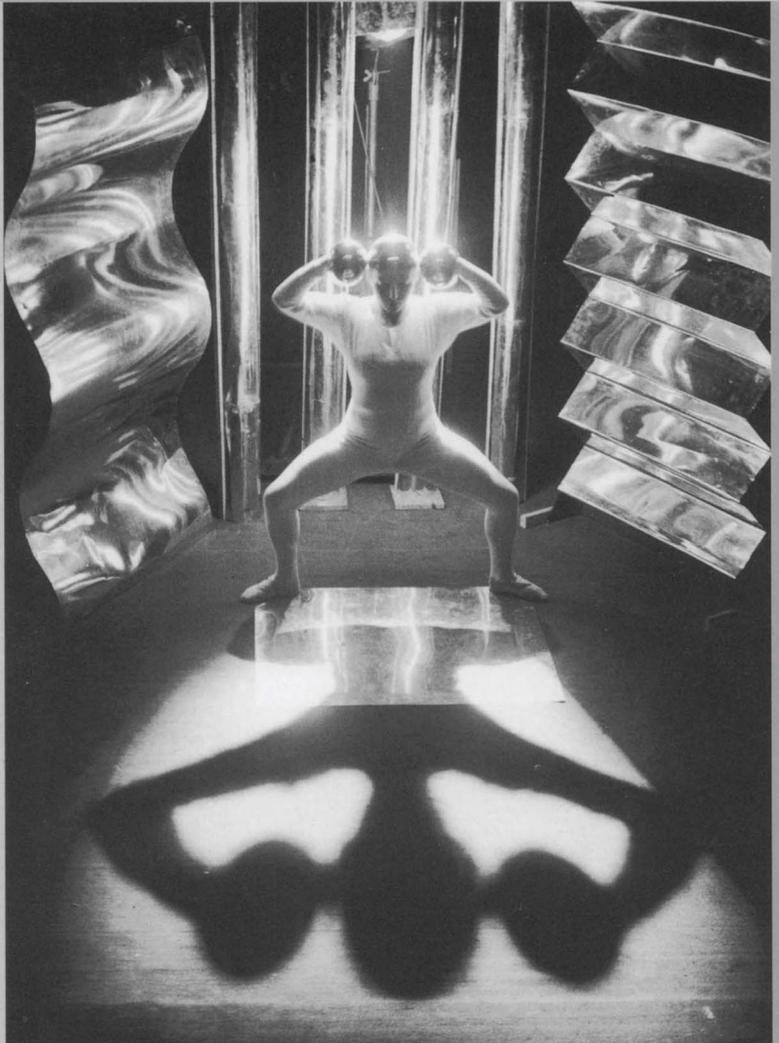


A History and Theory of the Social Sciences



Peter Wagner

A HISTORY AND THEORY
OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Not All that Is Solid
Melts into Air

Peter Wagner



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Chapter 10: ‘Crises of modernity: Political sociology in historical contexts’, *Social theory and sociology. The classics and beyond*, edited by Stephen P. Turner. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1996, 97–115.

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORICISING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In many respects, the twentieth century appears now, after its end, as the century of the social sciences. It was in intellectual debates, often accompanied by institutional struggles, at the end of the nineteenth century that the social sciences emerged from under the tutelage of philosophy and of history. They gained an independent status and some recognition for their own claim to provide valid knowledge about, and useful orientation in, the contemporary world. From those debates and struggles were then created what is now known as, among other approaches, 'classical sociology', 'neoclassical economics', an anthropology based on participant observation and experimental psychology as well as psychoanalysis, i.e. the whole range of approaches and disciplines in the forms in which we still recognise them today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One could be tempted to describe the twentieth century as the history of the emergence and breakthrough of social science.

