

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341907358>

Mark Worrell, The Sociogony: Social Facts and the Ontology of Objects, Things, and Monsters

Article in *International Sociology* · March 2020

DOI: 10.1177/0268580920906710

CITATIONS

0

READS

3

1 author:



[Michael Strand](#)

Brandeis University

20 PUBLICATIONS 284 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Reviews: Critical sociology

International Sociology Reviews
2020, Vol. 35(2) 178–184
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0268580920906710
journals.sagepub.com/home/iss



Mark Worrell,

The Sociogony: Social Facts and the Ontology of Objects, Things, and Monsters, Brill: Leiden, 2018;
348 pp.: ISBN 9789004384026, US\$179.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Michael Strand, *Brandeis University, USA*

Keywords

Critical sociology, culture, Hegel, Marx, ontology

‘Critical sociology’ is often synonymous for a close affinity with Marx. It is used as a self-identifying label for sociologists who still read the likes of Adorno, Marcuse or Fraser. It distinguishes a type of sociology in which the bellwether for good research is whether it draws attention to social problems and social inequities, to violence, destruction, and domination. None of these, however, really does justice to critical sociology. They do not really mark its position in the field nor explain how sociology can even *be* a critical endeavor and still remain sociology. They do not distinguish critical sociology from critical theory, or make it more substantive than a catchy label, or give it the vitality of an intellectual method. They do not disambiguate ‘critical sociology.’ Rather, they leave it still more ambiguous.

Which makes the present book such a unique and important addition. Mark Worrell’s *The Sociogony* offers a powerful demonstration of critical sociology in probably its weightiest form, as an outgrowth of Hegelianism, an unusual strain of sociology that did *not* take a positivist turn in the 19th century, is closely aligned with but not limited to Marxist applications, and which, in most overt fashion, *critiques* the given and therefore carries an entirely different understanding of social facts, data and the empirical than the measurement, recording and categorization of ‘matters of fact.’

Worrell is a capable guide to this rare school of thought and the alternative it presents to what he calls ‘ordinary sociology.’ Critical sociology ‘[demonstrates] how dialectics (literally split reasoning) is itself a feature of society at odds with itself, i.e. normal society, that reified products of human activity emerge out of a process, that the process is driven by contradictions, and that the process and procession has a structure. . . . [D]ialectics represents not only a feature of contradictory life but also the way out of alienated life as an essential intellectual method’ (p. 159). As Worrell argues, the simplest but most profound tool of critical sociology is syllogism: connecting ‘moments of

particularity' to a universal, and not mistaking particularity for individuality, which it is not (p. 20).

The Sociogony offers a first-volume (with another two to follow) synthesis of this approach, mainly of Marx and Durkheim, but more specifically of social facts and the critique of capital. Worrell situates these two classic arguments within the same intellectual trajectory that extends from Hegel, the Jena circle and his Jena lectures in the early 19th century to Marx's *Capital* in the middle of the century, to the publication of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in 1912. During this time, Worrell writes, 'Spirit found and comprehended itself . . . philosophically and sociologically but with no power to prevent mass suicide' (p. 276) as witnessed by the epic violence of the 20th century. Marx and Durkheim help us understand that violence. Their signal contributions offer, in a Hegelian lens, a kind of luminous self-clarification; yet because sociology is still not properly situated within this Hegelian lineage, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of social facts, how they are 'crystallized interactions and [how] interactions are fluid structures' (p. 163). Worrell's original proposal in the book starts here, as he attempts to critically model that process and advance a kind of self-comprehension attempted by Marx, Durkheim, and Simmel (among a host of others) before but without success, and which means that we ('Spirit') still lack a kind of 'recognition' that we are imperiled *not* to have.

Worrell's thesis is that social facts are best understood as the eponymous *sociogony*. He explains this as a processual understanding of social facts as they traverse through eight distinct moments: (1) assemblage or a weird nature complex, (2) ebullience or effervescence, (3) projection and externalization, (4) objectification and internalization, (5) estrangement and fetishistic inversion, (6) reification, (7) alienation and domination, and (8) desublimation and 'myriad possible consequences flowing from the process of derealization' (p. 162). While many in the field, shaped now by pragmatist and constructivist tendencies above all, will likely balk at any sort of teleology, even one as cautious of the dangers of teleology as this, Worrell gives space for competing theoretical approaches within his overall construct, arguing that pragmatism and constructivism theorize the first four moments of sociogony while power-oriented and structuralist frameworks theorize the next three. The final moment, meanwhile, is left to the 'world of monsters and magicians' and largely defies understanding by any existing theoretical school. Worrell here offers an inspired discussion of the appearance of monsters, monstrous forms, and other grotesqueries in industrial and neoliberal capitalist culture, borrowing from the category of the 'living dead' that Marx and Engels used to describe *both* capital's accumulation of dead labor and the zombies and vampires found so often in capitalist mythologies (p. 259).

But what is it? The sociogony, as Worrell explains, tries to comprehend the same thing that Marx attempted in his discussion of capital and its 'moments' of value in circulation, Durkheim in his dissection of the collective consciousness and its material embodiment in totems and ritual practice, and Berger and Luckmann in their tension-filled formula 'Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.' These are major contributions of sociology as a non-positivist critical pursuit, for which comprehension consists of self-understanding. Worrell proposes sociogony as a comprehensive attempt to finally grasp their common concern with the different moments of

unfolding social facts, which is where critical sociology stakes its ground as an intellectual method and promises a whole treasury of hitherto missing forms of intelligence and recognition.

