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When sociology must comprehend the incomprehensible: interpretation of Weber and Durkheim in the sociology of Theodor W. Adorno

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In this article, we will delve into Theodor W. Adorno's sociology. The general aim is to study Adorno's theory of society and its relation to sociological interpretation. What primarily distinguishes Adorno from other sociologists (of his time and today) is that he considers society to be the fundamental concept of the discipline. Theorising on the post-liberal capitalism of his time, Adorno proposes the concept of the exchange society, which is understood as an antagonistic totality that reproduces itself through the suffering it inflicts on socialised individuals. Within texts dating back to the 1960s, such as 'Society', Adorno engages in an exploration of comprehensive sociology and the sociology of social facts, reciprocally examining them. He confronts one with the other in a proposal of an interpretative model of the comprehensibility or incomprehensibility of society. This intellectual confrontation, while avoiding synthesis, leads Adorno to two main outcomes. First, it yields a diagnostic perspective on social theory, portraying capitalist society as simultaneously rational and irrational, comprehensible and incomprehensible. Second, it hints at a sociological interpretation of specific phenomena. In addition to exploring this central theme in Adorno's sociology, we will also shed light on his distinctive approach to classic texts and concepts. Specifically, Adorno links to the received terminologies but incorporates them into constellations that imbue them with eloquence by revealing the underlying objective moments they encapsulate. The theoretical significance of this article lies in the aim to demonstrate that Adorno's contributions to sociology are not merely borrowed from philosophical contemplations. Instead, they arise from an immanent critique of the sociological tradition.

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Introduction

In this article, we are interested in the sociologist Adorno. The general aim is to study Adorno's theory of society and its relation to sociological interpretation. For Adorno, the object of study of sociology can be none other than society. Thus, we want to enter into this concept of society, which must be developed theoretically so that researchers can carry out sociological interpretations of concrete social phenomena. This raises the problem of conceptual construction. Adorno does not define concepts but deploys them. This exercise is carried out in the text 'Society', where he takes on the task of constructing this concept in dialogue with the classics of sociology, Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

In the text 'Society', Adorno constructs a model or constellation that juxtaposes and brings into dialogue Émile Durkheim's sociology of social facts and Max Weber's comprehensive sociology. The terrain on which Adorno proposes the confrontation is the problem of whether the social is comprehensible or not. His critical dialogue with Durkheimian *chosisme* and Weberian *comprehensive sociology* does not intend to devise a new sociological method that would update their epistemological and methodological proposals. Adorno does not want to make an overcoming synthesis of Weber and Durkheim but to make one illuminate the shortcomings of the other. The opposition between the two brings a different perspective to the field of social science methodology. The epistemological discussion, even as the construction of the sociological science's object depends on carving out its own space, is intrinsically linked to practical concerns. Methodology always goes beyond what it presupposes. Adorno criticises the methodology of the social sciences from inside, which is oblivious to the danger that scientific knowledge fulfils an ideological function; that is, it shields society – a historically determined society – from critique. The constellation explicitly pits Durkheim against Weber, but Adorno's diagnosis is that both are insufficient to offer a model of critical interpretation. This reading is influenced by Marx's critique of economic categories.

This article is a commentary on the text 'Society'. More specifically, we will focus on the presentation and interpretation of the aforementioned constellation. Since 'Society' is a very short and sometimes schematic text, we will draw on Adorno's other writings – particularly those focusing on social theory and sociological interpretation – in our reading. Our interpretation also draws on some reception literature: first, we link to the extensive literature on Adorno's social theory that has drawn attention to the dimension of critique of capitalism in his concept of the exchange society as an antagonistic totality (Bonefeld, 2016; Heitmann 2018; Maiso 2022; Reichelt 2011). On the other hand, we take up the baton of studies that point to the importance of the idea of interpretation in Adorno and the understanding of the theoretical process as something constructive, tentative, of the composition of figures and models (Buck-Morss 1977; Romero 2010; Sevilla 2005; Vidal 2021). The article deals with the construction of sociological concepts as a result of interpretative modelling exercises. We are convinced that Adorno's sociology is best understood by keeping in mind the idea of interpretation proposed as early as the 1930s and implemented in the models of *Negative Dialectics*.

With regard to this Weber-Durkheim constellation on the possibility of understanding the social, we will defend three theses:

- a. From this constellation emerges a certain social diagnosis: Adorno highlights capitalist society as a fractured totality, embodying simultaneously elements of humanity and inhumanity, rationality and irrationality, and comprehensibility and incomprehensibility.
- b. This constellation gives rise to indications as to how the sociologist should make interpretations: Adorno suggests a way of interpreting specific phenomena that, while acknowledging their social determinants, remains cognisant of the fact that the social sphere is entrenched in reified praxis. He emphasises that adopting a genetic perspective is crucial to retaining a view of the active subject.
- c. This constellation evidences a particular way of reading the classics of sociology and their concepts: Adorno seeks to link with received terminology, incorporating it into constellations that render it eloquent by revealing the objective moments encapsulated within it.

We intend to contribute to the underdeveloped literature on Adorno's sociology. In this sense, the article has the theoretical significance of demonstrating that Adorno's contributions to sociology are not merely borrowed from philosophical contemplations. Instead, they exhibit a sense of continuity with the concepts of the sociological tradition, which are criticised from within. Thus, the article offers keys to understanding what Adorno thinks of the classics of sociology: Weber, Durkheim, and Marx.

