from different social backgrounds; of the consequences different linguistic abilities have for their future educational careers and so on. These were some of the hot topics in German Sociology in the early 1970s.

SS: What kind of empirical questions did German Sociology try to address? For example, in the Indian

context Sociology tries to address questions related to poverty, inequality, capitalism, caste and so on. Could you please say something about it?

HJ: As I just said one of the most important empirical questions of the time in German Sociology was educational inequality. The fact that most people in higher education came or incidentally still come from rather educated families. The injustice was an important aspect. Also, questions of expansion of higher education system that took place at that time and whether certain reforms of higher education system really contribute to the equalisation in that sense. You may be able to imagine that with myself coming from a non-well educated and non-academic family, this also was personally an important question.

Another important issue was the debates about an appropriate macro-sociological theory. What are the empirical implications of a revitalised Marxism for theories of social change and for the diagnosis of time? And then there was an intense reception, for the first time, of American micro-sociological traditions like symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and the specific empirical methods connected to those schools.

SS: You mentioned that your Ph.D. research was about George Herbert Mead. You came from a working class and non-well educated background. You also said that German Sociology of the time was deeply involved in such educational inequality issues. So, why did you not work on such issues but wrote a thesis on Mead?

HJ: I can easily explain that and it is also important to explain that. The first degree in the German system at least at the time, comparable to a Master's degree in the American system, was a Diploma and I wrote my Diploma thesis about sociological role theory. Actually this Diploma thesis, a rather unusual thing, got published as a book and sold seven thousand copies. At that time I was only twenty-four-years old and it was a real success in that sense. Why role theory? It is because role theory was an important element of this

debate about educational inequality. People are educated in anticipation of their future role because their parents or teachers anticipate their future obligations and so on. I wrote about this topic because of a particular professor who wanted me to write about that. So I wrote an overview of the contemporary international discussions and contributions in the field of sociological role theory. When I did that I came to the conclusion that the empirically most fruitful approach in this area is symbolic interactionism and symbolic interactionism treats George Herbert Mead as its classical founder. Mead never used the expression symbolic interactionism but it was one of his students, Herbert Blumer, who founded that school of sociology in the 1930s.

My first plan for my doctoral dissertation was not to write a thesis about George Herbert Mead but to write a thesis in the area of history of Marxism and to criticise Marx himself and several other important figures in the history of Marxism for their deficient understanding of the fundamental structure of human inter-subjectivity. So, I started with a chapter on Marx and Feuerbach because Feuerbach, who is mostly known today for his critique of religion and Christianity in particular, is also one of the crucial authors in the field of philosophy of dialogue and inter-subjectivity. The term Feuerbach used is “altruism”, not in a moral sense but in a sense of understanding the other. But after developing some chapters, I came to the conclusion that a dissertation that deals with Marx, Lukacs and other figures in the history of Marxism and that is coming to the same conclusion how deficient Marxism is in understanding human inter-subjectivity is somehow boring and I thought it will not attract people because the orthodox Marxists will not be convinced and the non-Marxists will say that’s what we have always assumed.

So, I went to my doctoral supervisor (Peter Dretzel) and told him that I would like to change the topic of my dissertation. I said I realised that in each chapter I used George Herbert Mead as a positive reference point and always criticised Marx and Marxists from a Meadian viewpoint. Would it not make more sense if I wrote about this positive reference point? He replied ‘yes, obviously, that is what you should do’.

Then I said unfortunately I will not be able to do that as well as one should do it because I would not have access to much of the material that is necessary for doing such a study, namely Mead’s remaining papers, his correspondences and all that which was and still is in the United States, particularly in Chicago but at the time parts of it were at the University of Texas (Austin). He said that is not a problem. I tell you honestly, for me, I think it was in 1974, going to the United States was something like if you told me today that I should go to the moon. It was just unimaginable. I said I do not have the money to travel to the United States. He said that is not a problem either; you get a scholarship. He asked Wolf Lepenies, the later Rector of the Berlin Wissenschaftskolleg, who had very good contacts with the Thyssen Foundation, one of the rich German foundations.

I got a scholarship from the Thyssen Foundation for my first trip to the United States in 1975-76. So, I went to Washington DC, to Chicago and to Texas to study all the unpublished materials by Mead and unpublished dissertations on Mead that could be found in the Library of Congress. I even discovered many of Mead’s publications that had never been listed in any one of his bibliographies and so on. So, for that reason, there is an immediate connection to these hot topics but I would say it is also a creative way out so to speak and to develop something that has not been part of German thinking at all; it was also to discover something in the tradition of American philosophy and sociology that I still think is of greatest relevance for sociological theorising but was not well-known in Germany and not even in the United States at the time. I finished this dissertation in 1979. The book is still on the market; it sells very well in Germany. It was translated into English and came out in 1985 with MIT Press, with the second edition published 1997. It was even translated into French a few years ago. That is particularly remarkable because first, the French translate very little and because at the time I did that, that was the time of the intellectual hegemony of structuralism and post-structuralism in France. Nobody had any interest in things like George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism and in those German traditions from which I come

in a certain sense like hermeneutics and German historicism. So, it is very remarkable that twenty-five years or so after the German original came out, it was translated into French. In that sense, I would say the dissertation was a success.

