The social sciences inherited from political philosophy their most basic questions. This observation is the starting-point for Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in *De la justification* (1991: 39) who show that the most clear-cut theoretical approaches in the social sciences – such as the ontological holism in much of sociology and the individualism in economics – should be read as opposed to social metaphysics that are unable to understand the superior principle that they share. Trying to find theoretical reason for assuming that agreement between human beings is possible, both of these approaches presuppose one ground for such agreement – ‘collective identity or the market value’ (44) – at the expense, though, of losing the understanding of how one form of agreement rather than another emerges. Boltanski and Thévenot call this operation a ‘reduction of political metaphysics in the social sciences’ (43) and their book is devoted to the ‘unconcealing of the underlying political metaphysics’. This operation, however ‘is made very difficult because of the rupture with philosophy through which both economics and sociology constituted themselves as scientific disciplines. . . . Both have been born from political philosophies that have served as their matrices and in which the metaphysics are visible’ (44).1

The reconstruction of those metaphysics that lie behind social-science reasoning, as performed in *De la justification*, has enabled the shift of perspective that has generated the research programme of the group around Boltanski and Thévenot that is discussed elsewhere (Wagner 1999; Wagner 2004). The repertoires of moral-political evaluation that human beings employ in situations in need of justification are practical political philosophies that are derived from the canonized approaches to political theory. Thus, normative political philosophy is indeed empirically found in social life, and this form of reasoning emerges, as is appropriate for the political, whenever there is a search for ‘the ground of an agreement’, i.e. when a consensus about the interpretation of a situation is to be reached.

While this programme is one of the most important intellectual events in the social and political sciences over the past two decades (see also the discussion in Chapter 6 by Frédéric Vandenberghhe), it does not answer all the questions that it raises. Among the criticism it faced, one major accusation held that the approach ultimately favours a return of the political, even though in a particular way, and the neglect of, or the emptying out of, the social. While not doing justice to the work of the group, such reproach nevertheless points to the persistence
of the divide between the political and the social, which opened with the rise of the social sciences and cannot easily be undone. In the light of this observation, it remains important to ask what precisely was the nature of that ‘rupture with philosophy’ that gave birth to the social sciences, what brought it about, and what are its consequences?

Far from giving exhaustive answers to any of these questions, this essay will merely claim that these are important questions to be raised and, possibly, also indicate some directions in which answers may be found. To fully grasp the issues at stake in contemporary social theory, it will need to proceed through a brief historical reconstruction of the way in which the social was separated from the political, and gradually took over the role of the political. The separation of social theory from political philosophy, as diagnosed by Boltanski and Thévenot, is often seen as coinciding with the decline of political philosophy. If this were so, though, then it would be more appropriate to say that the social sciences are a way of solving political issues by other means than philosophy – since political issues will not go away. At a closer look, indeed what happened was not the disappearance of political philosophy, but the alignment of a certain form of political theory, with individualist liberalism at its core, with a rather technocratic understanding of social science. Such a combination of genres reigned over the socio-political world during much of the second post-war period. If there are signs today that the end of that reign is reached, it is high time to understand its mode of governance.

The emergence of the social from within the political

From its origins in ancient Greece, the term ‘political’ refers to that which (any collectivity of) human beings deal with in common, or to their activity of dealing with certain matters in common. The term ‘social’ – and its correlates in other European languages – refers, in turn, to the connectedness of a human being to others. We could say that it enables us to talk about situations in which human beings create relations to one another. Logically, it seems, the social should include the political. Not always when human beings relate to one another do they do so with a view to dealing with common matters. Whenever they deal with common matters, though, they need to relate to one another. Rather than merely marking a difference between forms of human relations, though, the rise of social theory from the late eighteenth-century onwards offered a particular interpretation of that difference. A very specific way of talking about connections between human beings, namely, was introduced with the term ‘society’; and as a result the term ‘social sciences’ emerged in the eighteenth-century ever more strongly to gradually replace, or at least diminish the centrality of, terms such as ‘moral and political sciences’ or ‘state sciences’.

