

Reconsidering social forces [\[slide\]](#)

Desire to change society

We're here to talk about "Changing Society" and what our role could or should be therein. In fact, sociology was born with that question and probably wouldn't make much sense without it. Durkheim himself, for whom Politics and Science had to be clearly set apart, for whom Science could not rely on societal values without being flawed; Durkheim, that founding father who still brings students of mine to lead schizophrenic lives as they try to separate their scientific, objective and neutral selves from their knowledgeable, political and sensitive selves; that same man exclaimed right from the start, in his very first book, in 1893 [\[slide\]](#):

"None of my research would be worth a moment of your time if it were merely speculative. I carefully set apart theoretical and practical problems, not to neglect the latter and favour the former but on the contrary, I do this in order to better *solve* the latter [practical problems]." ¹

Every sociologist, whether he's a positivist or a post-structuralist, whether she's a Marxist or a phenomenologist, cares about the societal question; i.e. she or he cares about the difference sociological research can make. Stakes are high. We battle and fuss about the implications of our work, about politics, society and university. We each have our gods, as Weber, the other founding father, would have it. And the battle is never-ending. Let me quote him because what he says - to students, in 1917, about science as a vocation - is relevant for what I'm about to say [\[slide\]](#):

"When taking one or the other position, you serve one god and *offend another*. [...] Actually, what I've just said follows from a fundamental fact: life as it can be understood in and for itself is an endless battle between the gods that I've just mentioned. To say it without using any metaphors: life is a battle without exits, an irreducible struggle between ultimate points of view on life that are merely *possible*; and thus it requires that we should *decide* in favour of one or the other. That under these circumstances it is worthwhile to turn to science, that science itself is an objectively valid vocation, is a value judgement that should not be stated in a lecture hall. For indeed, it is assumed that all people who teach and work at University have answered affirmatively." ²

Yes, science is a valid vocation. Yes, sociological research makes a difference - and Weber would add - as long as and in so far as we clearly position ourselves and never dream of silencing others, of ending the existential and political battle once and for all.

A lot's been said about Durkheim and Weber. But the crux of the affair is this. One thought you could turn existential and political matters - or "Morality" as he called it ³ - into a positive science and that is why he wanted sociologists to keep their distance from prior values and judgements carried by society (for soon we would be able to guide morality objectively, scientifically). The other thought you couldn't and shouldn't do this, that no science would ever forego the need for personal judgement, positioning and decision-making, and he therefore wanted sociologists to make their choices and gods known. One was a positivist. The other was a perspectivist. And *both* wanted to change society. Changing society is really part of our disciplinary DNA.

Indeed, for more than a century now, that's what we've done: help society change its ways. Most often we've done so as part of the State's apparatuses for that's where our Universities stand.

Sometimes we've done so as part of the Establishment and its lot of experts. Sometimes we've done so as opponents and critical assessors of the ongoing situation. So many positions have been taken. So many have been battled for. What I want to do here is to present yet again a position: I've become convinced, with others, that today we sociologists need to revisit our history - that is why I started off with Durkheim and Weber in the first place. We need alternative histories. Why we need them and how we can go about them, is what I will talk about in the next two sections of the paper. Then, and that will be the short conclusion, I will argue what difference this makes. [\[slide\]](#)

Why alternative histories

Why alternative histories? Because without them we cannot face the demands made by today's most promising social movements. They are, amongst others, from my point of view, the radical ecologists - I mean to say those groups whose claims go well beyond the mere greening of the industry and involve an entire societal change - and the people I would like to call the "critical reclaimers" - I mean to say those women and men who claim we've spent enough time critically assessing the ongoing destruction of communities and resources and should now use our critical capacities to protect sites of reconstruction. Let me quickly sketch the demands made by those two social movements and then tell you why we are unable to face them.

For more than forty years now, radical ecologists have not only reinvigorated the critique of capitalism but also that of scientism. Indeed, besides raising the arguments of exploitation and inequality, of subjugation and hegemony; besides questioning the very patterns of progressive thinking that still rely on growth, on development, and on various technological fixes and productive forces to move ahead; they've also convincingly showed that science undergirded the economics of destruction by promoting linear thinking, by simplifying causality and by reducing half of humanity, of the ecosystems and of the material spheres, to mere passivity. Ecofeminism and libertarian ecology have done so, but see also the degrowth and the transition movements, ... Their claims are strong.

As to the critical reclaimers, recently, there's been a debate amongst sociologists on Critique and its pitfalls, on how critique tends to emphasise dead-end realities and how, in the absence of the long-awaited revolts that it was meant to trigger, it doesn't offer any other tools for emancipation⁴. See also scholars like Donna Haraway, Katie King or Giovanna di Chiro who claim themselves to be critical thinkers and who at the same time oppose all critical endeavours that stop short of opening up possibilities for the future. Or see Achille Mbembe who says we know the history of destruction but not that of possible reconstruction: those who rebuild *in spite* of the mortifying and commodifying forces, how do they do it? How do they get organised? And how can we learn from them?⁵

For sociologists who want to meet those calls, many cues are given. We must explore non linear thinking, embodied causalities and redistributed agency⁶. We must study possibilities that are already at work, future-making that is at hand, reclaiming that actually has been done. But there's a problem. Those empirical tales, when told and presented to the scientific community, are at best considered to be optimistic but naive side-notes to the bigger picture and at worst, instances of sociological revisionism i.e. the refusal to even see the bigger picture on the part of the researcher. In other words, sociology tends to drown specs of emancipation in a sea of structural social forces. Stories of alternative future-making are trivialised by the discipline's emphasis on society as a whole. And I've become convinced that this will remain so as long as we don't revisit our history. Our DNA is part of the problem.

