



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TRENTO  
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# The Future of Sociology

## Understanding the Transformations of the Social

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DIPARTIMENTO DI SOCIOLOGIA E RICERCA SOCIALE

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### *Introduction<sup>1</sup>*

The history of sociology is not short of projections about the future of this discipline. Most of those are either proclamations of the wide impact that recent breakthroughs will soon have – most notably those brought about by the authors of these projections – or announcements of a ‘coming crisis’ [Alvin W. Gouldner] or even imminent demise of sociology. But a few exceptions stand out. Analyzing the rise of democracy at an early moment, Alexis de Tocqueville called for a new form of social knowledge – which he called ‘new political science’ – to understand this phenomenon that comprehensively altered the fabric of society. Three quarters of a century later, Max Weber suggested that ‘objectivity’ in the social sciences is possible in as far as there is a relatively stable social world and, importantly, some degree of a common interpretation of that world. Whenever ‘the light of the cultural problems moves on’, however, new concepts would need to be elaborated for that changing world. Typically, Weber refrained from explicitly locating his own space and time with regard to this distinction and did not suggest whether the light of cultural problems was moving fast at that moment and in which direction.

Both authors suggested that social knowledge relates in a significant way to the reality it refers to, and both contemplated – or in the first case: claimed to observe – the possibility of changes in that reality that would demand future changes in the forms of social knowledge necessary to understand that reality. Two features of these statements need underlining for the purposes of this essay. First, the future of social knowledge is here not seen as a simple progress of cognition, as evident evolutionary moves towards greater ‘scientificity’ of the social sciences, or as steps towards ‘closing the last knowledge gaps’ about the social world, as statements from the 1960s, in many respects the heyday of sociology, often proclaimed. Both Tocqueville and Weber were interested in the question of a direction of human history, but neither of them

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<sup>1</sup> This text was originally written in the volume *History and Development of Sociology* edited by Charles Crothers for UNESCO, EOLSS Publishers, Oxford, UK, in preparation.



expected this direction, if there turned out to be any, to be one of evident progress, neither of society nor of our knowledge about it. Second, for both of them the relation between knowledge and reality is an 'active' one. They did not think that social knowledge merely mirrors the structure of the social world nor that higher 'rational' insight will necessarily bring changes in the social world about. Or in other words, they did not adhere to either material or ideational determinism. Rather, they held that considerable efforts at interpretation were necessary both to understand a changing social world better and to detect and pursue the normatively more desirable possibilities inherent in those changes – or often rather: to avoid the less desirable possibilities.

This essay aims to address the question of the future of sociology in the twenty-first century very much in the spirit of the two quoted authors. Its purpose is to reflect on the changes of social reality that may or will demand future changes in the discipline of sociology as we know it in the light of the experiences with our modern world and the necessary efforts to understand – and possibly improve – it. Now one may object to this approach on numerous grounds, of which only two shall be singled out at the outset. First, one may hold that the mid-nineteenth century or even the early twentieth century are 'sociologically' too far away from our time to derive much inspirations from authors who addressed the challenges of their own historical moment. Second, more specifically, one may consider neither Tocqueville nor Weber as the most useful references for reflections about the state and future of sociology. After all, Tocqueville was writing at a time when the term 'sociology' was just being coined and was asking for a 'political science', thus placing himself in the French tradition of 'moral and political sciences' and avoiding the then fashionable talk about 'society'. Weber, in turn, is certainly considered one of the founders of the discipline of sociology and he participated in the creation of the German Society for Sociology. In contrast to Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto or later Talcott Parsons, however, the creation of a new and separate discipline of the social sciences was for him secondary to the need for a novel comprehensive study of the social world, to which he most often referred as 'cultural sciences'.

Taking Tocqueville and Weber as a starting-point for reflections about the future of sociology, thus, carries some specific implications. It emphasizes the need for a long-term perspective, taking the actual founding of ‘sociology’ as a chapter in a much longer history of analyses of the social world. Second, it suggests that an understanding of the specificity of sociology within the larger field of the study of the social world is itself an important part of assessing its future. If there is any future, that is to say. A thoroughly historicizing perspective that relates social reality and the knowledge about it in the above-mentioned way also includes the possibility that ‘sociology’ has been a way of grasping that reality within a historical period that has now ended.

*1. Constitutive lack and future potential: sociology, society, and the social*

Sociology is a relatively young discipline. Being young, it should be expected to look ahead towards a long and bright future. One cannot exclude, however, that it may still suffer from some of its birth defects, or using non-normative language: from some of the features that marked it at its origins. Those features can be singled out by relating sociology at its origins to the other disciplines of the social sciences. Most of those other disciplines were already rather well established at the time of sociology’s birth, which we will date here in the late nineteenth century, now known as the beginning of the classical period of sociology with its so-called founders Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, and Georg Simmel among others.

At that time, the political sciences, often known as state sciences, analyzed the state and public law, and in the more democratic settings also modes of government; the economic sciences studied markets and enterprises; and psychology investigated the human self and the person. These sciences of contemporary ‘modern’ societies were flanked by the historical sciences for the investigation of the past and by anthropology – itself rather at its disciplinary beginnings – for the analysis of non-Western societies, then

mostly referred to as ‘primitive’. In this scheme, sociology did not have a specific object of investigation. A more long-term view of the differentiation of forms of knowledge, however, focuses on problems for investigation rather than objects. In such a view, philosophy is endowed with the task of exploring our possibilities for arriving at certain knowledge. Political thought investigates the forms of living together – of living together well and peacefully in a normative perspective. And economic thought focuses on the satisfaction of material needs. Again, though, we find that sociology does not have a *problématique* of its own. Sociology, thus, seems to be constituted by a lack, or at least so it seems, in relation to ‘traditional’ disciplines and perspectives.

Critical observers of the attempts to outline the field of sociology at its beginnings did not fail to point this out, and there were numerous of those among the philosophers, historians, and state scientists of the time. However, aspiring sociologists did not remain speechless in the face of such criticism, and the answers they gave were basically of two kinds: They either argued, as most prominently Durkheim, that ‘society’ formed a *sui generis* reality that would indeed become the object of the new discipline, or they held that no other discipline truly focused its analysis on the relations between human beings in the most general sense, henceforth called ‘social relations’, and on any emerging structure of those relations. Both these concepts – ‘society’ and ‘the social’ – were constitutive for sociological debates from the founding of the discipline. The latter has been criticized from those very beginnings and recently again more intensely [most recently Outhwaite 2006]. The former had always remained somewhat in the background and had never acquired a discourse-organising role. Taken together, though, these concepts certainly constitute the core contribution of sociology to debates about the social world. Sociology’s future, it will be argued here, lies in the potential of this conceptual constellation to address in a novel way the social transformations ahead of us.

