INTRODUCTION

The Social Construction of Reductionist Thought and Practice

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The argument I present here is that the 'retreat' in the social sciences from concepts of the social and society (and their reformulation in other terms) is intimately connected to an intensification of reductionist thought and practice. But this, as I will explain, is not merely a feature of the social sciences (where reductionist argument appears to play an increasing role). It could almost be described as a movement (a social movement?) extending well beyond the human and social sciences where the public at large, as it were, is not only being more exposed to non-social even anti-social arguments of a reductionist kind, but appears to be actively accepting and desirous of them. The idea of the social as integral to understanding is being bypassed or, if it is maintained as a key point of reference, emptied of much of the import it once had. The social has become a vacated category. Thus, there is often a shift away from a concern with social relational and interactive structures, as well as institutional and organizational formations. The complexities of their internal dynamics, their structuring processes, and the forces of their effects on human action within and beyond them have increasingly been neglected in the social sciences.

Anthropology provides a specific instance. Here the recent politics of the discipline has been expressly anti-structural, asserting processes of agency and individual subjectivity, some even arguing for a revaluing of a once disparaged methodological individualism (see Rapport 1997). Such a development has forced oppositions (structure versus agency, determinism versus freedom, objectivism versus subjectivism, for example) that are radically distorting and are otherwise negative in consequence. They continue the dichotomies of a modernism to which so many contemporary anthropologists are strongly averse, although they often tend to suppress the modernist dialectic (confirming it in its very suppression), for instance, denying structure while overdetermining the subject. So ethnography has frequently been reduced to individualistic narrative and strategizing, a discourse of subjective intention in which structuring processes are

increasingly less explored: either that non-reducible relational betweenness that can become vital in the commitment of interacting partners or those formational structural dynamics of phenomena described as institutions and organizations. These have history and memory integral to their formational dynamic no less than may be claimed for individual human beings (e.g., Douglas 1986). Individualistic diversity has displaced a concern with social complexities and the differentiated and differentiating structuring processes that are integral to the conceptions of the social and of society. For many, a focus on the individual is to address the complexity of human action that, it is claimed, a concentration on the social obscures.

The powerful individualist and subjectivist turn in anthropology—a turn that cannot be easily separated from larger political processes of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism—is one factor resulting in notions of the social and of society as becoming little else than empty shells of small or no analytical value. Furthermore, the idea of the social, many suggest, is not appropriate to contemporary circumstances of globalization, for which ideas such as networks seem more appropriate with their stress on radiating linkages between nodal points (together with their individualist implications).¹

The vacating of the social has opened the way for a triumphal return of categories of analysis that are highly prone to the risks of reduction, which ironically may involve an essentialism or foundationalism (or even a misplaced concreteness) that students of human action might otherwise seek to avoid. Abstractions such as capitalism, consumerism, and the market are thrown around with abandon and often given an unexamined descriptive and explanatory potency. A dangerous economism, together with its overrationalized approach to reality (frequently masquerading as itself the irreducible reality) and a claim that it virtually constitutes primordial ground, is in full force and asserted to be at the heart of the production of the social. The possibility that economic or consumerist processes—indeed, capitalism—are themselves embedded within the dynamics of historically produced social processes is commonly too easily glossed. Other abstractions, often highly philosophized and removed from embeddedness in socio-historical processes to be given a socially determinant role—power, the body, gender, identity, the psyche, violence, etc.—are rife, and in their socially isolated analysis are increasingly pushing aside the concrete exploration of the social. Indeed, a form of totalizing universalism and a new dominance of metropolitan thinking are creeping in, often amidst claims of doing precisely the reverse.

I must remark immediately that reductionism is not necessarily to be disparaged and, in a general sense, is impossible to avoid if the project of a social science is to be conceived as explanatory and not merely descriptive. Most explanation and theorizing—scientific or otherwise—is reductionist in a broad sense. That is, it tends to engage Occam's Razor, seeking for the most parsimonious or sharpest explanation of the complex phenomena addressed. However, there are risks in such an orientation that can lead to a kind of reduction that defeats its own purpose.

