What is society? Social thought and the arts of government[1]

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Abstract

Following conservative politicians, neoliberal philosophers and radical critics, different strands of social science, including those using Foucault's governmentality approach, joined the questioning of the salience of 'society' and ideas of 'the social' over the last decades. When the social reappeared, it was often in the moral domains of community and civil society. This argument re-evaluates the contribution of Foucauldian histories, or 'genealogies', of the social to these fundamental questions. Drawing upon them, it attends to their arguments concerning the place of social thought on the modern *episteme* in relation to economics, the emergence of the idea of 'society' with the modern arts of government of the state, and the formation of the 'social question'. The argument here allows that preconditions of formation of 'society' lie in the legal and political techniques of the territorial sovereign state. However, the literature under investigation indicates the implicit normativity of an idea of 'society' as a 'problematic unity' and the enduring necessity of a social domain in a law-governed state with a relatively independent economic sphere. This discussion thus seeks to contribute to the wider revaluation and redeployment of these terms in today's context.

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For sociologists, it is timely to begin the revaluation of the notion of the social and even the idea of a society as a whole. The last quarter of the twentieth-century witnessed neoliberal (Hayek 1979), political (Mrs Thatcher in 1987), and cultural–critical (Baudrillard 1983) versions of the end of society, the social and sociality, against the more general horizon of the problematization of the role and effectiveness of national and welfare states. It is a theme that has been echoed in influential social science theory with governmentality studies (Rose 1996), actor-network theory (Latour 2005) and risk theory (Beck

2000) voicing various kinds of scepticism toward the continued salience of the idea of society as a whole, given respectively the renewed governmental focus on community, the discovery of the heterogeneity of associations including with non-human and technical actors, and the incapacity of the nation-state in the face of unbounded and global risk. When the social and sociality reappeared during these years, it was often as a moral domain of community (Etzioni 1996) or of 'transnational' or 'global civil society' (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001). These frameworks approach society as a sphere of transformative politics and instructive ethics and deliberation, which is opposed to state domination and economic exploitation (Scholte 2000), and which can address all sorts of problems from world poverty, climate change, to the quest for peace (Matthews 1997; Kaldor 2003).

More broadly, this scepticism toward the idea of society was associated with what some identified as a shift from organized to disorganized modernity (Wagner 1994). Here the state as the apotheosis of bureaucratic rationality was viewed as undermining, misrepresenting, or threatening society in a variety of ways, whether through Habermas's 'colonization of the life-world', in relation to social movements or tribes (after Touraine and Maffesoli), or in contemporary sub- or micro-politics (after Beck and Foucault). The state could no longer effectively act as the 'container' of a society in the face of unbounded risk and global economic and cultural processes (Beck 2000). Society was threatened by the very bureaucratic rationality of welfare, which, though meant to secure it, would deprive it of its creativity, dynamism and energies (Donzelot 1991). The social would be displaced in a neo-Sombartian world of signs, speed and spectacles, to paraphrase Foucault (2008: 148), or of flows, processes, and mobilities (Urry 2000). What had appeared as ontologically given could be shown to be made up of different and local histories which put the social and a knowledge of the social, including 'social history', in question (Joyce 2002), and made way for a need to reconstruct or reassemble the wreckage of the social from its constituent parts, i.e., actors and 'actants', artefacts and things, inscriptions and representations, observations and modes of enquiry (Latour 2005).

The key argument here concerns the implications we can draw from histories and analyses that show the social to be constructed from various sources. The paper argues that such studies do not lead to 'the death of the social' thesis or end of society diagnosis. Rather they indicate the necessity of the social in liberal-capitalist states and an affirmative understanding of 'society' as a 'problematic unity' that succumbs to neither the scepticism of these social-theoretical currents or the moral romanticism that has filled the void.

The paper first introduces the argument more fully: by considering the preconditions of the social and the idea of society found in the territorial state; and by providing key exemplars from the Foucauldian histories of the social. Second, it investigates the place of 'society' and social thought in relation to the modern *episteme* and a theoretical conception of the economy. Third, over

two sections, it examines Foucault's lectures concerning civil society, and related histories of the 'social question', to argue that this genealogy – far from establishing the evanescence of these notions – confirmed the necessity of the social domain in liberal-capitalist societies and the normativity condensed in the idea of society as a 'problematic unity'.

The state and its social vocation

This section clarifies the scope and limits of the argument. The core argument is that the Foucauldian genealogy of the social establishes the necessity of a social domain, rather than its transitory character, in liberal-democratic-capitalist societies. It also argues for the continued salience of notions of 'society' understood as a problematic unity, which addresses central normative conundrums of these societies from the perspective of attempting a comprehensive government of the state.