SS: What aspects of Mead's work actually excited you?

HJ: I have to say several things on that. First, although I had these early interests in symbolic interactionism and Mead, I would describe myself as very different from the typical symbolic interactionists because a typical symbolic interactionist is a micro-sociologist and I am not. So, I would say that my specific vantage point from the beginning was to study Mead and American Pragmatism and the Chicago school of sociology with macro-sociological questions in mind, not micro-sociological questions. That is something for which you could find hardly any cooperation partner at the time because the symbolic interactionists left the macro-sociological questions to the Parsonians, the Marxists, and the conflict sociologists. You could find very few of them, David Maines is one of the exceptions, who tried to draw macro-sociological conclusions from the pragmatist approach. So, symbolic interactionism does not really describe, I would say, what I have been doing all my life because I have not been doing micro-sociological empirical research. I am much more interested in macro-sociological theory construction but, like the symbolic interactionists, inspired by the pragmatists.

Secondly, it is absolutely clear that the starting point of my interest in Mead was his interest in inter-subjectivity and structures of human interaction. Whereas the English version of my book is just called *George Herbert Mead*, the German version has a different title. The German title is *Praktische Intersubjektivität*. So, there is an emphasis on inter-subjectivity but I call it practical because that is directed in a certain sense against Habermas' emphasis on linguistic inter-subjectivity. I am not mostly interested in the structure of rational argumentation but of human cooperation – how human beings act together both for certain instrumental goals, let's say "real cooperation";

but also act together without having such clear-cut goals. My favourite example for that is a religious ritual; you do not want to produce something by this ritual so to speak but it is an intense form of mutual exchange.

Thirdly, at the beginning of this first long extended stay in the United States as a doctoral student, both my wife and I were rather shocked by the living conditions of the black underclass in Washington DC and Chicago; Chicago is very harsh in this sense. So, I developed a very intense interest on the one hand immediately on the question, how can it be that one of the richest societies in the world allows part of its own population to live under such incredibly bad conditions? Secondly, how can it be that a country with such a racist tradition has also developed all these interesting ideas that I find in this pragmatist tradition? Now, I add something that has to do with the very first phase of our conversation. One of the strongest impulses in my work that comes from my family is that question of how could it be that people who are not bad people as such became enthusiastic Nazis. I belong to the post-war generation but I certainly belong to those who have taken the experience seriously that our paternal generation was so much involved in Nazism and all that it implies. This became one of the strongest impulses behind our own intellectual development and thinking.

I have written an autobiographical piece for the volume, *The Disobedient Generation*, about the post-1968 people where the editors asked twenty sociologists from all over the world to write autobiographical pieces with special attention paid to 1968 and the consequences. What I describe with regard to myself was that when I was a student I felt attracted by three intellectual traditions in Germany – (1) hermeneutics and historicism; (2) a leftist egalitarianism, not necessarily Marxist; and (3) the Catholic tradition. What I realised when I was a student was that all three traditions, let's say in their German incarnation, were not very democratic. The German historicist - hermeneutic tradition was mostly one of the understanding of great men, not of everyday people; the Catholic tradition was very hierarchical, authoritarian; and even the German leftist egalitarian traditions,

both the communist and the social democratic traditions, were not very democratic. So, when I first encountered Mead's work and the writings of others in the same intellectual tradition in America, for example, John Dewey, William James and so on, I had what Catholics would call a *Damascus* experience. I realised that by means of American pragmatism I could reinterpret and integrate the three traditions – a pro-democratic, egalitarian type of thinking that does not treat religion as a matter of the past but something vital in our time and that is sensitive to the dimension of meaning and does not reduce social processes to causal connection between factors. Honestly speaking, that happened when I was student in 1970-71 but then I would say since then, there is absolute continuity; there is no major change in that sense. It is a very long extended process of working out what was somehow contained in this original inspiration.

SS: You said that your work in the beginning has been on Mead and American Pragmatism. What exactly is this theory of American Pragmatism?

HJ: Yes, I started by saying that I discovered one of the four classical figures of American Pragmatism for myself and I discovered this one figure because I saw in him the superior theory of human inter-subjectivity. So that is the main topic of the book on Mead. But, please do not reduce me to that because as I said I finished this in 1979 and it is decades ago. After that, almost immediately, I wrote another book together with a friend and co-author, Axel Honneth, who is now the successor to Jürgen Habermas on the Frankfurt Philosophy chair. We wrote the book together and it is called *Social Action and Human Nature*. It came out in German in 1980 and in English in 1988. It came out in English because Charles Taylor had read it and found it interesting. He persuaded Cambridge University Press to publish it and even wrote a preface to it. We were very proud at that time to have the book with a preface by Charles Taylor.

