

Rethinking the Social through
Durkheim, Marx, Weber
and Whitehead

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Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Whitehead

Michael Halewood



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used for the works of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. Full details are given in the bibliography.

Durkheim

<i>DL</i>	–	<i>The Division of Labour in Society</i>
<i>RSM</i>	–	<i>The Rules of Sociological Method</i>
<i>S</i>	–	<i>Suicide</i>
<i>EFRL</i>	–	<i>The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life</i>
<i>DD</i>	–	<i>De la division du travail social</i>
<i>Règles</i>	–	<i>Les règles de la methode sociologique</i>
<i>LeS</i>	–	<i>Le suicide</i>
<i>FE</i>	–	<i>Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse</i>

Marx

The English and German *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels are cited as *CWME* and *MEW*, respectively. The corresponding volume number is then used. For example, (*CWME* 3; *MEW* 1).

Weber

<i>E&S</i>	–	<i>Economy and Society</i>
<i>W&G</i>	–	<i>Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft</i>

Chapter One

RETHINKING THE SOCIAL

“[...] it is relevant to point out, how superficial are our controversies on sociological theory apart from some more fundamental determination of what we are talking about” (A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*).

In the English-speaking world, at least, it seems straightforward to talk of *the* social. We might slip phrases such as the “end of the social” into our essays, lectures, conversations or papers. We think that we know what we mean. But do we? As will be seen throughout the course of this book, it is interesting to note the lack of the use of the phrase “the social” in the works of Durkheim, Marx and Weber.¹ The same applies to later writers such as Parsons (1951, 1968a, 1968b) and Giddens (1984).

The following chapters will, through their readings of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, argue that none of these writers had a fixed conception of “society”, and it is only Weber who develops a clear conception of what constitutes “sociality”. As I have already indicated, it will turn out that the notion of *the* social hardly ever arises in these texts. This leads to the obvious but important question of why, if Durkheim, Marx and Weber do not talk of “the social”, has this concept been made a mainstay of the book? Is it not unfair or unwise to interrogate Durkheim, Marx and Weber with respect to a concept that they do not seem to recognize? The simple answer is that “the social” has become a problem for us. Although I have been unable to unearth exactly when the phrase “the social” was first used, I am tempted to state that it was first taken seriously and gained prominence as a stand-alone concept when social theorists started to argue that we are “at the end of the social” (for example, Baudrillard 1982, 2007).² This is perhaps why discussions of the concept are so urgent today. They signal an uncertainty as to the very foundations and possibility of social theory, sociology and social research.

Questions of “the social” have become inextricably linked to those of “society” and “sociality”. I therefore use “the social” as a conceptual device which enables the texts of different writers to be subjected to a similar form of analysis. It allows for direct comparison between these writers in their struggles to describe society and the kind of relations in which humans find

themselves embroiled. These substantive discussions are, therefore, not aimed at discovering the “truth” of what Durkheim, Marx or Weber said. It is not a matter of finally explaining what they really meant. Nor will I spend much time assessing the validity or otherwise of the more general elements of their theories. That is to say, the analyses are not intended to settle, once and for all, whether Durkheim’s concept of the division of labour is an accurate description of the development and sustenance of modern societies, for example. Rather, the aim is to unearth the extent to which these writers developed, reoriented and struggled with notions of sociality and society. I have subsumed these issues under the banner of “the social”, not because I want to argue that such a realm necessarily exists and can be an object of study, but because I believe that this angle of approach sheds new light on their work.

As these discussions unfold it will become clear that the notion of “the social” is something which deeply troubled all three and they have some surprising and innovative arguments to make. For example, Durkheim never adequately defined “society”; Marx insists on making a distinction between the social and the societal but English translations have glossed over this important point; Weber ultimately rejects the usual German term for “social” and makes a very specific use of the term “*sozial*”. Although the arguments set out are not simply to do with questions of translation, it is clear that the English translators have not always served us well with regard to these matters, as will be pointed out throughout this book. The lack of precision in translation has muddied the conceptual waters with regards to understandings of the social, society and sociality. The following chapters will attempt to provide some much-needed conceptual clarity. Overall, I want to argue that we should be careful about being overhasty in rejecting what we have not fully understood. This is why I believe it is worth returning to the problematical status of the social within the texts of Durkheim, Marx and Weber; not to find there a secret nugget of truth about what constitutes the social, but equally, not to reject their work out of hand. Instead, my point is to establish the extent to which these writers dealt with the problem of sociality, of the social, a problem which still haunts us today.