This argument might not appear particularly radical to those not versed in this Foucauldian literature or recent social theory. However, as well as contesting influential social theory, the current argument cuts against the grain of the 'anti-society' views of Foucault and certain of his followers and critics. Foucault famously argued that 'society' is an artefact of the recognition that government must deal with an outside not completely penetrable by its own mechanisms (1989: 261). If society is simply artefactual, i.e., a historical construction of a liberal art of government, it would appear to follow that it is possible to envisage a form of government which no longer needs to work through this particular version of the outside. 'Society' – and the social vocation of the state – would thus have no enduring necessity and can be replaced with other outsides, such as the market, community, and even globality. In this sense, one could pose the question of the 'death of the social' (Rose 1996).

On the other hand, Foucault has also been criticized for exactly the opposite: engaging in a kind of dialectical social theory which pits the government of the state against self-governing individuals and populations and through which emerges the liberal art of government. According to this view, he fails to acknowledge the centrality of the law and the modern state forged as a political technology from the bloody, confessional conflicts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (Hunter 1998; Saunders 1997: 103–6), and the consequent establishment of a domain of relative safety and regulated freedom. For this approach, it is because Foucault holds an implicit idea of an underlying social process that he is views 'civil society' as emerging from 'the "social" delimitation of the state' rather as an artefact of 'political improvization and juridical decision' (Hunter 1998: 261).

What is at stake here goes beyond internecine post-Foucauldian disputes because Foucauldian genealogy was among the most influential social-theoretical frameworks of the last two decades and a key carrier of 'the death

of the social' thesis into wider social thought and analysis (e.g., Urry 2000; Joyce 2002). To establish that such a conclusion cannot be made on the basis of that material is to force into focus a broader discussion of the social and indeed 'society' in our contemporary period.

Moreover, it is to join a wider debate about the history of the social and its contemporary implications that emerges once the key terms of sociology – including society – have been 'de-ontologized'. Here, partially after Foucault, the concepts and categories of the social are viewed as emerging from divergent and multiple sources, not only theories and philosophies, but also maps, surveys, censuses, and modes of investigation (see contributions to Joyce 2002). Similarly, academic disciplines such as sociology and anthropology are shown to be founded on and professionalize through a raft of contingent hypotheses, notions of causation, probability and scientific law, statistical models, social problems, local traditions and patronage, dogmatisms and personal disputes, access to and control of funding sources, and a little less than random array of key issues, as Turner's work on disciplines (1986; 2007b) and on intellectual biographies demonstrates (2005; 2007a). What are the implications for the social and for 'society' of this deconstructive work? That question is central to the present paper's engagement with the Foucauldian histories of the social.

It is also useful to clarify the scope of the argument. First, the argument here is not that the state is or has become social. It does not claim that the state is 'an inert but complex mechanism dedicated to social reproduction; its motions all reactive, parasitic on the active forces of society' (Kriegel 1995: 5). Nor does it wish to 'fetishize' society as the 'antidote to the malignant tissue of the state' (Kriegel 1995: 7). The genealogy of the social already presupposes a preliminary story of the formation of the territorial state and of the dependence of the social and conceptions of society upon government in its broader sense, and the state in the narrower sense.[2] It is thus worth making plain these political and legal preconditions of our present focus on the state's social vocation at the outset.

The genealogy of the social and modern notions of society have, among their necessary preconditions, the modern international legal and political system of territorial states, the internal development of these states and the pacification of their populations, and the monopolization, centralization and development of their legal-administrative apparatus by these states. The first emerged from a series of treaties between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, of which those concluded in Westphalia in 1649 are the most well-known, by which the plurality and independence of European states was mutually recognized (Gross 1948; Schmitt 2003). This ensured the existence, for the most part, of recognized borders (and means of redrawing them, including war and diplomacy), and the independence of the sovereign ruler over the territory so defined. The second consisted of the development of a state and a rule of law which put an end to the bloody civil and religious conflict of the Thirty Years'

War and which sought to relegate religion to the realm of private conscience (Hunter 1998; Kriegel 1995). The third arose when the state gained exclusive control over a territory in place of the multiple powers of late-medieval Europe (Hirst 2005: 31–3). At the same time, we witness the development of notions of sovereignty, rule of law, and the state, in Bodin, Hobbes, Grotius, Pufendorf and others. The major contribution of these thinkers to the notion of society is the construction of the political conditions for a domain of civil peace and safety and relative freedom for the populations under the territorial state. In this literature, the social is instituted in a 'voluntarist' way and notions of 'society' retain that voluntarism as forms of association made possible when the existence of the state has been accepted by all (Wickham and Freemantle 2008).

Whether or not Foucauldian histories of the social pay sufficient attention to all this will remain moot beyond citing myriad references in Foucault's lectures to the formation of the territorial state and state system, and the Westphalian and post-Reformation settlement in Europe (e.g. Foucault 2007: 289ff.). The primary concern here is not with these legal and political conditions of pacified territory, however important. It is with what the genealogy of social tells us of how an explicitly social vocation was attributed to the fruit of these earlier accomplishments, the territorial state. While accepting the state is not a social but a political and legal artefact, the literature addressed here is concerned with how that state came to take on a social vocation. This vocation, and new, explicit notions of 'society', together emerge in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The final clarification concerns the central claim that it does not follow from a genealogy of the social, which shows the social is formed from diverse and contingent trajectories and sources, that that the social is somehow superficial and liable to pass, or that notions of society, being epistemologically naïve, lose their normative force. These points can be made using two exemplary genealogists. Giovanna Procacci has argued that with the 'tragedy of urban pauperism in the nineteenth century' in France, a key problem for government became how 'to defuse conflicts due to inequality in a society founded on equality' (Procacci 1993: 24). The *necessity* of the social emerges from the tensions that occur in a society of legal and political equality (a fruit of the territorial state and the later development of representative government) that is also one of economic inequality. In this way, the necessity of a social domain is established not in opposition to the state but as a consequence of a form of citizenship that in principle regards all as equal under the law. This necessity applies to all law-governed states characterized by the inequality-generating domain of the economy. It therefore applies to contemporary liberal-democratic-capitalist states.

Similarly the idea of 'society' is not an emancipatory domain confronting a dominating state but one made possible by the attempt to govern features of

that state. This sense of the notion of 'society' is present in Robert Castel's (2003: xix–xx) definition of the 'Social Question' in his monumental work on the topic:

> The Social Question is a fundamental aporia through which a society experiences the enigma of its own cohesion and tries to forestall the dangers of its disintegration.

A society in this sense is thus a 'problematic unity', at once an ideal of an interdependent and harmonious whole and yet porous, fragile, exposed, conflict- and friction-ridden from inside and out, and subject to fragmentation and dissolution. It presupposes the idea of a definite population within a given territory made possible by the legal and political system of the state, which is also the key locus of action and intervention, of direction and coordination. No assessment of the weight of forces of globalization, for instance, can make the notion of a bounded society irrelevant because that notion already contains within it the key question of that which binds and that which rents.

An obvious objection to this thesis is the observation that social thought is intimately connected to economics and, in particular, to the idea of the law-like economic processes and their effects or to the conflicts that arise over the production and distribution of scarce resources. This is considered next.

Episteme and economy

How do we understand the relationship of the social to the economic? One preliminary answer is found in the epistemological configuration of the 'human sciences' (Foucault 1970) and the related emergence of the social in relation to the economy (Tribe 1978; Walter 2008). After Foucault, an *episteme* is a general configuration that defines the conditions of knowledge. The broader location of the human sciences on the 'modern *episteme*' is the result of the implosion of classical thought with the appearance of the figure of humankind as both the foundation of all positive knowledge and an object of knowledge among others. The human sciences occupy a fuzzy space in a volume defined by three axes: one of philosophical reflection; a second of the mathematical and physical sciences; and finally, of the sciences of language, life and labour, that is, linguistics, biology and economics (Smart 1982: 141, n.12). While they draw from each of these three axes, the human sciences are closer to the positive disciplines of the third. Their object is not, however, the positive knowledge of the human as a living, speaking and labouring being but a kind of analysis which extends from such knowledge 'to what enables this same being to know (or seek to know) what life is, in what the essence of labour and its laws consist, and in what way he [sic] is able to speak' (Foucault 1970: 353). The figure of the human thus can be both represented and representing, an object and a subject of knowledge.

For Smart (1982: 127), this configuration accounts for the remorseless demystification, critical self-examination and reflexivity of the human sciences, to which sociology is especially prone. It also manifests itself in the promiscuity by which 'frontiers become blurred, intermediary and composite disciplines multiply endlessly, and in the end their proper object may disappear altogether' (Foucault 1970: 58). Social thought appears in complex conjunction with heterogeneous disciplines, kinds of knowledge, forms of argument, and programmes of action.

One key 'composite knowledge' (Procacci 1993: 173–4) is that of social and economic thought. An obvious instance is Marxism. Another lesser known one is the discipline of 'social economy' in early nineteenth-century France (Procacci 1991, 1993: Part 3). A third is the renewal of Weberian economic sociology by mid-twentieth century 'ordoliberal' thinkers leading to the formation of the notion of a 'social market economy' today influential in the policies of the European Union (Joerges and Rödl 2004; Foucault 2008: 75–157). This can be understood through what Foucault calls the 'sociological region' of the human sciences. This is found as a projection on the surface of economics, which takes from economics 'the fact that "man" appears in conflict for scarce resources and thus establishes a body of rules which result from and try to limit that conflict' (Foucault 1970: 357).

