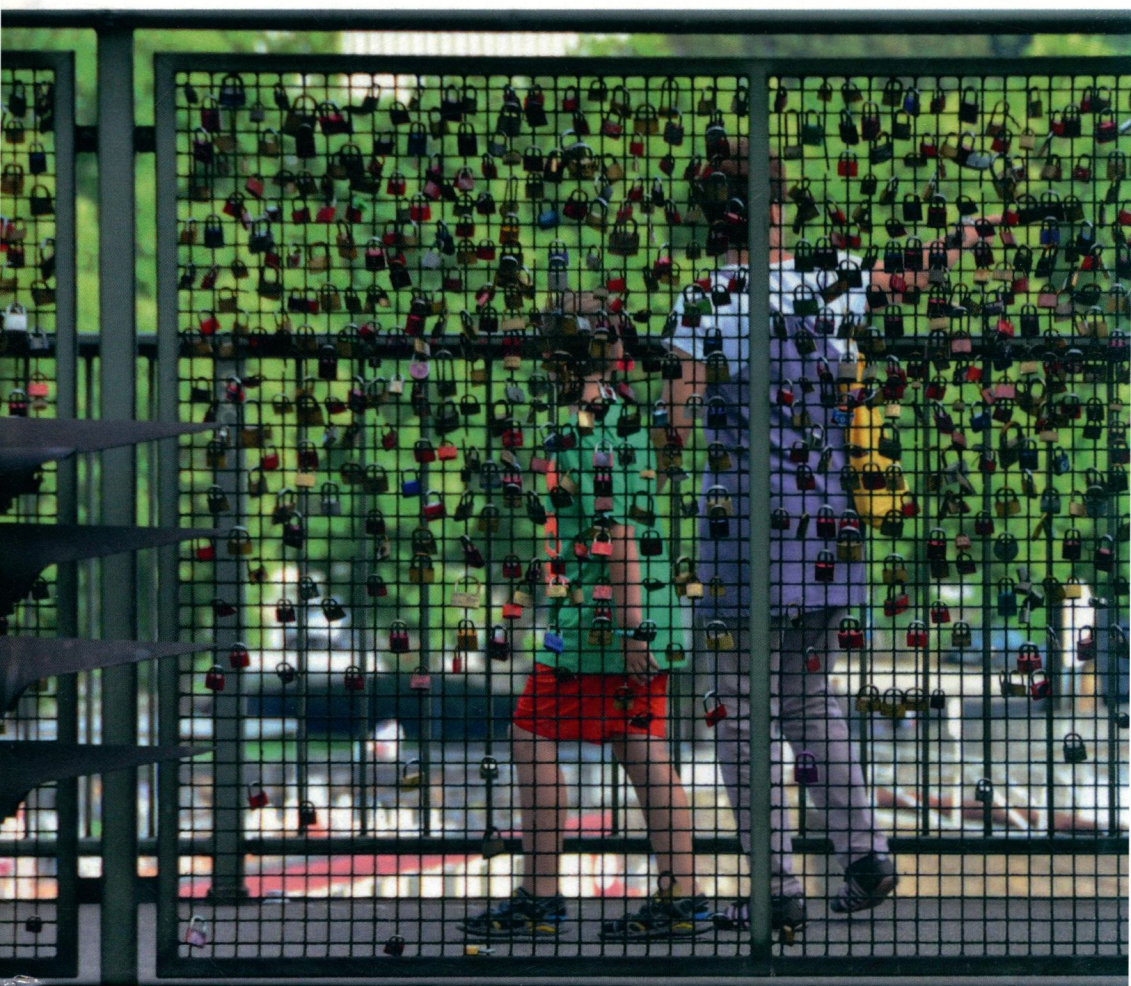


Debating Humanity

Towards a Philosophical Sociology

Daniel Chernilo



Debating Humanity explores sociological and philosophical efforts to delineate key features of humanity that identify us as members of the human species. After challenging the normative contradictions of contemporary posthumanism, this book goes back to the foundational debate on humanism between Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger in the 1940s and then re-assesses the implicit and explicit anthropological arguments put forward by seven leading postwar theorists: self-transcendence (Hannah Arendt), adaptation (Talcott Parsons), responsibility (Hans Jonas), language (Jürgen Habermas), strong evaluations (Charles Taylor), reflexivity (Margaret Archer) and reproduction of life (Luc Boltanski). Genuinely interdisciplinary and boldly argued, Daniel Chernilo has crafted a novel philosophical sociology that defends a universalistic principle of humanity as the condition of possibility of any adequate understanding of social life.

Daniel Chernilo is Professor of Social and Political Thought at Loughborough University. His previous books include *A Social Theory of the Nation-State* (Routledge, 2007) and *The Natural Law Foundations of Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2013).

