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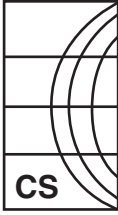
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# What are the 'Knowledge Conditions' of Sociology?

*A Response to Gary Wickham and Harry Freemantle*

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## I

It is rare for sociologists to take an active interest in their own disciplinary – let alone pre-disciplinary – history. That Gary Wickham and Harry Freemantle (henceforth, WF) do so is both welcome and refreshing. If I am puzzled by aspects of their argument, I am nonetheless solidly in agreement that standard accounts of sociology lack historical depth; that the notions of the 'social' and 'society' require us to dig deeper than the 19th century; and, fundamentally, that expanding sociology's historical self-understanding is a valuable reflexive endeavour. I am grateful to the authors for their stimulating article and to the editor of *Current Sociology*, Dennis Smith, for inviting a response.

WF make two major claims. Both of these are animated by the desire to encourage sociologists to think in a more angular way about their past. First, WF argue that among sociology's 'knowledge conditions' is the neglected 'voluntarist' tradition associated with the work of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes, and the uneven emergence of a regime type – French absolutism – that secured the existence of a relatively secure territorial environment. That in turn afforded the possibility of freedom, for without security – as we are seeing in the Middle East today – freedom is a chimera. Underpinning this new haven of protection was the emergence of an agonistic view of politics tamed, however, by public law. Together these forces created the rule of law state and, with it, the possibility of the 'social' or 'society' as a distinctive civil sphere. The knowledge conditions

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of sociology thus stretch back at least to the 17th century, and especially to the period that witnessed the Peace of Westphalia and the collapse of the Fronde (the French nobles' revolt between 1648 and 1653 against monarchical power). A pre-disciplinary history of sociology should start there, or even further back (the authors gesture at 1550 as some kind of rough baseline) rather than continue to be fixated on the European Enlightenment. Once established, 'the social' increasingly liberated itself from the political and legal forces that had brought it into being. And it was this gradual uncoupling that prompted sociology later to emerge as a discipline in the second half of the 19th century.

That, baldly, is the first claim. The second is that sociology's knowledge conditions required, or at least were profoundly influenced by, technologies that allowed human beings to envisage their environment in social ways. Sociology requires ways of seeing, as well as thinking; indeed, visualization is integral to thinking and moral reasoning. Integral to seeing socially were such innovations as geometrical perspective, microscopes, the camera obscura and the capacity for people to observe the world from hot air balloons.

## II

I am struggling to grasp the historical fibres that bind together absolutism, peace and order, 'the social' and sociology. Perhaps that is because I am troubled by the key concept of WF's article: 'knowledge condition'.

Here is the first problem. How does one establish that a particular constellation – the absolutist state, for instance – is a knowledge condition of *sociology*, as distinct from simply a historical prelude to changes in thinking about the world more generally? The authors do not tell us. A guiding principle, I suggest, is the following: to be regarded as a knowledge condition of sociology, as distinct from a background condition to intellectual change as such, the said knowledge condition must be shown to have demonstrably affected sociological ideas and institutions. Sociology is not a free-floating intellectual endeavour. It is an intellectual practice embedded in competing social networks and institutions: journals, universities, professional associations and so on. Now the problem is, of course, that when we discuss the pre-history of sociology we are, by definition, talking about an age in which these modern networks and institutions had yet to crystallize. All the same, French absolutism was the seed-bed of other networks and institutions – the court, learned academies, salons – which in the process of the 18th and 19th centuries were gradually transformed to provide some of the conditions that allowed sociology to emerge. Of critical importance was a new framework that witnessed the erosion of corporate monopolies; the unleashing of the nat-

ural sciences as a corollary of the reorganization of the educational system; attendant discipline differentiation; and, stimulating the whole process, a changing market in cultural goods (Heilbron, 1995). This and many other factors – including ideological and doctrinal battles – created a niche in which sociological ideas and institutions materialized (cf. Lepenies, 1988).