The type of reductionism upon which I concentrate is that which confuses an explanation of a part for the whole, in which the status of the part, in relation to the whole, is assumed rather than defined. Moreover, I am concerned with those kinds of reductionist argument or synecdoche that assert an identity of the part with the whole: for example, that form of argument that assumes that an understanding of human genetics or individual psycho-sexual motivations is not merely necessary for a grasp of the formation of human complexities, but encompasses such complexity or is already the complexity it purports to explain. Such reductionism is frequently imperialist in conception. That is, it is often not merely unaware of the potential limits to its explanatory potential, but is intrinsically antagonistic to any sense of limitation. Moreover, the logical dynamic of such reductionism is to place itself beyond or outside all refutation. It is radically egotistical as it is imperial. Such *imperialist reductionism* routinely falls foul of its own teleological magic. Thus, as is common in much sociology and social psychology the kind of argument that reconceives processes that are irreducibly intersubjective (e.g., the self) as in fact reducible entirely to independent intra-individual dynamics (missing the possibility that this is already a product of the social being of individuals—what G. H. Mead once described as an internal conversation of gestures). Such misplaced reduction is usually compounded by a radical ahistoricity that refuses the possibility of its own relativity. One paradox of this is that such reduction fails to recognize the forces that motivate its own possibility: that is, and in the case of radically anti-societal explanations, that particular reductions are themselves the creations of particular socio-historical processes. In other words, the very tension toward certain kinds of reductionist thinking, the status and respect accorded to them, has more to do with the social and political contexts of their production than any intrinsic value that might attach to their particular kind of explanation. The contemporary acceptance of social biological or neo Darwinist explanations, whether they be of aggression, warfare, or mating practices and love among human beings, has much to say about the political climate of contemporary realities or, dare it be said, patterns of social formation in which such explanations are given credence. Their presumed scientific value is already a socio-political value upon which much of their acceptance (truth?) may be founded.

Of course, that an explanation or theory is produced within the circumstances of a specific socio-historical context does not negate its scientific plausibility. The context of thought is vital to its imaginary and the scientific potency of this thought is by no means limited to or, indeed, reducible to its context. This is especially so where the thought is itself transcendent of human practice and ultimately not directed to the comprehension of human action. But the situation is far more problematic (which is not to say that it is excluded from the former) when theories directed to explaining or understanding human practice attempt to ignore, by the artifice of reduction, the complexity within which their imaginative possibility was emergent. The reduction (or bracketing as phenomenologists would argue) must be achieved rigorously and systematically and not by fiat, so as to recognize as fully as possible the

genesis and status of the reduction being made. Its scientific viability is dependent on such an exercise.

What may be discerned as the retreat of the social, even to a degree an abandonment of the idea of society as a vital concept, and an encouragement of reductionist argument of a non-rigorous kind, is a social phenomenon. It is part of changes in theoretical fashion that are affected by larger socio-historical processes. In certain ways too, and from a perspective within the social sciences, the retreat is directly related to the kind of vision of the social that once held sway which, if not reductionist in the sense I am chiefly addressing, shared some of the closure that is the characteristic of much reductionism.²

The idea of the social and of society as primary concepts for the understanding of human action, especially for anthropologists and sociologists, drew its impetus in the circumstances of the formation of the modernist secular state in Europe and North America. A political interest in the control, reshaping, and remoralization of the orders composed through the formation of the modern nation-state created the context for a discipline of the social. The work of Comte and of Durkheim and the *L'Année* school are outstanding examples of the development of a science of society stimulated in such a context and conforming to the structuring of 'disciplines' within a modernist university framework or organization of knowledge.