But what is it that unfolds? While Worrell admires Marxian attempts to understand the circuit of capital, he does not make this a culmination in which 'the now is [finally] *no longer* like night-time' (to paraphrase Hegel). Worrell would of course *need* to veer away from this if he wants to put Marx and Durkheim on an equivalent plane and synthesize them, but as he unpacks each moment of the sociology there is something lost in translation, perhaps because most of the discussion here consists of a truly virtuoso reading of theorists and writers ranging from Julian Jaynes, to Erich Fromm, Freud, Zizek and even Guy de Maupassant. The most extensively detailed moment is the eighth and final one, which also packs the most empirical punch. For each of the other moments, the analysis comes mainly in the form of allusion and quotation, tied together with sometimes dense but often evocative and well-crafted prose.

If the above vague questions are any indication, however, then the sociology does not offer much clarity on its primary object and what would presumably be the primary duty of critical sociology to sublimate and understand. Worrell refers to the sociology as a way of picturing 'a spiraling of negations, inversions, reversals and the continuous return of spectral residues that haunt psyche' (p. 162). But his analysis of its different moments offers an extensive compilation of on-the-point quotations without really explaining what inspired (or haunted) the theorists who wrote them. This book therefore reads somewhat less like Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, which discussed human events even though the most important thing about them was what was *written* about them after the fact, and somewhat more like the left Hegelians who drew Marx and Engels' satiric ire in *The German Ideology* as participating in a verbose 'world struggle' of spirit and 'revolutions' in mind that proceeded with exasperating rapidity.

Worrell's ambitious book and his three-volume series is a welcome and important contribution to a sociological landscape that often seems far less visionary than the terrible times demand. Critical sociology of this sort promises a needed antidote. My question is whether 'social facts' adequately serve as the thing that *has* these eight different moments? If so, then sociology arguably makes a more significant advance on the scale of something like Simmel's social forms than it does Marx and Durkheim's social totalities. If not, then what Worrell's book *lacks* is a critical-sociological inquiry into 'spirit' itself, or at least one that can adequately encompass both capital and collective consciousness alike and fit the profile that Worrell wants to give them. We currently lack self-understanding *as this* universal (syllogistically speaking) or even a reliable vocabulary to refer to it, with the possible exception of something like the Gaia hypothesis and its planetary scale.

Any strong move in this direction, however, is probably still vulnerable to Marx and Engels' *own* use of syllogism for critical purposes in 1846: 'First of all an abstraction is made from a fact; then it is declared that the fact is based on the abstraction. That is how to proceed if you want to appear German, profound and speculative.' *The Sociogony* remains largely immune from this (critical) criticism but this is mainly because the book hesitates to place its finger on spirit, slippery no doubt, even while it provides the means for a vivid *phenomenology* of spirit. Worrell promises to substantiate this in the eagerly

awaited next two volumes, so if there is a missing link in this first volume it is not fatal. But at the very least it suggests that critical sociology, in the disambiguated version of which Worrell's book offers such a superb demonstration, still has not completely surpassed its original cautionary tale.

Author biography

Michael Strand is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University. His published work has appeared in *Theory and Society*, *Sociological Theory*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Poetics*, *Science Technology & Human Values* and *History of the Human Sciences*. He is currently completing a book about the history of social justice (that is inspired by but hopefully deviant from Hegel). Address: Brandeis University, Department of Sociology, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02453, USA. Email: mstrand@brandeis.edu

Ruy Braga,

A Política do Precariado: do Populismo à Hegemonia Lulista, Boitempo: São Paulo, 2012; 264 pp.: ISBN 9788575592984 (pbk)

[*The Politics of the Precariat: From Populism to Lulista Hegemony*, Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2018; 292 pp.: ISBN 9789004272378 (hbk), 9789004277632 (e-book)]

Reviewed by: Stefan Klein, *Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brazil*

Keywords

Hegemony, Marxism, populism, precariat, sociology of labor

This book by Ruy Braga, originally published in Brazil in 2012 and in English in 2018, discusses the conditions of precarious labor relations in Brazil from the 1930s to the beginning of the 21st century. Focusing on changes in terms of its organization, it stresses the importance of Lulism – a neologism stemming from the Lula da Silva government – along with the concrete socioeconomic problems that, at each moment, became a fundamental trait of capitalist economies around the globe. As such, it constitutes a broader work on sociological theory, discussing and mobilizing a number of concepts to evaluate their relevance, while getting into a deeper debate concerning contemporary labor relations and their ties to wider social conflicts.

The book is made up of two parts, each one divided into two chapters. The conclusion is followed by a number of small pieces named 'interventions'.¹ The two larger parts – the first one entitled 'The Formation of the Reversal' and the second 'The Transformation of Hegemony in Reverse' – present an effort, to be found throughout this work as a whole, of continuously promoting an enticing dialogue between empirical research and theoretical interpretations. In this sense it offers an important contribution to the foreign audience by taking up vital historical developments throughout the 20th century as well as proposing a framework to understand contemporary trends.

Braga's working hypothesis is made explicit in the introduction: