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The return of society

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Abstract
This article is a plea for the idea of society in sociological theory. Even though the industrial national societies no longer exist, the successive crises that we have encountered show that we need a general concept to account for social life. Thus sociology should be enabled to remain a moral and political philosophy.

Keywords
Critique, institutions, social integration, society, sociological theory

This text is doubly contextualised.

It is the text of a sociologist now far removed from professional circles and the career and reputation issues that inevitably lead to 'placing' oneself in the professional 'field', if only to 'place' one's students, to get funding and to publish in the journals of the 'milieu'. This position may bring the virtues of distance and memory, but it undoubtedly also entails a dose of disenchantment, bitterness even, in the face of the state of a sociology atomised into a myriad of objects, paradigms and critical points of view. To me sociology seems to have lost much of its intellectual and political influence.

In terms of context, this article is written at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. It is clear to everyone that the health crisis is only the first step in a social and political crisis that will last for a long time and will cause more victims and more deaths than the virus alone. In my view, this crisis should bring a resurgence to the sociology of society that has become nothing more than a testimony of ancient times, an ideology of the founding fathers to which most current sociologies turn their backs despite a few agreed-upon reverences. The question that arises today – and will become even more important

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tomorrow – is about our capacity to build a social life that is sufficiently united and liveable. Society or barbarism! It is not clear at all what society will be like after the crisis. On the other hand, there is the prospect of barbarism: authoritarian regimes, hate campaigns, nationalism, irrationality, unlimited reign of the market, absurd inequalities and so on.

Of course, this return of society will not be that of the industrial and national societies we lived in until the 1970s, which were certainly not a golden age. But we will have to return to some form of society. If sociology does not devote itself to this task, if it does not assume itself to be the political and moral science of society, it risks becoming a small disciplinary niche combining more or less solid techniques with general criticism, while serious people will be doing economics and cognitive science.

A 'demand' for society

A desire for society

With the lockdown, each of us discovers the value of social life. First of all, there is the suffering of solitude and the disappearance of rituals and collective experiences: no more outings, no more shared meals, no more parties, no more stadiums, no more shows, no more weddings and funerals, no more school, no more co-workers, no more crowds, no more noise, no more 'density' of life, no more 'collective effervescence' and so on. Where the vast majority of sociologists saw only gregarious submissions, logics of distinction and strategic achievement, where no one was fooled by the manipulation of needs and more or less subtle forms of domination, everyone discovers that social life has a value as such. Everyone discovers that they are a Durkheimian. We don't go to concerts just for the pleasure of distinction, we also go for the happiness of being together; we don't work just to earn a living but also to feel useful and to be with others, comrades, colleagues and so on.[1] In short, social life has a value and, very strangely, sociologists have ended up forgetting the strength of the thousand rites that allow us to live in modern societies that are nevertheless described as 'individualistic' and disenchanted. When the society that is in each of us moves away, we discover emptiness, despair and panic and we fight against anomie. We understand that the most intimate subject, the most individual and singular, is a social subject. With the lockdown, the external social emptiness quickly becomes an unbearable internal emptiness.

With the virus, we also rediscover that society holds together through the division of labour and through adjustments in roles and functions; it holds together because society is something like a system of interdependencies. Suddenly, the functional and organic image of social life, which used to be called society, imposes itself upon us. What remains of society holds because each person fulfils their role, because activities are nested into each other, because the work of each person is part of a collective work, because jobs are practical achievements and vocations. Suddenly, we rediscovered systems and organisations, starting with the hospital and so on. If the caregivers hadn't been a bit 'Parsonian' in combining technical skills with moral universalism, no one would have been cared for. Similarly, if the teachers had not seen their role as a vocation, the majority of students would have been abandoned. We rediscovered those we had stopped

seeing: the cashiers, the truck drivers, the bakers, the caretakers and so on. We saw that school was not only a machine for producing and reproducing inequalities, but that it was an essential space for socialisation for children, for adolescents and for their parents who are able to work only if school does its job.

This is all so trivial, I'm almost embarrassed to say. It would have appeared, just a few weeks ago, as an expression of the naivety and foolishness of those who think that we are interdependent, that work has meaning, that institutions, 'functions', status and social roles underpin society as much as individuals. Naivety of those who think that social action is neither the pursuit of interests nor the internalisation of domination, or even a combination of both. Foolishness of those who think that social conflicts are not war because they call for compromises and institutions rather than the liquidation of the adversary.

The lost society

I have just mentioned the return of the idea of society 'from above', from the desire for solidarity and equality. But the demand for society has long since manifested itself in much darker aspects. For many individuals, often the least advantaged, the absence of society or the disappearance of society becomes a haunting and painful experience. The movements that, for want of a better term, are called 'populist' are not simply a symptom of economic difficulties and social inequalities, as the cases of Austria or Norway show, or that of France which is more populist than Spain despite the fact that the latter is hit harder by unemployment. Populist sensitivities, spilling over into the traditional right-wing and some radical left-wing groups, are organised around complaints in which society becomes a lost world that one would like to find again. Here, society takes the place of the traditional community in the second half of the 19th century.

Populist rhetoric denounces the disappearance of 'functional' economies and social structures organised around the complementarity of the division of labour and a central class conflict as a way of reading social life and situating solidarity in a functional order (the Saint Simonian 'beehive') and in a negotiated conflict. Populists claim the concept of social class has become exhausted and seek to replace it with a chain of social inequalities experienced, on a more individual and subjective level, as a form of *contempt* rather than of exploitation, and as a disorder through precariousness, disaffiliation, competition of victims, the triumph of 'selfishness'[2] and so on. From then on, they call for the return of national economies, homogeneous nations, the strong state and the Fordist industrial order which are, however, lost forever; to rebuild society, they would have to get out of Europe and the world.

