



# Driving in a dead-end street: critical remarks on Andrew Abbott's *Processual Sociology*

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## Abstract

In his book *Processual Sociology* (2016), Andrew Abbott proposes a radically new theoretical perspective for sociology. This review essay discusses the strengths and weaknesses of his “processual” approach, in comparison with other dynamic perspectives in sociology such as, in particular, Norbert Elias’s “process sociology.” It critically questions central ideas and arguments advanced in this book: the reduction of social processes to “events,” the focus on stability as the central explanandum of sociological theory, the implicit separation of individual and social processes, the proposition that the social world changes faster than the individual, the idea that “excess” rather than “scarcity” is the central problematic of human affairs, the strong emphasis on the inherent normativity of sociological concepts, the focus on values as the core of human social life, the neglect of human interdependence, power, coercion, and violence, and the distinction between “moral facts” and “empirical facts.” Detailed criticisms of the arguments in various chapters are given, and alternative viewpoints are proposed. The conclusion is that *Processual Sociology* fails to provide a fruitful approach for understanding and explaining social processes, and that it even represents, in several respects, theoretical regression rather than progress.

**Keywords** Andrew Abbott · Individual and social processes · Inequality and injustice · Moral values and moral facts · Processual sociology · Scarcity and excess

Andrew Abbott is an important American sociologist with a strong reputation as a highly original and innovative theorist. The quotations from renowned fellow sociologists on the back cover of his latest book, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago 2016), are telling. “Abbott has long been one of sociology’s most fertile and original thinkers,” whose “lucid and challenging essays” in this book display his “remarkably wide-ranging sociological intelligence at its best” (Rogers Brubaker). These essays “draw

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on a dizzying range of sources and examples, blended into a stunningly original, disruptive, and fecund analysis” (Paul DiMaggio). It is “a brilliant book” (Craig Calhoun), written by “the most surprising and innovative of today’s social theorists” (Randall Collins).

This exuberant praise as well as the title of the book arouses curiosity. What makes this book so stunningly original, innovative, disruptive, and brilliant? How does it enrich sociological theory? What does Abbott’s “processual sociology” entail, and how does this perspective compare to other dynamic approaches in sociology, such as the “process sociology” advanced by Norbert Elias?<sup>1</sup>

These are the questions I discuss here. To give now the gist of an answer: while I concur with Abbott’s insistence on the dynamic, “processual” nature of human social life, I am critical of how this assumption has been elaborated. Actually, this review documents my disappointment with Abbott’s book.<sup>2</sup> I argue that it fails to deliver what one might expect on the basis of its title: to provide a fruitful approach for investigating, understanding, and explaining social processes, in addition to, or as a correction of, available theories. In the end, I conclude, the book does not make significant contributions to sociological theory and even represents, in several respects, theoretical regression rather than progress. On the positive side, this essay is an implicit plea for careful sociological theorizing that aims to be cumulative, builds upon solid sociological insights, and is innovative without taking innovation or originality as a goal in itself. It is also a plea for a sociology that is consistently relational and processual.

### “Processual sociology” and the sociology of social processes

*Processual Sociology* is a collection of essays on different topics, held together—the author says—by a distinct theoretical perspective, called “processualism.” The core idea is that social life is fleeting, unstable, unpredictable, fast-changing (at least in the United States in recent times), and therefore difficult to grasp. As the author puts it on the first page of the Preface (p. ix):

By a processual approach, I mean an approach that presumes that everything in the social world is continuously in the process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself (and other things), instant by instant.

This is a starting-point for some theoretical explorations and speculations which seem to confer the message that sociology is not and cannot be a science. Abbott describes

<sup>1</sup> Also (and better) known as “figurational sociology.” This approach has been labeled also with the adjective “processual” (e.g., Gabriel and Mennell 2011). Abbott mentions Elias only once in his book (on p. 156, in passing), and his name is absent in the index and the list of references. Another name that is strikingly absent is Pierre Bourdieu’s, whose dynamic and relational approach has also been termed “processual” (Paulle et al. 2012).

<sup>2</sup> A caveat is called for here: this is a review of one book, not an assessment of Abbott’s work as a whole. I read the book and wrote this essay before taking notice of his other publications. So this essay represents, in a sense, a purposefully “naïve” view from a sociologist who did not follow the author in his path toward the ideas advanced in this book. This may entail some risk of misinterpretations, but also may have the advantage of a fresh look. Only after having written the first draft of this essay did I read other work by Abbott, which brought me to some reformulations and additional notes.

sociology as a “humanistic” enterprise, as part of the humanities and closely connected with philosophy and literary studies.

A summary of “some of the basic parameters of the processual position” is presented on page 75:

The world is a world of change, and stability must be explained. Stability arises in the form of lineages; individuals and social entities are in fact lineages of events, not enduring things. The process of lineage-making works through different forms of historicity, and the essence of historicity is “encoding,” the process by which the past gets preserved, moment by moment, into the present, the only place where it can influence or shape events. Encoding is sometimes in bodies, sometimes in memories, sometimes in records, and sometimes simply in the shape of social interconnection in the moment. All these form part of the localities, facilities and constraints within which the various forces of the present—social and cultural action, various forms of “social causation”—shape the currently open events into a next round of “lineages and their connections.”

Abbott apparently takes “events” as the basic elements of human reality.<sup>3</sup> Social entities and even human individuals do not really exist as “enduring things,” but only as “lineages of events,” ensured by “encoding.” This “lineage-making” explains stability, continuity, “historicity.” Social change, on the other hand, is the irregular succession of event after event, which seems to defy systematic explanation.