This article focuses on the interpretative aspect of Adorno's sociology in terms of both the sociologist's work in interpreting social phenomena and Adorno's own theoretical construction of the fundamental concepts of sociology. Although there are important works that point to the interest of Adorno's sociology (Benzer 2011; Muller-Doohm 1996), the interpretation of Adorno within the discipline does not sufficiently take into account that his sociological categories are dialectically developed in a model building process. 'Society', 'individual' or 'totality' are not standard concepts, they function as figures that make their time (post-liberal capitalist society) legible and at the same time want to liberate the living subjects who suffer reproducing it. These categories are multiple within themselves: they are composed of elements of description and critique. But it is not a matter of describing in order to criticise; the very mode of exposition is critical. This is what is at stake in the concept of constellation, which will be central to this paper. The constellation on the comprehensibility of society is one of the key models by which Adorno constructs the concept of *antagonistic totality* and makes it yieldable for a critical interpretation of concrete phenomena.

We shall begin with two chapters ('A sociology of capitalist society' and 'Socialisation and damaged lives') that attempt to give an idea of the concept of the exchange society as an antagonistic totality and of the problem of how it reproduces itself through the action of socialised individuals. These two chapters provide an insight into the role of Marxism and psychoanalysis in Adorno's social thought. They also help to situate the Weber-Durkheim constellation within the interests of Adorno's sociology. The third and longest chapter ('Is the social comprehensible?') will elaborate on the Weber-Durkheim constellation on the comprehensibility of the social. Finally, the fourth chapter ('Dialectical reading: Terminology and constellations') will make explicit Adorno's way of reading the classics of sociology and their concepts.

A sociology of capitalist society

For Adorno, the central object of sociology is society. This already has a substantial significance and is far from being a mere triviality. In the decades following the Second World War, although the concept of society was in good health in the social imaginary, leading German sociologists of note, such as René König and Helmut Schelsky, saw it as problematic. They viewed it as a speculative vestige in sociology, one that should be removed in

favour of a more empirically oriented approach, thereby eliminating philosophical perspectives (Adorno 2022c, p. 314; Lepsius 1979). The crisis surrounding the concept of society has deepened, as evidenced by the current pre-eminence of postmodern and asocial (if not anti-social) discourses (Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez, 2013, p. 245). Within sociology, this crisis is evidenced in the contemporary relevance of post-social sociology and various versions of individual-focused sociologies, particularly those that have arisen in France (see, for example, Dubet 2007; García Selgas 2010; Lahire 2011; Latour 2007; Martucelli and Santiago 2017).¹

The text ‘Society’ represents a specific proposition aimed at defining the concept of society. Adorno penned this text in 1965, just four years prior to his passing, and delivered it as a lecture on October 14, 1966, in Rome. As a prelude to his exposition, Adorno made it clear that it’s impossible to divorce ‘his formulations’ in the text from the motivation behind it, which was that it was written as a commissioned piece for the *Evangelische Staatslexikon* (Adorno 2022c, p. 569). It’s worth noting that Adorno is not inclined to arbitrarily fix terminological concepts but rather to develop them (Adorno 2021b). In other words, when confronted with the challenge of capturing something objective subjectively, which is the challenge of definition, he believes that problems and contradictions should not be simply resolved through conceptual clarification – though he acknowledges its necessity – but rather, they must be fully unfolded (Adorno 2021b, p. 741).²

Faced with the task of defining society, Adorno was initially daunted by the impossibility of doing justice to such a concept within the confines of a dictionary entry. During his lecture, he emphasised that he could undertake this endeavour only as a tour de force, a balancing act (Adorno 2022c, p. 569). The term tour de force is of French origin and, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to ‘an achievement or performance that shows great skill and attracts admiration’. However, Adorno imbues it with a different nuance that transcends the mere accomplishment of something highly complex. He employs this expression in *Aesthetic Theory* in the context of interpreting artworks: works of art designed as a tour de force are conceived as a balancing act capable of achieving the unattainable. Adorno asserts that ‘works of art that are deliberately conceived as a tour de force are semblance because they must purport in essence to be what they in essence cannot be; they correct themselves by emphasising their own impossibility’ (Adorno 2021a, p. 163). This notion is a fundamental element of Adorno’s understanding of interpretation and constitutes part of the challenge he believes all theory must undertake: to address the non-conceptual without renouncing the concept. That the theory proceeds as a tour de force means that its possibility starts by emphasising its impossibility, constructing a figure that renders the subject matter elusive. Thus, Adorno agrees to define the term ‘society’ only as an attempt or essay to explain why an emphatic concept of society, one that refers to dynamic realities, defies a straightforward definition. This is how the text commences:

Of the few concepts which, according to Nietzsche’s thesis, allow a verbal definition ‘in which a whole process is semiotically synthesised’, the concept of society is an exemplary model. Society is essentially a process; more is said about it by its kinetic laws than by the invariants which one could try to elaborate. (Adorno 2022c, p. 9)

Adorno commences his examination by critiquing certain common attempts at defining society. First, in contrast to how it may appear in common understanding, society is not simply the aggregate of all individuals inhabiting a particular place at a given time. This formal, nominalistic definition would prematurely

assume that society is inherently human and immediately associated with individual subjects. It fails to recognise that the distinctive essence of society lies in the predominance of relationships over individual human beings, who are ultimately nothing more than its private products of power (Adorno 2022c, p. 9). In essence, society is not merely a collection of individuals; rather, it implies a complex network of relationships that exert control over them, akin to an alien nexus.

Society is not only a dynamic concept but also a functional one. Adorno characterises society as a totality that represents a functional nexus. This signifies that we are referring to a framework of functions that encompasses every individual and interweaves all its members: every individual must fulfil a function as a means of ‘earning a living’ (Adorno 2022c, p. 10). Totality, in this context, is not an external construct; rather, it is realised only through the unity of functions.