Keith Tribe's (1978) account of the formation of classical political economy, instanced by David Ricardo, and its difference from earlier writings, particularly eighteenth-century 'Political Œconomy', clarifies the specificity of the economic. For him (Tribe 1978: 100–45), Political Œconomy remains within a moral and political framework of the state that ultimately invokes the presence of the sovereign or his/her agents. As Adam Smith put it, it should be 'considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator' (Dean 1991: 125), and it would be mistaken to imagine that his advocacy of the 'hidden hand' breaks with this genre and constitutes an economic discourse. In contrast, Ricardo makes a theoretical demonstration of the economy that connects different classes of economic agent, landlords, capitalists and labourers, with divergent economic interests dependent upon their position within a distributional mechanism (Walter 2008).

With classical political economy, then, we witness the emergence of a conception of the economy as radically independent of the legal and political framework of the state. This has implications for the human sciences. Through the presupposition of representation, social thought cannot be fully reduced to an economy in this latter sense and contains the potential of gaining an independence from it and resituating economic forms and agents within the domain of social organization and conflict.

More fundamentally, the idea of the independent reality of an economy and the constitution of economic actors introduces a new problematic into the exercise of sovereign power within a law-governed state. This

is addressed in Foucault's discussion of the emergence of an idea of society.

Foucault and society

The literature on the history of notions of civil society is vast. It includes Keane's (1988) examination of the various ways the 'subdivision' of state and civil society occurred during the period 1750 to 1850. It also includes Colas's (1997) tracing of the myriad uses of the term to Aristotle's *koinonia politikè* and its vernacular translations, and its early-modern appearance in relation to 'fanaticism' in Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation. If Keane (1988: 65) emphasizes the sense in which civil society is an independent space which can oppose and even overthrow the 'political despotism' of the state, Colas (1997: 346–53) concludes that civil society and the law-governed state are significantly linked as parts of one set of political arrangements. They are properly opposed not to state despotism but to the 'fanaticism' of those who call for unmediated authority and reject representation and the 'interval' between the earthly city and City of God.

Foucault's discussion of civil society, which includes an analysis of Adam Ferguson's 1767 *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, is salient to our argument as it represents his most extended discussion of the notion of society. The discussion is similar to Colas in that the formation of this notion of society is viewed as an extension of a law-governed state. For Foucault, 'society' is in part a solution to the introduction of the economic actor into the legal and political order of states from the late-eighteenth century. In this respect notions of society are the resultant of the attempt to exercise sovereign power within a law-governed territorial state when confronted with a domain of economic action and its implications.

The essential point Foucault makes is that legal and economic subjects are 'absolutely heterogeneous and cannot be superimposed on each other' (Foucault 2008: 276). The economic subject has a 'multiplying and beneficial value through the intensification of interest'; this simply does not match the transition from natural right to civil subordination of the legal subject. The involuntary harmonization of interests by *homo œconomicus* is pitted against the voluntary renunciation and composition of right in a system of law. Foucault concludes that in this schema *homo œconomicus* becomes the 'island of rationality within an economic process', which points to the 'impossibility of a sovereign point of view over the totality of the state he [sic] has to govern' (2008: 282).

For Foucault (2008: 293–4), two impossible solutions are presented to this problem. The first excises political economy from the sphere of sovereignty, as in Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. The second is the solution of the Physiocrats,

who construct a table of all the economic exchanges within the state so that the sovereign can recognize the 'evidence' that places him/her in a position of theoretical passivity in relation to the economy.

In reality, Foucault continues, neither of these can be applied (2008: 294–5). A new 'plane of reference' was needed, which was more than a collection of atomic economic subjects and more than a subject of rights from which is constituted a legal order. This plane will answer three questions: how to preserve the global character of governing; how to ensure governing is not subject to economic reason; and how to ensure that it is not split into a juridical government and an economic government? The unity, generality, and specificity of the art of government find this new plane of reference in 'civil society'.

For Foucault, civil society is hence constructed independently of the state in order to fashion the exercise of law-governed sovereign power in a world that recognizes the existence of an independent economic order. His view that liberalism emerges as a critique of 'too much' government does not set in train a liberatory dialectic between a 'discussing and reading public sphere outside the state' and a despotic state in the manner of Habermas (Keane 1988: 65). Rather it indicates the incapacity of maximalist doctrines of governing, such as 'police' and 'reason of state', to take this new economic reality into account within the field of governing (Foucault 2008: 318–19).

Foucault finds four innovations in Ferguson. The first is that social thought breaks with the political narratives of the constitution of civil society so there is no longer an opposition between a state of nature and a civil society. Social thought begins when 'civil society' is a 'historical-natural constant' (Foucault 2008: 299–300). The second is that society is a spontaneous synthesis, not a voluntary union, of individuals, as in contract theories of the state, but one that meets a new threat generated by this economic reality. Thus, Ferguson's civil society is a 'spontaneous synthesis within which the economic bond finds its place, but which the same economic bond continually threatens' (Foucault 2008: 303; cf. Hill 2006: 101–21).

