

JEAN TERRIER HAS two distinct aims in this remarkably interesting work of conceptual history. One is to give “a sense of the richness and variety of the language of the social”. The other is a distinctly “presentist” aim: to “present, and take a stance within, the debate concerning the limitations of the concept of the social which took place in the last decades”. It has been suggested by those advocating the “new paradigm” of a turn to “postsocial” history that such language is limiting because it views society as a closed structure determining individuals’ actions and leaves no space for discourse and imagination, and because it induces skepticism about the liberating potential of political action. Terrier’s argument with such views is to suggest that the language of “the social” is well able to “recognize the centrality of language, symbols and representations; the permeability of social boundaries; the transformability of social relations”.

Doubtless he is right about this. However, the main interest and value of the book lies in its very successful realization of its first aim, to which his presentist argument (mainly, it appears, with Migel Cabrera) provides him with a perspective from which to tell a coherent and very interesting story. It begins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when, as Keith Michael Baker argued in a very persuasive essay, “society” carried “a range of essentially voluntaristic meanings, clustered around two poles: association of partnership for a common purpose, on the one hand; friendship, comradeship, companionship, on the other”. But then, still according to Baker, a new semantic layer appeared, denoting “the basic form of collective human existence, at once natural to human beings and instituted by them, a corollary of human needs and a human response to them”. Terrier amplifies this account, arguing, correctly, that for most thinkers of the Enlightenment, the social could be remodeled by voluntary political action. Thus Rousseau, for example, thought that societies could be transformed from mere “aggregations” ruled by strong men into free associations governed by reasonable citizens.

The interest of Terrier’s book lies in carrying the story further to show how in the nineteenth century society and the social came to signify “constraints of a more fundamental kind” that “resists concerted,

* About Jean TERRIER, *Visions of the Social: Society as a Political Project in France 1750-1950* (Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2011).

purposeful action” and even “inflexibly and irresistibly causes humans to behave in certain ways”. All spheres of life, not least politics, come to be seen as “constrained by the overall shape of social relations”. Here Terrier’s “guiding thought” is that this very idea of “the solidity of society” was engendered by “the desire to re-orient political thought”.

He tells this story within a self-imposed frame, namely, for the most part, France during the long nineteenth century. He traces the story of the thickening of the social by considering a range of thinkers, first through conceptualizations of the nation, discussing, among others Montesquieu, Madame de Staël, de Maistre, Michelet, Renan, Le Bon (but where are de Bonald and Tocqueville?) and then through what he calls “the rise of the culture concept”, in which connection he discusses various notions of “national character”, and, with Tarde, Max Weber, Boas and of course Durkheim, the emergence of sociology and social anthropology.

It is, indeed, the chapter on Durkheim (who also reappears in other chapters) that is the central and most successful chapter of the book. It is, in my view, a *tour de force* that examines the intriguing question: where is society located according to Durkheim? He has the clever idea of asking what exactly Durkheim meant by “substratum” from which social facts are supposed to emerge and shows that Durkheim answered this question in different ways as his thought matured. First, he thought of the substratum in terms of a “material” or “morphological” basis, defined by geography and demography, then as consisting in the association of individual minds, or individual representations, so that “the substratum is the mental life of individuals”, then, in the new preface to *The Rules*, the substratum is “society itself”, since social facts must be external to individual minds. And Terrier concludes by arguing that Durkheim finally resolved the problem through his concept of “*homo duplex*”, adopting “a position between sociological realism and sociological nominalism”, coming to believe that “the substratum of society is neither the consciousness of individuals *in toto*, nor the consciousness of a transcendent social being, but a *specific region of individual minds*”. Thus his notion of *homo duplex* “allowed him to claim that the location of society (the substratum) is a specific region within the mind of the individual that is simultaneously also the seat of collective, morally superior and authoritative representations”.

Terrier’s last chapter, on Marcel Mauss, is also highly interesting and innovative. Focusing on Mauss’s texts on the nation, on communism and on the notion of civilization and drawing on some unpublished material, it argues that Mauss opened up Durkheimian ideas

THE THICKENING OF THE SOCIAL

to a conception of the transnational. That he replaced “the image of societies as self-centered totalities” with one of “societies as networks which overlap and intersect” and so began to develop a conception of the “intersocial, the *relations* and *interactions* between social entities and across all levels”. And so it is from this Maussian perspective that Terrier makes his presentist argument for the continuing viability of the language of the social.

S T E V E N L U K E S