

Section One

The Problem



The Rise, Fall and Return of a Concept

‘Society’, said Mrs. Merdle, with another curve of the little finger, ‘is so difficult to explain to young persons (indeed is so difficult to explain to most persons) ... I wish Society was not so arbitrary, I wish it was not so exacting.’

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

According to the cultural sociologist Friedrich Tenbruck, cultures have key concepts without which they cannot be known. For the foundation of his own cultural milieu he identified the idea of *society* (1984: 195–203; see also 1981: 333–50). Society was an idea that dominated human existence and eclipsed other identities such as ethnic group, nation, marriage and family. Despite the idea’s dominance in Tenbruck’s time, it fell into disfavour with him. Since then society has been treated in a hostile fashion much more widely.

This idea – society – is the basic motif of this book. The question surrounds the rise, fall and return of its idea specifically in its science, sociology. In this cycle of a rise, fall and reappearance, the last stage is the most interesting one. It is surprising to note that when society, first emergent and then influential, has been brought into disgrace in its science, it keeps coming back as if all by itself, even against resistance. The cyclic aspect of the concept is explored in this chapter. My own inclination here is to stop resisting the idea and help it return in a sociologically reasonable sense. After this chapter, the rest of what follows is assigned to this task.

The Rise

Tenbruck holds that society, the key concept for the modern condition, is sociology’s invention. Bruno Latour agrees: ‘without sociology there is no society’ (2005: 257). In some sociologists’ somewhat conceited opinion the twentieth century was conspicuously a sociological century. It was, in their eyes, a period that urgently demanded societies be described as

wholes. The description was delivered by a sociology oriented towards structural and functional analysis and towards society (Allardt, 2001: 4–5). Thus if sociology ever possessed a central concept it was society (Urry, 2000: 5). The discipline was to be, and indeed was, a science especially of society: ‘Sociology is, as anyone readily admits, the science of society’ (Tenbruck, 1981: 335).

In the narrative that follows, sociology did not discover society just to give a name to a new form of how human beings live together, but to reify this condition into a thing that must be instituted in accordance with the laws sociology was supposed to disclose. Sociology has been held to be one of the great forces that shaped modern society; it had power ‘over us all, over society, and over history’ (Tenbruck, 1984: 16–17).

Sociology’s rise to such dominance together with its central concept originated from what is called ‘decorporation’, or a dissolution of the traditional bonds of city, estate, sovereignty, province, university, guild and church. This dissociation, and hence sociology, resulted from emergent industrial capitalism. It liberated new forces and created a new *whole* that was identified, in the course of the nineteenth century, as society, a life-process not regulated through traditional norms. Saint-Simon, Comte and, most essentially, Emile Durkheim have been named as the principal discoverers of this new formation (Tenbruck, 1981; see also 1984: 199). The invention especially of the economic society as distinct from the political state is attributed also to Ricardo and Hegel (Polanyi, 1957 [1944]: 111, 115). Thus, in fact, *two* sets of forces were liberated by the dissolution of traditional bonds. From ‘decorporation’ emerged two formations that had been unknown until then: the modern society and the modern state (Tenbruck, 1984: 197). Sociology accommodated both aspects.

On the one hand, the discipline specialized in describing and explaining the character of modern societies; a picture emerged of a revolutionarily changed social life having taken place between 1700–1900 (Urry, 2000: 10). This revolutionary change meant that traditional regulations were replaced by the principle of individuals’ discretionary sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) and thus a new incalculable reality was born. This was modernization that revolutionized traditional life and established the state’s monopoly of legitimate violence, bureaucratic administration, a money economy, omnipresent markets, economic growth, industrialization, population expansion, urbanization, a secular culture, positivism in the law and elsewhere, and more (Müller, 1991: 263; Luhmann, 1992: 17).

Modernization brought with it the social dimension: the decay of customary values and practices, violence in industrial relations, a declining birth rate (yet an expanding population), crime, suicide, alcoholism (Hawkins, 1994: 461–2). Some of the sociological wisdom about these

consequences was condensed in the idea of anomie. Anomie arose when the traditional bonds were broken down and former static conditions were made fluid. The new condition exhibited a flux and reflux of people, an 'unsettling of the population', 'social dislocation' and 'turbulent waters' (Polanyi, 1957: 91–4). For this condition sociology invented its concept of society. But for what purpose?

The idea was not to just describe. Sociology designed society to make the new unpredictable condition predictable and governable, ultimately by the state. The liberated free expanses of action and movement had become erratic powers within the existing state. Sociology was to be a positive science that formulated general propositions about the laws and regularities of these powers in order to make them controllable by a reformed state. Durkheim had suggested that occupational corporations could be the agencies 'to apply the general laws of society'. Eventually, however, it was the state to which his sociology assigned 'crucial coordinating functions as the authoritative nucleus of the social organism' (Hawkins, 1994: 466–7, 479–80). The emergence of this whole is called 'the birth of society from the spirit of sociology' (Tenbruck, 1981).

A certain inversion of relations followed on from this new sociological idea. The existence of a society was discovered that was 'not subject to the laws of the state, but, on the contrary, subjected the state to its own laws' (Polanyi, 1957: 111; similarly Tenbruck, 1981: 347). Sociology acted as midwife to this transformation. At the core of this newborn overarching formation there lay sovereignty, national citizenship and, in particular, social governmentality or the organization of citizens' rights and duties by sovereign nation-states (Urry, 2000: 8–9). Again, this is what Durkheim had in mind. In *Leçons de sociologie* he saw it as necessary to determine the rights and duties for the various agents operating in the different branches of industry: a 'body of rules must be constituted' (quoted by Hawkins, 1994: 468).

Thus a double movement governed the dynamic of modern society for a century, from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century (Polanyi, 1957: 130–1). One aspect was the expansion of capitalism or Polanyi's market system that was thought to be self-regulating. The expansion of this 'satanic mill' roused a countermovement called the self-protection of society. The economic mill tended to grind society into atoms, and the result was that the 'inner temple of human life was despoiled and violated' which is why 'men had to discover society' (MacIver, 1957: x). This discovery led to interventions in the market system and to checking the action that threatened to destroy the social fabric and indeed the productive organization itself. The invasion of communities by market forces was countered by the state's intervention in the market system in the name of society (Polanyi, 1957: 201–8; Streeck and Schmitter, 1985: 120). In this

process society became a contested concept, especially between the liberalism of the trading classes and the principle of social protection defended by those most damaged by the market (Tenbruck, 1984: 198; see also Polanyi, 1957: 132; John Maynard Keynes identifies the latter group by calling its doctrine the ‘best possession of the great party of the proletariat’; 1972c [1926]: 311).

This antagonism gave sociology an opportunity to design a concept that would reconcile the conflicting forces, particularly those fighting against each other in industry and the economy. The idea was to dissociate power from interest and associate it with knowledge. This new knowledge also seeped into people’s heads and social institutions and its rule was felt ‘in the school and education, in learning and the university, literature and theatre, everyday life and trades, politics and the public sphere, religion and the church’ (Tenbruck, 1984: 24). The belief was not uncommon that the secret of society was now exposed and sociology had become an empirical science that could transform politics into an applied science. Sociology was there to enable human beings to control their social condition and build up a good and just society. This was to produce a planning euphoria, with social scientists at the forefront (Tenbruck, 1984: 158–62).

Disaffection

For all its seductions and conquests, society was and remained a contested idea. What was patently difficult was bringing the whole and its parts to terms with each other. To Georg Simmel the ‘real practical problem of society’ lay in the relation of its forces to individuals’ own lives. The duality could not be eliminated: ‘This antagonism between the whole and the part, the former demanding of its element one-sided partial functions, the latter wanting to be a whole in itself, cannot be resolved even in principle’ (1984 [1917]: 68). Durkheim encountered the same duality and ended up at the same impasse; an unresolved tension between the imperatives of social discipline and the demands of personal autonomy (Hawkins, 1994: 481).

The dominant whole aroused disaffection in the elements who wanted to be wholes themselves. One of them was Tenbruck, deeply unhappy about the sociological era and its core concept. His melancholy flowed from what sociology in his view did to human beings, namely swept them off from the scene. The subtitle of his study was *Die Abschaffung des Menschen*, the eradication of the human being. He asserted that sociology, from the beginning, discarded human beings as persons who were capable of independent and responsible action and reduced them to automata.¹

The instrument sociology used to eject humans from the stage was its concept of society. Persons were human beings who designed reality to fit

their values. The concept of society left so little room for such formative action that people, schooled in sociology, saw themselves simply as technical problems that could be solved through instituting society appropriately. Instead of human beings, society became the acting subject. Sociology dissolved people into data, factors, features, indicators, categories, functions, roles, patterns of behaviour – in short, societal mechanisms of behaviour. This diluted such ideas as conscience, responsibility, misconduct, commitment, guilt, duty, imperative, freedom, will, decision, and meaning of life, and also diluted questions about the validity of values. On all these things, Tenbruck asserted, sociology was silent.

This condition is sociological alienation or the degradation of humans to the base status of social beings (*Gesellschaftswesen*, Tenbruck, 1984: 23, 240). The social sciences ‘have contributed worldwide to estrangement from cultures and communities’ (p. 308). The accusation is that sociology itself produces this objectivation and estrangement by means of its key concept, society. In this way sociology deprives people of the freedom to take an independent stand, grounded on their values, in relation to reality. Still, even as they are created by their conditions, they do not exist just as objects; ‘as subjects we want to, and must, lead our lives ourselves’. Every religion, culture, education, morality, community and polity, except for sociology’s society, is inspired by this anthropological necessity. Society is a devious concept. It is a concept of a science, yet sciences should not put about, under the guise of authority, world views that bring human beings ‘under tutelage by wresting from them their freedom’ (Tenbruck, 1984: 257–8).