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The general idea for this book started life with an invitation to speak at the Colloquium 'Identities in conflict, conflict in identities' at the Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic, in 2010. My idea for this talk was, quite simply, to reflect on the elements that constitute the idea of 'human' identities. I have since been able to try out some of my arguments in various conferences, workshops and lectures in: Berlin (2014), Brno (2012) Buenos Aires (2011), Cambridge (2015, 2016), Jena (2011), Leeds (2012), Loughborough (2010), Paris (2015), Rome (2015), Santiago (2010, 2013, 2014, 2015), Temuco (2013), Trento (2012), Turin (2013), Valparaiso (2013) and Warwick (2010, 2014, 2015). I am grateful to the organisers and participants of these events; I hope that they will see that their suggestions and criticisms have been put to good use.

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The last part of Chapter 3 builds on: 'The theorisation of social coordinations in differentiated societies: The theory of generalised symbolic media in Parsons, Luhmann and Habermas' (*British Journal of Sociology* 53(3): 431–49, 2002).

A handful of paragraphs of Chapter 5 draw on: 'Jürgen Habermas: Modern social theory as postmetaphysical natural law' (*Journal of Classical Sociology* 13(2): 254–73, 2013).

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Introduction

This book explores a number of anthropological dimensions that contemporary sociology and philosophy have used to define notions of 'the human', 'human being', 'humanity' and 'human nature'. Rather than declaring the death of the human, or that it incarnates everything that is wrong with 'the West', I contend that we need to look closely at a variety of ways in which these conceptions have been more or less explicitly articulated in the work of a number of leading theorists of the past sixty or so years. I call this project *philosophical sociology* and organise it around three main pillars:

1. The anthropological features that define us as human beings are to a large extent independent from, but cannot be realised in full outside, social life. The core of this book then looks at seven of these properties as they have been discussed by a particular writer: *self-transcendence* (Hannah Arendt), *adaptation* (Talcott Parsons), *responsibility* (Hans Jonas), *language* (Jürgen Habermas), *strong evaluations* (Charles Taylor), *reflexivity* (Margaret Archer) and *the reproduction of life* (Luc Boltanski).
2. Given that in contemporary societies humans themselves are ultimate arbiters of what is right and wrong, our shared anthropological features as members of the human species remain the best option to justify normative arguments. These anthropological traits define us as members of the same species and are the basis from which ideas of justice, self, dignity and the good life emerge. *A universalistic principle of humanity* is to be preferred over particularistic conceptions of race, culture, identity and indeed class.
3. Normative ideas are therefore irreducible to the material or socio-cultural positions that humans occupy in society; they depend on the human capacity to reflect on what makes us human; our conceptions of the human underpin our normative notions in social life because they allow us to imagine the kind of beings that we would like to become. This book offers neither a complete nor a unified catalogue of anthropological capacities that can be construed as 'human nature'.

It focuses instead on those anthropological features that are central to our understanding of the normative aspects of social life.

Sociology and Philosophy

The notion of *philosophical sociology* indicates also a preference for a conception of sociology that cannot be realised without a close and careful relationship with philosophy. While the early institutionalisation of sociology was unquestionably driven by an effort of differentiation from philosophy (Manent 1998), it is wrong to construe this as sociology's rejection or neglect of philosophy (Adorno 2000). We can instead observe at least three main ways in which these connections are being constantly redrawn.

A first 'positivist' path understands the philosophical tradition as sociology's *pre-scientific heritage*, whereas its future belongs to empirical and scientific work. Within the classical canon of sociology, this attitude is arguably best represented by Durkheim (1982) as he engaged extensively in philosophical speculation but sought always to keep both domains distinctly apart. Durkheim remained interested in philosophy and wrote more than occasional works that are indeed philosophical, but he never betrayed his fundamental intuition that he was to contribute to sociology as a specialist subject that was defined by its own theories, methodological rules and internal thematic differentiation (Durkheim 1960, 1970). The key feature of this way of looking at their interconnections is that, however much can be gained from *philosophical* enquiry, this does not constitute a sociological task *sensu stricto* (Luhmann 1994, Merton 1964).

A second trajectory is constituted by explicit attempts at *epistemological self-clarification*. An argument that we can trace back to Weber's (1949) extensive methodological disquisitions, the focus here is on elucidating the logic of sociology's scientific arguments. All such debates as idealism vs materialism, individualism vs collectivism, or realism vs constructivism belong in this category, and we may equally include here a wide range of histories of sociology that have been written in order to illuminate the wider pool of *cognitive* commitments that inform the sociological imagination (Benton 1977, Levine 1995, Ritzer 1988). Rather than being excluded from sociology, philosophy takes here the well-known role of under-labourer: philosophical tools may be included into the sociologist's kit, but a neat separation between epistemological discussions and substantive empirical work ought to remain in place.