This reevaluation of the starting point of social science does not stem from a mere methodological preference for holism over methodological individualism. Totality is not a methodological postulate; it represents the concept of a tangible reality that acquires autonomy (Reichelt 2007, p. 5). It is a distinct historical process – the establishment of capitalist society as a system – that necessitates a structural approach within sociology. Furthermore, the inception of sociology is intricately intertwined with the historical emergence of capitalist society, a society that manifests as a totality where each process is a function of other processes and, in turn, of the totality (Adorno 2011, pp. 123–124).

To elucidate the underlying logic of the advanced capitalist society of his era, Adorno draws upon Marx’s terminology. Particularly in Adorno’s later works, where social theory takes on a foundational role, he provides key components for a theory of the *exchange society* (Adorno 2020, pp. 327–351; 2021c, pp. 58–63; 2022c, pp. 13–14, 38, 47, 209, 293–296). This functional interconnection binding individuals together is determined by the exchange relationship. In the universal realisation of exchange, ‘the qualitative constitution of producers and consumers, the mode of production, even the need that the social mechanism satisfies in passing, is disregarded as secondary. What comes first is profit’ (Adorno 2022c, p. 13). Here, Adorno references Marx’s theory of value: this common element among commodities, allowing for their comparison once singular elements are set aside, is value. Value emerges as a result of the objective social process in which all privately produced goods, transformed into commodities, are interrelated within the generalised exchange relation (Marx 2012, pp. 85–98). The objectivity of value is inherently social: a conceptual component, value, lies at the core of the object. Adorno advances the notion of an ‘objective conceptuality’ or ‘objective abstraction’ (Reichelt 2007). ‘Exchange-value, which is something merely thought as opposed to use-value, dominates over human need, and in its place, appearance dominates over reality’ (Adorno 2022c, p. 209). Value, akin to the concept, performs generalisation operations wherein different entities are linked to others based on a shared element. Thus, when Hans Albert, within the context of the disputation of positivism in German sociology, criticises Adorno for having an abstract, metaphysical concept of society and totality, Adorno responds by asserting that abstraction is not a discretionary choice within his critical model of sociology – it does not originate from him – but rather is inherent to the object itself (Adorno 2022c, pp. 293–294). It constitutes a real abstraction produced by subjects in the realm of exchange.³

In capitalist society, the system’s essence lies in the expansion of the principle of exchange. As Adorno articulates in his work ‘Society’, “abstractness of exchange value, before any concrete social stratification, goes together with the domination of the general over the particular, of society over those who are forcibly

its members” (2022c, pp. 13–14). Adorno’s critique of identity fundamentally revolves around this critique of value.

The concept of society is not merely a classificatory one, that is, the most abstract concept in sociology, which should be abstracted from individual facts (Adorno 2022c, p. 9). The categorisation of society cannot be achieved by simply progressing from the specific to the general, for when we recognise that the essence of society involves a complex and differentiated network juxtaposed with individual beings and phenomena, we cannot presume a seamless continuity. The objectification of social relations renders it arduous to elucidate the intricate interconnections implied by society concerning living individuals – or, in Marx’s terminology, it impedes a straightforward explanation of value with respect to living people and their labour. Adorno underscores the notion that the core of capitalist society has become something alien, profoundly inscrutable to individuals, suggesting that we have become reliant on something not entirely human. Hence, regarding the concept of society as merely a classification is, to borrow from Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, to confuse the fact of logic with the logic of fact (Marx 1981, p. 216). In Adorno’s words, it is ‘to confuse the usual ideal of the scientific, hierarchical ordering of categories with the object of knowledge’ (2022c, p. 9). Furthermore, the attempt to derive society from the generalisation of the specific fundamentally excludes the possibility of recognising that the general, the social totality, inherently shapes individual actions.

This assertion hinges on the idea that, in Hegelian terminology, society constitutes a *concrete totality* – a concept upon which the existence of every individual depends, yet one that hasn’t been abstracted from individuality but encompasses within itself, as a prerequisite, all individual aspects (Adorno 2021c, p. 103). However, Adorno’s interpretation of Hegel carries a critical dimension. Totality, in his view, isn’t a category of the spirit but rather a feature of social objectivity, even though it possesses a conceptual core. Furthermore, as a force compelling the living individual who fails to recognise themselves within it, exchange society bears an element of falsity. This is why it represents an *antagonistic totality*. According to Adorno, liberated humanity would not be synonymous with totality in any way (Adorno 2022c, p. 292). The fundamental problem of Adorno’s social theory is to understand the process by which relations between people eventually take the form of a rigid structure that is opposed to individuals. He shares Marx’s interest in the process of fetishisation or reification. Reified structures must be able to refer to the action or praxis objectified in them.

An exchange society constitutes a functional interconnection, remains elusive, and defies immediate comprehension or empirical verification. In other words, it eludes the commonly referred to criterion of verifiability, refusing to be confined to empirical *facts*. (Adorno wryly employs English terms to satirise positivist and scientific American sociology.) Consequently, positivism seeks to discard a concept like society, dismissing it as a metaphysical vestige of a historically less critical era in social science. But ‘what an unrealistic realism’, Adorno replies, for ‘there is no social factor that is not determined by society’ (2022c, p.10).

