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The Dissolution of Society within the 'Social'

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Abstract

This article provides a general, theoretical reflection on the decline of the normative dimension in postmodern societies. Modern societies were the first to recognize themselves as societies, that is, to reflect explicitly on the normative basis of their constitution. With the decline of modernity, societal integration, which was based in part on the collective solidarity borne of an idea of Justice, has dissolved into merely 'social' forms of integration, legitimized in terms of a claim to operational perfection. At a purely epistemological level, this results in a profound misunderstanding of the subjective and unitary character of society and social action. The article ends in a plea for the recovery of a reflection on values, understood not just as a change in values, but as a change in the relation to values, necessary to confront the irreducible plurality of the world.

Key words

■ modernity ■ norms ■ postmodernity ■ social ■ society

The societal crisis that we are presently traversing in the transition from modernity to postmodernity is accompanied by a semantic *quid pro quo* that causes us to speak of the social with respect to society. This slippage in vocabulary is not, to my mind, fortuitous: it goes together with what in this crisis is most profound, that is, the dissolution of society and its mode of existence, of its simultaneously unitary and reflexive dimension. By attempting to demonstrate, in a very general manner, the ontologically realist character of society, understood in opposition to a nominalist conception of the social, I will try to show that this *quid pro quo* serves to blind us to what is at stake in the crisis. On this basis it will be possible to criticize the 'ontological denial of normativity' that, for more than a century, has characterized the development of the social sciences, insofar as they have become increasingly involved in the control, management and production of the social, and have forgotten their original object – the study and critique of society's normative structures.

My point of departure, as concerns the nature of the social, is taken from Hannah Arendt. As is well known, this author worried about the 'rise of the

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social' in the evolution of modern societies.[1] Within an anthropological framework that first contrasts the *vita contemplativa* to the *vita activa*, in order to then distinguish between three hierarchical levels of human activity, *labour, work* and *action*, 'labour' corresponds for Arendt to merely reproductive activity, that which provides for the constant necessities of 'organic' life. This judgement is based on the following claim: while in traditional societies – and above all in Classical Greece, which served as her model – *labour* remains restricted to the private sphere (in Greek, the *oikos*), providing (free!) men, at least ideally, with the leisure to dedicate their lives fully to *action* in the public sphere (I need not speak here of slavery as a condition of such leisure); in modernity the public space has been undermined by the problematic of need satisfaction. Thus the political public sphere has been progressively turned into a merely social public sphere, in which the finalities that characterize the most 'elevated' activities end up being stifled or ignored, and fall instead, by a sort of inversion of values, within the private sphere.

In order to root my critique in an author now considered classic, I will confine myself to Arendt's fundamental intuition concerning the nature of the social, as it exists or existed in modern societies – though I hardly consider myself bound to her manner of conceptualizing this intuition. It is obvious to me that the 'social', as defined by Hannah Arendt, does not directly correspond with the historical reality that, for example, presently preoccupies 'social work' – that would be to completely ignore social work's originally normative dimension. In effect, whatever one thinks of the contemporary evolution of public and private intervention in the 'social domain', one should not forget that it originated in a new conception of societal solidarity and, therefore, of collective identity, as expressed in a new concept of *Justice* understood as, precisely, *social justic*e. That this new concept of justice was progressively formulated in response to the disintegration of the communal and hierarchical forms of solidarity proper to traditional societies – and in response to the growing autonomy of the economic sphere with its subsequent generalization of 'labour' – does not detract from the normative constitution of a new type of society and a new form of sociality.

The critical position adopted here with respect to Arendt does not require me to reject her intuition concerning the nature of the social and its hegemony, but to displace its historical field of application. Here the 'rise of the social' no longer corresponds to modernity in general, but to the contemporary transition to 'post-modernity'. The 'crisis of the social' is to be understood as a 'crisis of society' that corresponds – particularly in the field of objective perception proper to 'social work' – to the progressive loss of the transcendental dimension represented by the normative reference to Justice. As such, it also corresponds to the constitution of the social as a properly empirical field, as Arendt understood it.

My argument makes the following claim: the 'social', in the Arendtian sense, results, *ab origin*e, from the decomposition of society as an a priori subjective and self-identical totality, and from its replacement by a new mode of 'being-and-acting-together' or 'sociality', one that tends to be purely empirical and pragmatic. The social, however, does not present itself as such all at once: at first it

appears as a 'scientific' avatar of society, as the manifestation of its ultimately empirical character – an avatar that nonetheless still bears all the essential attributes of society, whether 'traditional' or 'modern'.

Thus our 'objective' representation of society when we 'work' the 'social', when we intervene in it in a thousand different ways, this original, traditional image of society as *universitas*, does not suddenly disappear. This image forms part of the 'reserves of tradition' mentioned by Habermas, which take a long time to disappear, though they are not renewed. The recognition of society as an order *sui generis* does not imply its immediate reduction to the 'social'. If society first arises as a concept (at the same time as the 'social sciences') from the separation between an a priori subjective unity and objective empirical determinations (through the differentiation of the 'state' and 'civil society'), the objective determinations first appear in the form of the 'economy', and only annex and appropriate 'culture' at a second moment. As long as the cultural representation of society (as synthetic) is maintained, the appeal to Justice – which served as a fundamental reference for the new universalist collective identity (while the reference to Reason grounded the equally universalist mode of institutional regulation proper to state power, particularly in the instrumentalized field of the economy) continues to provide 'social work' with its ultimate finality. In this double sense, the social is first apprehended as societal.

This was clearly expressed, at both the ideological and political-institutional levels, by the entire 'utopian' current that accompanied the development of modernity, beginning with its earliest origins in the bourgeois communes, continuing through the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – and not excluding, needless to say, the workers' movements up until the middle of the twentieth century. But it is just this that has been exhausted by the contemporary world's dominant line of evolution, leading to the loss of 'society's' subjective, self-identical dimension. Society is transformed into an 'objective system' while 'social work' becomes simply technical activity for the management (control, regulation, adjustment, energization, mobilization, and training) of the social.

The present sense of the 'fragmentation of the social' corresponds then to the exhaustion of both the traditional 'societal' image and the reference to Justice and solidarity, which were still charged (notably at the political level) with a subjective transcendence, and projected onto 'the social' throughout the transition period. The fragmentation of the social thus corresponds to the coming of the social as such, to the realization of its first, purely 'objective' and, then, solely 'operational' nature. Far from fragmenting, the social only now reveals its truth, that is, that it is a pure 'operational system' serving as a complex if one-dimensional 'environment' for all sorts of individuals and organizations. But to speak of a crisis of society is not yet to suggest its death, as would have already occurred with society's irreparable dissolution in the social. Here 'the present tense' designates, in anticipation, the 'postmodernity' towards which contemporary historical trends only point, in however a unilateral manner. In truth, the traditions of modernity are far from being exhausted, and an alternative is already beginning to take shape.

