

A. N. Whitehead and Social Theory: Tracing a Culture of Thought and the Processual Re-orientation of Sociology

Published: July 13, 2026 | Index ID: #208

The intellectual legacy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) has undergone a significant renaissance in the 21st century. While historically categorized primarily as a mathematician and logician—notably for his collaboration with Bertrand Russell on the *Principia Mathematica*—his later metaphysical period offers a profound and radical challenge to the foundations of modern social theory. As explored in Michael Halewood's seminal work, **A.N. Whitehead and Social Theory: Tracing a Culture of Thought**, Whitehead's philosophy of process provides a robust alternative to the static ontologies and dualisms that have long characterized sociological inquiry.

The Crisis of Modernity and the Bifurcation of Nature

At the heart of Whitehead's critique of modern thought is what he famously termed the **"Bifurcation of Nature."** This concept refers to the philosophical tendency to split the world into two distinct realms: the objective world of physical matter (primary qualities like mass and extension) and the subjective world of human perception (secondary qualities like color, sound, and value). This division, according to Whitehead, has led to a "culture of thought" that isolates the observer from the observed, and the social from the natural.

For social theory, this bifurcation has historically resulted in a struggle to reconcile the material world with the social world. Sociologists have often oscillated between **materialism** (where social facts are reduced to physical or economic drivers) and **social constructivism** (where the physical world is treated as a mere backdrop for human meaning). Whitehead argues that this split is a "false abstraction." His process philosophy seeks to reunite these realms by positing that the fundamental units of reality are not static substances, but **"actual entities"** or **"occasions of experience"** that are inherently relational and processual.

The Lure of Whitehead in Contemporary Sociology

Why is Whitehead relevant now? Unlike the more deconstructive or nihilistic aspects of postmodernism, Whitehead offers a **constructive realism**. He does not seek to destroy the concepts of truth, nature, or the social, but rather to re-ground them in a way that accounts for change, creativity, and the interconnectedness of all things. This makes his work particularly appealing for addressing contemporary challenges such as the climate crisis, the digital revolution, and the fluid nature of identity, where traditional binary categories (human/nature, digital/physical, self/other) are increasingly blurred.

Core Concepts: The Theoretical Framework of Process Philosophy

To apply Whitehead to social theory, one must first master his specific technical vocabulary. Whitehead redefined metaphysics to focus on **becoming** rather than **being**. Below are the core mechanisms of his system:

- **Actual Entities (Occasions):** The final real things of which the world is made. They are not enduring objects like rocks or people, but momentary events that happen.
- **Prehension:** The mechanism by which an actual entity "grasps" or incorporates aspects of other entities into its own being. This is a move away from the idea of a subject perceiving an object; instead, it is an entity being constituted by its relations.
- **Concrescence:** The process by which many diverse elements (prehensions) come together to form a new,

single actual entity. It is the act of "growing together."

- The Creative Advance: The perpetual movement of the universe into novelty. Each new moment builds on the past but adds something unique.
- Societies: In Whiteheadian terms, what we usually call "objects" or "institutions" (a chair, a person, a corporation) are actually societies—groupings of actual entities that share a common form and sustain themselves through time.

A Matrix of Philosophical Re-orientation

The following table illustrates how Whiteheadian process theory shifts the focus from traditional sociological paradigms toward a process-oriented approach.

Feature	Traditional Sociological Paradigm	Whiteheadian Process Theory
Basic Unit	Individuals, Institutions, Structures	Actual Entities, Occasions, Societies
Ontology	Substance-based (Static things)	Event-based (Dynamic processes)
Nature/Social Relation	Bifurcated (Separate domains)	Entangled (The social is part of nature)
Subjectivity	Exclusive to human consciousness	A property of all actual entities
Change	An exception to the rule of stability	The fundamental state of existence
Language	Signification (Representing the world)	Symbolism (Acting within the world)

Technical Analysis: Re-orienting Key Social Topics

Halewood and other Whiteheadian scholars use this framework to re-examine specific pillars of social theory. The goal is not merely to describe the world differently, but to provide a more accurate account of how social phenomena actually function.

1. The Relation of Language and the Body

In traditional sociology, language is often treated as a symbolic system that represents an external reality. For Whitehead, language is a physical event. He distinguishes between "**Presentational Immediacy**" (the clear, conscious perception of the world) and "**Causal Efficacy**" (the vague but powerful sense of being influenced by the past and the physical environment). Language operates at the intersection of these. It is not just about meaning; it is about the physical transmission of influence from one body to another. This perspective allows for a social theory that takes the **physicality** of communication seriously, moving beyond the "linguistic turn" to a "materialist-semiotic" approach.

2. Sexual Difference and the Concept of Nature

Whitehead's rejection of the bifurcation of nature has profound implications for feminist theory and gender studies. If nature is not a fixed, inert, or "given" essence, then the biological body cannot be seen as a passive container for social gender. Instead, the body itself is a process of **becoming**. Whitehead provides a way to talk about the reality of sexual difference without falling into **essentialism** (the idea that gender is biologically determined) or **radical social constructionism** (the idea that gender is purely a social fiction). In a Whiteheadian view, sexual difference is a real, physical, and social process that is continually being negotiated and enacted.

