THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE SOCIAL

Peter Wagner

Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy

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Summary

This essay aims to address the question of the future of sociology in the twenty-first century very much in the spirit of Tocqueville and Weber. 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. 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. 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' of 'society'. This conception is 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 endeavor 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.

1. Preamble

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 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.

2. Constitutive Lacks 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's *The Future of Society*). The former had always remained somewhat in the background and had never acquired a discourse-organizing 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 endeavor, 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.

3. '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 (e.g. as Parsons wrote on it). 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 than can be made to help us understand more adequately the long-term conditions under which 'social' knowledge is created.

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' in Meier's words. 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' questions 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 (as Hallberg and Wittrock have argued). 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 rendering – is often considered unsatisfactory as a single term in translation?

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Biographical Sketch

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).