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## *The case for a philosophical sociology*

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# The Case for a Philosophical Sociology

In this short intervention, I offer a plea for sociology's reengagement with philosophy. To be sure, the extent to which their ties have severed over the past few decades will vary in different national or regional contexts. As far as I know, the case is more pronounced in English-speaking sociologies than in Spanish-, German- or French-speaking ones.<sup>1</sup> Also, the field that is commonly demarcated as 'the epistemology of social sciences' remains one way in which both traditions still interact – although one suspects that social scientists pay far more attention to it than philosophers do.

I call this invitation 'philosophical sociology' and define it as the attempt to unpack the (mostly implicit) conceptions of the human, humanity and human nature that underpin our conceptions of social life. The main intellectual source for the idea of philosophical sociology comes of course from philosophical anthropology. Originally associated with the names of Max Scheler (2009) and Ernst Cassirer (1977) in the 1920s and 1930s, the tradition of philosophical anthropology was explicitly devoted to the development of a general understanding of 'what is a human being'. For my purposes, the most important intervention in this field comes from a short book by Karl Löwith (1993). First published in 1932, Löwith's *Max Weber and Karl Marx* starts by stating what for us is now the obvious: Weber and Marx shared an interest in the rise and contemporary workings of modern capitalism and offered radically different interpretations of it. Their *scientific* originality, their 'sociologies', is apparent in how their historical and conceptual sophistication wholly transformed our understanding of capitalism. But Löwith argues that these explicit *sociologies of capitalism* are in fact underpinned by a *common philosophical concern* that is the ultimate motif of their work: what it means to be human under the alienating conditions of modern capitalism. Löwith contends that Weber and Marx were 'essentially sociologists, namely, *philosophical sociologists*' because 'both provide – Marx directly and Weber indirectly – a critical analysis of modern man within bourgeois society in terms of bourgeois-capitalist economy, based on the recognition that the 'economy' has become human 'destiny' (Löwith 1993: 48, my italics).

As philosophical anthropology continued to develop after World War II, the notion that emerged was that a dual scientific and philosophical approach to understanding the human results from, and must be preserved, because of the duality of the human condition itself: humans are partly natural bodies that are controlled by their urges, emotions and organic adaptation to the world *and* they are also partly conscious beings that are

defined by their intellectual, aesthetic and indeed moral insights (Gehlen 1980, Plessner 1970). A key motif of this philosophical anthropology is the claim that no substantive idea of human nature was ever going to capture the *essential* features of what makes us humans; human beings are fundamentally indeterminate with regards to organic adaptation and this is what makes social institutions and cultural practices essential to human live.

A second insight for the idea of philosophical sociology comes from Max Weber's lecture on *Science as a Vocation* (1970). Weber contends there that sociology *can* make a contribution to public debates by unpacking the various practical and indeed normative implications of different policy options. I translate this insight into the suggestion that normative debates in society – from abortion to euthanasia via migration and welfare reforms – are actually underpinned by ideas of the human that are never fully articulated out. All societies have normative ideas and most sociologists will accept that a good account of social life will have to be able to say something meaningful about how these ideas are actualised; why and how some are preferred over others. Unpacking these ideas of the human is important because normative debates are never fully disconnected from what human beings themselves consider right or wrong, fair or unfair. In the societies we live in, humans have turned themselves into the ultimate arbiters of normativity itself. By means of its expert empirical knowledge, sociology can cast a critical eye on what is exactly being advocated, both in normatively and in practice, in particular instances.

To reclaim the importance of understanding the relationships between our preconceptions of the human and our explicit theories of society does not entail a return to an anthropocentric 'epistemological obstacle': *thou shall not explain society through the action of individuals* (Luhmann 2012). It is instead an invitation to reconsider the idea that social life itself is predicated on the fact that human beings are capable of such collective existence. Humans are beings who have a continuity

<sup>1</sup> I don't know enough about others linguistic contexts to pass judgement, but if colleagues are happy to share their experiences, I would be extremely interested.

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of consciousness so that they see themselves as themselves throughout their life; beings who negotiate a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory identities and recognise each other as members of the same species, and they are also beings who can create and interpret cultural artefacts. Crucially, humans are beings who can deploy a sense of self-transcendence so that they are able to look at the world from somebody else's point of view and thus conceive new social institutions (Archer 2000, Arendt 1978, Parsons 1978).

But in mainstream contemporary sociology we are missing these insights all too easily. Its social constructionist variant mistakenly treats the social and the human as a zero-sum game, so that bloated notions of the social leave no space for a philosophical enquiry about preconceptions of the human. Conversely, in the 'combative' variant as advocated by Bourdieu (1994), conceptions of justice, legitimacy, fairness or democracy need not be included as part of the social world because conflict, power and struggles are deemed to give a *full* ontology of the social (Honneth 1986). The fundamental reason for these shortcomings lies in the deficient philosophical underpinnings of both: whilst radical constructionism pays no attention to any form of anthropological reflection, Bourdieu's sociology uses a highly reductionist conception of human nature that cares only for power and strategic bargaining. Indeed, this form of irrationalism has been available within sociology for several decades (Bendix 1970); other candidates being more or less essentialist ideas of 'identity' and 'authenticity' that figure so highly in postcolonial and intersectional approaches (Connell 2007, Mignolo 2005). This is sociology's very own self-fulfilling dystopia: although most sociologists do care about normative questions

(not least in relation to their own justifications as to why they are doing sociology at all), they feel no particular need to take normative ideas into account as part of they have to explain sociologically (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

The history of sociology is of course full of attempts at determining the problem of normative justifications. Even if religion does remain available in contemporary society, cosmological convictions now co-exist with a wide pool of competing justifications and that their (ir)rationality is hotly contested. We have also witnessed the appeal to teleological ideas of secular progress and their belief in the normative power of history: justifications for the rights and wrongs of past and present were to be assessed against the promises of a better future. And society itself has been posited as a source of normative integration. But being subject to permanent historical and cultural changes, society was equally weak for the task of providing stable normative justifications. The ambivalent normative appeal of the nation in modern times, and the need to defend minorities against the nation's unsavoury wishes, illustrates well this point (Chernilo 2007).