General corruption, electoral absenteeism and the logic of voting 'against' tell us in a thousand ways that politics has ceased to represent society, that it is powerless and that it is no longer the expression of a 'social contract'.[3] It is the reign of mistrust, particularly in France, and of an appeal to a leader, to the State, to republican purity against the symbolic and practical weakness of democracy. Democracy cannot represent society when political parties stop being the expression of classes and 'social forces', and when politics is increasingly powerless in the face of global economic

and financial forces, and in the face of delegations of sovereignty to various international bodies. The image of society engendered by a political contract – French representation if ever there was – breaks down, accentuating the feeling individuals have of abandonment.

This last theme, perhaps the most violent, is the obsession with the denationalisation of society. One 'discovers' that society is no longer based on a national community, which without doubt has always been imaginary, but strongly experienced.[4] While one might have thought that society and the nation were two ways of referring to the same thing, one by its functions and the other by its culture, it appears that the nation is no longer what one thought it was now the image of 'diversity' is imposed everywhere, now it becomes clear that society is no longer based on a culture shared by all, now the American melting pot and the French melting pan become myths and lost ideals. Hence the call for the return of an exclusive, racist and xenophobic nation in some cases, and for religion as a supranational identity in others, and these calls are not, as is too often claimed, derived from social problems; both have their own symbolic economy. Ultimately, the end of the interlocking of an economy, a political sovereignty and a national culture in the same whole is seen as a tragedy by all those who think that society is breaking up and abandoning them.

Although these nostalgic appeals to the imagination of a lost society have become reactionary, xenophobic, racist, anti-liberal, unrealistic and dangerous for rights and democracy, they are very much in the mainstream of social thinking. A sort of viral Fox News reigns over the continuous news channels and over a large part of the political speeches that promise to regain society from globalisation, foreigners, blind finance, Europe, or the reign of individualism. With no moral equivalence, the two sides of the call to society, the Maurassian on the right and the radical anti-capitalist on the left, share some of the same grief and nostalgia, and citizens who swing from one to the other may find it difficult to distinguish between them.

Dream of a new society for some, nostalgia for a lost society for others, there is a good chance that political life in the coming months will be dominated by this debate. The debate is all the more obscure since intellectual life is not immune to the general panic. With the crisis of the virus, many experts and intellectuals have become a caricature of themselves; they had predicted everything and know all the solutions. Each one reduces their anguish by affirming that the crisis confirms their analyses: neo-liberal globalisation, *deus ex machina* and sole cause of a multiform evil, technology, China, the revenge of 'mother earth' and so on. The virus would be the providential revolutionary agent destroying neoliberal globalisation, but it would also be the enemy's weapon, punishment and salvation. In short, as in the time of the plague, we are navigating between the apocalypse, redemption and the search for scapegoats: the Chinese, the Americans, Europe, capitalists and finance, science, foreigners, Jews and so on. Everything is good when one needs to demonstrate that behind uncertain causes, there are hidden intentions and that one can therefore indicate culprits and conspiracies.

Rise and decline of society

What is society?

What unravels through these heterogeneous and heteroclite appeals to a lost world, through these feelings and emotions, is the idea of a set of *integration* mechanisms – economic, cultural, political – a notion that has now almost disappeared from the sociological vocabulary.[5] In this representation of social life, society is, at the same time, a moral person, an epistemology and a narrative.

The moral person was based on the idea of functional, 'holistic' solidarity, as opposed to the image of solidarity resulting from common, imposed adherence to religious values on the one hand, and to the miracles of the market alone on the other. In France, this representation was consubstantial with solidarist thinking and the formation of the welfare state. The theme of industrial society appeared as the counterpoint to capitalism; it is capitalism that has become organisation, it is regulated conflict, it is the market nested in society.[6] As Mauss thought, society is a theory of expanded giving.[7]

But society is not only a functional system, it is also a conception of social action. Integration is always twofold, systemic and functional and at the same time social and subjective; it is based on social structure and on social action itself.[8] If there is a strong theme in the idea of society, it is what has been defined as institutional individualism.[9] Society 'holds' because the actors have learned to accomplish freely what society expects of them. All the strength of this conception comes from the fact that social action cannot be reduced to conditioning; individuals become autonomous subjects because socialisation by the universal values of the great modern society gives them the capacity to self-actualise while more or less conforming to the 'functional' requirements of social life. Durkheim, Elias, Freud, Mead, Parsons, Riesman, Simmel and many others have developed various versions of this individualism which 'miraculously' combines subjective freedom, universal values and conformity to norms. Socialisation, habitus, roles and personalities, Me, We, I, Superego and the ideal of the Self are part of these various theoretical constructs. For the most part, the sociology of society has sought to demonstrate the profound correspondence of the actor and the system perceived as two parts of the whole. This conception of social action supposes that there is always a distance between Us and Me, and even more so between Me and I, a distance from the irreducible singularity of individuals, that of neurosis and depression, but also that of reflexivity and criticism. In sociology, as in the novel, all the tragedy of human action and experience comes from the fact that the individual's ability to fit in the modern social world is never total because real society never accurately follows its theoretical model.