Here the idea of the social was explicitly set against visions of individualism and subjectivism, bolstered by a context of French revolutionary and socialist thought. Thus, Comte (who despite his later religious mysticism was influenced by Saint Simon) recommended a positivism that was aimed at recivilizing human beings out of a 'natural selfishness.' Durkheim took a somewhat different course, in effect, establishing a ground for a science of the social that had long-consequence, in which 'natural' human being is already a social being—the social is prior. This idea was, perhaps, most brilliantly argued in *Suicide* where Durkheim attempted to show that the most individual and reducible of all human acts, suicide, was in fact grounded in the social. His treatment of suicide was effectively directed against that vision of human beings that saw them as being based in self-interest. Killing oneself is in defiance of such a conception and indicated the force of the social over and against the individual motivation to self-preservation (self interest). In Durkheim's analysis even individual action that did appear to be self-interested was socially conditioned. The individual is a socially produced fact and cannot be otherwise. The argument was powerfully anti-reductionist and explicitly opposed to individualist orientations at the time. Durkheim was impatient with what he saw as the obscurantist philosophical subjectivism of Henri Bergson and its anti-empirical bent. Bergson, as with Durkheim, continues to be influential in debates in which reductionism is at issue. Interestingly, Bergson is highly influential on poststructuralist philosophy, notably Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, which bears a relation to current developments (which occur in a similar moment of socio-political change) that can be associated with the rise of reductionist thinking (see also Iteanu this volume).³

But a larger observation that might be made is that a dialectic of reductionism/anti-reductionism (in its individualist versus social as prior or transcendent aspects) is at the center of modernist visions generally. It is at the heart of social science debates from the very beginning of their formation as university disciplines. Importantly, the swaying of these debates has much to do with shifts and variations in socio-political orders and their legitimating ideologies. Thus, liberal philosophers of the British state at the time of Comte and Durkheim were quick to attack the anti-individualist society orientation.⁴ This is a tension that has continued up to the present day and manifested in much of the contemporary criticism of anthropologists in the French tradition such as Lévi-Strauss and Louis Dumont, especially by those in the line of British liberalism (see Bastin this volume).

Ideologies of the Left and Right maintained a powerful tension between society and systemic approaches, on the one hand, and individualist perspectives on the other. However, the opposition between the perspectives cannot be reduced to political orientations too easily. Furthermore, what I generally refer to as reductionism is applicable across the political divide. While there is a tendency in an individualist (instrumentalist) stress toward reductionism this is by no means exclusively so, as is indicated in many so-called poststructuralist positions. Those with a powerful societal emphasis often evince reductionist potential as in the economism of some Marxist orientations or the historicism and materialism across a diversity of perspectives in anthropology. The determinism of these approaches often bears a manic and obsessive affinity with a variety of positions strongly vulnerable to reductionism, such as some orientations within psychoanalysis and psychiatry or those of a sharp methodological individualist persuasion.

Nonetheless, recent changes in state ideologies and practices—broadly glossed as neoliberalism—appear to have opened the way for an intensification of reductionist positions in the social sciences, anthropology and sociology especially. The retreat (not to say dying) of socialism, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has removed some of the ideological supports that influenced the maintenance of strong societal and anti-reductionist positions. Here the institutional effects of such changes regarding the universities are of great significance. I refer specifically to the managerial shifts in university organization away from disciplines to schools (often a form of downsizing oriented to market demands). This has resulted in greater inter-disciplinary cross-fertilization which while frequently beneficial has also obscured and weakened important theoretical standpoints that were a positive product of the effort to develop a specific disciplinary approach, as in a stress on culture (value, ideology) and the social (structuring processes, practice, social dynamics) in anthropology.

The relatively new field of cultural studies is a case in point. This is a field that is more the result of the politics of university reorganization and administrative decision than the result of the birth of an idea that then became formalized as a knowledge/discipline in universities as was the case with anthropology and