As religion, history and society are all in trouble when trying to uphold normative justifications, we can still ask whether the defining anthropological features of our species can do this job – and this is a path philosophical sociology seeks to explore.

*Ideas* of humanity are certainly socially construed and have themselves changed over time (Fuller 2011). But it seems to me that a key strength of philosophical sociology lies in its taking seriously the humans capacity to reflect on what makes them the kind of being that they actually are. Anthropological arguments remain the best option here because they allow us to consider, simultaneously, that normative arguments are only actualised in society, are to carry the free assent of individual themselves and yet their binding force remains attached to some stable features that all humans possess qua human beings. Indeed, this is precisely why we claim human rights ought to be respected under all circumstances and, on occasions, against society's own will (Habermas 2010, Joas 2013).

For all their claims to originality and intimations that they seek to make sense of a new world that is still in the making, the new strand of post-humanist thinking belongs in the mode that I am describing (Braidotti 2013, Haraway 1991). This genre is constituted by its own combination of partly speculative and partly scientific arguments and echoes previous critiques of humanism. Indeed, its fundamental question remains exactly the *same*: how open to social manipulation human nature actually is, whether developments in contemporary technology have put an end to the human being as we know it and whether the very idea of humanity has ever been anything but an pernicious illusion.

Inside mainstream social science, Bruno Latour (2013) has

advanced similar claims about the *definitive* need for a whole new ontology that can do without the distinction between humans and nonhumans (although the philosophical result of his investigations is an even more reductionist ontology that allows only for the networks). I suggest that we turn their claim to novelty on their head – and not only because there is nothing less

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original than their claims to originality. The fundamental point that they miss is precisely that their very quest is paradigmatic of the all too human frustration with the irritating inevitability of the question what is to be human. When the post-humanist literature rejects the 'foundationalism' that underpins traditional 'humanist' ideas, they use this term now to indicate *exactly the same* that, in the 1960s, was deemed mere 'bourgeois' or 'ideological' humanism and, in the 1920s, it was treated as unwarranted 'metaphysics'. What is really going on, however, is that their ontologies of the social are underpinned by too shallow a view of the human.

This anti-humanism is as conventional as it is flawed: it conflates 'Humanism' as the colonial ideology of the West with the legitimate enquiry about anthropological foundations of social life and, as it deconstructs the inconsistencies of the former, it has no difficulty in ubiquitously appealing to traditional humanist values (solidarity, emancipation, subjectivity) for its own justifications. Their explorations into the limits and exceptions to 'Western anthropocentrism' is potentially illuminating, but there is something deeply elitist when this is proclaimed 'on behalf' of the disposed of the world who, quite literally, are dying for the most simple humanist values and institutions that are being so arrogantly dismissed here: the right to work, basic human decency, equality before the law. In the old debate on humanism between Sartre (2007) and Heidegger (1993), all the



important lessons have been learnt the wrong way round: they misunderstand the deeply humanistic sensibilities of the former (however imperfect) and have instead become intoxicated by the smug self-congratulation of the latter (regardless of how misguided).

The fundamental point remains, therefore: the 'Copernican revolution' of humans stop putting themselves at the centre of the universe is itself a major human accomplishment (Bachelard 2002). If the current decentering of anthropocentrism is to become sociologically fruitful, we have to accept the fact that this decentering has a limit and *is not wholly reversible*: the science, law and philosophy that now reflect on the environment, animals and cyborgs remains the wholly human accomplishment of those members of our species that now show an increased sensibility towards them.

If what I have argued so far makes sense, it may already be clear that this is not a task that sociology can fulfil on its own. Given the historical, moral, scientific and indeed theological density of our conceptions of the human, for sociology to pursue this task it needs to reconnect to philosophy. A dual approach, both scientific and philosophical, is needed because this reflects best our human condition – and sociology's highly sophisticated ability to empirically account for the ways and trends of contemporary society shall prove essential here. We must reconnect our *sociological* understandings of social life with *philosophically* informed ideas of the human, humanity and even human nature.

After a long history in which sociology tried to differentiate itself from philosophy in order to secure its scientific status, it is now again in need of philosophy. But the idea of philosophical sociology for which I advocate is neither a substitute for empirical sociological research nor a philosophical dissolution of sociology (Chernilo 2014). It rather suggests that the

common anthropological traits that define us as members of the same species create the conditions for social life to unfold without this common humanity itself being able to act directly on society (Chernilo 2013). They are also the basis from which ideas of justice, self, dignity and the good life emerge. These are irreducible to material factors because their normative worth ultimately refers back and thus depends on our conceptions of what is to be human. Without disciplinary arrogance or parochialism, a re-engagement between sociology and philosophy can take the form of a mutual learning process among the different knowledge claims that underpin them both: the empirical vocation of sociology as it grapples with the complexities of contemporary society and the kind of unanswerable questions that we still associate with the best of the philosophical tradition. At stake here is the fact that as long as sociology continues to raise the big questions about life in society – the powers of agency, the relationships between nature and culture or the dialectics between domination and emancipation – these are all questions that also transcend it: good sociological questions are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones.

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