The career of the term ‘society’ went through several phases. Initially, it had no direct political meaning. A ‘society’ was a voluntary association of human beings that came together for a purpose (Heilbron 1995: 87). Gradually, however, it came to be used in the moral and political sciences, in particular within French and Scottish debates, and it acquired the place of the denomination for the key object of socio-political life there. In combinations such as ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’, it referred to nothing else but the state, but from a point of view of contract theory, namely as the aggregation of human beings that have come together for a purpose, implying now that all human beings on a given territory agreed on the purpose, unlike in the earlier ‘private’ meaning of ‘society’. Thus, it retained its original meaning, but was now employed, by way of analogy or counterfactual hypothesis, to explain the emergence of a polity of human beings under conditions of equal liberty. Clearly, a ‘social’ term was here used for ‘political’ matters: the bond between those beings was political;
they only linked up to each other because of a common need or purpose. However, it was also a specific way of thinking the political. In the hypothetical state of nature, i.e. ‘before’ the formation of the contract, politics does not exist, in this view. Such thinking was alien to ancient political thought, in which the human being was a zoon politikon, or in other words, in which the question of handling things in common was a constitutive problématique of human life. In contract theory, in contrast, based on modernist individualism, the human being was first thought as a being without political bond. It is only the unpredictable or even outright conflict-prone nature of their social relations that made humans create a political bond.3

From such a derivation of the political from the social in individualist theorizing, the next step in conceptual development was a novel form of separating the social from the political, from the late eighteenth-century onwards. ‘Society’ came now to be seen as a phenomenon that was different from the polity, even though it remained articulated with the polity. The idea of ‘society’ as a sui generis reality between the polity and the individuals (or households) continued to suggest, along the lines of the earlier conceptual innovation, that there were social bonds between human beings that were different from their political bonds. In most versions of nineteenth-century social theory, however, the character and extension of the social bond was conceptualized in such a way that it could sustain the political bond (Wagner 2001). Thus, the social was used to solve the problem of the political, a problem that had become intractable, as I will argue later, under conditions of individual liberty. This kind of thinking continues its grip on our ways of conceptualizing the political. The idea of a ‘social substrate’ necessarily underlying any viable polity, for instance, is used to analyse the relation between the European democratic nation-states and the emerging European polity (e.g. Offe 1998). True, in some versions, most prominently the Marxian one, it was precisely the tension between the structure of the social bond and the structure of the political bond that provided the moving force for social change. Such thinking, though, rather than providing an alternative, merely inverts the idea that a certain structure of social bonds is required to sustain a polity.

The social bond was conceptually separated from the political one only to be reconnected to it in the next conceptual step.4 The separation was necessary, in the first instance, to underpin an individualist conception of freedom; the reconnection was necessary to link freedom to predictability. Even given complete autonomy, so the reasoning of the social sciences goes, human beings would reveal themselves driven by a limited number of intelligible inclinations. And this linkage of freedom and predictability became particularly important at the historical moment when the externally imposed barriers to free deliberation threatened to be removed; the moment of the American and French Revolutions.

The moment of the revolution

These revolutions gave institutional expression to the political aspect of a broader culture of individual autonomy that is a key element of modernity. In this sense, much of this era can be seen as a liberation of human beings from imposed ties, but this liberation was far from unproblematic. As Claude Lefort (1986: 214–215) once described this feature of modernity: ‘When he is defined as independent, the individual does not exchange ... one certainty against another one. ... The new mode of existence of the individual within the horizons of democracy does not merely emerge as the promise to control one’s own destiny, but also and not less as the dispossession of the assurance as to one’s identity – of the assurance which once appeared to be provided by one’s place, by one’s social condition, or by the possibility of
attaching oneself to a legitimate authority.’ Liberation is here interpreted as an increase of contingency and uncertainty in the lives of human beings.

