

The Idea of a Social Philosophy

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The object of this paper is to rethink the scope, boundaries, and main themes of a philosophical discipline that takes society as its object. Our traditional conceptual map includes a distinction between the territory of *political philosophy* (characterized by themes like political justification, the nature of power, legitimacy, justice, the nature of liberty, of rights, democracy, and so on), the territory of *moral philosophy* (characterized by themes like the correct way of understanding the “moral point of view,” the distinction between the right and the good, the nature of moral obligation, the notion of virtue, etc), and the territory of the *philosophy of law* (where the relevant themes concern the nature of the rule of law, constitutionalism, the phenomenon of law, and once again the nature of rights). Our conceptual map then includes a series of territories corresponding to the various social sciences: political science and political theory, sociology and social theory, social psychology, cultural anthropology, and several others. In each of these disciplines we somehow find the notion of *society* and the related notions of *social action* and of the *social actor* at work. Why should we then bother to redraw the boundaries in order to represent yet another territory on the map, yet another philosophical discipline?

As usual, the reason for rethinking the contours of a somewhat vaguely defined tradition is bound up with identity – with the affirmation of a difference. The reason why today, almost half a century after Peter Winch’s suggestive meditation on “the idea of a social science,” we might be interested considering “the idea of a social *philosophy*” rests on the sober realization that a whole body of philosophical reflections has been sedimented which, if it remains dispersed within a plurality of disciplines and merely functions as supporting evidence for arguments that have their *raison d’être* and main focus elsewhere, risks losing its chance to play the vital catalyzing role that it could play. Instead, this body of reflections, if unified and integrated, could have the potential for giving rise to a great philosophical discipline of recent origin but of no lesser thematic differentiation, theoretical depth, and scope than the other specialties mentioned above and of much greater coherence than the loose field corresponding to what sometimes is today referred to by the term social philosophy.¹

The Birth and Transcendentalization of the Social

Distinctive of my idea of social philosophy is its revolving around the concept of the *social*, as a concept distinct from the older concepts of the *political* and the

moral and irreducible to them. The social, needless to say, is a creature of modernity. Of course Plato and Aristotle addressed questions concerning the conditions of the society in which they lived, but they did so and theorized about society without having a notion of the *social* as distinct from the political.

Ever since it was first conceived, the notion of the social has referred to some kind of coordination of individual action which results in orderliness, where coordination is produced neither by the efficacy of a norm external to the agent nor by any kind of natural, biological, or physical causation. For reasons that would be too difficult to expound here, this idea of the social only arises with modernity and more specifically with the Enlightenment. Moreover, as Habermas has pointed out, it developed in a kind of truncated form: it arose against the background of a burgeoning philosophy of the subject which tended to conflate action and instrumental action. We should then not be surprised by the fact that most philosophers conceived of this coordination of individual actions which results in social order, as opposed to chaos, as a kind of coordination taking place “behind the backs of the concerned agents,” as an unintentional effect of the intentional actions pursued by the individuals. “The invisible hand,” “the ruse of reason,” “private vices, publick virtues,” or the mechanism of social reproduction to which Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, attributes the fact that all societies have put a premium on the ability to appear other than one is – all of these are metaphors and concepts with which social philosophers have tried to capture the idea of a coordination of action via unintentional effects.

Two centuries later, in that comprehensive treatise of social philosophy which the *Theory of Communicative Action* really is, we are finally offered a view of the social which brings the truncated picture to completion. Alongside the so-called “system” type of action coordination, a new kind of coordination of action, based on reciprocal understanding, is investigated. This was a real paradigm revolution, whose potential is still at risk of being dissipated by the revolutionized discipline’s failure to come into its own.

The problem of the coordination of individual action, however, is not the only perspective from which we can make sense of the distinctiveness of the social. Another perspective that can be helpful in this respect is related to the constitution of subjectivity. Already in the thought of Durkheim and Mead, but also in Parsons, we can observe a rethinking of the transcendental as socially constituted and a parallel transcendentalization of the social. On the one hand, the subjectivity-constituting function exerted by the Kantian categories of cognition gets reformulated along social lines, in terms that link them to the here and now of a concrete form of life.² On the other hand, the social becomes transcendentalized in the sense that it is understood in terms that are not merely descriptive: it becomes a condition of the possibility of action that is social, or of “interaction.”