The third approach to the relationships between sociology and philosophy uses the philosophical tradition as a source from which to draw

various *normative motifs* (Ginsberg 1968, Hughes 1974). Classically, Marx's (1973) critique of political economy shows the extent to which the fundamentally philosophical motif of critique was to guide his engagement with the 'scientific' procedures or empirical concerns of political economy. Also close to an idea of 'social philosophy', critical social theory is arguably paradigmatic of this kind of engagement in terms of the reconfiguration of normative questions as philosophy's key contribution to scientific sociology (Habermas 1974, Marcuse 1973). Yet this kind of engagement is equally available in 'nostalgic' or even 'conservative' positions within the history of sociology (MacIntyre 2007, Nisbet 1967).

These three approaches to the relationships between philosophy and sociology may not exhaust all possible options but do capture the most salient ones. Neither disciplinary arrogance nor parochialism will do here though: a re-engagement between sociology and philosophy must take the form of a mutual learning process between the different knowledge-claims that underpin them both: the empirical vocation of sociology as it grapples with the complexities of contemporary society and the kind of unanswerable questions that we still associate with the best of the philosophical tradition. At stake is the fact that as long as sociology continues to raise the big questions about life in society – the relative influence of material and ideal factors in historical explanations, the relationships between individual actions and social trends, the interconnections between nature and culture or the dialectics between domination and emancipation – these are all questions that also transcend it: *good sociological questions are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones.*

Philosophical Anthropology

The idea of philosophical *sociology* achieved some modest visibility in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. As Georg Simmel (1950) and Ferdinand Tönnies (2005) defined it, philosophical sociology was a form of epistemological self-clarification whose purpose was to contribute to the scientific establishment of sociology. But in the context of a discipline that was still intellectually and institutionally in the making, philosophical sociology was always unlikely to find wide support. Short-lived as it actually was, the project of a philosophical sociology was already building on previous work on *philosophical anthropology*.¹

¹ There is no comprehensive account of philosophical anthropology available in English, but see the special section on philosophical anthropology in the inaugural issue of *Iris* (in particular, Borsari 2009, Fischer 2009, Gebauer and Wulf 2009 and Rehberg 2009). My brief account below is informed by Cassirer (1996, 2000) and Schnädelbach (1984).

An incipient intellectual project, philosophical anthropology looked for a comprehensive answer to the question of what is a human being. Its foundational cohort is primarily associated with the work of Max Scheler and to a lesser extent with that of Ernst Cassirer, both of whom shared a diagnostic with regard to the need for a new discipline that could *bring together* what we know about what makes us human beings. Writing in 1927, Scheler (2009: 5) opens his *The Human Place in the Cosmos* with a claim that we have since heard many times: ‘in no historical era has the human being become so much of a problem to himself that as in ours’. From medicine to philology, the original project of philosophical anthropology was an attempt to *reunite* scientific and philosophical knowledge about what is a human being. Crucially, this argument for reunification was made not only in an epistemological key but also in an ontological one: a dual approach to human beings results from, and must be preserved, because of the duality of the human condition itself: humans are partly natural bodies that are controlled by their urges, emotions and physico-chemical adaptation to the world *and* partly conscious beings that are defined by their intellectual, aesthetic and indeed moral insights.

The rise of philosophical anthropology led also to a fuller realisation that the question ‘what is a human being’ does not trouble professional intellectuals alone. It rather emerges out of human experiences of and in the world; it is the kind of ‘existential’ question that is a perennial concern for human beings themselves. As part of the human condition, it is central to religious, mythical and indeed scientific world-views and is to be found across history and through different cultures: *a human is a being who asks what is a human being; humans are beings who ask anthropological questions* (Blumenberg 2011: 341, 375). At its best, this early programme of philosophical anthropology leads to a universalistic principle of humanity that is built on the following four commitments:

1. Life expresses itself through an upward gradient in complexity that goes from *plants*, that have little option but to passively adapt to the environment, to *animals* that make use of their instincts, to *humans* who can *reflexively decide* who they are and what they want to do with their existence.
2. Average members of the human species are *all* similarly endowed with general anthropological capacities that make a key contribution to life in society. Human beings recognise one another as members of the same species because of these shared anthropological endowments.²

² In contemporary philosophy, the so-called Capabilities Approach may be taken as one tradition that builds on previous insights from philosophical anthropology (Nussbaum 1992, 2006, Sen 1999). Interestingly, this is now finding a voice also within sociological debates (Gangas 2014, 2016).