Two notes of caution are apposite, however. While it is true, on the one hand, that the late nineteenth century can be regarded as the formative period of the institutionalised social sciences, their basic modes of conceptualisation as well as the fundamental problématiques they are addressing stem from much longer-lasting discussions. In such a perspective, it is rather the end of the eighteenth century that stands out as the crucial period in the development of the social sciences. And the 'classical' period at the turn of the nineteenth century is then seen as a period of transformation rather than of foundation. Once the notion of transformation is introduced, however, new questions arise. Can this transformation, which led to the disciplines of the social sciences by and large as we now know them, unequivocally be considered as a process of maturation? Or are further transformations in new historical contexts conceivable? This leads to the second observation.

On the other hand, namely, doubts have arisen during the closing decades of the twentieth century as to whether the social sciences' way of observing, interpreting and explaining the world really brought superior insights into the social life of the human beings. The spectre of 'the end of the social', as such necessarily accompanied by the end of the social sciences, has been raised from quite different perspectives. Some observers were inclined to entirely abandon any attempt to render the social world intelligible in the face of its complexity and lack of evident reason or order. Others, in contrast, see this alleged end of the social as the finally generalised acceptance of the insight into the centrality of individuals and their rationality, so that an understanding of the human world could be based on a rather asocial, individualist theorising. And, finally, philosophers and historians, for a

long time on the defensive, have also renewed their time-honoured claim to a privileged understanding of the human condition.

This book adopts neither the view of the inevitable rise of the social sciences after the once accomplished breakthrough nor the alternative narrative of their rise and fall during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Neither the epistemological optimism in some periods nor the pessimism in others has necessarily been well founded. But the observation of recurring, or maybe even persistent, challenges to the social sciences, which entail calls for a reconsideration of their form and character, asks for a very reflection about the relation between the history of the forms of social knowledge production and the modes of theory building and concept formation themselves. To provide such a reflection is the objective of this book.

Most generally put, the social sciences are an intellectual response to the post-revolutionary aporias of political philosophy after the American and French Revolutions. The development of the basic conceptual approaches of social theory as well as the emergence of an empirical research strategy in the social sciences – as contrasted to the tradition of normative political philosophy – are means to provide arguments for the form and substance of socio-political orders after the revolutions had initially appeared as melting all that was solid into air. Thus, the history of the social sciences is a history of dealing with a number of key problématiques stemming largely from the onset of political modernity. These problématiques have certainly not been solved, but they have also not been abandoned either. They have, however, undergone historical transformations, of which a history of the social sciences gives testimony. A review of this history, as (selectively) proposed in the first part of the book, is at the same time an exploration of the registers of social and political thinking that are available to us when aiming to understand our current condition. The findings in the course of this exploration will be put to use in the second part of the book.

Part I, thus, portrays the development of the social sciences at key junctures in the history of Western societies and sets their intellectual development in relation to the politico-institutional development of these societies. Two chapters (1 and 2) focus on the turn of the nineteenth century, often seen as a formative period for the ‘modern’ social sciences as disciplines. They aim at understanding ‘classical sociology’ and the political discourses during the ‘crisis of classical liberalism’ as ways of dealing with a first major restructuring of those post-revolutionary societies, a transformation which I have elsewhere proposed to label ‘the first crisis of modernity’ (Wagner 1994). The next two chapters (3 and 4) discuss the social sciences as participants in the subsequent ‘organisation of modernity’; first, in their relation to ideas of societal planning, and second, as contributors to the ‘rationalistic revolution’ of the ‘golden age of capitalism’ during the 1950s and 1960s. This part concludes with a discussion of the impact of the postmodernity debate on the social sciences (Chapter 5). It sees this debate as symptomatic of a ‘second crisis of modernity’. This view allows me then to compare these debates with those arising during the first crisis of modernity to arrive at a more systematic assessment of such periods of intellectual questioning and restructuring.

This part certainly provides a kind of history and sociology of the social sciences. However, it sees itself not just as a contribution to disciplinary and/or

intellectual historiography, but rather as an account in terms of a political sociology which sets institutional-intellectual developments in the contexts of political problématiques. On the basis of this account, conclusions can then be drawn as to the directions which current conceptual debates in social theory should possibly take. This is the objective of Part II.