sociology. There have been attempts to discover an intellectual lineage for cultural studies. The Birmingham School founded by Stuart Hall is sometimes referred to as a founding instance, but its recent disbanding by administrative fiat provides ironic support for my argument. Cultural studies is a refuge for a diversity of subjects in the social sciences and humanities that have thereby been weakened in their commitments to several different frameworks of knowledge practice and, although sometimes fruitful, have misrecognized the contributions of their peers working from other traditions, overlooking and sometimes feebly reinventing the lessons of other work. The idea of culture in many of the humanistic disciplines is vastly different from the concept as it has been forged in debate by numerous anthropologists (see Kapferer 2000 for one recent discussion; Sahlin 2004). The same is true with the concept of society and the social. In the case of anthropology, while its relativism has been hotly debated, it was such relativism, and a powerful attachment to notions of the possibility of radical difference, that was used to question the inherent universalism (reductionism? and racism?) of assumptions derived in a European and North American history, that made anthropological concepts of culture and society powerful tools for analysis. They were not mere descriptors or homogeneous and totalizing categories as they have too commonly been trivialized: understandings that reduced notions of society and culture once again to Western commonsense, a commonsense that was indeed part of colonialist hegemonies from whose grip many anthropologists (perhaps unsuccessfully) struggled to wrest them free. The administrative amalgamation of disciplines of which the phenomenon of cultural studies is one example has contributed to the emptying out of categories for analysis which were avowedly anti-reductionist and occasionally their replacement by concepts that in their very abstract quality (power, the body, the visual, the sensory, etc.) are vulnerable to dangers of reduction and the refusal of complexity, even as they may be mounted against such possibility and to overcome analytical neglect.

The amalgamations that are occurring in the social sciences and humanities might also be seen as a form of political attack upon them and an opening up of their terrain, especially in the social sciences, to interest from areas of knowledge in the sciences that regard necessarily reductionist arguments far less problematically than those in the social sciences (although notions of complexity and emergent properties in the sciences indicate a growing difficulty with reductionism). The social sciences have always looked to the physical and biological sciences. While their positivist influence was once hotly debated and provided some ground for an unhealthy division between the sciences and humanities, there has been in recent years a greater and productive openness to the imaginative and speculative contribution of the sciences (but often because of the success of these speculations to capture the popular imagination). The benefits have been clear even if some of the cross-fertilization has provoked angry responses (e.g., Sokal 1999).

But I note that the involvement of the sciences is not a matter of the free choice of the social scientists or simply an outgrowth of internal intellectual

developments. The conjunctions are sometimes a question of intellectual survival (the only way research can be funded). The innovative projects that involve cross participation (e.g., as described by Dosse 1999, for France) are part of government policies and are vulnerable to closure. More to the point, the power in the participation is in the sciences that exert some pressure on forms of explanation that deny the worth of arguments that have hitherto concentrated on the social (an example is recent attempts in anthropology to arrive at so-called cognitivist universalist explanations of religion, which appear to this anthropologist as both hopeless and spuriously scientific) (Whitehouse 2004).

The movement away from the concepts of the social and society (their reformation as vacated categories) is a function of processes in the wider social field. It is related to the reformation of the terrain of government which in many ways has encouraged subjectification in the form of an instrumentalizing of “the self-governing properties of the subjects of government themselves in a whole variety of locales and localities—enterprises, associations, neighborhoods, interest groups and, of course, communities” (Rose 1996: 352; also Rose 1991). The decentralization of state bureaucracies, which was once the context for the invention of the social and of society, is now a dynamic that is integral to what Rose refers to ambiguously as “The Death of the Social?” The concomitant growth of an audit culture (see Strathern 2000) is not merely a state practice of surveillance but a phenomenon allied to the technologization of the social, the production of an environment that is largely antagonistic to social explanations of a non-reductive nature.

All this is not to say that the social sciences have not been complicit in the retreat of the social and the creation of fertile ground for the relative triumph of a diversity of reductionist thinking. The concept of society has been attacked by anthropologists and sociologists as unwarrantedly totalizing and homogenizing. Durkheim is sometimes the target. But even in his hands the idea of the social was in effect a concept that indicated forms and variations in complexity. Eric Wolf has written sharply on the history of commonsense and homogenizing uses of the social, but warns against the abandonment of the concept as it began to be worked out by the increasingly overabused modernists such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (and not to discount the significance of often misunderstood figures such as Westermarck and especially Tonnies). Wolf is worth citing on the matter: “Within our discipline, and also outside it, dissatisfaction with the concept (of Society) has led many to shift their emphasis from Society as a total system to the Individual, the individual maximizing, strategizing, plotting, or creating, inventing, altering the inherited circumstances of life. Yet the abstract individual is merely another monad, a timeless reified essence like the conceptual entity it is supposed to criticize and oppose” (2001: 333).⁵

The kind of argument that Wolf develops is more strongly pursued in post-structuralist arguments that frequently manifest the kind of slippage of which Wolf complains. Possibly the most outrageous contemporary exemplar is Rapport who in his recent book (2003), *I Am Dynamite*, unwarrantedly, in my

view, co-opts Nietzsche into his rampantly individualistic and reductionist view (see also Just this volume for a critique). Rapport is antagonistic to all forms of structural or cultural analysis asserting, among other things the perfect genius of individual creativity, ignoring that such creativity usually achieves its impetus within structural formations and often realizes its force in restriction and not in perfect freedom (see Elias 1994 on Mozart).⁶

Poststructuralists (and North American postmodernists) have been most critical of the concepts of society and of culture as totalizations. This, as I have intimated, is not necessarily independent of neoliberal formations even being internal to their ideological project. The discussion of the porosity of boundaries (and a positive desire to transgress them) in some postmodernist quarters refracts features of contemporary imperializing moves, which does not necessarily discount a larger intellectual value. However, it is worth noting that some of the major directions in post-structuralist thought are not, of course, antagonistic to structure or to concepts of the social. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988) are cases in point who, for example, draw extensively on anthropological ethnographic analyses of political processes (developed through a concrete exploration of social practices and their cultural conceptualizations) which many of their anthropological followers often appear to distance themselves from. They seem to be attracted by a certain style of incoherency rather than the actual depth of content and thought that these authors evince. Also Deleuze is frequently anti-reductionist when some of those who seem to be in broad accord with his position ignore the implications of his attacks, for instance, on certain kinds of phenomenology and psychoanalysis—perspectives which in these times of the reign of the subject are manifesting a marked return to favor. Deleuze's discussions of singularities is epistemologically opposed to the, indeed, reductionist (and deterministic) possibility of some phenomenological (and psychoanalytic) orientations. These reduce multiplicity to the One or the Ego and, as in some post Hegelian writing, are still committed to that dialectic that seeks to overcome contradictions in some kind of real or imagined resolvable higher unity. Deleuze conceives of a diversity of structural dynamics that derive their energy from the impossibility of their resolution despite their linkage in social and political processes, as in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the combination of hierarchical and rhizomic processes. Such a poststructuralist position suggests a carrying forward of the notion of complexity that was vital already in the works of Durkheim and many others through the engagement of notions of the social and the cultural. This is not to say that there should be a return to the likes of Durkheim, but it is to suggest that the abandonment of concepts such as the social and the cultural (which in their usage have often been far from the totalizing and homogenizing ideas as frequently presented) risks the creation of a void in which many social sciences may come to destroy the very ground for their contribution and their reason for being.

The Essays

The essays presented here (all by anthropologists) take a variety of positions on the matter of the retreat of the social. Friedman and Baca explore the contexts of social reformation that are disguised in an apparent retreat of the social and which might yield an ineffective understanding. Friedman examines some of the major contours of political reformation and the relevance of too-easily discarded social analytical categories. Baca critically explores some of the characterizations of modernity and the reductionism underpinning prominent scholars of globalizing trends. Taylor, Just, Ernst, and Siikala examine different forms of reductionism in current anthropological and other understandings of human action. Taylor finds reductionism in the abstract notions of power employed by many of those, for example, uncritically committed to Foucault and whose understandings are not necessarily easily applied outside northern European contexts. Just and Ernst in different ways take sharp exception to those who would too easily abandon certain key features of the anthropological project. Just attacks the trivializations of certain recent anthropological approaches to the individual and the subject while Ernst is concerned to remind us firmly of the innovative significance of the ideas of the social and the cultural in anthropological understanding. Siikala demonstrates the importance of in-depth ethnographic work and the dangers of a movement away from it in the context of the radical changes in the university system. Bastin and Iteanu address particularly poststructuralist trends. The former comments critically upon their influence in the field of South Asian studies, a major region for the anthropological and Orientalist construction of the Other. Iteanu addresses one of the most important deconstructionist and poststructuralist scholars, Jacques Derrida, demonstrating the virtual impossibility of doing without a notion of the relational and of structure. Hart brings us back to the themes that opened this collection, concentrating on the revaluation intrinsic in contemporary forms of technical scientific measurement of social processes and how they reflect socio-political transformations. All of the essays demonstrate how an anthropology wishing to avoid some of the abstractions and reductionisms of the past nonetheless should find it impossible to do without a strong concept of the social if anthropology and other social sciences are to fulfill the task of a critical understanding of the diverse realities in which we all must live.