In this objectionable condition Tenbruck concluded, somewhat surprisingly, that in the end we cannot do without the social sciences (note that it is now a question of the social sciences, not particularly of sociology). Without ‘a science of society, a secular commonwealth cannot exist’. The purpose is not to eliminate the social sciences; they ought to be bridled (1984: 261, 304). The means is to exclude society from their notions and even vocabulary (pp. 202–3). It is permissible and often necessary to use the word in its everyday meaning. But the social sciences ought to turn to ‘real phenomena and powers’. This means states, nations, tribes, parties, religions, churches, cultures, economies, ideologies, associations, groups, publics, and so on. They are no societies; they are *sociations* (*Vesellschaftungen*; Tenbruck, 1981: 349). I shall come back to this important concept.

The Fall

With such a ferment of disaffection, it was only a question of time before the dominant society was successfully challenged. A set of interrelated

transformations produced a favourable conjunction. One element in this condition was the changed class structure.

If society in the sense of social justice is in the proletariat's interest, then some other values and justices will probably appeal to other people. If the class proportions change, the rank order of values and justices is likely to change, too. And the class proportions did indeed change. When sociology's society attained maturity the central impulse behind this, the proletariat or the working class, was already in decline. The sociological opinion was that towards the end of the twentieth century the 'working class ... is on the way out' (Bauman, 1987: 179). It was admitted that the 'future challenges to the rulers of the world will come from other sources than industrial labor' (Therborn, 1999: 4). The whole structure 'where class divisions are strong and politically articulated' was passing away (Pakulski, 2005: 175). The working class was the productive class. The closer the end of the century came, the fewer the number of people who were engaged in the role of productive labour. The consumer was on the rise (Bauman, 1987: 179–80). If classes are defined in terms of consumption, the middle class has been the winning group. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, its share is estimated at nearly or over half of the world's population. With the decline of the working class and the rise of the consuming middle class, the disaffection with society intensified.

Globalization, regionalization and individualization, processes that puncture the borders of nation-states and reduce their moment, are further changes acting in the same direction. The result is that society loses a great deal of its analytical clarity and explanatory power. The loss is attested by the 'disappearance of society from the sociological analyses of contemporary social phenomena', by its 'dissolution into the idea of the social' and by 'explicit demands to relinquish the whole idea of society' (Kangas, 2001: 305–6). It has become increasingly difficult to demarcate society as a definable whole; 'society has become an outright mystery' (Saaristo and Jokinen, 2005: 270). It is ever more problematic to talk about societies 'as if they were entities with clearly marked boundaries' (Heiskala, 1997: 329). Self-sufficiency is gone and units are units in name only. The sociological vocabulary, focused on the concept of society, seems to have faded away:

Many elements of meaning, taken up in the idea of 'society' in the 1930s and especially after the Second World War, have become problematic. This holds as well for society in the role of an object of rational knowledge and planning as for society in the role of an actor who, from high up, allocates roles, teaches values and hands down rights and duties to its members. (Kettunen, 2003: 207; see also Urry, 2000: 164–5)

Globalization is accompanied by a growing doubt as to whether it is possible at all to supervise social developments and whether social units

exist that are distinct and independent enough to warrant the word 'society' (Lagerspetz, 2007: 259; see also Wolfe, 1989: 193 and Gronow, 2000: 213). As the idea of society – the global idea that includes the state, political institutions, the economic organization and cultural practices and values (Touraine, 1998: 122) – is called into doubt, sociology turns to preferring smaller issues. Globalization itself does not only mean that large-scale systems are created, but also that local and personal contexts of social experience are transformed, the last-named tendencies being the really interesting ones (Giddens, 1994: 4–5; for a conscious movement towards narrower concepts, see also Collins, 1981 and 1994, and Davis, 1994).

If it is true that society was the key concept and sociology the key science of an epoch, this epoch was coming to an end around the time Tenbruck was writing his indictment at the beginning of the 1980s. The period may have been relatively short. It is possible that sociology 'as a high-consensus, progressive science' was successful only for a short time after the Second World War, in about 1945–1970 when national political elites were seeking scientific knowledge to assist them in constructing the good society they thought themselves fit to lead (Lemert, 1996: 382).² Tenbruck periodizes similarly; sociology's best days were in the decades following the Second World War (1984: 152–72).

In the early 1980s, a change seemed to be under way. Tenbruck's work became both symptomatic and facilitative of this transformation. His intention was not to undo sociology, not, at any rate, 'a science of society' (*eine Wissenschaft von der Gesellschaft*), but his terminological shift from sociology to the social sciences is indicative. Yet deleting society from sociology's concepts and vocabulary, as he recommended, must involve the discipline being in trouble. A professor of sociology Sundback recognized this when she enjoined sociology to analyse and discuss society, because without society 'sociology will be brought under question' (2007: 340).

Tenbruck's advice to exclude society from the vocabulary of sociology was, if not effectual, at least predictive. There was to come, just a few years later, a notorious statement by the then Prime Minister of the UK Margaret Thatcher, talking to *Women's Own* magazine in 1987: 'There is no such thing as society'. This statement marked the neo-liberal turn in economics, politics and the whole spectrum of culture, also in sociology and the social sciences. In that reversal, discontent with sociology's preoccupation with society was spreading. A good decade after Tenbruck's offensive, sociology's status at the end of the century began to be intensively debated in Germany. The starting point was Warnfried Dettling's claim that sociology was in decline for the reason that the discipline's object of study, society, has ceased to exist. There would be 'no society "in the accustomed sense" any more, "just individuals whose activity no longer fits in with the old social formations"' (quoted in Kneer et al.,

1997: 7).³ I mentioned above John Urry's confirmation that society had been sociology's long-established central concept (Urry, 2000: 5). At the end of the twentieth century, however, he suggested the discipline was 'losing its central concept of human "society"' (p. 3). Consequently it urgently needed a new agenda to avoid a complete demise.