Socialisation and damaged live

However, the social sphere doesn’t merely assert itself ‘over the heads of individuals’. In his *Introduction to Sociology*, Adorno emphasises that the examination of the individual cannot simply consist of identifying what directly results from society’s influence. On the contrary, one must interpret the category of individuation itself and the specific forms of individuality as manifestations of the internalisation of social coercion or societal

demands (Adorno 2021c, pp. 188–190). If we want to express it in jargon more familiar to sociology, we would say that Adorno considers a theoretical explanation of the problem of the internalisation of the external to be necessary (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

Despite its overwhelming influence, society isn’t detached from specific moments; it thrives within the thoughts, actions, and emotions of unique individuals within particular situations and institutions (Heitmann 2017, p. 56). Adorno understood that post-liberal capitalism, characterised by an immense concentration of economic and political power that disempowers individuals, transcends being simply a mode of production; it becomes a mode of constituting life in its entirety (Maiso 2022, pp. 155–156). Consequently, even though his diagnosis adopts Marxian categories of the critique of political economy, the transformations of the object compel him to go beyond them (Maiso 2022). The critique of capitalism must encompass the processes of socialisation – that is, how living subjects internalise and perpetuate an increasingly irrational society. Living individuals are indeed victims of society, but they are also essential for its existence. It’s not merely a systemic logic dominating a different logic, that of action; instead, it reproduces itself precisely through the actions of individuals. All actions are socially determined, but the social persists and reproduces itself because living individuals, with a certain degree of agency, adapt to these constraints in various ways. This core issue, which challenges a concept like *Lebenswelt*, is encapsulated in Adorno’s statement that individuals are objects, not subjects, of the social process they perpetuate as subjects (2022c, p. 358).

Society reproduces itself through antagonism and violence: there is conflict between groups and individuals who never cease to compete for the social cake, and there is intrapsychic conflict resulting from the need to adapt to social demands. Adorno saw this paradox of capitalist socialisation: the mechanism that brings people together is the same that tears them apart; the unity of the system derives from its irreconcilable violence (Adorno 2022a, p. 273).

The process of socialisation does not take place beyond or in spite of conflicts and antagonisms. Its medium is the very antagonisms themselves, which simultaneously tear society apart. The antagonism that could wipe out organised society any day with total catastrophe is set and reproduced in the relationship of exchange as such. Only through the interest in profit and the immanent breakdown of the social whole that the mechanism survives, creaking, groaning, with unspeakable sacrifices, until today. (Adorno 2022c, pp. 14–15)

Therefore, the fact that the individual makes the determinants livable and has, particularly in consumption, a certain capacity for choice, does not mean that it is a successful subject (Maiso 2022). For Adorno, the life that has incorporated social needs can only be a *damaged life*. We make the determinants livable but with great sacrifices. The attempt to make the demands of the exchange society compatible with our personality is painful and involves the splitting of the subject itself. Thus, when Adorno speaks of the damaged life, he is referring to a social suffering that does not depend on particular situations but on the social constitution itself. The ‘new human type’ borne out of post-liberal capitalism can no longer be considered a fully realised individual, as its character loses the qualities of uniqueness, continuity, and substantiality (Maiso 2022, p. 253). This is the sense of non-identity between subject and object, between society and individuals.

Post-liberal capitalist society, a ‘radically societalised society’, becomes a seamless system but irreconcilable (Adorno 2022a, p.

273). This directs attention to the psychology of the socialised subjects. Adorno will be clear that the critique of psychologism must not lead to a renunciation of psychology. The diagnosis of the damaged life, which identifies the point where the logic of the social system intersects with the biography of the individual (Maiso 2022, p. 15), draws essential support from psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, in tandem with sociological theory, could examine the connection between society as a whole and the structures of human drives. Following the failure of the revolution, the rise of fascism, and the solidification of capitalist society as an oppressive second nature, psychoanalysis could emerge as an ally in deciphering the ‘enigma of docility’ (Zamora 2007). Adorno frequently remarks on his era, emphasising that the chasm between the power and powerlessness of living individuals has never been more pronounced. This common characteristic binds capitalism and fascism as societies of ‘total socialisation’ despite their obvious differences (Maiso 2022, p. 117 ff.). It became imperative to scrutinise the subjective conditions of objective irrationality, and in this endeavour, psychoanalysis became relevant (Adorno 2022c, p. 42; Maiso 2022, p. 275).

Is the social comprehensible?

After addressing the key aspects of social theory and the issue of socialisation, we need to explore how we grasp society and make intelligible the phenomena it influences. Two classical perspectives have played a central role in sociology: Weber’s comprehensive sociology and Durkheim’s sociology of social facts.

For Weber, sociology’s goal is to comprehend (*verstehen*) social action through interpretation. Social action refers to human conduct in which one or multiple individuals attribute subjective meanings. To truly understand an action, one must focus on the meaning ascribed by the relevant subject (Weber 2021, p. 149). In this regard, sociology aligns with the tradition of Dilthey and methodological hermeneutics. However, the emphasis on rationality demarcates this understanding from psychology.

Additionally, Weber addresses and rectifies his historicism and idiographic orientation by introducing the concept of *ideal types* – abstract models that enable him to move beyond the examination of individual cases. Ideal types, though not existing in reality, serve as mental constructs that unilaterally accentuate particular viewpoints, synthesising numerous individual and diffuse phenomena. They function as heuristic tools, akin to ‘yardsticks’, helping to identify divergences or similarities between cases and the type (Weber 2021, pp. 157–158). They do not represent knowledge of reality itself but facilitate the formulation of hypotheses (Bourdieu et al. 2005, p. 246).

For Durkheim, sociology primarily concerns itself with social facts rather than individual actions. These *social facts* emerge from processes that occur outside of us, making them akin to natural facts. Social facts cannot be apprehended through introspection or hermeneutic methods because they possess an inherent foreignness that necessitates a departure from spontaneous sociology. Instead, Durkheim advocates for observation and experimentation, asserting that ‘the mind cannot understand without going outside itself’ (Durkheim 1982, p. 36).