Overall, the current situation of intellectual questioning (that often goes under the name of postmodernity, or at least used to do so until recently) is here taken to point to a considerable need for conceptual rethinking. However, neither the 'post-modern' conclusion that the intelligibility of the social world is entirely in question nor the opposite view that theorising needs to restart from rationalist-individualist foundations, since there allegedly are no social phenomena, is accepted. The chapters instead take up the reasonings behind key concepts in the social sciences and ask in which way those reasonings have to be seen as historically contextual and possibly superseded and in what respect the concepts still point to important problématiques that social theorising will need to address. In each case, elements for a new understanding of such concepts are provided.

The second part starts out with a discussion of some of the broadest concepts – choice, decision, action and institution. First, the limits of rationalist individualism are discussed in the light of the current trend towards the cross-disciplinary diffusion of rational choice theory. At the same time, the genesis and adoption of such thinking are set into the context of historical situations (Chapter 6). The following chapter (7) turns the question around and asks how the concepts of action and institution can be reconceptualised so as to allow for understanding the situatedness of action under conditions of relative uncertainty and possible dispute. The basis for this conceptual analysis is recent work in the so-called 'new French social sciences' (Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and others), which stays clear of ontological or methodological individualism without falling into collectivism. The subsequent chapters then deal with those collective concepts that are today often considered as untenable – on either postmodernist or individualist grounds – and discusses the persistence of the problématiques that stand behind these concepts: culture (Chapter 8), society (9) and polity (10). On that basis, the book concludes with observations on the one concept that is currently used to move the social sciences back to a conceptually informed diagnosis of the present: modernity (Chapter 11).

The attempt undertaken here to link history to theory may appear very unusual at first sight. In less explicit form, however, it has been, and continues to be, pursued in a variety of ways. There have been two principal ways of proceeding, both of which need to be avoided, in my view. On the one hand, most of the numerous disciplinary histories of the various social sciences adopt a perspective, in more or less concealed guise, in which all prior debates and disputes gradually and possibly unevenly, but equally unfailingly, lead to the state of conceptual and empirical accomplishment that has been reached in the present. The authors of such accounts are often active practitioners of the social sciences rather than historians of ideas or sociologists of knowledge and the sciences. As such, they find it – understandably – difficult to imagine a higher state of knowledge being attained at times other than their own, be it in the past or in the future.

On the other hand, approaches that we may call, for want of a better term, critical histories of the social sciences insist on the rootedness of intellectual work in the context of its time. Inaugurated, arguably, with Marx and Engels' *German ideology*, such a perspective found a number of important incarnations during the second half of the twentieth century such as Georg Lukács' *Zerstörung der Vernunft* (1954), Göran Therborn's *Science, class and society* (1976), and Geoffrey Hawthorn's *Enlightenment and despair* (1976). Focusing on the rise of the social sciences from the end of the eighteenth century to their own time of writing, these authors rightly connect these developments with the rise of the bourgeoisie, and then mass society, and with the rise of capitalism. However, they have an inclination to work by means of denunciation, which, even though tragic elements are occasionally introduced, stays within the framework of a traditional critique of ideology (see critically Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; 1999). As a consequence, they cannot provide themselves with any means to distinguish between 'what is dead and what is alive' (Benedetto Croce) in the social sciences. Focusing on the contextual embeddedness of intellectual work, they always interpret such embeddedness as a constraint only, which they themselves can identify as well as overcome from a distant vantage-point. The relation between history and theory is conceptualised ultimately in an entirely linear and unequivocal way, in this sense not unlike the way this relation is seen in the histories of the progress of knowledge.

The most recent such critical history of the social sciences is, possibly, Peter Manicas' *A history and philosophy of the social sciences* (1987). As the title already suggests, however, Manicas intends to make the relation between history and philosophy itself problematic. His narrative does not unfold along a straight line, upwards or downwards, but he identifies in the works of authors all along the historical trajectory significant elements for a reshaping of the social science enterprise – which he sees as necessary, and that is why his history can be called a critical one. In this respect, the following book is close to Manicas' way of proceeding as well as to his concern. There are also important differences, though. Where Manicas concentrates on issues of ontology and epistemology, my predominant concern is with what is sometimes called concept formation. In other words, as our titles indicate, his work adopts the language of the philosophy of the social sciences, whereas mine reasons more in terms of social theory (on the problematic nature of these very distinctions see Wagner 2001). Furthermore, where Manicas remains close to the history of ideas, my ambition is to contextualise more thoroughly. This history of the social sciences relates the developments of ideas and concepts to the transformations of modernity (see Wagner 1994). Finally, where Manicas' work culminates in a discussion – and critique – of methodology in the social sciences, my key interest is in the problématiques that underlie and inform both conceptual and methodological choices.