If this view were unequivocally valid, one should expect a philosophy of contingency – in Richard Rorty’s style (1989), for instance – linked to a liberal-individualist political theory to dominate the intellectual scene forever after the successful revolutions. However, historically this was not at all the case. In contrast, ‘the historical moment, about which we speak, emerges in such a way that the real rising of the political instance entails its theoretical abatement’ (Manent 1994: 123). Instead, the historical moment of liberty coincided with the rise of social theory. ‘Society’ as the object of the social sciences has been a ‘post-revolutionary discovery’; or, to put it even more succinctly, ‘the sociological point of view constitutes itself in the moment when the notion of liberty becomes the principal articulation of the human world’ (Manent 1994: 75 and 113). Such apparent paradox reveals the aporia of political thought after liberation. Very generally speaking, social theory was exactly a part of the response human beings gave to their new condition of – self-incurred, one might say – contingency and principled uncertainty. Being unable to rely any longer on externally defined certainties, socio-political thinkers started searching for regularities and continuities which exist without being commanded, or even at all created. Social theory has been a means to decrease contingency.

The problem of post-revolutionary liberty

One can understand such intellectual shift by means of a look at the deep shock the revolutions meant to social and political thought (Wagner 1998). In a first step, somewhat schematically described, the experience demanded the substitution of the republican concept of liberty for a liberal one. In the Hobbes-Lockean lineage, liberals define liberty as non-interference. The state, founded by free contract, dominates over the individuals, but it interferes with their liberties only to the degree required for the maintenance of order. The liberal tradition needs to draw a strong boundary between the public and the private; whatever social bonds exist in the latter, they will not impact on the former, the form of which is determined by reason. Since non-interference of the public into the private is the supreme principle, this thinking can only have a ‘thin’, a-social concept of membership in a polity. In contrast, republicans define liberty as non-domination. Drawing via Machiavelli on Roman (and Greek) political thought, non-domination is conceptualized in stronger terms than non-interference; it requires security against interference. Such security stems at least in part from the ways in which citizens relate to each other, in other words: from their social bonds, so that there is a less sharp divide between the private and the public and a ‘thicker’ concept of membership than in liberalism (see Pettit 1997; Skinner 1998, for recent accounts).

Among historians of political thought today, there is broad – maybe even too broad, but this is not the space for further discussion – agreement that republicanism was by and large abandoned around the turn of the eighteenth-century, and liberalism, though it neither appeared particularly powerful nor coherent before, very soon emerged as the pivotal political theory in post-revolutionary polities. Despite being inspired by republican thinking, the revolutions aimed at combining two objectives that proved to be practically impossible to hold together. On the one hand, they aimed at transforming state sovereignty in the hands of the monarch into popular sovereignty, i.e. they worked with extended notions of citizenship and liberty. On the other hand, they held such a transformation of the polity to be conceivable only in the form of the existing territorial state and within its dimensions.
Such double transformation entailed, first, that the existing social bonds between the people, tainted with the suspicion of domination and privilege characteristic of feudal society, had to be weakened or abolished. Thus, however, a major available resource for a substantive, ‘thick’ grounding of a modern republic was rejected. Second, the idea of extending political rights widely cast doubts on the viability of a demanding, socially rich concept of liberty such as the one upheld in the republican tradition. Caution seemed to demand, not least for some more conservative observers, limiting the substance of the concept of liberty at the moment at which its reach was extended. As a consequence, the public realm, the polity, was robbed of most of its ‘social’ substance and the formal process through which common deliberations were reached was emphasized instead. The adoption of some kind of such a proceduralist, individualist liberalism is the main reason why the tradition of political philosophy declined. With the renunciation of any substantive, social foundation of the polity and ‘a total grounding of government in self-interest and consent’ (Wood 1998 [1969]: 614 and 612, about the founding of the USA), the conclusion seemed undeniable that, once the reasonable will of the human beings had been cast into institutions, the political order must be seen as intrinsically satisfactory (Manent 1994: 228–9).

The rise of social theory

Not everybody, though, was convinced that such solution was viable, in particular in Europe where the revolution towards self-determination seemed to be intrinsically connected to the possibility of terror. ‘The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations’, as Edmund Burke (1993 [1790]: 8–9) famously put it in his reflections on the French Revolution. While individualist liberalism may be seen as providing the (‘negative’) concept of liberty as non-interference that may live up to Burke’s requirements under the proviso that the state is capable of maintaining order for and above the individuals, there is another way out of the aporia of liberty, namely the attempt to arrive at knowing ‘what it will please them to do’ by other means. The American and French revolutions, thus, strongly suggested to study what held human beings together, how they would actually organize their lives – individually, in ‘associations’ (Alexis de Tocqueville) or ‘social movements’ (Lorenz von Stein), and in the polity and the ‘nation’ – and what kinds of regularities and orders could be expected, if people were permitted to do so on their own, without imposed restrictions. This is a new search for social bonds, which is simultaneously one major root of social theory and a politically motivated search.