Our own considerations will therefore begin with some work at conceptual retrieval about ‘the social’ and ‘society’. This retrieval will require some more digging into the history of social and

political thought than a reader of an essay about the future of sociology may expect and be willing to accept. To increase this reader's patience, a brief outline of the argument may be useful. A first step will be devoted to a reflection on the emergence of the Latin concepts 'the social' and 'society' within a socio-political language that was – and to a considerable extent still is – based on Greek. This step will recall that it is possible to subtly analyze the 'social' world without those concepts that we sociologists are used to thinking of as essential. It serves here as preparation for the second historical step, namely a brief discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptual transformations that can now be seen as specifying 'the social' and 'society' rather than inventing them. Thirdly, the history of sociology as a discipline from its classical era onwards witnesses a shift of emphasis from the relational concept of 'the social' towards the 'collective concept' [Max Weber] of 'society'. This shift accompanied, and maybe enabled, the rise of sociology to its position of high cultural significance in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is also at the roots of later 'crises', both in an intellectual and a political sense. If the emergence of the conceptual constellation of 'the social' and 'society' was constitutive for the sociological way of thinking, the shift of emphasis towards the latter term was an over-specification that could at best be justified on historical grounds – in a world consisting of nation-states and national societies. It is untenable in the present and, even more so, for the global future, as structures of social relations are unlikely to ever cohere again within a national form. The future of sociology as a culturally significant intellectual endeavour, we will now be able to say, depends on the way in which it exits, if it exits, from this situation of conceptual over-specification. The concluding sections will first critically discuss the widespread resort to an individualist-aggregative understanding of the social as a self-defeating strategy that indeed prepares the end of sociology as an intellectually distinct enterprise. Then, the challenges that emerge from recent and ongoing transformations of the social will be addressed in terms of their conceptual and methodological exigencies for the future of sociology.

## 2. *'Sociology' without 'the social': a brief re-reading of the ancients*

Long-term perspectives on the history of sociology sometimes start with a reference to ancient Greek thought. They then, though, have to explain how even a proto-sociology is possible in a context in which there is neither the word 'society' nor any reality resembling our view of it [see, e.g. Parsons 1934]. Is there any way of saying what 'the social' is in Aristotle's *Politics*, and how it relates to 'the political', the key Greek term in this text? One could easily hold this to be an anachronistic question that cannot sensibly be answered, but there are at least three observations that can be made to help us understand more adequately the long-term conditions under which 'social' knowledge is created [the following draws on Karagiannis and Wagner, in preparation].

First, Aristotle's reflections need to be understood against the background of transformations in the social and political life of ancient Greece that began almost two centuries earlier and have been analysed as 'the discovery of politics' [Meier 1990]. The reforms pursued by Solon and, in particular, by Cleisthenes in sixth-century Athens entailed the broadening and, maybe more importantly, the explication of the rules of participation in the handling of matters of common concern in and for the polity. Using the terminology of contemporary social theory, one could say that authoritative power was, maybe for the first time in human history, subjected to explicit and public rules. Subsequently, experiences with this new rule-set, and interpretations of it in the light of those experiences, led to the possibility of differentiating between political regimes, with the distinction between oligarchy and democracy being the most important one for the city-state context. And finally, the writings by Plato and Aristotle that aimed at a systematic presentation of such political possibilities inaugurated a genre of thinking that became known as political philosophy. In sum, this period witnessed the very coming into being of 'the political' – certainly as a concept, and in some way also as a specific realm of human activity.

Once one has made this observation, second, it becomes easily recognizable that Aristotle's *Politics* discusses such 'political' que-

stions in relation to the structure of ‘social’ relations in the polis. His observations on the need for friendship to sustain a polity, or his views about the requirements for full citizenship, convey a sense of the variable nature of social relations as well as of what later sociology would call a ‘social structure’ of the ‘political community’ (*koinonía politiké*). Thus, accepting the somewhat anachronistic mode of description, we can say that Aristotle embedded his reflections on political forms into observations on the social fabric for which the rules of the common life were made. In contrast to the tradition of modern social and political thought, however, he neither derived a political form from a social structure nor made the social instrumental for the political. The relations between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ are open and indeterminate in Aristotle, and this means not least that they were accessible to the action of the members of the polis themselves.

Arguably, those relations could only be open and indeterminate for Aristotle precisely because no concept of ‘the social’ was available for him, such concept being a presupposition for the thinking of an instrumental or subordinate relation. It was not available for the simple but in current usage often forgotten fact that the term ‘social’ enters our vocabulary only with the Latinization of what at its beginnings was a Greek political language. This Latinization, and then the vernacularization into European and non-European languages from the sixteenth century onwards, both preceded by much earlier translations into Arabic, has been a long and complex process that was accompanied by conceptual transformations. We want to underline here – and this is our third observation on *Politics* – two aspects of lasting significance, both related to Aristotle’s key term *koinonía politiké*.

The first translations of the concept into Latin, inspired by Christian thought, worked with variations of *communio* and *communicatio* for the noun and proposed *politica*, retaining the Greek term, or *civilis* as the adjective. It was in the Renaissance in the context of the Florentine Republic that the full term was for the first time rendered as *societas civilis*, thus stepping out of Christian political thought into what we now refer to as republican humanism. This novel term ‘civil society’ inaugurated a wholly

new lineage of conceptual development focusing on the social and the civil instead of on the political and the communal [Hallberg and Wittrock 2006]. It thus provided a precondition for the later conceptual separation of the social from the political, but none of this happened between the fifteenth century and the eighteenth century, a period during which terms such as ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’ could be used interchangeably and, importantly, without introducing the distinction between ‘civil society’ and ‘state’ that should become prominent in the nineteenth century.