3. Capitalism as Process

One of the most innovative applications of Whitehead is the analysis of **Capitalism**. Instead of viewing capitalism as a fixed "system" or a set of rigid structures, it can be understood as a **process of capture**. Capitalism seeks toprehend diverse social and natural processes and channel their creativity into the production of value. By framing capitalism as a process, theorists can better account for its incredible adaptability and its ability to incorporate even its own critiques into its logic. This requires a shift from studying "capitalist structures" to studying "capitalist flows" and the specific mechanisms of **valuation** that drive the creative advance in a market context.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Processual Research

For researchers and practitioners, adopting a Whiteheadian approach requires a shift in methodology. This is not about applying a template, but about developing a sensitivity to **concrecence** and **novelty**. The following steps outline a process-oriented research workflow:

Step 1: Identify the Nexus

Rather than starting with an abstract category (e.g., "The State"), identify the specific **nexus** of events you are studying. What are the actual occasions where this social phenomenon is enacted? This might be a meeting, a transaction, or a digital interaction.

Step 2: Map the Prehensions

Analyze what these occasions are "grasping." What influences from the past (causal efficacy) are being brought into the present? This includes physical environment, historical documents, emotional states, and technological tools. **Strongly consider non-human actors** as being prehended by the social occasion.

Step 3: Analyze the Mode of Symbolism

How is the experience being translated into symbols? In Whiteheadian theory, **Symbolic Reference** is the bridge between the vague physical world and the clear world of thought. Look for where these two modes mismatch—this is often where social tension or change occurs.

Step 4: Locate the Creative Advance

Where is the novelty? In every social process, there is a moment of decision (**Decision**, in Whitehead's technical sense, means "cutting off" other possibilities). Identify where the process deviates from the established "society" or habit. This is the site of potential social transformation.

Comparison of Research Methodologies

The following table compares traditional empirical methods with Whiteheadian process-oriented inquiry.

Metric	Traditional Quantitative/Qualitative	Whiteheadian Processual Analysis
Data Point	Static facts or survey responses	Traces of events and transitions
Role of the Researcher	Objective observer or subjective interpreter	An actual entity participating in the prehension
Temporal Focus	Present state or historical cause/effect	The "becoming" of the present from the past
Primary Question	"What is this?"	"How is this becoming?"
Outcome	Generalizable laws or thick descriptions	Mapping of relational intensities and novelty

Case Study: Analyzing Urban Gentrification through Process Philosophy

To illustrate the utility of this approach, consider the phenomenon of **urban gentrification**. A traditional sociological study might focus on demographic shifts, property values, and the displacement of residents. While these are important, a Whiteheadian analysis goes deeper into the **Culture of Thought** and the **Bifurcation of Nature** inherent in the process.

The Problem: Abstracting the Neighborhood

Gentrification often begins with the **abstraction** of a neighborhood. Real estate developersprehend the neighborhood not as a living nexus of social relations, but as a set of "primary qualities": square footage, geographic coordinates, and potential ROI. This is a classic bifurcation—the lived experience (secondary qualities) is stripped away to reveal a "market reality."

The Process: Re-orienting the Social

A Whiteheadian researcher would track how the "society" of the neighborhood—a specific grouping of habits, memories, and physical structures—is being re-concreted into a new form. This isn't just about people moving out and new people moving in; it's about the **actual entities** (the daily interactions) changing their prehensions. The local bodega is prehended differently by the long-term resident (a source of community and history) than by the new resident (a source of "authentic" aesthetic experience). The conflict of gentrification is thus a conflict of **valuation** and **prehension**.

The Solution: Processual Intervention

By understanding gentrification as a process of abstraction, policy-makers can intervene by re-introducing the **Causal Efficacy** of the neighborhood's history into the planning process. This might involve legal structures that force the prehension of community value, ensuring that the "creative advance" of the city does not discard the "value of existence" inherent in the existing social nexus.

Societies, Subjectivity, and the Value of Existence

One of the most profound contributions Michael Halewood highlights is Whitehead's redefinition of **subjectivity**. In the modern culture of thought, subjectivity is often seen as a "private" interior world. Whitehead explodes this, suggesting that **subjectivity is the process of self-formation** that occurs in every actual entity. This means that social theory can finally move past the "individual vs. society" debate. The "individual" is a society of occasions, and

the "social" is a larger society of those occasions.

Furthermore, Whitehead introduces the concept of **Value** as an ontological category. To exist is to have value for yourself and for others. This "thorough-going realism" provides a moral and ethical ground for social theory. If everything that exists is an occasion of experience that prehends the world, then the "social" is not just a human construct, but a cosmic fact. The **Value of Existence** becomes a metric for evaluating social systems: Does a particular social arrangement (like a specific form of capitalism) enhance the creative intensity of its members, or does it reduce them to mere abstractions?

The Lure of the Future: Moving Beyond Postmodernism

As social theory moves deeper into the 21st century, the limitations of postmodernism—its tendency towards irony, fragmentation, and the denial of reality—become more apparent. Whitehead offers a way forward. By tracing a culture of thought that rejects the bifurcation of nature, social theory can regain its footing as a discipline that speaks truthfully about a real, albeit changing, world. We are invited to see the social world not as a collection of fixed identities or oppressive structures, but as a **creative advance** that we are all, at every moment, participating in. The "lure of Whitehead" is the promise of a social theory that is as dynamic, complex, and vital as the life it seeks to understand.

The task for future sociologists is to continue this re-orientation. Whether analyzing the impact of AI on human subjectivity, the processual nature of global pandemics, or the shifting tides of political movements, Whitehead's **Philosophy of Process** provides the technical tools and the metaphysical depth required for a truly modern social science. The transition from a sociology of **being** to a sociology of **becoming** is not just an academic exercise; it is a necessary step in addressing the pressing realities of our interconnected world.

Tags: #A.N.Whitehead #Michael Halewood #Social Theory #Process Philosophy #Bifurcation of Nature #Metaphysics #Sociology

