On the history and politics of the social turn

MARTIN WEBER

Abstract. The emergence of social theory is closely linked to the transformations inaugurated by the rise of a distinctly capitalist modernity from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. In this article, I reconstruct the outlines of two strands of social theorising that emerged in response to the radical challenges posed by 'the great transformation' on the one hand, and the French Revolution on the other. I juxtapose two responses to the transnational constellations these events signify, one heralded by Auguste Comte, and the other, *inter alia*, by Karl Marx. While the Comtean frame obliterates meaningful registers of thinking about political transformation, I argue that conflict-theoretic tradition indebted to G. W. F. Hegel and Marx is much more amenable to analytical and practical concerns with responding politically to the challenges posed by 'the rise of the social'. In the final part, this is discussed with reference to the 'social turn' in IR theory.

Martin Weber is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Queensland. He writes about critical social and political thought in International Relations, environmental politics, and ecological political thought, the politics of social movements and transnationalising public spheres, and the media in global politics.

By good fortune (for the case might easily have been otherwise) the history of our species, looked at as a comprehensive whole, does exhibit a determinate course, a certain order of development: though history alone cannot prove this to be a necessary law, as distinguished from a temporary accident. Here, therefore, begins the office of Biology (or, as we should say, of Psychology) in the social science.

John Stuart Mill[1]

John Stuart Mill's exposition on Auguste Comte's philosophy of science provides a vignette of some tropes that resonate in the 'social turn' in International Relations (IR). In unwinding the discipline from the intermittently firm though always tenuous grasp of rationalist methodological precepts, constructivists reached for philosophical resources. They sought broader, more inclusive theoretical designs to enable a lateralisation of the range of variables (actors, operations, meanings, and practices) admissible to analyses of world political events.[2] They examined both momentous shifts, like the end of the Cold War or the emergence of 'new norms', and ostensibly significant continuities, such as the 'democratic peace'. Shifting attention to concerns with ontology afforded constructivists the opportunity to bring conceptual and methodological inventories to bear into a field they perceived to be limited significantly in either its dominant rationalist instantiations or the contributions of the latters' critical discontents. A middle way was deemed possible, charted on the

---

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (EPub: Project Gutenberg, 2005), available at: {http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16833} accessed May 2014.
[2] See Martin Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts": IR constructivism, critical theory, and the challenge of political philosophy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 516–43.

basis of an integration of elements from critical realist philosophy,[3] and sociological structuration theory.[4] Constructivists since have, in the more programmatic and less applied writings, extolled the virtues of this approach.[5] The constructivist approach, on this account, offers the possibility of admitting and accommodating a plurality of theoretical and methodological predispositions. Based on the meta-theoretically effected widening of permissible variables, as well as the continued commitment to IR as a science, the *social turn* in mainstream constructivism engendered a shift to Sociological perspectives and decidedly away from the questions raised – and the issues confronted – by Political Theory and Political Philosophy.

However, with this shift comes baggage. In this article, I want to show that the intellectual project of mainstream IR constructivism is much more firmly rooted in very specific premises, the historical legacy of which link back to the inception of the emergence and then study of society as a distinct, separate, but also *more fundamental* concern. In turn, this allowed for the study of politics to be rendered as contingent upon ground-clearing work provided by 'the social science', as Mill called it, using the telling singular. Insofar as a distinctive concern with 'social' affairs became an urgent matter for attention during the nineteenth century, I argue that it is possible to discern at least two distinctively different strands of thinking that attached to equally distinctive ways in which the challenges associated with social change and transformation were conceived. As I will seek to show below, these two different strands also entail quite different possibilities with regard to how questions of international and transnational flows, relations and exchanges can be understood, configured, and problematised.

Unfortunately, the kind of sociological thinking now dominant in IR constructivism owes effectively only to one of these strands. Oriented in terms of the question of the conditions and maintenance of order, it bears the imprints of Comte's teachings on method, as well as of his tangible commitment to a naturalist ontology. Committed as it is to a comprehensively naturalist conception of the contiguity of knowledge of social and political worlds with the recently emboldened natural sciences, this scheme aligned swiftly with attempts to explicate the conditions of 'order' first and foremost within nation states (not all of which were well formed yet); in doing so it contributed to preparing the ground for the current conventional understanding of 'international relations' as the problem of creating or maintaining an order among units which are themselves comprehensively ordered internally. The issuance of political authority consequently, in this broad mode, attaches to the task of ensuring the stability of social order holistically understood, though the 'totality' this implies is already rendered as internal to the confines of national territorial polities.

This strand can usefully be contrasted with another, which also gained momentum during the nineteenth century, and which led into what is today often referred to

---

[3] Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1998); see on this Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 50–1; see also Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

[5] Examples of this kind of argument can be found, for instance in Ted Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism in International Relations theory', *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 171–200; Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous liaisons? Critical international theory and constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:3 (1999), pp. 259–94; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking stock: the constructivist research program in International Relations and comparative politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), pp. 391–416.

summarily as 'conflict theory'.[6] In this mode, the interest in 'the social' proceeds as a project dedicated to explicating the sources and modalities of antagonistic relations among different groups of actors (or classes), implicating political authority, legal-political arrangements, and factual order at least potentially in the perpetuation of such antagonisms.

The central claim of my article is that a bifurcation in theorising 'the social' arose in the nineteenth century, comprising distinctively different responses to the challenges experienced in the context of what Karl Polanyi referred to as the 'Great Transformation'.[7] This was the bifurcation between the project of shoring up a robust concept of social order on the one hand, and a competing account rendering order contingent on the processing of conflict on the other. In the first part of the article, I sketch two constellational aspects against which this bifurcation occurs, the Great Transformation, and the French Revolution, and place them in the context of a sketch of changing conceptions of political authority and legitimacy. These constellational aspects, I argue, underpin the rise of the famous 'Social Question',[8] namely of how to respond to the risks of fragmentation and disorder arising in the context of the pervasive and trans-politically efficacious changes affecting the populations of Europe, and of its colonial empires.[9] I briefly focus on 'who posited the social question', and 'who asked the social question' respectively, in order to underscore my point that at least to very different orientations became formative for the tasks of social and political theorising in the wake of the two constellational shifts.

Against this backdrop, I draw out two responses to the Social Question. The first leads via Comte's positive sociology to the functionalist imaginary, which would prove to become dominant in the new discipline of sociology. It established the practice of associating social inquiry with science, mandating a continuous and close conversation with developments in philosophical naturalism, and with trends and refinements in scientific method. In keeping with the stages-model popularised through Comte's writings, and the relationship of 'supervenience' he established between the different scientific domains, the Social Question was to be answered through the explication of a rational order based on an inclusive account of human needs. This imaginary, which I argue throws its long shadows into the 'social turn' in IR theorising, subsumes politics under a quite specific and constrained form of observant reason.[10]

---

[6] Prominently, for instance, Randall Collins, *Four Sociological Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[7] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation – The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); see also Hannes Lacher, 'The politics of the marker: Re-reading Polanyi', *Global Society*, 13:3 (1999), pp. 313–26.

[8] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin Books, 2005). For a more recent, wide-ranging reconstruction, see Robert Castel, *From Manual Labor to Wage Laborers: Transformations of the Social Question* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003); and in IR, Patricia Owens, 'Human security and the rise of the social', *Review of International Studies*, 38:3 (2012), pp. 547–67; Patricia Owens, 'From Bismarck to Petraeus: the question of the social and the social question in counterinsurgency', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:1 (2013), pp. 135–57; Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Patricia Owens, 'Method or madness? Sociolatry in international thought', *Review of International Studies*, 41:5 (2015), this Forum.

[9] I use the term 'trans-political' here in order to imply that different polities across Europe and in the colonies had to deal with the effects of this transformation, leading not least to 'different' nation states, once that specific institutional form eventually becomes dominant.

[10] There is no possibility to explicate this last point in the necessary detail. Suffice it to point here to the basic reflectivist problem it indexes: The need to provide an account of the conditions of possibility behind the analysts ability to stand apart from the 'social order' in order to both, describe it comprehensively, and to assign 'politics' its place therein. Below, I return briefly to this issue.

The second response to the Social Question, signaled, *inter alia*, by Karl Marx, and particularly by Friedrich Engels' studies on the conditions of the working class in England, took the question of order to be open-ended, and worked with a different, dialectical concept of 'science'. While it, too, became formulated within the broad parameters of a progressivist philosophy of history, it took the conflict associated with the unfolding modern project to be the constitutive ingredient for attempts to shape and consolidate social and political order, and hence rendered the latter contingent on capacities to process conflicts appropriately. As I show, there is a distinctively different understanding of (legitimate) political authority at play, which links back to the two historical backgrounds I draw out in the first part of the article.

Finally, I trace these two different strands to the *social turn* inaugurated by the advent of constructivism in IR. Although the conditions behind the meta-theoretical commitments of the two strands of social theorising have changed significantly, they continue in modified forms to affect respective theoretical and explanatory efforts. For contemporary debates in IR theory the programmatic conception of sociology outlined first in the work of Comte still frames in particular constructivist understandings of social theories of International Relations. Not least the systematic problems with the study of norms and normative orders is indicative of this. The conflict-theoretic strand, which itself requires more conceptual and methodological attention in the context of the study of world politics, provides at least some conceptual tools for addressing the short-comings attributable to the continuing mainstream deference to naturalist paradigms.[11]

Before turning to the first part of my argument, a few words on the scope of the undertaking below are in order. The reconstructive critique on offer here is limited in its explicit form to what can on a wider reading only be described as a fragmentary account of thought on matters 'social' and 'political'. Focusing as I do on the positioning of canonical accounts of social theory within contemporary analytics in IR risks inadvertently a certain degree of 'shoring up' a highly undesirable and unhelpful eurocentrism. This is negotiated within the confines of the analysis below by bringing into play at least a selection of some of the critics of Eurocentrist historiography and 'theorising', whose contributions to thinking about world politics are as crucial and important, as their reception in the discipline of IR is, to put it mildly, 'underdeveloped'. A more systematic approach to this is beyond what is possible in this article, which in a sense aims to lay tracks – by way of an emphasis on the immanent critique of Eurocentric schemes – that lead towards the more important task of rendering *that* version of immanence as problematic as it has in many ways always been.

Two constellational shifts as backgrounds to the rise of 'the social' and social theorising: the Great Transformation, and the French Revolution

The first constellational shift I focus on concerns alterations in the meaning of political authority. Though these occurred unevenly, incrementally, and with different

---

[11] In pursuing this argumentative strategy, I am of course aware of the many different and continuing attempts to read the 'conflict theoretic' heritage, too, as aligned with naturalist precepts. In IR theorising, this has had exposure in particular through works indebted (if to different degrees) to 'critical realism' (or scientific realism) more generally, and the work of Roy Bhaskar in particular (see, indicatively, Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*). On why this naturalism is problematic, see Martin Weber, 'Ontologies, depth, and otherwise: Critical notes on Wight's meta-theoretical proposal for a scientific realist IR', *Review of International Studies*, 38 (2012), pp. 223–34.

and distinct local 'flavours' across Europe, it can be related to the emergence and growth of 'civil society'. Polanyi's *magnum opus*, *The Great Transformation*, as well as Fernand Braudel's sweeping studies of the emergence of modern systems of production, distribution and social organisation,[12] focus on the eighteenth century as the historical context in which crucial changes were introduced, which led to the gradual consolidation of the 'empire of civil society'.[13] The nineteenth century, during which *the social* becomes the object of specific interest, is witness to these transformations; of the messy and uneven transmission of the institutional conditions for civil society as a distinctive realm of political and economic dynamic change. Substantively, these transformations comprised in particular the gradual demise of subsistence economies, and the gradual consolidation of administrative power over what become *populations*, masses with ascriptive characteristics.

In many ways, the transformation from the mid eighteenth to the late nineteenth century involves the gradual (and frequently violent) inclusion of rural populations into the realm of 'civil society'. The success of this inclusion – and the concomitant forms of *exclusions* it engendered – was dependent on novel forms of rule and control, according to which the rules of civil society (its formal laws, conceived out of exchange relations) could be policed and enforced.[14] The need to bring large numbers of people into the remit of formalised exchange relations was encountered on two fronts.

First, domestically, the peasantry, rural craftspeople, day labourers, 'vagrants', and bandits had to be brought under control and into line with the requirements of a transfigured labour market, and the demands for efficiency by capital-driven production and trade. Second, transnationally, the same had to be effected with the colonial subjects.[15] In both cases, *civil society actors* led the way; 'societies' formed of interested venture businessmen provided metropolitan lobbying power, fund-raising capacity, and hubs for knowledge sharing with regard to 'frontier' development opportunities. To succeed, labour markets had to be created, formally controlled, and policed; this comprised practices, which ranged from slavery through the monopolistic control of production by companies to various forms of debt dependencies.[16] The immensity of this task, which required nothing less than the extensive replacement of entrenched economic practices with those described by Polanyi in terms of the 'market society', or civil society with its formal freedoms and corresponding rules, could only be met by finding new tools with which to secure the

---

[12] Relevant for this argument, in particular here Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce – Civilization and Capitalism 15th–19th Century, Volume 2* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

[13] Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society – A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994).

[14] See Claire Cutler, 'Globalization, the rule of law, and the modern law merchant', *Constellations – An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 8:4 (2001), pp. 480–502; G. F. W. Hegel, *Elements of a Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See on this also specifically Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 92–130.

[15] See, for example, the trenchant reconstructions in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe – Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); in IR, see Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[16] On linkages between various forms of the use of force and coercion during the formative periods of 'classical political economy', but especially the crucial role played by practices of enslavement, see Robbie Shilliam, 'Forget English freedom, remember Atlantic Slavery: Common law, commercial law and the significance of slavery for classical political economy', *New Political Economy*, 17:5 (2012), pp. 591–609.

necessary practices of inclusion and rule. This provides the context for the discovery and deployment of a range of innovations according to which 'the social' would become known. For instance, in the 1820s, *social statistics* emerged for the first time as a major concern, replacing the older 'political arithmetic'. The latter had provided on the whole merely aggregative figures for births, deaths, and male-female ratios for the purposes of confirming princely wealth and power.[17] A novel orientation towards seeking patterns of regularity, together with the sheer amount of data gathered (and numbers to be processed) provided more and more texture to the sense that *society* operated according to its own laws, the latter seemingly impervious, or at the very least obstinate, to the controlling interference by the political power of the state.[18]

The contiguity of such attitudes regarding the discernibility of law-like propositions about *populations*, and the governance of groups identified for the purposes of matching productive labour with efficiency demands under the unifying logic of pricing mechanisms is readily apparent. That it had to be established with a considerable amount of force is well known; and, again, the resources for this were developed in civil society first, with industrial inspectors instituted and supplied by companies, who, in this sense, formed at least institutionally part of the *political* horizon for workers, as well as the urban unemployed.

This first important piece of historical background for making the shift to 'the social' intelligible arises from the ways and techniques by which a transformation of political authority was effected during the emergence and increasing 'inclusiveness' of civil society as conceived in accordance with (commercial) formal freedom.[19] The processes of this transformation unfolded gradually, and, following Braudel, began in the late Renaissance period. But they took on particular urgency in the context of the more pervasive technological and institutional shifts emerging round about the middle of the eighteenth century, and this intensified phase lasted throughout the nineteenth century.