Durkheim challenges what Bourdieu labels the *illusion of transparency* to establish the focus of the emerging sociological science. To understand and explain an institution, it is insufficient to rediscover the intentions that may have contributed to its formation. Institutions are entwined within a complex web of historical determinants and interactions with other institutions (Bourdieu et al. 2005, p. 146). Social facts are imposed on individuals as external, coercive entities, exerting daily pressure without being readily comprehensible. In response, sociologists are compelled to approach social facts as if they were inanimate

objects. Durkheim contends that sociological study must begin with ‘the principle that one is entirely ignorant of what they are’ (1982, p. 36). This implies that, unlike ideas, which are known through introspection, social facts must be *explained* externally within their relational contexts.

In a passage from his work ‘Society’, Adorno brings Weber and Durkheim face to face, seeking to examine their respective moments of truth and falsity. While this passage is lengthy, I believe it merits quotation before we delve into our analysis.

Society, however, is both recognisable and unrecognisable from within. [Dialectical thesis to be developed]. In it, in the human product, the living subjects are still capable of finding themselves despite everything and as if from afar, contrary to what happens in chemistry and physics. In fact, action within bourgeois society, as rationality, is from a largely objective perspective both ‘comprehensible’ and ‘motivated’. The generation of Max Weber and Dilthey rightly reminded us of this. The ideal of understanding was partial in excluding from society that which is contrary to the identification by the person understanding. Durkheim’s rule that one should treat social facts as things, refraining in principle from understanding them, referred to this. He did not allow himself to be talked out of the fact that society encounters each individual primarily as a non-identical thing, as a ‘constraint’. In this respect, reflection on society begins where comprehensibility ends. In Durkheim, the method of natural science he advocates registers Hegel’s ‘second nature’, which society eventually became as opposed to living beings. The antithesis to Weber, however, remains as particular as Weber’s thesis, since it is satisfied with non-comprehensibility in the same way as Weber was with the postulate of comprehensibility. Instead, non-comprehensibility would have to be understood as deriving relations from relations between people, relations that have become independent and opaque. Today, sociology would finally have to understand the incomprehensible, the incursion of humanity into inhumanity. (Adorno 2022c, pp. 11–12)⁴

Adorno juxtaposes Durkheim against Weber and Weber against Durkheim, even though both are seen as having their limitations. On the one hand, while sociology’s primary focus should be on objectified forms as social totality rather than meaningful actions or values, there is a moment of truth in comprehensive sociology. In society, living individuals can still discover themselves and catch a glimpse of the practical essence within the objectified, reified structures. In this sense, Adorno acknowledges that in Dilthey’s methodological hermeneutics and Weber’s comprehensive sociology, there exists this moment of truth. Despite the pervasive reification, not everything is alien or unfamiliar. Even if this understanding is achieved from a distance and often requires intricate interpretation, we can still discern our actions and rationality embedded within structures that aren’t entirely rational. This is why the social sciences can maintain the possibility of comprehension [Verstehen].

This recognition of the moment of truth within sociological subjectivism is, however, contingent upon the ‘dialectisation’ of the Verstehen, which connects it to the issue of reification. This ‘ideal of Verstehen’ neglects what exists in society that contradicts comprehension, what cannot be equated with it: reality and experience cannot be simply reduced to mere meaning (‘the ideal of understanding [Verstehensideal] was partial in excluding from society what is contrary to identification by the one who understands’ (2022c, p. 12)). In contrast, Adorno juxtaposes Durkheim’s concept of *chosisme*, which highlights that which cannot be reduced to understanding (‘reflection on society arises where

comprehensibility ends' (2022c, p. 12)). Here, comprehensibility refers to the Weberian *Verstehen*. Adorno, along with Durkheim, does not advocate for abandoning the conceptual or empirical grasp of social facts but rather for comprehending them as meaningful. Durkheim illustrates that society primarily confronts individuals as something non-identical and coercive. For instance, in the context of education, he argued that:

it is vain to believe that we can educate our children as we wish. There are customs which we are obliged to accept; if we depart from them too severely, they come upon our children. [...] There is, then, at every moment, a regulating type of education from which we cannot depart without encountering lively resistance which serves to restrain the vagaries of dissidence. (Durkheim 1922, p. 41)

This is why the Durkheimian method, which mirrors that of the natural sciences and their inherent detachment from the object, captures the reified social ('registers Hegel's "second nature", which society eventually became as opposed to living beings' (2022c, p. 12)). The notion of second nature already contains a critique of hermeneutics: it suggests that society is presented as something distinct, something separated from the individual, akin to the first nature, and drained of meaning (Lukács 1920, pp. 52–57). Traditional hermeneutics posit a meaning that, from this perspective, justifies the existing state of the world. On the other hand, any application of the natural sciences' method to sociology can effectively capture social dynamics 'a contrario' –Adorno also highlights this in Comte (2011)– not solely due to a methodological choice, but owing to the historical process by which humanity becomes estranged.

The concept of a social fact, an inherently incomprehensible foreign entity, serves to 'register' second nature. However, Durkheim's objectivism is only partial because it is not only a matter of registering social totality ('the antithesis to Weber, however, remains as particular as Weber's thesis, since it is satisfied with non-comprehensibility in the same way as Weber was with the postulate of comprehensibility' (2022c, p. 12)). Durkheim's sociology focuses exclusively on society in its alienated state as a worthy object, but it lacks reflection on the mechanisms of reification (Adorno 2011, p. 86). The external and coercive nature of social facts records the reification within capitalist society but transforms this issue of the object into a methodological presupposition, dehistoricising and absolutising it. Criticising *Verstehen* should not lead to an affirmative stance on existing institutions.