The third characteristic of civil society in Ferguson is that it is the 'permanent matrix of political power' (Foucault 2008: 298). Subordination and authority exist first; that which regulates, delegates or legally establishes them, somewhat later. Finally, civil society has a history. The pursuit of what we might call economic self-interest accounts for the 'dissociative association' of civil society passing from property-less savage society, though barbaric society with pastures and herding, to private property first based on client and patron and then on a law-polished civil society. Glossing Marx, Foucault observed that for Ferguson civil society is the motor of history (2008: 305–6).

Civil society – or, simply, society – emerges in the attempt to find a rationality of government suited to a law-governed state and characterized by an independent economic order. Yet, Foucault also adds that this notion indicates the possibility of an anti-governmental eschatology (2007: 356–7; 2008: 310) – a

variant on Colas's 'fanaticism'. On the one hand, modern knowledge claims to observe and unveil the mechanisms and processes of civil society external to the state. Foucault, however, shows that such knowledge is only possible within the attempt to fashion a comprehensive government of the state itself and its regimes of security and discipline. On the other, no sooner had this knowledge of civil society been discovered, then it gave rise to the dreams of the dissolution of the state within civil society, or a civil society without government or state, or an overthrow and 'withering away' of the state. With Thomas Paine, Abbe Sieyès and Marx this eschatology will find populist, national and revolutionary exemplars.

Today, the hopes invested in the notion of a civil society occupy a liberal internationalist version of this romance of the pure association 'as an arena of virtue that overcomes domination in government and exploitation in the market' (Scholte 2000: 277). These notions of 'global civil society' stress the idea of voluntary association within an ethical and empowering arena of 'non-governmental space' (Amoore and Langley 2004). They view that domain as one of virtue and of transformative politics and so resurrect the theme and normative ideal of a community of moral individuals outside political domination and economic exploitation and thus veer toward romanticism. Foucault's genealogy of the emergence of 'society' from the attempt to develop a government of the state indicates, in contrast, the dependence of society upon the state and its political and legal technologies. It also shows why 'society' is more than the juridical conception of a compact instituted between rights-bearing individuals when the government of the state must take into account the existence of a benign 'economy' that also generates conflict, problems and inequalities. Society is formed from a relation to and between state and economy, not in opposition to them.

On the darker side, the imagination of a society of free human beings associated without the evil of government is found on the fringe right of US politics, inspiring anti-government militia, citizen attacks on federal buildings, organized political factions (e.g. the 'Tea Party') and their more mainstream supporters.[3] In so far as much of social thought continues to suffer a 'state phobia' which views the state as capable of unlimited expansion and detects an affinity between the administrative and bureaucratic and totalitarian and fascist states (Foucault 2008: 187–8), it too partakes of this anti-governmental eschatology.

One domain in which the social and notions of a comprehensive government of 'society' reappear today is in health policy. Here, epidemiologists have argued that health follows a 'social gradient' and that action on health inequalities is not simply an action on the most disadvantaged but on society as a whole (Marmot 2010). As we shall now see, through 'local' problems, such as those of health, histories of the social can further trace the emergence of the social and of notions of society.

The social question

The historical studies of Castel, Procacci, Donzelot and others, despite their individual differences, have addressed the invention and metamorphosis, and continuing *necessity*, of a social domain. However, rather than do this as an extension of the analysis of social thought in dialogue with a comprehensive government of the state, these thinkers have revealed the dependence of a social domain on multiple problems and practices and local relations of power and struggle. Deleuze (1979: ix), in a much-quoted preface, emphasized that the social is a local sector rather than a global quality; that it arises in relation to specific problems, such as child abuse, disability, alcoholism and delinquency; and that it defines certain institutions, from the family court to welfare benefits and consists of particular personnel and professional groups.

To uncover the emergence of the social domain this literature thus starts with local problems and their 'pure little lines of mutation' (Deleuze 1979: x). Donzelot himself famously focused on family reform as a kind of solution to a problem faced by the 'liberal definition of the state' in nineteenth-century France. This problem concerns both the maintenance of the autonomy of the family, the promotion of the capacities of its members (sometimes against one another), and how it can meet new medical, educational and relational norms (Donzelot 1979: 53–8). Part of the solution is philanthropy as a 'deliberate depoliticizing strategy' concerned with fostering savings, introducing health and educational values, and using alliances of family members with doctors, teachers, and social workers.