It is true that sociological opinion is divided about whether sociology is in decline, and if it is, about whether the downturn is related to difficulties with the concept of society. Sociology may seem healthy so far as appearances go; there has been no manifest shortage of research programmes or international conferences. 'Yet beneath the surface there lingers muted disquiet' (Levine, 1995: 284). Even gloomier views have been expressed. Horowitz's *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1994) lists several symptoms of sociology's institutional and intellectual disintegration (see also Bertilsson, 2000: 41–6). Goldthorpe's impression is that 'at the end of the twentieth century the state of sociology gives cause for serious concern' (2000: 65–8). Many mainstream sociological theorists seem to find it hard to 'say anything positive about science in general and of sociology as a science in particular' (Therborn, 2000: 14–15).

Their cheerless condition should have come as no surprise to sociologists. Gouldner predicted sociology's bleak future early on, in his (1970) book *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. The predicted depression had set in by the 1980s when a worried Swedish *Sociologisk Forskning* published an issue on how neighbouring disciplines saw sociology's current condition (Från redaktionen, 1987: 2). The 1990s were marked by even more forthright concerns, such as *Sociological Forum's* special issue on the theme of 'What's wrong with sociology?' (see Cole, 1994: 129–31). Bleiberg Seperson confirmed the issue's anxious query; the discipline's problem was that its standing in the eyes of college administrators, legislators and the public was low (1995: 309). This was alarming because the legitimacy of a profession depends on its special knowledge enjoying public acceptance and support (Edman, 2001: 304). Sciences come to their end if their findings, even if correct, are no longer held as worth learning, 'For this means: they are of no interest to anybody any longer' (Tenbruck, 1984: 272–3). With the legitimacy, acceptance and support gone, symptoms of degeneration are likely to appear. This was happening to sociology, or at least the possibility was disturbing quite a few sociologists and arousing discussion.

If sociology was in trouble, this may have resulted in part from its dropping its central integrative concept, society. A widely held diagnosis of the discipline can lend some support to this assumption: the fragmentation of the field. Fragmentation or disintegration is likely to follow if a unifying idea – such as that of society – falls away.

Sociology can display fragmentation in two related senses. Its research topics have multiplied. Sociologists' conferences are divided and reassembled into dozens of working groups ranging from the sociology of expertise, knowledge and art to the sociologies of civic culture, feminism, governmentality, identity, the internet, and so on. In 2008 Finnish sociologists branched out into 30 groups, while in the USA sociology is organized into 43 factions (Burawoy, 2005: 23). A shift has taken place from a single theoretically accentuated discipline to a multitude of practically-oriented specialities such as urbanology, social planning, demography, criminology, penology, hospital administration, international development work, and so on (Horowitz, 1994: 13).

In addition sociology's theoretical orientations have become more diversified. This development since the 1960s has shattered the vision of a unified discipline 'once and for all' (Levine, 1995: 279). Donald Levine lists 19 spin-offs from the sociological tradition, from rational-choice theory to symbolic interactionism, and says that this has made it problematic to conceive sociology as a discipline with an identity. Sociologists in general also find it difficult to say what the discipline consists of (Stinchcombe, 1994: 290). The increasing divergence 'may be experienced as a loss for those with strong professional attachments to the field' (Levine, 1995: 283); indeed it may even lead 'to a state of intellectual paralysis' (Levine, 1989a: 163). Thus, despite Gouldner's attempt in *Against Fragmentation* (1985), the discipline shows tendencies towards disintegration. This may in turn indicate the downfall of the integrative idea of society as was claimed by Dettling and prescribed by Thatcher.

We can read Dettling's claim – that there is no society any longer for sociology to study, so there is no need for sociologists – as meaning that the shared existence of human beings has changed in such a way that the conventional sociological idiom is 'of no interest to anybody any longer'. Perhaps this is why sociology is now, and has been for a considerable time, in trouble, not just in Germany but also the globe over. One editor of a sociological journal estimated that the discipline has been forced to adopt a defensive posture because it 'hasn't had anything to say' (Pöntinen, 1995: 251). Ten years on, another editor of the same journal was still confounded by the same predicament, 'the evaporation of sociology's societal relevance' (Jokinen, 2005: 2).

Despite such claims that society has vanished – thus removing the ground from under sociologists' feet – issues still repeatedly arise that are felt to be grave and beyond the competence of special-interest studies. On such occasions, a 'diagnosis of our time' is expected from the social sciences (Levine, 1995: 284), yet often the wait is in vain. It is said that identity is a problem for modern sociologists who in this embarrassing

situation have read and reread their classics. But ‘they have seldom been able to give us an answer on the burning issues of today’ (Boje and Svallfors, 2000: 2). Social scientists instead exhibit fragmentation and silence over acute contemporary questions, and they elaborate on the trivia where they should try to discover ‘epochal societal changes’ (Tenbruck, 1984: 308). It seems that for no few authoritative commentators sociology does not have the intellectual tools to enlighten society about itself, is not sensible enough to react to radical changes in society, and hence is of no interest and practical utility to anybody. The radical allegation is that sociology’s object of study, society, has expired.