The second important historical backdrop to the rise of the Social Question is the French Revolution.[20] By now, the events leading up to this most visible assault on the prevailing political pre-eminence of the monarch and the nobility has been increasingly documented as a *transnational* event as much as one affecting 'domestic' France. Only a cursory glance at the significance of the Haitian revolution, its relation to the Assembly, and the significance of the experiences of transatlantic slavery and the Caribbean trading empire in patterning opposition between the 'left' and 'right' provides ample testimony.[21] The profound shock among political elites in Europe at the vehemence and comprehensiveness with which the old order was being swept away by 'people power' was more than matched by the trepidation caused by the complete reversal of the 'normal' order at the hands of the enslaved of Haiti, and the constitutional proposals which shaped the political outlook of that revolt.[22]

---

[17] Michael Donnelly, 'From political arithmetic to social statistics: How some 19th century roots of the social sciences were implanted', in Johan Heilbron, Lars Magnusson, and Bjorn Wittrock (eds), *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity: Conceptual Change in Context, 1750–1850* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), pp. 225–40.

[18] Donnelly, 'From political arithmetic'; see also Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things – An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1994); and Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[19] Cutler, 'Globalization'; see also C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism-From Hobbes to Locke*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)

[20] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

[21] C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1980).

[22] See Siba Grovogui, 'To the orphaned, dispossessed, and illegitimate children: Human rights beyond liberal and republican traditions', *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 18:1 (2011).

As far as the reconfiguration of *political authority* is concerned, the substantial threat was comprised by the push towards a *democratic* understanding of legitimate rule. Robert Wokler in his reconstruction of early themes in social scientific thinking,[23] teases out the intricacies of this substantive challenge, which played out between two versions, one inspired by Rousseau's conception of the common will (which would commit democracy to popular sovereignty proper), and one oriented towards representative government eventually adopted under the guidance of Sieyès' accommodation. The trope of the threat of representative government had been with modern political thought since at the latest Hobbes' attempt to guard against it in his work.[24] However, the events around the Revolution, and the return of absolutism to France under Napoleon, provided nourishment for both the forces for democratisation in the image of *egalite* and *liberte and* proponents of qualified defences of state-absolutism. Meanwhile, there was recognition on all sides that the *Social Question* had pushed the agents of revolutionary change towards the violence with which it sought to usher out the old order.[25] Widespread poverty and enforced changes beyond the capacity of people to respond in accommodative and productive ways, had built up into a political problem for which no plausible institutional resonance existed in the prevailing centers of political authority. The capacity to 'represent' oneself and one's interests had been characteristic of the relationship between the nobility and the crown. This pattern of partaking in political authority had proven to be, at least to some degree, sufficiently expansive into the realm of the upper echelons of the emerging capitalist bourgeoisie. But no similar pattern of substantive participation was available for those further down the hierarchy in any plausible form.

The upshot of this kind of radicalism, and its circumscription in terms of the Social Question, would be felt across Europe and the wider world. Responses ensued such as the 'pre-emptive' lancing of revolutionary pressures, including the violent suppression of signs of working-class discontent, or agitation among the poor; the punitive deportation of deviant populations to the colonies; or the proactive persecution of labour activist, pamphleteers, and petitioners.[26] In all of these contexts, there was an urgent problem of how a political order was to be conceived that corresponded to both the need for comprehensive authority to regulate civil society and the need to procure stability and a modicum of solidarity.[27] The answer to the problem of order and authority becomes a central, administrative (modern) state in charge of representing the nation as a whole. For this to be possible, the representatives themselves will have to be insulated from those they represent. As Wokler puts it in the context of his observations about Sieyes' accommodation:

Sovereignty (thereby) passed from the nation's multifarious fragments to the people's delegates constituted as one body, the populace ceasing to have any political identity except

---

[23] Robert Wokler, 'The enlightenment and the French Revolutionary birth pangs of modernity', in Heilbron, Magnusson, and Wittrock (eds), *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity*, pp. 35–76.

[24] On this, see Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[25] Arendt, *On Revolution*.

[26] See Donald Read, *Peterloo: The Massacre and its Background* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958).

[27] Peter Wagner, *A History and Theory of the Social Sciences: Not all that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Sage, 2001).

as articulated through its representatives, who by procuration were granted authority to speak for the electorate as a whole.[28]

If the French Revolution thus heralds a transformation of political order, it simultaneously can be regarded as inaugurating the legacy of a restriction of the political registers within which the new, emerging political order could be authorised. The representative script of legitimate governance is, on this reading, an important, but also contingent component of the emergence of the 'nation-state'; as well as an important, but equally contingent circumscription of *democracy*.[29]

Taken together, the two strands sketched above highlight the diverging and conflictual trends inherent in the spread of 'civil society' and the reconfiguration of political authority. The former, often not sufficiently recognised for its violence (particularly in the context of colonisation), and certainly not subjected to sufficient political analysis, amounted to forms of what became known as '*societalisation*'. It effected political change and upheaval, but these were conceived in terms of contract, private merchant law, and the abstractions of 'classical political economy'. Political authority, in turn, circumscribed *aspects* of 'civil society' by domesticating some of the resultant conflicts under the comprehensive representative government of a fixed territory. Government *underwrote* the colonising expansionism of civil society incrementally, by providing military support, and ultimately by establishing sovereignty over the expropriated territories, though concomitantly denying the modicum of representational accommodation outlined above to the colonised. This feature of a 'dual rule', which comes to dominate the 'domestic-international' imaginary in IR theory is constitutively linked to the two constellational contexts outlined above. The move to 'the social' in thinking about the challenges of these transformations is, then, also a move informed by the absence of sufficiently cogent conceptions of politics, complete with the attendant registers in which social problems can be translated into practices tackling the ensuing conflicts politically.[30] With the demise of polycentric sovereignty,[31] and the shift in political authority away from royalty, the princes, and the nobility, politics had to be reconceptualised. With the great transformation in 'political economy', the forced displacement of rural populations (including the end of subsistence communities), the subjection of peoples in the context of colonial expansion, the creation of industrial labour, and the transfers of segments of populations to overseas territories, grievances arose for which *political* channels were not (yet) available. New codes in 'private' law had the effect of empowering an ascendant bourgeois segment, and disempowering (including expropriating) others, both 'at home' and abroad. Reconfigured political power could align itself with the former, and ignore, neglect, or ultimately pathologise the latter.

---

[28] Wokler, 'The enlightenment', p. 52 (my excision (in brackets)). This signals neatly the different possibilities for democratic politics, as well as the route eventually taken. It also signals the institutionalised differentiation of 'political' society from the realm of 'the social', the populace, or 'the masses'.

[29] There is, of course, a deep-seated register of reasons, rules, and imaginaries underpinning both, these contingencies on the one hand, and the eventual establishment (via renewed absolutism) of the 'representative' script. For more on such backgrounds, see, for example, Siba N. Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns and Africans – Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minnesota Archive Editions, 1996).

[30] Peter Wagner, 'Certainty and order, liberty and contingency: the birth of the social sciences as empirical political philosophy', in Heilbron, Magnusson, and Wittrock (eds), *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity*, pp. 241–63.

[31] H. Glenn Penny, 'Reflection: German polycentrism and the writing of history', *German History*, 30:2 (2012), pp. 265–82.

These two broad constellational backdrops signal both comprehensive changes in the organisation of human life as well as the contingency of the latter. Importantly, and for IR theorising particularly so, they index a setting in which the transformations in question cannot without gross anachronisms be mapped in terms of the methodological nationalism on which IR came to rely during its formation in the early twentieth century. The conflict-dynamics we encounter in this context correspond much more neatly with the notion proffered by Justin Rosenberg of an 'empire of civil society',[32] which impacts in various and uneven ways on questions and problems of state-formation, producing very different versions of the latter not only in parts of the world incorporated by Western imperialism, but also in Europe itself.[33] If this brief captures some significant aspects of the kind of integration into 'society' underway during the nineteenth century, and also its exclusions and subalternisations, the contrast with the newly found penchant for 'social' theorising in IR based on unit-reproduction,[34] evolutionary logics,[35] state-oriented normative change,[36] or internally differentiating world society [37] could hardly be greater. The two constellational shifts I focused on below are intelligible only if their transnational reach, impact, and implications are considered centrally. This is crucial not least from the perspective of having to account for the multifarious processes underpinning emerging state-formations, and the differential and uneven accommodations of sociopolitical conflicts that have reached through these. That the turn to sociological inventories in IR has not, on the whole, responded to this well, may seem surprising against this backdrop. As we will see below, to some extent this owes to the peculiar attachment of social theorising in IR to functionalist explanations with their roots firmly in naturalist schemes, of which Comte's is perhaps the most well known.

'Analysis and practice': Who posits the Social Question – who asks the Social Question?

In the light of the sketches above, the answer to these two questions should now be relatively clear. The Social Question is *posited* first and foremost by the newly constituted masses, an entirely new phenomenon in thinking of political relations, and in significant ways the result of what Polanyi called the great transformation. Localised systems of support, distribution, and redress (including forms of clientilism, or parish systems) fell away for the large numbers of people who were, sometimes gradually, sometimes instantly and by force, moved either to urban centers, or the colonies, or were in other ways made dependent on access to wage-labour.[38] In efforts

---

[32] Rosenberg, *Empire of Civil Society.*
[33] Shilliam, 'Forget English freedom'.
[34] See, for example, Alexander Wendt, 'The state as a person in International Relations theory', *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2004), pp. 289–316.
[35] Indicatively, Emmanuel Adler, 'Cognitive evolution: a dynamic approach for the study of International Relations and their progress', in Emmanuel Adler and Neta B. Crawford (eds), *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 43–88. Despite Adler's attempts to dissociate his account of 'cognitive evolution' from the trappings of teleological conceptions associated with Darwinism, his scheme remains tied to an account of 'selection' between and among different 'learning communities'. It fails to unravel the *implicative* logics of change driven by contestations over power, authority and legitimacy.
[36] Emblematic for this, Margret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
[37] Mathias Albert and Barry Buzan, 'International Relations theory and the "social whole": Encounters and gaps between IR and Sociology', *International Political Sociology*, 7:2 (2013), pp. 117–35.
[38] Castel, *From Manual Labor to Wage Laborers*

to redress the threats encountered by these novel forms of deprivation,[39] and not least spawned by the events in France, they would eventually settle on contesting the new relationships with landlords, factory-owners, the police, and the taxation authorities of municipalities and the state, initially through the medium of the mass protest, and eventually through the formation of collective agencies (for instance, consumer societies).[40] Public protest was immediately understood as the threat it no doubt was; the responses, before they eventually became ameliorative and led to 'social policies' (regarding, for instance, housing arrangements, health, or education), were often swift, brutal, and characterised by attempts to repress and subdue (on early nineteenth-century political violence in such contexts).[41] The practices of *petitioning*, which for much of the nineteenth century combined the new register of mass politics with the older practice of appealing directly to princely or noble power, continued, but met with the new reality that princes and nobles themselves now increasingly deferred to the new class of wealth-owners. Emblematically, this can be seen in the context of the history of the 'northern radicals' in England, and events around petition-processes, such as the blanketeers' march, or the Peterloo massacre in Manchester. Engel's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is one *locus classicus* of an in-depth empirical study of the constitution of the masses in the context of urbanisation, industrial labour, unemployment, and capitalist landlordism.[42]

The Social Question was also equally *posited* by the colonial subjects, where the question of their inclusion into, or exclusion from civil society was of acute importance, not least when 'divide-and-rule' strategies prevailed as integral to the maintenance of control.[43]

In cases of settler-colonialism, such as in Australia, Canada, and the US, where frontier wars and a steady influx of settlers soon tipped the population balance firmly in favour of the 'arrivals' *vis-à-vis* their indigenous 'others', this had further consequences with lasting legacies. It became possible for the dominant to rely on assimilation strategies, which involved bluntly racist conceptions of exclusion;[44] these typically and problematically survived the eventual independence and establishment of the former colony as a sovereign nation-state. In either case, the administrative lessons learnt from managing – at least potentially – antagonistic people *en masse* traveled both ways, from the colonies into the 'core' and from the 'core' to the colonies.[45]

Consequently, if the 'Social Question' was *posited* predominantly by the newly generated and discovered masses, it was *asked* by those concerned with the political threats they posed. On the one hand, those were the administrators and organic

---

[39] See, for example, Roland E. Quinault and John Stevenson, *Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History, 1790–1920* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975).

[40] For a brief, but incisive summary of this in the context of a reconstructive approach to normative changes in social and political integration, see Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit – Grundriss einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), pp. 360, ff.

[41] See, for example, Read, *Peterloo*.

[42] See also Castel, *From Manual Labor to Wage Laborers*. Castel's book uses the concept of 'metamorphosis' to trace through a much wider range of shifts and changes to the 'Social Question' than is possible to render in this attempt to reconstruct the intellectual cleavages affecting the integration of social theoretic inventories into IR.

[43] Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: The Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); on the colonial construction of civil society and inclusion/exclusion, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject – Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[44] Consider, for example the various instantiations of racists 'integration' policies in the Australian context, focused on skin-color, and involving *inter alia* practices of state-sanctioned forced adoption schemes.

[45] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

intellectuals of the incrementally consolidating order of nation-statehood in Europe (colonial, or not); on the other, it was the aspiring organic intellectuals of movement-driven politics, for whom that order was precarious, and preliminary at best.

It has become customary to read this sort of constellation through the lens of an ostensible juxtaposition of 'conservatism' vs 'progressivism'.[46] For our purposes here, and probably most others too, this practice is spectacularly unhelpful, not least because it is only possible to make sense of the two strands of social theorising I am looking to explicate below by heavily refocusing the routine connotations of those terms. Thus, for instance, both, Marx *and* Comte were in recognisable ways progressive thinkers; both were, in some if not the same ways indebted to socialist thought. Likewise, both proponents as well as the strands of thinking they inspired, were, in their nineteenth-century manifestations, in broad agreement on significant aspects of methodological, epistemological, and wider philosophical issues. Marx and Comte (along with many of their European contemporaries) both articulated a strong version of the philosophy of history, allowing of 'stages' of development, and the supersession of more 'primitive' by more sophisticated forms of human coexistence and organisation. Both (though in quite different inflections, as we shall see) were committed to using a version of the dialectical method widely.[47] Both shared also, for instance, an epistemological proclivity towards evolutionary theories, which allowed either of them to set out their philosophies of history, their constitutive assumptions about pre-ordained developmental pathways, in close proximity to readings of *natural* history.

If they are nevertheless portrayed below as the respective stand-ins for what are argued here to be significantly and decisively divergent social-theoretic outlooks, I want to make the case that this is plausible predominantly because of the ways in which *political* problems are made to appear in their respective schemes.

Comte's positivism: Social theory within the boundaries of the nation-state

The first strand of social theorising, of which Comte's work is indicative, and which leads via maintaining strong conceptions of social evolutionism into the development of functionalism (at the hands of Durkheim), is concerned foremost with explicating the contours and prospects for order (now conceived as 'social integration') under the conditions of a new age. The crucial move here consists in the analytical *domestication* of the problem of 'civil society', together with the domestication of the processing of its exclusionary tendencies and effects (poverty, the 'reserve army'). Comte's concern was with the *replacement* of the old order by a new one, and with apprehending and outlining the features of the latter.[48] He set about doing this by introducing first a 'stages' model of principle features underpinning three distinctive phases in realising human potential. This was the developmental sequence of 'theological', 'metaphysical', and 'positive' stages that reflected epistemological (as well as methodological) premises. Second, a hierarchical model of knowledge established relations of supervenience based on increasing levels of complexity between different

---

[46] On the disclosive potential of approaches couched in the cogent conceptual pair of 'left' and 'right', see Alain Noel and Jean-Philippe Therien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[47] For those readers not suspecting Comte to have been invested in this methodological outlook, see Peter Halfpenny, *Positivism and Sociology – Explaining Social Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).