How to go about them

We want to help change society. Fine. But what is society? What are the structural social forces? What is big? And can we not find ways of *including*, into that bigness, the reconstructive tales I've just mentioned? I think, with other sociologists, we can and we must. [By the way, you will have noticed that I've moved to the last section of my paper: how to go about alternative histories.] [slide] Perhaps the others would frame it differently but they go a long way into the same direction. See, for instance, Christian Borch's recent book [slide] *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology*⁷ that shifts emphasis from society as a whole to crowds, crowds that are big and small, trivial and structural at once. Or see the sociologists who have worked at the revival of Tarde's oeuvre [slide], an oeuvre that allows for a more horizontal, networked and contingent approach to society⁸. So, alternative histories can be told by shifting emphasis and by unearthing forgotten authors. And there are, no doubt, many other ways to go about it.

I for my part think we need to reconsider the "social forces". Social forces are a notion used by the 19th-Century founders of sociology in order to point to phenomena that exceed the individual. Social forces exist, therefore sociology must exist. That was the claim. It's as if sociology was born in order to question, to tease, to mock, to taunt the modern independent individual, reminding him that regardless of his pretentious emancipated self, no heroism, nor wilfulness, would do. There always will be forces that slip away, overtake and outrun the modern individual. That's the message sociology's been conveying for over a century now. And that's the beauty of our discipline. Sociology's shown the rest of the world the unbridled and even, at times, unfathomable nature of collective life.

But one mistake was made. The social forces were called upon to prove the existence of a social *order*. They were used to show the persistence of society *as a whole*. Forces that had a real potential for change and upheaval were narrowed down to only one of their attributes, i.e. constraint and domination. Today we need to undo that mistake. The forces that slip away, overtake and outrun us, the de-individualising processes that overpower us, do not necessarily and do not only subjugate and dominate. They can also be forces that emancipate, reclaim and reinstate. In other words, I think time has come for our discipline to redefine the social forces as those that simply build the future, in one way or another (*life is a never-ending struggle*, remember). Sociology then becomes the study of the battling and contradictory forces of future-making. Its concern with bigness would no longer lie with society as a whole, nor with social order, but with *any* collective action that pushes future in one direction or the other.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. I still need to do my part of the work and look at authors that could help sustain such a view of sociology? But let's not forget that the exploration has already started and that I'm not the only one saying this. Our history is up for calls again - just as it was at the turn of 19th Century, or in the aftermath of World War II, or during the 1970s¹⁰. That's why Borch is writing, why Tarde is put to the forefront, why right now sociologists are claiming we need to go back to Auguste Comte and his take on society [slide]¹¹, or why others still are rewriting our history to meet the ecological endeavours [slide]¹². We are at the crossroads again.

The difference they make

Let me conclude [slide]. What difference does it make to base our discipline on a history that emphasises future-making forces? What difference does it make to redefine the discipline and to shift emphases in such a way? For a start, it would free us from systematically snubbing empirical

tales of local resistance and reconstruction. This was my initial motivation for looking into the matter. But now I know there's more to it.

Such a redefinition of the field and the alternative history it is based upon would broaden the scope of investigation. For future-making happens everywhere. Commodifying and mortifying forces are all over the place. And so are the reclaiming forces. Indeed, I think it is likely that tales of reconstruction, *when looked for, when properly framed for by sociology*, can be discovered in even less obvious places, such as State administrations, amateur networks or engineering offices, just to list the least sexy ones. Sociology could call our attention to those tales.

Last but not least, the position I'm presenting here would allow us to acknowledge and implement - or should I say weave into the very heart of our research - a fact which, however simple, still seems to defy us sociologists. Here's the fact: future-making happens now. The dice are not thrown irrevocably thrown, and they never will be. What would sociological research look like if it was lived by that simple truth? (Or is this my god speaking?) Stated differently, instead of predicting tendencies, we'd better map the forces at play and *add* our tales to the never-ending struggle.

Thank you for your attention.