Delete Society, Insert the Social

When society is removed from sociology, the emphasis is shifted somewhere else. Latour (2005) shows us where this is. He defines sociology as the ‘science of the living together’ (2005: 2, borrowing from Thévenot, 2004). This almost amounts to saying that sociology is simply the study of society, whose name is derived from the Latin *socius* meaning associate, colleague, comrade, companion. After all, associates, colleagues, comrades and companions are the people who live together with the rest of us, and thus make up society. Latour’s opening move is fine; it is his continuation with which I have trouble.

The fact is that Latour definitely rejects the idea that sociology should study society. His orientation, the *actor-network-theory* (ANT), is grounded in the idea that ‘there is no social dimension of any sort, no “social context”, no distinct domain of reality to which the label “social” or “society” could be attributed’. Conscious of the provocation he says that his orientation could subscribe – ‘but for very different reasons!’ – Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement that ‘There is no such thing as society’ (2005: 4–5). Latour’s project is to reassemble *the social* in such a way that no society is needed. It is possible to show, however, that the suppressed idea does not remain in limbo.

Instead of society Latour configures something which he calls *collective*; ‘from now on’, he says, ‘the word “collective” will take the place of “society”’ (p. 75; see also p. 247). In one sense the substitution does not alter that much. Whatever the term, ‘society’, ‘collective’, or something else, sociology cannot dispense with speaking of a *whole* that people make among themselves because of living together. Why then the change of words?

Latour, as with Tenbruck and Thatcher, renounces society vigorously. The force of this reaction indicates that the idea is charged with disliked values. The substitution of collective for society marks an attempt to change from a value-laden idea to a descriptive one. A reasonable starting

point is the distinction between *actors* and *observers*. Human and social scientists will often begin with this contrast and the requirement that analysts should be observers too and not just participants (see Hart, 1970 [1961]: 86; Pike, 1971 [1967]: 37–72; Zetterberg, 2006: 245–6). Latour, taking up the observer's position, turns to the actors and declares: 'We won't try to discipline you, to make you fit into our categories; we will let you deploy your own worlds, and only later will we ask you to explain how you came about settling them' (2005: 23). A choice has to be made:

[E]ither we follow social theorists and begin our travel by setting up at the start which kind of group and level of analysis we will focus on, or we follow the actors' own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups. (p. 29)

Latour's choice is obvious; the latter is the acceptable procedure. The sociologist's job is not to decide about the ingredients that make up the social world; such matters must 'be left entirely to the "actors themselves"' (2005: 257 and 30–1).

Maybe we can now discern the motive behind Latour's project as also the same one behind Tenbruck's and Thatcher's: the social ensemble is to be realized by practical actors without any conceptual ballast from the social sciences. The notion that no society exists would not be an empirical statement; more likely it would be normative, a *proscription*. The term 'society' would indicate a conceptual outlook that practical action must not have. In this view the question of sociology and society becomes a normative issue. A report from the USA states it in exactly this way; the regime that was then in power there would have been 'deeply antisociological in its ethos, hostile to the very idea of "society"' (Burawoy, 2005: 7). This regime was accused of having set about dismantling the welfare state that had been erected in the post-war period, while 'sociologists everywhere are wondering, "What's wrong with sociology?"' (Lemert, 1996: 392). Similar developments could be observed in Great Britain where Thatcherism had successfully contested some of the social rights that had previously been acquired (Urry, 2000: 165). The contestation indicated that in the statement about the non-existence of society the emphasis was on proscription more than description.

We noted above that with the passing away of traditional communities two sets of forces were liberated, the modern society and the modern state. The latter answered the expectation that 'in the future the government will have to take on many duties which it has avoided in the past' (Keynes, 1972b [1925]: 301). In the modern condition people could not be trusted to institute the requisite social controls in their spontaneous interaction. Hence 'Government will have to do it for them' (Wolfe, 1989: 199). It

seemed that the point of the newest veto on society was to prevent people other than the actors themselves from getting involved in their business.

Latour would dismantle the assumed sociological regulation of practices by depriving the science of its autonomy, by dispossessing sociologists even of sociology: 'Actors do the sociology for the sociologists and sociologists learn from the actors what makes up their set of associations' (2005: 32 and 49, n. 46). The analyst does nothing more than recapitulate what the actors have already done, and this presumably with a perfect knowledge of what they were up to. However, in his deregulative undertaking Latour gets caught up with indecision. He resolves the problem between practice and theory in three different ways. The first solution is that practical actors themselves have both language and theory to understand their behaviour. Yet Latour maintains that, like 'Jesus on the cross, it is of the actor that one should always say: "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do"'. Then who does know? The second solution is that no one knows. As well as actors social scientists 'have to remain puzzled' (2005: 46–7). 'The fact is that *no one* has the answers' (p. 138). Finally, the third answer. After stating repeatedly that actors know best, that actors teach researchers and not vice versa, and that science gets under way without presuppositions, Latour gives an example of what social scientists can nevertheless do: 'They are revealing calculative abilities in actors who did not know before they had them and making sure that some of these new competences are sunk into common sense' (p. 257). So, after all, practical actors *do not* know their competences and *do not* comprehend their own economic action. The economists, by contrast, can decode their abilities, reveal these to them, and ensure that they devise their future routines using this knowledge.