Donzelot's analysis thus begins to suggest ways in which these 'little lines' cross to form the social domain. To take other examples, the problems of the housing of the urban poor, of the correlative growth of the workless and public assistance, of rates of disease and mortality among the population, and of the upbringing of children, can be regarded separately by different professionals and authorities from town planners to educationalists, doctors to engineers. Yet all these problems were codified and linked up in the French literature of 'social economy' in the first half of the nineteenth century and the almost simultaneous British discussion of the 'conditions of the labouring population'.

Procacci (1991, 1993) has examined the material which constituted social economy, in which poverty, the foundation and limit of political economy, opens up a whole new domain of intervention – pauperism – with a new array of tools including savings banks, philanthropy, mutual assistance societies, domestic economy, domestic and public hygiene and so on. This literature explicitly cross-references English studies of the 1830s and 1840s, proposed by civil servants, doctors, educators and reformers, concerned with the conditions of the labouring population.

Both these forms of knowledge attempt to distance and differentiate themselves from political economy (Dean 1991: 199–210). Social economy presents

itself as a critique of political economy, which examines *la misère* – defined as poverty felt morally – alongside the study of wealth (Chevalier 1973: 142). The condition of the labouring population literature tends to address a bundle of 'moral, social and physical conditions' (Gaskell 1833). These conditions both pauperize the labouring class through ill-health and premature death and provide the environment for the aetiology of epidemic disease and demoralization. Social thought of this kind emerges in relation to political economy, as 'a critique, a test and a means of verifying it', as Eugéne Buret wrote (Chevalier 1973: 144).

The attempt to include poverty as a normal status in the liberal economy led to a view of 'pauperism' as condensing a range of moral attributes that are inimical to the form of life of the labourer and *his* family: imprudence, dependence on relief, licentiousness, idleness and even criminality. Pauperism only escaped this economy in so far as it came to be viewed as the result of a set of 'social' conditions of the poor. Rather than poverty being attacked as a moral deficiency, it started to become visible as a 'social' problem, which encompassed morality within a wider bundle of causes. A figure like Edwin Chadwick, for example, who was party to both the 1834 Poor Law with its workhouse solution for the able-bodied and author of a key sanitary report on the conditions of the labouring population, illustrates how much of the reform and extension of national government in Britain took place between these two poles. Here we can distinguish a form of social thought, quite distinct from a concern with the character of the poor. Social thought, however, does not put an end to moral thought but transforms it, as Procacci makes clear (1989: 164), with what Auguste Comte calls 'the universal preponderance of a social point of view' emerging with the recognition of social science as a new kind of moral discourse of duty of each and all.

To raise the 'social question' is to suggest that the social is not simply a collection of discrete problems, actors, institutions and aspirations. For social thought, and the posing of the 'social question', the little lines do link up – or can be made to link up – and form something that goes beyond local and singular problems and their resolution. To cite another example, it is precisely this relation between 'social problems' and social theory that was central to the emergence of one kind of professional sociology in the USA in the early twentieth-century and the biography of a figure such as Charles Ellwood (Turner 2007a).

The notion of a society thus appears not as a privileged source of virtue as it does in the romantic ideals of communitarians and many ideas of global civil society today. Rather the idea of society stresses not only the interdependence of individuals but also their dependence on the state. The new techniques of the state such as social insurance form a 'federating bond, which makes everyone's interdependence tangible', as Charles Gide put it, so that at last the state can become the 'visible expression of the invisible bond' (Donzelot 1988: 403).

A similar theme emerges from Robert Castel's account of the emergence of the governmental principle of *solidarisme*. He views this as resolving the recurrent French politics of the nineteenth century defined by the liberal rejection as socialistic of the assertion by the workers of the right to work as a part of the rights of the citizen (Castel 2003: 251–4). So for Castel the social question was posed between the liberal 'quasi-prohibition against public intervention' and the socialist 'threat of the capture of the state'. As a result, what is lacking is an 'Archimedean point for orchestrating social policy' beyond the language of civil and political rights.

The liberals of 1848, such as Tocqueville, were not able, in other words, to provide this point. The assertion of the autonomy of civil society and individual rights against the potentially despotic state is coupled with a premonition of great catastrophes stemming from public assistance detailed in Tocqueville's memoir of his visits to England (1997). If his strength was the assertion of the bureaucratic impacts of equality-seeking free individuals under popular sovereignty (Keane 1988: 55–7), his weakness was to fail to understand that the interdependence of individuals is not only with one another in democracy but also secured by a new vocation for the state. For many liberal conceptions of civil society, then as now, individuals and the social bond remain constituted external to the governmental domain.

In France, the answer to this conundrum comes in the concept of 'solidarity', which had already been found in both Mill and Comte (Turner 1986: 4). This notion of solidarity was articulated famously in Emile Durkheim's account of the division of labour and extended and deployed by statesmen such as Léon Bourgeois, with his doctrine of *solidarisme*, and latched onto the technology of social insurance (Castel 2003: 254–6; Ewald 1991). In this case, the actions and form of the state are not opposed to civil society and the development of individualism but are its condition, expression and guarantee. 'Individualism has evolved at the same pace as statism', as Durkheim put it (1992b: 57).

