

Álvaro Santana Acuña

Jean Terrier, Visions of the Social: Society as a Political Project in France, 1750-1950. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011, xxxi + 216 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/36432)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Jean Terrier, *Visions of the Social: Society as a Political Project in France, 1750-1950*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011, xxxi + 216 pp.

doi: 10.2383/36432

In the last three decades sociologists have been at the forefront of efforts to articulate more nuanced and grounded understandings of key concepts such as gender, race, identity, nation and culture [see Casanova *et al.* 2011]. Yet they remain more skeptical (when not openly hostile) to similar efforts concerning two of sociology's foundational concepts: "society" and "social" – the nominalization of social as "the social" was a more recent conceptual development [see *infra*]. Such efforts are mostly in the hands of historians, philosophers, and political scientists. Letting other disciplines engage in the society/social fight on their behalf, sociologists watch calmly from the ringside.

The efforts in question range from refurbishing the concepts of society and social (Judith Butler, Bruno Latour, William Sewell, and Peter Wagner) to overcoming them (Keith Baker, Miguel Cabrera, Patrick Joyce, Ernesto Laclau and Nikolas Rose). Jean Terrier endorses the first strategy in his book, claiming that he sees "little reason for an abandonment of the language of the social" [p. 191]. Readers however might end up with the opposite view after scrutinizing the evidence supporting his claim. He relies on writings concerning society and social in the works of major and lesser-known thinkers (e.g., Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Adhémar Esmein, René Worms, and Léon Duguit). The evidence covers the period 1750-1950 and shows that the concepts allude to a codification of human relationships that emerged in Eighteenth-century Europe and that they would eventually become a historical relic – as medieval providential concepts are today. Whereas Terrier avoids commenting on the palpable conclusion to his book (the future twilight of the social idol, to paraphrase Nietzsche), he skillfully documents the rise and institutionalization of the language of the social in the intellectual arena in France during that period.

The book opens with a survey of recent literature on the concepts of society and social. Terrier discusses at length the work of Cabrera – whom he sees as a leading contributor to a postsocial approach – and argues that his underlying structuralism prevents him from overcoming "the social." He is more sympathetic towards Latour's "sociology of association" [p. xxi], with its emphasis on interactions and assemblages as opposed to structural constraints.

In chapter 1 Terrier explains that the language of the social was born in the late Eighteenth century in France in connection with a changing concept of the individual. The idea that an individual's free will was part of a "natural order" came increasingly under attack after the French Revolution. The order that replaced it was "social," in which society functioned as the regulatory force of individual action. The introduction of modern causal thought further made the individual a product of society. Another component of the social order was the rising nation-state. Rather than a mere collection of citizens, the nation was now a pre-existing form of cohesion, like society itself. Bounded together, not only were nation and society interchangeable concepts; they also shared a similar metaphor – they behaved like individuals. Throughout the Nineteenth

century this “personalist” metaphor, Terrier details, superseded the organicist metaphor as present, for instance, in the work of Ernest Renan. The conceptual coupling of nation and society strengthened during the second half of the Nineteenth century, when methodological nationalism developed within the language of the social [ch. 2]. Terrier suggests that the most successful social scientists were especially those who embraced structuralism (via the personalist metaphor) as well as methodological nationalism: e.g., Durkheim (Gabriel Tarde, Durkheim’s main rival, rejected structuralism and attacked nationalism.) The concept of culture buttressed the conceptual coupling of nation and society [ch. 3]. During the Nineteenth century culture primarily functioned as a synonymous of “national character” and civilization (cultured nations were ahead in historical development). In the following century it took a different meaning, related to habits and shared representations. Terrier credits Marcel Mauss with modernizing the concept in France.