The chief example of such transcendentalization of the social is provided by the argument with which Parsons defends his view of social institutions as “moral phenomena,” where “moral” must be understood as meaning, in a broader sense,

“normative.” Taking the mainstream view of action as a frame of reference for elucidating the nature of social institutions, Parsons starts from the uncontroversial assumption that while acting every individual orients herself to a subjectively conceived chain of means and ends.³ It goes without saying that for every individual member of a given society there must exist one or more ends that are not means to any further end – namely, one or more *ultimate ends*. Borrowing from the vocabulary of logic the very strong term “contradiction,” Parsons argues that it is no less than *contradictory* for us to think that a number of individuals belong in one and the same society, as opposed to the state of nature, and at the same time that their ultimate ends are totally unrelated or, which is the same, stand in a random relation to one another.⁴ This is not to say that the relation among these subjective ultimate ends should be thought of as harmonious – very often it is antagonistic – but it means that such a relation cannot but be patterned in one way or other. “Social institutions,” as Parsons calls them – or, more generally, the social – provide some sort of coordination between the web of relations that these individual ultimate ends develop with one another on the one hand, and the kind of more partial ends that the individuals also pursue on the other.⁵

These considerations suffice to highlight the reason why the rise of a perception of the distinctiveness of the social could not take place before modernity. The social could not be perceived as a distinct dimension before both a post-traditional frame of reference, revolving around the notion of the autonomous individual, and a post-ontological frame of reference, within which the shaping force of the social is no longer connected with either the divine or with a godless cosmic order, came into being.

Yet while social philosophy presupposes a view of the social as a normative force capable of coordinating the conduct of multitudes of agents and making it predictable without however *causing* such action (in the way, for example, an instinct induces certain animal species to behave in a certain way) and without merely representing a summation of individual unrelated acts, there is more substance than this to social philosophy. By no means does the elucidation of what distinguishes the social from other kinds of normativity exhaust the subject matter of social philosophy. I will return to the normativity *sui generis* of the social at the end of this paper, after discussing some of the other themes that have provided additional foci of attention for social philosophers past and present, over and beyond the crucial issue of the nature of society and of the social bond.

Some Central Themes in Social Philosophy

Just as in moral and political philosophy – over and beyond the central issues, respectively, of the nature of the moral point of view and the justification of political obligation – we find a host of themes that have attracted attention and stirred debate over time, so in social philosophy several problems can be pinpointed that have attracted the attention of social philosophers perhaps with uneven force but

with a basic continuity: a) the peculiar form of integration of modern society; b) the nexus of modernity and the individual; c) the nature and origin of social change; and d) the pathologies of modern societies. The brief restatement of these problems offered in this section is meant not just as an inventory of past social philosophical discussions but also as a launchpad for a future oriented discussion on the identity of a philosophical discipline which up until now has mainly existed in a state of diaspora.

(a) *The Integration of Modern Society*

The problem posed by a reconstruction of the peculiar form of integration of modern society is not to be taken as a mere restatement of the classical problem of order – how is society possible? – within a different vocabulary. For in this case the focus shifts from the classical question “How is it *generally* possible that from the chaotic interweaving of individual actions a social order emerges, stabilizes and reproduces itself over the subsequent generations?” to the new and more specific question: “How can post-traditional societies, no longer cemented by a homogenous horizon of shared meanings, avoid the fate of disintegrating in a kind of ceaseless confrontation that gradually reverts back to the war of all against all?” Concrete given societies in a sense never “end,” never regress to the state of nature;⁶ but if we want to visualize what is at stake in the latter question, we can just think of the predicament incurred by Albania at the beginning of the 1990s: a society where all form of central authority had collapsed, where right had yielded to might, where warring armed factions contended on the public scene, where property had suddenly become no more than an insecure possession, and where the only way to escape from the empire of physical force was either to organize a more powerful force or to leave the country at the risk of one’s own life. By virtue of which integrative forces and which modes of coordinating individual and collective action do *modern* societies – namely, societies no longer in a position to benefit from the integrative effect provided by a shared, uncontested, and publicly institutionalized religious horizon but, on the contrary, often traversed by deep conflicts of interest and values – come to a plight that generally looks quite different from the one just described and resembles instead the kind of normal predicament made familiar by the clichés – so often used by uninventive cover designers for sociology textbooks – of the crowd of shoppers strolling on a sidewalk, the crowd of commuters emerging from a subway station, the line of voters patiently waiting for their turn, the group of workers chatting at break-time, or the class of students in high school?

Social philosophy has provided five distinct answers to this question.⁷ The first maintains that it is typical of modern society to be able to dispense with common values: the diversity of interests never issues in outright conflict because the integrative effects of the *interdependence of interests* – namely, the fact that the satisfaction of one’s own interest usually depends on the satisfaction of someone else’s

interests – overrides the divisive impact of the diversity of their objects. This is the idea underlying Smith's metaphor of the "invisible hand," the metaphor of society as an organism coined by Spencer, and that of society as a "system" especially in the version developed by Luhmann.