The translations of *koinonía politiké* that we currently use are mostly of a much later date, and thus they were created in the awareness of the conceptual development and the further transformations of social and political thought. A ‘progressive’ view of conceptual history as a process of increasing precision would expect major clarifications from such recent translations, but this is arguably not at all the case. In H. Rackham’s 1932 translation of *Politics*, to give one example, *koinonía politiké* is variously rendered as ‘society’, ‘community’ and ‘partnership’. Such practice can be defended by saying that we now have differentiated terms for phenomena that Aristotle kept together. It remains striking, however, that two of the terms used – ‘society’ and ‘community’ – have become constitutive counter-concepts in the sociological tradition since the end of the nineteenth century. The third one – ‘partnership’ – has hardly any ‘political’ connotation for us at all, but refers predominantly to ‘economic’ or also to ‘private’ matters. Clearly, this threefold distinction connotes highly different ways of conceiving of the ties between human beings that live in any such relation to others. Is it imaginable that Aristotle had such different bonds between human beings in mind, even though he was using always the same term? The fact that he refers to friendship and justice, that is, to other ways of relating to other human beings, in a subtle and distinct way, speaks against this view. So, does the translator assume that our social and political life has changed so considerably since Aristotle’s times – and in particular: has created so many more differentiated ways of being together – that the text would convey no meaning to us if a single word was used for translating *koinonía politiké*? What is the reason, if any, why ‘political community’ – arguably the least contestable rende-

ring – is often considered unsatisfactory as a single term in translation?

### *3. Specifying the social: the challenge of modernist individualism*

We can approach the search for an answer to these questions by first investigating the reasons why – closer to us in time – the distinction between ‘community’ and ‘society’ was considered necessary. When Ferdinand Tönnies discussed it in 1887, he based the distinction on two forms of the human will. In ‘society’, human beings live together because of their ‘arbitrary will’ or ‘elective will’; in ‘community’ because of their ‘essential will’. Importantly, those who elect, in the first case, are individual human beings, whereas, in the second case, the ‘essence’ is something transcending individuals. Tönnies was here summarizing and conceptually formalizing a debate that had gone on for more than two centuries before him and that can historically be reconstructed in the form of an innovation and the response to it.

The innovation was atomist individualism, and Thomas Hobbes can be credited as a key contributor towards it. Hobbes’ problem was without doubt one of order, and the immediate reason for his concern was the strife of the European religious wars. The fundamental insecurity provoked by those events led him to hypothesize a situation in which human beings were on their own and permanently exposed to the possibility of violence by other human beings in the struggle over self-preservation. Reducing thus radically the assumptions about things being shared among those humans, he arrived at the idea of a contract that the use of basic reason alone would suggest, a contract serving to establish a sovereign state over and above the strivings of the individuals, but leaving them to pursue their strivings in as much as order was not threatened.

Leviathan inaugurated the tradition of social contract theory that was to be continued – and considerably modified – by, among others, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel



Kant and most recently John Rawls. Despite all modifications, the central idea remained the same. If one starts out from a multitude of human beings and their strivings, then one must consider the likelihood that their interests will interfere with each other, leading to conflict and strife. Thus arises the problem of order – as the question namely how, under the assumption of a multitude of free and possibly diverse human beings, peaceful life together can be assured. Given the starting emphasis on freedom and possible diversity, nothing much could be known about what those human beings would want to do (to paraphrase Edmund Burke). Or in the terms of contemporary political philosophy: no substantive assumptions could be made. One would not engage in discussions about social differentiation into classes, or about cultural differentiation of different basic beliefs or values. Order should be able to come about and persist precisely despite whatever conflict-prone differences might exist between the members of a polity.

In the terminology we apply here we may state, thus, that ‘the social’ turns extremely ‘thin’ in this thinking, the focus being on individuals (more precisely: individual households) and on the polity only. It is important to underline, however, that this ‘thinning out’ was normatively motivated before it became an analytical move. Most of these philosophers were well aware of the richness of particular ties between human beings. Rather than denying their empirical existence, they argued that these ties should not matter when questions of common concern were to be discussed and decided. And this is the main difference to earlier social and political thought, from Aristotle to Machiavelli and Montesquieu. The ancient Greek philosophers, the classic republicans and the humanists knew the manifold ways in which the particular relations between human beings (‘the social’) can have an impact on the determination of the common (‘the political’). Their political philosophies are not least explorations of these manifold ways. They indeed did not see any need for a strong conceptual distinction between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, a view that prevailed until the seventeenth century and stayed alive until the end of the eighteenth century.

Individualist liberalism aimed at eliminating such – in this view: potentially detrimental – impact of the social on the political. From the French Revolution onwards, this idea inspired much political debate, and in particular constitutional design for liberal-democratic polities in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If the advent of the democratic revolution, in particular in its French version, can be seen as the historical moment of individualist liberalism, however, this very moment also saw the beginning of a critical debate about the insufficiency of this mode of political thought. This critical response to the individualist innovation resulted in a broad intellectual and political movement components of which have been described as ‘the rise of social theory’ and as ‘the invention of the social’ [Heilbron 1995; Donzelot 1984].

Before the seventeenth century, atomist individualism did not exist, and that is why no explicit concept of the social existed either. Our observations on ‘social relations’ and ‘social structures’ in Aristotle’s *Politics* needed to proceed by terminologically anachronistic means. From the eighteenth century onwards, in contrast, the social rose explicitly in response to individualism. For that reason, it became a key concept in social and political thought, and it also acquired a particular meaning that cannot be detected in earlier texts, not even by our anachronistic method.

As we have seen, individualism emptied political ontology of everything between the individuals (households) and the polity. While the normative background to this move is understandable, its outcome is conceptually unconvincing and empirically implausible. Furthermore, as was increasingly recognized, such political theory also proved inadequate for the creation and maintenance of a polity. In the face of such insights, ‘the social’ is given specific significance as that which is neither part of the private lives of individuals in their households nor of the polity as the set of institutions that regulates the common. And increasingly so, such ‘social’ is conceptualised as that which may bind individuals together and, thus, support a viable polity.

A variety of such conceptualisations have been developed over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The social could be

seen as the aggregate of individual behaviours amenable to statistics. It could be seen as the ensemble of shared norms and values, including a common language, theorized in cultural-linguistic approaches from anthropology and cultural sociology. It could be identified through an analysis of stratification related to interest positions, as in what became mainstream sociology. And the social could find a sedimented form in institutions consciously created to remedy the deficiencies of individualism, such as those of the emerging welfare state as the organized expression of solidarity within a polity [see Karagiannis 2007 for an argument for conceptually ‘enlarging’ the signification of solidarity]. The ‘rise of the social’ and the ‘invention of the social’, as we conceive of them today, have thus been the result of a re-interpretation of the social and political world after the rise of individualism by means of the identification and, to some extent, the institutionalisation of novel bonds between human beings.

The set of sociological modes of explanation of the social and political world was a key part of this re-interpretation. Within the social sciences, the dispute between individualist or atomist approaches, on the one hand, and collectivist or holist approaches, on the other, has continued ever since, and it cannot be settled with the means of the social sciences alone [see Boltanski and Thevenot 1991]. For our argument it is important to note that such social-science modes of explanation tended to replace those offered by earlier political philosophy. This occurred by virtue of the fact that the insufficiency of individualist liberalism was considered to be due to its social ‘gap’; and the remedy was accordingly seen in filling this gap with rich substantive social theory as well as systematic empirical observation. As we noted at the outset, rather than the human capacity for reason or for moral action providing for ‘political order’ as domestic peace and security, it was now value commonality or compatibility of social interests that sustained ‘social order’.

The ‘social’ of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, therefore, was much different from the ‘social’ that we interpretatively projected into ‘pre-modern’ or ‘early modern’ political thought. The new ‘social’ was explicitly elaborated to deal with

a problématique that the individualist-liberal theory of political modernity had created. As such, it was based on a sharp – even though not necessarily always very clear – distinction from the ‘political’. Furthermore, it was conceptualised in such a way that an analysis of such ‘social’ could be expected to provide answers to the question whether a viable political order is possible. This is what we refer to as an instrumental conceptual relation of the social to the political. In other words, the social is deployed as an underpinning of the political and not as a feature of human life in need of being explored in general terms. This conceptual move left only an impoverished view of the social that, even though it may sometimes be seen as determining the political, is narrowed down in its meaning and made subject to possible regulation.

#### *4. Over-specifying the social: the ontological shift towards collective concepts*

One way of describing this impoverishment further is to locate it in the above-mentioned shift of emphasis from ‘the social’ to ‘society’. Increasingly it was assumed that the structure of social relations – or, according to intellectual tradition: their sum, their form, their substance – was in some way internally coherent and clearly demarcated from its outside. In its broadest sociological sense, the term ‘society’ can be seen as exactly referring to a coherent and bounded occurrence of ‘the social’ and as postulating the impact such an entity has on the behaviour and the attitudes of its members. True, strictly speaking it is only the Durkheimian-Parsonsian tradition of sociology that strongly embraces such a concept of ‘society’. Classical authors such as Simmel and Weber had always been more cautious; and contemporary ones such as Alain Touraine and Michael Mann have confirmed the sceptic view on any ontologization of society. However, the concept of society certainly performed a discourse-organising role for the sociological tradition. Some social determinism, even though it may take a weak form, is characteristic for sociological reasoning, and any such determinism requires some collective entity that determines, that ‘causes’ behaviour and attitudes. This entity was most often ‘society’ in some way or other.

We refer to this shift as an impoverishment because it rules out other, less coherent, less clearly bounded structures of social relations, or regards such occurrences as deviant, as underdeveloped in an evolutionary sense, or as empirical impurities that should not stand in the way of conceptual elaboration. More neutrally, one can refer to the rise of 'society' in this sense as at least a very particular specification of 'the social' that itself requires explanation. We shall try to do this in three brief steps.

Despite the clarity of presentation in some writings, such as Durkheim's *Rules of sociological method*, first, the introduction of 'society' into sociological reasoning was not a single conceptual innovation, but part of a larger shift in basic ontology. 'Society' was accompanied by a large supporting cast of collective concepts such as most importantly 'nation', 'class' and 'state'. Nascent sociology was part of a larger intellectual movement towards conceptual collectivization, and it cannot be entirely dissociated from this context. When Weber argued against the unreflected import of collective concepts into scholarly reasoning he referred explicitly to even more dubious coinage such as 'national spirit', but his own reticence about building sociology on a concept of 'society' showed that this remark had wider bearings. The specification of 'the social' as 'society' had indeed been an over-specification, noticeable to some contemporaries, but supported by a broader politico-intellectual context and thus rather successful.

Therefore, second, we need to take a closer look at this context, in a first step at the more truly intellectual one. The conceptual collectivization can be understood as a reaction against atomist individualism, and this in two respects. An observer of the rise of American democracy and the French Revolution such as Tocqueville saw clearly that democratization would not come to a halt before universal suffrage had been reached. In our terms here, he saw thus political individualization in the form of the individual right to political participation as a key element of the emerging social configuration, and he analyzed it in sociological terms, as a change of social form, not as a politico-legal transformation only. Such analysis of democracy remained rare in Europe where a-

dvances in voting rights were slow. The main focus of debate was rather, but in very similar terms, on the economic transformation brought about by the industrial revolution and the politico-legal changes it entailed, namely the liberation of commerce including the right to sell and buy labour-power. Classical sociology can be read as following up on a broad mid-nineteenth century reaction to the cultural hegemony of political economy and as an attempt to give more scholarly precision and clarity to this need to combat economism. Among the ‘classics’, Durkheim, Weber and Pareto each had their specific and explicit stand on this issue, and for all of them the relation to economics was crucial for nascent sociology.