Chapter 4 marks a return to the concept of society by analyzing its location in Durkheim’s thought. Readers would find that Terrier’s analysis conforms to the standard narrative on the question. But he adds an intriguing twist. He unearths the centrality of the much-ignored notion of substratum in Durkheim’s works: first, it was as central as structure in his writings, and second it channeled his evolving views about the location of society. Durkheim’s nephew, Marcel Mauss, took a different path on the “location” problem [ch. 5]. Rather than self-centered totalities, he conceived of societies as “networks which overlap and intersect” [p. 173]. Having worked on several of Mauss’s unpublished manuscripts, Terrier advances two original arguments. His ideas on the national should place him as a pioneering thinker of transnationalism – Terrier highlights his theory of the “dispersed people” [p. 162]. And his transnationalism, anchored in research on the international exchange of goods, contributed significantly to his famous work on gift-giving.

Terrier’s book covers an impressive amount of historical ground but at the expense of a thorough and cohesive narrative, leaving the impression that it only explores the tip of the iceberg. More importantly, Terrier neither articulates the difference between the concepts of social and society, nor does he distinguish between social and the social (*le social*). He uses society and social, and social and the social indistinctively throughout the book. However the concept of society has a different conceptual genealogy (beginning with the Roman term *societas*) from the Eighteenth-century neologism social [see Gordon 1994; Mintzer 2008]. And *le social* only entered everyday language in the Nineteenth century. Falling prey to the very language he seeks to historicize, he overlooks that the major achievement of the language of the social was to merge and make society, social, and the social synonymous and interchangeable terms.

In addition, first, Terrier does not consider competing languages, that is, alternative conceptions of the human bond and relations. If, as he correctly puts it, the social describes “a specific kind of relation between human beings” [p. x], what kind of relation do the pre-modern concepts of *universitas*, commonwealth, or friendship describe? And why, as society and social rose, were the latter concepts pushed to the margins? And second, an analysis beyond discourse would have enriched the overall argument on the rise and institutionalization of the language of the social, especially by looking into the implementation of practices and techniques of the social (e.g., the cadastre, social surveys, the insurance system, or the welfare state).

Yet, by focusing on a central arena – the coupling of society and the political [Joyce 2010] –Terrier demonstrates forcefully that society and social possess multiple ramifications (what also reveals why researchers find so difficult to dispose of both concepts). In modernity, society and social have become *ramified concepts*, expanding into the nation, culture, objects, etc. This is why, to return to my initial criticism, Terrier's position about preserving the language of the social might puzzle readers after a 200-page journey embracing two hundred years. He might believe that there is no alternative to such language; no alternative to the narrative stating that social reality, whether or not it is mediated by culture, causally structures individual action. But he seems to waver. In a footnote [p. xxii, n. 47] he wonders whether online social networks represent a return to the pre-social understanding of society as a voluntaristic act. I think so. Such networks are not total societies (or social structures) but voluntaristic associations. But I share his caution for a different reason: it might be too early to claim that what I call *digital voluntarism* can bring to a close the history of the language of the social.

Terrier's book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the deep and ramified history of the concepts of society and social, as well as to current efforts concerning the history of modernity's key concepts [Fernández Sebastián 2011]. For sociologists in particular the book should be an invitation to stop watching the fight from the ringside and instead to be at the forefront of efforts to articulate new or refurbished understandings of our discipline's foundational concepts.

Álvaro Santana Acuña
Harvard University

References

- Casanova, J.-C. *et al.*
2011 "La sociologie: science ou discipline?" *Commentaire* 136: 1001-1094.
- Fernández Sebastián, J. (ed.)
2011 *Political Concepts and Time: New Approaches to Conceptual History*. Santander: Cantabria University Press.
- Gordon, D.
1994 *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Joyce, P.
2010 "What Is the Social in Social History?" *Past and Present* 206: 81-120.
- Mintzer, Y.
2008 "'A Word Newly Introduced into Language': The Appearance and Spread of 'Social' in French Enlightened Thought, 1745-1765." *History of European Ideas* 34: 500-514.