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Preface

This is primarily a book for audiences. It is a primer for people who wish to improve the quality of their engagement with news and current affairs. Much like books that are bought with a view to learning a foreign language, I can't guarantee that you will get through the book, or even the first chapter, although I've tried my best to write it in such a way that this will happen. I've no doubt that it will be demanding at times, and this can't be helped; it's in the nature of the beast. I can, however, promise that if you do get through the book, having read it attentively, rising to whatever challenges it poses without losing patience, then you will get a great deal more from news and current affairs accounts than you previously have. You will be better equipped to engage in considered, reasonable, judicious debate about the social and political issues of the day than you previously were.

The book aims to realize this promise by bringing the academic specialism of social theory into a sustained conversation with the ways in which educated, thoughtful, citizens view and read news and current affairs. My motivation as I started writing the book lay in the determination to test out a belief that had for too long remained an intuition. This intuitive belief was that social theory, with its sustained, systematic quest to think deeply about the nature of society and the many different ways in which it ticks along, should be able to make more inroads into public life than it seems to manage. It should have the potential to contribute much more to the quality of public understanding about social and political issues than it does.

Part of social theory's under-performance has to do with the chasm that exists between the language it uses and the language of the public sphere, including the various registers of news and current affairs. These are languages from different worlds, each with their own traditions and history. If social theorists are to carry their thoughts into the public sphere, to persuade citizens that they have something valuable to offer, then ways have to be found to mediate between the two linguistic worlds. The conditions have to be created in which exchange and dialogue is possible.

Social theorists have a particularly heightened awareness of the role that *ideas and preconceptions* play in what we make of social life. That is, a heightened awareness of their influence on the way we see the world, its people and

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its institutions, in the way social interaction takes place, and in the way we interpret what we encounter in the media. Because of this, theorists spend a lot of time thinking about these ideas and preconceptions, asking themselves how these 'ways of seeing' might affect the quality of our grasp of the social world. They recognize that poor preconceptions, inadequate ways of envisioning the social and political worlds, lead to poor understanding. Our preconceptions – our typified ways of seeing – naturally influence our judgements about how to identify such things as an abuse of power, unfitting behaviour, pitiless decision-making, or the immediate source of suffering. Such judgements are based on generalizing criteria, so that there is much about the skills required to, say, identify a cause of suffering, that can be transposed, carried, from one situation to another. It is important to remember this, that background ways of seeing are routinely transposed from one situation to another. We carry them with us across the borders of different situations and events, and then adapt them to the specific circumstances and details of the case at hand.

The quality of the background, transposable, ways of seeing we bring to these judgements needs to be good if we are to develop genuine understanding about important social events. There is also an onus on knowing how to combine these general preconceptions with the colour and details of varied, individual cases. There needs to be quality at both of these levels. This is as true with respect to how we approach news and current affairs accounts as it is in any other aspect of our social lives. If there is an absence of quality at either of these levels, then our ability to interpret particular news and current affairs accounts will be limited; our judgements about causes, morality and the best ways forward will lack authority.

Social theorists reflect constantly on both levels of quality relevant to understanding news and current affairs. They reflect, that is, on how to improve the general ways of seeing that we carry with us from one situation to another, and on how we should combine these with the details of particular events and processes. Because of the key role played by ways of seeing that are general and transposable, and hence separated at a certain point in the thinking process from the concrete details of real-world situations, social theorists are inevitably and necessarily drawn to concepts and abstractions. The specialist terms and language they develop tends to parallel this. The language reflects a way of thinking that gets used to extracting the general from the detailed particulars of everyday life, of pulling back from the fray. Discussions of distinct political and social issues in the public sphere, on the other hand, tend to be expressed in the language of the everyday worlds of the various institutions that make up societies. The overriding impulse here is not one of abstraction. Rather, it is that of getting down to immediate tasks, making it through the day successfully enough, interacting with flesh-and-

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blood people, following or breaking written or unwritten rules, striving to achieve broader goals, to solve problems, to help someone out or to give them their comeuppance. Here there is a natural tendency to the concrete, the situational, the empirical in the many small worlds that loom large for us at work, home and in other spheres of life. This is paralleled in significant part in the more overarching public sphere, in the world of social and political issues conveyed by the media in news and current affairs coverage.

The gulf between the two languages needs to be bridged somewhere in the middle. Social theorists can play their part by engaging more directly with the visual, oral and written languages used in the various genres of news and current affairs, working hard at bringing their concepts into contact with the stories that are told in these formats, thinking about forms of expression in which the two worlds can be spoken about in one breath. The citizen-audiences for news and current affairs, for their part, need to be building from the other shore, prepared to bring the familiar and the abstract together in their interpretations.

At present, there is very little dialogue, and the dialogue that does exist is severely impoverished. It is conducted primarily in the realm of numbers – too often cut off from careful reflection on concepts – or in the realm of abstract moral ideas. These are significant areas to be concerned with, but they are a huge distance away from being enough. They need to be combined with, integrated with, and framed by, much deeper ways of thinking about the *in-situ* processes of the social world itself. How should we think about the precise mechanisms at work in the social and political processes that we see on television news? What is an adequate way to link these mechanisms to their consequences? How should we combine a better understanding of such real-world causes and consequences with the abstract thought about morality produced in political and ethical philosophy? And, in the light of these reflections about causes and consequences, and about how action in the midst of such complexities should be judged in moral terms, how can we also find a responsible way to think about remedies, solutions, or of simply making a bad situation a little less so? Another way of couching the last point is to ask: How should we think about strategy and political will in particular circumstances, and about the role that values should play in formulating these?

The intellectual sophistication with which we approach literature and the arts in the public sphere, and which we have latterly begun to show to an understanding of the natural world with the rise of popular science, is missing from public engagement with social and political issues. Adoption of the approach I advocate in *Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory* could go some way to addressing this deficit. The strategy of the book focuses on improving the quality of the 'ways of seeing' audiences bring to news and current affairs. It begins by setting out just why it is essential for the

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dramatic surface events and spectacles of current affairs, of the kinds that overwhelmingly populate television news bulletins, to be thought about within their wider context. Events can only be understood once they are envisaged as positioned within this context, which should be thought of as a network of social and material relations in which the events have been produced. It isn't possible to understand how these events have come about, to understand what causal sequences are responsible for producing them, unless an effort is made to think about how they have emerged from a particular set of relations and circumstances that stretch beyond the immediate moments and visual spectacles of the events themselves. The immediate events have a history that is now in the past and, in this age of extended, complex societies, they will have been affected by processes that are also spatially distant. It is necessary to understand these 'absent' or 'invisible' conditions in order to understand why and how the events have come about as they have, and what alternatives are possible. This means we need to develop ways of thinking, ways of seeing, that incorporate these absent conditions if we are to have a better grasp of news and current affairs. Another way of talking about the same thing, of referring to the networks of relations in which events and the people involved in them are embedded, is to talk about the ways in which *social actors* – people and organizations – and their actions are embedded in *social structures*. The key objectives of the book can be summed up as follows. First, it wants to give audiences a firm sense of how to locate news and current affairs events within a context of social structures and processes within which the events make sense. And secondly, it provides the conceptual tools for audiences to be able to judge just how much or how little knowledge of this structural context, and what goes on within it, has been provided by a given current affairs account. In doing these things, it aspires to radically increase audience capacity for genuine understanding and analysis.

This emphasis can be thought of most fruitfully in tandem with the kind of message promoted by Alain de Botton in his recent book *The News: A User's Manual*. As I was completing my own book, I went to listen to de Botton give a lecture on *The News* to 2,500 people in the Concert Hall of Sydney Opera House. Inescapably, I wanted to quell the anxiety that we'd not both written the same book, but more realistically I was intrigued to see how two approaches to roughly the same subject matter, written at roughly the same time, would compare. The lecture was enviably insightful and engaging, and my conclusion was that while these were two very different books, each approach could enrich the other. For while de Botton's eloquent arguments were not directly concerned with social structure, or with the embedding of news events in contexts of relevant social networks, one of his central concerns is with how to get people to care sufficiently about news stories that they start to think seriously about them, and this is also of central importance for my own

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goals. De Botton writes of the need to expand the ways in which the news is told, venturing to broaden and develop the sensibilities of audiences. In search of these ends, he says, news stories should look to adopt some of the techniques of art and literature, including travel literature, whose neglect would be misguided. Journalists should seek out sensory, visual, empathetic ways of exciting our deeper interest in people and places, and their news organizations should encourage them to be unafraid of taking a distinctive perspective, of expressing a response with an individual voice and personality. Writing about world news, he declares that much less harm would be caused by such intrusions into neutrality than by those 'reporters who, by their implicit denial of ever having a response to anything foreign, fatally undermine our desire to add to our knowledge of the world'.¹