Why is it so difficult to decide? My hypothesis is that this indecision results from a decision to turn away from the idea of society, the whole that results from practical actors' action, but is not what they intended to accomplish. Without such a guiding idea one is liable to vacillate between two alternatives. One may feel obliged to respect the practical actors' knowledge, yet, as a scientist, one cannot readily give up the assumption of autonomous scientific wisdom. That assumption, however, presupposes that one has a concept which gives his or her science its indispensable independent standpoint. Indeed, we can see Latour ultimately looking for such an idea, namely for an equivalent to the idea of society and its ballast of values. At the end of his methodology Latour admits (in a section entitled 'A different definition of politics') that sociology 'also needs to tackle the ontological question of the unity of this common world' (2005: 259). The *unity* of this common world is, on the whole, what the term 'society' stands for. It seems that the idea of society is hard to quell. If it

is kicked out of the front door, it very soon returns in by the back way. This re-entrance consequently raises the question: ‘So in the end, what is ANT’s political project?’ (2005: 258).

The Eternal Return

We saw above that Latour’s attempt to drive out society from sociology did not turn out as intended, but the concept does return. My assumption is that the same is the case with the others who seek to oust society and yet intend to practise sociology. This will be demonstrated below.

When society reasserts itself, it does not do so for the sake of description alone. Society is a thoroughly obligational issue. This is revealed by what I think is a reasonable idea in the actor-network-theory: the insight that ‘society is a premature assemblage: it should be put ahead of us and not behind’ (Latour, 2005: 171). Things we put ahead of us are goals. Goals are valued and prescriptively defined. If we put society ahead of us it has some value to us and some standards will define the shape of and route to the valued thing. Thus, with society, a project is in question and politics is concerned with the realization of such projects. Political projects generally set up values. So also does Latour, for he looks for ways to assemble collectives ‘in a satisfactory form’ (p. 261). The cause he holds ‘worth living for’ is ‘to render the world more livable’ (p. 259). Correspondingly, Tenbruck wants to transpose society from the wings to centre stage. Normal sociology discovered society as a pressing force ‘behind the acting human beings’, while the task ahead is to design a sociology or, at least, *eine Wissenschaft von der Gesellschaft*, that ensures individuals have ‘the freedom to conduct their own life’ (1984: 254–5).

I shall show next how the idea of society, the normative accent included, comes back to people who have consciously broken with it. With Latour we are already acquainted; the other examples are Tenbruck, Elster, Urry and – to link the issue to a wider context – Thatcher together with her neo-liberal political programme.

First Tenbruck, in whose view a modern commonwealth cannot exist without scientific specialists with a skill ‘to ascertain and interpret the social reality’ (1984: 304). Specialists cannot do their job without proper concepts. Society is not acceptable to Tenbruck. In the end, however, one of his central concepts *is* society. Namely, we come closer to reality ‘in the same degree as we learn to speak of nameable states, nations, cultures, tribes, people, religions, associations, parties, ideologies, economies, publics and the like, as so many sociations (*Vergesellschaftungen*) of their own kind, without wrapping the deceptive band of “society” around them

all' (1981: 349). The central point is that we should learn to speak of those states, nations, cultures and so on, not as such but as 'so many *Vergesellschaftungen* of their own kind'. Common to the items in the list is that they are all *Vergesellschaftungen* or sociations. The term of the classical German sociology, *Vergesellschaftung*, is derived from the word *Gesellschaft* or society. It stands for the process whereby a number of individuals have become and are society. Thus society, expelled from sociological discourse, returns to it in a barely disguised form and the normative aspect asserts itself: it is desirable that we learn to speak of social processes as ones that institute society.

Next we have Jon Elster who also adopts the Thatcherite point of view (as observed by Holmwood, 1996: 14): 'There are no societies' (Elster, 1991 [1989]: 248). But this is a mere gesture because the sentence continues: '... only individuals who interact with each other'. The latter part of the sentence revokes the former part because Elster finds it possible to identify separate clusters of denser interaction and uses the term 'society' for such clusters: no sooner does he deny society than he fetches this out-cast back. The self-asserting society, however, is beset by a problem: 'How is spontaneous order possible' in the interactive formation (p. 250)? Elster's normative issue is about the order and 'cement of society'.