After that a certain split set in. On the one hand, I personally was very interested in continuing this theoretical strand; but on the other hand, I had to find a

job and it was just impossible to get a job for such theoretical work. Eventually, I got a job at the Berlin Max-Planck Institute for Human Development and Educational Research for large-scale quantitative research on the labour market for higher education. It was absolutely different from what I had been doing. To be honest, I was not very much interested in it but I needed a job. It was very convenient to find a job in Berlin where my family lived; it was a first-rate institute and also I was interested in getting better training for large-scale quantitative empirical research. On that basis, I had quite a number of publications and wrote a book in the second half of the 1980s. The book has never been translated into English because it is about Germany. But I also realised that I cannot switch completely from what I had been doing and what I found deeply motivating. So, in a certain sense, I continued my theoretical work in my leisure time. I sometimes say in an anecdotal form that at that time I read Elias Canetti, a Nobel Prize winner in Literature. He was trained as a chemist. He wrote a three volume autobiography where he mentioned how he spent the whole day doing research in chemistry and then going home and doing literature because that is what he felt inclined to. I felt that this is a direct parallel between my workday in empirical research and my authentic interest. I spent five years or so following such a life-style.

I continued my theoretical work and at the time the idea I had was that I should go beyond the study of Mead and include all the important figures in American Pragmatist philosophy and study all the attempts in the sociological tradition to draw macro-sociological conclusions from that and to compare that with a much better known sociological approach in macro-sociological theory derived from Marx, Weber and Durkheim. So, I produced a series of articles in all these areas, but I felt that it is not enough to write these articles about classical sociological theorists; I wanted to present my own views on that in a more systematic way. So, I worked on both projects simultaneously and published both as two different books in 1992 in German. This "collection" is the book, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* that came out in English in 1993 with the University of Chicago Press

and the “systematic” book - which I personally think is maybe the most important book I have ever written - is called *The Creativity of Action* (The University of Chicago Press, 1996). It came out in English in 1996 and has been published in several other languages including French, Russian, and Korean. So, I would say my early work so to speak is about Mead and American Pragmatism on the one hand and about empirical work on primary socialisation and labour market professional socialisation on the other hand. That describes my work until the early 1990s.

Then, this systematic work, *The Creativity of Action*, came out and at that time I thought I will never write about pragmatism again; I wanted to write about actual questions of sociological theorising from that perspective but not about pragmatism as a tradition or a school of thinking. Perhaps, here I should also say something what I consider to be the interesting thing about *The Creativity of Action* book; otherwise it remains totally abstract.

SS: Yes, please...

HJ: The basic idea is as follows. In Sociology, the understanding of human action has mostly moved between two poles from the late 19th to the late 20th century. On the one hand, the model today, what we would call rational action – the micro-economic model of human action; you find the same model of action in authors who would not say rational action. For example, Pareto said logical action. So, the terminology is different, but one of the basic approaches in social sciences in general is this goal orientation, rational calculation of means and so on. The alternative model in the sociological tradition is mostly influenced by Kant and opposes the fact that human beings have a conscience, have a moral and a normative orientation to that other model. When Durkheim criticises Spencer or when Parsons criticises economic theory, they always, in a certain sense, have defended this second position. Both positions get modified but there is a basic controversy between these two approaches.

For the moment, let's call the first rationalist and the other normativist. They are not just on the same

level because the normativists claim that in their theory they can attribute a specific place to the rational action model – that the normative model is more comprehensive than the rational action model. That was at least Parsons' position in his *Structure of Social Action*. My point in *The Creativity of Action* was to say that there is a third possibility and that is a model of human action that emphasises the creativity of human action and that is even more comprehensive than the normativist model. The normativists are able to describe the conditions under which the rational action model can be applied. The creativists (although this name could be misunderstood) or the creativity oriented model is even superior to the normativist model because it is able to deal with two empirical questions with which the normativist model cannot deal, namely, how do norms and values emerge and how do actors in action situations apply their internalised norms and values because this application is not just an act of logical deduction; it is always a kind of risky enterprise. That is the basic idea of *The Creativity of Action* and that allows me then to say let's look for all types of thinking that have already in the past contributed to such a creativity oriented understanding of human action – Pragmatism is one, but a certain version of Marxism is another one; Marx's own understanding of production is certainly a creativity oriented understanding of production.

SS: During your work on this creativity of action, did you find any kind of parallel or similarity with the action model that was provided by Max Weber? Weber has also talked about social action and categorized different kinds of action....

HJ: Yes, of course! I have a chapter on Weber in the book. My main point is that Weber's theory of charisma plays a crucial role in his understanding of religion and his sociology of domination. Clearly, he thinks in terms of creativity; at least a charismatic individual is a creative individual. Then I try to show that Weber's typology of action does not allow him to fit his own ideas about charismatic innovation into his own typology of action. There is a tension between Weber's four types of action and his ideas about

charismatic innovation. So, I am very critical of Weber's theory of action not only for this reason but also for inter-subjectivity and linguistic problems. But, I am a great admirer of Weber's historical sociology. I see his work as full of internal contradictions and tensions and not as something on which we can simply rely so to speak.

SS: I wanted to ask that you are one of the Sociologists who have received all his degrees from the non-English speaking world. But you have a very significant working experience in the United States. My question is when was the first time you were exposed to American academic life, particularly with regard to work and teaching, besides the time you spent there for collecting research materials for your Ph.D.?

HJ: Yes, you are right that I spent my student days in Germany, but I must say that even then as a doctoral student, a large part of the most important intellectual influences come from the English-speaking world. In the preface to my 1997 book, *The Genesis of Values*, I gave a list of seven names of North-American philosophers and sociologists who had the most important intellectual influences on me. They are: Robert Bellah, Richard Bernstein, Donald Levine, Edward Tiryakian, Charles Taylor, Amitai Etzioni, and Philip Selznick. When I was a student, I never met any one of them. In the course of my life I became a close friend to all of them; six of them are alive. There are also a few more. I should mention the names of Shmuel Eisenstadt who is not from North America and in Germany, certainly Jürgen Habermas was an important influence.

But your question was less about intellectual influence. Yes, I spent several months in the United States as a doctoral student and that was the first contact you could say. But my first serious involvement with the American higher education system began in 1985. Anthony Giddens had heard about my book on Mead and took a special initiative to have it translated into English. I am eternally grateful to him for doing that. On that basis, even before the book came out, I was invited by the University of Chicago to

teach there as a visiting professor in the spring of 1985. I was still quite young at that time. I prepared myself to teach a class on Mead there, but they changed their mind and asked me to teach a class on contemporary European social theory instead. I had never taught a class on European social theory before. So, I prepared myself and decided not to teach those types of theories that are well-known in United States; people in Chicago or students in Chicago do not need me for that. Perhaps, they need me to better understand Habermas, Luhmann, Alain Touraine, and Pierre Bourdieu, Cornelius Castoriadis and so on. That class was a real success and the Chair of the Sociology department even approached me at the end of the quarter and asked whether I would be interested in a position there. I would have been interested but my wife made it very clear that she did not want to move there. So, I said no but that was the beginning of a very serious relationship between me and the American higher education system.

In the following year in 1986, I received another invitation for a visiting professorship from the University of Toronto and then it became much more intense from the early 1990s on. Chicago would have offered me a rather junior position, but in the early 1990s, I got an offer for a senior position at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I said no, but I went there twice as a visiting professor after that. Then, things changed at my side; from 1990 onwards, I was professor at the Free University in Berlin. I was very happy about that. I loved Berlin and that was the time after German reunification; it was politically and intellectually a very stimulating time. That was a great time, but, from 1996, there were enormous cuts in the budget of the Free University. So, the number of professors was constantly reduced but the number of students was not reduced. I had the feeling that with the demands for teaching, examinations and meetings I will never be able to do serious scholarly work and writing and I was really frustrated.

In that situation, people in the United States had heard about my teaching and publications and on that basis, I was approached by the University of California at Berkeley. I had a serious conversation with my wife and told her that you know that I am getting so

frustrated here and they are offering me twice the salary I get here for much less work. I said I took it very seriously. However, something funny happened. In the leading American Universities, when they hire somebody in a tenured position, they ask many people to write letters of recommendation. So, they approached all sorts of colleagues in America to write about me and one of them was Professor Donald Levine at the University of Chicago who had taken the initiative to invite me to Chicago in the eighties. He told me ten years later that he was sitting down to write a very positive letter of recommendation for me, but thought about it. He asked me, 'are you really serious this time about Berkeley?' If so, Chicago could also make you an offer. I said, 'yes, I am very serious.' Then two other positive things happened namely, in Chicago, the offer did not just come from the sociology department but also from the inter-disciplinary Committee on Social Thought. It has an enormous reputation. At a certain point I knew I could go either to Berkeley or to Chicago. But the Chicago people said since Chicago is a private university we are totally flexible in the sense of if you want to come for half a year, quarter of a year or full year. Everything is possible, but Berkeley made it clear that they want me full-time or not. So, the flexibility and the Committee on Social Thought made me decide in favour of Chicago. This happened in 1998. At that time, I had an invitation from the Swedish Institute of Advanced Study where I spent one year without any teaching obligations. So, I started in Chicago in the year 2000, but before that, in the 1990s, I was visiting professor in Madison and at Duke University, and also as Theodor Heuss professor at the New School for Social Research in New York.

SS: You have taught in North America and also in Europe. What kind of differences and similarities do you find between these two systems of higher education?

HJ: Europe has so many different systems; let's reduce it to Germany. The main difference between the German higher education system and the US higher education system is the stratification of the US higher

education system. Until a few years ago, at least on paper, all German universities were considered equal. Of course, one department has a better reputation than another department but you cannot say in Germany that this university is excellent in all disciplines, whereas another university is weak in all the disciplines. That is not the case and that has to do with the financing of the universities and all that. Whereas the US has this totally stratified system, so that every generalisation from one's experience with one of these leading universities is wrong because America has some of the best universities in the world today but many American universities are also much worse than some German universities. You just have an enormous spectrum. I have the privilege that I have only been to the very good universities. Chicago is one of the best in humanities and social sciences; Madison is a very good state university and particularly has a very strong sociology department. So, the main difference between the two systems is that in the US you concentrate the best students and the best scholars in a few institutions and that is not the case in Germany. I would say that Germany has students who can easily compete with these best students in America and Germany has professors who can compete with these professors in America; they are just not in one institution together but distributed across universities.