From an epistemological point of view, the sociology of society aims at founding the ontological consistency of the social world: it is there, it resists and it functions. Although it is not natural like nature, it is 'objective', governed by 'laws' and regularities. Built by humans, society nevertheless imposes itself as a reality. No need to be a Marxist or a functionalist to adhere to this conception, society is an objective fact that is different and superior to the mere sum of individual actions and subjectivities. Contrary to a constructivist critique that has become routine and conventional, this position has never prevented any sociologist, beginning with Durkheim, from thinking that this social

world is constructed and that all categories, including those of nature and understanding, are social in nature. The fact remains that the sociology of society is, to a certain extent, naturalistic: society exists, it resists, and it is not enough to deconstruct it for it to dissolve.

In the end, the sociology of society is a theory of modernity. It is a *narrative* that, it has become easy to show, universalises the history of some western societies, Germany, France, Great Britain and the United States, to make into a kind of natural history of humanity. With the notions of rationalisation, division of labour, functional segmentation, secularisation, individuality, equality, sociology inscribes the description of societies in evolution rather than in history. But if modernity is a 'providence', as Tocqueville would have said, there is no proof that it escapes tyranny, the iron cage, the feeling of emptiness and barbarism.

It is this whole set of normative postulates and 'facts' that has been assembled under the notion of society. From then on, the idea of society has functioned as a 'ghost', as Latour says,[10] as an object of research and as an ontological and moral person controlling sociological reasoning and the way modern societies understand themselves in an ever-renewed departure from tradition. It is perceived as the natural form of social life in modernity, it is both the object of sociology and what explains the functioning of this object – at the risk of an irreducible tautology well highlighted by Popper. In this case, the sociology of society is a theology as revealed by the Durkheimian conception of religion as the essence of a transcendent social system. The whole question is whether sociology can do without this framework, or something like it.

National industrial societies are no longer modern

The idea of society has played a central role in the history of sociology, but it has not established itself as the indisputable paradigm of the social sciences. It has not acquired the place of the marginalist theory of value and general equilibrium in classical economic theory. It is probably for this reason that sociology can be considered to have lost the battle against economics to define social reality.[11]

The gradual disappearance of the idea of society can be explained first of all by the transformation of societies themselves, since the idea of society was born in modern, industrial, national and often imperialist societies from the second half of the 19th century onwards. The sociology of the last 50 years has constantly highlighted the exhaustion of this model by accumulating analyses in terms of 'crisis'. With the exception of sociology textbooks, the idea of society survives only in the narrative of its decomposition and disenchantment. In fact, as I have just mentioned, everything tends to show that forms of life and social organisation no longer fit into the framework of society which becomes a theoretical aporia identical to the idea of community as it left the scene; society survives only in the distance we are away from it.

There is no shortage of works describing the transformations of a social structure organised around class conflict and a functional division of labour. The wage society, which bases identities, solidarities, conflicts and political representations on work and social classes, is irresistibly disappearing.[12] Inequalities no longer seem to form a system, at the same time that some are being reduced others are growing, and individuals are

caught up in these contradictory mechanisms. With the weak superimposition of cleavages and the generalisation of statutory incongruities, inequalities disperse and breakup. They are reinforced while at the same time becoming fragmented. Inequalities are all the more badly tolerated or, on the contrary, all the more accepted, the more they are experienced as individual trials and the more the axes of reading are multiplied: age, gender culture, 'race' and so on.[13] The theme of 'intersectionality' says it all: one is unequal *as* a woman, a member of a minority, a worker, a homosexual, a graduate and so on.

It seems self-evident that this evolution distinguishing between cosmopolitans and locals, insiders and outsiders, creatives and others stems from changes in technology and management, and even more from the decline of national industrial economies: individuals living in the same society are no longer engaged in the same markets, in the same networks, and therefore can no longer conceive of the complementary aspects of their work. The image of the national 'beehive' associated with that of the struggle between a national working class and 'its' bourgeoisie seems irretrievably past and, with it, that of a division of labour ensuring integration when class conflict turns into social progress.

A second theme, which has also recurred for half a century, is that of the 'crisis' of institutions and institutional individualism. Gradually, subjectivities are said to have become disengaged from the social roles and moral expectations that once conditioned and controlled them. 'Forced to be free', the contemporary modern individual would no longer be defined by a robust autonomy forged by institutions, but by a feeling of emptiness, narcissism and enrolment in continuous competition. Individuality is then described as a test constructed by the deviation from the structure of roles and subjectivities, revealing a crisis of the symbolic dimension of institutions that would be nothing more than control apparatuses, service industries and the product of contextual and unstable arrangements.

So, most of the work devoted to the nation dismantles the myth of national identities and narratives, it reveals the cultural plurality of old nations and the return of the repressed colonial. They reveal that nations no longer correspond to societies. The distinction between nation and society has become obvious with the multitude of works on migration, globalisation 'from above', that of the elites, and 'from below', that of the diasporas, with discrimination, ethnic and religious clashes and so on. The formation of culturally homogeneous national societies no longer seems to be the natural aim of modernity that was expected by both the colonial powers and the anti-imperialist movements.