[48] See Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

knowledge domains, which in turn reflected different aspects of reality and experience.[49] Comte distinguished between 'celestial physics', 'terrestrial physics', 'organic physics', and 'social physics', the latter conceived as the natural science of society. He considered most of the problems at the three more basic levels solved by nineteenth-century science, but argued the knowledge of *social physics* needed to yet be advanced to the positive stage.

For Comte, and for the discipline he was to found, Sociology, it was clear that society formed a distinct field of inquiry (characterised in particular by complexity), but equally clear that the general methods which had been successful in the natural sciences would be so in 'social physics' too. Against this backdrop, three distinctive themes emerging from the early conception of a science of the social are of particular interest for my argument about international social theory.

The first concerns the mode of observation, which became crucial for the *scientific study* of society, and which is indicative of the early emergence of functionalist leanings. Nothing illustrates this more neatly than Comte's treatment of religion. For Comte, the *institutions* of religious life played particular roles in focusing, structuring, and patterning the affairs among people; the *functional* contribution of religious observance and consociality thus appeared cogent from the perspective of explaining certain requirements for social cohesion and/or civility (not least via the iterative re-enactment and re-affirmation of moral codes of conduct). This separation of the (functional) social purpose of an institutional complex from the ostensible reasons for its existence ('the truth of God, and reverence') establishes a train of thought that informs the social sciences to this day.[50]

The second concerns the introduction of ideas according to which *social development* proceeds akin to *evolutionary precepts*. Comte's analytical distinction between social statics and social dynamics provides a basic framework through which methods have become oriented towards *data* on the one hand, and *facts* on the other. The promise of 'social statics' is that a given social order can be apprehended in its totality as it presents itself at a particular point in time; for this, the new statistics, as well as a range of descriptive operations aimed at demonstrating the orderly interrelation between the constitutive parts of social reality would be sufficient, and the orientation would, in this sense, be towards 'givens' ('data', from Latin *dare* 'to give'; *facere*, which gives us 'facts' alerts us to the epistemological principle of the modern sciences: *verum-factum*, 'the proof of truth is in the act of making').[51] The investigation of the laws of social cohesion that coordinate and integrate the constituents of social life, which are the concerns of 'social statics', frame the methodological requirements for gathering up 'what is actually there', and for showing how it constitutes an order under conditions of complexity. The investigation of the laws of social change ('social dynamics') provides a diachronic meta-narrative for ascertaining 'where a particular society is at', relative to the stages-theory of historical development.[52]

[49] Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity – Volume 1* (London: Longmans Green, 1875), pp. 1, ff

[50] Exemplary in recent IR theorising, for instance Albert and Buzan, 'International Relations', and their reconstructions of elements the integration of social theorising into IR, as well as of the gaps and omissions discernible from their perspective in this context.

[51] See Antonio Perez-Ramos, *Francis Bacon's Idea of Science, and the Maker's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[52] See Alexander Wendt, 'Why a world state is inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 491–542. Wendt's article takes social self-organisation theory as a framework for arguing that a three-stage teleological trend is likely, which will see the 'evolution' of the international system to

Thirdly, the outlines of this scheme display at the meta-theoretical level the commitment to structuralist explanations. Being able to articulate both *order* as social cohesion and *change* as a regulative constraint in terms of law-like propositions implies that action-theoretic premises are at best epiphenomenal to social explanation. Teleological commitments thus come into view, modelled after the conception of the world as layered in terms of increasing complexity, from simple though general cosmological laws through to the laws of social organisation, which, in turn, are codependent on cognitive evolution. To see the world from the vantage point of the *positive* (scientific) stage allows one to recognise the world-views of previous stages as quaint, relatively under-complex, and inferior. That this inadvertently entails a bias against *action-theoretic* accounts will concern us further below.[53]

One general upshot of this is that questions of *politics* are relegated comprehensively to the realm of administrative and organisational tasks.[54] The promise of *sociology* is that the sphere of the social becomes transparent, and comprehensively explicated in terms of its laws and mechanism. The task of *politics* becomes to *police* in accordance with established knowledge about social cohesion for the purpose of *maintaining order*. On the programme inaugurated by Comte, *politics* as understood previously (political philosophy) is overcome together with the metaphysical stage.[55] Crucially, the scheme Comte introduced consolidated the notion that the question of 'order' arose, was to be addressed and ultimately also to be settled within the boundaries of nation states. A problematisation of the political effects and implications of the expansion of 'civil society' (see earlier) is scarcely possible within this scheme.

The reconfiguration of politics and social conflict

The second strand of thinking about the social works from a different set of premises, which can be usefully associated with *political theories* of what were now conceived as *social struggles*, the most famous precursor of which is Ibn-Khaldun.[56] Ibn-Kalduhn's unique attention to methodological problems was matched by his sensitivity to the *precariousness* of 'social' order(s), and the need to provide inclusive analyses directed *deliberately* against the risks of systemic bias, to which Comte succumbed. In this, Ibn-Kalduhn prefigured central preoccupations of Marx's *conflict theoretic* understanding of the great transformation, and the open-endedness of the question of order, which would always constitutively depend on the political processing of conflict-constellations.[57]

---

international society, and finally world society, with the emergence of a 'world state' as the inevitable corollary.

[53] On the paucity of action-theoretic approaches, see Kathryn Sikkink, 'Beyond the justice cascade: How agentic constructivism could help explain change in world politics', available at: {http://www. princeton.edu/politics/about/file-repository/public/Agentic-Constructivism-paper-sent-to-the-Princeton-IR -Colloquium.pdf}.

[54] This is, of course, consistent with practices that confine the remit of Political Science to psephology and/ or narrow conceptions of change in the 'political system'.

[55] See also Owens, 'Method or madness'; Owens, 'From Bismarck to Petraeus'; Wagner, 'Certainty and order'.

[56] Robert W. Cox, 'Towards a posthegemonic conceptualisation of world order; reflections on the relevancy of Ibn Khaldun', in James Rosenau and Ernst O. Czempiel (eds), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[57] See Mahmood Mamdani, 'Reading Ibn Khaldun in Kampala' (2013), available at: {http://critica-lencounters.net/2013/07/05/reading-ibn-khaldun-in-kampala-mahmood-mamdani/}.

As I have argued elsewhere,[58] the central intellectual commitment behind the orientation to conflict and struggle is to a comprehensive *critique of relations of domination*, the earlier outlines of which can be discerned in G. W. F. Hegel's writings,[59] and subsequently in Marx's reconstructive critique of Hegel's philosophical inconsistencies with regard to the resolution of conflict through the modern state.[60]

In Hegel's discussion of the three distinct realms of modern societal life, the *political* question becomes that of how the realm of negative freedoms (associated with civil society), guaranteed by the rule of law, and the mutual recognition among rights-bearing individuals and corporations *as* rights-bearing individuals and corporations, could be sustained as a *polity*. He proposed the solution that the *state* is to supply the system of rules, as well as the wider purposes in accordance with which the potentially destructive forces of civil society could be kept in check.[61] Marx's argument raises against this reconfigured account of the representative and integrative role of the state the *democratic* alternative. Instead of expecting order to be ordained from above (whether by God or sovereign), and integration to be supplied by however benignly imagined elites, the question of political rule is ultimately to be settled by popular sovereignty. The latter is understood substantively, meaning that those subjected to the rule of law at the same time have to be able to see themselves as the *authors* of such law, raising once again the tensions with merely representative models of democratic rule already mentioned.[62] The absence of political channels for recourse and of an effective set of institutional arrangements for bringing grievances generated the sense of polarisation in class-struggle, which so vividly informs Engel's studies, and Marx's theorisation of the social relations of capitalism as a *political* problem.

