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SOCIOLOGY AFTER 9/11

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Abstract

The attacks on New York in September 2001 and subsequent attacks on other Western targets continue to serve as a stimulus for a number of academic disciplines. In this way, in a bid to remain relevant to the needs of post-9/11 Western governments, the likes of international relations, political science, middle eastern studies, and comparative religion have, at least to some extent, reassessed their objects. Sociology has not reacted in anything like the same manner, assuming, it seems, that its object needs no adjustment for the field to be as relevant to post-9/11 Western governments as any of the other disciplines listed. Taking 'the social' to be sociology's fundamental object, this paper will argue that sociology's stance is much more complacent than it should be. The paper sketches the contours of three understandings of the social that are available to sociology and emphasises three points: one, that while the basic-interaction understanding is still useful to the discipline's work, it is not helpful in making the discipline relevant to the needs of post-9/11 Western governments; two, that the reason-morality understanding is actually an obstacle to this type of relevance; and three, that the politico-legal

understanding needs to be given more credence within the discipline, for it is in fact the key to this type of relevance.

Keywords: the social; basic interaction; reason-morality; politico-legal; 9/11

Introduction

The attacks on New York in September 2001 and subsequent attacks on other Western targets continue to serve as a stimulus for a number of academic disciplines. In this way, in a bid to remain relevant to the needs of post-9/11 Western governments, the likes of international relations, political science, middle eastern studies, and comparative religion have, at least to some extent, reassessed their objects. Sociology has not reacted in anything like the same manner, assuming, it seems, that its object needs no adjustment for the field to be as relevant to post-9/11 Western governments as any of the other disciplines listed. Taking ‘the social’ to be sociology’s fundamental object, this paper will argue that sociology’s stance is much more complacent than it should be.

While one understanding of the social – the very fact of interacting humans, sociology’s most basic object – needs no adjustment for the discipline to produce analyses of the post-9/11 world that are relevant in one way, the level of relevance involved is so basic as to be meaningless. Yes, humans still interact in mostly the same ways in which they did before 9/11, but this is to say little more than that the sun still comes up. This is not, however, the main source of the relevance problem.

Where sociology is slipping behind in the relevance stakes is in the way it conceptualises the social beyond the basic-interaction understanding. By being so closely aligned with one or another form of what I call the reason-morality understanding (mostly the gift of Kantian and French enlightenment thinking; in this way, the reason-morality

understanding has a strong tendency towards the idea that human societies have the capacity to progress), the discipline is missing the opportunity to explore a rival understanding that actually underlies what it was that was attacked on 9/11 and in subsequent attacks on Western targets, what I call the politico-legal understanding (mostly the gift of the civil enlightenment that Kant so forcefully opposed; in this way, the politico-legal understanding is deeply suspicious of reason-morality progress projects).

I have room only to sketch the contours of each of the three understandings of the social set out in the preceding paragraphs. I will do so in such a way as to emphasise three points: one, that while the basic-interaction understanding is still useful to the discipline's work, it is not helpful in making the discipline relevant to the needs of post-9/11 Western governments; two, that the reason-morality understanding is actually an obstacle to this type of relevance; and three, that the politico-legal understanding needs to be given more credence within the discipline, for it is in fact the key to this type of relevance.

The basic-interaction understanding of the social

For the basic-interaction understanding, the social is the interaction of two or more human beings (and even, in some cases, two or more animals; chimpanzees are obvious examples, but basically any species of animal that interacts towards the protection and sustenance of their own unit of agglomeration and/or towards the destruction of other units is reasonably said to be 'social' in this sense¹).

By this understanding, the social is a synonym of sociality, sociability, and even of culture and community, each of which is understood only in basic-interaction terms). This basic-interaction understanding is of course widely employed beyond sociology, in expressions like, 'He leads an active social life', 'She is socially very skilled', and 'I'm going to join the debating society'. Perhaps because of its wide usage it is vital to sociology's sophisticated descriptions of interactions. Here is how Bessant and Watts describe this understanding, in their introductory textbook: "Social" is a word that is rarely discussed in sociology ... For simplicity's sake, let's say the term social refers to the idea of relationships between people' (Bessant and Watts 2002: xvi).

I have no desire to deny the importance of this basic understanding, in either its everyday uses or its uses in sociology. Indeed, the basic interaction understanding is at the heart of the tradition by which sociology is the disinterested pursuit the details of interaction, in the manner recommended by Max Weber. Weber famously contended that all those engaged in this type of pursuit must strive to 'change hats' whenever they shift from knowledge production of this type to political commentary or advocacy (see esp. Weber 1949).

In drawing this distinction, Weber is of course acknowledging that for sociology to be relevant to the political and governmental concerns of the day (in our case these must include 9/11-related concerns) the basic-interaction work must be left in its various research locations. A different understanding of the social is needed. As I have said

already, the politico-legal understanding is the best one available to the field. But that is to get ahead of myself. For now I must describe the reason-morality understanding and its shortcomings.