Thirdly, we can now move from intellectual to politico-institutional issues. In Europe, those struggles over the containment of political and economic liberalism focused institutionally on the questions of cultural-linguistic identity and social solidarity. These were struggles about the limitation of the socio-historical meaning of liberal modernity, and thus about the socio-political feasibility of modernity in Europe. The form that European political societies gradually acquired during the nineteenth century was not predominantly a politically individualist and democratic one, but that of the cultural-linguistically based nation-state. Liberal ideas and national ideas were linked by the concept of national self-determination, and where this matrix for cohesion was accepted and its territorial foundation accomplished, it became possible to set the external boundaries of the modern polity based on the concept of ‘nation’. Movements across those boundaries could thus be reduced – by restrictions to immigration, tariffs, currency regulations and other forms of border control. And stability also became an issue inside national societies requiring the creation of internal coherence. This issue was triggered not least by the experience that the dynamics of liberated economic allocation, i.e. the emerging capitalist economy, had had an adverse impact on living and working conditions of many compatriots. This is one way of formulating what became known as ‘the social question’. Its very formulation presupposed external boundaries to the polity. The question itself, however, referred to the internal boundaries within the polity, thus to an analysis of ‘class structure’ and of ways to

find arguments for peaceful co-operation between classes, such as 'the division of social labour'. Both the national and the social question were linked to notions of collective identity and of collective agency, 'nation' and 'class'. The management of these questions through the creation of organised collective agents was a historical way and means of containing the unlimited challenges of the individualist liberal utopia outlined by political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and by political economists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This triple set of brief observations may suffice to suggest that increasing attempts at collective organisation and co-ordination marked the period between, roughly, the 1870s and the 1960s, strongly in Europe but also elsewhere. Sociology has been a particular intellectual component of this collectivist transformation. Saying this is not meant to denigrate the scholarly value of sociologists' work nor to radically relativize this work. Historical contextualization does not invalidate knowledge, it makes it understandable in its context and thus permits attempts at separating 'that which is alive and that which is dead' [to paraphrase Benedetto Croce] in the sociological tradition for the analysis of our current situation.

To illustrate such use of contextualization, we may briefly remind of the fact that recently all the above-mentioned collective concepts – 'society', 'nation', 'class' and 'state' – have been criticized for introducing inefficient rigidities into the social fabric and preventing the move towards greater 'flexibility' in social life. Between 1870 and 1960, though, neither the prevailing consciousness of European societies nor the social sciences as their tools of self-understanding were prone to reason about internal and external boundaries of social configurations in terms of 'inflexibility'. The currently alleged 'rigidities' were regarded as essential components of, even requirements for, stability and social order. If one adopted a Parsonsian functionalist paradigm, for instance, those boundaries could not even be experienced as inflexibilities, since cultural identity and social solidarity were part of the socio-cultural norms of these societies and state institutions were the natural units of activity. Such a view has rightly been accused of

providing an overly harmonious picture and of denying the existence of oppression and exclusion owing to such rules and institutions. In addition, this view has always been unable to reflexively consider its own historical context. In the current situation, however, it serves as a useful reminder of social reasons for avoiding a concept of flexibility that presupposes a permanently alert population.

##### *5. The crisis of collective concepts: against sociological nostalgia*

Until the late 1960s, for the reasons given above, structural-functionalism, and the sociological theory of modernisation which accompanied it, and structuralism had provided objectivist pictures of society that rested on the idea of strong ties between human beings guaranteeing coherence and a stable socio-political order. The conceptual elements varied between the approaches, but some combination of an interest-based, an identity-based or an institution-based explanation, emphasising structure and social class, culture and nation and procedure, law and state respectively, was always at play. In the area of sociological theory, this thinking was challenged in all respects during the 1970s and 1980s. To give just some key examples: Anthony Giddens's work stands for the turn away from functionalism; Pierre Bourdieu's for the opening up of the structuralist tradition towards considerations of issues of temporality and agency; and Jürgen Habermas and Alain Touraine have tried to diagnose contemporary Western societies without fixing their institutional structures in any modernised version of a philosophy of history. In addition, empirical findings proliferated on subjects as diverse as personal identity and selfhood, forms of political participation or technologies and organisational forms of production, which all undermined the image of a generally stable and well-ordered society which had prevailed in the sociology of the 1950s and early 1960s. These theoretical and empirical developments have led to a situation in which many of the established categories of sociology have been dissolved by a justified and irrefutable critique. However, critics have hitherto been unable to provide a representation of the structure of social relations that



could convincingly replace these redundant ones. We can distinguish three main sociological responses, each one of them emphasising one aspect of the critique and its consequences.

First, one strand of criticism had focussed on the unacceptable ease with which ‘epistemological obstacles’ [as Bourdieu liked to quote Canguilhem] have been presumed to be solvable by methodological fiat alone, in particular in quantitative-empirical research. Criticism of epistemology-cum-methodology during the 1970s was enormously rich. However, its outcome to-date has been an unbroken continuity of the criticised approaches, on the one hand, accompanied by the emergence of a position which radically underlines the problem of the very intelligibility of the social world, on the other. This latter position focuses on the, always linguistic, nature of the representations of the social world given in the social sciences and the inevitable indeterminacy of the relation between such representations and the social world they are allegedly about. Also – and mostly pejoratively – known as post-modernism, it has neither been welcomed nor even much listened to in sociological debates. Its marginalisation, however, combined with a closing-off towards all epistemological and methodological critique, has entailed a decline in the overall intellectual attractiveness of sociology.

A second strand of criticism has focused on the objectivism prevalent in sociology in particular during the early post-Second World War period. Not only the existence of a structure of social relations was then often taken for granted, but also its stability over time and its determining impact on the orientations and behaviour of human beings. In particular, the problem of the boundary and structure of the polity was cast in almost unassailable forms by the conflation of the historical nation-state with the sociological concept of ‘society’. Multiple critiques from the 1970s and 1980s seem currently to have converged on the term ‘reflexivity’ to describe not only the demand for a revised sociology but also changes in the actual social world.

Thirdly, in some strands of debate, the postulation of ‘collective concepts’ without sufficient investigation into the existence of

the social phenomena they referred to became the explicit target of criticism. This line of criticism recently ushered into emphasising ideas of increased ‘individuality’ and tendencies towards ‘individualisation’ in contemporary social life. The emergence and assertion of the individual as a being without predetermined strong connections to or within collectivities has moved to the centre of sociological interest. Together with the parallel debate on ‘globalisation’, a sociological image of the contemporary world has emerged in which there are no social phenomena ‘between’ the singular human being, on the one end, and structures of global extension, on the other.

Assessing this intellectual situation, some interim conclusions on the present state of sociology can now be drawn. First, there is no possibility of a return to those concepts on which the social theory of twentieth-century modernity – or, in other words, of mass-democratic industrial-capitalist society – was based. Without doubt, the conjoined intellectual-political support for such concepts provided considerable security across much of the twentieth century, in terms of justifications for political action, in terms of the rootedness of personal lives and in terms of the tasks of the sociologist. Clinging to those concepts today, though, when time-honoured theoretical criticism has been joined by decreasing persuasiveness in the light of political changes, would be little more than a contemporary conservatism.