The change in perspective compared with all the above-mentioned works, including even the one by Manicas, has been possible only against the background of the new, or renewed, concern for language in the human and social sciences, sometimes known as the linguistic turn.¹ The implications of such a linguistic turn for the analysis of the languages of the social and the political have been explored in as diverse projects and approaches as those of the 'history of the present',

associated with the name of Michel Foucault and subsequent related work; the 'history of concepts', developed by Bielefeld historians around Reinhart Koselleck and others; the study of 'ideas in context', as pursued by Cambridge historians around J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner; and the 'history of consciousness' of the group around Hayden White. In these works, however, except to some extent in those that followed Michel Foucault's perspective, the 'modern', discipline-based social sciences and their attempt to explain and understand the social world have rarely been at the centre of interest.² With precisely such an aim in view, this book provides, first, a critical history of the social sciences in Western Europe (and partly the US) from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries and, second, a rethinking of some key categories of the social sciences in the light of the historical analysis.

PART I

RECONSIDERING THE HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

1

AS A PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCE UNJUSTIFIABLE, AS AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE ANYTHING ELSE BUT NEW

Classical sociology and the first crisis of modernity

Sociologists usually have a clear conception of the history of their discipline. They may disagree on the merits of individual contributions to the development of the subject, but they tend to share the view that there was a first blossoming around the turn of the century, a period which they label the 'classical era'. The era is easily demarcated. While there was a wide diffusion of sociological activity, a limited number of towering figures emerged, often named the 'founding fathers' of the discipline, whose intellectual life-spans coincided neatly. Emile Durkheim got his first appointment, at the University of Bordeaux, in 1887; Max Weber, at the University of Freiburg, in 1895; and Vilfredo Pareto, at the University of Lausanne, in 1893. Durkheim died in 1917, Weber in 1920 and Pareto in 1923. By that time, they had all contributed to the construction of the intellectual field for which two of them had appropriated the name 'sociology'. The third one, Weber, was more reluctant but increasingly used this label after he had been involved in the founding of the German Society for Sociology in 1909. It should probably be no wonder, therefore, that sociologists look back on this period as constitutive for their field. And even to the analytical view of a historian, the era appears as the one of professionalisation of sociology, the setting of standards for sociological work and, consequently, the demarcation of boundaries to other academic fields and to 'lay' non-professional activities (Torstendahl 1993).

In a significant way, however, such views are rather misleading. While it is true that intellectuals strove to establish a science of society at academic institutions in this period, their project ultimately proved to be a failure. Sociology was not institutionalised at European universities in its 'classical' era. Furthermore, no common understanding on what such a science of society should be was achieved.

Standards of sociological work were developed and proposed but could not be enforced among those who considered themselves to be sociologists. During the inter-war period, the major intellectual projects of this 'classical' period were almost completely abandoned. 'Modern', post Second World War sociology is an intellectual enterprise essentially different from 'classical' sociology. To understand this rupture (which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere: cf. Wagner 1990), it is necessary to look beyond problems of institutional and scientific legitimacy to the different ways in which politics and society were, in part implicitly, conceptualised in these approaches.

'Classical' sociology was, other than a scientific one, also a political project. All variations notwithstanding, it can be called post-liberal thinking. It started from bourgeois liberal assumptions, recognised that societal developments had superseded classical liberalism, but insisted that revisions had to be made in the continuity of that political tradition (Seidman 1983). 'Modern' sociology, however, did away with the liberal tradition from the start and rephrased the relation between the individual and society in completely different terms. A comparison of the fate of both approaches during the first half of the twentieth century cannot be undertaken without looking at the development of political institutions. 'Modern' sociology proved to have greater cognitive affinity to the structures of the interventionist welfare state which emerged in this period; the political legitimacy of 'classical' sociology, in contrast, decayed rapidly.