This may sound new, but it echoes old traditions. Taking “events” as the basic elements of social life suggests a narrativistic rather than a sociological approach of history, a *histoire événementielle* rather than a *histoire sociale* in Braudel’s terms (Braudel 1969).<sup>4</sup> And while the author criticizes the static assumptions of much of conventional sociology by insisting that “the social world is one of constant change” (p. 1), he also argues that, *because* change is “the natural state” of social life, explaining stability is “the central question of social theory” (pp. 23–24).<sup>5</sup> This brings him, paradoxically, close to structural functionalism, with its focus on social stability and the maintenance of social order and its avowed problems with explaining social change.<sup>6</sup> This once dominant sociological theory

<sup>3</sup> As Abbot puts it in the Preface (p. ix): “The world of the processual approach is a world of events. Individuals and social entities are not the elements of social life, but are patterns of regularities defined on lineages of successive events.” Presumably, this idea has been informed and inspired by his methodological work, particularly on sequence analysis (Abbott 1983, 1995, 2001a). In this book, he makes a problematic move from methods to substance, from research to theory.

<sup>4</sup> *Histoire événementielle* is traditional historiography in which “events” are central, whereas *histoire sociale* makes use of concepts such as “process,” “development,” and “structure.” (Cf. Nisbet (1969); Sewell (1996). In the analytical sociology represented by Elster (2007), “events” are also a central category.

<sup>5</sup> Abbott suggests, then, that social change does not need to be explained because it is “natural.” If this argument were valid, most scientific work would be superfluous. The question is, first, *why* social change is “natural”; or, to be more specific, why humans, in contrast to all other animals, have induced vast social and cultural changes in the course of time, independently from changes in their genetic make-up. The second general question is how to explain *specific* social changes. Given the “naturalness” of social change, social stability is a limiting case; there is only relative social stability, which one has to explain in accordance with, not apart from, explanations of social change.

<sup>6</sup> As Parsons put it in *The Social System*: “a general theory of the processes of social change of social systems is not possible in the present state of knowledge” (Parsons 1951, p. 486, italics in the original; also see p. 534).

exemplified what Elias (2012[1978, 1970], pp. 106–110) criticized as “process reduction,” the tendency to reduce all processes to static conditions.

Abbott’s reduction of reality to “events” is not exactly process reduction in this sense, but equally problematic. What is an “event”? In traditional historiography—the *histoire événementielle*—“events” usually refer to big moments in history: wars and combats, rebellions and revolutions, important political decisions and public declarations. Focusing on such events implies, of course, a very selective view of social life, which leaves a lot uncovered. Each of these events, moreover, is a complex conjuncture of many different, intertwined social interactions or processes. If, on the other hand, “events” are regarded as the basic elements of all human life, the question is how these elements should be defined and delineated from one another. An “event” could be anything. Every single heart beat could be called an event and viewed as a separate fact. It seems more useful, however, to consider the succession of heart beats, the beating of the heart, and the consequent circulation of blood as a continuous and regular *process*: a process of repetitive movements, which together with other processes ensures the continuity of the body and at the same time contributes to bodily change in the longer run. Something similar can be said about human behavior and social relations. Every single act, every fleeting social interaction could be called an “event,” but it makes more sense to view them as non-discrete parts of ongoing social processes.

“Process” can be defined as more or less gradual, continuous, and regular change.<sup>7</sup> Some processes have a repetitive character, such as everyday habitual routines of eating, sleeping, bodily care and working, and recurring collective rituals that order the flow of time. Other processes are cumulative, consisting of tiny changes that build upon one another and result in a greater and more lasting change in a certain direction. Examples are learning a language, acquiring new habits through daily social interactions, and, on the collective macro level, technological developments. Acquired new skills and habits become routinized in recurring practices that contribute to relative social stability over time. Yet these recurring processes never repeat themselves exactly and they are connected with wider social change. Eliasian process sociology assumes that intertwined social processes of different kinds and on different levels—repetitive and non-repetitive, micro and macro, short-term and long-term—are the stuff of social life and the proper field of sociological inquiry. Macro long-term processes in a particular direction called social developments are often described with terms ending in “-ation,” such as democratization, agrarianization, industrialization, civilization, urbanization, technization, state formation, nation formation, internationalization, or “sportification.” Like all sociological concepts, these are quite fuzzy terms, which derive their meaning and substance from empirical specifications. The implication of this process sociology is that within seemingly fixed social structures—“the capitalist system,” “feudalism,” “modernity,” et cetera—there are always changes going on that transform these structures, and that, conversely, behind the façade of big events and sudden radical transformations there are always gradual processes to which these events and transformations are causally related.

<sup>7</sup> As the words “more or less” in this definition indicate, some processes are more gradual, continuous, and regular than other ones. “Process” does not exclude relative discontinuities, irregularities, sudden accelerations, or turning-points. The point is that a process cannot be broken up into frozen slices of separate moments, instants, or events.

Abbott in his book barely hints at such processes. He not only pays no attention to the work of Norbert Elias and related “process sociologists,” he also ignores other dynamic and historical approaches, including the tradition of social evolutionism from Comte and Spencer to Leslie White and Gerhard Lenski (e.g., Lenski 2005).<sup>8</sup> Nor does he seem to be interested in, or to know about, the recent innovations and extensions of Darwinian evolutionary theory and its elaborations in the social sciences (cf. Mesoudi 2011), or the expanding new fields of ecological history and world or human history, in which sociologists participate (e.g. Goudsblom 2015). Insofar as he deals with actual social changes, they are almost exclusively located in the United States in the past 150 years. No attempts are made to explain these changes.

Given that *Processual Sociology* hardly deals with social processes, neither empirically nor theoretically, the label “processual” for this sociology is quite misleading, I think. But any distinctive label could be misleading, since it would suggest more consistency and unity than these essays display. The author’s ambition is clear: he is critical of mainstream sociology, wants to break out of the conventional confines of his discipline, and aims at originality and theoretical innovation. It is less clear to what kind of new substantial insights this ambition might lead.