All descriptions of the decline of industrial, national and modern societies open space for a host of essays that emphasise the 'post', the 'liquid', the 'void' . . . so many ways of saying that, henceforth, the social is not the society. There are countless criticisms of all categories of the anthropological and ontological foundations of the idea of society, but the destruction of these categories does not mean, for the moment, that new ones are being formed. Consequently, sociologists fall back on an elementary and ultimately reasonable assertion: everything is social, but the social is not society. Thus, at the risk of dilution, sociology has widened its territory, the social becomes broader and more floating than society ever was.[14]

The sociological disappearance of the idea of society

It is obviously difficult to distinguish 'real' society from its representations, and that includes its sociological representations. The sociological decomposition of the idea of society has taken several paths that I will characterise in broad terms to avoid getting lost in the currents and undercurrents of thought, and by not making intellectual judgements about these currents from which I often borrow. The point is not to classify or rank the sociological schools; my purpose is to show that the theoretical creativity of the past half-century converges towards the disappearance of the idea of society as I have outlined it.

The reified and disenchanted society

The strongest argument that could be made against my brief account is the place held by Bourdieu's sociology in French sociology. Even more, I hypothesise that Bourdieu's success is due to the fact that he pushed the idea of society and system to the limit: the congruence of the actor and the system, the structuring of inequalities, the convergence of economic interests and symbolic economies and so on. It is not excessive to read Bourdieu as a hyper-functionalist. Indeed, in his theory, actors only move, protest or suffer to the extent that the mechanisms of the congruence of actor and system weaken. They only suffer disorder. Conflicts arise from the inadequacies of habitus and contexts, from downgrading and classification struggles; in other words, the problem is anomie, the misalignment of habitus and positions. 'Total' and disenchanted, society then presents itself as a system of hidden and internalised dominations, of tricks and bad faith, all proceeding from a necessity: the reproduction of a society conceived as a system of economic and social inequalities backed by an order of symbolic domination. Faced with actors constructed with the rigour of socialisation that imposes effective measures and strategies at an early stage (effective because they are unconscious and naturalised), the sociologist can only denounce the human comedy of the 'clever' and 'half-clever' unmasked by Pascal. But the sociologist is a Pascal without faith; the gift is impossible because it is an obligation and an interest, art is a distinction, democracy is a cunning ploy and so on. In a way, Bourdieu hardens the idea of society while emptying it of all moral content under the double focus of utilitarianism and hyper-socialisation. Durkheim plus Marx, plus Gary Becker and Coleman, plus a 'cynical' reading of Goffman and so on. However, Bourdieu's last engagements perhaps reveal a more defensive than critical attitude when social change sometimes seems reduced to the liberal project of destroying society, a society that is nevertheless devoid of breath and action, but a society that should be defended in spite of everything because it ensures the security of individuals in a social order, however unjust it may be. If the school, for example, is only a machine for whitewashing and justifying social inequalities, why defend it against liberal reforms that would at least have the merit of revealing their true nature and not advancing in disguise?

To a large extent, Bourdieu remains a sociologist of society far more classical than he often suggests. His sociological program aims to establish strong correspondences between subjectivities, actions and position structures that are broken down into a series

of formally homologous fields; all these analyses fit together like Russian dolls. In this critical version of the idea of society, domination is the hidden mainspring of social life. But it is a radical critique without a revolutionary project and, *a fortiori,* without a reform project since reproduction and domination always win in the end. In this world, there is only one real subject, the sociologist themself, the only one capable of denouncing the masks of domination. Provided that this denunciation is not, in turn, a new ruse of domination! It is easy to understand the voluptuousness conferred by this posture, which neither 'facts' nor criticisms can undermine. Criticisms and dissonant facts are part of the general mechanism of masking domination. The idea of society is reified, rigidified to such an extent that it has lost the charms and illusions of those who saw it as a form of progress and emancipation, at least of those who saw it as a political and moral project that the workers could use to oppose capitalist violence and bourgeois egoism.

Focus on individuals and interactions

Over and against this crystallisation of the idea of society, the social sciences are swept away by the success of the economic paradigm as a theory of action and social order; action conforms to the utilitarian blueprint, and social order is the involuntary product of the aggregation of individual actions. This paradigm has the advantage of being 'economic'. It mobilises few axioms and does not require heavy anthropological and normative prerequisites. Rational action, useful action, is simply that which one accomplishes. This paradigm can be formalised and can be extended beyond strictly economic exchanges when the reign of 'good reasons' is supposed to apply to all aspects of social life. As Laval and Dardot clearly show, the normative concerns of a Smith, a Bentham or a Stuart Mill are gradually disappearing from a theory that thus presents itself as the only truly scientific social science.[15] Today, economists are remaking sociology, often without knowing it, and in any case the holistic 'collective beings' disputed by Popper are disappearing, starting with society itself which is replaced by the sum of emerging effects and regulatory mechanisms. Top down integration is replaced by emerging cohesion. More than sociologists, economists have become experts on social reality, advisors to princes and the best analysts of the processes of globalisation. Also, many sociological currents have taken up this model in the various theories of rational choice and, whatever the contributions and developments of these theories, there is no longer any room for society.

Probably far too quickly, it can also be said that the idea of society has been replaced by that of interaction. While the model of society consists of explaining the micro by the macro, interactionism and a certain pragmatism go, conversely, from the finer grain of the explanation to the larger grain. The ethnomethodological current has taken this logic further by affirming that the idea of society, of its mechanisms and its overarching frameworks, is only a way of accounting, of constructing the ad hoc common world of each interaction, a world that must be explained by its most tenuous elements. Parsons' students, such as Garfinkel, have totally reversed the teacher's reasoning: the social order is not already there, it is a continuous achievement of interaction.