SS: What do you then have to say about the university rankings? Recently, we saw that the German Sociological Association boycotted the higher education rankings in sociology. Do you think that these rankings are unfair to some of the countries in the developing world?

HJ: That was not the motive of the German Sociological Association, but I think it is absolutely justified that the Sociological Association examines critically how ranking lists are being produced. What are the indicators? How valid are these indicators? These are typical sociological questions. Don't just trust people who say here is a ranking list; ask who made it! How did you make it? What did you take into consideration? When I was still in Berlin in the 1990s, the university administration began to use, that had not been

done before, quantitative indicators for the performance of professors. For example, publication records; I would say yes because that is an important thing. But how exactly do you measure the quality of an individual's publication record? I had found out, along with others, that the bureaucrats took every publication as just one point whether you write a one-page review or you write a six-hundred-page book. That's the bureaucratic logic. They are not interested in whether what they are measuring is somehow reality; he just needs some quantitative indicators to distribute some funds. That is a crucial thing.

Today, I think there are all sorts of problems connected to measurement. For example, from the natural sciences comes a tendency that the most important publication is a journal publication, in a refereed, highly respected journal. But in the humanities at least and this includes parts of the discipline of sociology, books are considered more important than journal articles. So, it is very difficult to find indicators that are valid for different disciplines and it does not make sense to employ the same indicators for all the disciplines. There is also a bias in favour of the English language.

SS: Most of the teaching and research in Germany employ the German language. Do you think this puts the German students in an unfair position to compete globally?

HJ: I personally think that German students should be able to read English, to express themselves in English and to spend time outside Germany, but I do not think all teaching in Germany should be done in English or that everything that is done in German should be published in English. German is not a small language and very often it is very ridiculous to see that, for example, Americans who have specialised on German thinkers, from Kant to Max Weber and Heidegger, Hegel and Marx and so on are not able to read those authors in the original. It would be more absurd so to speak if Germans are now expected to publish on German thinkers exclusively in another language. In my case, I am not a narrow-minded German nationalist when I say that but I would defend the role

of the German language as a scholarly language.

SS: I also have another question related to the academic training that graduate students receive here in Germany. If we look at the Ph.D. training in the United States, it is around five years or sometimes more than that. But in Germany, Ph.D. training is around three years; this, I personally feel, does not give much scope for students to think.

HJ: That is not totally correct. First, three years is only on paper; it's a rule for the funding agencies, but if you look into the empirical data, practically no German doctoral student finishes her/his thesis within three years. In sociology, the average is a little more than four years. Secondly, in our very first exchange I said that you cannot really apply these notions of undergraduate and graduate to the German system. The number of years that you count in the American system is from a different point. In a certain sense, in the German system, the years during which the doctoral students are expected to take courses are the last years before they take their Masters' degree or their Diploma.

The main difference though is in America the expectation is that when you do a Ph.D. that you are interested in making an academic career and that is not the case in Germany. In Germany, you may do a Ph.D. but you may do something completely different afterwards. Another difference is of course that in the US, people work several years after doing their Ph.D., mostly on revising their dissertation and turning it into a book and that I find a good thing. Whereas in Germany doctoral students are expected to publish; they are not allowed to call themselves Dr. before having published their thesis, which means they often publish their thesis as it is.

SS: Now, I would like to ask you about your work on religion, secularisation and modernity. Could you please say something about your work on secularisation and modernisation?

HJ: Let me go back to the 1990s where we left earlier. As I said, *The Creativity of Action* book came out in

1992. Then comes a book that I think, at least for my personal intellectual development, is very important and that is the point of departure for the work on religion. That book is called *The Genesis of Values* (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), first published in German in 1997. There is a connection between *The Creativity of Action* book and *The Genesis of Values* book. It would take a long time to talk about that connection but in *The Genesis of Values* I asked the question why do we sometimes have this feeling that something is self-evidently good or evil. Which experiences lead to this impression that I do not need reasons, it is just clear to me.

This may sound like a strange question but the answer to this is what I call the experiences of self-transcendence. I interpret Durkheim's ideas about collective effervescence and so on in light of what I call a phenomenology of experiences of self-transcendence. That Durkheim has a very one-sided way of understanding self-transcendence; that is collective ecstasy or effervescence. So, my basic idea is, under certain conditions people experience that they are somehow deeply attracted or captivated or seized by something that draws them beyond the boundaries of their self and when that experience is over they have to reintegrate that experience into the interpretive frameworks of their everyday life. They do that by attributing certain qualities to the situation in which they had this experience and the quality they attribute is the quality of sacredness. It is an element of creativity, but a passive dimension that I am attracted by something that transforms my 'self' and I interpret what transformed my 'self' as the quality that is external to me. That is not a quality which can be described in the language of everyday life, but is different from everyday life. Max Weber's calls this 'ausseralltaglich' - 'extra-ordinary' is a very weak English translation of the German term. This is the basic idea in *The Genesis of Values* book. At the time, I thought this book is an interesting addition to *The Creativity of Action* book in the sense of drawing some ethical conclusions from it. But it has proved to be something totally different for me in the following three ways.