Originality is of course an important value in sociology, like in any scientific field. But because of the low degree of consensus in sociology about the basics of the discipline and, moreover, the problematic relation between sociological knowledge and lay knowledge, originality in sociology (as in other social sciences and large parts of the humanities) often comes down to what I would call *quasi-originality*. This may take the form of introducing new terms or proposing new conceptual distinctions that confuse rather than clarify or of advancing an idea that radically contradicts a mainstream view but is in no way more adequate than its opposite. Quasi-originality is innovation insufficiently checked by serious scientific (i.e., sociological) considerations. Yet it may acquire a degree of recognition among colleagues. Insofar as this is the case, it will contribute to theoretical pluralism but hinder rather than stimulate theoretical progress. Abbott’s book, I regret to write, contains various examples of this all-too-common sociological anomaly. I discuss some of them here.

## Individual and social processes

In the first chapter, entitled “The Historicality of Individuals,” Abbott argues that individuals are more “historical,” that is, have more continuity over time, than “the vast majority of social structures,” at least “at present.” Therefore, larger social forces

no longer tower over the individual in the social process. They tower over particular individuals, as we all know at first hand. But they do not tower over the great mass of individual historicality. For while a single individual is easily

<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that Abbott is ignorant of all this work. Far from it; in previous publications, he proposed methodological bridges between history and sociology and between historical and analytical approaches in sociology (Abbott 1983, 2001a). Yet in that earlier work too, he was barely concerned with substantive problems that are central in historical sociology (cf. Tilly 1984).

erased by death, the large mass of individuals is not. And that mass contains an enormous reservoir of continuity with the past. This continuity confronts the “large social forces” of our arguments—the division of labor, the technological conjuncture, the coming of capitalism—with a huge, recalcitrant weight of quite particular human material that severely limits what those large forces can in fact accomplish. (pp. 8–9)

In short, the “enduring mass of biological individuals is one of the largest ‘social’ forces that exist” (p. 15). I find this difficult to understand. If the mass of individuals is one of the largest social forces that exist, there are apparently *other* social forces *outside* that mass of individuals. What could that mean? It can only be understood, I think, as a version of the often-used but false dichotomy of “individual” and “society,” the image of “society” as consisting of impersonal social forces, external to the individuals who are confronted with them. In reality, “social forces” never exist apart from and outside human individuals; they consist of the myriad interactions of innumerable interdependent individuals with different intentions, interests and power resources, resulting in social processes that are, to a greater or lesser extent, unplanned, unforeseen, and unintended by any of them.<sup>9</sup>

Abbott illustrates his idea by pointing out that a majority of the same people continued to live in subsequent periods of American history; for example, “most people who lived and worked in the Depression had also lived and worked in the Jazz Age” (p. 9). Yes, that is true. This means that the second period cannot be understood without the former and that there is a lot of continuity between the two periods. That is also clearly true. Now this continuity means, according to Abbott, “that we cannot write a history of periods.” That is a strange *non sequitur*, the more so since the author continues to distinguish historical periods and label them with different names. We *can* “write a history of periods,” provided that we 1) regard the distinctions between periods as helpful constructions rather than as objectively given, sharp demarcations, 2) do not conceive each of the distinguished periods as static,<sup>10</sup> 3) recognize both the changes and the continuities between the periods, and 4) view the transition from the one to the other period not as sudden break out of the blue or as caused by abstract, impersonal “social forces,” but as resulting from the joint actions of interdependent individuals whose lives encompass both periods. In such transitions, individuals change together with the social relations or social structures they form with one another.

This does not mean that the individual level and the social level are identical. On the one hand, human individuals are bodies with clear boundaries, material units of flesh and blood and brains, learning systems, for which memory is indeed crucial, as Abbott rightly notes. Social entities (groups, networks, societies, organizations, “social structures”) on the other hand are, at most, only bodies or organisms in a metaphorical sense. Their boundaries are not always clear (who are members and who are not?), they

<sup>9</sup> A classical formulation of this basic sociological insight is by Merton (1936). In *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen* (*The Society of Individuals*, originally written in 1939), Elias criticizes the dichotomization of “individual” and “society,” as the title of this essay indicates (in: Elias 2010 [1991, 1987]). In *What is Sociology?*, Elias (2012 [1978,1970]) resumes that critique and proposes the concept of “figuration” to overcome this dichotomy.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what Abbott wrongly suggests by characterizing a succession of historical periods as “a succession of snapshots” (p. 9, also pp. 212–213).

do not have coordinating brains (but, at most, procedures and authority structures for coordination); they can easily fuse with other social units or split into smaller ones. When they dissolve, their parts usually live on, unlike the parts of individual bodies. Insofar as they can be regarded as systems, their degree of “systemness” is much lower than that of individuals. For these reasons, we could say that the continuity (“historicality”) of human individuals is indeed greater, more evident, more solid than that of social entities. Yet at the same time the *discontinuity* of individuals is greater, as the distinctions between living and non-living, existence and non-existence are much sharper. While individuals have a well-defined life span, with a beginning and an end, this is harder to tell for most social entities. Social entities do not necessarily disappear when individual members die. They can last much longer than individual members by the entrance of new members, through biological reproduction, recruitment, or migration from outside, and by subsequent socialization or, in different terms, habitus formation.

This notion of the continuity of social entities in relation to individuals is, of course, standard sociology, particularly emphasized in the integrationist-functionalist tradition: while individuals come and go, societies or social systems continue to exist through the replacement of old by new members, the succession of generations, and the transmission of culture—socialization—from one to the next generation and from established members to newcomers. The long durability of social units (families, tribes, nations, local communities, religious groups, etc.) compared to the temporariness of individual lives is also a widespread popular idea, cherished and aggrandized in nationalist and other collectivist ideologies that imagine the we-group as perennial. Abbott reverses this view by stating that individuals are more continuous, last longer, and change less than (most) social structures<sup>11</sup>, which is at least as problematic and one-sided as its opposite, and equally misleading. It is, moreover, quite unclear what Abbott wants to say. He wavers between a universal proposition, valid for all human societies, and what he calls “a stylized understanding of contemporary society,” in which social change “is happening faster and faster” and, at the same time, the average life span of individuals has become much longer than before (p. 9). But even if specified in this way, the statement does not make sense. Yes, the society in which I now live is quite different from the society of the 1950s in which I grew up, but is the change from the one society or historical period to the other greater than the change from the child that I was to the elderly man I am now? I doubt that. Actually, these two types of change are incommensurable; they cannot be meaningfully compared in terms of more or less, faster or slower.

Abbott’s statement reflects another popular idea—that we live in a time of “faster and faster” change, uncontrolled, unintended, confusing social change, which undermines cherished norms and habits, makes many people uncertain and fearful about the future, and gives them the feeling that they are out of touch with the time in which they live. These subjective experiences are no doubt widespread, today perhaps more than ever before, and an interesting topic for sociological research and analysis. They are manifest in present-day nationalist populism, which combines them with the image of

<sup>11</sup> Abbott considers this idea important enough to repeat it several times. Thus on pp. 248–249: “[...] it is clearly the case that the social world, for all its power over the individual, actually changes much faster than does the individual, as I have argued several times in this book.” Indeed, and it is still not clear at all.

the nation as an essentially unchanging we-group. Such sentiments cannot be simply reduced to, and objectified in, the statement that social structures change faster than individuals. A much more differentiated explanation is needed to understand how and why so many people have the feeling that changes are going too fast, how and why these feelings vary over time, and how and why they differ among groupings distinguished by such attributes as age, class position, and geographical location.<sup>12</sup>

## Scarcity and excess

In chapter 5, “The Problem of Excess,” Abbott reverses another “customary assumption,” as he puts it himself: the assumption that scarcity—“having too little of something”—is the core problem of human social life. He contends, in contrast, “that in the modern world excess and overabundance are the main problems (...).” Examples are “massive pollution, sprawling suburbs, a glut of information” (p. 123). Problems of excess are not limited to the modern world, however. Abbott claims that “the central problematic of human affairs is not dealing with scarcity but dealing with excess” (p. 124); in other words, the core problem in all societies at all times is “not having too little of something, but having too much of it” (p. 125). Apparently, he wavers, again, between a universal proposition and a more modest contention about modern societies. Again, he seems to conflate conditions characteristic of the contemporary world with conditions common to all human societies.

In an erudite overview, Abbott shows that priests, philosophers, and social theorists throughout the ages have dealt with problems of scarcity and excess, from the Book of Deuteronomy to Mandeville, Adam Smith, Durkheim, and Keynes. Much of this concern is moral: excess, abundance, gluttony, and avarice have been condemned time and again as vices, whereas sobriety, restraint, and even voluntary poverty have been praised as virtues. This moral condemnation of excess does not yet prove, of course, that it *is* a major problem in social life, let alone *the* central problem, or that it is a bigger problem than scarcity. It shows, rather, that “excess” is a moral category and therefore difficult to objectify in sociological research.

The assessment of scarcity (“having too little”) or excess (“having too much”) depends on the use of criteria, which are related to moral values, social standards of normality, or definitions of human needs. Abbott does not deal systematically with the question what these criteria might entail. It is clear that what is normal or even restrained consumption for some (buying a new car every 3 years, making long-distance holiday trips twice a year, dining regularly in expensive restaurants, etc.) looks like “excess” to others. It is also clear that the standards for what is considered material excess or abundance on the one hand and scarcity, shortage, or poverty on the other have shifted with the overall growth of economic prosperity in modern societies.

Scarcity is a central concept in economics (not in mainstream sociology), where it refers to the tension between human wants and the availability of resources to satisfy these wants. Economic goods that are produced and sold are scarce by definition; the

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<sup>12</sup> Theoretical ideas that may provide tools for understanding and explanation are Ogburn’s classical thesis of the “cultural lag,” the idea of generation-specific social experiences pioneered by Mannheim, and the notion of “drag effects of habitus” (Ernst et al. 2017).



price of a good indicates a gap—however temporary—between wanting and possessing the good, and buying is a way to overcome that gap. All goods that serve to satisfy human wants and are not freely available, for which people have to work, are scarce in this wide sense. More narrowly defined, scarcity refers to shortage or deprivation: enduring situations in which people have less than they want and are unable to acquire goods they want but do not have. One does not have to be an economist to acknowledge that scarcity, whether defined broadly or more narrowly, is a basic condition in all human societies, from hunter-gatherer bands to postindustrial metropolises, and from the poorest to the richest countries in the present-day world.

This does not mean, of course, that “excess” of whatever kind is not important. As Abbott notes, “scarcity and excess are not necessarily conceptual contraries” (p. 125). He even raises the possibility that the two are complementary, dialectical twins that presuppose each other. The tension between wants and goods that defines material scarcity can also be interpreted as excess of wants, especially when these surpass the “poverty line,” the level of what is seen as necessary for a decent way of living. Excess of population as a result of population growth causes severe material scarcity, as Malthus argued long ago. (Abbott discusses the Malthusian thesis, but makes no reference to Darwin’s use of it in his theory of natural selection and evolution.) Scarcity of work in times of large unemployment can also be defined as an excess of workers. Excessive human exploitation of the earth brings about increasing scarcity of natural resources. *Et cetera*.