To my mind, one major problem with contemporary social theory is that it has tended to gloss over or ignore the complexities of these debates. We have fudged the issue and now treat the social as a given, a question that has been answered. We have lost the critical insights developed by Durkheim, Marx and Weber, and what is worse is that, in doing so, we have tended to mix together their starkly different positions, resulting in a placid and unthinking usage of contradictory elements of their work, all subsumed under phrases such as “social conditions”, “social structure” and “social meanings”.

Three Aims

There are three things that I would like readers to take from this book. The first is to consider how they use the word “social”, to be careful how they do so (and, perhaps, to use it less). What do we mean, or gain, by talking of “social factors”, “social circumstances” or “social conditions” instead of “factors”, “circumstances” and “conditions”? The second, related, point is to argue that sociologists and social theorists need to evaluate exactly what they mean by “social”. The substantive chapters of this book on Durkheim, Marx and Weber will suggest that none of these writers actually say what many social theorists and sociologists seem to assume that they say on the status of society and sociality. Of course, nowadays, there are few practising sociologists who would describe themselves as pure Durkheimians, Marxists or Weberians. We are more sophisticated than that and think, or hope, that we have taken the best elements of each of these theorists to develop more robust, more up-to-date, conceptions. Furthermore, we have developed other powerful conceptual apparatuses such as feminism or post-structuralism which have moved beyond the works and concepts of such writers. However, in claiming to make such advances, have we really reformulated or established exactly what we understand by the words “society” and “social”? If these “founding thinkers” lacked clear and concise formulations of the social, then we should be wary about simply cherry picking what might not actually be there.

This mention of “founding thinkers” leads to a question which may already be troubling some. That is, is it really justified to focus only on Durkheim, Marx and Weber? What about Simmel, for example? And this “for example” is instructive. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive analysis of what all social theorists have said regarding the social. Equally valid questions might be: “why no Wollstonecraft, or Du Bois, or de Beauvoir, or Schutz or Mead (either George Herbert or Margaret)?” I am aware that in choosing this triumvirate alone, I run the risk of reinforcing certain white and masculinist prejudices as to what constitutes the subject matter and procedures of social analysis. There is certainly a *prima facie* lack, in this book, of a recognition of the contribution of feminist thought to the development of theoretical understandings of sociality. Yet, in so far as the arguments of this book are set out to develop a reconsideration of certain founding concepts, then I feel justified in sticking with these “founding thinkers”. My argument does not rely on these being the only thinkers who had problems with the concept of society and the social. Moreover, I will not deal with them in strictly chronological order. This is because I feel that it is Durkheim whose legacy is the most enduring in terms of establishing what we think we understand by the social. He also provides the most lengthy treatments of these concepts. In this way, it

is precisely the extent to which these writers have been considered as somehow foundational that both drives my arguments and gives them their purchase. By contrast, and to put it boldly, Simmel just has not had a similar impact on the everyday thought of contemporary social theorists, although I am aware that in the last twenty years or so, the importance of Simmel with regard to such debates has been re-evaluated (see, for example, Frisby 2010; Frisby and Sayer 1986, 55–67; Pyyhtinen 2010). The key elements of Simmel's work appear to be his refusal of the concept of society as the basis upon which sociality arises; his focus upon the processes by which we become social; and his emphasis upon sociality as interaction. As will be seen, some of these ideas were taken up in the work of Weber and it is the formulation of such ideas in the latter's work which seems to have had the most impact. Nevertheless, it does seem possible to derive, from Simmel, a novel, theoretical approach to "the social". For this reason, a brief summary of the important philosophical points which are to be found in Simmel's work will be given in a later chapter, after the fuller discussions of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. This mention of philosophy leads to my third aim which is to develop a philosophy of the social. But it should be stressed that my aim is to develop *a* philosophy of the social, not *the* philosophy of the social.