In the following I shall, first, give an impression of the intensity of the sociological debate and of the social status which the sociological intellectuals enjoyed in wider society during the 'classical' period, and shall point to the decline of this mood in the first decades of the twentieth century. To make these developments understood I shall, second, try to define the project of that science of society in scientific, political and institutional terms. This analysis will allow me, third, to give an account of the failure of the project in exactly the same terms by relating it to the structure of academic institutions and of political institutions and to the transformation of both fields during that period. Finally, I shall give some indications of what happened 'instead' of a continuation of those sociological projects. Attempts to study society scientifically went into different directions during the inter-war years, one of which contained the nucleus of 'modern' sociology as it became dominant after the Second World War.

The rise and decline of early sociology

Between 1870 and the early 1900s, numerous attempts were made to lay the foundations of a science of society, mostly labelled sociology. Programmatic books were published, journals created and academic societies founded, and inside academic institutions moves were made to designate chairs in sociology and to introduce new types of examinations and degrees. A few examples will be given to indicate the breadth and intensity of this sociological movement in continental Europe.

In France, Durkheim's approach was only one among many. Before him Frédéric Le Play had already advanced his action-oriented *science sociale* and had

found followers who continued his project. Gabriel Tarde and René Worms, both contemporaries of Durkheim, competed with the latter for the legitimate representation of the discipline to be built. The former advocated an individualist approach based on a law of imitation as the prime mover of society, the latter reasoned in organicist terms. In Italy, the emerging sociological field was even more multifarious and pluralistic. In an attempt at clarification, Icilio Vanni listed no fewer than ten different conceptions of sociology in 1888 (cf. Sola 1985: 136–7). Three years earlier, Vincenzo Miceli had already complained that the field was growing very quickly and had become fashionable to such an extent that whole crowds of *letterati* had entered it:

Persons who are said to be of common sense or even ignorant speak and write continuously about this science without having at all been engaged in studying it and without, therefore, possessing the preparation which is now necessary more than ever, given the numerous difficulties which the phenomena present. (Miceli 1885)

In Austria, Ludwig Gumplowicz published his programmatic work *Foundations of sociology* in 1885 and Gustav Ratzenhofer followed in 1898 with his treatise on *Sociological knowledge*. In all these countries, the label ‘sociology’ was used without hesitation and very often with a conscious link to the positivist tradition.

In Germany, in contrast, for the very same reason, that label was untouchable for scholars who had grown up in the humanistic-philosophical tradition of the German university. The relative absence of the word, however, did not indicate the absence of attempts to establish new, or modify old, approaches to the study of society. Whereas Heinrich von Treitschke had rather defined the problem away in his *Gesellschaftswissenschaft* (science of society) of 1859, works by Robert von Mohl and Lorenz von Stein tried to incorporate a new understanding of society into the ‘state sciences’ during the same period (see in more detail ch. 9). In 1875, Albert Schäffle talked in organicist terms about the *Anatomy and life of the social body*, and in 1887 Ferdinand Tönnies published his influential book on *Community and society* which, however, was newly subtitled *Basic concepts of sociology* only in the second edition of 1912. By that time, the aversion against the word ‘sociology’ had diminished and Georg Simmel and Max Weber were ready to use it, though in a different mode than their counterparts in Western Europe.

These intellectual activities found their expression also in the creation of social science journals. In Italy, the *Rassegna di scienze sociali e politiche* existed between 1883 and 1890, and the *Rivista italiana di sociologia* was founded in 1892 and continued to appear until after the First World War. In France, Durkheim’s *Année sociologique* was probably the most successful, but by far not the only sociological journal. The ‘Le Playists’ had their own journals and Worms founded the *Revue internationale de sociologie* in 1893, to give only two examples. Worms also created the *Institut international de sociologie*; these were both initiatives to stimulate and enhance international sociological communication and simultaneously means to counteract the emerging dominance of the Durkheimian approach on the national scientific field by enlisting international scholars in his support.