Within these few pages, I cannot possibly justify this argument, either conceptually or historically. Instead I will have to content myself with delineating its three principal moments: modernity, the tradition closest to us, even as it still bears many an older tradition; modernity's present decline or exhaustion, which for over a century has been tied to the dynamism engendered at its most mundane, everyday level; and lastly, the normative choice that this decline now presents us with. We should begin with a few brief remarks concerning society's ontological nature – 'society' understood as a totality with a real but subjective character,[2] and not to be confused with the empirical sum of its members or 'elements', or with the objective structure of all the social actions and interactions that occur within it, but do not suffice to comprise it.

The 'Transcendental' Character of Society's Unity

In contrast to inanimate physical reality or purely biological behaviour, 'social life' is made up of actions that are subjectively meaningful, symbolically mediated and normatively organized into 'social relations', these latter having a simultaneously concrete, objective (categorical and structural) and (inter)subjective character (that distinguishes them from mere 'objective relations' as in statistics). At the most basic level, the reference to a common symbolic system orients particular actions and, from their interior as it were, brings about their global structural integration.

In more 'complex' societies, a form of exteriorized regulation of a 'political-institutional' character is superimposed on (and in part substituted for) this interiorized 'symbolic' (or 'cultural') regulation. Despite having developed historically, both the interiorized symbolic system (the learning of language, the education of children, socialization, etc.) and the exteriorized political-institutional system ('domination') represent a priori conditions for the sociality of social practices, whether at the level of their particular signification or global integration.

Just as meaningful 'speech' only exists by reference to a pre-existing 'language' (even if each speech, assuming it is 'understood', can also contribute to that language's transformation), each action only exists socially by reference to a culture or political-institutional superstructure that specifies its signification, value and meaning for others in advance of its enactment. Society, understood not just as a set of discrete social activities, but as a concrete totality, supposes from the outset such an a priori character relative to the cultural and political-institutional mediation of its social practices. It is this a priori character of society that elevates simple, singular 'behaviours' into 'meaningful actions' with a claim to 'universal' intelligibility. And it is not a matter here of a formal or abstract universality, but of the participation of such actions in the concrete *Universum* that each of the cultural and/or political fields of societal integration represents in and for itself (by virtue of their value for the establishment of social identity).

In their most general sense, the cultural and political-institutional mediations

of the social practices (constitutive of society's real unity) have a normative value as regards the social actors and actions. By the establishment of normativity attached to and imposed on action, each particular act contributes to the reproduction of society's general structure and, so, to its very existence as a totality. If each particular act is thus mediated by reference (whether interiorized or externally imposed) to the general societal order, then, conversely, this order's very existence, that is, its reproduction, can be said to be mediated by all the 'autonomous' acts that ensure its actual realization. As such 'society' immediately appears marked by a double contingency. There is the contingency that inheres in the historical specificity of the particular normative order that institutes and constitutes it; and there is the existential contingency that affects its actual reproduction, by the fact of the latter's dependency on all the particular, even singular actions that participate in its realization.

Given the contingency or existential precariousness of society's general normative order, this order is itself always represented normatively, if in historically variable ('ideological') forms (such as myth, cosmology, religion, etc.). As such, society's immanent (a priori) transcendental character is, in a sense, 're-constituted' subjectively-reflexively in the form of the a priori common identity's transcendentalization (its 'transcendental reification'). The protection and dependence provided by this 'reification' helps ensure the common recognition of each particular identity (as well as the signification, value and meaning of each action). As the a priori unity of all social practices, society takes on its ontological value as a totality with a subjective, self-identical character. Such unity does not exclude 'conflict', for it is within (and with reference to) this unity that conflicts acquire meaning as social or societal conflicts.

In what follows I will seek to demonstrate that society's transcendental unity, with its subjective, self-identical character, is presently threatened with 'fragmentation' or 'dissolution'. This threat takes the form of society's progressive ontological reduction to the social, which 'operates' in a purely objective, empirical manner. The social sciences explicitly conceive the social in just such a manner, and are increasingly engaged in its operationalization. I would therefore like to show how the 'social sciences' have directly contributed to this ontological reduction, at both the level of their most general epistemological and methodological principles and that of their particular bureaucratic-technocratic forms of intervention.

Society's Double Constitution, Ideal and Empirical, in Modernity

Ontologically, 'society' has always, until now, existed *in itself*. Its existence as a concrete totality corresponds to humanity's symbolic existence; it is in 'society', as in language, that the human species' specific difference can be identified. To cut to the quick, let us say that society exists, relative to all particular subjects and social actions, in basically the same a priori manner as language, which also has

an a priori existence relative to all meaningful speech. Society may be the 'product' of individual actions, but it is progressively constituted or consolidated outside (or better, simultaneously before and after, beneath and above)[3] each of these actions considered separately. Only the existence of norms can ontologically ground or establish the 'reality' of the categories of social life (like the family, economy, etc.) that appear objective to everyone. In a sense, the problem examined here, as well as the solution proposed, concerns the philosophical problem of universals, as posed and debated in the West since the Middle Ages, and revived in modern sociology, notably with Weber. Unfortunately, in a context dominated by individualism and utilitarianism, the ontological importance of the opposition between realism and nominalism has passed largely unnoticed and the problem has been reduced to purely methodological considerations.

Phenomenologically, however, society has not always existed *for itself*; or at least, it has not always been represented ideologically-reflexively by its members as having an autonomous existence, clearly separated from that of the 'world' or 'gods'. Without speaking of the forms of social existence and representation in 'primitive' or 'traditional' non-western societies, or even in classical Antiquity, let us simply recall that, until the Renaissance, the Christian Middle Ages conceived of reality in terms of an opposition between the creator and his creation – and that within his creation, one scarcely distinguished (in an ontological sense) between the social and natural worlds, as both were commanded by the same divine will. In this world humans alone stood out, for they were individually created in 'God's image' and had a fate (salvation) that was, precisely, not 'of this world'. 'Society' in this context signified nothing more than 'polite society' or 'good company'. And as for the *Universitas* to which we alluded earlier, it referred to Christianity as a collective or 'mystical body'.

Retrospectively, sociologists can now understand the reference to divinity as representing the (a priori) mode of transcendental constitution characteristic of traditional societies. In effect, they established their particular normative order, by projecting it without, in order to place themselves, by a mirror effect, within its ontological dependence.[4] But this is not how modernity, beginning in the sixteenth century, conceived of tradition's existence. In its desire to emancipate itself from tradition, modernity's attitude was both sweeping and critical. It did not see tradition as one form of society among others, but as the very expression of a fundamental ontological arbitrariness, irrationality and inconsistency. On the basis of the idea of the individual's 'natural' autonomy (as given by its 'free will', but also by the pursuit of its 'interests' in the face of tradition's normative prescriptions), modernity conceived the project of a 'rational' reconstruction of human order. It was this project, the counterpart of the emancipated individual, this design for a new order, produced by men in the free exercise of their reason, that underwrote the figure of 'society' and grounded its ontological autonomy.

'Society' in its modern sense – and it is this sense that is now threatened with dissolution in the transition to postmodernity – results from the junction and fusion of two movements, closely correlated with each other structurally. On the one hand, at a 'cultural' level, as individuals are emancipated from the traditional

norms and authorities that governed their identities and actions, the concept of 'polite society' becomes increasingly broad and abstract, and is thus progressively transformed into a 'public sphere' ruled by 'civility'.[5] But this public sphere is itself turned into a 'political public sphere', where the critique of traditional authority and demands for the rational-democratic reconstruction of the socio-political order are expressed with increasing legitimacy. This same public sphere is gradually turned into 'civil society' with the realization of these political demands, and with the establishment of a unified structure of rational-legal regulations that possesses a formal, universal character and is visible to and binding on all (the liberal concept of the state of law).

Society takes on the value of an objective totality in the eyes of its members through this mode of institutionalization, whereby society is divided into an instituting body and an instituted order such that it can act reflexively and politically in view of its own transformation. Modernity is thus the first societal regime that, by purposely conceiving and producing itself, represents itself as a society, that is, as a unified reality *sui generis*. At first the 'reality' of society appears ideally – and thus counter-factually – as the possible project and product of individual free wills inspired by the same universal reason, with a transcendental character. But this idealist conception of society will become an empirical conception with the gradual consolidation and legitimation of the modern social order as a common political-institutional system (the state of law) that objectively governs the ensemble of civil society, though appearing, in its ideology and praxis, to emanate from the latter.

We should note that the modern idea of society also takes shape in the modern conservative movement's reaction to the 'revolutionary' political institutionalization that we just discussed. For here too movement is involved, not just inertia; for this 'reactionary' movement also objectifies society (reflexively, politically, doctrinally and ideologically), even as it understands the latter as a traditional order, and affirms its normative naturality against revolutionary liberalism's voluntarist arbitrariness. But both these opposed but complementary ways of conceiving society ('politico-revolutionary' and 'cultural-conservative') are going to be overtaken in part by a third, purely positive perspective. The latter will no longer conceive of society except as a coherent set of regularities, understood in terms of objective laws that, unbeknownst to the social actors, govern all their actions, relations and ideas, including their ideas about society.

Consider briefly the status and content of this new modern concept of society relative to the historical evolution of modern societies. First, it should be emphasized that throughout the period of modernity's expansion and struggle against tradition, society is not represented, for itself or its members, as a positive empirical reality (this will occur only in the nineteenth century). Instead society appears as an ideal reality with an essentially normative character, in which Reason (associated with Justice) assumes the role of the founding transcendental reference point. Thus, in modernity's struggle against tradition, one does not immediately perceive the loss of the transcendental reference relative to the social order's legitimization (a reference that first took the form, in an implicit,

non-reflexive manner, of 'meaning'), but rather its formal abstraction and universalization.

By contrast, religious transcendence possessed, at the level of its representation, an essentially concrete character (the will of the gods). As such it could be projected – in accordance with a rather revealing spatial metaphor – above and beyond the intra-worldly reality with which it still maintained a thousand direct, 'quasi-empirical' relations. The concreteness of divine representation – which corresponds to its institutional representation in the form of ecclesiastical authority – will be rejected by the Protestant Reformation and its ethical reinterpretation of religious ideology[6] (the subjective interiorization of abstract 'duty', the suppression of institutionalized mediations, the passage from 'submission' to 'responsibility' and from 'faithfulness' to 'faith', the *deus absconditu*s, etc.). The abstraction of the transcendental reference will subsequently be completed on a secular plane with the triple ideological figure of English utilitarian empiricism, Enlightenment rationalism, and their synthesis in German idealism.

This is when the 'social sciences', or at least their direct precursors, the doctrines wherein they still locate their origins, first emerge. The first such doctrine, which still appears as a normative theory of society, is the juridical-political doctrine of natural law and the social contract. This doctrine would ground the new social order in an abstract, universal reason, invoked counterfactually in order to legitimate in advance the new type of society borne by the 'bourgeois revolution'. And this transcendentalization of Reason corresponds ontologically to the fundamental individualism that animates the revolutionary process, claiming that each individual has immediate, 'natural' access to, and participates in, this abstract, universal reason. As such, this doctrine formally elaborates modern society's discourse of legitimization, and explicitly serves as a transcendental reference in the struggle against tradition, right up till the moment of its institutional triumph in the English, French and, to a lesser extent, American revolutions (see Freitag, 1994a).

The success of the bourgeois political revolution, which tends to ensure that the constitutional political order's legitimacy appears self-evident, results in the displacement of the problem of societal legitimization from a formally political level to that of civil society's concrete mode of organization. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, one sees a shift from the problem of the government's form (traditional monarchy versus the constitutional state) to that of civil society's institutional content. This is when political economy, notably with Adam Smith, replaces political theory as modern society's fundamental discourse of legitimization and appears, at a theoretical level, as the 'dominant social doctrine or science' (see Rosanvallon, 1979).

As a totality, 'society' will first be perceived as 'economic society'. For its primary institutional conflicts will be defined at the level of its socio-economic organization (economic liberalism versus statist voluntarism and, later, revolutionary socialism), while the question of legitimacy is gradually displaced from the normative thematic of 'Reason' to that of social reality's 'positive naturalness'. But the claim that 'economic laws' – and particularly the 'laws of the market' –

are 'natural' still preserves a normative-ideological moment. As such they are not to be understood as simply an objective description of 'empirical social reality'; these laws are the new transcendental reference for the legitimation of capitalist society – which can, therefore, no longer be equated with the model of a merely 'bourgeois' modern society. Marx's work, subtitled a 'critique of political economy' illustrates this normative-ideological dimension: and it is here that the concept of the 'bourgeoisie' most clearly undergoes a change in meaning. But as this change does not occur reflexively, and as the new meaning is combined with the old, the term's usage is burdened with an ambiguity that will prove of considerable profit to political polemic, but at the expense of its theoretical conceptualization.

Despite the presence of a revolutionary, anti-capitalist movement, the twentieth century will be marked globally by the success of capitalist economic organization. The latter will manage to associate itself with the political forms of the 'liberal-democratic' state; and to integrate, more or less, the 'popular masses' as they become politically mobilized – the latter being concurrent to their 'proletarianization', that is, to the subjection of their 'labour force' to the laws of the market. To be sure, there were exceptions, as first evidenced by the reconversion (and reinforcement) of certain traditional structures of domination into the 'state authoritarianism'[7] and 'Bonapartism' that carried out the industrial-capitalist revolution 'from above' (Bismarck's Prussia providing perhaps the best example) – the same (bourgeois) revolution carried out 'from below' in England and, to a lesser extent, France. The development of fascism in the first half of the twentieth century will share something of the same dynamic. But the integration of a society 'ruled by the economy' and a society 'based on individual political liberty' remains the central societal dynamic of the nineteenth century, and engenders two sets of consequences (each being originally attached to one of the poles). The birth of sociology will express the 'need' to find a normative synthesis of these two poles.[8]

The economy's autonomous development under capitalism eventually dissolves all forms of societal solidarity, whether traditional (community solidarity and hierarchical responsibility) or modern (where solidarity takes the form of a demand for social justice). Here one can refer not just to Marx – who remained captive to the positivist and naturalist economism that dominated the nineteenth century – but to Karl Polanyi in particular, and his important and lucid work, *The Great Transformation*.[9] Capitalism's development raises the problem of 'social solidarity' and that of the 'mode of constitution of society's unity' as a subjective totality, and places it at the forefront of 'societal legitimization'. And this problem will be posed at a time when democratic participation in the exercise of political power represents an 'irreversible' ideological acquisition of the bourgeois revolution.

Sociology, in its turn, is going to inherit the question of the 'normative' and 'symbolic' conditions of society's integration, as newly posed by the 'capitalist economic regime's' success. But when considering the historical conditions of the birth of this new 'science', one must not neglect the fact that the societies that acceded to the political status of the universal, remained divided into distinct

'nation states' (as a consequence of the historical particulars relative to the processes of political mobilization that determined their emergence). Thus the development of capitalism leads, beyond the confrontation of strictly individual interests, to an 'international competition' between politically autonomous collective entities, which in turn endows the forms of national collective identification with a highly 'nationalist', 'communal' character. As such, nationalism acquires, for a period that is historically pivotal, the ontological status of a transcendental reference point.

On the other, more strictly political side of the equation, one must consider the fact that democratic participation in the constitution of state power (with labour parties, unions, etc.) placed modern industrial societies on the path of 'social-democratic reformism' (labour rights, social rights, economic legislation, etc.) – the latter's stakes being constituted by the very conditions of capitalism's institutional functioning. A cumulative contradiction was developing between capitalism's autonomous development and the demand for social justice expressed by the essentially political character of the new collective solidarity. At the same time, then, as sociology inherited the problem of societal integration in industrial capitalist societies, it had to confront the problem of the legitimation of social conflicts, since the legitimacy of reformist-democratic societies was being displaced onto their empirical capacity to resolve these conflicts. Thus the characteristic confrontation, at an ideological level, between nationalist unanimity and democratic conflictuality, which are far from mutually exclusive, but develop in parallel (except under totalitarianism, where the conflictual dimension is entirely projected outwards, at least officially-ideologically).

In the exercise of its theoretical-ideological dimension, sociology moved from the problem of societal integration (the conditions of society's a priori integration) to that of the social integration of the multiple, particular demands and identities constitutive of the dynamics of a progressive society. This movement occurred in tandem with the development of reformism, of which sociology itself represented an essential moment. This brings us to our third point, and second moment of historical mutation.

Modernity's 'Empirical Fulfillment' and 'Ideological Exhaustion'

From its beginnings sociology was heir to 'capitalism's contradictions', and in a broader sense than Marx had perhaps understood (at least after the *1844 Manuscripts*). For it was faced with the problem of society's normative integration,[10] which could no longer be assured when an autonomous economic logic dominated society's development. Sociology, or at least its classics, still conceived of society as a concrete totality but one whose unity had become problematic.

Beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century, society's development no longer followed the path laid out by the rigorous logic of a sovereign 'liberal' economism. If it had, it would no doubt have confirmed the

revolutionary conclusions that Marx had sought to grasp theoretically in his analysis of *Capital*. Independent of all local variations, the reason for such a 'historical deviation' can be summed up in one word: reformism.

We should add that Marx's conclusions, if their oppositional stance and political implications are bracketed, largely coincided with those of the classical English economists. What distinguishes Marx from Ricardo is not so much his economic theory, but the political conclusions he draws from that theory. For Marx's political commitments maintain an appeal to a transcendental principle of Justice that the classical economist would have dismissed as unscientific, that is, as extraneous to the necessary laws supposedly governing a rational (and natural, therefore, ideal) society. But on precisely this point, which radically distinguishes him from the classical economics, Marx proves inconsistent; for he too adheres, ontologically and epistemologically, to a positivist, scientistic conception of society and the social sciences – the social science version of the period being provided by 'economism' and social Darwinism. Thus Marx failed to follow through theoretically, that is, explicitly and reflexively, on his ethical and sociological commitments.

For a similar reason, he was unable to develop an adequate conception of the political. He persisted in grasping the political in an instrumental manner, not unlike English political philosophy. But in contrast to the latter's individualism, this was in direct contradiction with his own 'normative' intentions and, indeed, with the transcendental grounds of his entire critical project – as already visible in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. It is here, in his failure to comprehend the political, and in the repression of the transcendental character of his own social commitments, that one finds the Achilles' heel of what still remains an impressive theoretical construction. This is why reformism always appeared, from Marx's perspective, to be merely a 'straying' from the rigorous development of capitalism's market logic that, left to itself, would culminate in a final crisis.

In order to understand reformism's historical nature and import, one must remember that liberal bourgeois society was not just an economic, but a political society based on the transcendental ideal of the realization of formal Reason and material Justice. At the economic level, bourgeois society's 'transcendental' liberty was, to be sure, based on a universal, abstract and formal idea of 'individual liberty' applied to private property in particular, and to the capacity to act without restriction entailed by the latter (see C.B.Macpherson, 1962). But this same principle also served as a political basis for the construction of a regime of law, since it underwrote what was already a more concrete concept, that of the 'citizen' – i.e., the rational individual who, as a member of the nation, is part of the sovereign, and thereby participates directly in the constitution of state power. Moreover, this somewhat negative principle of liberty, the basis of 'modern natural law', was offset politically by reference to a positive, collective demand for Justice and 'general happiness'.

If the basic idea of liberty included formal political equality and individual economic autonomy (via the absolutization of 'property rights'), the idea of Justice, by contrast, suggested that individual autonomy be exercised in the

context of an active, positive societal solidarity of the 'communitarian' sort. So the demand for solidarity also conferred an a priori normative character and collective finality, as expressed by the constant reference to the 'common good', on the 'spontaneous', 'impersonal' societal dynamics unleashed by the economic individual's autonomization.

With this double principle of transcendental legitimation, the consequences of the unencumbered exercise of economic liberty – as manifested empirically by pauperization and alienation – would be reconsidered at the level of formal political liberty. And at this level social reformism would emerge as a movement speaking in the name of a positive or material demand for Justice. The primary objective of this movement was, precisely, the political transformation of the institutional rules governing civil society – the latter having been understood initially as an economic society completely dominated by the 'natural' institution of property.

In its first phase, reformism stayed within the framework of the formal, universalist legitimation of modern bourgeois society. Thus it was in the terms of political legislation that it sought, in the name of political liberty and social justice, to formulate and realize its principal demands: the extension of the liberty of association and political participation, labour rights, social rights, education, etc. This first phase, though it still accorded with the abstract, universalist forms of regulation characteristic of bourgeois society, nonetheless broke with the latter's understanding of the interests deserving of universal social recognition.

To speak only briefly of these matters, this phase asserted the idea that these interests were substantial, and not just formal. And it did so by denouncing the hypocrisy of presenting and legitimating property interests as purely formal and universal, and thus as superior to all other interests. Such hypocrisy was all the more evident as property, understood as *ius usus et ab usus*, could no longer be presented, in a society now dominated by the bourgeoisie, as necessary to the individual's emancipation from all traditional 'norms' and 'authorities'. On the contrary, it appeared to constitute a new form of tyranny. The idea that 'liberty' inhered in property provided a good bourgeois argument against the Ancien Regime. But this same argument lost its absolute, transcendental value when applied to social categories (the 'proletariat') that had fallen outside the communal hierarchies of traditional, patriarchal society. These categories were now at the mercy of the owners of capital, and their formal, 'equal' rights were without concrete content.

The appeal to substantial interests could still be invested with a 'transcendental' value by claiming that need has a natural, universal character. But the normative transcendental principle of Justice was beginning to be debased when it referred, in the positivist spirit of the times, to empirical 'needs' and the natural 'necessity' of their satisfaction. The naturalist legitimacy connected to the idea of need satisfaction would eventually transform all existing societal imperatives into purely empirical, contingent givens. But this, the last naturalist formulation of a universal, transcendental reference relative to societal legitimation was thereby swept away when society's development (the growth of production and

consumption) ended up revealing the ultimately contingent or purely social, and even 'arbitrary', character of all needs.

With the transcendental demand for Justice converted into an empirical claim for satisfaction, one entered an era of 'relations of force' – an era not mediated transcendentally, but managed through media, bureaucracies and technocracies. Moreover, we might suggest that Habermas's search, in his theory of communicative action, for the rational a priori foundation of practical norms still comes down to that moment when the naturalness of need becomes the ultimate 'material' argument on which discursive reason can agree, once every participant in the 'dialogue' has agreed to renounce all 'constraints' (both political and cultural) in order to conform to the 'quasi-transcendental' imperative that inheres, in a purely formal manner, in the very concept of 'communication'.

However, the dissolution of the universal, transcendental reference proper to modernity was carried out, above all, by another process of institutional development, which, though essentially American in origin, spread throughout the West during the second half of the twentieth century. Its origin was not fortuitous. America's 'national revolution' fixed and preserved, for its common immigrant culture, the political experience of the English revolution; in a sense, the latter was spontaneously 'naturalized' with no need for lofty phraseology or learned theories. As such, a certain idea of concrete individual liberty understood as natural, that is, as non-political (a matter of 'rights' [*droits*] rather than 'laws' [*droit*]) serves as the transcendental reference for American society. Thus Americans will express their social demands through the dynamics of 'particular rights'; and social struggles will develop largely outside the political arena, while being marked for a long time by an unmediated recourse to violence. This violence would eventually be contained, but only by being referred to the contracts and collective conventions of private law – at least until the New Deal, whose very name still remains revealing.

The dissolution of the reference to universal transcendence thus entails the recognition and legitimation of the law's capacity to produce contractual arrangements, which includes as its three main moments: the development of 'collective agreements', the recognition of 'corporate property', and the change from a state of law based on an *imperium* to a 'managerial' or 'referee' state based on 'competence'. With the constant addition of new functions, the state gradually but inexorably loses the transcendental character of its formal unity. The latter is replaced by the autonomous development of multiple executive agencies oriented in a purely empirical manner to questions of 'efficiency', 'efficacy', and 'effectiveness', in short, to the *management* of society as a systemic *going concern* (Parsons) that finds its grounds in its own functioning.[11]

The classical vertical dualism between state and 'citizen' and between the sphere of the *imperium* and that of private liberty (or civil society with its contractual responsibilities) is gradually replaced by a 'horizontal' pluralism. Here the particular interests, aggregated according to circumstances into 'social partners', confront each other 'peacefully' (and thus 'legitimately'); for they respect the now purely procedural rules that represent the ultimate instance of the system's

legitimation as guaranteed by the state – itself understood as the highest instance for the arbitration of private conflicts. Such horizontal pluralism has nothing to do with equality (which requires a vertical transcendental reference!), since it places on the same level both weak and powerful interests, large and small identities, with discrete or clamorous, 'micro-' or 'macro-molecular' characters. What we have here is the purely negative principle of the absence of violence, which now becomes the ultimate principle of legitimation – even in the theory of Jürgen Habermas. One can thus understand the obsession with subjective violence, whether public or purely private, in a society that, having successfully projected its objective violence outwards, appears so pacified, at least in its center. The struggle against terrorism will perhaps be the founding myth of our depoliticized postmodernity!

As the classic distinctions between state and civil society, private and public law, civil and penal law, collective rights and private contracts, facts and principles, are effaced; as the distinction between political *imperium* and private force gives way to the purely contingent and pragmatic hierarchies constituted by 'relations of force'; as the political 'public sphere' is turned into a 'media space'; as power becomes 'influence'; and legitimacy is identified with the mobilization of 'motivations' – then society (understood as an a priori totality that has a subjective character, transcendental value, and its own self-identity) is transformed into a purely empirical 'social system' whose unity now exists only a posteriori. This is when society is replaced by the social, understood as the empirical-statistical set of all 'existing social relations' and considered exclusively from the perspective of particular social 'actors', 'agents', 'partners' or 'movements'.

But there is a fundamental aporia here. The 'social' remains inescapably grounded in sociality. And sociality is not a natural, purely positive thing (or 'attribute'); it cannot be divided, shared, circulated, accumulated, harmonized, counterbalanced, let alone created – as in the typically American conception of power understood as a 'zero sum game' or pure system of 'influence'. Although Habermas himself is not that far removed from such a conception when he conceives society as a system of communication!

Sociality is, in its very essence, a relation to the other mediated a priori by a common belonging to the totality. This is true from the beginning, when it concerns the necessarily inter-subjective signification of all speech, which can only be grounded in a common relation to language. The concept of the 'social' is quite precarious; it lives exclusively off 'reserves of meaning,' 'identity', 'legitimacy' and 'transcendence' (here in a formal and abstract sense) that it does not itself reproduce in its mode of operation and existence. The 'crisis of the social' is not, therefore, due to its 'fragmentation', but on the contrary, to the full realization and indefinite perfection of the System's conditions of functioning and operation. To be sure, there is a certain, short-run (or so one can think) 'crisis of the social' tied to neo-liberal policies – a practical crisis (or the crisis of a certain, already purely practical mode of functioning, but carried out in a less than practical manner) – as well as an ideological legitimation crisis relative to the classical forms of state intervention. But this is not what is at stake, it seems to

me, when one questions the 'fragmentation of the social', particularly in a context where the social sciences sense a fundamental theoretical crisis relative to the nature of their object and signification of their concepts, as inherited from modernity.