As opposed to Parsons (1951), who felt that he was outlining the parameters of "*The Social System*", I do not believe it possible or desirable to proscribe what should or must be thought with regard to the concept of "the social". The final chapter will use the work of Alfred North Whitehead to develop a possible theoretical approach to the concepts of society, social order and the social. This is not intended to be some kind of manifesto, a set of rules which must be learned and applied; these analyses will propose what *could*, not should, be thought. It is offered as a way of thinking which recognizes but avoids some of the conceptual problems identified in the texts of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. That is to say, Whitehead will not provide us with all the answers, but his work does offer a new way of thinking about our current concerns and problems to do with the social. However, my understanding of a philosophy of the social is not limited to developing one specific philosophical approach. I also believe that it is possible to treat philosophically the concepts and concerns of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, with regard to the problem of the social. In this respect, the main chapters of the book could themselves be considered as exercises in a philosophy of the social.

A Philosophy of the Social

To advocate a "philosophy of the social" is not to declare that "the social" is an identifiable object which exists out there, somewhere in the world, akin to

the way in which some have sought to create a “philosophy of language” or a “philosophy of mind”, for example. The aim is, rather, to trace and clarify what is at stake in this problem and to offer new avenues of thought which may be taken up, if found useful.

I envisage “the social” to be emblematic of a problem which can be treated philosophically. In this sense, the reason for such a project starts from *within* social theory, sociology and social science rather than coming from *without*. It is not a matter of deploying already-formed philosophical concepts. The need for a new understanding of the relation between sociology and philosophy has been outlined by Pyyhtinen (2010), however, the kinds of argument to be set out in this book share more with, and are indebted to, the approach of Karsenti (2013).

For Karsenti, the philosophical, the political and the social have long been intertwined. One major step in realizing this is to recognize that many philosophical questions have always been linked to conceptual problems which themselves are implicated in a specific milieu or situation. This is not to reduce philosophy to a mere cultural, historical or social phenomenon (Karsenti 2013, 15–16). It is certainly not to indulge in the worst kind of sociological relativizing which assumes that any acceptance that the thoughts and problems of philosophy have a historical specificity means that these problems can be reduced to expressions of certain social structures or concerns. Such a position amounts to more of an explaining away rather than a genuine understanding.

Karsenti gives the example of the kind of thought which is developed in Plato’s dialogues, one which Weber also lighted on in his essay “Science as a Vocation” (Karsenti 2013, 10). Karsenti characterizes this mode of thought as establishing a situation where it becomes possible to “trap someone in a logical vice” (Karsenti 2013, 13).³ Such a historical specificity does not take away from the effectiveness of this kind of logical argument or conception of rationality. The fact that the rotary steam engine was invented in the late eighteenth century in the UK does not mean that such a steam engine is reducible to some kind of social or historical fiction. Similarly, Plato’s invention of a mode of philosophical thought which invokes mathematics as the cornerstone of rational thought and philosophy does not mean that it is reducible to the political and social conditions of Athens over two thousand years ago. Badiou (2008) makes a similar point when he argues that Plato’s creation of a link between mathematics and philosophy heralded an event which is, in one sense, historical but only in so far as it pinpoints a real moment of effective discovery. “Apart from mathematics, everything that exists remains under the sway of opinion. So the independent, effective, historical existence *yielded* the following paradigm: it is *possible* to break with opinion” (Badiou 2008, 102. Emphasis in original. See Halewood 2010 for a further discussion of this).

Karsenti is more specific, and perhaps less dogmatic, than Badiou. He envisages Plato's conceptual construction as one which is aimed against the rhetoric of the Sophists but, more importantly, against the possibility of corruption within the Athenian State (or polis), of which the Sophists are seen as emblematic (Karsenti 2013, 14). That is to say, the model of a logical rationality which is able to trap its interlocutors in its snare is a form of resistance to more widespread (social and political) corruption. "To put it bluntly, the philosophical dialogue was a new kind of social relation, designed to make things happen [*bouger les choses*]" (Karsenti 2013, 13). This does not reduce such philosophy or the logical strictures that it develops to mere social phenomena. What is perhaps unfortunate is that this aspect of Plato's conceptual assault tends to be forgotten and we are left with an image of mathematical-logical thought as somehow wedded to a realm of eternal truths, a realm which no longer seems to be sustainable. Today, we need to recover the inextricable link between philosophy and resistance to the prevailing situation. This is not to make philosophy solely a political or social critique; we must also resituate the powerful and productive work that can be accomplished by philosophical activity and work.