Such an attitude, which can be found both in sociological and in political circles, is not only looking nostalgically back to times of relatively high security and bounded inclusiveness in social arrangements (of ‘organised modernity’), it also denies or underrates one key aspect of modernity, the emancipatory promise of liberation. The experience of modernity, or its ‘adventure’ [Claude Lefort], is made possible by the questioning of all foundations – of knowledge, of justice, of politics. This questioning is a liberation from the imposition of external sources of legitimacy, but it cannot but go along with new uncertainties as well, which may appear as threats and dangers. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of modernity can be read as the attempt to provide new, social rather than religious, foundations, but it is in the nature of

modernity that those foundations can in turn be questioned; and such questioning can be a criticism of constraints in the name of liberation. A key aspect of recent changes in the intellectual and political world is such a critique of modernity, which is very far from being a rejection of modernity but rather is a critique of the actual organised modernity of the middle of the twentieth century.

The critique of sociological nostalgia in the name of modernity, though, as important as it is, cannot be the final word either. Let us briefly consider the twin image of globalisation and individualisation, so dear to much current sociology, in this light. This is an image that at best captures some recent tendencies in the restructuring of social relations; it can hardly be upheld as the basis for a renewed sociology of contemporary social configurations. If it were valid as the characterisation of inescapable trends, then the social world would become devoid of social structures as well as of forms of domination. It would be inhabited by individual human beings pursuing their lives by constantly reshaping their orientations, achieving what they achieve on the basis of their abilities alone, and moving in an open world which itself would be constantly adjusting in line with the evolving orientations of the human beings that populate it. Such a picture, as we hope is obvious, is blatantly inadequate to describe the current social world. Empirically, it does not fit any number of observations, and conceptually, terms such as 'flexibility' and 'individual' are systematically insufficient to describe and interpret social relations. Nevertheless any attempt at re-description of the structure of social relations under current conditions has to take the challenge that this image provides seriously. The image is based on some observation and experience of recent changes; while it is inadequate, it thus cannot be ignored.

Sociology is as yet quite far from providing such a revised analysis of the structure of social relations. The current task can be compared to the one the now so-called classical sociologists faced when they were trying to develop conceptual tools for understanding the emergent mass-democratic industrial-capitalist society roughly a century ago. In the remainder of this essay, we move from the present to the future and will discuss first a radical, and

currently widely debated, proposal to recast the conceptual question about social bonds and social relations and their relevance for social life and will subsequently try to identify the main transformations of the social bond that are currently ongoing and require sociological analysis. As for the classical authors, the intellectual project of conceptualising and analysing major social transformations does not rest on observation alone. It relates to the ongoing restructuring with its own active interpretation and thus becomes itself a part of that restructuring, part of an interpretative-interventionist effort – for the simple reason that any major social transformation may include some moving on of the cultural light.

*6. An individualist-aggregative understanding of the social: sociology's default option?*

Sociology has always been a theoretically and methodologically pluralist discipline, and there is no reason to think that this will be no longer so in the future. However, there is currently a strong contender for hegemony within the discipline, namely the combination of rationalist-individualist theorizing and empirical-quantitative methodology, sometimes self-praisingly referred to as 'analytical sociology' or 'rigorous sociology'. This combination has long been dominant in the economic sciences, even though the precise relation between neo-classical economic theory and econometrics has never been fully spelt out. Quantitative approaches became a central component in the striving for greater 'scientificity' in sociology and political science in the 1950s and 1960s, first in the US and later elsewhere. Rational-choice theory has made strong inroads into political science in the past quarter of a century, again predominantly in the US, where it is the prevailing paradigm, but increasingly so elsewhere. Sociology was affected somewhat later, but the rise of rationalist-individualist thinking is clearly visible. Recently, indeed, it has been proposed that the marriage of quantitative approaches with individualist-rationalist reasoning is the most promising avenue for sociological theory and research [Goldthorpe 2007; see for a synthesis Manzo 2007].

The key idea here is that aggregation of large numbers of individual data, and the sophisticated treatment of such aggregate data, provides rational-choice theory with an empirical underpinning, which it largely lacks otherwise, that is compatible with the atomist-individualist ontology on which the approach is based.

The recent success of this approach in the social sciences in general, and in sociology in particular, requires a complex explanation only hints towards which can be given here. A condition for success is certainly the fact that all components are based on longstanding and well-established traditions of social-science reasoning: rationalism, individualism, and quantitative methods have all been applied and debated since the seventeenth century. Two more questions need to be raised, though. If the particular combination is so compelling as some of its proponents hold, why did it not become dominant much earlier, for instance in the early nineteenth century when Enlightenment rationalism was still alive, when political economy had gained some intellectual hegemony in shaping the new post-revolutionary world, and when fact-gathering and statistics were seen as important tools in grasping the evidence of this world? And, second, given that all components of this new approach had historically been exposed to sustained criticism, how does their return in the guise of 'analytical sociology' present itself in the light of such criticism?

To answer these questions we need to disentangle historical from conceptual issues for a moment. Historically, as our earlier sketch has shown, there was indeed some dominance – maybe more shapeless than in current approaches – of rationalist-individualist and aggregative approaches to the study of society in the early nineteenth century, but they were seen to have failed, or at least been insufficient, by the end of the century. The actual collectivization of social practices in the building of nation-states and welfare states was accompanied by the shift to collective concepts, and this conceptual elaboration occurred in rather conscious criticism of the earlier approaches. The current situation, in turn, is marked by the partial dismantling of those collective practices accompanied by forceful criticism of the collective concepts elaborated earlier. The question then is how to interpret this se-

quence of two historical shifts. Can the later one simply be taken as evidence that the earlier one occurred on flawed assumptions? Or, similarly but slightly more cautiously, does the period between 1890 and 1970 need to be seen as a historical parenthesis that, for all its worth at the time, is now closed and the steady undercurrents of the history of modernity reassert themselves in the form of rationalization and individualization?