These modes of disappearance of society are accentuated by what we have to call a deconstructivist doxa. Under the pretext that everything is socially constructed – an

obviously acceptable postulate – it is often inferred that these constructions are arbitrary and without 'real' foundations, that they only hold and resist thanks to the effects of belief, imposition and linguistic performativity. It would suffice to deconstruct them for the 'facts' to disappear. How many articles begin with a preamble presented as a revelation – vaguely humiliating for the somewhat informed reader – explaining that social categories: gender, ethnicity, culture, state, nation, professions . . . are social constructs! But once this is said, we do as before, even if it means changing the words so that the 'facts' disappear with it, in the same way that inclusive writing would destroy gender domination. What magical thinking!

We must question a vulgate asserting that, since everything is social and constructed – which is not a revelation – everything is arbitrary, has no real consistency, does not resist, is not a 'social fact' relatively independent of attitudes and judgements.[16] Society no longer defines the ontological reality of social life (as shown by the avatars of the notion of culture) which becomes both a stigmatising construction and a legitimate claim.[17] Explaining the conduct of actors by means of their culture has become a major fault; a stigmatising and reifying culturalism. Culture is itself a social construction and even though everyone can freely detach themself from it, it is a way of assigning identities, even when we do not always know who assigns them. But at the same time sociologists, and often the same sociologists hostile to culturalist reifications, vigorously defend the right of each person and each group to the recognition of their own cultural identity. Although culture is a construction and does not really exist, it is also a 'sacred' good. On one side, culture is a construction imposed on individuals; on the other, it is a vital dimension of all authentic existence.[18] Chased out of the door of domination, the culturalist devil returns through the window of good feelings.

Between the studies and the global

One only has to read a treatise on sociology, especially an American one, to see that sociology presents itself as a largely fragmented field in which the logic of objects imposes itself on the logic of 'great theories' held to be useless and impossible. Changes in the organisation of scientific work: career building, forms of recognition, competition sharpened by the number of competitors and so on lead to increased specialisation and a juxtaposition of local and ad hoc theories linked to various objects, and to the construction of careers in increasingly narrow fields.[19] It is as if a few general theories had ceased to apply to particular objects, and as if each object closed in on itself, on its journals, its scientific committees, its colloquia and its networks, with increasingly heterogeneous theoretical 'bricolages'. The organisation of work in terms of *Studies* is the result of this process; each social question is first deconstructed and becomes the object of multidisciplinary approaches, organised into a scientific community with the ambition of seeing the world from the point of view of the *Study* in question. The collective capacity for research and the production of precise knowledge has increased and become largely internationalised, but this fragmentation distances sociology from social thought and public debate, despite the references to the now obligatory 'public sociology'.

On the other hand, when sociologists try to do 'global sociology' in the name of a legitimate criticism of 'methodological nationalism', they point out that everything is in

everything, the global and the local, the national and the international, and that is hardly questionable. But is it really a global sociology? In fact, researchers most often adopt the categories of the international benchmark, those of the OECD and the World Bank and, even more naively, the categories of the dominant power that naturally thinks of itself as universal and global. No known American sociologist is local; almost all the others – Africans, Asians, Europeans, Latinos – are threatened with remaining local, except those co-opted by the major American universities and international networks.

Global thinking, which is not necessarily 'global sociology', then becomes the prerogative of the social and moral philosophers who deal with the age-old questions of freedom, equality and fraternity and whose debates aspire to a certain universality. We no longer know whether Habermas, Honneth, Sandel, Sen, Taylor, Walzer and so on are philosophers or sociologists, and many sociologists try to achieve a sense of generality and address collective issues through these philosophical detours, particularly through theories of justice.

The critical explosion

An academic standard

Who's not critical? It would be difficult today to oppose a sociology of society, a conservative sociology of order, to a critical sociology, a sociology of conflict and domination. Almost all sociologists adopt a critical stance and announce it at the opening of their most academic publications. Critical points of view have become commonplace, multiplied, and are now part of normal professional canons. Critical indignation does not hinder careers, but so promotes them, as shown by the dominant position of the Bourdieu School in a large number of French universities, laboratories and professional institutions. Critical indignation has become part of the routine professional culture, at the risk of being nothing more than 'radical academicism'.[20]

While the sociology of society incorporated some critical principles, critical standpoints multiplied: domination and conflict against the postulate of functional order, the 'disenchantment' of the world against modernity, the first Frankfurt School combining the two theories, Marx plus Weber, plus Lukács. With the distance from industrial society, the theme of the exploitation and alienation of blue-collar work was overshadowed by that of discrimination. Not only can all inequalities can be perceived in terms of discriminations, but discriminations proceed less from a systemic logic than they arise from the naturalisation of social categories and the violence of interactions. Therefore, the critical position sticks to the analysis of all social life.

Thus, deconstructive criticism starts from gender, the post-colonial, heterosexual norms and so on. And since these all-powerful social categories are supposed to totally determine identities and subjectivities, only those who are discriminated against, or the researchers who speak for them, are empowered to critique. I remember a stay in Californian universities where each research centre was defined by discrimination (*gay and lesbian studies, Afro-American studies, native studies, Japanese and Korean studies*, etc.), and where all the researchers belonged to the minority studied and based a large part of their legitimacy on this belonging. In the same way, it becomes difficult, perhaps

even illegal, to study minority groups, such as Native Americans, without being a member of that group, since study by someone other than oneself would be part of a post-colonial or post-genocidal domination. Strangely enough, this criticism underscores the arbitrary nature of the identities on which discrimination is based, while at the same time making these same identities sacred. It is easier to understand why only those who are part of it are allowed to speak. With this extension of the reign of discrimination, the meaning and value of criticism are directly indexed to the identity of the person making the criticism.

It will be observed, however, that the explosion of such criticism is largely confined to campuses and that everyday social life remains far removed from it, if not hostile to it. I have even observed that those who are victims of discrimination, and who are not unaware of it, are often distrustful, even hostile, towards analyses and theories that assign them to more or less total identities and that invalidate their fatally alienated experience. The critical point of view assumes that the discriminated person does not know what is happening to them and so they delude themself, but fortunately the sociologist is there![21] The radicality and multiplication of these criticisms often lead to satisfying oneself with the pleasures of indignation since it becomes easy, and almost automatic, to demonstrate that all policies that try to act on the problems denounced are nothing but tricks that the sociologist is never fooled by. Just as the exception 'proves' the rule, quota policies stigmatise but their absence discriminates. Identity attribution alienates and its denial is a form of contempt. In a world reduced to the internalisation of domination, even by the dominant, the world is bad and the will to reform is perverse. The sociologist can denounce mechanisms from which no one but the sociologist can escape, although one wonders how they gain access to this astonishing privilege.

When domination and discrimination are total, all victims of injustice become 'innocent' and just; the injustice suffered makes the victim just by nature. Obviously this postulate is of variable geometry. The poor offender is a victim of injustice and a sort of Robin Hood in spite of themself; but the same poor person who beats their spouse must be severely condemned even if they are as much a victim as an offender. The one who hates the police is a resistance fighter, but the same one who hates immigrants is a bastard, and many hate cops, immigrants and women at the same time. Fortunately, the old sociologists of society naively attached to outdated illusions of democratic society did not morally justify the vote of German proletarians in favour of Hitler, under the pretext, however indisputable, that they were miserable, reduced to unemployment by the crisis of 1929, and humiliated by the German defeat of 1918. Critique has become routine and ends up being mere posturing, in the same way that radical criticism of university selection stops at the door of the Ivy Leagues for which children of the upper middle classes (of which the critical sociologist is usually a member) are prepared. In this critical universe, the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility no longer seem to have anything in common.[22] From the point of view of a functionalism of the worst kind, it would be possible to ask whether these critical postures are not also devices of the system because the 'people' – the positive horizon of these criticisms – look elsewhere and no longer vote, or do so badly.

Sociology of 'ordinary' criticism

The exhaustion of the great frameworks of overarching criticism and the expansion of criticism have, in my view, had a happy result: the development of research on 'ordinary' criticism. Rather than developing an a priori critique, it is necessary to study the repertoires, principles and modes of argumentation that individuals deploy in their ordinary and situated critiques of social injustices.[23] In a society where criticism is a commonplace cognitive and moral activity, showing that actors are not as duped as the theories of domination postulate, it is important to know what is perceived as unjust and, even more, why what is perceived as unjust is unjust, in the name of which principles and representations.[24] We then 'discover' what we already knew: some inequalities appear to be just and 'necessary' while others are not. The criteria of micro-justice are not always the same as those that concern the whole of social life. Actors may adhere to principles of justice that contradict each other. Criticism of actors is embedded in cultural and social frameworks that profoundly transform the experience of individuals – as shown in Lamont's study on the experience of racism in several countries.[25] The most subjective experience of discrimination is embedded in political and moral frameworks and in national narratives of struggles that give it singular meanings and determine modes of resilience and struggle. The sociology of critique differs profoundly from the thousand versions of critical sociology because it is based on the categories of actors rather than on the emotions and ideas of the sociologist, who is always tempted to think that their indignation confers them a certain moral greatness.

However pragmatic it may be, the sociology of critique demonstrates that while the criticisms of actors are always contextualised, if they cover particular interests, they are obliged to rise to a generality and to construct arguments and justifications that refer to the representations and normative principles of what was considered a society. 'Real' or not, society is a philosophical and moral framework that no one can really dispense with, except by choosing to be out of the world – or above it.

Why we need society

It goes without saying that the idea of society as a representation of industrial, democratic and national societies is definitively dead. Worse, it has even become worrying. In France, the nationalist/republican/Fordist theme, coming from the right and the left, calls for the return of the 'enchanted' moment of a homogenous nation, a strong state and an unequal but reassuring labour order. Generally speaking, the so-called populist movements are driven by this dream of a lost society which, however, does not entail any defined economic or social policy. The economic nationalism of Bolsonaro, Johnson, Orban, Salvini and Trump is certainly neither anti-liberal nor social. But it is not because populist responses to a demand for society are unacceptable that this demand can be ignored or that the problem has disappeared. The problems of the nature of the social order, of solidarity, of action and institutions have not been solved. I will limit myself to indicating a few problems that necessarily call for a theory of society.

What solidarity?

If we look at modern societies or modern segments of societies, the affirmation of the principle of the fundamental equality of all has gradually been extended to those who were excluded from it: women, minorities, and individualists can now claim equality. Complementarily, the circle of freedom also seems to have widened in terms of the ability to choose one's own conception of a good life. Almost all choices become legitimate as long as they are perceived as an expression of individual freedom and authenticity. At the same time, however, social inequalities are widening everywhere, sometimes dramatically, especially in the United States. The affirmation of the fundamental equality and equal freedom of all does not translate into social equality. Most often, this paradox is explained as a mechanical consequence of capitalism, and since financial capitalism is today almost out of the control of states and social movements, actors suffer inequalities as an external constraint, as a kind of fatal disease, as a virus. This analysis is not false, especially when it comes to explaining the explosion in the income of the richest 1 per cent or 0.1 per cent.