The second contends instead that ultimately no society, not even a complex one, can do without common values *altogether*. Before the invisible hand can operate, in other words, there has to be an *invisible handshake*. This thread runs through the social thought of Comte, who identified the common value integrating modern society in the recognized superiority of the scientific approach to reality; of Durkheim, who found these post-traditional common values in the modern "religion of the individual" and "universalistic morality"; of Parsons, whose notion of social institutions as moral phenomena somehow connecting individual ultimate ends has already been recalled; and today of philosophers like Taylor and MacIntyre.

In addition to these two canonical answers, somehow located at the extreme polarities of a conceptual continuum that explains integration with agency-richer or agency-poorer categories, we can find other interesting alternatives. Montesquieu and Tocqueville, who at the same time are also full time members of the tradition of political philosophy, emphasize the *integrative function of the political arena* where competing values and interests come to clash in the context of a confrontation about the common good. Many of their contemporary heirs understand deliberative democracy, civil society, social movements, associational, agonistic, and contestatory democracy as notions not only of *political* relevance, but relevant also for an account of how societies of unprecedented complexity can stick together. Underlying this perspective is the intuition that modern society coheres rather than collapses insofar as a shared political space emerges within which the conflicting interests and values can become objects of assessment and deliberation.

A fourth answer comes from those who like Marx deny that modern society, insofar as it is traversed by structurally generated class divisions, can really be integrated at all or who, like Simmel, believe that the conceptual opposition between the presence of *social conflict* and social integration is to be thoroughly reconsidered.

Finally, for all the differences between their approaches, Weber and Habermas converge on indicating *modern positive law* as the decisive integrating factor for modern, pluralistic, complex, post-traditional societies.

Today a new spur to social philosophical reflection on this question comes from liberal political philosophy. The fundamental question underlying the argument developed in *Political Liberalism* is formulated by Rawls exactly in terms that echo the issues just mentioned: "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?"⁸ Rawls's answer connects the possibility of having such a society with the rise of

an overlapping consensus not over substantive values as over a political conception of justice, which in turn rests on certain shared intuitions, for example the idea of a fair and durable system of cooperation among equals. No complicated arguments are needed in order to show how close to one another the vantage points of social philosophy and of a certain tradition within contemporary political philosophy are, and the extent to which one of the most influential political philosophers, in building his case for political liberalism, implicitly relies on allegedly simple notions – such as that of “fair cooperation” – which are really quite complex and multifaceted (as any reading of Smith, Marx, Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim would show) and, under the heading of the “division of labor,” have for a long time been at the center of social philosophical reflection.⁹

(b) *The Nexus of Modernity and the Individual*

Social philosophy has always been concerned with the implications of the modern form of life for those who inhabit it. From the beginning, quite different, in some cases conflicting, understandings of these implications have punctuated its history. For brevity's sake, the plurality of these interpretations can be brought down to three main theses.

The first thesis, by and large the most influential, turns on the idea of an “increase in individuation.” It boils down to the proposition that the main impact of modern life on the individual has been to offer her a chance to be incomparably more autonomous, more unique, and more authentic than most human beings of the past ever had a chance to be. The reason for this impact, according to the proponents of this thesis, lies in the fact that the rapid acceleration of social differentiation brought about by modernity, the availability of more numerous social roles for the individual to play, the increase in number and size of the social circles to which she belongs, in sum the sheer fact of finding herself exposed to a greater variety of social contexts during her life, brings the modern individual to define herself on the basis of a broader spectrum of possible self-representations and thus to experience new dimensions of choice. The individual acquires a richer texture insofar as the richer plurality of possible roles and commitments makes it more difficult for her to adhere to the masks of fixed and predictable social representations and invites instead the search for a self-definition located at a level deeper than the impersonated roles. The origin of this interpretation of the nexus of modernity and the individual dates back to the onset of the modern consciousness, then this thesis undergoes important developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with Simmel and Durkheim,¹⁰ and then in the mid to late twentieth century acquires new facets through the work of Parsons and Habermas. Montesquieu is indeed to be credited as the first social philosopher to forcefully articulate this thesis in his *Persian Letters*.

The second thesis, which I will call the thesis of the “plural self,” initially takes on the semblance of a radicalization of the first thesis, but that is a false

appearance. On closer scrutiny, it appears to lead to quite different result. The thesis of the plural self also originates in the mid-eighteenth century, in the debate on the modern condition and its consequences to which Montesquieu and Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau all took part. One of the most interesting formulations of this thesis can be found, albeit in an implicit form, in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* – a short dialogue which fascinated Hegel to the point of inducing him to add the section called “Spirit in Self-Estrangement – The Discipline of Culture,” where Rameau's nephew is presented as the archetype of the modern individual, to the nearly completed manuscript of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