Now the realization of the 'social's' operational perfection ('the best of all possible worlds'!) would necessarily entail the loss of an illusion: i.e., the idea that one should be able to seek and find something in the system that is 'social', subjective, ethical and political, in short, a common world (a *koinionia* or *universitas*) that, by its very nature, transcends the purely technical conditions of its operational efficiency and functional effectiveness. Admittedly, such perfection is still a matter of science fiction, but science fiction anticipates technocratic practice (whether public or private, the distinction is losing its meaning) – as already repeatedly illustrated by technological science fiction in its apolitical naiveté.

One last point, to return to the fate of the social sciences. Sociology, originally a science of societal integration, has gradually been transformed into a science of social integration – at least to the extent that reformism, with which it is ideologically identified, was able to confer a new legitimacy on society, a legitimacy based not on the transcendental ideas of individual liberty and social justice, but on ideas of personal autonomy and social progress understood in an empirical, pragmatic manner. At this point sociology tends to mutate into social work taken in its largest sense.

'Social work': the term is often more loaded than it appears! The intentions of 'social workers' have no doubt (almost) always exceeded their discipline's concept, which is simply sociology considered as productive labour. They were used by the concept, until the moment when, in their eyes, it proved stronger than their intentions; but then it was not the concept that gave way, but the intentions with which it was charged! In the purely positive functioning of a society abandoned to the constraints of systemic integration alone, the normative ideals founder, while ethical and political dreams dissolve in the cyberneticized insipidity of the 'social's' quotidian management. Social workers are heirs to this new conception of society, but in the last instance, only to its 'bad side' where 'problems' ceaselessly re-emerge because 'persons' continuously subsist.

In its actual, empirical practice, sociology still intervened in terms of the normative ideas, inherited from its past, of progress and collective solidarity. But the transformation of society's conditions of reproduction, now regulated by a multitude of decentralized ('ex-centred') agents, procedures, decisions, programming, forecasting, etc., has made sociological practice lose the unitary, normative idea that, theoretically, it once had of its object.

A Normative Alternative to the Postmodern 'Loss of Meaning'?

Here one could again begin with Arendt's distinction between 'labour', 'work' and 'action', and pursue the reflection she initiated concerning the opposition

between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* (which is not identical to the modern distinction between theory and practice, as the latter possesses an essentially formal character). Or one could begin with the Heideggerian critique of technique, provided that one doesn't repeat his retreat from politics into ontological fatalism. But I will be content to allude to just one idea: that of the ontologically normative nature of the social and social action, which entails as a requirement this normativity's transcendental foundation, and as a possibility this foundation's reflexive recognition. Both the requirement and the possibility are based, in the last instance, on the autonomy that, by definition, each particular action possesses. In effect, all action, if it is properly human, refers reflexively to the norms that govern it – in contrast to a mere fact or event inserted into a chain or structure of determinations bound by necessity.

When one speaks of the fragmentation of the social, one is recognizing the existence of a societal crisis. But as a social system contemporary society is not in crisis: it is functioning rather well. It possesses a remarkable capacity for integration and reproduction, increasingly ensured in technical (technological or technocratic) terms – even if it pushes to the margins a number of serious problems that, given its formal and material capacities, could be resolved if there was the will, that is, if their resolution was made the object of a fundamental norm or essential goal. Moreover, one has reason to think that the system's most threatening aspect is precisely its capacity to function while producing an increasingly inhuman world, even as it succeeds in managing both this inhumanity and the revolt it provokes.

It is not a matter, as Habermas once thought, of a legitimation crisis. One need simply note that the new technological and technocratic modes of the social's management possess, in contrast to traditional and modern forms of domination ('regulation' and 'reproduction'), a remarkable capacity for self-legitimation; for their legitimacy is based on their efficiency, their effectiveness and, ultimately, their very operationality. One could question such 'efficiency' by noting that society (as a 'system') is constantly weighed down by the purely endogenous conditions of its functioning, a little like yesterday's dinosaurs – though today one speaks of 'complexity' rather than mass and weight, since we are in the information age, and not the age of Newtonian physics. But for the moment there is no real shortage of means (particularly with respect to information) for resolving these sorts of problems, and perhaps to resolve them *ad absurdum*. The new problem lies with an excess rather than a lack of capacity (and this is why the classical concept of 'crisis' is in need of revision).

If there is a crisis, it must be situated at the level of the normative orientations of social action and social life; it inhabits individual and collective identity and touches on the very meaning of human-social-historical existence, on the common consciousness of ends. In sum, what is in crisis is what, relative to society, the social sciences have sought to bracket. The nature of the crisis, then, is such that it tends to worsen as the system becomes more efficient, 'competent', 'effective' and 'operational' in its functioning and capacity for integration and legitimation.

One has spoken of the disenchantment of the world, of a loss of meaning, of a life become absurd. The death of God was proclaimed, and barely fifty years later that of the subject. Are we truly dead as subjects, or only weakened, 'cretinized'? What then was this now defunct God? We are told that we have lost our illusions, but what were these illusions? Were they really illusory? If there is no 'foundation' (always a spatial and ultimately realist, substantialist and positive metaphor) where previous societies believed, whether in the gods, the fleeting intimacy of individual consciousness, or the Reason at the center of that consciousness, does this really mean that we are without foundations, that we are falling in *Abgrund*, into the abyss?

The problem we are now confronting is not 'complicated': every adolescent has to resolve it to become an adult. In conceptual terms, it comes down to the question of the reality of 'transcendence', which entails that of the validity of norms. For the justification of norms is rooted in a transcendental dimension of existence, even as this ontological dimension grounds their claim to an a priori validity relative to the formal autonomy of particular social practices. The question, then, concerns the foundation or mode of constitution of this societal a priori; it is the question of society itself, understood as having an identity and normative dimension, and as a real totality that is simultaneously objective and subjective. Unlike the prophet, it is not up to the sociologist or philosopher to determine which values should exist. S/he can, however, demonstrate the value of values and the importance of ends, because this is precisely what s/he does when she fixes her reflexive gaze on human, social and historical action, and considers a person's or society's mode of existence.

What is involved is a question of ontology bearing on the irreducibly normative 'mode of being' of human (read: contingent) reality, and the fragility inherent in the 'mode of being' of value. Note that it is not the mode of being (our mode of being as social beings) that has changed, but only our manner of representing it. Until now all societies have given themselves, through the 'debt of meaning', an indirect view of their transcendental constitution and, in consequence, their ontological actuality. By projecting outwards their inner consciousness of themselves (at first in a concrete, and then an abstract manner), they were not – whatever might have been said – deluding themselves as regards their nature. On the contrary they were duly recognizing, in an entirely realist manner, the ontologically transcendental character of their existence. In a sense, they were only looking at themselves in a mirror. True, the mirrors were broken; but being just mirrors, what they reflected did not, thereby, fall to pieces. And what were these mirrors? At bottom no more than the reflection's 'reification'. And the reflection is still with us: it is immanent to our capacity to see and think, and is fundamental to our liberty.