Durkheim (1964) articulates a conception of the social bond that is irreducible to the individuals with legal and political rights who are found in society, and a conception of the state that is more than the legal and political structure that guarantees those rights. This is evident in Durkheim's insistence, *contra* Spencer, on 'non-contractual' social relations and institutions and the non-contractual elements of contract (1964: 206–16). Rather than a unilinear evolutionism, he produces a narrative of what is specific, fragile and disintegrative in the social bond of contemporary society, from which can be derived a general understanding of state intervention. Rather than emphasizing his tendency to postulate society as a realm of transcendent causation, it is helpful to focus on his idea of interdependence. For Durkheim discovers the singularity of the social bond in modern society in the 'organic' solidarity of an interdependence between different parties that displaces, but never completely, the

'mechanical' solidarity of the relation between similars (as his discussion of occupational associations illustrates (Durkheim 1964: 1–31)). As Castel observes: 'The division of labour presupposes a complementarity of ever more specialized tasks, and thus there is an objective foundation to this idea that modern society forms *a collection of unequal and interdependent social conditions*' (2003: 255, original emphasis).

Durkheim viewed the state as the 'very organ of social thought' that 'does not think for the sake of thought . . . but to guide collective conduct' (1992a: 51). There is a certain hyperbole here and, *pace* Kriegel (1995), we do not need to read this as meaning that the state is purely or essentially social. Yet it seems a good description of the ethical ideal sought by his political contemporaries, whatever his own reservations about them.[4] Bourgeois and others articulate a conception of society as one in which the individual stands in debt to the collective in so far as he or she is born into a world with an extant social fund (Castel 2003: 256–7). The heart of this ideal is not the equality of social conditions, but notions of social justice as the guarantee against risks and access to social goods.

Indeed, risk and social insurance will be among the principal instruments of *solidarisme* and they can be thought about in Durkheimian terms. Following its success in the domain of workers' compensation (Ewald 1991), social insurance is a technology of solidarity for all individuals in a society that renders accidents, illness, unemployment and other ills the result of the collective reality of the new division of labour. It thus expresses a form of organic solidarity. Nevertheless, individuals receive entitlements not as individuals but as members of different collective bodies defined by profession or occupation, for example, characterized by the principle of similarity and thus by a mechanical solidarity. Social insurance as a political technology thus produces and attempts to reconcile two forms of solidarity and their co-presence in an industrial society. While we should not overemphasize the tightness of the nexus between solidarity, *solidarisme*, and social insurance, we have here an example of a configuration of social thought as an autonomous theoretical form of knowledge focused on the problematic unity of a society, as a set of programmes of reform, and as inscribed within instruments of the government of the state.

These histories of the social illustrate the pathways through which the state went beyond protecting its citizens from internal and external threats to offer them some measure of social protection from the vagaries of the system of wage-labour in which they had no choice but to participate. 'Social right' (Donzelot 1988: 403) and collective 'duty' (Procacci 1989: 183) came to be added to legal and political right. Of course there is a much longer story, of the ways in which the social was consolidated in public education, health care and welfare, of its variable development in different states, and its latching up with techniques of Keynesian macroeconomic management of national economies.

Yet, even in these earlier attempts, we see strategies of inclusion of all citizens, especially the poor, within firstly the liberal economy and later a system of the socialization of risk.

Since the 1980s we have witnessed another configuration of the social: poverty is no longer to be included but seen as one symptom of exclusion; it is welfare (i.e. social protection) not poverty that is regarded as a threat to social participation; and welfare itself has to be 'reformed' with the objective of putting its recipients in moral order (Procacci 2007). Nevertheless even in these circumstances the social did not end. Rather, it became 'a post-welfarist regime of the social' (Dean 1999: 171–4). The social had its preconditions in the legal and political order of the territorial state. However, the attempt to pair the social back to securing the 'rule of law' was coupled with two proxies for social citizenship and right under conditions of widespread labour-market insecurity: the first was not simply the abandonment of all to the market but the construction of markets themselves in areas of formerly public provision, often in partnership with private for-profit and non-profit entities. The second was the 'paternalist' re-disciplining of populations that focuses on the moral character of individuals (Mead 1997), e.g. in workfare and welfare reform (Schram 2000; Peck 2001). Even strategies to govern without the social somehow reinvented it. This is because, when states offer legal and political equality to their populations and seek harmony and civil peace, they must address the widespread if not increasing social vulnerabilities of personal, familial and communal life, and precariousness employment and mass unemployment (Castel 2000).