I now move to Urry and his proposal for a renewed sociology. He takes issue with 'the social as society' – societal stasis – and intends to show that, 'whatever its value in the past, it will not in the future be especially relevant as the organising concept of sociological analysis'. His project is to reconstruct 'the social as society' into 'the social as mobility' (2000: 1–2). The project leads him to consider 'new modes of putative global citizenship' (p. 168) and the rights and duties connected with it – 'mobility rights and duties' (p. 5) – which cannot be guaranteed and administered by nation-states. They can be established and governed, and here society is introduced again, 'only by some kind of putative global society' (p. 186). The 'putative global society' is of 'some kind' but certainly it is society, so society has slipped back among sociology's central concepts. The book that is intended to show 'that mobilities rather than societies should be at the heart of a reconstituted sociology' (p. 210) in the end comes to a point where the problem of 'the social as society' is at hand again. And again normative issues are involved; the question is one of citizens' rights and duties. Something important is missing, however, from Urry's involuntary restoration of society. Here I mean the essential question, and an answer to that question, what in this or any society is society? This question is at the heart of Simmel's sociology (see 1908: 12). I shall come back to this below and then proceed from it.

After the examples above it should be no great surprise that Mrs Thatcher fits in with the same pattern. Her interview with *Women's Own*

magazine denied the existence of society, twice in fact. She first asked, ‘Who is society?’ and replied ‘There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families’. ‘Families’ already compromised the core idea to a certain extent, but even more debilitation followed. ‘There is no such thing as society’, she says a second time and continues: ‘There is a living tapestry of men and women and people’ (2008 [1987]). We can take Thatcher’s living tapestry as corresponding to Latour’s collective and Tenbruck’s *Vergesellschaftung*; it is the then Prime Minister’s thinly veiled symbol for society as a whole. By denying the existence of society Thatcher the politician, like Latour the sociologist, possibly wanted to get rid of the normative implications society carries with it. Yet even the normative aspect returns. Namely, the second renunciation of society continues with the following words: ‘... and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us is prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate’. The whole (= tapestry = society) is evaluated for its ‘beauty’ and ‘quality’ and human action is consequently prompted by an appeal to responsibility. Obviously the whole, society, obliges.

Society: Dispersion and Integration

The discussion above shows that despite energetic efforts to remove society from sociology, the idea keeps coming back. It seems that the concept is intricate and hard to manage, so there is good reason to be careful with it. Normally the word is used of large collectivities in two senses. In one sense ‘society’ means connections and relations between human beings; in general it connotes social association and interaction. As the word is a noun, singular, it also has an aspect of wholeness and detachability for separate inspection and denotes a unit with boundaries which set it off from other surrounding units (Giddens, 1984: 24, 163). In the former sense society is dispersed and without a distinct shape, a mere chance as it were. In the latter sense that chance is realized and the various elements are integrated into a pattern.

The word’s two senses are interrelated. There is a bridge between them that is connected to the fact that the word is used not just to register reality but also to create reality. We saw above that the concept of society is not only descriptive but has also a normative aspect. The concept’s two senses – society as association and society as a unit – are connected in the normative aspect. In the twentieth century, the nation-state was the first practical agent in the transition from society as ‘human association in general’ to society as

‘a bounded whole’. The nation-state’s performance had one of its moral supports in sociology.

Obviously the attempts to eliminate society from sociology are not meant to deny the fact that connections exist between human beings who are seen as related to each other. The fact is too evident to be denied. Rather the denial of society is directed at a certain *form* of society, namely a form that is coincident with the nation-state. Sociology’s invention of society was motivated by a need to understand, and by means of the nation-state to conduct, social life. These collectivities were the societies sociology was preoccupied with. The nation-state was sociology’s main partner. The discipline had a practical end in what is called social governmentality; it saw societies as sovereign units founded upon social governmentality: ‘Such social governmentality has been effected through new forms of expertise, partly based upon sociology as the science of such societies’. Universities took to providing national public spheres with the information and knowledge that were needed to discuss the future organization of society (Urry, 2000: 9, 11, 211).

Sociology turned to the state to convert itself into practice, even though the state was not its single ally; in addition to governments, ‘parties, communities, associations, firms, universities, academies, mass media, churches, committees and trusts competed in utilizing and promoting the social sciences’ (Tenbruck, 1984: 166, 253; the civil society as a whole was involved; Urry, 2000: 211). Probably sociology’s co-operation with nation-states reached its high point after the Second World War. At this time sociologists and politicians ‘claimed to know the answers to such questions as, What are the supreme goals of society? What laws govern society? What is the right thing to do in politics?’ (Aarnio and Peczenik, 1995: 142). Social democracy in particular instructed citizens not only to mind their own business, but also to devote themselves to fulfilling the supreme goals of society.

The state’s share was the practical action of societal construction; sociology seconded by pointing out the goal, society, and what was required to reach it. Sociology’s task was to produce ‘coherent theoretical schemas to order bodies of human knowledge’ and to provide ‘reliable guides to social policy and planning’ (Bell, 1982: 55). The promise of the social sciences was to replace amateur politicians and administrators with ‘a new type of professional man, with specialized scientific training’, so that life ‘will go on against a background of social science’ (Julian Huxley, quoted by Alpert, 1969 [1959]: 85). Such professional men and women, trained in the social sciences, would occupy positions ‘in education, in government, in business, and in the multitudinous array of civic and social-service agencies which guide a substantial portion of the nation’s private

and public affairs' (Lerner, 1969 [1959]: 22–3; see also Urry, 2000: 211). Particularly in Parsons' post-war science, the institution of a good and just society came into view so that the spectrum of politics and public opinion could be adapted to this sociologically anticipated society (Tenbruck, 1984: 159, 243; Parsons, 1952).