The reason-morality understanding of the social

I stress at the outset that I have been leaving the word ‘abundant’ out of the name of this understanding – its full name is the abundant reason-abundant morality understanding. I have been leaving out the ‘abundant’ only to make the name less of a mouthful. It is actually the abundance of reason and morality that is the main distinguishing feature between the reason-morality understanding and the politico-legal understanding. The politico-legal understanding does include a consideration of the importance to the social of *some* reason and *some* morality, but nothing like as much as feature in the reason-morality understanding.

The reason-morality understanding has its roots in Plato’s and Aristotle’s understandings of sociality, particularly through the Platonic premise of *homo-duplex*, whereby humans are seen to have two natures; a lower nature by which they experience the world and a higher nature by which they can rise above their base experience and realise their abundant capacity to reason. This understanding picked up a few Christian edges in its journey from the ancient to the modern world, through the likes of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, but gained most of its current strength through Kant and his various heirs (see esp. Colas 1997).

The reason-morality understanding is the dominant understanding of the social within contemporary sociology. The advocates of the reason-morality understanding are very confident of their dominance, so much so that they see their champion not as *an* understanding of the *modern Western* social but as *the* understanding of the social *per se*. For these advocates, their understanding captures the form of the social given to humans by nature (or, in some older versions, by God).

For this understanding, the social is an outcome of our abundant reason-driven quest for the moral perfection which nature sets for us as our goal. For this understanding, the social, alongside culture and community, is an ally of our abundant reason and our natural morality as they struggle to reduce the influence of and/or to control each of politics, law, and the state. In other words, the social, alongside culture and community, is concerned with the formation of fully-reasoning, morally-aware individuals and groups, the true building blocks of modern life. On the other hand, for this understanding, politics, law, and the state have no fundamental relationship to reason and morality. The fundamental relationship forged by Aristotle between reason, morality, and politics, for example, was dropped by this approach in the modern period, no longer trusted, perhaps in the wake of Machiavelli's decoupling of politics from morality. For this understanding, however, politics, law, and the state can and do still have nobility, but only if they serve reason and morality, which is what Kant tried to make them do and what those working in his wake still try to make them do. For this understanding, this is to say, politics, law, and the state can be useful forces in the promotion of reason and morality, but only if

they are strictly servants. They definitely have no place in the coalition of forces that is meant to rule human interactions – reason and morality, as expressed through culture and community.

This is the case for Durkheimian sociology, based around the importance of community, as well as for Marxist and other critical forms of sociology, based around the reason and morality of revolutionary change. While it would be ridiculous to charge every reason-morality form of sociology with a propensity for the support of terror, it is worth noting that in his recently released book, *Black Mass* (2007), John Gray mounts a cogent argument to the effect that most forms of enlightenment thinking, especially Marxist forms, do indeed contain the seeds of terror, if only as the price the social might reasonably pay for perfection (see esp. Gray 2007: 36-73).

One does not need to go as far as Gray's post-9/11 warning, however, to understand that for the reason-morality understanding the social is the supposedly natural extension of the aforementioned rule by reason and morality through culture and community. Those who are guided by this understanding therefore cannot possibly accept that politics, law, and the state have produced the social, they cannot possibly accept that post-9/11 modern Western governments might do more to control the social, in a bid to control those cultural forces that continue to produce types of persons keen to blow themselves up in a bid to promote their particular eschatological vision. In the eyes of reason-morality thinkers, the social is the stage on which the dramas of politics, law, and the state are played out. This is why such thinkers focus so much of their intellectual energies on

criticising modern Western governments. These thinkers do not want the modern Western social governed in line with the demands of politics, law, and the state, no matter what the security climate. They believe that the modern Western social should instead be governed in line with the perfectibility thesis at the core of this understanding: that because of their innate drive toward higher reason and higher morality, humans have a natural drive toward perfectibility. Modern Western governments, it follows, are to be incessantly criticised because, instead of seeking perfection, they seek only to do the best they can with the resources they have to hand, the resources of politics, law, and the state. The reason-morality thinkers are thereby forever using ‘the politically unattainable best’ as ‘a stick with which to beat the attainable good’ (Turner 1995: 397).

The politico-legal understanding of the social

For its part, the politico-legal understanding has its roots in the much harsher ‘man is a dangerous animal in need of great discipline’ Epicurean and Stoic understandings of sociality/sociability (see esp. Hunter 2001: 171-172). Human beings, by this picture, have some reason – enough to allow them to see that they need strong rule, that they cannot trust themselves to rule by reason alone – but their will far outweighs their reasoning capacity. On its journey to the modern world, the politico-legal understanding picked up a few Christian edges of its own, as well as a few Judaic, neo-Epicurean and neo-Stoic edges, but gained most of its direction through the work of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes in England, and Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius in Germany, as well as earlier thinkers like Machiavelli in Italy and Hugo Grotius and Justus Lipsius in the

Netherlands (see esp. Grotius 1925; Hobbes 1994; Hunter 2001; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2005; Lipsius 2005; Machiavelli 1961; Pufendorf 2003; Thomasius 2007).