Besides this international academic society, national societies were established. The followers of Le Play in France, for instance, even formed two organised groups, one of a more academic nature, the other more practically oriented. For the Durkheim group, the journal provided a strong organising focus. In the German-speaking areas, the Viennese Sociological Society was created in 1907 and the German Society for Sociology followed in 1909. In Germany, a social science association had already existed since 1872, the *Verein für Socialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy), which showed a broad historical orientation to social science and intended to put its work into the service of the newly founded German nation-state.

Scholarly journals, academic societies and intense publication activities on theoretical and programmatic matters – all the elements required for the building of a discipline seemed to exist in the early 1900s. Sociologists, however, hardly achieved recognition in academic institutions, which is an important precondition for a scientific field to be securely established. Many contributors to the sociological debates were academics who held chairs in disciplines such as philosophy, economics, law, history or medicine. While it is obvious that ‘founding fathers’ cannot start out from established chairs, it is important to recognise that, though many strove for it, hardly anyone of this generation of sociologists succeeded in obtaining a sociological label for their chairs. Durkheim was one of the few, and by the time of his death three more chairs at French universities carried the sociological denomination. In Germany and Austria, no chairs for sociology were created until 1919, the one at the University of Munich, which Weber had accepted shortly before his death, being among the first. For Italy, Robert Michels – who emigrated from Imperial Germany because he was not accepted in German universities at all – remarked in 1930 that sociology had ‘no academic citizenship, and its representatives are either outside the university itself or occupy chairs in economics or legal philosophy . . . So far as my knowledge extends, there is no course in sociology in Italy, with the possible exception of Padova’ (1930: 20–1).

By the early 1900s, thus, ‘sociology’ had experienced a boom of activities which had lasted for about three decades. It had flourished, supported by a ‘positive social culture’ (Barbano 1985: 68), by a wide interest in new, systematic and ‘positive’ approaches to understanding social development. Despite this supportive context, however, it had been unable to achieve full academic institutionalisation and, therefore, remained extremely vulnerable to changing circumstances. Around the turn of the century, political and intellectual tides were, in fact, changing. These changes spelled, as I will argue in some detail, the end of classical sociology because of its inability to allow for appropriate modifications of its discourse.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century were, very broadly speaking, a period of construction and consolidation in continental Western Europe. Precarious and unstable socio-political constellations were overcome and the new formulae, after some critical early periods, seemed to work: the lay and socially oriented Third Republic in France; the authoritarian bureaucratic state dominating the society of Imperial Germany; and the unified Italian nation-state based on the interdependence of urban and rural elite groups in the north and south. This was the constellation which bred the self-conscious and self-assuring sociological

movements: while these societies surely had problems, they also had the means to solve them by self-inspection through empirical analysis. Especially in Italy, but also in the other countries, one is tempted to speak of an unbound will for knowledge, to use Foucault's terminology.

By the end of the 1800s, uncertainties were returning and were there to stay through the first half of the twentieth century. The rising workers' movement was about to challenge elite consensus; industrialisation and urbanisation not only changed material living conditions rapidly, but also raised uncertainties about social status among many groups, including, not least, the bearers of the intellectual culture. Put in the terms of the historian Stuart Hughes (1958: 41), on all 'levels of intellectual activity, doubts arose as to the reigning philosophy of the upper middle class – the self-satisfied cult of material progress which, in a vulgarised sense, could also be termed "positivism"'. All its heterogeneity notwithstanding, the thought of the early sociological movements was part of this reigning philosophy and went into crisis with it. While the early will for knowledge was based on rather unproblematic, mostly implicit assumptions about the relation between social reality and the knowledge that could be generated by observing it, the new uncertainties were not least of an epistemological character. They raised the question of the very possibility of knowledge about society. The most important contributions to classical sociology reflect the culmination of these crises. Weber, Durkheim and some others doubted the easy claims made by their sociological predecessors. But in contrast to some of their 'culture-critical' and relativist contemporaries they sceptically insisted on, and searched for, the possibility of a science of society.