First, the idea I had, which, you could say, can al-

ready be found in some way in Durkheim and in William James, is not just true for religion but also for emerging commitments to secular values as well. When a person becomes a nationalist or Marxist or a liberal there may be similar crucial constitutive experiences behind that. So, I had to develop something out of this basic idea that shows the fruitfulness with regard to values and not just religious values. That is why I chose this value complex of human rights and the value of universal human dignity. So, I wanted to apply this basic idea to non-religious or not completely religious value complex.

Second, I had to specify more clearly what then are religious convictions and experiences? On this, I have written a small book titled, *Do We Need Religion?* There is also another book which is published in German as *Glaube Als Option* (Faith as an Option) and this will be out in English next year with Stanford University Press.

Third, after writing *The Genesis of Values*, I realised that I had almost exclusively focussed on what I call positive or enthusiastic value constitutive experiences. But there are also the experiences of violence and traumatisations that are, although not enthusiastic, similarly life transforming. As you might know, I have strong interests in issues of violence and war and I have written two books on it: *War and Modernity* (Polity Press, 2003) and *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present* (with Wolfgang Knoebl, Princeton University Press, 2013).

SS: You spoke about religion and violence. In recent times, we see religion has been politicised by different groups and as a result of such politicisation and radicalisation, religious violence has been occurring in different parts of the world. What do you think would be an appropriate approach to understand religious violence? I am asking this particularly with regard to your work on communitarianism.

HJ: Let me start with your remark on communitarianism. I think the term has been used in different ways by different people. In the French discussion, when you say *communautarisme* that necessarily means something which is not Universalist, but

restricted to specific communities. That is not how the American communitarians like Selznick and Etzioni used the term. Their aim was not anti-universalism; their critique was directed at a certain understandings of individuality and individualism. So, I do not see a contradiction between being close to the American communitarians and my emphasis on human rights and moral universalism.

With regard to religious violence, I have a whole chapter on that question in *Faith as an Option*. I agree with your point on politicisation of religious difference. Wherever religious differences are politicised, this is dangerous; but the main motif for this politicisation of religious differences is not religion. People can live peacefully together with very different religious convictions if no material advantages are connected to belonging to one or the other religious communities. But as soon as the members of one religious community assume that they are disadvantaged in terms of material wealth or political power or career opportunities, you have a dangerous mixture. I think that has always been the case and that is not a new development. Look at Northern Ireland; there was a clear disadvantage for the Catholics for centuries and they had reasons to complain. Similarly, I find an important case in the Middle East where people today tend to treat Israeli and Palestinian conflict as if it were a religious conflict. This is not a religious conflict; the early Zionists were very often very secular. The Palestinian resistance for a long time did not define itself in terms of religion, but in terms of Arab nationalism, and some of them in terms of Marxism and anti-imperialism. It is a historical development that they began to define themselves in terms of Muslim resistance and that Israel, particularly the settler movement, uses religion for the justification of territorial expansion. Then, of course, it looks like a religious conflict, but the dynamics that led to the escalation of the conflict are not really religious.

SS: I have a related question with regard to communitarianism. We see that there has been a lot of emphasis given by the United States on the spread of democracy to non-democratic world and democracy is usually understood in relation to individualism.

Do you think that there is some sense of incompatibility between communitarianism and democracy? I am asking this question particularly in the context of East Asian countries. Some scholars have argued that democracy is fragile in these countries because of their emphasis on community rather than individual or individual rights and so on.

HJ: I do not see any fundamental incompatibility. It is a question of what we really mean by communitarianism. The spread of democracy is a risky term. On the one hand, I, being German, think that countries with a rather weak democratic tradition can become democratic and it is good that if they get some support on that. But it must be a support for the self-discovery of something; otherwise, it is always experienced as foreign oppression. For example, in Germany you could say that there is a successful spread of democracy. West Germany above all is a very particular story because this whole process began after a defeat in war that was also a moral catastrophe and also it happened during economic miracle. We know from sociological theory that economic progress very often increases loyalty to a political regime, whatever the regime it is. Then there was a new generation that developed, in the Weberian sense, a 'value rational' commitment to democracy in Germany. The other cases in the world, I would say, spreading democracy in Iraq for example, was more propagandistic hoax than the real driving motive.

With regard to East Asia, let me rephrase your question instead of speaking about democracy and human rights. I personally think the only point people could have with regard to communitarianism in East Asia is that highly individualistic understanding of human rights is not the only possible understanding of human rights. In the Western tradition, we have two competing versions of the understanding on human rights. One is highly individualistic and the other is dignitarian or 'personalist' where the dignity of every human person is in the centre and that we want to live under conditions in which every human being is respected as a human person. As Durkheim had said, a society consists of persons and there is no contradiction between the development of persons

and a social structure or a political order that guarantees every individual to develop into mutually respected persons. In the Chinese intellectual tradition, I see no major contradiction. My recent book with Robert Bellah on Axial Age (*The Axial Age and its Consequences*, Harvard University Press, 2012) is an attempt to look for the oldest sources of moral universalism, not only in the Western tradition but also in the Chinese and the Indian traditions.

