THE CENTRALITY OF SOCIALITY

Responses to Michael E. Brown's *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Social Sciences and the Humanities*

Edited by Jeffrey A. Halley and Harry F. Dahms

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THE CENTRALITY OF SOCIALITY

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THE CENTRALITY OF SOCIALITY: RESPONSES TO MICHAEL E. BROWN'S *THE CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL IN UNITING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES*

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Jeffrey Halley dedicates this book to his wife and love, Jeanne Halley, October 7, 1944–July 28, 2022, in remembrance of her encouragement, critical comments, and devotion during their life together.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS DISTINCTIVELY HUMAN ABOUT HUMAN AFFAIRS?

Jeffrey A. Halley and Harry F. Dahms

THE CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL

There is a startling lacuna in the status of key sociological concepts in the literature of sociology. What should be primary remains implicit, contingent, and not examined. We are speaking about the notion of the "social," and the less used "sociality." Assumptions are made that these terms are understood and are stable in their use, yet they function as a kind of black box in the literature. As Brown points out, "[s]ociology can be thought of as a discipline aimed at regulating the use of such terms according to a highly flexible language in which they circulate as 'non-rigid signifiers'... Such rigor envisions a definition capable of representing something (the social) as fixed despite the fact that it must also represent the very unfixable activity involved in *coming* to a definition... ambiguity, in the broad sense of the word, is a necessary feature of that very life..." (Brown, 2014, pp. 9–11). Glossing over this ambiguity then leads to concepts that seem more grounded in mainstream sociology, but are also problematic, such as institution, and role. This is Michael Brown's primary issue in his book *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

In his book, Brown investigates the question: what are we referring to when we use the word "social," a concept that underlies much theoretical writing in the human sciences – *both* the humanities and the social sciences – but remains taken-for-granted or rarely made explicit? His development of the notion of "sociality" leads to a critique of many standard concepts in the literature, such as the conceptualization of the social vis-a-vis the individual, to theories of action, and notions of subject-object relations.

The core of his book concerns the notion of sociality, long neglected in the social sciences. It is *what is distinctly human about human affairs*, in that for Brown, the social is an ontological priority. He demonstrates that the shared

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object of the human sciences, which unites them, is "an irreducible and irrepressible sociality and that these qualities are evident when the social is identified as the course of activity and described according to conditions of agency-dependent activity" (Brown, 2014, p. 2). As Brown develops this argument, he takes to task our taken-for-granted notions of individuality and agency in action (Brown, 2014, p. 2). Given this, he is able to develop a critique of standard concepts in the social sciences such as "interaction, cooperation, solidarity, exchange, interpersonal relations, social fact, social action, group, organization, institution, society, social structure, and social system" (Brown, 2014, p. 5).

We begin, as Brown does, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, since the key point of the book hinges on Rousseau's concept of "the basic fact." This basic fact of sociality is what Rousseau, in his concept of a "first convention," calls the "general will." It consists of an equality of dependence. Brown (2014) quotes Rousseau:

> Since each gives his entire self, the condition is equal for everyone (Rousseau, 1978, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 53).
>
> As each gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one (Rousseau, 1978, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 53).
>
> . . . in the place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body. . . which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, and its will (Rousseau, 1978, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 54).

Brown emphasizes that sociality, as the basic fact, includes notions of trust and mutuality, and not simply communication, a meeting of minds, or shared values. The latter implies that we are beginning with individuals, rather than the basic fact of the collective activity of the general will (Brown, 2014, p. 37). In the place of the individual is the continual life that people are part of in the social. For Brown, personal autonomy implies participation in the social (Brown, 2014, p. 437).

The justification for this is that we cannot conceive of a presocial human being and therefore must accept, as the basis fact, that each is dependent on all. The basic fact is not a self-contained entity – it is the basic principle. Brown concludes that *. . .humans are essentially social, that human affairs are irreducibly and irrepressibly social, and that sociality, and the 'attitude of waiting' that corresponds to it, can be understood, from the perspective of a possible unity, only as a course of activity* (Brown, 2014, p. 297; emphasis in original). Thus, sociality is always and already in motion.