For Hegel, each of the two protagonists of Diderot's dialogue – the philosopher “Moi” and Rameau's nephew – embodies a model of individuality typical respectively of the premodern and the modern world. The two historical models of the self here contrasted are called “the honest” or “noble” conscience and the “disintegrated” conscience. It is not possible here to examine Hegel's argument in detail, but it is worth mentioning that in his interpretation the seeming futility, heteronomy, incoherence, superficiality, and lack of a sense of purpose of Rameau's nephew – and more generally of the new individual inhabiting the mid-eighteenth-century European large cities – reverberates the blossoming of *Geist*, in the sense that “every content,” every symbolic construct sedimented in the culture, every social expectation, every role imperative, every value, every norm, becomes “a negative,” namely something not to be taken at face value, for what it pretends to be. The only “positive” moment is the process of self-reflecting subjectivity, the internal process of the subject's “I.” On the one hand, Rameau's nephew belongs in that new vision of subjectivity opened up by Usbek, the protagonist of *The Persian Letters*, and characterized by the fact that identity, what makes of me “me,” is perceived as something unique and located underneath the layer of social roles. On the other hand, this identity possesses a texture somewhat different from that of the individual celebrated by Montesquieu and Voltaire. Not only is Rameau's nephew alone, drifting in an ocean of only partially shared social meanings whose overall sense escapes him, but in a way he has no true self to which to plan to remain faithful. The truth of his self, to use Hegel's language, lies in his Proteus-like ability to adapt, in his letting himself drift in the ocean of social life while keeping faith neither to a course, which he never set, nor to a destination, which he is unable to choose, but merely to a certain style of navigation – a self that can become itself and find fulfillment solely in the dimension of *plurality*.

In this sense the young Rameau is a predecessor of the “man without qualities” depicted by Robert Musil.¹¹ Like Ulrich, Rameau too is characterized by a kind of infinite “closurelessness,” a boundless internal virtuality that transcends every role, every impersonation that he might try to pursue. The self-experience of the modern individual, from the point of view of this thesis, is the experience of one's own insubstantiality, of a plurality not amenable to unity. Some respond to this predicament by reviving the utopia of restoring the plenitude of the self,

of gaining access to renewed forms of total reconciliation with one's own "inner nature" and with society. Others consider this predicament to be an inescapable condition for the modern individual and actually as a challenge to be welcomed – namely the challenge to really confront the inexhaustibility and ambivalence of meaning, the ineradicable transience of all human objectivations, and the task of transforming oneself from creature to creator of oneself. This vision of the self, first introduced in the discourse of social philosophy by Diderot, has surfaced again in the past century in the work of Erving Goffman, for whom the unity of the social actor has to be understood as the simultaneous co-presence of a plurality of selves that address different publics depending on the circumstances. More generally, it has reincarnated itself philosophically in the poststructuralist and postmodern conception of subjectivity found in the writings of Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty.

Finally, a third thesis on the relation of modernity to the individual can be summed up in the phrase "the end of the individual." This thesis is the true antagonist of the thesis of the "increase in individuation," in that its proponents purport to unmask the falsehood of the assumption that in the modern condition the individual comes to acquire a larger measure of autonomy, self-determination, and uniqueness. With the quite broad plurality of voices that articulated it, since the eighteenth century, this thesis is meant as the denunciation of an unfulfilled promise. The increase in individuation extolled by the enthusiastic modernists is only the bogus, never fulfilled promise continuously renewed by a modern society that develops in a distorted way – captured by Marx in terms of a prevailing alienation induced by the capitalistic nature of its economy, by Weber as the outcome of pervasive processes of bureaucratization which, through the hegemony of purposive rational models of action, lead to the "iron cage," and by others as a consequence of social conditions that, especially in late modernity, lead to the narcissistic transformation of the personality. The thesis of "the end of the individual" also has its point of origin in the debate that apparently took place in eighteenth-century Paris about the implications of the modern form of life. Its first proponent was Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* – one of the texts most representative of social philosophy at its best. During the next several decades and again at the turn of the twentieth century, the thesis of "the end of the individual" gained a broader acceptance. It is worth mentioning Alexis de Tocqueville who, albeit with less apocalyptic emphases than Rousseau, in his investigation on democracy draws that portrait of *homo democraticus* as driven by the passion for equality which much later will become an obvious term of reference for the contemporary theses of the decline of public man, of the triumph of expressive individualism and of the therapeutic, and of the ideology of intimacy and private fulfillment.¹² Also Nietzsche's appraisal of modernity, with its emphasis on the growth of the herd men, driven by *ressentiment*, and on the last men of whom Zarathustra talks, can be included in this camp. In the twentieth century, finally, the thesis of the "end of the individual" branched out in three

distinct versions that cannot be investigated in detail here: the theory of mass society, inaugurated by Ortega y Gasset, the theory of the administered society (the Frankfurt School), and the theory of the hetero-directed and narcissistic personality (David Riesman, Christopher Lasch).