The legacy of the French Revolution is obvious, both in terms of the political practices and the intellectual challenges it had posed for thinking about the changing order. However, in this 'conflict theoretic'[63] understanding, a very different line of inquiry is opened compared with the positivist project, which took its orientation from very similar problems. By focusing on antagonistic relations reinforced by wealth, privilege, and the ability to make and enforce rules affecting, though not significantly affected *by*, the newly constituted masses, the conflict-theoretic paradigm precisely *deferred* the concrete conception of a sociopolitical order, which for the positivists was already there to be found and explicated. Though this deferral comes, as already suggested, with the baggage of the Philosophy of History, it has the merit of keeping the question of the totality of relational constellations relevant to the reproduction of political order open. The positivist correlate, on the other hand, could be co-opted without obvious contradictions to the highly problematic idea that the concrete empirical wholes facilitating the reproduction of 'order' were nation-states. The conflict-theoretic tradition – despite its own severe limitations[64] – at the very least provided a substantive analytical account of the great transformation, which reached

[58] Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts"'; Martin Weber, 'Come in, make yourself uncomfortable: Some thoughts on putting Critical Theory in its place', in Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima, and Joao Nunes (eds), *Critical Theory In International Relations and Security Studies – Interviews and Reflections* (London: Routlegde, 2012).

[59] Michael Theunissen, *Sein und Schein: Die Kritische Funktion der Hegelschen Logik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980).

[60] Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), pp. 57, ff.

[61] Theunissen, *Sein und Schein*, pp. 231–7.

[62] Ingeborg Maus, *Ueber Volkssouveraenitaet- Elemente einer Demokratietheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011)

[63] Collins, *Four Sociological Traditions*.

[64] See Weber, 'Come in'; Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts"'.

through this architecture of 'domestic' vs 'international' societies' that has remained attached to what is today criticised as methodological territorialism, and discrete unit black-boxing.[65]

The two strands and their legacies: Towards the 'social turn' in IR

In the process of reconstructing two different strands of approaching the Social Question, I have accentuated crucial differences between two broad approaches with incompatible meta-theoretical outlooks. The dialectical imagination[66] underpinning conflict-theoretic approaches conceives of the problem of order in terms of an iterative processing of antagonistic relations, based on the persistence of challenges to heteronomies extended through practices of domination, exclusion, and unequal allocation of resources and privileges. In this approach, to understand contemporary constellations as historically produced and relationally contingent, means to *include* in the scheme the natural sciences, as both circumscribed achievements and concrete practices with (sometimes highly) problematic implications for the processes of 'societalisation' to which they contribute. To glean what this is aimed at, consider the argument already advanced by Hegel that *poverty* is an inevitable correlate of the modern expansion of the realm of formal freedoms.[67] Also consider the scale, problems, and sheer institutional incommensurability attached to ecological problems and their 'governance', whether climate change, biodiversity, or food security. In all these contexts, the rules of societalisation, the epistemic authority of claims to scientific knowledge, and the implications of the application of technological practical knowledge are turning increasingly conflictual, and testify to deep-seated paradoxes.[68] This resonates with Bartelson's critique in this Forum, through which he raises the specific challenges posed by a constitutively assumed split between 'nature' and 'society'.[69] Although Hegelian-Marxist dialectics comprises its own problematic attachments to what Bartelson in this issue describes as the rather provincial idiom of Eurocentric modernity, it considers the *identification of 'nature'* with what is known about it in scientific terms to be a fallacy. This particular trope continues into the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, which explicates at one level the effects of treating others as objects *in the same way* as the instrumentalising logic of scientific inquiry permits the treatment of objects in the world.[70]

In the positivist strand, we saw the tendency towards treating the (natural) sciences as an epistemic model for the social sciences, with the commitment towards law-like statements confirmed in the first instance by the consolidation of social statistics.

---

[65] See Heloise Weber, 'A political analysis of the formal comparative method: Historicizing the globalization and development ebate', *Globalizations*, 4:4 (2007), pp. 559–72.

[66] Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

[67] See Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*. See also Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit*. Hegel was exceptionally clear that the system of 'needs and freedoms' that constituted the 'state of civil society' created more needs and desires than could be satisfied within national boundaries, and would hence produce both, poverty, *and* the expansionist-appropriative practices of colonisation. This aspect of his analysis is simply irreconcilable with both, his explorations in the *Logic*, and his rendition of the 'state' as the 'universaliser' within boundaries in the *Philosophy of Right*.

[68] See Simon Dalby, 'Ecology, security, and change in the anthropocene', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 13:2 (2007), pp. 155–64. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The climate history: Four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (2009), pp. 197–222.

[69] Jens Bartelson, 'Towards a genealogy of "society" in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 41:5 (2015), this Forum.

[70] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1995).

Subsequently, towards the turn of the century, the trends set in motion by Comte to locate 'social physics' relative to 'biology' consolidated in the programmatic development of *functionalist* sociology.[71] This research programme, which conceives of society in analogy with a complex 'organism', has had a series of reiterations, particularly in the works of Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons, but lately also in the post-Darwinian shift towards 'complex adaptive systems' as an analytic realigning organism with more contingency inflected approaches.[72] Through various stages of reception of instances of their work, it has also become the dominant social theoretic influence in IR. It is well known that Parsonian thought played a crucial role in shaping Kenneth Waltz's formulation of neorealism,[73] and as I have argued elsewhere, also significantly framed the avowedly critical response to it by mainstream constructivism.[74] Consider the notion of an *international system*. Classical realists had provided the consolidation of the notion of an international realm constituted of formally equal nation states. Insofar as theirs *is* a conflict-theoretic orientation, relevant conflicts occurred between territorial units conceived in terms of a fit between state, nation, and society, producing a clear domestic-international delineation. We have seen that this conception is resultative, rather than generative (or, genealogical). Not only does it detract from the relevance of *ongoing* state-formation, as well as the capacity to give an account of the significant forces underpinning the latter, it renders, for instance, the reconstruction of colonial political relations *theoretically* exogenous; alternatively, it forces implausible constructions such as 'latent universal nation-statehood'. Realism also screens out the spread of the 'realm of civil society', which, as we have seen, reaches *through* the political architecture described on the basis of methodological nationalist premises, with *socially* transformative effects, and correlating *political* problems and conflict-potentials. The main disagreement neorealism had with classical realism was that it lacked a (theoretically and scientifically) robust notion of the international system. An essentially Parsonian conception underpinned Waltz's *Politics*.[75] The *culture* of the international system (in Parsons' AGIL scheme the 'Latency' function which supplies integrative inventories such as 'values') becomes, in Waltz's version, anarchy. The latter is the resource, which all (relevant) actors in the international system draw on, and which hence 'binds them together', even in antagonism. Recast in Comtean terms, this gives us the *static* elements of the 'social physics'.

The *dynamic* elements (making room for notions of 'facts' among the 'givens') are subsequently provided by the critique coming through the social theoretic wing of the constructivist turn.[76] According to this version, without altering the *integrative* function of anarchy, actors in the international system can 'play by' different modulations of that cultural resource ('anarchy is what states make of it'), prompting research programmes directed, once more, at essentially 'evolutionary' understandings of international systemic change. The heterodoxies attaching to the corresponding notions that states both have identities and can change them then

---

[71] Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (Free Press, 1982).