If we follow this to its conclusion, we must say that this interdependence – or perhaps we should we even refer to *intra*-dependence, since "inter" implies individuals as prior to sociality, which is not conceivable – is essentially the basic fact. Brown emphasizes that it can never settle itself (Bakhtin, 1981) and is reflexive to itself (Garfinkel, 1967). Of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, Wayne Booth underscores the inherent sociality here: ". . . it seems clearly to rest on a vision of the world as essentially a collectivity of subjects who are themselves social in essence, not individuals in any usual sense of the word. . ." (Booth, 1984,

p. xxi). Out of this incessant dialectical movement comes Brown's notion of sociality, "being in the middle," and "the course of activity." If we accept the basic fact, then, we must accept the proposition that all that is human is in motion.

THE COURSE OF ACTIVITY AND BEING IN THE MIDDLE

If we posit sociality as key to what is human about human affairs, then this implies a rejection of any static concepts and requires dialectical theorizing of incessant movement and change. Brown's concept of "course of activity" and "being in the middle" accomplishes this. Brown characterizes "the social as *a course of activity* in contrast to an entity or a state of affairs" which is "consistent with Rousseau's idea of the social contract and what is actually presupposed by the human sciences" (Brown, 2014, p. 42). He underscores that "[i]f this is so, then the models of human behavior in the social sciences fall short of taking into account this dialectical movement. A course of activity... is different from action, practice, activity as such, process, and the like, which cannot be reduced to ... individual intentions, originary events, conditions and consequences, or states of mind and which cannot be registered according to an ontology of spatiotemporal distinct entities..." (Brown, 2014, p. 17).

The course of activity and being in the middle are immanent and are internally and not externally related. This leads to Brown's critique of theories of action, which he conceives of as too static, in comparison to the course of activity, which is dynamic. By the same token, Brown privileges the activity of theorizing over theory (Brown, 2014, pp. 131–149; 183–283). Brown argues that "...standard models of sociality posit relatively fixed entities, normatively constrained processes, repeatable expressions of pre-social instances of intentionality, or unacceptably reduced forms of human association. In other words, models of organization, system, culture, exchange, overlapping intentions, and the like are either inconsistent with the idea of the social they are intended to affirm or unaccountably abstract" (Brown, 2014, p. 432).

The Development of this Book Project

The genesis of the present volume of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* began as a series of responses to Michael E. Brown's, 2014 book, *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. The Southern Sociological Society convened an "author-meets-critics" session for the book at their 2019 meeting in Atlanta, with Michael J. Thompson, Jeffrey A. Halley, and Harry F. Dahms as "critics," with a response from Michael E. Brown. At that point, several of us conceived of the idea of a book in reaction to a number of the key points raised in *The Concept of the Social*.

As our authors were preparing their manuscripts for the book, a second "author-meets-critics" session was held, virtually, at the International Theory Consortium Conference in June 2021. Papers were presented by Daglind E. Sonolet, Ilaria Riccioni, Harry F. Dahms, and Alan Dunn. Michael E. Brown responded with concluding remarks.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The contributors whose essays are included in this volume discuss particular issues raised by Brown's concept of sociality, and either are located at the more or less discernible and problematic border between or at the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences. In different ways and with emphases, they address issues that implicitly or explicitly pertain to this distinction and its current relevance, and the bearing it has on efforts to grasp the social as the terrain they both touch and rely on, and directly or indirectly try to illuminate. At the same time, the efforts to clarify challenges and problems relating to the social, sociality, as well as the question of what is human in, to, and about human affairs also represent instances of delineating the nature and strength of the social today. For this reason, the chapters are not organized into parts, but instead should be read as being centered along an axis whose exact orientation cannot be identified clearly and precisely.