Textbooks may still present atomism and holism, or individualism and collectivism, as symmetric alternatives to the philosophy of the social sciences and in social ontology. In the light of our experiences with modernity, though, the continuation of such undecidable opposition seems no longer suitable, and an asymmetry between these two approaches needs to be recognized. This asymmetry resides in the fact that the unit of observation seems to be self-evident in the atomist-individualist discourse, namely the individual human being, whereas any argument for 'collective concepts' – and similarly for organisation and co-ordination of human activities – needs additional substantive resources to provide an underpinning for the collectivity. A culture like 'Western' modernity, the self-understanding of which is broadly humanist and the institutional justifications of which cannot do without some element of rights-based individualism, will show an individualist bias and this bias is likely to make itself felt in both social ontology, which in this sense is inescapably historical, and in political disputes over the organisation of society. This is a lesson the recent demise of collective concepts in sociology provides.

The argument does not stop here, though. Under conditions of such modernity (and if one excludes the recourse to violence and oppression), any co-ordination by organised collective actors presupposes some common understanding of belonging to such a collectivity, a broad acceptance of membership rules and some degree of responsibility towards other members. This is especially true for institutionalised co-ordination, which is expected to show a certain longevity and durability of structuring of orientations. Put like this, such stable co-ordination must seem a rare occurrence in a world consisting of individuals, and this is where the force of the individualist-aggregative ontology is located. Even in our

era of alleged globalisation and individualisation, however, such ontology seems inadequate for grasping many social phenomena. It is indeed the ability of human beings to invest 'social labour' [Luc Boltanski] into the construction of social 'things that hold together' [Alain Desrosières] as well as the availability of some substantive resources from which to build such 'things' that makes stable co-ordination less unlikely than it may at first seem, and in turn suggests that the disappearance of consciously structured social phenomena of some extension and durability is not likely to be near. Thus, 'collectivity' does not disappear from the social world, but it becomes permanently dependent on the 'investment in forms' [Laurent Thévenot] by human beings interacting with each other. Thus, rather than individualism or collectivism, sociology requires a relational ontology that considers durable and extended social phenomena – those 'macro-phenomena' that were taken for granted in collectivist ontology – as emerging from and persisting through the constructive interaction of human beings. Such interaction may sometimes, but will not regularly be amenable to techniques of aggregation; it will rather require the analysis of how the situation of co-ordination is interpreted by the actors who 'invest' in them.

Our first conclusion for the future of sociology is thus the following: There is some likelihood for the forward march of rational-choice thinking combined with quantitative methodology to continue in sociology. It will maybe increasingly be accompanied by claims to hegemony, not least because other contenders are not in sight in our long-stretched period of crisis of collective concepts. The strength of this claim resides in the combination of some individualism inherent in our modernity with the recent experience of apparent failure of 'collectivities'. There is, though, no ground for accepting the claim to hegemony. Rather, this 'analytical sociology' provides a particular interpretation of our modernity that is neither entirely compelling on scholarly grounds nor necessarily attractive on political grounds (an argument that cannot be pursued further here) [see Wagner 2008]. Sociological alternatives are, in principle, available in the form of a combination of creative interactionism with historical sociology based on a rela-

tional ontology. The full elaboration of such alternative is maybe the major challenge for sociological theory in the near future.

### *7. The social and the political: creating and maintaining a common world*

The preceding argument implicitly accepted the view that the concept of 'society', as historically elaborated in the sociological tradition, is untenable for a future sociology. It will need to be replaced by a concept of structure of social relations, in which the term 'structure' entails neither a presupposition of coherence and boundedness nor one of durability or causal efficacy without action and interaction of human beings.

Work at conceptual criticism and retrieval, as it is attempted here, however, should not be satisfied with merely discarding that which appears as superseded. One needs to ask why a concept was developed and became prominent in the first place, an analysis that will always need to point to historical reasons but often also to aspects of a concept that transcend a specific historical situation. An empirically open concept of 'structure of social relations' indeed lacks one key component of 'society', namely the idea of a relatively stable 'common' that precedes human action and serves as a reference-point for it. Historically, one can show that sociology tended to conflate its 'society' with the European nation-state; that this conflation has always been conceptually problematic; and that it arguably is today not at all viable any longer.

There may thus be reasons to not keep using the term 'society'. However, one of the issues that sociology also aimed to address when employing the concept does not disappear with the end of the historical period of the term's applicability. Inheriting the idea directly from social contract theory and indirectly, namely through a transformation of the idea of 'political community', from ancient Greek thought, 'society' also referred to the capacity of a multitude of human beings to constitute itself as a collectivity with the ability to act upon itself. One may consider this issue today as one



that pertains to political philosophy in neat disciplinary differentiation from sociology. However, much of the writings on ‘society’ in the sociological tradition would lose meaning if one overlooked their authors’ concern for this question.

Furthermore, political philosophy in the ‘pure’ – non-empirical – state in which it most often occurs today is unable to satisfactorily address the question of a collectivity’s capacity to act upon itself. Sociology rose to prominence after the so-called democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century precisely because new conceptual and empirical means were required to understand the conditions for a viable democratic society. And still today, the analysis of the ‘structure of social relations’, as for instance Tocqueville performed it for associative life in America, provides at least a necessary part of that answer.

The conflation of the polity with society was at best a historically significant working hypothesis. However, sociology would abandon an important component of its heritage if, under contemporary conditions, it analyzed ‘globalization’ merely in terms of new extensions of social relations and possibly novel, network-type forms of such relations without asking the question what these transformative processes entail for the human collective capacity to act upon itself.

The second conclusion of our reflections on the future, therefore, is that sociology should analyze the transformation of ‘the social’ that is commonly referred to as ‘globalization’ not merely as a process of extension of networks of social relations and destruction of preceding social structures, but in terms of a major alteration of the conditions under which something like a common world – a world for which mutually intelligible frames of interpretation exist that permit some action in common – can be maintained or re-created, or even be created for the first time in world-history.

### *8. Transformative agency and the weakening of the social bond*

The self-constitution of society in the above sense was possibly the most important challenge to post-revolutionary societies over the past two centuries. For this reason, the question of transformative agency was located in the collectivity – nation, people, class – and the horizon of the future was marked by the idea of the self-realization of the potential of these collectivities. Arguably, any such idea of radical collective transformative agency – ‘revolution’, as it used to be called – has ceased to hold much persuasive power. This does not mean, though, that the utopia of a novel beginning disappeared from the human imagination.