The point is that ‘the social’ was only the most general and indeterminate background of the process. For an episode to count as a knowledge condition of sociology, we require an institutional story. Without one, without specifying a palpable relationship to – and forceful impact on – *sociology*, a knowledge condition is amorphous and inordinately elastic. Is that a bad thing? I think so, because the more amorphous the putative relationship is the less confident one can be about its existence and influence. For almost two millennia, western civilization has been permeated by Christianity. One of its fundamental tenets, from the days of the Founder, is the idea that humans owe different obligations to God and to Caesar – the secular ruler. Later, that idea took institutional form in the medieval distinction between *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, Pope and Emperor (Scruton, 2002). Is this one of the ‘indirect’ (WF’s term) knowledge conditions of sociology? After all, the notion that the social consists of a separate entity presupposes an attitude to the world that recognizes the basic legitimacy of secular separation in the first place. That is what Christianity – Caesaropapism aside – offered. How does one evaluate the importance of one knowledge condition of the social relative to others?

Perhaps, though, I have misconstrued WF’s argument. After all, on their account ‘the social’ is doubtless a necessary but insufficient condition of sociology’s emergence. To that extent, an institutional story of the kind I have mentioned is not required for their immediate purposes. That is logical but historically unsatisfying because we still surely wish to know how sociological institutions fit into a narrative that claims to deal with sociology’s origins.

Here is a second problem: why should one privilege the domain of relative peace and security – what earlier writers might have called *police* – as the key meaning of ‘the social’ or ‘society’? To do so seems somewhat arbitrary. Society is a very old word; ‘social’ a much newer one. Both words – and ‘sociability’ too – have a complex history. We cannot assume that security and freedom are the root meanings of the social, any more than we can assume that, down the historical road, sociology issued from those meanings. The most common idea of a society today, and one on which sociology trades, is a sphere of human life, a territorial community, to which everyone, irrespective of wealth and power, belongs. That idea was first formulated in France in the last decade of the 17th century. Before that – and for some time afterwards – ‘society’ was a portmanteau

for such things as a refined form of activity, a mode of friendship, an elite courtly circle and a legally recognized commercial or professional association. By the mid-18th century, these ideas had morphed to take on a more bourgeois, civil tinge; and 'society' had expanded to refer to a spatial arrangement that encompasses all smaller human units. Students of language and of the history of concepts have provided rich studies of 'social', 'sociability' and 'society' (e.g. Baker, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Joyce, 2002; Williams, 1985). This scholarship has been fundamental in reconstructing when and why 'the social' emerged in its modern form. In contrast, WF latch on to a meaning they intuit in Hobbes that appears to substantiate their sense of the social. I am not sure that it does, but let us say they are correct. Even if it is the *root* sense, why should that make it more *authentic* than other (including early) senses? WF evidently believe that it is the most authentic; they refer to 'the way we think it [the social] should be used'. That perspective is dangerously close to what Lyons (1981: 55) calls the 'etymological fallacy', the assumption 'that the original form or meaning of a word is, necessarily and by virtue of that very fact, its correct form or meaning. . . . All the etymologist can tell us, depending upon evidence, is that such and such is the form or meaning of a particular word's earliest known or hypothetical ancestor.' Moreover, is the 'social' that 'separate domain of freedom and safety'? Or is the 'separate domain of freedom and safety' that which gives birth to the social? I was never sure.

In short, WF's view of the social rests on a limited linguistic investigation of terms that might serve as an index of their claims (I return to this later), on a dubiously normative account of the social itself and on an indeterminate relationship between the social and the space of security and liberty. WF also equivocate between two senses of 'the social': first, as an idea ostensibly grounded in 17th-, and possibly 16th-, century linguistic usage; second, as 'a separate domain of freedom and safety that *came to be known* as the social' or, as they put it elsewhere, that '*we* have come to call the social' (my italics). Now suppose one renders the social differently: as an entity that encompasses a broad range of durable human interactions. In that case, the significance of French absolutism takes on a very different hue. Daniel Gordon (1994: 5) points out that, in order for the new idea of the social – the one I have just abbreviated – to be established, a number of obstacles had to be overcome. He mentions three in particular: Christian metaphysics (the Great Chain of Being; the notion that all human life and association cannot be self-instituting because it depends on higher powers); early modern science (which searched not for an independent order of things but rather access to the Heavenly City); and royal sovereignty itself:

Defenders of royal sovereignty did not formally recognize the existence of a social realm in the sense of a sphere of activities separate from the supervision

of the monarch. In their view, no important form of exchange could subsist without the intervention of sovereign authority. Nothing, then, was apolitical. The invention of the social field required a demonstration that some meaningful activities are self-instituting; that in some situations human beings can hang together of their own accord; that humans, in short, are sociable creatures. (Gordon, 1994: 5)

Note that this is emphatically not the picture of human beings that emerges from Hobbes for whom Man is essentially, rather than contingently, an anti-social being that requires an indivisible secular power to keep his passions in check. In sum, if one considers 'the social' to designate something different from WF's construction of it, we may conclude that French absolutism was a major obstacle to 'the social,' rather than a precondition of it.

I come now to a third problem: the authors' analysis of four 'lower-level technologies' that contributed to the ability of human beings to visualize their world 'socially'. WF acknowledge that many technologies other than the ones they mention could 'equally' be considered 'as lower-level practical conditions for the emergence of sociology'. Perhaps that is true. But the more these lower-level conditions proliferate, the less one is sure which of them are crucial for sociology. Rather than a sociology of knowledge that now includes technical inventions, one has a 'list' (again, WF's term) of items in a rather uncertain relation to themselves let alone to the sociology they purportedly shape. Say that I plan to make risotto this evening. The list of ingredients that I require includes onion, rice and chicken broth. But these are the same ingredients that could also form the base of a chicken curry if I so desired. The example is homely, I know. But it serves to illustrate the point that lists of ingredients are one thing; how they mix together and what they form is something quite different. Applied to our topic of knowledge conditions, the crucial issue is not the list of technologies but their precise articulation to each other and to sociology. The list, of itself, will not do that work. But without doing it, we are back with the worry that almost any technology could be said to be a knowledge condition of sociology.

### III

Up to this point, I have been mostly concerned to clarify some of my perplexities with WF's argument. Let me now try to be more constructive. The authors are engaged in a research programme the details of which cannot all be canvassed in their short article. If I had read more of WF's work, I am sure that I would have understood it better. It is notoriously easy to poke holes in an argument, especially when it is bold. It is far harder to come up with an audacious argument in the first place. With

that in mind, let us applaud WF's ambition to get us all to think more deeply about the conditions of our discipline. How might we help push their research programme forward? Here are two suggestions:

1. A history of sociology requires greater attention to a prominent indicator of social change: language. If 'the social' is deemed to have been the equivalent of relative order and liberty, we need to see this proved in some detail. We might want to distinguish between the *term* 'social', the *concept* of the social and the *family of concepts* of which it is part (cf. Baehr, 1997: 117–19 for a parallel discussion on the language of illegitimacy). One model approach to the study of language is the German genre known as *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts). Its jewel is the multi-authored, multi-volume compendium of political and social concepts edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and, especially, Reinhart Koselleck (see Brunner et al., 1972–97; for a review of the project in English, see Richter, 1995; and for an example of the genre in translation, see Koselleck, 2006). This postwar tendency in German historiography brings the study of language into a particularly close relationship to social and political history. On such an account, shifts and discontinuities in conceptual formation are an index of wider social changes but are also very much involved in shaping them because it is through language that agents define, make sense of and contest new situations. Koselleck focuses on the transition period between c. 1750 and 1850 in which political and social concepts – for instance, work, democracy, leadership, society, civil society, war and race – were subject to remarkable volatility. Evidence for that is the proliferation of neologisms, the increasing democratization of the social and political vocabulary (hitherto restricted to elite groups), the intensification of the ideological and political payload words carried, and the eschatological horizons in which they were framed. Perhaps WF might be able to locate another, earlier, transition period relevant to their claims about the social. That would be a major discovery.
2. Somewhere, WF's research programme needs to find a role for conflict and crisis in the genesis of sociology. Readers will recall the authors' argument that the social is tantamount to an island of relative order and freedom. Does that mean that sociology *also* grew out of proximate conditions of order and freedom? WF remark that 'it was only' in the second half of the 19th century that the social 'could become the object of a new discipline, sociology'. But if political order and freedom were truly germinal for sociology, one would have expected our discipline to have developed earlier and far more rapidly in Britain than in France – the pioneer. Between 1789 and 1815, France experienced a Republic, civil war (the Vendée, the Terror), regicide, European war and imperial