But for the rest, economists themselves explain that the development of inequalities is a social production resulting from public policies and the behaviour of individuals that generate inequalities, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes willingly. When one can, one chooses the residential community, just as one resolutely chooses educational inequalities for one's own children. In short, one chooses unequal behaviour while condemning its consequences. Moreover, in the name of equality of opportunity and the responsibility of each individual, the causes of poverty and unemployment are mainly attributed to the poor and the unemployed themselves. It would therefore be legitimate not to want to pay for them any more, just as some rich regions in Europe no longer want to pay for others. The solidarity 'contract' behind social transfer mechanisms is less and less visible and less and less legitimate.[26]

Ultimately, the development of inequalities is essentially the result of the decline of solidarity, which invited people to pay for those they did not know but nevertheless felt close to and dependent on. In France in particular, solidarity was based on the very idea of society. I am willing to pay debts and claims against me when society is supposed to be based on a functional link; I am willing to pay if an imaginary bond of fraternity – national, religious or simply human – binds me to fellow human beings; I am willing to pay if democratic political life represents a social contract. But when this block of representations, imaginations and beliefs is exhausted, I do not see why I should pay. This vacuum is now filled by a dream of regressive, communitarian, exclusive solidarity; we pay for those who are like us and for those who deserve it. Solidarity works to the exclusion of those who are not like us and do not deserve it. Against this tendency, it is obvious that the idea of society has irreplaceable moral and cognitive force, even though its old incarnation in the industrial society of *Les Trente Glorieuses* (1945–1975) is over. The task of sociology is not only to criticise the unfortunate turn of social life, it must be to intellectually reconstruct the framework of society. Whether it likes it or not, the question is put to it, and it is its very usefulness that is at stake. The ability to construct a theoretical framework that encompasses structures, cultures and forms of action, the

ability to offer a reasoned image of social life that can be appropriated by actors, even in their confrontations, remains a central issue, today as it was 150 years ago.

No one can ignore the fact that the economic crisis that will follow the pandemic will be much worse than the health crisis alone. Either we will continue as before, with an even higher level of violence, hatred and resentment, and sociologists will continue to denounce inequalities, to say that it is not right and to protest, or sociological criticism will be based on social philosophy and a project for society. It will question inequalities that are considered unjust or relatively acceptable by actors without looking for the hand of domination. It will question the limits of the welfare state as it is conceived and which protects less than we thought, while at the same time relieving individuals of practical solidarity. I observe that economists ask themselves these questions much more boldly than sociologists; in their view, the economy exists, it has mechanisms, but it is possible to act rather than simply limit oneself to denouncing its effects and the 'construction' of neoliberalism.

Institutions

Based on the case of the school, I have tried to describe the decline of the institutional model by which the French school had become the vector of democratic and national modernity.[27] Identified with the values of modernity, reason, progress, nationhood, equality, the school constructed a symbolic arrangement aimed at producing citizens according to a mechanism often borrowed from that of the church which aimed at the conversion of souls: the 'vocation' of teachers, the sanctuarisation of the school, the emancipation of citizens through the interiorisation of universal principles. This 'institutional programme' has promoted modernity but it has not survived its success and continuous disenchantment. School culture lost its authority, school massification opened up the space for continuous competition in which the instrumental relationship to studies became the norm, the school sanctuary was invaded by social problems, by youth culture and by all the singular demands. The transmission itself seems to be threatened by information technology and the image of the school crisis has become all the more evident as the promises of equal opportunities have not been kept.

This crisis of the school institution is generally approached solely from the angles of efficiency, the level attained by pupils, equity, and the capacity to reduce the impact of social inequalities on educational inequalities. The main thrust of almost all sociology of education is devoted to the question of effective schools and educational inequalities. But what Durkheim defined as 'moral education' seems to have disappeared from the debate, even as the most serious problem is undoubtedly that of the institution itself, of its capacity to institute a subject, and even as the theme of the 'formation of the citizen' has become both ritual and largely contradictory, as shown by the conflicts over the various conceptions of secularism. Between the call for the windfalls of an eternal and perfect republican school and the desire for an understanding and warm school, there is no real educational project.

However, the construction of these projects cannot be based solely on the representation of the virtues that an ideal individual should acquire. The definition of *curricula*, that of school discipline, that of the rights and duties of each individual, that of the

cohabitation of the school world and the world of youth require a representation of what we call society. What qualities are good for individuals *and* for societies? What rights can be granted to children and their parents? What definition of merit in school does not threaten people's dignity? Who owns the school? All these choices of values and all the quarrels they provoke are based, whether one knows it or not, on a conception of society, its 'reality', its culture and its actors. In this area, there is no reason to think that sociology should limit itself to measuring and explaining the formation of inequalities, ignoring fundamental questions. What will replace the 'republican paideia'? What kind of subjects should schools offer if we consider that they should not be reduced to producing the skills of human capital? The answer to these questions calls for a representation of society, the one that exists and the one that could be. And these questions do not only arise with schools; all institutions are concerned, starting with social services, political parties, trade unions and even companies if we think that work is not just a way of losing one's life to make a living.