The idea of transformative agency may reside more than ever in scientific-technological progress, and that which it alters is now the lives of the individuals rather than any common condition. The former belief is certainly not new at all, and science and technology were often seen as driving the revolutions of the past. Over the past three or four decades, though, a shift has taken place that was barely noticeable at its beginnings, and even today is perceived more in terms of the absence of collective transformative agency than in the emergence of a different, highly individualized utopian ideal. Technologies of human reproduction have reached a state at which a partially designed individual seems to become possible and is often – maybe even originating in feminist debates – discussed as desirable. The hubris of total revolution producing a ‘new man’ (and woman) has not disappeared; it has shifted terrain [Boltanski 2002].

The third conclusion, thus, suggests that sociology needs to look at this shift in the meaning of total revolution in terms of a possibly unprecedented transformation of the social, relativizing the concept of ascription even for parenthood and distancing humanity further from the idea of ‘situation’ as destiny [Agnes Heller]. If one does not want to remain confined to regarding these recent developments as a science-driven anthropological mutation, there is dire need for their sociological analysis.

*9. The risk of worldlessness in its current guise and the 'end' of sociology*

A fourth conclusion of a more general nature can be added, providing to some extent a synthesis of the three preceding, partial conclusions. We have discussed up to this point a crisis of sociology's collective concepts that makes an individualist-aggregative sociology dangerously attractive as a social theory of default, in the absence of other compelling options – but not for that reason more desirable than in the past. We have further looked at the globalizing transformation of social relations in the light of the possible withering away of the human capacity to act collectively. Thirdly, we have regarded recent scientific-technological change as a transformation of the social from the stand-point of the individual, further weakening any sense of inescapable social ties connecting one's own life to others.

The last two processes derive ultimately from sources which, in this author's view, one should not – normatively – want to prevent from flowing, as they are based on an idea of self-determination and self-shaping that is at the core of our modern self-understanding. When it was most challenging and interesting, however, sociology has always looked at modernity in terms of its 'dialectics', 'contradictions' or 'paradoxes'. In other words, the best of sociology was intended as a contribution to a critique of modernity that itself reasoned against the background of a commitment to modernity. For some period, many sociologists have maintained, and not entirely without reason, that the concept and practice of 'society' was able to contain those contradictions at least in such a way that a disintegrative explosion could be avoided. This 'container' itself, though, has long started to leak at numerous points, and the leakages were the result of modernity-inspired actions, thus were produced, so to say, from within.

Such 'leakage' has by now often been diagnosed, but its significance for human world-articulation has rarely been addressed. The further rise of individualist-atomist ontology makes it difficult to conceive of social phenomena other than aggregations of individual acts. The view of globalisation as an unstoppable and uncontrollable dynamics, as in Anthony Giddens' metaphor of the

‘juggernaut’, loses out of sight its human-made character, thus its being amenable to re-interpretation and change. And the displacement of the idea of radical change from the collectivity and its history to the singular human being and her/his ‘bare life’ [Giorgio Agamben] completes the new image of a world in which social relations may have global extensions, but are so thin and ephemeral that contemporary modern human beings are held to realize their own lives in a social context that they cannot conceive of as their own. As the earth becomes entirely subjected to human intervention, the world, in the sense of the social space that human beings inhabit, recedes into unrecognizability – a situation Hannah Arendt had described as ‘worldlessness’.

This imagery is partly ideological. It refers to observable transformations but conceptualises them in such a way that their current state is exaggerated and their future continuation held to be inescapable. Importantly, the current image works with the extreme end-points of social life, the globe and the human body, and thus conceptualises away any structured existence of ‘the social’. Historically, sociology has always refused to accept any imagery of this kind. It elaborated and insisted on an understanding of ‘the social’ as that which is in-between singular human beings, precedes their interpretations of the world and is amenable to re-interpretations. For some period and for some authors, its concept of ‘society’ suggested that such ‘social’ had an eternal form – or had found its lasting form in ‘modern society’. This was an error from which sociology has started to awake. It now needs to take up its historical agenda of analysing and understanding the major transformations of the social, and it needs to do so with regard to the current such transformations, without accepting the ideological prejudice that those transformations spell the very end of this agenda – or its rewriting beyond recognition in rational-choice theory. This essay on the future of sociology worked largely by means of a retrieval of sociological debates from the past, because it needed to show that transformations of the social are at the core of sociology’s enterprise, not a determinate state of the social, and that such transformations keep going on. To retrieve the ‘end’ of sociology in the sense of a mission that by its historically changing nature can never be fully accomplished is needed to

avoided having to talk about the 'end' of sociology in the sense of having had only historical significance.

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# The Future of Sociology

## Understanding the Transformations of the Social

*Peter Wagner*

This essay aims to address the question of the future of sociology in the twenty-first century through a historical reconstruction of conceptual transformations. A first step is devoted to a reflection on the emergence of the Latin concepts 'the social' and 'society', a second one to a discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century changes that can now be seen as specifying 'the social' and 'society' rather than inventing them. Thirdly, from the late nineteenth century sociology as a discipline shifts emphasis from the relational concept of 'the social' towards the 'collective concept' of 'society', a shift that is here analyzed as an over-specification that is at the roots of later 'crises', both in an intellectual and a political sense. The future of sociology as a culturally significant intellectual endeavor depends on the way in which it exits from this situation of conceptual over-specification. The concluding sections will first critically discuss the widespread resort to an individualist-aggregative understanding of the social as a self-defeating strategy that indeed prepares the end of sociology as an intellectually distinct enterprise. Then, the challenges that emerge from recent and ongoing transformations of the social will be addressed in terms of their conceptual and methodological exigencies for the future of sociology.

Peter Wagner is Professor of Sociology at the University of Trento. His research focuses on questions of social theory, historical and political sociology and the sociology of knowledge. In particular, he has aimed at analyzing the history of European societies in terms of transformations of modernity. His publications include *Modernity as experience and interpretation: a new sociology of modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 2008, *Varieties of world-making: beyond globalization*, ed. with Nathalie Karagiannis, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2007. *Theorizing modernity and A history and theory of the social sciences*, both London, Sage, 2001 and *A sociology of modernity: liberty and discipline*, London, Routledge, 1994.