[72] See Anthony D. Smith, *The Concept of Social Change: Critique of the Functionalist Theory of Social Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

[73] Stacey Goddard and Daniel Nexon, 'Paradigms lost? Reassessing *Theory of International Politics*', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:1 (2005), pp. 9–61.

[74] Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts"'.

[75] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston Mass: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[76] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

makes *some* room for non-state actors to play their role in the reproduction of the international system as incremental 'world society'.[77] World Society represents the 'whole', and the frictions among and between its various parts are the dynamic forces driving both deeper integration and further differentiation.

Such functionalist social theorising has held on tightly to its links with biology as already suggested by Comte. Surely aided by the resonance with older metaphors and tropes through which the association of the 'body politic' with a biological organism had been popularised functionalist thought analogised 'society' with just such an organism, whose constituent parts were defined in terms of their contribution to maintaining the 'whole'. This very specific way of construing a relationship between the 'whole' and its 'parts' reappears in IR theory's conception of 'international society'.[78] There is (in concurrence with Owens's analysis of the 'social' in this forum and elsewhere) really *no* room for political questions in this scheme: Conflict registers as 'deviance', which in turn is recaptured by further social differentiation and reintegration.[79]

The analogy with biological organicism is as instructive, as its implications are problematic. To conceive of 'parts' in terms of the contribution they make to maintaining the 'orderly whole' (to reproduce recognisably stable patterns), that 'whole' has to be already known, given and identified in its essential features. To deliver this, the historicity of the international is conceived (as was the case in nineteenth-century positivism) along a logic of stages, the latest of which has now allegedly delivered the 'universalisation' of an international order based on nation-states. Not only does this identification of the whole in terms of its parts (and *vice versa*) beg the question of those political forms not contained within its terms (such as indigenous peoples' struggles);[80] it also once again precludes any serious consideration of salient differences among, between, and across 'units', as well as questions of *ongoing* state-formation and (sociopolitical) transformation. In addition, it forgoes analytically (and, perhaps more importantly, politically!) questions regarding *ongoing* shifts in social and political configurations, and the dynamics through which they are driven. In keeping with the organicist temper, the identification of disturbances to the reproduction of the orderly whole is consequently thought of in analogy with infectious disease. In the social sciences, however, this inevitably incurs the problem of having to provide *normative* supplements by which deviancy can be justified *vis-à-vis* what is right and proper (that is, contributes to the reproduction of stable order).

With a more systematic turn to social theorising in the context of the constructivist challenge to the intellectual hegemony of the Neo-Neo synthesis, a door was potentially opened towards a comprehensive engagement with the legacy and problems of the conflict-theoretic tradition. An advantage of this would have been that problems of integration into 'society', shot through with transnational relational lineages, would have come into view as *political* problems. Instead, the social theoretic imaginary, which has underpinned mainstream constructivism, has remained much

---

[77] See Albert and Buzan, 'International Relations'.

[78] See Martin Weber, 'The concept of solidarity in the study of world politics – towards a critical theoretic understanding', *Review of International Studies*, 33:4 (2007), pp. 693–713. See also Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts"'.

[79] Owens, 'Method or madness?'; Owens, *Economy of Force*. To be clear, this 'absenting' of political questions in the *analytical schemes* described here should not be confused with an absence of political discourse and/or practices in the context of actual relations.

[80] See, for example, James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity – Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

closer to the Comtean project than many of its proponents would probably assume. Consider constructivists' own reflections on the silences and/or omissions of their research programme. Here, I have only room to consider three vignettes, and indicate the ways in which they are linked to the problematic attachment to the order-oriented, Comtean sociological approach.

The first concerns the problem of normative theory, identified by contributors to constructivist IR theory consistently as an area of further concern.[81] Constructivist success in demonstrating the efficacy and salience of *norms* in international relations leads on to questions over whether established, enacted, and/or enforced norms *are* actually good, desirable, justifiable, or defensible on other grounds. The encounter with political philosophy which is conjured up by this short-coming requires analytical and theoretical readjustments away from constitutive assumptions about 'fact-value' distinctions, for which the constructivist project in its current form seems to have no adequate conceptual inventory.[82] When constructivists treat norms as action-constraining and enabling social facts (backed by force or commitments), rather than relationally inflected discursive practices intrinsically dependent on justification(s) and/or contestation, they simply short-circuit the questions of intersubjective *intrinsically relational* logics that render normative discourses politically potent, transformative, and politically interesting. Comte's project of a comprehensive 'social physics' shines through here in the alignment of the study of 'norms' with naturalist premises, in the shunting off of political philosophy into the realm of the metaphysical (or, equally often, mere preferences), and in the construal of social facts as *objective* (enabling) constraints on actors.[83]

The second vignette concerns the continuing paucity of action-theoretically oriented research in IR. Noted, among others, by Kathryn Sikkink,[84] the relative absence of explicitly action-theoretic work[85] should be a surprise given that the constructivist project was originally set out in terms that would suggest a much wider scope for agential explanatory understanding. Indeed, some versions of IR constructivism[86] are clearly more amenable to action-theoretic frames. By and large, though, constructivist scholarship in IR has stuck much more closely to the perspective of the reproduction of international order, and focused on the adaptive pressures (state-)actors face in order to be recognised and enabled as successful players. This reflects the discussion of the tendency to derive explanations regarding the 'parts' from a salient, though mostly disarticulated notion of the 'whole'. Even in schemes as ostensibly oriented to *new* actors in international relations such as Margaret Keck and Sikkink's *Activists Across Borders*,[87] the contribution agents make is, in the final analysis, read in functionalist terms. That is, as a form of 'messaging' subsequently processed by the international system, the vanguard of which is defined in terms of those who can successfully mainstream a new norm into the institutional fabric of international society. A more consistently action-theoretic frame would move the social theoretic project in IR towards the *political* register of

[81] Finnemore and Sikkink, 'Taking stock'.
[82] See, indicatively, Richard Price, 'Moral limit and possibility in world politics', *International Organization*, 62:2 (2008), pp. 191–220. In response, see Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts"'.
[83] Indicatively, again, Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism'.
[84] Sikkink, 'Beyond the justice cascade'.
[85] For a notable exception, see Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency, and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[86] Nicholas Onuf, *A World of Our Making* (London: Routledge, 1998).
[87] Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*.

how peoples in both concert and contest *make* their world, always under the proviso that it could, and perhaps should, be made otherwise.[88] Under such an approach, it would be feasible to interrogate the conditions and possibilities of bringing together diverse preconceptions about order, legitimacy, justice, and the use of force, without the need to read them through the lens of a settled, essentially resultative conception of international 'society'.

The final vignette echoes points raised above concerning the assumptions about staged progress and evolutionary change, which Comte introduced comprehensively as part of the sociological imagination and which continue to reverberate in contemporary constructivist projects. The stages-model has entailed too many obvious continuities, particularly in development policy and politics to remain insulated any longer from serious critical attention. This does not mean that the latter has been sufficient, or sufficiently mainstreamed at this time.[89] To conceive of 'social' change in evolutionary terms, likewise, entails short-cuts with crypto-normative implications. This is not unlike attempts to link understandings of politics and social life to the disclosive power of theoretical physics and cosmology.[90] The reinscription of political events and upheavals into grand naturalist schemes premised on the *very* longue durée flattens politics and history. In the light of the real possibility of anthropogenic ecological disaster the progressivist tempers associated with naturalist conceptions of historical change and unreconstructed imaginaries about 'increasing complexity', or evolutionary advances in what is assumed to be generally either 'the right direction' or inevitable, ought to be just as suspect today as the thick versions of the philosophy of history with which colonial domination was justified in the nineteenth century became during the twentieth century.