(c) *The Problem of Social Change*

A social order lasts over time and reproduces itself over the generations. It is a set of stable and interconnected normative expectations to which every new member of society is somehow, with varying degrees of success, *socialized*. While such “order” represents the moment of continuity in social life and the moment that allows us to identify a given society as *that* specific society, we should also account for its transformation over time. Why and how does it change? This question too is answered within social philosophy in a variety of ways that can be grouped around a few fundamental conceptions.

First, for some social philosophers social change is best conceived in analogy with the transformation of biological organisms. Namely, change occurs through *growth* and *differentiation*. Starting with Comte, but mainly with Spencer – who first articulates it in an explicit way – this view of social change proves very suggestive and soon gains a position of relative predominance not only in social philosophy but also in sociological theory. While Spencer developed it from an *evolution-theoretical* perspective, we can find it in a less naturalistic version in Durkheim’s *The Social Division of Labor*. In the second half of the twentieth century this idea of social change reappeared as part of a larger system-theoretical conception of society, and exerted great influence both in Parsons’s and in Luhmann’s version of it.

A competing conception instead connects social change with *conflict* in different ways. Should we interrogate Simmel on the subject of social change, he certainly would have to be included among the advocates of this thesis. The key figure, however, for understanding this kind of answer to the question concerning the causes of social change is Marx. For him, the motor that brings social orders to transform themselves is not just any conflict, but a special kind of conflict between social groups that subscribe to opposed views of the way in which human beings can “reproduce their existence” – namely between groups that stand to lose or to gain from the reproduction or transformation of certain existing “relations of production.” Social change of this societal magnitude, however, will come to a halt when eventually, in the communist society, “just” relations of production are established that no longer generate a conflict between oppressors and oppressed.

A third conception of social change arose from among those traditions which have considered the genesis of the social order from a microsocial perspective, locating its source in the face to face interaction of concrete individuals – for example, the traditions of symbolic interactionism, of ethnomethodology, and

once again of the dramaturgic paradigm, or those traditions indebted to the phenomenological perspective or a position such as that articulated by Foucault in his trilogy on the *History of Sexuality*.¹³ For those who embrace this conception, social change proceeds not so much from social differentiation or from conflict, as from the *gradual sedimentation of single individual deviations in the way social roles are performed*. A social order can in fact be understood as a complex of institutions which, in turn, include a diversity of roles that can be performed by different individuals in succeeding generations. A role is like a musical score that can be executed with somewhat different colorings, emphases, rhythm, speed: all these different possibilities constitute the space left open for the interpreter. Unlike musical performances, however, the diverse performance styles adopted by distinct individuals can and usually do bring about a rewriting of the score in the course of time. Under the causal pressure of factors that it is sociology's task to explain, and in the light of values that must be reconstructed along moral and political lines, the "deviations" that characterize the way in which millions of individuals at a certain historical moment perform the most common roles – for example, those of parent, child, teacher, student, client, professional, political representative, and so on – often reveal a shared *pattern*. When this happens, when these "deviations" are understandable not merely as individual idiosyncrasies but all point in the same direction, they end up sedimenting a durable transformation of the normative structure of the given roles and thereby often result in a macro-transformation of some aspects of the social order.

(d) The Pathologies of Modernity

The analysis of the pathologies of the modern form of life is another theme that traditionally has attracted a lot of interest among social philosophers. The heroes of this subcanon – with which Axel Honneth tends to identify the whole canon of social philosophy – are once again Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim, Nietzsche, Weber, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault.¹⁴ Each of these authors from his own specific angle claims that the modern form of life is at the origin of a number of social pathologies which make the unfolding of forms of undistorted individual self-realization quite problematical and dry up those motivational sources of social solidarity without which the integration of society is thrown in jeopardy. For Rousseau, it is widespread competition for zero-sum rewards (wealth, power, and prestige), inherent in all societies but enhanced by the mechanism of reproduction of modern civil society, that both erodes the autonomy of the modern individual and distorts the political process in a divisive and particularistic direction.¹⁵ For Marx, it is the injustice of a mode of production based on the private appropriation of surplus value that on the one hand gives rise to a condition of endemic alienation and increasing pauperization of the majority of the population, and generates deep and persisting conflicts which can be overcome only through the transition to a different form of social organization on the other.¹⁶ For Durkheim,