SS: You have done significant work on secularisation and modernisation. Could you please say something about this?

HJ: The book *Faith as an Option* starts with two criticisms. I say that in the debates about religion and politics in the 19th and the 20th centuries there were two assumptions that were both wrong. One was the favourite assumption of the secularists and the other was the favourite assumptions of the believers. I say that they both are wrong. The favourite assumption of secularists was that religion is dying out or that modernisation leads to secularisation. They liked this assumption because it meant that they did not simply have to say I am not a believer but in being not a believer I am somehow historically more advanced than you as a believer are. When we want to discuss this, we can do this on two different levels.

One is on a more conceptual level when we ask, what exactly do the secularisation theorists mean when they talk about religious faith or when they refer to modernisation? I try to show that the secularists assume that religious faith is an immature state of cognitive knowledge, and scientific progress leads to a weakening of that because we get more certain knowledge. Or they assume, as Marxists do, that religious faith is the expression of some suffering – of a need that cannot be fulfilled under the given economic circumstances. They assume that the richer societies become or the more equal they become the less religious they will be. There are other versions as well. This is one way to discuss that and to show why from my perspective all the implicit assumptions about religious faith in the writings of secularisation theorists are wrong.

The other way is a more empirical way. First, let's look at the religious landscape of Europe. Europe has a very heterogeneous religious landscape and the question is, can we explain the intra-European differences with regard to religion by differing degrees of modernisation, and it is very easy to demonstrate that we cannot. Second, let's bring the US into the picture. Nobody denies that the United States is a very religiously vital country; nobody denies that it is a very highly modern country. Why is it an exception from the rule or is there no such rule? Third, the consequences of the European expansion in the 19th century above all on religion in the non-European world; and fourth, a realistic picture of religions in Europe in the pre-industrial times of Europe.

On these bases, I feel confirmed that the assumption that there is a law-like connection between modernisation and secularisation is wrong. But religious believers have always tended to make another assumption, which is also wrong, namely that human beings cannot really live without religious faith. If they live without religious faith, they will be unhappy or amoral and there cannot be any social integration or social peace. Again let's look at what is the exact understanding of morality is and let's look at certain empirical cases because now there are European societies like Sweden, England, Estonia and East Germany that are extremely secularised. Are they extremely amoral? Sweden is one of the most moral countries in Europe but also one of the most secularised. I have written a chapter on what exactly is the connection then and this is much more complicated than these assumptions assume.

This is my starting point in *Faith as an Option*. So, I say what we need, on the explanatory level, is a better theory of secularisation and here I think the most important inspiration comes from the British sociologist David Martin who published in the 1970s a book that has been called the most gloriously mis-titled book in the sociology of religion because it is called *A General Theory of Secularisation*. Actually, it is not a general theory of secularisation, but it is a demonstration that there cannot be a general theory of secularisation. The crucial factor is the political role of religion in different states. For example, I write in

the third chapter of *Faith as an Option* about the attitude of churches and other religious communities with regard to the so-called national question, the social question, the democratic question and the question of individualism and human rights and the questions of religious plurality. I think one can show in French history, in Prussian history or European histories that there were crucial events; for example, the 1848 revolution in Prussia. The Prussian revolutionaries expected the Protestant church to support them. But the church did not; it supported the dynasty. So, they were totally disappointed and slowly moved away. That is why the early Prussian liberals or the Prussian labour movement was anti-Protestant. In certain Catholic areas the history was totally different. So, we have different religious patterns in different parts of Germany. In Bavaria, for example, where I come from, the Catholic Church was, like in Poland, seen as the defender of the national Bavarian identity against the Prussians. So, there was an enormous sense of loyalty; every true Bavarian so to speak is a true Catholic. It is a fusion of religious and regional or national identity. That in brief and somewhat superficial way is my alternative; that I think it is much more successful in explaining actual patterns of secularisation than the conventional secularisation theory.

SS: There has been a lot of debate on how the secular state in Europe is facing challenges because of migration. Recently, a year ago, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, also declared that multiculturalism in Germany has been a failure. What do you have to say about this?

HJ: We have to first distinguish different meanings of the term secularisation. There are several meanings of secularisation, but I use it in the sense of the decline of religion. That is different from the religious neutrality of the state. These are two different things. The United States is a religiously neutral state and in that sense the US is secularised. But in terms of religious vitality it is not secularised. We are talking about two different things here. When I talk about religious decline in Germany, this has nothing to do with how religiously neutral the state is. You are right about

Germany. Above all, more than in other European countries, a large part of the migration to Germany has been, in the last decades, from the Muslim countries. That leads to a different situation. In Britain, for example, many of the migrants come from the Caribbean or Africa and many of them are Christians. But in Germany, there is a specific situation with a relatively large Muslim minority. I would not take seriously the quotation that you just mentioned; it is a polemical way to speak as if for a long time the social democrats and the Greens had assumed that it is easy and there will be no problems with migration. That's how Angela Merkel used *Multikulti*, but I can affirm that this has never been the attitude of the Social Democratic Party and with regard to the Green Party, it was very marginal.