It soon emerged that there was a variety of ways to conceptually determine ‘what it will please them to do’, and this variety forms precisely the social metaphysics that Boltanski and Thévenot chose as the starting-point for their reconstruction of practical political philosophy. Some strategies start out directly from the assumptions of individualist liberalism. The rights-endowed individual became in such views the only conceivable ontological as well as the methodological foundation of a science of political matters after the revolutions. Once the rights of man had been generally accepted as self-evident and unalienable, it seemed obvious, to Turgot and Condorcet for instance, that they were also ‘the logical foundation of the science of society’ (Baker 1975: 218). In rights-based liberalism, the individual is the only category that need not, often in fact – cannot, be debated.

Once this assumption was accepted, basically two avenues of constructing a science of the political had opened. Both these forms of theorizing connect modernist political philosophy,
i.e. individualist liberalism, to a science of the political. 8 One possibility was to try to identify by theoretical reasoning the basic features of this unit of analysis, the individual human being, and its actions. Since this unit was conceived as an ontological starting-point, devoid of all specific, historical and social, ties to the world, its characterization was to proceed from some inherent features. From earlier debates, those features had often been conceived as twofold, as passions and as interests. In the late Enlightenment context, the rational side of this dichotomy was regarded as the one amenable to systematic reasoning. It thus allowed the building of a scientific approach to the study of at least one aspect of human activity, namely the production and distribution of material wealth. 9 This approach inaugurated the tradition of political economy, later to be transformed into neo-classical economics and, still later, into rational choice theory. The moral and political philosophy of the early modern period split into a political theory based on the idea of the social contract and a rationalized moral theory based on the idea of exchange. In both cases, the individual is the starting-point and unit of the analysis.

While political economy was based on a highly abstract, but for the same reasons extremely powerful, assumption of human rationality, the other conclusion from the individualist foundational principle was much more cautious. Avoiding any substantive assumptions on the driving forces in human beings at all, the statistical approach, often under the label of political arithmetic, resorted to the collection of numerically treatable information about human behaviour. The space of substantive presuppositions was radically emptied in this thinking, but the methodological confidence in mathematics increased in inverse proportion (Desrosières 1993).

Thus, two strands of political thought that had been proposed and elaborated for some time rose to new and greater prominence, political economy and political arithmetic. The denominations these approaches were known by in the late eighteenth-century referred explicitly to political matters. Both were to lose these attributes in the nineteenth-century when they had consolidated their ways of proceeding and when the application of these cognitive forms had established predominance over political deliberation in decision on common matters, at least in the view of many economists and statisticians. Mostly, this terminological change has been interpreted as an autonomization of cognitive approaches and as a differentiation of the sciences into disciplines. However, it is not exactly appropriate to say that economics and statistics separated from politics. Once the approaches of the former two are accepted as comprehensively valid, there is nothing political left to study. The common just emerges from assumptions about rationality or from aggregation.

The acceptance of the economic and the statistic ways of conceiving of the social world did not go without criticism; and they were never accepted as the only possible ways anywhere. However, the critiques and alternatives that were proposed most often accepted the fundamental change in political reasoning after the construction of a polity based on the assumption of free individuals. 10 After such a polity had begun to come into existence, new problems were identified. These were now essentially liberal problems; they resulted, one might say, from the observation that not everything that was needed for organizing a liberal polity could indeed be derived from an ‘original position’ (John Rawls 1971). Two main types of problems may be distinguished by reference to the hypothetical original position in which individuals meet under a veil of ignorance.

On the one hand, the range of conclusions that could be drawn from the assumption of free and equal individuals was too limited. These individuals’ relations were structured by the existence of politically important ‘pre-political’ social facts, of orientations and links between human beings that were seen to already exist before individuals entered into political communication and deliberation. On the other hand, the working of the liberal rules would
themselves produce new kinds of social relations, ‘post-political’ relations, which would have a structuring impact on the polity in turn.