- ¹ Durkheim, Emile. 2008 (1893). *De la division du travail social*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. xxxix (première préface). My translation & emphasis. Original version: “Nous estimerions que nos recherches ne méritent pas une heure de peine si elles ne devaient avoir qu’un intérêt spéculatif. Si nous séparons avec soin les problèmes théoriques des problèmes pratiques, ce n’est pas pour négliger ces derniers : c’est, au contraire, pour nous mettre en état de les mieux résoudre.”
- ² Weber, Max. 2005. *La science, profession et vocation*. Paris: Agone, pages 50-51. My translation.
 The full quotation is slightly more complex: “When taking one or the other position, you serve one god and *offend another*. Indeed if you are true to yourself [and clarify your position], you’ll inevitably grasp the ultimate consequences that are implied by your position. This could be, ideally, the part played by science [...] to help each one of us *look the ultimate sense of one’s action into the eye*. [...] Actually, what I’ve just said here [about the possible role of science] follows from a fundamental fact: life as it can be understood in and for itself is an endless battle between the gods that I’ve just mentioned. To say it without using any metaphors: life is a battle without exits, an irreducible struggle between ultimate points of view on life that are merely *possible* [not inevitable, they cannot be imposed]; and thus it requires that we should *decide* in favour of one or the other [ultimate point of view]. That under these circumstances it is worthwhile to turn to science, that science itself is an objectively valid vocation [for it helps to clarify positions], is a value judgement that should not be stated in a lecture hall. For indeed, it is assumed that all people who teach and work at University have answered affirmatively.”
 See the French version: ““Pour employer une image: en optant pour telle ou telle position, vous servez un dieu *et vous en offensez un autre*. En effet, si vous restez fidèle à vous-mêmes, vous en arrivez nécessairement à telles ou telles *conséquences* ultimes, qui sont les implications intrinsèques de votre position. Tel pourrait être, en principe du moins, l’apport de la science [...] nous pouvons ainsi contraindre l’individu, ou du moins l’aider, à *regarder en face le sens ultime de sa propre action*. [...] L’hypothèse que je vous présente ici découle en vérité d’un fait fondamental: pour autant qu’elle repose en elle-même et qu’elle est comprise à partir d’elle-même, la vie ne connaît que la lutte éternelle des dieux que j’ai déjà évoquée. Pour le dire sans métaphore: elle en connaît que le combat irréductible et sans issue des points de vue ultimes sur la vie qui sont simplement *possibles*, et la nécessité qui en découle de se *décider* en faveur de l’un ou de l’autre. Que, dans ces conditions, il vaille la peine de faire de la science sa “vocation”, qu’elle ait elle-même une “vocation” objectivement valable, c’est encore là un jugement de valeur dont on n’a pas à faire état dans un amphithéâtre. Il est en effet présupposé que ceux qui enseignent à l’université ont répondu à cette question par l’affirmative.”
- ³ See excellent article, as well as the rest of this special issue on Durkheim, by François-A. Isambert (1990) Durkheim: Une science de la morale pour une morale laïque, *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 35, 129-146.
- ⁴ The debate didn’t only take place in the UK. See amongst others, in France, Boltanski, Luc. 2009. *De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l’émancipation*. Paris: Gallimard. Heinich, Nathalie. 2007. *Pourquoi Bourdieu*. Paris: Gallimard. Latour, Bruno. 2004, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *Critical Inquiry*, 30, pp. 225-248.
- ⁵ Mbembe, Achille. “L’Afrique est-elle l’avenir du monde?”, Conference at the cultural center Pianofabriek, Brussels, 29 March 2014. Personal notes & translation. “We know the history of destruction. But we don’t know the history of reworking, of reinstatement (refondations) and of reconstruction. What happens when we create? Under what conditions can we recreate in order to build conditions that are more or less dignified? Amidst all that destruction, within the play of all those merchandizing and mortifying forces that destroy all forms of life, how can we reclaim some living space? [...] We urgently need to revisit our archives. Those who rebuild and reinstated, those who reconstructed and created what did they do and how did they do it? How did they get organised?”
- ⁶ On non-linear thinking, see work done by sociologists involved in complexity theories such as M. Castells, I. Wallerstein, J. Urry or, in France, E. Morin, to name the most well-known ones. On embodied causalities see the classic *Ecofeminism* by M. Mies and V. Shiva (1993) or, more recently, D. Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2008) and G. di Chiro’s *Embodied Ecologies: Science, Politics, and Environmental Justice* (forthcoming). On redistributed agency, see the work done by sociologists involved in Actor-Network-Theory and more particularly work by B. Latour, J. Law, A. Mol.
- ⁷ Borch, Christian. 2013. *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press.
- ⁸ Most of Gabriel Tarde’s work has recently been published by *Les Empêcheurs de Penser en rond & Seuil*, two academic publishers, under the direction of Eric Alliez. See also the 2007 and 2008 reenactment of the 1903 Tarde Durkheim debate: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/354>
- ⁹ See work by Serge Moscovici, Saul Alinsky and others yet to be discovered.
- ¹⁰ Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1999. “The Heritage of Sociology, the Promise of Social Science”, *Current Sociology*, 47, 1-37. Reproduced in: Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1999. *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 220-250.
- ¹¹ Karsenti, Bruno. 2013. *D’une philosophie à l’autre: les sciences sociales et la politique des modernes*. Paris: Gallimard.
- ¹² Berlan, Aurélien. 2014. *La fabrique des derniers hommes: Retour sur le présent avec Tönnies, Simmel et Weber*. Paris: La Découverte.