rule. Britain endured the costs of a continental war but it was free of the paroxysms of regime change. Britain suffered no equivalent of the February 1848 revolution and the slaughter of the June days; no equivalent either of Louis Bonaparte's putsch and the repression that followed it: the mass arrests, censorship, prohibitions on assembly, purges and deportations: as late as 1859, 1200 of the original 9600 deportees were still languishing in Algeria. And most evidently, there was no parallel to the way that the franchise was granted, and then employed, in French elections and plebiscites during the period between 1848 and 1871. In Britain, electoral reform was a gradual process. Inclusion of the male members of the 'masses' came incrementally and the first strides towards franchise extension were, in quantitative terms, the shortest: the Reform Act of 1832 increased the electorate by only 2 percent (from 5 to 7 percent of the adult population). The Reform Act of 1867, following three decades of political education, roughly doubled the number of those entitled to vote, while the Act of 1884 further increased the British electorate but only to 5 million. To be sure, these dates and figures notoriously conceal the arguments, hopes and torments that animated debates among the propertied classes. To say the electoral process in Britain was 'gradual' does not mean that it was smooth and unproblematic; nor should it imply a consensus on how, and at what pace, the working man should be integrated into the parliamentary system. Even so, British conditions contrasted starkly with the wild leaps and oscillations that characterized franchise reform in France. Before the February revolution of 1848, fewer than 250,000 electors existed. By March, this figure had swollen to over 8 million. In 1849, the electorate increased by almost 2 million more. But then, in 1850, alarmed by workers' support for republican and socialist candidates, the government rendered a sizeable bloc of mobile workers electorally impotent by imposing a three-year residence qualification on the right to vote. At a stroke, roughly 3 million of the 10 million electors were effectively disenfranchised (Cole and Campbell, 1989). I mention these facts because, like Raymond Aron (1968: vi), I see sociology's emergence in France – together with socialism and the 'social question' – as the corollary not of unity but of a profound sense of crisis, antagonism and national decadence (the Franco-Prussian War, the Dreyfus Affair). It is when things fall apart, when people feel *insecure*, rather than in a milieu of peace and order, that sociology first gained urgency. WE, on the other hand, treat what they call the 'rawness of politics' as something extraneous to sociology's birth. 'It was only when the balance [among law, politics, and the *Rechtsstaat*] stabilized to a greater degree, later in the 19th century, that the separate sphere of individual freedom and safety it had created was recognized as such, only then that this



sphere – the social – was bathed in a light strong enough for it to be studied as a distinct domain. Enter sociology.'

## IV

Anyone involved in historical work knows that methodological reflection can never guarantee that a particular enquiry is conducted competently; nor can it ever be a substitute for the hard graft involved in reconstructing an event, or indeed, a rhetoric, concept, or semantic field in detail, a process so full of surprises that no theory or set of protocols can ever anticipate it. Moreover, a cold look at the history of the human sciences indicates that research programmes and research teams are just as likely to imprison thought as they are to produce remarkable feats of intellectual coordination and disciplined creativity. WF are unlikely to become dogmatic; their tone is tentative, their minds open. They seek to challenge us. They succeed. More spadework is needed to convince me of their larger claims. I look forward to learning more.

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