De Botton draws on George Eliot, the author of *Middlemarch*, that masterpiece of empathy with large lives lived in hidden, prosaic places, traversed and fettered by the large forces of history. He argues that writers such as Eliot have the ability to help us imagine what it feels like to be caught up in news events: to be a human being in the midst of war, famine and dictatorship, or to be at the receiving end of human rights' abuses, or to be caught in the net of poverty, exploitation or corruption, or to find oneself at the mercy of a socio-natural catastrophe of the many kinds that continue to escape our capacity for prediction. Art, in its widest sense, said Eliot, is capable of helping us by 'amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'. It stretches our imagination to the lives of others, extending our sympathies and our sensibilities: '... a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment'.²

This concern to awaken audiences to 'the planet's less obtrusive beauty and tragedy', to get audiences to pay close attention to at least some of the news, some of the time, about others we don't naturally have an interest in, is not something I address explicitly in this book. In this, my argument needs to be complemented by de Botton's writing. However, the concern is there implicitly, and quite centrally, in my argument's key insistence. For the central contention of the book is that it isn't possible to truly understand the experience and fate of individuals if one fails to grasp the network of relations in which those lives are enmeshed, which impose their demands, rewards and sanctions on those individuals, and which provide the substance of everything they care about.³ What is true for individuals is also true for the organizations and institutions in which they live their lives. To truly understand what is happening in news and current affairs events, to understand what has brought about these situations and predicaments, to be able to identify, who, if anyone, is responsible, and to responsibly suggest how things might change

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for the better, one needs the capacity to envisage the events as embedded in their relevant structural context. This capacity can provide imaginative empathy with added weight, with the ballast that grounds an individual within communities, social contexts and concrete networks of relations.⁴ Caring about the substance of news and current affairs, and about those caught up in its forces, can be brought about both by the expansion of sensibility aided by art and literature and by the depth of comprehension allowed by situating events within the social co-ordinates which have made them what they are. Social theory complements the literary and artistic imagination. It enables us to explore the causes of events in specific times and places; to think seriously about moral responsibility within complex networks of social relations; and to engage with issues of what can be done, feasibly and responsibly, from a position that has a considerable grasp of what it does and doesn't know.

The arguments of the book are informed by the writings of a distinguished array of social thinkers. I have introduced some of these writers directly within the main text. However, for the sake of fluency and readability, in the body of the text I focus more on explaining the theoretical ideas and concepts relevant to the argument rather than spending too much time discussing their provenance. This gives readers the option of following the argument itself without having its flow disrupted by too many scholarly interruptions. On the other hand, I've used endnotes, numbered in the text, to reference all the theorists whose ideas are referred to, and to comment on these ideas where appropriate. This means that the book can also be read, with the aid of the endnotes, as an introduction to the underlying history and landscape of social theory, and also as a guide to which aspects of the work of given theorists are applicable to which aspects of real-world situations. References in the endnotes are both to short, introductory material and to more complex writings for those wanting to venture deeper into particular issues. For the introductory material, I've drawn heavily on my edited collection, *Key Sociological Thinkers*, which is a series of accessible 5,000-word chapters on prominent theorists written by leading commentators on their work.⁵

As will become clear in the course of *Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory*, I approach the work of social theorists in an ecumenical spirit, wanting to draw from as many approaches as seem to offer insights into whatever problem is at hand. Any theorist, however, will have their own set of predilections, and will automatically gravitate towards some abstract concepts and approaches rather than others. In my case, these are around ideas of social structure, agency, time, space, power, culture, norms and ethics, and my leanings towards these can be partly explained by the fact that I've found these notions the most useful for the topics and questions I've grappled with, and attempted to shed some light on, during my own intellectual life. Such reasons will also have figured in other theorists' attraction to different

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concepts and ideas. As will also be seen in the course of the book, many seemingly disparate approaches are in fact compatible with each other, and my first instinct is always to look for ways of combining approaches so as to have the most powerful set of concepts to hand in seeking greater clarity about whatever part of the social world is beckoning.