3. The human body has an ambivalent position for humans themselves: it is an object in the natural world, it is the 'container' of our anthropological features *and* it is also a cultural artefact.
4. Given that human nature is ultimately indeterminate vis-à-vis social and cultural relations, humans do turn themselves into an explicit concern.

For my purposes in this book, by far the most consequential intervention in this early delimitation of philosophical sociology and philosophical anthropology comes from Karl Löwith's 1932 book *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. Arguably best known for his discussion of secularisation (Löwith 1964) and his perceptive criticisms of Heidegger (Löwith 1995), the main contention of this little book is that the importance of both Weber and Marx lies in that they successfully brought together the two intellectual genres in which we are interested: the venerable concerns of philosophy with the idea of 'man' and the fresh start that was offered by the interest of the social sciences in 'capitalism'. The latter was of course the explicit focus of Weber and Marx: they were *equally* trying to understand capitalism and offered radically *different* accounts of its emergence and functioning. But there is also a philosophical layer to their writings that, in Löwith's interpretation, is in fact more significant. There, he contends, their apparent differences are sublated into a fundamental common ground: the core 'of their investigations is one and the same ... what is it that makes man "human" within the capitalistic world' (Löwith 1993: 42–3). This anthropological enquiry into what is a human being was surely not the explicit goal of either writer, but therein lies nonetheless 'their original motive' (1993: 43). Weber and Marx offered a new kind of intellectual enquiry that was, simultaneously, empirically informed and normatively oriented, and this was precisely what made them 'philosophical sociologists' (Löwith 1993: 48). It is through the combination of scientific and philosophical approaches that they addressed fundamental intellectual questions: the interplay of material and ideal factors in human life, the immanent and transcendental condition of historical time, the relationships between social action and human fate, the disjuncture between existential concerns we all share as human beings and our particular socio-historical contexts. In Löwith's reconstruction, therefore, Marx's idea of humanity is fundamentally informed by his understanding of alienation – a world that must be wholly transformed because it impedes human development – while Weber is concerned with the inevitable flattening of our human concerns in a modern world that allows only for specialism, bureaucratisation and disenchantment.

Deeply rooted in its own intellectual traditions, this first generation of philosophical anthropology did not fully realise the extent to which natural

scientists had already stopped asking for philosophy's permission when it came to asking questions about the human condition: the biological sciences rather than philosophy were making knowledge about the human to advance at an unprecedented rate (von Uexküll 2010). On the one hand, if science was setting the new standards, then the *philosophical* drive of philosophical anthropology looked somewhat inadequate: as a project that needed to confront the challenges of the contemporary *scientific* civilisation, philosophical anthropology, looked old before it really got going.³ On the other hand, philosophical anthropology was looked at with scepticism even within professional philosophy itself. To Edmund Husserl (1931), who at the time was *the* leading German philosopher, philosophical anthropology seemed second-rate philosophy because the psychological and physiological limitations of the human mind were never going to live up to the standards of the general questions about mind, consciousness and reason *in general*.⁴ A *mere* interest in the human, the more so as it now had to include the 'lower' biological functions of human life, was never going to replace philosophy's enduring concerns.

If we now include also the turbulent historical period within which philosophical anthropology emerged, there was perhaps something inevitable in its rapid demise as a field of study. In a context of volatile nationalistic passions, growing state institutions, urbanisation and industrialism, militarisation and colonial wars, hyperinflation and the rise of mass political parties, a concern with the human in general, let alone a belief in a unified theory of the human under the tutelage of philosophy, could be seen as dramatically out of touch. Whole populations or collectives were being pushed outside the human family (if they were ever permitted to sit at this high table in the first place), political democracy was scoffed by traditional elites *and* dismissed as mere bourgeois ideology by revolutionaries, and the individual was being sacrificed on behalf of the nation, the party, the revolution and indeed humanity itself. In a world that seemed dominated by power struggles, capitalism, technological innovations and particularistic ideas of nation and race, the venerable Kantian idea that humans be treated as ends and never as means rang idealistic at best.⁵

³ This is, in effect, Jürgen Habermas's (1992a) argument on the relationship between science and philosophy in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. See also Chernilo (2013b).

⁴ To that extent, Heidegger's equally ambivalent relationship to philosophical anthropology echoes Husserl's doubts, though in his case the general scepticism is based on an irrationalist and elitist understanding of *being*. See Chapter 1.

⁵ Or, differently put, the 'revival' of German philosophical anthropology in the early part of the twentieth century can be seen as a reaction to the success of philosophies of history in public discourse as apparent, for instance, in Oswald Spengler's hugely popular *Decline of the West*, whose first volume was originally published in 1918.