Nevertheless, Abbott rejects the idea that “excess of one thing is simply scarcity of another” (p. 134). He has to reject it, since otherwise his whole argument that excess is much more important than scarcity would fall apart. The reason he gives for his rejection rests on formal, mathematical reasoning. Suppose, he writes,

that we have a set with many kinds of elements, all but one of whose exclusive kind-subsets have equal cardinality. And suppose that one has smaller cardinality than the others. (For example, suppose nine exclusive subsets, each of which contains 11 percent of the larger set, plus one exclusive subset containing 1 percent.) We might in this case [...] speak of the scarcity of that one element in the overarching set. But we would not speak of excess among the others. (p. 135)

This is far from convincing. We would *not* speak of the scarcity of that one element, I think, unless its small “cardinality” is regarded as problematic. Abbott seems to forget here his own definition of scarcity as “having too little of something.” “Too little” is not just “little.” One does not usually speak of a “scarcity” of people with red hair, though they make up a small percentage of the population, or a “scarcity” of persons who are taller than seven feet. A small group within a large population may be deemed even an “excess” if it is seen as too large. Minority groups are often regarded as such in populist-nationalist discourses. If excess and scarcity are complementary twin concepts, they empirically pertain to very different kinds of things, which cannot be regarded as “subsets” that add to one another. If there were a “scarcity” of people with red hair, for example, this would not because they are fewer in number than people with brown or blond or black hair, but because their hair color would be in high demand (and the natural hair color would be preferred to dyed hair). We might also say then that there is

an “excess” in the demand for people with red hair. As remarked, scarcity and excess are always defined by certain standards or criteria that vary among groups and over time.

Abbott seems to be insufficiently aware of these implications. His treatment of the central concepts in his argument lacks rigor and precision. There is also, here and elsewhere in the book, a yawning gap between the theoretical pretensions of universality and the implicit focus on contemporary American society. Consider, for example, the offhand way he discusses poverty at the end of this essay. “One can even rethink poverty in excess terms,” Abbott writes, and he illustrates this by referring to a study in 2001 of women in a welfare-to-work program, which

shows clearly that one the central problems of poverty is the large cognitive burden it creates. Just to get to the program's classes, women had to make complex arrangements to ensure care for their children, to change doctors' appointments, to hide their valuables from predacious boyfriends, and so on. (p. 159)

For villagers in Africa or slum dwellers in India, the problems of poverty are different, we may guess, not to speak of the survival problems of people in former times. This is not the only passage in the book that manifests a glaring combination of US-centrism and presentism.<sup>13</sup>

Yes, many contemporary problems—among them pressing and severe ones—can be put under the broad conceptual umbrella of “excess.” They range from overpopulation and overexploitation of natural resources to informational overload, from overcrowded touristic hotspots to everyday overstimulation in modern cities, from “choice stress” as a consequence of a bewildering variety of action possibilities to artistic, scholarly, and scientific overproduction. And indeed, much human behavior might be interpreted as ways of coping with these various kinds of excess. But it is misleading rather than fruitful to declare “excess” *the* central problem of human social life in general and to contrast excess with “scarcity” as if it were only a minor problem or not a problem at all.

## Time and fractals

Like (Elias 2007b [1992, 1984]), Abbott is very much interested in the time dimension of individual and social life (see especially Abbott 2001a), though his treatment of this vast topic is very different from Elias's developmental and consistently sociological approach. At several places in the book he refers approvingly to the Hegelian philosopher John McTaggart (1908), who denied the reality of historical time itself. Abbott seems to go along with this view, at least to some extent. “At any given instant, the past

<sup>13</sup> In spite of the author's recommendations in the Epilogue: “[...] sociology cannot be so narrow. It must broaden its temporal range of vision, just as it must broaden its social range beyond its local region in the present. [...] a sociologist must be traveler, across time as well as across social space” (p. 281). Quite right, but the book does not demonstrate this.

as such does not exist,” he writes; “the present is all that exists” (pp. 25, 33). This may be questioned. One could argue, on the contrary, that “the present as such” does not exist. All human actions and conceptions of reality involve an awareness of passing time, which includes knowledge of the past as well as anticipations and expectations of the future. The moment in-between, “the present,” is hard to grasp. It may refer to a vaguely delineated period that extends over months and years (“the present time”), and covers the recent past as well as an expected future. If, on the other hand, the present is defined as “now” in the strictest sense, it is an infinitively small moment in time, which approaches zero. The present of my writing the former sentence has already become the past at *this* moment. And the present of my writing the sentence that I am writing *now* can be divided into even smaller “presents” in which I subsequently type the letters A, n, d, et cetera on the screen. The present as it moves through time is elusive.

In chapter 6, “The Idea of Outcome” (pp. 165–197), Abbott critically discusses various ways in which sociologists, economists, and psychologists deal with time when doing research. It is perhaps the most original and challenging part of the book, which demonstrates the wide range of the author’s theoretical knowledge<sup>14</sup> as well as his ambition to undermine conventional wisdoms. Yet it also contains several obscure, ill-argued, even bizarre passages.

An example is Abbott’s discussion of the idea of “flow,” as developed by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi. When people are “in a flow” by concentrating on a specific task, their sense of time is “deformed”; they have the feeling that time goes on and on, “minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.” Abbott formalizes this expansion of experienced time by applying the mathematics of so-called Koch fractals:

Think of time for the moment as (...) a time segment of a certain length or duration. Now imagine that we expand that line by replacing the middle third of it by the two sides of the equilateral triangle of which that middle third is the base. The segment is now a trajectory with a deviation in the middle, and is four-thirds as long as it was before, although its horizontal extension remains the same. Now do the same to each of the four segments of which the trajectory is currently composed. The total trajectory is now sixteen-ninths of what it was to start with, although the horizontal extension remains exactly the same. (p. 191)

And so on. Indeed, we can imagine this, as we can imagine almost anything. But why would the subjective lengthening of time in a flow conform to a Koch fractal? Abbott does not give any possible reason to assume that. This kind of formal modeling clarifies nothing. While the mathematics is faultless, its use here makes no sense, apart from the fact that it may impress some readers. It is just another instance of quasi-originality.