Notes

1. Network analysis, as developed in anthropology in the 1960s, was concerned with a reconfiguration of ideas of the social that escaped the bounded limitations of then current notions of the social. It was another forming of the social, which attended to complexities that other notions of the concept tended to neglect. Furthermore, it was a

technique to identify the structuring dynamic of the social that otherwise might escape the anthropological gaze.

2. Max Gluckman (1964) argued for the development of a strong anthropology conscious of its own limitations in the context of the disciplinary structure of the universities in England at that time. He was not proposing—contra the mainly intentional misunderstanding of his critics at the time—that anthropologists should ignore the findings of other disciplines. Rather, he was insisting that anthropologists should develop their own critical understanding of other's work from the context of their own powerfully grounded ethnographic experience. He did not want the development of an anthropology that was reductive of its own worth. The closure he argued for was of the kind that enabled interaction of reciprocal value with other disciplines, in fact recognizing the risk of not engaging in a discourse with other scholars who had different sources of knowledge and expertise. As Siikala (this volume) states, the ethnographic tradition of anthropology which is currently under threat is the very lifeblood of the particular contribution that anthropology can make. This tradition is not the mere collection of topical facts—a danger of much anthropology today—but an engagement with ethnography in such a way that it gives up what may be embedded in it. Gluckman in fact argued for a radically deconstructive interrogative ethnography.
3. Bergson, I note, was writing at the turn of the last century and at a time of enormous political and technological changes. He was an intellectual hero of a North America already postmodernist in ideological orientation. His career bears comparison with contemporary poststructuralists in a similar period of massive political and technological change.
4. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen asserted in response to Comte's positivism that "to me this is like saying, the great object of mechanics is to alter the laws of gravitation" (1991: 126). John Stuart Mill, the great philosopher of British liberalism, argued in *On Liberty* against any state plan to improve the social condition—an object of both the work of Comte and Durkheim. He wrote: "M. Comte, in particular, whose social system, as unfolded in his *Système de Politique Positive*, aims at establishing (though by moral more than by legal appliances) a despotism of society over the individual, surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among ancient philosophers" (1989: 17).
5. Wolf argues against the totalizing concept of society concluding, after a discussion of the roots of the concept in a history of Western commonsense, that anthropologists should not cleave to "the inherited abstractions of our political-economic legacy. Rather, we need to invent new ways of thinking about the heterogeneity and transformative nature of human arrangements, and to do so scientifically and humanistically at the same time. The attempt to understand what humans do and conceive economically, politically, socially, morally, cognitively, and emotionally all at once has always been a hallmark of anthropology, and that goal remains a usable and productive program" (1999: 333–334). Quite so. The point is that anthropology has made much of a holistic approach that had, even in, I contend, the bad old days of functionalism, recognized the social and the cultural as complex and highly differentiated. The vision of anthropological idea and practice of social analysis as involving notions that are totalizing and homogeneous is to ignore the history of the subject over the last fifty years and more. It has the character of a modern or postmodern urban myth that might have been constructed by those anthropologists of 'communities' largely centered in North America and European locations who sometimes appear to be caught in an imaginary of their own invention.
6. In this context, I recall an interview by the BBC of the Chinese film director Chen Kaige, then still in China, regarding his politically critical film *Farewell My Concubine*. When asked about how he could make such a fine film in the repressive context of Communist China, Chen Kaige replied to the effect that repression and restriction provide the creative ground for human creativity and ingenuity.

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