For this understanding, the social is an achievement of the equilibrium that developed between politics and law, a relationship which produced the modern state, via the notion of sovereignty. In this way, the social is an achievement that relies upon a very basic element, which Hobbes describes in *Leviathan* in the following terms: ‘Fear of oppression, disposeth a man to anticipate, or to seek aid by society; for there is no other way by which a man can secure his life and liberty’ (Hobbes 1994: 59 [Part I, Ch. XI: Para. 9]). Crucially for our argument, he insists that the social is not natural, arguing that Aristotle was wrong to compare the natural societies of bees and ants with human societies (Hobbes 1994: 108-109 [Part I, Ch. XVII: Paras 6-12]). The main blow he strikes on behalf of the politico-legal understanding is offered as part of his famous claim that in the state of nature ‘the life of man’ would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’: ‘In such condition, there is no ... industry; ... no knowledge of the face of the earth; ... no arts; no letters; no society’ (Hobbes 1994: 76 [Part I, Ch. XIII: Para. 9]). In other words, the social is something that we cannot take for granted, something which requires enormous political and legal effort, something which both marks peace and helps achieve peace, and, in this sense, something which can be lost, if we are not careful. This is the social that was attacked on 9/11 and in subsequent attacks on the West. This is the social that sociology needs to acknowledge and perhaps even to defend.

To be more exact, for the politico-legal understanding, the social did not emerge until the

aforementioned equilibrium was able to contain the power of morality, culture, community, and religion. For this understanding, morality is not natural at all but is a series of conventions, conventions which are not always conducive to the peaceful rule of individuals and groups but which can be made so by bringing culture – for this understanding, the formation of strongly willful and only partially-reasoning individuals and groups – under control, such that new, more restrained persons were formed as new moral personae. For this understanding, community is the agglomeration of the individuals and groups around different moral goals (and therefore always potentially dangerous to those who would seek to rule them). For this understanding, religion, if it is not contained as a private form of spirituality, is a special, particularly powerful form of morality, culture, and community, and so considered especially dangerous. And of course, for this understanding, the social itself is a domain of relatively peaceful, relatively safe interaction between individuals and groups, a fragile domain achieved only by the aforementioned equilibrium. Where all else had failed, this is to stress, especially, all theological avenues, the equilibrium of politics, law, and state succeeded.

The mechanisms behind the emergence of the equilibrium, and hence of the social, included the development of the absolutist state, especially in France, the separation of a private religious conscience from a public legal conscience, especially in England, the development of forms of public law, especially in Germany and England, and the increasing deployment of neo-Stoic and neo-Epicurean techniques for making new types of subject, like constancy and decorum, especially in the Netherlands, England, and Germany. I have detailed the operation of these mechanisms elsewhere (see, for example,

Wickham 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; Wickham and Freemantle 2008).

As my last point in this section, I stress that the idea of a sociology in which the politico-legal understanding of the social is to the fore is a long way from being a new idea. While the tradition has its roots in the work of the early modern thinkers discussed above, there are a number of heirs to these thinkers who have practised (and in some cases still practise) a politico-legal sociology — for example, Aron, Hennis, Shils, Stephen Turner, and Weber (see: Aron 1988; Hennis 1988; Shils 1997; Turner 1999; 2003; Weber 1994).

Conclusion

I want to use my conclusion to make perfectly clear that urging sociology to acknowledge the importance of the politico-legal social, in a bid to make the discipline more relevant to post-9/11 modern Western governments, is not at all the same thing as urging it to become a cheerleader for the modern state. The state was and remains important to the formation and operation of the politico-legal social as a domain of relative freedom and relative security (allowing much greater levels of freedom and security to individuals than had ever been possible before its emergence). But this did not, and still does not, I hasten to add, make governing through the modern state somehow angelic, somehow immune from the usual litany of political motivations, the grubby, power-hungry motivations no less than the noble ones. As Michael Oakeshott puts it, this style of governing has entirely contingent origins, being born as nothing more than “the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice ...

brought together” in such dreadful circumstances (Oakeshott, quoted in Loughlin 2003: 79). The point that Oakeshott impresses upon us is that the modern state is a “somewhat ramshackle construction” (Loughlin 2003: 16, quoting Oakeshott).

My support for the idea of governing through the modern state, this is to say, endures in spite of its all-too-human failings. It endures because this style of governing and the equilibrium of which it is part actually managed to create civil peace in the most trying of conditions, when no other style of governing could, least of all those driven by reason and morality. Despite many dreadful lapses, it is still the best bet for delivering relative freedom and safety to the greatest number of people, especially in the wake of 9/11.

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