## Inequality and injustice

Contrary to what its title suggests, the chapter “Inequality as Process” (pp. 233–252) does not deal with social processes through which inequality structures are reproduced

<sup>14</sup> He demonstrated this more extensively in Abbott (2001b).

and change. The author's intention is, rather, to present a critique of the concept of inequality as it is used in contemporary American sociology. He announces on the chapter's first page that "contradictions and inconsistencies about that concept appear almost immediately" (p. 233).

However, these contradictions and inconsistencies are hard to find on the pages that follow. There is not even a beginning of a systematic analysis of the concept of social inequality, which might lay bare such contradictions and inconsistencies. Abbott's main point is that "*inequality*" in American sociology actually means "*injustice*" (p. 238). Inequality, in other words, is a normative and political concept; it refers to deviations from what is considered good: social equality. Rather than hiding this by pretending value-neutrality, it should be recognized and brought into the open, Abbott argues. Therefore, he suggests, the openly normative term *injustice* is preferable to its weaker "euphemism" *inequality*. Measures of inequality should then be renamed "measures of injustice" (pp. 240, 241).

This argument is not very helpful in solving or even clarifying problems concerning the study of social inequalities. Indeed, social inequality, like most sociological concepts, has normative connotations. Indeed, it is often associated with social injustice. And yes, much sociological research in this field is inspired by the wish to contribute to change in the direction of more equality and justice. But that does not mean that the term "social inequality" is, can be, or must be used as equivalent to "social injustice."

The first question is, whether and by whom "inequality" is used as another word for injustice. Do American sociologists really think that inequality always means injustice, and that social justice can only be attained when there is absolute equality? Are they that naive or dogmatic? Abbott gives no textual evidence to sustain this. He presents data about the frequency of the words "injustice" and "inequality" in articles in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which shows that the first term was used more often in the years 1895–1915, and the second term much more in the period 1966–1995 (pp. 236–237). But that does not prove, of course, that "inequality" was only a substitute for "injustice." Even if these terms covered the same type of phenomena, the shift is probably more than only terminological. It may indicate that American sociology has become less moralistic and more empirical. In any case, several—American and European—sociologists who since the 1960s wrote explicitly about (in)justice did not confuse it with (in)equality (e.g., Homans 1961, pp. 232–264; Eckhoff 1974; Moore 1978; Phillips 1979).

Although social inequality is a complicated concept, particularly when it comes to operationalizations and measures, its descriptive core meaning is not that unclear. In sociology, as in colloquial language, it is usually conceived as referring not to all kinds of social differences—inequality in the broadest, "literal" sense—but, more specifically, to "vertical" differences, for which the high-low metaphor is used, expressed in words like top and bottom, upper, middle and lower classes, underclass, upgrading, upward and downward mobility, social climbing, and stratification. These words have normative connotations as well; "higher" in the context of social relations does not only mean more powerful and privileged, but is also associated with intrinsically better (Ossowski 1963; Goudsblom 1986). Yet it is not impossible to take distance from both the positive and the negative normative connotations and use "social inequality" and related terms in a primarily descriptive way, as referring to differences in power, privileges (rewards, gratifications), and prestige (status, reputation). Social inequality

is concerned with empirical observations of these differences, social (in)justice with moral judgments and feelings about the observed differences.

Conceptions of social justice may have an impact on observations and interpretations of inequality, but they do not simply determine them. And when sociologists propose explanations of social inequalities they do not have to make the “political” assumption, as Abbott suggests, that “equality is the default value for social life, that equality is the value from which deviations must be explained” (p. 257). Why would that be necessary, logical, or even plausible? As if one would say that physicists explain movements by assuming that rest is the default value for the physical world, that rest is the value from which deviations must be explained—an assumption that physicists since Galileo have left behind. The interesting questions concerning social inequality are not about actual inequality versus fictitious equality, but about variations and changes in the nature and degree of inequality. Thus, sociologists have observed that social inequalities within Western societies from the nineteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth century tended to *diminish* in several respects, and offered explanations for this equalization trend (Lenski 1966, among others).

The distinction between inequality and injustice can be further illuminated with the help of empirical sociological studies of social (in)justice, to which Abbott does not refer (e.g., Jasso and Rossi 1977; Alves and Rossi 1978; Szirmai 1986). The central question in these studies is: what kind of norms of justice or fairness do people in a given population adhere to, and how do they use these norms when they express opinions about perceived social inequalities? An overall result from research on this topic is that people in general do not simply identify inequality with injustice. Unequal earnings, for example, are generally considered fair when based on differences in perceived merits. When, on the other hand, people who “do nothing” get the same income as people who “work hard,” this is usually regarded as unfair. In summary, most people seem to be perfectly able to distinguish perceptions of inequality from normative judgments in terms of (in)justice. There is no reason to assume that sociologists would be less able to do so. On the contrary, one may hope that they are able to make sharper, more precise distinctions between the two.

## The normativity of social life and sociology

Abbott takes the covert normative meaning of social inequality as an example of what he regards as a fundamental characteristic of sociology in general, namely, that it is basically normative. It is normative in two respects: norms and values are at the center of sociology’s subject-field, social reality; and therefore doing sociology always involves normative choices. In other words, Weber’s distinction between sociology’s *Wertbezogenheit* (concern with values) and *Wertfreiheit* (value-freedom) is incorrect; precisely because sociology is concerned with moral values it is *not* “value-free” (especially pp. 278–279). This is a well-known position in an ongoing debate, but Abbott gives his own, in my view peculiar, reasons in favor of it. Again, I am not convinced, to say the least.