the pathologies of modernity can be summed up in the condition of endemic anomie which starting from the sphere of the economy – for him as well, albeit in a more nuanced sense, the main pathogenic agent within modernity is the capitalist economy – unfolds its effects on the rest of society by giving rise to the so called abnormal forms of the division of labor, to deep fractures in the social body, and to that general weakening of societal cohesion of which the increasing suicide rate, and anomic suicide in particular, are among the main indicators. For Weber as well the process of economic modernization generates a pathological outcome – the “iron cage” mentioned above – which takes the form of a polarization of society in the two rival cultures of the “specialists without spirit,” namely that part of humanity condemned to relate to their world solely in instrumental and not solidaristic terms, and of the “sensualists without heart,” namely those who are capable of developing an aesthetic but equally non-solitaristic relation with the world.¹⁷ The true victim of this polarization of modern society in a technical-instrumental and an aesthetic sphere is the possibility – therein lies the pathology of modernity highlighted by Weber – of articulating, and adequately institutionalizing in the form of role expectations, that moral point of view which formed the core of the premodern ethic of brotherliness and that up to the early stages of modernization could reemerge without difficulty from under an instrumental outlook that still remained just a “light cloak.” For Nietzsche, modernity refines and brings to fruition a gregarious mentality which rests on the distortion of the originary will to power; the “last men” mentioned by Zarathustra are beings haunted by a resentment which poses as a moral impulse and have lost all ability to even relate to their own will to power.¹⁸ For Horkheimer and Adorno, the inner dynamics of a merely instrumental relation to the world leads modern society to become the “administered society,” where life is offended, damaged (*beschädigt*, as Adorno says in his *Minima Moralia*) and where the very basis of subjectivity is thrown into question. Equally for Foucault the transition toward a disciplinary mode of wielding power is but one element in a broader canvass where the scene being represented concerns the rise and affirmation of a censoring relation of the self to itself.

The Future Agenda of Social Philosophy: Some Ideas

I have deliberately chosen this retrospective angle in presenting the main themes of social philosophy because it allows us to best highlight, by contrast, the selectivity inherent in some of the contemporary views on social philosophy. On the one hand, some view social philosophy as a conceptual elucidation of certain key terms, called by Searle the elementary components of “social reality,” understood along cultural lines as that realm made out of things that exist only because they are believed to exist (e.g., money, property, government, marriage).¹⁹ And on the other hand, we can find a notion of social philosophy as a forerunner of critical theory, articulated by Honneth, namely as a critical reflection on the

pathologies of modernity as they can be reconstructed from the vantage point of concrete subjects.²⁰ The reconstruction of the thematic spectrum of the tradition of social philosophy allows us to highlight, by contrast, how much would be missed by adopting either of these reductivist perspectives: both would tend to reduce social philosophy to a monothematic field. In Searle's case, it is hard to understand how social philosophy would differ from a kind of *cultural-philosophical anthropology*. In Honneth's case, the reduction of social philosophy to a critique of the pathologies of modernity would make social philosophy a kind of philosophical *restyling* of critical theory as practiced by the early Frankfurt School. Social philosophy so conceived would retain all the pre-postmetaphysical residues detectable in Horkheimer's and Adorno's philosophical positions and would introduce a hardly justifiable hyperselectivity in the identification of the canon. Can one legitimately, for example, the exclusion of Montesquieu, Diderot, Smith, Herder, Comte, Spencer, the social-philosophical Freud of *Civilization and its Discontents*, or Mead simply because they interpret those phenomena in which others see pathologies under a different light?

The retrospective angle chosen here is not meant to exclude the possibility that social philosophy could add *new* themes to the list drawn above. I cannot take up the challenge of identifying the new social-philosophical foci of concern in the necessarily quite limited space of an article. I'll just tentatively suggest two or three possible items for a future agenda.

It is now commonplace to say that we live in an epoch of globalization. It is for other disciplines to identify the reasons, dynamics, social, economic, and cultural consequences, as well as the limits and risks that characterize this process. From the standpoint of social philosophy, one of the main questions raised by the current processes of globalization is the following: can humanity be thought of as a collective social actor? Can there be an identity of humanity? The answer to these questions inevitably affects the outcomes of philosophical battles fought in other theaters and over other contentious issues, for example over the possibility of rethinking justice as a larger loyalty, as loyalty to a group that coincides with humanity in its entirety, or as an oriented reflective judgment formulated from the standpoint of the good for humanity.²¹ More generally, on the answer to this question turns the viability of a conception of intrasocietal as well as global justice which, in alternative to the formalism of neo-Kantian approaches, sets once again in motion the Hegelian idea of anchoring the moral point of view to the situatedness of a post-traditional *Sittlichkeit* based on liberty without enclosing that *Sittlichkeit* within the bounds of the nation-state. At stake in the way of answering these questions is, furthermore, the possibility of rescuing Hegel's justificatory strategy under postmetaphysical premises, namely by way of anchoring morality and justice to the concrete ethical life of humanity on its way to unification – a concrete ethical life anchored no longer to the nation-state but to those international organizations (the UN in the first place) where an ethos centered around human rights and equal respect has emerged and is becoming increasingly institutionalized.

A somewhat related theme that should certainly feature on the future agenda of social philosophy is *recognition*. One of the reasons why the idea of a concrete ethos of humanity anchored to the identity of humanity leaves many perplexed is the difficulty of imagining any “other” of humanity that might recognize humanity as a subject. The alleged identity of humanity would in fact represent the only case of an identity that comes into being in the absence of relations of reciprocal recognition, the only case of *self-recognition*, as it were. The perspective of recognition, put forward today by Honneth, Taylor, and Margalit, enjoins us to undertake a reconsideration of such notion that is best carried out as one of the central tasks of a renewed social philosophy.

Finally, it would not be unimportant for social philosophy to reflectively address, at this point in its development, its own relation to other traditions. I have already mentioned the relation of social to political philosophy above. In at least one important tradition, that of political liberalism, the division of labor between the two disciplines is inscribed in the central question that inspires the latter. For political philosophy makes use of the notion of society as a “system of fair cooperation that lasts over time” but can only import this notion from social philosophy. Also within the Habermasian framework – at least as outlined in *Between Facts and Norms* – we find the idea that both political justification and the legitimacy of deliberative democracy rest in part on the vitality of the *public sphere*, and the notion of the public sphere, together with that of *civil society*, is another theme for social philosophical reflection. But also those political philosophies that focus on the phenomenon of *power* can enter a beneficial dialogue with those perspectives on power – just think of Weber and Foucault – that originate from within social philosophy.

Leaving aside its relatively uncontroversial relation to moral and legal philosophy, the task of articulating the relation of social philosophy to the social sciences, and more specifically to social and political theory, seems more complicated. Also in this case, the reasons for *not* conflating social philosophy with social and political theory are ultimately connected with our sense of which traditions or paradigms can make the most of a certain body of knowledge and reflection. For a long time social theory and social philosophy have almost been indistinguishable: classical figures of the sociological tradition like Marx, Comte, Durkheim, Spencer, Simmel, Weber, and Parsons have certainly been part of both fields. The question underlying Weber’s comparative investigation in the sociology of religion, for example, is an exquisitely philosophical question: how are we to understand the relevance of the Western experience and of its peculiar rationalism within the larger context of a developmental history of humanity, understood as a process involving the rationalization of religious cultures which all try to come to terms, in their own ways and in the most consistent possible way, with the fact of human finitude? On the other hand, within the tradition of social philosophy we also find contributions such as those of Montesquieu, Smith, and Rousseau – sometimes ignored by social theory narrowly understood – and

contributions like those of Condorcet, Diderot, Herder, and Burke, which are very rarely considered part of the sociological canon. Over the past few decades a host of scientific paradigms – from structural functionalism to systems theory to rational choice – has come to prevail within the social sciences and within sociology in particular. Several laudable exceptions notwithstanding, this has shifted the main axis of the sociological and political disciplines in an antiphilosophical direction, wherein theory tends to become a mere support for empirical generalization. It is no wonder, then, that a number of contemporary authors certainly to be included in a list of social philosophers – Castoriadis, Bataille, Baudrillard, and Honneth, just to mention a few – have never become real sources for *sociological theory*. In this case, then, rather than in terms of thematic boundaries, we should think of social philosophy on the one hand, and social and political theory on the other, as different and only partially overlapping traditions which nonetheless are located in the same general area. Relative to social and political theory *as they are perceived today within mainstream sociology and political science*, social philosophy appears to be an enterprise of greater “pith and moment,” capable of including and making the most of a larger and more diverse set of theoretical contributions.

The Normative Point of View in Social Philosophy

However, disciplinary borders, a list of key problems, and a canon, even if taken together, still don't add up to the *raison d'être* of a discipline. A discipline so constituted would be as weak and incapable of arousing enthusiasm as those states formed by drawing artificial borders on maps laid open on the tables of peace conferences far from the territories that they are designed to mark out. A discipline can truly come into its own and give impulse to a powerful tradition only if it has a *unifying idea* at its center – such as the “moral point of view” or the problem of political justification – on the basis of which a unique vantage point on a certain subject matter can be generated. In the case of social philosophy, this vantage point is constituted by a reconstruction of the inextricable yet puzzling nexus of “the social” and “the normative.”