In her chapter, "Consciousness and Crisis: Durkheim, Marx, Spinoza and Revolutionary versus Reactionary Spirit Today," Roslyn Wallach Bologh addresses what Michael E. Brown calls the immanence of sociality to individuality, by focusing on the essentially social nature of human consciousness. Via an exploration of Durkheim's analysis of human consciousness, beginning with totemism and concluding with his analysis of German consciousness at the time of WWI, Bologh provides insights into the rise and nature of political movements. Her special focus is on extreme right-wing political groups and leaders today and the spirit of the French Revolution in European and American history. Referring to Marx's early writings on consciousness, spiritual nourishment, and the fettering of forces of production and his later writings on the critical significance of fetishism, and the role of "fictitious" capital, Bologh concludes that bringing together the insights of Durkheim, Marx, and Spinoza can provide a way to analyze and address the interlocking social, political, economic, and cultural crises of today.

In his essay, "The Uncertainties of the Social," Jean-Louis Fabiani attempts to rethink the social from the vantage point of intellectual history, aiming to contribute to the continuing discussion centering on what "the social" is when being concerned with intellectual objects. Fabiani first examines the question of the unity of the social sciences in the light of proliferating specialized studies, emphasizing the questioning of such entities as institutions as a process. He then turns to the sociological analysis of concepts that emerge in diverse social contexts. The next two sections are dedicated to Pierre Bourdieu's "grand" theoretical endeavor, in comparison to Bruno Latour's strategy of flattening the social, which is the object of Fabiani's critical analysis. This approach enables the author, in the final two sections, to propose a renewed analytical frame capable of accounting for the sociality of intellectual contents, based on the "density of practices" (Stéphane Van Damme).

In the third chapter, entitled "Brown on Sociality and the Social," Peter K. Manning contends that theorists and theory have lost their way. By contrast, in search of the social – what is left out and remains implicit – Brown offers

guidelines for reviewing and finding new ways of writing. Manning is concerned with the role of the tantalizing "actor" in the process of theorizing: is s/he a puppet on a structural string, a bundle of emotions, a strategic actor employing tactics of assertion, or a rational chooser? Brown's treatment of the actor as a momentary social creation draws attention to how what is said about the actor implies what is *not* said, as well as to the dubiousness of "words." In light of this stance, Manning argues that the body in fact acts without words, even though it remains a shadow figure in current thinking, including Brown's *The Centrality of Sociality*. Studies of Manning and Fabrega highlight the cross-cultural relevance of the self-body connection as evidence of the situated nature of the actor, along with the meaning of the body in time and space.

In "Brown's 'Course of Activity': Non-Repeatability, the Avant-Garde, and Temporality," Jeffrey A. Halley focuses on Brown's concept of a "course of activity" in its relation to nonrepeatability, the avant-garde, and temporality. Of special importance for Halley is the bearing of the notion of sociality on the arts and humanities in regard to art and its avant-garde moments –particularly in his work on Dada and Brown's accounts of two avant-garde theatrical performances. His chapter examines what is entailed by separating agency from individuality and by the idea of a "course of activity," (going on) and its relation to the concept of sociality. This also bears on questions of ontology, as Brown's "course of activity" is generative and nonrepeatable. The idea of the course of activity and its nonrepeatability are related to both avant-garde practice and new notions of temporality. Halley refers here to the avant-garde of dada and surrealism, and to conceptions of time in the works of Jean Duvignaud, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Jean-Paul Sartre. He raises the question here of teleological understanding – how we link the present course of activity with future events.