It is neither a matter of reviving 'old' values, nor 'producing' new ones, but of establishing a new relation to values that will no longer be mediated by reflection's reification. What is involved is the attainment of a new, direct consciousness of our reflexivity, one that needs no longer be guaranteed by its alienation, that is to say, by the alienation of ourselves as reflexive beings. Instead of

succumbing to 'nihilism' – which is nothing more than 'illusion's illusion' (that is, the illusion that it is just an illusion and an arbitrary one at that) – we can establish a new relation to values. This relation will no longer be prophetic or dogmatic, but reflexive and pedagogical; in it the 'value of value' will be immediately understood, since it will be recognized ontologically and experienced existentially. But this implies, relative to both modernity and tradition, a sort of ideological revolution, if by the latter one refers not to how being is, but to how it is conceived (and one could add, to approach Hegel a little, how it arrives at its self-understanding).

We should point out the ontologically unrealistic character of the opposition between 'facts' and 'principles' (*droit*), and to the ontological preeminence given in modernity to the 'facts' (once the movement against tradition was over). The facts are identified directly and unconditionally with 'being' while principles are never more than a hypothetical 'ought-to-be', which neither truly nor fully exist because they do not exist of, by or for themselves, but only on the condition of their subjective recognition and realization. In a similar manner we should point out the epistemologically unrealistic character of the opposition between theory and practice. The most immediately pressing object of our consciousness, the objective stratum of human-social-historical reality (one might remember here the Socratic dictum 'know thyself') is normative through and through, since it can only exist as an objective reality in its self-affirmation. It exhausts its being in the contingency of what exists in and for itself, and therefore, only realizes its plenitude in the realization of its contingency; it is as such, directly, that this reality can be known and must first be recognized.

Such a conception implies the claim that 'being' is not 'what is' but 'what exists' – which is to say that, in its concept, being necessarily encompasses what is plural, and thus 'coexistent' or 'convivial'. One could say that this ontology rejects the distinction between essence and existence, as long as this distinction concerns being itself, and not just a manner of speech – that is, our (subjectively inevitable) manner, when speaking and acting, of establishing a distance between ourselves and existence (including our existence when we refer to ourselves), in order to fix existence outside ourselves, such that there will be time for speech to make sense, action to take effect, and for speech and action to take on meaning.

Contingency is neither necessary nor arbitrary. It is the mode of being of that which is neither 'necessary' nor grounded in something outside itself (particularly as regards its form and specific or generic mode of being) but exists in and for itself. What befalls it occurs by and for itself, not according to some external, objective (or 'necessary') 'law' but in accordance with its own interior norms, subjectively and reflexively assumed within the continuity of temporal events. One understands why science has become the prevailing if impoverished common sense of modernity: for science what is 'real', or what is most real, is what conforms to universal laws, and is thus 'necessary' and, in principle, predictable, i.e. deducible from its prior conditions.

I am claiming here the spirit of a pre-modern common sense where the 'true world' appears as the 'world's wealth', the world of a contingent multiplicity, an

inexhaustible diversity of particular beings and forms and their enchanting harmony, a world that possesses ontological beauty and offers us an epistemological welcome. In this world there is nothing particular, let alone singular, that is, properly speaking, 'necessary'. This applies most of all, of course, to human beings, with their diversity of societies and cultures, and the irreducible uniqueness of each person's consciousness of himself and of the relations of recognition he maintains with others. But it also applies to every species of living being and even, at the limit, to every grain of sand if its existence has been singularized by the awareness of a conscious being. Nothing in this world, with its particular living forms, individuated existences and singular experiences, has its existence guaranteed by 'something else' of absolute value. And as such, as we are now quite aware, everything, as particularity and singularity, can disappear (this is perhaps why this world – the 'real, true world' – was placed in peoples' minds under the protection of God or the gods).

Doesn't everything that has a contingent existence possess the highest degree of being, the greatest dignity and most elevated ontological value? The universal that corresponds to the concept of matter in the objective universe (attraction, weight, mass, energy, movement and so on) is only the smallest common denominator of existence, and not the basis or ontological limit of all that is. Diversity implies being's deployment and enrichment, not its scission, limitation and/or impoverishment (cf. Kant's *Critique of Judgement*).

Thus the adventitious existence of each living species, each language and culture, each person in her or his liberty in society, and of the 'world' understood as an ontological space for the diversity of existents, their cohabitation, relations and 'harmony'. All this binds us by norms, not by some external necessity, and immediately connects us to everything that exists (including ourselves), and to everything that can be known in its existential fragility. Still we can adhere to all this ontologically, that is, existentially (to use what is now a more suitable term), by the recognition (here the word's two meanings merge) and affirmation of a 'wanting-to-be', a 'wanting-to-live', and a 'letting-live' – whose wealth implies a respect for being, and for other beings, a 'letting-be'. It seems to me, moreover, that one can interpret Nietzsche's 'will to power' – which he invokes in such an ambiguous manner – as suggesting respect for this desire to let live, rather than as an arrogant, individual and singular affirmation. In an analogous fashion, one could extend the ontological or existential reach of the Gadamerian critique of the 'modern prejudice against the absence of prejudice'.

In a word, we only exist within a tradition (which is simply to say, by its transmission); and this tradition itself only exists because it has been continuously transmitted and received, with no total rupture, within or on the margins of its own reflexive and critical opening. It is always in such an opening that a tradition is constituted by its being augmented, pursued and prolonged – even at the risk of being lost – so as to be extended all the way to us, and within us, as the indefinite duration of the 'present', Tradition, in its inner depths, appears as something that is perpetuated through the transmission and reception of a 'gift' – that is, precisely, of a 'gift of being' created by a normative ontological debt that can

only be 'paid off' by this being's death. For one doesn't 'make' oneself, and one doesn't 'make' life, but one can give life, and once received, one can 'make one's life,' that is, one can augment it and become its 'author'.[12] This is why every frozen, dogmatic tradition slowly becomes a 'dead letter', something 'past', an obstacle to its living transmission.

Such 'knowledge-that-acknowledges' (*connaisance reconnaissante*) ought perhaps to be the cognitive-normative objective of all present research and reflection, should the latter wish to be seen as heir to the 'social sciences'. For the social sciences were obliged to make sense of society – for society and in its name – at a time when not just religion was no longer capable, but when the transcendental ideological reference points of modernity (liberty, equality, justice, progress) were themselves being undermined, and even frontally attacked on their own ideological terrain (I am thinking particularly of the nihilist critique of modernity). But what the social sciences tried to put in place of these transcendental principles, the pure positivity of the social facts' functional interdependence, the social processes' immediate objectivity, could only be a source of legitimation in its turn, for as long as the ideology of science, necessity and positive truth could conserve its transcendental value, however residual. Thus the present 'fragmentation' and 'loss of meaning' arises with the 'crisis of science' and its conversion into a technologism or technocratism (a crisis marked politically by the passage to a strictly 'utilitarian', 'operational', purely 'managerial' Keynesian state.[13]

But here again it is not a matter of a pure given or simple fact. The stakes are existential, and consist in normatively recovering the transcendental or a priori value of identity, and normatively understanding the social in the context of society's unity and relation to the world. They consist, above all, in rendering technique (which, by its autonomization, has become the measurable, verifiable, 'testable' ability to do almost anything) and, in particular, the techniques of social management, dependent on deliberate adherence to common ends as established by informed reflection. It is not a matter of attacking science and technique with dogmatically posed absolute values. In our practical and critical relation to the world and ourselves, science and technique constitute our know-how and can-do (*savoir-faire et pouvoir-faire*); their development constitutes the newest, most vibrant part of our tradition, our own ontological contribution to the constant process of growth that is subjective existence.