Every science must correspond to its object in the sense of being commensurate with its complexity. Nevertheless, it is clear that a particular knowledge, a specific science, does not share the same nature as that object. A science is distinct from its object. For example, the science that studies diseases is not itself a diseased science (Plato 2018, 438e). In Durkheim's case, we can say that sociology seems to become too closely aligned with its object, the reified society (or how it presents itself): he transfers the negativity, opacity, and disconcerting unfamiliarity of the social from the individual to the methodological maxim –'you must not understand'. He essentially reinforces the existing myth of society as destiny but with a scientific positivist stance (Adorno 2022c, p. 240).

Weber and Durkheim both exhibit partial perspectives. In both cases, social objectivity remains shielded from critique. In one instance, this is achieved by not delving into the study of the mediation of the social totality and by justifying the world through the lens of endowed meaning. In the other, it's achieved by conforming too closely to it and presenting it as a fact when, in reality, it has undergone transformation. Adorno concludes this passage by emphasising the task of sociology: 'non-comprehensibility

would have to be understood as deriving relations from relations between people, relations that have become independent and opaque. Today, sociology would finally have to comprehend the incomprehensible [*das Unverstehbare zu verstehen*], the incursion of humanity into inhumanity' (2022c, p. 12).

It is important to note that 'comprehending incomprehensibility' does not imply the overcoming or synthesis of the sociology of action and the sociology of social facts. The concept of totality does not emerge from the fusion of both paradigms, action theory and system theory. Adorno constructs a figure or *constellation of positivism* (Reichelt 2011, p. 39). In the construction of constellations or models, the goal is to arrange and rearrange elements, juxtapose them, and create a tentative figure (Adorno 2022b, pp. 335–337). Adorno develops an interpretative constellation between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility. 'Comprehending incomprehensibility' constitutes an oxymoron, combining two contradictory terms within the same syntactic structure. However, this composition does not seek to generate a new sense; such expectations are preemptively frustrated (2022b, p. 334). In the constellation, one moment throws light on the other. This figure successfully highlights the tension between subject and object that has been perpetuated or externalised throughout the history of the sociological discipline. No compromise or middle ground is possible because social objectivity itself is the subject of contention (Jameson 1990, pp. 38–39).

This epistemological dispute unveils the antagonistic nature of society, establishing a perspective "that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted" (Adorno 2021d, p. 283). The confrontation between comprehensive sociology and the sociology of social facts generates a field of tensions in which society unfolds as a rational and irrational, comprehensible and incomprehensible, human and inhuman totality. A related mode of interpretation emerges, which, while not naive about the true moment of imposition (*de facto*, people are products of their social relations, of this totality), is also aware of its false moment (the social is reified praxis, and second nature is the alienation of the historical).

Adorno employs the figure 'comprehending incomprehensibility' as a means of playing with hermeneutics, conducting an immanent critique of it. This understanding of incomprehensibility, namely, the interpretation of the social as second nature, differs significantly from Weber's *Verstehen*, although they both share an interest in the practical perspective. The foundation for this approach can be traced back to Marx and his critique of economic categories (Bonefeld 2016; Reichelt 2011). As Lars Heitmann points out: 'Marx shows how the "economic categories" (value, price, money, capital, wages, profit, interest, etc.) establish a practice of economic activity that belongs to an inverted, seemingly self-moving "whole"' (2018, p. 591). Adorno's ironic demand for 'good comprehension' refers to the capacity to discern the laws governing society, essentially the theoretical intellection of the totality's constitution. This has little to do with understanding from the perspective of individual intentions.

As Helmut Reichelt notes, Durkheim and Weber articulate a 'phenomenal knowledge' of how social objectivity is experienced by individuals. They (perhaps unknowingly) express an awareness of society's autonomisation but fail to conceptually grasp it, resulting in a lack of development of incomprehensibility, of objective abstraction within its inherent dynamics. Positivism does not grasp the genesis of objectification; in this sense, it remains limited to a mere phenomenal understanding. In contrast, Adorno champions materialism as an *anamnesis of genesis* (Reichelt 2011, pp. 35–39). The objective is to recognise the processes of 'having come to be' or the 'immobilised dynamics' of phenomena (Adorno 2021c, p. 244). A sociology that neglects the historical dimension of 'having come to be' is, in essence, a

sociology devoid of genuine experiential insight (2021c, p. 250). The link with Marx is explicitly pointed out by Adorno in his lectures on ‘History and Freedom’:

Interpretation, I said, is criticism of phenomena that have been brought to a standstill; it consists in revealing the dynamism stored up in them, so that what appears as second nature can be seen to be history. On the other hand, criticism ensures that what has evolved loses its appearance as mere existence and stands revealed as the product of history. This is essentially the procedure of Marxist critique (if I may briefly make mention of this here). Marxist critique consists in showing that every conceivable social and economic factor that appears to be part of nature is in fact something that has evolved historically (Adorno 2006, pp. 135–136).

While Weber exhibits an inclination to treat the social as practical, the distinguishing trait of critical sociology lies in not unquestioningly accepting praxis as a given but maintaining it as a possibility, persistently denouncing the objectified aspects of the social. Only through this approach can sociology potentially contribute to broadening human experience.

From this point, the interpretative task of sociology, primarily conceived as *social physiognomy* (Romero 2010, pp. 151 ff.), can be delineated: it must render the historical totality evident within concrete phenomena (sometimes even within apocryphal or divergent phenomena, which can be particularly revealing). However, it should not reveal this totality as its meaning but as a web of *guilt-nexus* that stifles experience, as a structural context, historical but naturalised, that binds human action. In this manner, social phenomena, individual actions, and modes of thought and emotion are interconnected with the process that led them to become what they are. Only through this historical perspective can the possibility arise that they could become something else. The interest of interpretation is the unique and the individual: ‘dialectical critique seeks to safeguard or help establish that which does not obey the totality, that which opposes it, or that which first forms itself as the potential of an as yet non-existent individuation’ (2022c, p. 292).

