

*Paper presented at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference 'Social Worlds, Natural Worlds',
University of Warwick, 28-30 March 2008*

Beyond 'sociological naturalism': Nothing new after Simmel and Weber?

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Abstract

Georg Simmel's notable paper 'How is society possible?' opens with Kant's question about the possibility of nature. Previously, 'society' was modelled on natural facts, leading to Emile Durkheim's so-called 'sociological naturalism'. About two decades later, Max Weber, in his own words, buried the primordial naturalism by a flood wave of symbolic action. What opposes these sociologists is the way they handle 'society'. Whereas Durkheim created it as a social organism and the discipline's basic concept, the two German scholars contest its status and avoid using the term. Instead, Simmel and Weber offer distinct conceptions of 'sociation' and 'meaning' which can be used to differentiate between nature and the social. Derived from these classical theories, two questions arise: 'how are nature and society possible?' and 'is there anything new after Simmel and Weber?' In order to approach the second question, two current conceptions are delved into: Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology and Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory both aim to explain the social. In this paper it is argued whether these sociologies have achieved any considerable progress since Simmel and Weber's conceptions. Such a comparison seems promising. This might hold especially true for the theoretical boundary of nature and the social and thus have implications on its contemporary understanding.

Keywords

Simmel and Weber on nature and society, theory, contemporary approaches