Constructivists' insistence on theoretical and methodological pluralism [91] is taking place in a much more restrictive register than its proponents believe. This has significant consequences for the *political* analysis of formations of international and transnational authorities, and the questions of legitimacy and legitimation constructivists are ostensibly interested in. By operating from the premises of an over-institutionalised conception of political contestation, constructivism misconstrues the *substantive* grammar and implications of political contestations related to *detrimental* effects of 'social integration'. As James Scott has shown, the order established by the political production of nation states is often precisely the *problem* for some people;[92] the relentless march to greater efficiency and prosperity involves choices, which separate populations from their livelihoods, not infrequently by force;[93] and the readiness to accept the need to sacrifice *some* in efforts to consolidate the standards of 'civilisation' assumed to be set by liberal democracies

---

[88] See Weber , 'Between "isses" and "oughts" '; see also Owens, 'Human security'; Owens, *Economy of Force*.

[89] Weber, 'A political analysis'.

[90] See, indicatively, for different takes in this general frame, Alexander Wendt, 'Social theory as Cartesian Science: an auto-critique from a quantum perspective', in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics* (London: Routledge, 2006); Heikki Patomäki, 'Cosmological sources of critical cosmopolitanism', *Review of International Studies*, 6 (2010), pp. 181–200.

[91] For a rounded, recent restatement of this position, see Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[92] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[93] See, for example, Philip McMichael, 'Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please…', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8:2–3 (2008), pp. 205–28.

through brute force has *political* implications, which cannot be deferred to the envisaged orderly integration afterwards.[94]

For IR theory, the turn to 'the social' involves an increase in complexity, requiring more factors, perspectives, and interactions to be considered than in the tidier setting of studying the interactions of ideal-typical Weberian nation-states, while assuming those not fitting such types to eventually be on a convergence course. In the context of the disruption of the latter scheme brought on by 'complexity', the two strands of thinking I have outlined offer distinctively different disclosive possibilities. The capacity to understand conflicts and contradictions as *political* challenges and possibilities, rather than as pathogens in open systems' capacity to adapt and evolve, marks out the conflict theoretic approach against the naturalism of much social theorising in contemporary IR.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are at least two distinctive idioms in which social theorising has entered into IR theory, and that both have important and problematic linkages with central transformations, conceptual and historical, which underpinned the formation of thinking about 'the social' in the nineteenth century. I have juxtaposed the positivist project inaugurated by Comte, with a conflict-theoretic one, whose epigone became Marx, not least with the intention to demonstrate that of the two strands the latter operates with a *political* understanding of social strife, and the dialectics of 'social integration', which the former merely resolves from the position of an already posited conception of 'wholes', and their constitutive parts. Throughout, I have parsed the conflict theoretic tradition away from naturalist premises, in ways, which some readers might find either surprising, or positively wrong. It is, for instance, less than clear whether a sociologist like Randall Collins would agree with the line I take in this regard; likewise, it is incumbent to acknowledge that a great many historical materialists *do* embrace a close integration of the social sciences with the sciences of nature. If I insisted here in stressing the anti-naturalist proclivities in the dialectical tradition, I did so in order to highlight that the latter provides resources for working through *social and political* conflicts and institutions in ways only awkwardly or unconvincingly rendered in accounts based on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises of apprehending and manipulating material objects.[95] That *within* the broad imaginary established by the modern scientific division of labour any *critical* reflection of scientific practices depends on bringing this point to bear on them, as was already thematised by Edmund Husserl,[96] should have become a great deal more plausible (and urgent) in the context of the rise of 'sociogenic' environmental crises with trans-politic and global implications.

I am in agreement with Owens's argument in this Forum that the turn to 'the social' entailed a significant turn away from questions of politics and the political. In earlier work, Owens's reconstruction of Arendt's separation of the realms of politics and 'the social', the distinction between the public and the private spheres recuperates an important critical register particularly *vis-à-vis* practices invested in the

---

[94] See Mick Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War* (London: Routledge, 2009).
[95] More on this in Weber, 'Ontologies, depth'.
[96] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

authorisation of violence in support of 'security' and counterinsurgency.[97] However in my reading, the 'rise of the social' also signals issues of *political* significance. While Owens is surely right to stress that the *emphasis* in critical theory as it emerged in a broadly Hegelian-Marxist vein was – at least initially – firmly on the analysis of the *social* transformations inaugurated by the rise of the 'project of modernity', there is a sustained interest in the *political* conditions, implications, and possibilities throughout, which in my reading render her claims regarding the entrapment of critical theory in an ontologised monism of the 'the social' problematic.[98] The central conceptual register of the critical theoretic tradition I have in view here is lodged firmly in the *critique of domination*; though I have argued above that all this needs to be, today, provincialised, too, the possibilities for *political* analysis in this register to establish connectivity with other approaches to political thought are quite radically different from what I have glossed as naturalist approaches, which are in turn invested much more firmly (and less reflectively!) in the reproduction of quite specific institutional imaginaries. Nevertheless, I suspect that our disagreements on this issue would turn out to be fewer and less significant than they may seem, if I supplemented the argument I made here about two distinctly different strands in social theorising with a more textured reconstruction of the ways in which both have developed up until the present. Such a reconstruction would, in the case of critical theory, clarify that some affinities exist between conceptions of politics there, and Owens's Arendtian leanings; the pervasive discontent with 'normal' (and 'normalising') sociology particularly in the Frankfurt School tradition could then be seen to quite comprehensively refute the notion that a conception of totality operates as the standard of critique in the form of an 'ontology of the social' in such a way as to cancel out any more genuine conception of the political.

As I argued above, in the conflict-theoretic understanding, social 'issues' may index a move in the registers and institutional settings of politics and political contestation, rather than the latter's comprehensive evacuation. In good dialectical fashion, and perhaps also echoing Robert Cox's classic adage of critical theorising, this also serves as a reminder that what is rendered by some in some context as a *social* problem may well be on closer inspection an *interested* side-stepping of genuinely *political* problems.[99] The social world, on this reading, is *constituted* politically, echoing the indication in my reconstruction above that the conflicts entailed in enforced social transformation implicate political arrangements and institutions. Nevertheless, this leaves me in agreement with Owens's critique of merely 'social' modes of theorising, insofar as the latter side-step such conflicts, or preclude their analytical processing by meta-theoretical feat.

I have already signalled my agreement with Bartelson's thematisation of the modern 'nature/culture' differentiation, which he cogently traces through to the establishment of 'society' as a domain of its own, generative of its own knowledges divorced from 'material' circumstances. The constitutive problems were in *some* outlines already considered by Marx and Engels, pointing to the persistence of the dialectical imagination as a critique of contemporary dominant practices.[100]

---

[97] Owens, 'Human security'; Owens, 'From Bismarck to Petraeus'; Patricia Owens, 'The supreme social concept: the un-worldliness of modern security', *New Formations*, 71 (2011), pp. 14–29.

[98] See Owens, 'Method or madness?'

[99] See Cristina Rojas, 'The place of the social at the World Bank (1949–81): Mingling race, nation, and knowledge, *Global Social Policy*, 15:1 (2015), pp. 23–39.

[100] Alfred Schmitt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: Verso, 1973).

Nevertheless, and in line with Bartelson's conclusion, the puzzle of the separation of 'society' and 'nature', which is simultaneously entirely implausible, and pervasively hegemonic in Western thought, is perhaps best addressed by following his advice to work to translate the questions of those, whose cosmological and epistemic commitments do not reflect our own. This line of inquiry provides additional support for my problematisation of the naturalist temper within which so much of the constructivist sociological project in IR theory operates. Since it makes clear that *nature*, too, cannot be merely apprehended in its 'totality' within the epistemic confines of what we have come to know as the natural sciences, it underlines the point also that it is erroneous to forgo *political* analysis in favour of naturalistically conceived social wholes.