In order to achieve this, Karsenti argues, we must not return to some model of philosophy as a realm with its own (eternal) questions, or view it as a "supra"-discipline; one which watches over all other areas of thought, intervening only when it deigns it necessary to point up inconsistencies which those working in the field have not noticed or are unable to deal with. A crucial step in Karsenti's argument is his insistence that we need to refigure our understanding of the status of philosophy and how it works. Crucially, we need to recognize that "philosophy only gains its consistency through being an act accomplished in a specific situation; it modifies the latter at the same time as it is informed by it" (Karsenti 2013, 15). Philosophy is not applicable to all moments or events in history; it is required at certain points where certain problems emerge. Moreover, and even more importantly, philosophy does not remain untouched either by the situations in which it becomes involved or by the changes it makes, the concepts that it produces. This is one of the major contentions of Karsenti's work: we do philosophy differently after the birth of the social sciences in the nineteenth century (Karsenti 2013, 13).

According to Karsenti, this is evident in the manner in which Comte set up many of the parameters of sociology (Karsenti 2013, 18). Comte gave us a new problem, one which still pertains today. Too often this is reduced to the simple question, "Is sociology a science?" For Comte and his contemporaries, this was only part of the problem. The real question was, and still is, "What is the status of scientific knowledge and its relation to the new kind of societies which seemed to arise in the nineteenth century, and how are these related

to the possible kinds of lives that we can now live in such societies?" None of these terms are fixed. The question of the status of science, knowledge, and of the lives of humans are all interlinked. "We see [in the work of Comte] that science and politics were reborn *together*" (Karsenti 2013, 18. Emphasis in original). Comte, in his outline of a resolute positivism, may have contributed to and confounded the modern conception of the status of science, but what is more important is that we remember that the battle for establishing modern science was always involved in battles for establishing how we can come to know ourselves and our societies, both politically and sociologically. We have not succeeded in answering any of these questions either separately or taken together. We may think that we have separated off the realm of science and of scientific knowledge from questions of society but, in doing so, we have misrecognized that the question of the status of science was always implicated in questions of society. The difficulty comes in admitting that these elements are interrelated without reducing one to another, or explaining one in terms of another.⁴ The philosophical problems which were present at the birth of the social sciences remain.

Foucault puts the same point slightly differently, according to Karsenti (2013, 19–21). In Foucault's account, from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, an "epistemic change" occurred which produced a new, historically and socially specific "logical vice". Now the problem has become one of modifying our understanding of contemporary existence (of the status of modern social life) while, at the same time, developing new ways of acting on and in such modern societies. This, again, is closely related but not reducible to the development of modern science, to modern forms of knowledge. The imbrication of the concerns of knowledge, science and society is one of the hallmarks of the creation of that new arena of thought and action – social science.

The birth of social science and this new set of interrelations constituted a great challenge to philosophy. Unfortunately, for the most part, this challenge was not taken up and, since the nineteenth century, philosophy has refused to believe it possible to treat of questions of truth, knowledge and morality as related to questions of politics and society. The demand to construct a new form of philosophy in light of the operations and impact of the social sciences has not been heard or acted upon. This has led to an impoverished form of "academic philosophy" which has become a dry, technical exercise, reduced to speaking of highly specialized questions regarding the meaning or truth-value of the sentences of ordinary language, for example. This, Karsenti argues, is a betrayal of the potency of philosophy as well as a misrecognition of its status as an element of human thought, in the widest sense of this phrase (Karsenti 2013, 16). The social sciences do not owe their birth to philosophy. Yet, in

their modern birth, the social sciences inherited, while reformulating, key concerns of traditional political philosophy, such as those concerning matters of authority, sovereignty, the subject and power.