Dialectical reading: terminology and constellations

Adorno’s interpretation of Weber and Durkheim is to be understood within a theory and practice of dialectical reading of inherited texts and concepts. Adorno’s approach has the potential to transform non-dialectical thinkers into dialectical ones by nurturing the thematic or objective element that “creeps in”, even against their own intentions. Adorno states in his course *Philosophy and Sociology*:

the origins of dialectical thinking do not lie in the speculative tendency of an individual thinker, in purely intellectual functions, but even thinkers as unsuspected of such intentions as the old Comte, only by the force of what they dealt with, were forced into dialectical conceptions. (2011, p. 36)

Beyond the author’s intentionality, the language objectified in the texts fixes their time and its conflicts. This language, alienated from the author’s subjectivity, becomes a sign to be interpreted, an indication of the historical moment (Vidal, + 2019, pp. 134 ff.). In terms of psychoanalysis, a concept dear to Adorno, one could liken this process to uncovering the latent social unconscious within the text’s literalness.

Adorno’s interpretation reveals how Weber and Durkheim inadvertently incorporate their contemporary societal context into their writings. Within the epistemology and methodology of

classical sociology, capitalist society and its reification subtly infiltrates. In fact, Adorno asserts in his *Introduction to Sociology* lectures that the support for this objectivity in the structure and organisation of the subject matter becomes even more compelling when it unintentionally emerges from sociologists whose methodological stance contradicts his own (2021c, p. 208).

This is linked to a particular way of conceptualising terminology and adopting a specific stance towards longstanding philosophical issues. Only a dialectical philosophy, guided by an ahistorical truth, is willing to set aside traditional problems and embark on a fresh beginning (Adorno, 2022b, p. 339). Adorno dismisses attempts to eradicate inherited terminology, whether through artificial language or neologisms (2012, p. 44). Acknowledging the connection of thought to historical continuity is essential. The originality of a thought, its capacity to engage with that core of experience that remains distant from rigid terminology, necessitates a ‘strict dialectical communication with the most recent attempts at solution that have been made in philosophy and its terminology’ (2022b, p. 340). In his lessons on *Philosophical Terminology*, Adorno intertwines the exploration of established terminology with the concept of a constellation:

The most fruitful means of communicating an original thought from the point of view of language consists in splicing with the terminology received by tradition, but incorporating constellations into it by which the related terms are expressed differently. (Adorno, 2012, p. 44)

In this notion of aligning with tradition, of working with inherited concepts without attempting to unearth their original meanings but also without discarding them in favour of entirely new ones, Adorno encourages us to engage with significant texts and transcend the all-too-common scholastic barriers. However, this stance does not constitute a defence of the authority of tradition but rather seeks to connect with potent concepts and theorems. These concepts derive their power precisely because, whether the author intended it or not, they have the capacity to encapsulate the essence of their own era. It is about compelling these concepts to convey different meanings to us. Adorno manages to make the fractured capitalist society appear within the framework of classical sociology (Weber and Durkheim). And through the interpretative construction, he is able to detect a critical potential in Weberian subjectivism and Durkheimian structuralism. The bourgeois concepts are not discarded; instead, an immanent critique is applied, revealing their critical potential and aiming to transcend capitalist society itself.

After affirming in *The Rules of Sociological Method* that it is imperative to examine social facts in their own right as external entities detached from individuals, Durkheim notes, ‘if this exteriority is only apparent, the illusion will dissipate as science advances and, so to speak, *the exterior will become interior*’ (1982, p. 70, emphasis mine). Interpreting this passage allows us to glimpse a Durkheim who seeks to break free from the constraints imposed by his own methodology. In the words of critical theory, Durkheim is alluding to the possibility that the social, in its reified form, is akin to a fetish. The phrase ‘if this exteriority is only apparent’ can be read without too many interpretative pirouettes as ‘if the fact that the social presents itself as second nature is only an appearance’ (this conditional sentence is an affirmation in Adorno). And then Durkheim goes on: ‘the illusion will dissipate as science will advance and the exterior will become interior’. This eloquent phrase, ‘the exterior will become interior’, essentially relates, as we have attempted to elucidate, to the potential for a genuinely humane society where individuals recognise themselves within their social relationships. Formulating this process in terms of the dissipation of an illusion fits with the Adornian *topos* of breaking the *spell*.

Primarily, Durkheim offers a methodological assessment that places trust in scientific progress. However, we can now discern that within it, the issue of social emancipation becomes objectified. Durkheim and Adorno would concur that it is not yet possible to be interpretative in sociology and that an inner knowledge of social phenomena is not yet possible. Yet, whereas Durkheim believes this potential hinges on scientific advancement, Adorno is convinced that it first and foremost relies on a transformation of society. Critical theory would not entertain the idea that the exterior becoming interior or the realisation of an emancipated society could be achieved through social science or thought, regardless of how critical or successful their interpretations might be. Instead, it demands a fundamental restructuring of the social framework itself by subjects who re-appropriate the world.

Conclusions

Adorno's dialectical reading, which aims to connect with classical terminology while incorporating it into constellations, takes the form in sociological texts of the 'constellation of positivism'. Weber's and Durkheim's frameworks are incorporated into the comprehensibility-incomprehensibility model. Adorno's critical interpretation makes their dispute a sign of a fractured society, both rational and irrational, system and rupture. In this regard, he puts forth a non-systematic social theory that embraces the element of non-identity. This non-identity is crucial as it enables us to maintain the perspective of an 'individuation that is not yet' in the social physiognomy (Adorno 2022c, p. 292).