The sense of interdependence of 'each and all' and dependence upon the state does not need to take the Durkheimian form of a narrative of the division of labour. To take a current example, 'society' can be represented as a graph of life expectancies and 'disability-free' life expectancies of different neighbourhoods according to various percentiles of income. 'Society' appears now as a gradient (Marmot 2010: 38, Figure 1.1). It is an artefact of a particular problem, health inequalities, represented through various technical means, employing various methods and modes of investigation. None the less, it reveals the interdependence of divergent health statuses within a given territorial state (e.g. the UK) in a form that can be acted upon by the state through its distributive mechanisms. Society is thus constructed in a manner amenable to actor-network or governmentality analysis. Yet it condenses a fundamental normative question of the fairness of health outcomes, and is necessary to any action upon this question that presupposes the state.

These histories of the social indicate key political options within liberal-capitalist societies. Their demonstration that the social is a historical artefact of multiple and contingent sources does not foreshadow its imminent demise. Rather it reveals its necessity and solidity in a society that must deal with the disintegrative forces of conflict and inequality as it seeks to integrate its diverse population in a capitalist economy and a liberal legal and political

order. The notion of society makes it possible to think this central problem and therefore to imagine how it might be acted upon.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to learn from these histories of the social. One can observe a notion of society as a 'problematic unity' in each aspect of these histories. It appears: first, in relation to the internal and external threats to the territorial state and its population; second, in the representation of the economic in social thought as entailing conflict and order; third, in relation to the dissociative forces within civil association which the government of the state must address; and finally in the fundamental aporias of the social question in which the notion of 'a society' is formed in relation to the possibility of its own disintegration.

Recent decades witnessed a kind of recession of the social domain, particularly in relation to the ideal of a welfare state, and a correlative announcement of the end of the social/society. Yet reports of 'the death of the social' proved premature. Even those who sought to limit the role of the state often did so to revitalize the energies of society and relied on a proxy social thought and account of social development. Hayek's (1979) narrative of spontaneous orders owes much to Ferguson (see Hill 2006: 4, n18). Even Mrs Thatcher (1993: 626) later clarified that she meant to endorse society as a 'living structure of individuals, families, neighbours and voluntary associations', a definition close to ideas of 'social capital' embedded in networks of trust and associational relations in civil life (Putnam 1996), and to the communitarian celebration of shared values (Etzioni 1996).

If all these notions participated in the attempt to shear 'society' as a domain of virtue from the state, the actual social domain took proxy and hybrid forms. It reverted to, renewed or even invented paternalist styles of protection (Mead 1997) and adopted disciplinary, authoritarian and coercive modes. Despite the claim that global forces beyond the nation-state rendered it impotent, the latter undertook or coordinated new styles of direct or indirect management of the lives of those it held were excluded or had excluded themselves. A renunciation of the 'social point of view' seemed to have been inevitability tied to the regeneration of the state's coercive powers and the moral problematization of those seeking its assistance. The incapacity of those movements and programmes, that sought to by-pass society and displace the role of the state to do so, stands as evidence of the continuing normative power of this notion of society as a problematic unity.

The majority of the world's population still lives (or aspires to live) within the legal and political protections of territorial states even when these states act in concert, as they often do, to provide them. Representative regimes still

try to govern such states, which are riven by economic realities even if these are now conceived as global or regional rather than national. These regimes are still faced with massive and often increasing disparities of wealth and income, and some are becoming more aware of unfairness in health outcomes, in a system of political and legal equality. They still must address the 'disaffiliation' (Castel 2000) of those marginalized by precarious relationships to the labour-market and made vulnerable by the breakdown of communal, familial and personal ties. When authorities, movements, citizens or organizations raise questions of levels of tolerable inequality in such a society, of the relation between health and inequalities, of the best way to provide and care for ageing populations, or how to engage disaffected youth, they are posing questions, whether they admit it or not, of society. When they act to address such 'problems', they contribute again to the formation and reformation of the social.

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Notes

1. I should like to acknowledge the comments on earlier versions of this paper by Barry Smart, Kaspar Villadsen, Barry Hindess and its referees for this journal.

2. Much of has been made of Foucault's broader definition of the idea of 'government' as the 'conduct of conduct' (2007: 192–3). While acknowledging the field opened up by such a definition, here I focus on what might be better called the 'government of the state'.

3. See the op-ed piece by Frank Rich, 'The axis of the obsessed and deranged', *New York Times*, 27 February 2010. [Accessed 2 March 2010: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/opinion/28rich.html?em]

4. See Giddens's discussion of Durkheim on state and politics (1978: 49–62) and Lukes on the complexity of his relation to *solidarisme* and radical republicanism (1973: 350–4). Founier (2005) provides a helpful discussion of his relation to socialism and nationalism, and Humphreys (1999) and Gane (1992) deal with the political implications of Durkheim and his school.

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