In attempting to revitalize the philosophy of the social sciences, Karsenti insists that this field still has an important role, as long as it recognizes that the very manner and content of philosophy have been altered by the development of the social sciences themselves. For example, he states that the social sciences have altered philosophy by positing “economics” as a central concern (“the mystery of the economy figured as the inverse of the economy of mystery” (Karsenti 2013, 42)). This does not entail approaching the problems of the social sciences from without. It entails treating philosophically those problems which arise from within social science. As Karsenti’s text unfolds, it becomes clear that he has in mind topics such as power, sovereignty, government, and so on. Also, Karsenti is resolute in his wish to retain the phrase “philosophy of the social sciences” as best expressing the problems that he views as central. It is at this point that I begin to diverge from Karsenti. This divergence is not a disagreement. Karsenti provides a thorough, convincing and appealing approach to thinking philosophically about some of the problems within social science. He also points to certain key concepts which will be taken up in this book. For example, that Durkheim’s various discussions of what constitutes a social fact always involve questions of what constitutes collectivity, authority and morality (Karsenti 2013, 60ff.). The interrelations of these concepts can be traced throughout all of Durkheim’s works from *The Division of Labour* to his final major text *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. As will be seen in the next two chapters, it is precisely Durkheim’s on-going and shifting attempts to come to terms with these questions which epitomize his problematical relation to the social.

More generally speaking, it is possible to identify a problem, a problematic, which runs throughout Durkheim’s text which is both sociological and philosophical. Indeed, as his thoughts develop, Durkheim seems to deal with such questions more and more philosophically up to the point where it becomes possible to talk of his own “philosophy of the social” (see Chapter Three). It is well-known that many major sociologists always have been interested in, and have situated themselves in relation to, philosophers and philosophical questions: for example, Marx and Hegel; Durkheim and Kant’s categories; Weber and German idealism. This is not, however, my main point. What is of interest, in terms of this book, is the extent to which these writers “do” philosophy in Karsenti’s sense of the word. Approaching their texts in this manner entails that each chapter of the book is, itself, a development of a philosophy of the social.

To clarify further what I mean by a “philosophy of the social”: it is not the application of an already-existing approach or set of concepts to a field

within sociology or social theory. It is a way of teasing out a problem, or set of interrelated problems, that are immanent to social theory. The philosophical element comes from the manner in which this is done. Following Karsenti (2013, 9) and Stengers (2009, 18–19), I believe that the manner of philosophy implies a constraint upon thought. It is not simply speculation or the rendering of certain problems according to already-established criteria. Each act of philosophy or philosophical reading “invents its own rigour” (Karsenti 2013, 10). This is not easy to justify in abstract. The chapters which follow will attempt to provide such a justification through the readings that they develop of the various ways in which Durkheim, Marx and Weber deal with the problem of the social. To put it another way, the concept of “the social” is indicative of a problem which can and should be dealt with philosophically. These themes will be drawn together and developed in the final chapter in which the work of Alfred North Whitehead is presented as offering a novel approach to this “philosophy of the social”.

Latour, or not Latour?

It may be surprising to some that I have managed to discuss the contemporary problematic status of the conceptual status of “the social” without, so far, mentioning Bruno Latour, for it is he who has, in many ways, provided the most sustained critique and reconceptualization of sociology’s concepts of society, sociality and the social (Latour 1993, 2005).

For example, one day in 1991, Bruno Latour sat down to read his daily newspaper. In it he found articles on, among other things, the hole in the ozone layer, computers, contraceptives and whales wearing tracking devices. Latour reports that he found it difficult to work out which bits of these stories related to the natural world and which to the cultural realm. “All of culture and all of nature get churned up every day” (Latour 1993, 2). The belief that there is a strict separation between what is natural and what is cultural is a mistaken one, Latour argues. It is an inconsistent dogma which lies at the heart of how Western, modern, humans think of themselves and of the world. Latour sets himself the task of tracing this inconsistency and states, provocatively, in the title of his book, that *We Have Never Been Modern*. One main strand of his account is that, under what he terms “The Modern Constitution” (Latour 1993, 13ff.), a strict and seemingly irreconcilable gulf has been manufactured between Nature and Society. On one side there are, supposedly, the objects, things and organisms which make up Nature. Society, on the other hand, is populated by humans and their politics, economics, literature and so on. Much effort goes into attempting to keep these separate and pure. For, it would seem that if we allow politics or economics into matters of nature (or science) then we have tainted such nature. Equally, if we allow nature into the social realm