Adorno's work allows us to continue exploring the realm of critical sociology, one that resides beyond the boundaries of both positivism and hermeneutics. It acknowledges the moment of truth and falsehood within praxis, within social action. To grasp Adorno's interpretation of Weber and Durkheim and to articulate the comprehensibility-incomprehensibility constellation effectively, it is imperative to comprehend what Adorno's sociology derives from Marx. Approaching society as an object is only critical if it ensures that the perspective of society as a subject is not forfeited. Without the viewpoint of society as a subject, we cannot develop a theory of the constitution of totality as a process of reification, nor can we envision social relations where we genuinely recognise ourselves –thus envisaging a truly humane society.

Stating that the subject matter of sociology is society is a proposition that many sociological currents might not readily embrace. The concept of society was already in crisis in the 1960s, at the time of the *Disputation of Positivism*, but the crisis has worsened today. In contemporary sociology and social sciences, it is increasingly common to encounter the argument that the individual serves as the starting point for comprehending modern societies. This shift is attributed to various factors, such as the growing singularity of socialisations, the phenomenon of deinstitutionalisation, or the preference for discarding surplus individuals rather than exploiting their labour force. Adorno provides valuable tools for addressing this issue, which calls for innovative approaches to understanding the complex relationship between society and individuals who are apprehensive about being marginalised within the machinery, all while maintaining a sociological perspective centred on a theory of late capitalist society.

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Notes

1 So-called micro and interactionist-oriented sociologies have always preferred notions such as interaction or situation as more explanatory than social structure; they have

also preferred to prioritise uncertainty over structural adjustment. Today, it is quite common in sociology, and in social sciences in general, to find the thesis that the individual, and not society, should be the analytical starting point for understanding contemporary societies (Martucelli and de Singly 2012, Martucelli and Santiago 2017, pp. 31–44). A change in the sociologist's gaze is advocated, however, induced by a diagnosis of social theory: 'various processes of social change brought about by advanced modernity, such as deinstitutionalisation, the decline of the "institutional programme", the multiplication of inequalities and of the spheres of socialisation or the increasing singularisation of individual trajectories, make this idea of society, as well as the model of the social figure, implausible –and above all not very useful analytically' (Martucelli and Santiago 2017, p. 32). This diagnosis has paved the way for interesting proposals such as the various sociologies of the individual, the sociology of experience, the sociology of social challenges, or even the sociology of the network actor. We do not intend to establish a discussion with these recent currents but simply to show the topicality of the discussions on whether we should continue to use the concept of society or not. In any case, affirming that society does not offer a unity of social life and that sociology must therefore start from the individual, attending to how he or she metabolises the social (Dubet, 2013, p. 189, cited in Martucelli and Santiago 2017, p. 34), does not imply renouncing Adorno's position that it is precisely a split society that makes identity between the system and individuals impossible, nor the associated idea that much of the uncertainty that determines different situations is structurally produced. But then, the demand to attend to the individual –also in Adorno, that of the ego is a privileged space for attending to the conflicts between the demands of adaptation and the potential for possible emancipation (Maiso 2022, p. 275)– is always accompanied by a certain diagnosis of social theory.

- To offer a model for what it means to unfold the problems and not solve them by mere terminological clarification, we can turn to the notion of the subject. In the first of the *Dialectical Epilegomena*, entitled *On Subject and Object*, Adorno points out that the concept of subject refers both to the moment of individuality, as presented in what Schelling called 'egoity', and to general determinations that refer to something more than the 'it-there' of a particular person, in various senses. Well, this ambiguity should not be resolved by betting on one of these senses, but both elements must be present, and it must be shown how they need each other (Adorno 2021b, pp. 741–742).
- This decisive element in Marx's critique of value completely escapes vulgar materialism, which makes statements such as: 'ideas are derived from the material, from the basis of society'. The question is more complex because 'where it is a question of the decisive, of the reproduction of life, i.e. of exchange, a conceptual moment is already contained' (Adorno 2011, p. 145).
- Gesellschaft jedoch ist beides, von innen zu erkennen und nicht zu erkennen. In ihr, dem menschlichen Produkt, vermögen stets noch die lebendigen Subjekte trotz allem und wie aus weiter Ferne sich wiederzufinden, anders als in Chemie und Physik. Tatsächlich ist Handeln innerhalb der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, als Rationalität, weitgehend objektiv ebenso „verstehbar“ wie motiviert. Daran hat die Generation von Max Weber und Dilthey zu Recht erinnert. Einseitig war das Verstehensideal, indem es ausschied, was an der Gesellschaft der Identifikation durch den Verstehenden konträr ist. Darauf bezog sich Durkheims Regel, man solle die sozialen Tatsachen wie Dinge behandeln, prinzipiell darauf verzichten, sie zu verstehen. Er hat es sich nicht ausreden lassen, daß Gesellschaft auf jeden Einzelnen primär als Nichtidentisches, als „Zwang“ stößt. Insofern hebt die Reflexion auf Gesellschaft dort an, wo Verstehbarkeit endet. Bei Durkheim registriert die naturwissenschaftliche Methode, die er verfiel, die Hegelsche „zweite Natur“, zu der Gesellschaft den Lebendigen gegenüber gerann. Die Antithese zu Weber indessen bleibt so partikular wie dessen Theses, weil sie bei der Nichtverstehbarkeit sich beruhigt wie jener beim Postulat der Verstehbarkeit. Statt dessen wäre die Nichtverstehbarkeit zu verstehen, die Menschen gegenüber zur Undurchsichtigkeit verselbständigten Verhältnisse aus Verhältnissen zwischen Menschen abzuleiten. Heute vollends hätte Soziologie das Unverstehbare zu verstehen, den Einmarsch der Menschheit in die Unmenschlichkeit (2022c, pp. 11–12).

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