"The Concept of Sociality in the Literary Criticism of Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann and Theodor W. Adorno" is the title of Daglind E. Sonolet's exploration of the notion of the social in the literary criticism of Lukács, Goldmann and Adorno, and, in particular, their use of the essay form, which they maintain is a key form of critique during times of swift social change. While the young Lukács embraced the essay form, by the 1930s he had turned away from it toward instead a critical or socialist realism as a source of enduring cultural values. In his writing on Balzac, Stendhal, Thomas Mann, and Solzhenitsyn, concerning the difference between the European realist novel and the Soviet novel, Lukács developed a concept of the social totality as a dialectical summation of perspectives. These impose on the individual writer the moral task of choosing between "progress" and what he characterizes as avant-garde "negativity." However, this seems inconsistent with his espousal of a reflection theory of art and sacrifices the social aspect of production and reception to the writer's individual choice. Although influenced by Lukács, Goldmann's approach to literature emphasizes its social dimension. Cultural production is carried out by the social group, the transindividual subject. He takes from Lukács's early writings a theory of tragedy, and the concept of "maximum possible consciousness," which he develops in his study of Racine and Jansenism. This consciousness is the world

vision of a social group, and it structures the work of the writer. Turning to the twentieth century, he finds in the literature of absence, Malraux's novels, the *nouveau roman*, and in the theater of Sartre and Genet, that cultural creation acts as resistance to capitalist society. For Theodor Adorno, the carrier of the social lies within the avant-garde, with its techniques and procedures, exemplified by the writings of Kafka. Through its use of formal innovation, especially in the use of the essay, small forms, and the fragment or the aggressively, art can critique the process of societal rationalization and maintain sense of the possibility of change.

The chapter, "In Defense of the Social: Convergences and Divergences between the Humanities and Social Sciences in the United States," by Harry F. Dahms, emphasizes the need to examine how such concepts as *the social*, *sociality*, as well as the much broader *society*, must be viewed "in time and space," as they are at the same time malleable, reflective of concrete socio-historical circumstances, and indicative of national and regional differences. It is also important to keep in mind that those circumstances exert specific kinds of gravity on efforts to illuminate and apply the above concepts, in the interest of examining the societal realities they denote, their concrete content and meaning, and how those efforts themselves are symptomatic of the distinctive social, cultural, political, and economic features. In the United States, related challenges are especially pronounced, for a range of reasons, including especially the fact that as a "young nation" that was created under very unique conditions (while also influencing all subsequent history elsewhere to a greater or lesser extent), the character of the social and the foundations of sociality are discernibly different from most other "societies" on planet Earth (including other settler and immigrant societies, which were prone to remaining much more closely tied to the country of origin and its distinctive traditions and identity). In part due to its sheer size and stance of superiority regarding other countries, it is especially challenging to gauge the bearing and shaping power of unique ("exceptional") aspects of the United States on all things social. As an acute outlier in many ways, especially when compared to other industrialized, democratic, and capitalist societies, scholars, researchers, and theorists in American society, both in the social sciences and humanities, are persistently in danger of essentializing specificity and exception as lenses through which to view the form and substance of the *social*. Against the neoliberal trend to pit the social sciences and humanities against each other, they must learn to collaborate and complement each other in ways that secure the independence and autonomy of the *social*, *sociality*, and *society*.

Michael J. Thompson's chapter, "The Ontology of the Social as a Theory of Social Forms," outlines a social ontology that is critical and political, and contrasts this to the theory of sociality as presented in the work of Michael Brown. For Thompson, we need to see the social ontologically, as a dialectical mediation of layered structures. The ontology of social forms that he develops demands functional, descriptive, and evaluative categories. However, in order to complete his critical social ontology, he takes into account the idea of power. Thompson contrasts his critical ontological approach with other recent postmetaphysical approaches of later critical theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, that rely on

neo-idealistic notions, such as discourse and recognition. Thompson sees Brown's concept of sociality as a possible necessary but not sufficient condition of critical analysis, perhaps as an aspect of critical subjectivity understood as the capacity of individual subjects to relate to one another, even in the "irrational society" of capitalism.