Over time, in such a changed intellectual climate, the sociological projects were massively transformed, however. In France, Durkheimism remained strong as the basis of a quasi-official republican ideology, but in this function its moral and philosophical aspects were emphasised at the expense of its sociological ambitions. From having been considered a positivist-minded social science, it was turned into appearing to be an idealist philosophy (Heilbron 1985). In Italy, sociological thinking did not survive the onslaught of idealism as epitomised in the cultural dominance of Benedetto Croce's thinking, which has even been labelled intellectual dictatorship (Bobbio 1969; Asor Rosa 1975). As early as 1906 Croce wrote, commenting on a proposal to establish chairs in sociology, that this thinking was a 'chaotic mixture of natural and moral sciences . . . another "new science" which as a philosophical science is unjustifiable, and as an empirical science anything else but new. It is new only as sociology, that is as a barbaric positivistic incursion into the domain of philosophy and history' (Croce 1942: 130). In Austria, sociology continued to flourish for a brief period in the political context of 'red Vienna' but hardly influenced academic debate at the universities and the intellectual debates at large. In Germany, seemingly deviant, sociology was institutionalised at the universities after 1919 with several dozen chairs being created by 1933. As will be shown later, though, this sociology had abandoned most of its earlier ambitions, as its proponents had settled for an institutional strategy which would minimise confrontation with other, well-established academic fields.

In sum, my look at these intellectual and institutional developments between 1870 and 1930 amounts to saying that there was a strong movement for founding and establishing a sociology as the science of society, that this movement culminated intellectually in the proposals known today as classical sociology, but that by the end of that period the sociological project had failed. To substantiate this view, it is required to characterise the main features of that project first.

The project of classical sociology: a science of society

Classical sociology was, first of all, a response to political economy and, then, to neoclassical economics. This feature has been aptly described by Göran Therborn (1976: 170–1):

In revolt against the deductive, individualist-utilitarian and laissez-faire character of orthodox (above all ‘vulgar’) liberal economics, new social theories developed in the last quarter of the 19th century which were inductive, social-ethical and interventionist . . . We can distinguish in this respect three critiques of political economy, each in a particular way significant for the development of the sociological project. One centred on liberal economic policies and gave rise . . . to a kind of investigatory practice which is often labelled sociological, but which has increasingly become part of normal administrative routine. The other two were instrumental in . . . constructing sociology as a distinct theoretical and empirical discipline. One of these started from a critical analysis of the epistemological basis of economics. The other was an across-the-board critique of the epistemology, the utilitarianism and policy recommendations of liberal economics. Max Weber may be taken to represent the second and Durkheim the third kind of critiques.

Disentangling this summarising view, one can argue that sociology met with economics in three respects, which can be analytically separated: scientific, political and institutional. In *scientific* terms, it was a response to the individualist methodology of economics and, in part, to its epistemological assumptions. In *political* terms, it reacted against the liberal, non-interventionist implications of a theory, or at least vulgarisations of a theory, that postulated self-regulation and equilibration of economic interests through market forces and, thus, an automatic achievement of maximum welfare without conscious political action. In *institutional* terms, any such project would be faced with the problem that economics was already established in academia and claimed to take the place of a science of contemporary society. This threefold response will be discussed in more detail, taking the examples of Durkheim, Weber and Pareto as the outstanding, but simultaneously typical, contributors to classical sociology.

In Durkheim’s view, the economists had taken the first steps towards a science of society; they had been ‘the first to proclaim that social laws are necessary as physical laws, and had made this axiom the basis of a science’ (1888: 25). They were wrong, however, in seeing in the individual the sole tangible reality that the observer can reach. The constitution of human beings was much more complex than rational-individualist theories assumed; human beings are ‘of a time and a place, [they have] a family, a city, a homeland, a religious and a political belief, and all these aspects and others more mix and intertwine in a thousand ways . . .