Attempts to theorize ‘pre-political’ relations all start out from the critical observation that the human being who enters into political relations is not such a kind of individual as liberal political theory described it, and that the hypothesis of any original position would lead to serious flaws in the conclusions. This thinking emphasizes the rootedness of the singular human beings in contexts from which their ways of giving meaning to the world stem. The broadest intellectual movement of this kind has been the cultural-linguistic theory of the boundaries of the polity, which inaugurated culturalist thinking in social theory and also became one source of later nationalism. However, the contexts need not necessarily be defined in collectivistic terms; two major alternatives have been developed across the past two centuries. They can also be conceptualized as modes of intersubjectivity emerging from an idea of primary sociality and of interaction, such as in the early works by Hegel (see, e.g. Honneth 1992; Joas 1992), or they can start out from an original condition of being-in-the-world and of being-with, as developed by Martin Heidegger and his followers (see, e.g. Nancy 1986; 2001). In both cases, though such alternative assumptions do not lead as directly to ideas about the form of the polity as collectivistic theories do.

The other main line of post-revolutionary social thought started out from the insights, first, that the basic liberal assumptions, once they were cast into effective rules, would have durable and important effects on what social theorists would soon call the ‘structure’ of social relations. In this sense we can refer to those relations as being conceived as ‘post-political’. And second, the question of such relations was forced on to the agenda of social and political thought by the fact that the liberal assumptions on their own did not suffice to create and justify a political order. The observation of structures of representation was used to enhance stability and certainty in political procedures that otherwise could appear to be opened to all contingencies by the abolition of any legitimacy of preordained orders. There are then again two main strategies for rediscovering certainties, systematic observation and reflective conceptualization. These two intellectual responses to the political problématique inaugurate two further modes of social theorizing, the behavioural and, based on a social-interest theory of representation, the structural-functional one. Unlike economics and statistics, they do not make individualistic assumptions but aim at grounding socio-political life in purely social forms.

The social and the political bond after the rise of social theory

Thus, all basic approaches to social theory can be regarded as ways of dealing with the problem of contingency after the assertion of human freedom. Theories of the social are proposed to make intelligible the possibilities and probabilities of actions and their consequences in the space of the political that was widely opened at the moment at which it was exclusively the free will of its members that should determine the polity. Philosophies of the political had long already known what is at stake, and from Greek political thought to Renaissance humanism they had tried to give reasons and means for both accepting the openness of the political and limiting its impact. Working generally with the view that politics is seen as a human activity that by its nature is open, plural and diverse (Arendt 1958), any strong cognitive linkage of free action and predictable outcome was inconceivable. But political philosophy had never before been required to develop its reasoning under the assumption of equal liberty of all members of the polity, and it was under these circumstances that, apparently paradoxically, ‘the sociological point of view constitutes itself in the moment
when the notion of liberty becomes the principal articulation of the human world’, to paraphrase Manent again.

More recently, such social theorizing has come under strong attack, mostly because of its inherent determinism. Orderly outcomes can only result from planned or routine activities, work and labour in Hannah Arendt’s terminology, over which certainty can be established before they are started. In contrast, political action in a context of liberty must go along with contingency of outcomes. From an Arendtian viewpoint, thus, social theory establishes an impossible connection. Trying to identify laws and regularities of human action and societal development, social theory necessarily abandoned the heritage of political philosophy, the emphasis on creative agency, irreducible diversity and the permanent possibility of unpredictable beginnings. It is in the light of such considerations that the closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed a revival of political philosophies of freedom, often going beyond concepts of liberty as held in liberal political theory. These works, by authors such as Claude Lefort, Pierre Manent or, more historically oriented, Quentin Skinner, are not merely contributions to political philosophy or its history. Rather, they challenge the very separation of social theory from political philosophy.

As much as the critique of social theory from such a perspective is highly valid, however, the mere return to political philosophy is no solution to the issues that are raised. Many of the contributions to the current debate fail to address the reasons for the historical decline of political philosophy and the concomitant rise of social theory. And those that do, most often conclude on a normative rejection of ‘the invention of the social’ (Donzelot 1984) because of the implied move towards the ‘administration of the social’ (Arendt 1958) without, though, fully appreciating the ways in which politics was transformed in response to actually problematic situations rather than merely because of misconceptions of the political. It is on those grounds that this essay needed to reconstruct, even if in all due brevity, the historical shift from the political to the social with a view to the specific conceptions of the political and of the social bond.

In our brief intellectual history, one key observation concerned the centrality of a notion of equal liberty in European (and North American) history of the past two centuries. This notion is closely related to the assumption of ‘common humanity’ made by Boltanski and Thévenot to identify the common principles of the social metaphysics. We may say that Boltanski and Thévenot only look at ‘modern’ modes of justification, or that they only draw on the resources of political modernity in their reconstruction. While they do thematize the boundary they thus create, for instance in their discussion of eugenics, they do not reflect on the conceptual relation of that assumption to the modes of justification that are reigned by it. In our reconstruction above, this assumption is seen as being at the core of individualist liberalism, the pivotal theory of political modernity. If it is accepted as in some way inescapable, there are then three ways to deal with this approach.

First, one can take individualist liberalism as self-sufficient for the normative underpinning of ‘modern societies’. All one needs to posit is the equal freedom of rights-endowed human beings, and everything else can be left to those human beings’ use of the liberties. This is the position to which Burke objected. In the terminology chosen here, it conceives of only a thin political bond between human beings and of no social bond of any interest at all. Second, one can argue that equal liberty is only the starting-point for reasoning about a political modernity that is furthermore characterized by the communicative interaction between human beings with a view to determine what they need to regulate in common and how they should do so. This is the republican position that has largely been found, even while attractive, implausible and unsustainable under conditions of large societies with complex forms of interaction. It
works with a strong assumption about political bonds being woven and constantly rewoven in social interaction, but it says little to nothing about the nature of those bonds. Third, one can respond to the desire of knowing more about the bases on which humans interact by observing and conceptualizing their modes of interaction with various auxiliary means. This is the way social theory and the social sciences went, and it has been accused of socially overdetermining human life. This approach works with a strong conception of the social bond, or rather: with a variety of such conceptions, and it has largely forgotten about the political question that stood at its origins.

A comprehensive political sociology that reopens the connection between social theory and political philosophy, and that can draw some inspiration from Boltanski and Thévenot’s theory of justification, would stand between the second and the third position, while accepting elements of the first as a background. It allows for substantive assumptions, the application of which determines the outcome of interactions and the positions of human beings in society; in this sense it operates in the mode of social theory. But it also holds that the application of such assumptions is itself a possible concern of dispute and interpretation, thus requiring the kind of communicative deliberation that is at the centre of republican political philosophy. There is, thus, a possible theoretical position that integrates again what was separated in the intellectual history of the past two centuries, the conceptualization of the political and of the social. It still needs to be shown, in part contra Boltanski and Thévenot’s own claims, that from this position a sociology of entire social configurations can be developed that sustains the concern for political forms. Lacking the space to demonstrate this in detail here, I will just use as an illustration the political history of post-Second World War Europe.11

**Contemporary modern polities and their need for justification**

The reconstitution of polities during this period was marked by a strong emphasis on civic liberty and the rule of law, stronger indeed than during the nineteenth-century and the first half of the twentieth-century. We recognize here the application of individualist liberalism as a normative political philosophy underlying these polities. A closer look, however, will also reveal that the relatively stable West European political orders of the ‘thirty glorious years’ (Jean Fourastié 2004) were indeed not based on the pure procedurality of rights-based individualist liberalism. Domestically, as liberal-democratic nation-states with increasingly developed welfare policies, they rather showed signs of a compromise between liberal justifications and both those of a cultural–linguistic and a social-interest based nature. They, thus, combined a rational–individualist, a cultural–linguistic and a structural–functional socio-political theory – in common political terms known as liberalism, nationalism and socialism – into a viable arrangement, which was not theoretically consistent on any terms, but was seen as satisfactory by a large majority of the population, as increasing ‘mass loyalty’ seemed to demonstrate until the late 1960s. Vaguely aware of the inconsistency of this liberal–cultural–social foundational compromise, furthermore, these polities tied those justifications together by recourse to an empirical science of politics and society, using the tools of behaviourism and statistics, which was to guide the way on a path of wealth and loyalty, the employment of which was never free of technocratic undertones.