What is involved is, for the first time, assuming responsibility for our 'authority', in the entirely new situation resulting from the increased importance of technique, whether turned towards the transformation of the 'external' world, or the 'self-production' of society, that is, everything considered, of ourselves. Because, as we now realize, we are the ones responsible in the last instance, we cannot assume such responsibility without a new consciousness of the ontological value of existence in both its subjective and objective dimensions. What is required, then, is a new consciousness of the hierarchy immanent to being, where the affirmation of identity is valid only in its respect for difference, a respect rooted in the recognition of a common belonging that already encompasses even

our innermost depths in everything. The sap that nourishes the branches and leaves, and allows the fruits to ripen, always rises from the roots. All religion (*religere* – to link together) is first expressed in a feeling of piety that associates the recognition of the self with the recognition of the whole (whatever the historical, conceptual or categorical forms of the whole's representation); it is then expressed in an attitude of 'prayer', itself a demand for recognition, and the opposite of arrogance.

What is new compared to the religions of the past is that we have become relative to all human and, indeed, all living things – to the entire sublunar world! – the masters of destiny. Our prayers, piety and respect are addressed not to an Other, but to ourselves, understood in terms of all that grounds and binds us. And the latter comprises the three thousand million years of our emergence in the world, that is, the world's emergence to the multiplicity and wealth of its beings, and the emergence to consciousness that we, as humans, have of and for it – such a consciousness being in itself atemporal, since it produces time and the way time is measured and counted, the latter having appeared quite recently, which is to say, objectively speaking, quite late. Within such a 'reflective religion' what binds us to being is being itself, directly grasped in its wealth and beauty, and the feeling that we are welcome despite the pain and effort required to make ourselves at home in it. The reality of the world and its welcome are first reflected in the apprehension of the irreversibility of time, of the time that we do not have and will retroactively never have, as long as we remain mortal. For as mortals we cannot appropriate anything definitively, whether of the world or ourselves; nor can we create *ex nihilo*. Still we are receptive to everything; we can transmit or extend anything, or conversely, we can lose it all.

By 'inscribing' wealth, multiplicity, harmony and beauty in the ontological field of 'being' and 'truth', I am simply repeating, if in a pompous, laboured manner, what has always spontaneously been recognized by common sense. But the latter has been downgraded by science, and by technique's claims to 'creativity'. Here perhaps is the nub of the problem: how could the knowledge, intuition and certitude of common sense allow itself to be completely marginalized ontologically (that is to say, cognitively, aesthetically and normatively) by a knowledge and certitude that can only connect with the 'true world's reality', while still relying on common sense, as it remains an abstraction from the latter? Common sense, which immediately affirms not just the cognitive but the normative and aesthetic value of its judgements, has become restricted to the ontologically inessential realm of 'private life', even if, within that realm, it is exalted by contemporary psychology and personalist ideology. And even if this ideology lays claim for both itself and its object to the singular nature of personal subjectivity, identified with being's ultimate ontological truth.

However, this aesthetic and normative apprehension of the world is not to be restored within the realm of singular 'persons' and individual' arbitrariness. For ontologically each particular depends on a relation to the whole from which it alone is distinguished, as every singular entity is dependent on its type, whether natural or symbolic, for the very possibility of its identity. Such a restoration,

then, can only be meaningful and significant if it is carried out in a 'common domain', that is, within a society that sees its normative and aesthetic judgements as fundamental to the search for and expression of its collective goals and, in consequence, its identity and limits.

From the critique of the 'social' to the recollection of society, and from this recollection to the reflective recognition of being (of what exists): let me apologize for this unravelling. But perhaps it is with such recognition that we can rediscover necessity, not represented as something external, as an objective or subjective law, but for the first time presented as an ontological choice that is ours alone to make – as revealed in the alternative 'to be or not to be', or to endure or disappear. Consciousness of such a choice is acquired by cognitively informed reflection, and is taught with normatively assumed conviction. As science, the social sciences, both pure and applied, have perhaps had their day (though a place still remains for their technical dimension, provided that 'legitimate' ends can be found for their application). We must instead become conscious of the ontological reality 'unveiled' by their critique of ideological reification. Here too, behind the purely critical form of its implementation (and by way of it), an 'unveiling of being' can acquire meaning and value, should we prove capable of effecting its ontological recovery, as an 'enhancement of being' within an immemorial, indefinite process of transmission.

Notes

Translated by Brian Singer

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1 See Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978).
2 See in this regard my article 'Pour un dépassement de l'opposition entre "holisme" et "individualisme" en sociologie' in the *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* (1994b).
3 'After': heritage, tradition and memory; 'beneath': as a condition; 'above': as the representation of an ideal; and 'before': as project and perspective.
4 See the idea of the 'debt of meaning' proposed by Marcel Gauchet (1977, 1997).
5 On this subject see, among others, Richard Sennett (1978) and Jürgen Habermas (1989).
6 Here one could take up, but by radically historicizing it, Weber's ideal-typical opposition between the priest and the prophet (see *Economy and Society*, and in particular vol. 1, ch. VI, pp. 439 ff.)
7 In the liberal democracies, one should point out that the same traditional despotic structures of authority flourished, but within economic enterprises, and that for a long time the state placed its power in the service of the employers as exercised under the legal mantle of the labour contract.

8 For a more scrupulous examination of this 'ideological genesis of the social sciences' see Freitag (1995).
9 The original English edition, dating from 1945, would not be published in French until 1983, by Gallimard.
10 It is the global question of society's integration that Marx designates by 'the social question', which for him too went beyond the question of both the polity and the economy.
11 The words in italics are in English in the original.
12 I am again borrowing from Hannah Arendt this reminder of the Roman entomology of the word 'author' (*auctor* and *auctoritas*) that comes from 'augere' which means 'to augment'. Emile Benveniste contests that the first sense of augere is that of increasing or augmenting: 'In its oldest uses, *augeo* denotes not the increase in something which already exists but the act of producing from within itself; a creative act which causes something to arise from a nutrient medium and which is the privilege of the gods or the great natural forces, but not of man' (1973: 421–2). From the perspective of a vitalist ontology, however, these two interpretations are not contradictory since a creation *ex nihilo* is inconceivable.
13 I am not speaking here of Keynes himself, who was personally attached to an idea of communitarian and democratic solidarity – and not just to the social conditions of economic growth.

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