This whole, grounded in scientific knowledge with a built-in normative and practical element, is the society its opponents want to get rid of. Behind this project is a change in longing. The hope of a rationally constructed society gave way to other, different hopes and a reaction emerged: 'A phalanx of sceptics appeared, preaching passivity in regard to social problems'. The advice was to let the 'big things alone, mind our own business', and leave societies in the care of invisible hands (Aarnio and Peczenik, 1995: 142–4).

However, as we saw above, the 'big things' do not consent to be left alone. They assert themselves in the shape of a reappearing society. And they also assert themselves even to those who have deliberately excluded them from consideration. From this follows on a problem. When society reasserts itself to its antagonists, it does so in an underhand manner. The nature of this restored society remains obscure. Its indistinct nature becomes visible in the indefinite language that is used to speak of it, in such expressions as 'putative global citizenship', 'putative global community', and especially 'some kind of putative global society' (Urry, 2000: 168, 174, 186). This big thing is hypothetic and in particular it is of 'some kind', of some unidentified kind. When society comes back, it returns without a clear knowledge as to its quality. Its aspect of dispersion is visible – a condition for some to celebrate, for others to detest. Its integration is a possibility that is sensed very indistinctly.

This state of affairs should be an opportunity for a sociology that understands itself to be the science of society: once again there is a perplexing spectrum of social life crying out for clarification. I said 'once again' for the reason that the condition now resembles in some respects the time of sociology's first birth. There had been a breakdown of traditional bonds, an 'unsettling of the population', 'social dislocation' and 'turbulent waters'; settled populations had been dispersed and 'a new type of people, migratory, nomadic, lacking in self-respect and discipline' was born (Polanyi, 1957 [1944]: 91–4, 128; see above). For this condition sociology invented society. What we have now, a good hundred years after sociology's first emergence, is global flows of people, information, objects, money, images and risks across regions, so that established social patterns are broken anew into 'heterogeneous, uneven and unpredictable mobilities' (Urry, 2000: 38). And once again society lies in wait for an explication. In this sense society seems to move in a circle: at first this has

discernible contours, then it becomes blurred and dissolved into mobilities, and eventually it tends to emerge again from confusion.

The flows and mobilities at the beginning of the twenty-first century replay movements that occurred more than one hundred years earlier and dissolved the social patterns of their time. It is only natural that the newly emphasized mobilities are seconded by neo-liberalism's reanimation of liberalism. Not unexpectedly sociology, too, is being reinvented, by Urry for one, who argues that 'the material reconstitution of the social presumes a sociology of diverse mobilities'. He designates his book 'as a manifesto of such a revived sociological project' (2000: 20). His project re-states and brings up to date especially classical discoveries of disorder, mobility and flux.

My own intention is to join in at a point that follows Urry's position as next in order: to rediscover society amidst the dispersion. The sense of society in this context is the integration of disjointed elements into a whole. Accordingly the classical issue concerning societal integration is the central problem here. The solution is sought from classical sociology, particularly Simmel's sociology that stated the problem in the form of a question: 'How is society possible?' (1908: 27; this question is a follow-up to his even more elemental question: What in society is society?)

Sociology was born for the first time out of the troubled social and societal relations of modernity, from its 'satanic mill'. Its goal was to clarify, pacify and consolidate modern relations in some form. The form it arrived at was, as described above, the one 'ordered through a nation-state, with clear territorial and citizenship boundaries and a system of governance over its particular citizens' (Urry, 2000: 9). The general usage of sociology, the rule also followed here up until now, is to call this form 'society'. A classical distinction, however, is now timely, namely the contrast between *society* and *community*. The distinction is needed in order to avoid repeating sociology's history without having learned any lesson from the discipline's past, especially in order to avoid reinstituting the state or other equipotent powers to their former positions. For this reason I turn next to the lesson which, to my mind, is worth learning: the shift in conceptual focus from society to community in classical (Weber) and modern (Parsons) sociology.

Notes

1 Many decades earlier sociology was denounced for much the same reasons by Benedetto Croce (see Wagner, 1990: 242–5). Helmut Schelsky (1981), Tenbruck's coeval, was similarly disappointed.

2 Lemert holds that this was true mainly of the USA; in Europe the ideal would have succeeded less well (1996: 382). In Finland and Scandinavia, the relation between elites

and the social sciences was nevertheless patterned approximately after Lemert's model. A study of Finnish alcohol policy, for example, postulated that a progressive social policy needed social scientific research for its beacon and proceeded 'from trial-and-error social policy towards controlled, experimental construction of society' (Kuusi, 1956: 4).

³ Dettling's essay is entitled *Fach ohne Boden* (Discipline without a foundation; 1996: 11–19). The possibility of a sociology without society has lately occupied several sociological minds: see Wolfe, 1989: 187–211; Touraine, 1998: 119–43; Turza, 2003: 187–198.