SS: You have been trained as sociologist and now you are working in a school of history. So, what do you have to say about inter-disciplinary research and what do you think is the role of history in sociology?

HJ: I have been part of interdisciplinary institutes since 1990. When I became a professor at the Free University of Berlin, my main affiliation was with the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies and not with the sociology department. The John F. Kennedy Institute is a very highly respected institute for inter-disciplinary research on North America. It includes Economists, Political Scientists, Historians, Literary Scholars and also Linguists. In Chicago, I am part of the Inter-disciplinary Committee on Social Thought. I was the Director of the inter-disciplinary Max Weber Centre for many years and now I am in a School of History that not only invites historians but also historically-oriented social scientists.

Let me move to the other part of the question that you are asking, namely about Sociology and History. That is very important for me. I personally think the founding generation of Sociology, the great figures like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim had a background, you could say, in universal history; not just modern history but the whole of human history; it was not just Western history but global history. In the founding generation, the idea really was Sociology will

be based on universal history, on global history in all epochs from the totemism of the Australian aborigines, which we cannot investigate today but can make some assumptions, to the present. I personally think that that was right. But, Sociology, in the course of its development, became more and more de-historicised. That is of course not true for all, but for many people. Sociology is the discipline that studies the present and not history.

An individual researcher should study the present; I have nothing against that, but with regard to our theories that is a problem because most sociologists today look for theories that they can apply to their material in the present and these are often theories that themselves are not based on a study of history. For example, an approach like rational choice is not based on history but on an ahistorical understanding of Economics. Other approaches are based on some philosophical assumptions but not based on historical knowledge and that I find totally dangerous because the whole way of theory construction then is general theory and application to specific material and not as in Weber the generalisation of historical cases into a rich form of understanding that is sensitive to the historical variability of these processes. I would say that there are counter-tendencies in contemporary sociology. I personally think Michael Mann's multi volume work on *Sources of Social Power* and Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* are the greatest works in contemporary sociology. These works show what sociologists can do and what their relative superiority over historians can be so to speak. They give a big picture, the generalisation from individual cases but based on historical investigation. So, I am extremely happy to be a sociologist in inter-disciplinary contexts where I can learn a lot from historians, philosophers, and theologians.

SS: Please tell us something about your current work. What are the questions or issues that you are trying to address in your current work?

HJ: The last book was *Faith as an Option*. This year I am writing three small booklets. One is based on the volume with Robert Bellah on *Axial Age*. In this vol-

ume, I have a chapter called 'The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse', which deals mostly with a relatively forgotten 19th century philosopher of history, and with Max Weber and Karl Jaspers. I am now expanding that by including many other figures leading up to the present and that ends with Robert Bellah. This will be published in Basel, Switzerland.

I was also recently awarded the Hans Kilian Prize and they want to publish a small booklet. So, I am writing something on a German novelist (Alfred Döblin) who was one of the most successful novelists in the 1920s but left Germany because he was Jewish. I have written something on his last novel published in the 1950s. I interpret this novel as a crucial text on traumatised and value commitment – how the experience of violence leads to the transformation of life.

The third text will be published in English by Brill in the Netherlands. That is a small continuation of the book, *The Sacredness of the Person*. The empirical cases I studied closely in this book were: the abolition of torture in Europe in the 18th century and the abolition of slavery in the United States in the 19th century. What I am now writing about is a short text about what exactly happened to torture in European colonies after the abolition of torture in Europe. Torture was not abolished in European colonies; it was widely practiced during decolonisation, for example, by the French in Algeria and by the British in Kenya. And, I realised that the abolition of slavery in the United States is often used in a self-congratulatory way in Western tradition. I write about the fact that the West that abolished slavery first developed slavery into a huge production system in the Atlantic world. So you cannot simply say that the Christian tradition leads to the abolition of slavery when the Christian tradition did not resist the expansion of the system.

So, these are the three works during this year. For the next year, I have written the first draft of a book. Although I do not know how I will call it, but let's say at the moment, 'My Theory of Sacralisation'. So, what is originally based on my ideas about the experiences of self-transcendence and sacredness in *The Genesis of Values* and then developed in the book on human rights, I try to present now a very specific theory of the inter-play between the dynamics of such

sacralisation processes and the dynamics of the processes of the formation of power. This is in a certain sense close to Max Weber but in another sense intended to be an alternative to what Max Weber says about disenchantment, rationalisation and so on. That is a rather ambitious project and I do not know when I will be able to finish.

SS: Thank you so much!

Note: This interview was conducted on 23 July 2013 at the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies (FRIAS), Freiburg, Germany. At that time, Sarbeswar Sahoo was a Humboldt Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Max-Weber-Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt, Germany.

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Sarbeswar Sahoo and Hans Joas