No one has captured this nexus better than Durkheim when, reflecting on the relation between the sacred and social solidarity, he writes:

A society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal. This creation is not a sort of work of supererogation, by which it would complete itself, being already formed; it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade.²²

In this statement we can find that substantive *raison d'être* of social philosophy which can vivify the otherwise uninspiring geometry of the disciplinary borders, the book-keeping of the members of the canon, the list of agenda items. The normativity of the social – its enjoining and forbidding, its including and excluding, and at

the same time its capacity for arousing a sense of solidarity and community – is a normativity *sui generis*. Unlike moral and legal normativity, it can only be conceived against the background of that modern form of life whose underlying principle has been identified by Hegel in the principle of subjective freedom. On the one hand, it originates not in a disembodied and decontextualized reason located outside a given and concrete society – it is neither a Platonic idea nor a piece of transcendentalized “inner nature” – but in the very process through which society, understood as the living in association of men and women, “is periodically made and remade.” On the other hand, the normativity of the social cannot be reduced to the factual pressure toward conformity associated with fashion, panic, or the mechanism of social distinction either – all phenomena that orient and indeed channel social action, but do not allow for any appeal to an “ought” distinct from the “is.” The normativity of the social is not a reflection of the merely existent and cannot be confused with a normative tyranny of the majority. On the contrary, it is a critical force to which we often appeal *against* prevailing opinion, against the normativity contingently regarded as binding. It often constitutes a *critical force* which disrupts, revolutionizes, and destabilizes social arrangements, though at other times confirms, consolidates, and stabilizes them.

It is the task of social philosophy to elucidate the basis on which the normativity of the social rests, the source from which it is nourished while being aware that this normative force often generates an “ought” which, on one hand, is capable of undermining complex normative orders that merely continue to be taken for granted and, on the other hand, preserves its connection with a concrete form of life and a given historical context. The normativity embedded in the social does not work regardless of who we are but, on the contrary, by virtue of who we are and of our self-understanding. Such “collective-agent-relativeness” of the normativity of the social is well captured, once again, by Durkheim when he states that

The ideal society is not outside the real society; it is part of it. For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself.²³

The idea of social philosophy then presupposes and rests on a broader philosophical reflection concerning the special notion of validity or normativity reflected in the social. This necessary link between social philosophy and a certain idea of “exemplary” or “context-sensitive” validity allows us to make sense of the delay with which social philosophy is coming into its own as a distinct field of philosophical inquiry. Not only can social philosophy not flourish unless there exists a (modern) understanding of the social as distinct from the political and the moral but – again unlike political and moral philosophy – it cannot reflexively come into its own as an autonomous discipline if the mainstream philosophical sensibility continues to have no use (as has been the case for all the pre-postmetaphysical

philosophical horizons that have succeeded one another up to the rupture represented by the linguistic turn) for the legitimacy of any form of validity which is not “context-independent” and thus continues to provide no means for conceiving of a kind of normativity which is situated yet cogent and unconditional.

NOTES

1. Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Gerald Gaus, *Social Philosophy* (New York: Sharpe, 1999).

2. See for example Durkheim’s social genealogy of the categories of space and time in Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 23–25.

3. See Talcott Parsons, “Prolegomena to a Theory of Social Institutions,” *American Sociological Review* 55 (1990): 322–23.

4. *Ibid.*, 323.

5. *Ibid.*, 326.

6. Cf. *Toward a General Theory of Action*, ed. Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 204.

7. For a detailed reconstruction of these five distinct answers, see Massimo Rosati, “Il problema dell’integrazione nelle società moderne,” in *Sociologia e modernità*, ed. Enzo V. Trapanese (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1996), 121–43.

8. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 6–7.

9. On this particular point, see my *Justice and Judgment: The Rise and the Prospect of the Judgment Model in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Sage, 1999), 33–34.

10. See Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, tr., ed. and intr. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1967), 409–24 and *Über soziale Differenzierung. Soziologische und psychologische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1890); Emile Durkheim, *The Social Division of Labor*, 111–32.

11. For a fascinating interpretation of Musil’s novel from social-philosophical angle, see Peter Berger, “Robert Musil and the Salvage of the Self,” *Partisan Review* 51 (1984).

12. See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

13. Aside from the works of Goffman and Foucault, for this way of understanding social change, see also Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, with an introduction by Philip Rieff and a foreword by George H. Mead (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, tr. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert, intr. George Walsh (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

14. Axel Honneth, “Pathologien des Sozialen. Tradition und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie,” in *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), 11–69.

15. See my *Modernity and Authenticity. A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 47–50.

16. *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, tr. and ed. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967), 287–314.

17. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons, foreword R.H. Tawney (New York: Scribner, 1958), 181–82.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. and intr. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 296–306.
19. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
20. Honneth, “Pathologien des Sozialen,” 12–13.
21. Richard Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” in *Justice and Democracy: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. R. Bontekoe and M. Stepaniants (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 9–22; Ferrara, *Justice and Judgment*, 178–201.
22. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 470.
23. *Ibid.*