Historically existing polities can thus be interpreted as institutionalized compromises of a variety of basic modes of justification. Individualist liberalism provides the background, and also creates the basic problématique, against which the other modes of justification are being deployed. It allows the question of the constitution of a polity to be seen as indeed a political
one, as the foundation of an agreement under conditions of liberty, but as one that cannot be resolved by the conventional means of political philosophy. Assumptions about the social bond, most importantly the cultural-linguistic one and the structural-functional one, then step in to deal with the problématique thus created. They are not just social theories; they support repertoires of justification of immediate political relevance. They may be used to determine, as a matter of principle, whether a human being is rightly a member of a given polity rather than a different one, and what her/his place within that polity is. Finally, these repertoires of justification are not sufficient on their own for such determination. For their use, their concepts need to be transformed into categories of action that allow the precise identification of a singular human being as indeed a ‘case’ in which the justification may be applied (see Wagner and Zimmermann 2003). This task can be accomplished with the help, most importantly, of law, in direct association with the rights-endowed individual of liberalism, and of statistics, in direct association with the cultural and social modes of reasoning. These tools permit the creation of those devices that can stabilize the complex institutional compromises between modes of justification that characterize contemporary polities. The comparative study of modern polities from the perspective of such a conjoined social theory and political philosophy would then need to focus on three issues: the analysis of the variety of forms of political modernity on the basis of the observable range of institutionalized combinations of individualist liberalism as the inescapable groundwork of political modernity, with the socially richer interpretations of the human engagement with the world provided by what for want of a better word was just called cultural and social modes of reasoning (see Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Wagner 2005); the study of the ‘cultural’ variety of modernity in terms of existing combinations of these latter modes of reasoning as basic modes of societal self-understanding or, in Cornelius Castoriadis’ terms ‘imaginary significations of society’; and the study of the use of modes of justification, with a view to overcoming the antinomy between (political) voluntarism and (social) determinism, as actualizations of the commitment to liberty in situational contexts, or, as Charles Taylor (1975) would put it, as ‘situated freedom’.

Notes

1 Translations are my own.

2 For an interpretation of the political discourse of modernity as the attempt to decrease this necessity, by way of ‘immunizing’ singular human beings, see Esposito (1998).

3 For a retrieval of the emergence of a ‘society’-based terminology from an earlier ‘politics’-based one, see Hallberg and Wittrock 2006; for a proposal to reweave the connections between the social and the political, see Karagiannis and Wagner 2005.

4 See very similarly Bruno Latour’s observations on the separation of the natural and the social in Nous n’avons jamais été modernes (1991).

5 As Rorty (1989: 63), in a combination of complacency and lack of historical political knowledge indeed suggests: ‘Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs’; for a reflection on this phrase, see Gander (1999).

6 See Therborn (1976), for an earlier – Althusser-inspired – analysis of the emergence of sociology ‘between two revolutions’.

7 For a detailed reconstruction of republican political thought in Europe now see van Gelderen and Skinner (2002).

8 They are versions of ‘social theory’ in our current understanding of the term, even though their view of the social is extremely thin, or maybe more precisely: their substantive interest in the social is very limited; the outcome of interaction is in the centre of interest.
9 As Albert Hirschman (1977) has shown, this reasoning also suggested a transformation of social configurations towards an ever-increasing importance of the 'commercial bond' at the expense of other forms of social bond.

10 Since nineteenth-century polities all worked with restrictions that are incompatible with a fully-fledged individualist liberalism, one should say more precisely that such a polity was put on the horizon of political debate through the revolutions, rather than made actual in institutional form.

11 One basic assumption that enables this step to be taken is the following: Under conditions of political modernity, the rules of political life are always in need of justification, or more broadly: they can be exposed to the requirement of justification.

References