Allen Dunn's essay, "Other Voices: The Concept of Heteroglossia in Michael E. Brown's *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and Social Sciences*," considers the Bakhtinian account of language that Michael Brown presents in his book and suggests that it is in tension with his Rousseauian description of human sociality. In similar fashion as Rousseau, according to Brown, human sociality derives from a recognition of mutual dependence that cements the disparate wills of individuals into a general will which, in turn, enforces social equality and protects the rights of all. Brown asserts that this fundamental human sociality is instantiated in language itself, describing it not as communication, but as "an anti-telic moment of collective enunciation," and identifying this collective enunciation with Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. Yet, this approach causes Brown to downplay the drama of individual and social struggle that is at the center of Bakhtin's work, thus underestimating its power as a force for social change.

The ninth chapter, by Ilaria Riccioni, addresses "Conceptual Implications in Social Sciences for Inquiring into the Social. Insights from Michael E. Brown's *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Social Sciences and Humanities*." She asks what exactly we mean by "the social," and whether we are in static issue or dynamic terms, and as a theoretical or a grounded empirical concept? She also asks whether this concept should be capable of uniting two orders of knowledge, such as the social sciences and the humanities, in a broad sense, or whether this knowledge should be considered within a reciprocal relationship, creating a tension that can have consequences – uniting in some cases, but also differentiating and conflicting in others. Brown's book being extraordinarily detailed and consequent in this regard, it presents a continuous attempt to develop a terminology that can move from static concepts of the social in favor of dynamic ones.

Michael W. Raphael's chapter, "Theorizing, Bounded Rationality, and Expertise: Cognitive Sociology and the Quasi-Realism of Problem-Solving as a Course of Activity," presents cognitive sociology as a paradigm appropriate to the concept of the social, understood as an ongoing course of activity through the "quasi-realism" of problem-solving as a course of activity. In doing so, he shows how bounded rationality and expertise play a crucial role in how communication interacts with the division of cognitive labor. This is true of what he calls "representational representationality," the idea that reveals how clarity among language, meaning, and thought is relative to issues of audience and their ignorance. This concept is significant because it demonstrates how the relationships between meaning, language, and thought lead to "communicative errors" – errors that arise from a predicament of intelligibility and not merely arising from issues of computational skill, as described by Herbert Simon's model of bounded rationality and expertise in human problem-solving. What follows shows how the means for "adapting to ambiguity" distinguishes Simon's model from a quasi-real model in terms of its principles of

rationality, efficiency, and the cognitive styles of problem-solving adopted in deliberate practice. This bears on what "examples" are good for in the problem-solving process, thereby revealing the "politics of expertise." These conflicts in sociological explanations of strategy cannot be seen merely as a pluralism of values. Rather, the conflicting explanations of theory and theorizing can only be resolved when the "situational rationality" of sociology as a discipline realizes the quasi-realism of problem-solving as a course of activity.

In his response to all the previous essays, "What is Distinctively Human about Human Affairs: Sociality and the Question of Society," Michael E. Brown summarizes the formation of the concept of "sociality" as it was developed in *The Concept of the Social in Uniting the Humanities and Social Sciences*. The book's thesis is that if the human sciences are to have a representative *discipline* that defines human reality – in contrast to a *field* of largely topical studies – this discipline must be in possession of a concept of its distinctive reality. The basic fact the concept describes, then, must be indisputable: irreducible and irrepressible as well as distinctively human. These qualities are satisfied by the formula "each-dependent-on-All," where each shows itself as "*intra*-dependence" and, therefore, as "being-in-the-middle" of a "course of activity without immanent beginning and end." Applying this concept to diverse theoretical positions serves two purposes: first, to determine how a given theory might differ – contrary to conventional pedagogies in sociological theory – when the basic fact is systematically taken into account; and second, to establish among the implications of the concept a dialectic of social progress and societal change that is incompatible with received positive ideas of society – e.g., as an entity, system, or totality – and compatible with the idea of such an apparent formation as a project in which the manifold (internal) relations of each-dependent-on-All present social progress as the ongoing *reality* of human reality.

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