Recognition and the common

When questioned, people who are discriminated against use two principles of justice to denounce the treatment they receive.[28] The first is that of equality and merit. Discrimination is defined and experienced as the refusal to treat individuals fairly in the various tests, such as access to employment, housing, or the basic respect to which individuals who are equal in principle are entitled. The more individuals feel equal, the more qualified they are and the more they feel 'assimilated' into the majority, the more they feel discriminated against. They therefore call for the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, policies and mechanisms. According to a whole range of criteria, discrimination is a crime. Affirmative action policies such as quotas are being implemented to achieve equal treatment of all individuals, regardless of their gender, sexuality, origin, religion, disability and so on. In terms of meritocratic equality alone, the notion of society is not essential to an understanding of discrimination and the feelings of injustice it causes.

But this egalitarian logic does not encompass the whole experience of those who are discriminated against, because discrimination is based on a set of stereotypes and stigmas that lock individuals into devalued identities. The second principle of justice called for against discrimination is, therefore, recognition of identity. It is not only a matter of being treated as an equal, but also of having one's identity recognised as acceptable and worthy to be on an equal footing with majority identities. In plural societies, the struggle for recognition becomes essential because each identity must be accepted for what it is or what it wants to be. However, while egalitarian claims do not a priori pose problems in democratic societies that value individual merit and the fairness of professional and academic tests, recognition directly questions dominant sexual, religious or national identities, which in turn become particular identities if they give full recognition to minority and allogenic identities.[29] There is no longer a 'normal' identity, there are only singular identities, even if they are in the majority.

It is obviously in this area that majority resistance is strongest, because minority demands threaten the self-evidence of things defined by 'nature' in the case of sexuality,

and by the nation in the case of culture. Treating people who are Muslim fairly is not the same as saying that Islam is part of national identity. Not discriminating against homosexuals is not the same as transforming the traditional definition of family and filiation. For many, the right to recognition is only a matter of tolerance. But this definition is insufficient because the recognition of differences presupposes first of all that we are able to say what we have in common. What we have in common goes far beyond the realm of rights and freedoms alone. It implies that we share bonds of solidarity and common identities in which differences have a place. This definition of what we have in common, which is both social and moral, is based on a representation of what we call society. It requires agreement on what we call the family or the nation, it requires agreement on what is taught in schools, on the place of religion and on the rights of individuals. When Quebecois implemented the 'reasonable accommodation' policy, they did not just seek compromises, they were led to define Quebec society itself, and that is where the problems arose. Today in France, the greatest tensions around Islam do not stem from the 'nature' of Islam, but from the fact that Islam forces us to say what France is or, more exactly, what French society is. The fact that this question is monopolised and instrumentalised by xenophobic and racist movements, sometimes called republican movements, does not exempt us from answering it. What is more, it forces sociologists to address it by redefining modern society.

At a time when we know that everything can flip over as we move towards another future that is not necessarily bright, and we know we are not returning to the status quo ante but to something much worse, sociology could have something to say. Instead of rehearsing the criticisms of the previous world, sociology could make criticisms that belong fully to this world and follow it like its shadow. Sociology could have something valuable to say.

Of course, the modern society built by the founding fathers is no more. Of course, the project of modernity has diffracted into a myriad of modernisation processes. Of course also, the contradictions of the democratic emancipatory project of modernity have widened; the proponents of the most radical cultural liberalism are hostile to economic liberalism while their conservative and liberal enemies end up defending the market against the autonomy of individuals. But if we do not want to live in the war of identities and under the reign of a capitalism that nobody seems to control, then we must rebuild the image of societies, partial and local recompositions of a social life sufficiently integrated and robust for social actors to control their personal freedom and collective destiny.

It is in this sense that the modern project of rebuilding a society must be considered through the study of the thousand ways in which social life is recomposed. How do systems of norms and cultures meet the markets?[30] How do institutions make it possible to act together and build trust? How can autonomous subjectivities and bonds of solidarity be formed? These questions will arise tomorrow when we ask ourselves how and why various national societies have resisted the virus, and how and why they have developed more or less effective and democratic economic and social policies.

These are the questions that sociology should ask itself so that individual trials and collective issues once again appear as two sides of the same coin. Even if society is no longer what it used to be, the modern project of building societies has not run out of

steam. Individuals and social movements need sociology, and sociology should assume part of its vocation. It is a project of knowledge as well as a political and moral philosophy.

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Notes

1. This is shown by all research into work, especially in France where self-fulfilment at work is considered more important than income and integration into a collective. Suffering at work does not preclude the value assigned to work; it is even stronger the more one expects from work.
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18. The controversy around Hugues Lagrange's book *Le déni des cultures,* (Seuil, 2010) is perfectly revealing of this attitude. To say that sub-Saharian migrants arrive with their culture is to stigmatise them and assign them to an identity. But at the same time, it goes without saying that all cultural rights must be granted to them!
19. My observation is similar to that of Andrew Abbott on what he calls 'the bad patch of sociology': infinite fragmentation caused by increased competition that leads researchers to make their careers on micro objects; disciplinary vagueness (literary criticism makes cultural studies); academicism of scientific publications that found legitimacy but have few readers. Sociology is sliding down disciplinary hierarchies. In Demazière, D., & Jouvenet, M. (2016). *Andrew Abbott et l'héritage de l'école de Chicago.* Ed de l'EHESS.
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François Dubet mainly studied social movements, educational systems and social inequalities. He published around 40 books, a few of them pertaining to sociological theory.