Abbott’s insistence on “the centrality of values in the social process” (p. 254) accords with the integrationist-functionalist tradition in sociology represented by Durkheim and Parsons. Yet he criticizes Durkheim, astonishingly, for his alleged

“materialism” and giving insufficient weight to moral values. “Processual ontology makes it evident that all the ‘empirical realities’ of social life are in fact congealed values of one sort or another,” he writes (p. 229); “the social process itself consists mainly of things that are congealed values” (p. 258). These are strong but unclear statements. The expression “congealed values” suggests that values are initially liquid particles of a stream, which then somehow become clustered and stabilized. But how then could “the social process itself” consist of congealed values? If the constituent parts are congealed, what is the process? Note also that no mention is made here of “events” as the basic elements of social life, as in the quotation above from earlier in the book.

What is strikingly absent, here and throughout the book, are notions of human interdependence, power, coercion, force, and violence. A quotation from the Epilogue illustrates this:

The astounding variety of human societies both over time and across space reveals that social entities and abstractions within those societies are and were the ongoing concretizations of social values that have their ultimate origin not in causes, but in the endless conversation among humans about the particular nature of what has value, what should happen, and what is good. (p. 279)

Apart from the awkward formulation (“abstractions” that become “concretizations”), it is notable that the distinct characteristics of a given society are viewed here as resulting from conversations, just conversations. Human social life is brought back to an idealized version of a school class or a Swiss town meeting. It is Jürgen Habermas’s *herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation*, communication without the interference of power and authority—with the crucial difference that Habermas presented this as a normative ideal, not as the “ultimate origin” of the variety of human societies.

“Congealed values” are centrally important for Abbott as the instances that give order and continuity to social life. “Because the processual view emphasizes the perpetually remade character of social life,” he writes, “[...] it emphasizes potential for action and the openness of the present for genuine choice” (p. 230). At any given moment, individuals are free to choose between what they consider right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. How these free individual decisions result in collective values with some degree of stability remains somewhat mysterious. But Abbott needs these values in order to escape from chaos: they are in his view the *only* “empirical realities” of social life. He also needs them, on the other hand, as a basis for attacking sociological objectivism. His “processualism” is an uneasy combination of three strands of thought: a strong emphasis on norms and values as the core of social life, in line with Parsonian functionalism; an outspoken individualistic voluntarism derived from pragmatism, particularly from the work of John Dewey; and a special kind of constructionism, which focuses on normative judgments rather than cognitive classifications. The “empirical realities” to which sociological concepts refer are put between quotations marks since these concepts are always “defined by values and normative judgments” (p. 229). “The family,” for example, just like “inequality,” is a normative category. Therefore, it cannot be considered “a ‘social institution’ in some transcendental analytic space” (p. 229).

No, the family is not a social institution in a transcendental analytic space. “The family” as a unit with universal and constant traits does not exist. But families, in the plural, do exist; there is no way to deny that and no reason to put their existence between quotation marks. While families are not “values”—but, rather, human groups, relations of interdependence, sets of daily practices—normative regulations and value-laden social definitions are constitutive elements of family life in any society. That does not mean, however, that sociologists and anthropologists who take account of these norms and social definitions in their empirical research, simply reproduce them and are forced to conceive family relations in these same normative terms. In discussing concepts like “the family,” Abbott ignores the basic distinction between *emic* and *etic*, indigenous and social scientific meanings, or, in Elias’s terms, between involved “we-perspectives” and a relatively detached sociological “they-perspective” (Elias 2007a [1987]).

This is not to say that sociology is, can be, or should be “value-free”; we can agree about that. Apart from values that are inherently central to the sciences (such as empirical adequacy and consistency), nonscientific, “heteronomous” values always play some role in social theory and research. While there are enough reasons to continue the debate about this issue,<sup>15</sup> Abbott does not bring us further, as he ignores the differences between indigenous and social scientific meanings, and overstates the normativity of sociology. He did that, as we saw, where he dealt with the concept of inequality. He does it also in his criticism of Talcott Parsons.

Abbott discusses in particular Parsons’s contribution “Professions” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Parsons 1968). Parsons states here that professions are characterized by intellectual competence, and that, as Abbott quotes, “a full-fledged profession must have some institutional means of making sure that such competence will put to socially responsible uses.” Parsons means by this statement, according to Abbott, that “a full-fledged profession *ought to* have some institutional means of guaranteeing socially responsible use of its competence, and an expert group without that is a morally bad profession.” (p. 266, italics and quotation marks by Abbott). Therefore, Parsons’s argument is “plainly normative.” Anyone who reads Parsons’s article, however, can see that this is not plain at all. Parsons defines “professions” by three criteria. The first criterion is “formal technical training” and “mastery of a generalized cultural tradition,” the second one is that “not only must the cultural tradition be mastered (...) but skills in the form of its use must also be developed.” And then follows: “The third and final core criterion is that a full-fledged profession must have ...” et cetera. (Parsons 1968, p. 536) The quoted sentence is part of Parsons’s *definition* of “professions.” The term “must” in this sentence is not meant as a moral prescription (“ought to”) but as a definitional requirement.<sup>16</sup> Abbott’s reading of Parsons is plainly wrong here. There are good reasons to criticize Parsons’s work, including its covert normativity,<sup>17</sup> but this particular criticism is misplaced.

In the same chapter, Abbott takes a bold step by distinguishing “moral facts” from “empirical facts.” These “moral facts” are not a kind of Durkheimian “social facts,” as

<sup>15</sup> See for a sophisticated discussion: Abend (2008).

<sup>16</sup> One may argue that Parsons’s expression “socially responsible” is inherently normative; but that is another matter.

<sup>17</sup> As critics since Gouldner (1971 [1970], pp. 167–338) have pointed out.

one might think: in contrast to these social facts, Abbott's moral facts are located *outside* the empirically observable social reality. He criticizes both Durkheim and Parsons for their "empiricization of morality" (p. 265). This is more surprising in view of his own emphasis on "the centrality of values in the social process." Remember the statement, quoted above, that "all the 'empirical realities' of social life are in fact congealed values of one sort or another." Since values are for Abbott primarily moral values, morality must be part of the empirical reality, perhaps even the core of empirical social reality. Morality seems to be split, then, into an empirical and a non-empirical part. What could be that non-empirical part of morality? In other words, how can "moral facts" be regarded as non-empirical? The answer is, presumably, that these "facts" do not refer to observable human actions and interactions in which moral claims are made, but to the content of these claims: to an invisible reality that tells us what is right and what is wrong.

This brings Abbott into the highly contestable and contested philosophical position of moral realism, rooted in religious and metaphysical traditions. (He does not refer, however, to these traditions, or to the extensive philosophical literature on this topic, or to any of the arguments used in this debate.) He defines "moral facts" as referring to:

a body of human phenomena that, in the phenomenology of experience, are taken to be rooted in a notion of "oughtness," and that are judged in that experience not by the criterion of truth or falsehood, but by that of right and wrong. (p. 260)

This definition is problematic for several reasons. The most important is that it is not clear why the judged phenomena in the definition would be "facts." The word "fact" implies a claim of truth; to say "this is a fact" means: "This is true, independently from what you or anyone else may think." To speak of "moral facts" (in the non-Durkheimian, non-empirical sense) means that moral claims are not only judged by the criterion of right and wrong, but *also* by that of truth and falsehood, and that certain moral claims are true. On the one hand, Abbott maintains the Humean-Kantian separation of "facts" and "values"; on the other hand, he denies that separation. "Moral facts" in his definition is a *contradictio in terminis*.

Abbott illustrates his idea of moral facts as distinguished from empirical facts by noticing a "gap" between his own work in the sociology of professions and his behavior as a professional sociologist. While he denied and debunked the importance of professional ethics in sociological publications and lectures on professions, he strongly believed and believes in "professionalism as a moral phenomenon," and "live[s] it on a daily basis." This personally experienced gap is generalized into "a contradiction between professionalism as explained and professionalism as experienced, between professionalism as empirical fact and professionalism as moral obligation." Therefore, he concludes, both sides of the coin have to be recognized: professionalism is an empirical fact *and* a moral fact. (pp. 254–259).

My conclusion would be different. If there is a gap or even a contradiction between Abbott's sociological work on professions and his convictions and activities as a professional, and if these convictions and activities are not exceptional, there is a good reason to revise that work. If he and his fellow professionals by their behavior and beliefs falsify a sociological theory of the professions, the theory is empirically



inadequate. If moral considerations are so important for professionals, a conflict model, according to which they are only driven by self-interest, needs correction. (Parsons's view might then get some rehabilitation.) Only in this way can the observed contradiction be overcome.

For Abbott, however, morality, pure morality (such as, apparently, his own moral considerations as a professional) is outside the scope of empirical sociology. When sociologists investigate morality, they do not grasp its essence, but only superficial derivations. Thus, Durkheim in *De la division du travail social* did not describe “moral facts” but only “the shadows they cast in the empirical world.” And when Abbott wrote about professional ethics 30 years ago, he “looked only at the shadows that professionalism cast on the empirical wall” (pp. 264–265). These formulations evoke Plato's parable of people in a cave who do not realize that they see only the adumbrations of what is real: the reality of Ideas. Pure morality is located outside the cave, outside the empirical social world, because it rests on free individual choices for what is good and is independent from any causality. Morality is a reality *sui generis*, uncontaminated by mundane interests or social pressures and hidden from systematic observation. Reality is divided into two: the empirical and material world of cause and effect, conditions and constraints; and the spiritual world of freedom, morality, and responsibility. This second world is independent and invisible, yet “interpenetrates” the empirical social world and social reality is a “mixture” of both worlds.

## To conclude

All this—the reduction of processes to events, the disregard of theories of social change, the implicit separation of “individual” and “society,” the easy and superficial critique of concepts such as “scarcity” and “inequality”, the empty formalistic reasoning, the confinement of social reality to values, the complete neglect of human interdependence, power, coercion, and violence, the ill-argued distinction between empirical facts and moral facts, the Platonic evocation of a pure morality—cannot be considered a serious contribution to sociological theory, I think. On the contrary, in several respects it is, rather, a regression to pre-sociological metaphysics. It is a denial of much of what sociology has achieved and stands for. It is a refusal to think sociologically in systematic and consistent ways. It is also a failure to appreciate promising rapprochements between the natural sciences and the social sciences.<sup>18</sup>

Abbott's processualism, in summary, is by and large theoretical innovation in the wrong direction—an instance of quasi-originality. It is a sad irony (but for me the reason to write this lengthy critical review) that the author of these essays is one of the central figures in contemporary American sociology, highly esteemed and highly praised for his theoretical work by other sociologists. This may tell us something about the state of sociology today, particularly in the United States, but it would require more study and another article to specify this connection.

In this essay, I have been focusing on what struck me as weak points in the author's arguments. I could have mentioned more. On the other hand, throughout this book I came across interesting remarks, flashes of insight, nice formulations, statements to

<sup>18</sup> As in evolutionary theory, network analysis, and ecological history.

ponder about, and passages I wholeheartedly agreed with. I chose to be one-sided in this essay, because I found the weaknesses overwhelmingly more important. Taken as a whole, Abbott's "processual sociology" as presented in this book has very little to offer. It is, I am afraid, a dead-end street.

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