

Andrew Abbott

The Future of the Social Sciences: Between Empiricism and Normativity

This article takes a processualist position to identify the current forces conducive to rapid change in the social sciences, of which the most important is the divergence between their empirical and normative dimensions. It argues that this gap between the many and various empirical ontologies we typically use and the much more restricted normative ontology on which we base our moral judgments is problematic. In fact, the majority of social science depends on a “normative contractarianism.” While this ontology is the most widely used basis for normative judgments in the social sciences, it is not really effective when it comes to capturing the normative problems raised by the particularity and historicity of the social process, nor the astonishing diversity of values in the world. The article closes with a call to establish a truly processual foundation for our analysis of the social world, which must move away from contractualism and imagine new ways of founding the human normative project.

Morgan Jouvenet

Contexts and Temporalities in Andrew Abbott's Processual Sociology

Since the 1970s, Andrew Abbott has promoted an original and ambitious project for the social sciences. In particular, he has argued for the development of a “processual sociology” based on precepts first articulated by the Chicago tradition of sociology and in his view somewhat forgotten. Against functionalism, against the “variables paradigm,” he has emphasized the Chicago tradition's focus on patterns of interaction and their contexts, and has deepened our analysis of the local and ever-particular dimensions of social entities by considering their inscription in successive sequences. As well as seeking to formalize these sequences, this vision aims to link processes playing out at different rhythms and levels. As a project it is based on a conception of social life as a “world of events,” where “change is the normal nature of things” and “not something that happens occasionally to stable social actors.” This makes it possible to explain the emergence and durability of social entities (for example, professions and disciplines) in the flow of events. The originality of this approach consists in founding a new institutionalist analysis of social realities on this ontology of perpetual movement.

Marked by American pragmatism but also traversed by the question of order and social structures, Abbott's oeuvre offers an original approach to the diversity of contexts and temporalities in processes that, through the intermingling of various “lineages,” constitute social traditions and entities. This article presents Abbott's contextualist theses and the intellectual background against which they emerged. It also considers the place that the processual approach accords to contingency and personhood, factors that enable Abbott to work toward a synthesis of history and sociology.

John Ma

 Elites, Elitism, and Community in the Archaic *Polis*

This article explores the famously diverse and expressive political cultures of the “Archaic” Greek communities (650–450 BCE) in the light of recent work on public goods and publicness, to which the present essay partly responds. This contribution may also be considered as a fragment of the long history of the Greek *polis*. The distinction between “elitist” or “aristocratic” styles and “middling” or “popular” styles, upon closer examination, turns out to be a set of political play-acting gestures, predicated on different political institutions and notably on access to public goods. The “middling” styles paradoxically reflect restricted political access, while “aristocratic” competition in fact responds to the stress and uncertainties of broad enfranchisement. The whole nexus of issues and gestures surrounding distinction is hence not socially autonomous, but immediately linked to political requirements and institutional pressures. This article thus argues not just for the centrality of public goods to *polis* formation in early Greece, but also for the centrality of formal access and entitlements to the “public thing”—in other words, for the centrality of the state and its potential development. Putting the “state” back in the early history of the Greek city-state: the exercise has its own risks (notably that of teleology), but it attempts to avoid problems arising in recent histories of the *polis*, where the state is downplayed or indeed dismissed altogether, and the *polis* itself reduced to a pure phenomenon of elite capture or elite constitution.

Kostas Vlassopoulos

What Do We Really Know about Athenian Society?

Traditional accounts of Athenian society tend to take their sources at face value, as direct reflections of Athenian reality. They present a model of free citizens working as independent producers, while the elite derived its surplus income from the exploitation of slaves. This model underestimates the systematic omissions of the sources, their consistent and distorting focus, and the implications of these biases. By mapping the field of vision of Athenian sources and the discourses that focus attention on certain aspects while leaving others in the shadows, this article offers an alternative methodology for reconstructing Athenian society. In particular, it considers the Athenian distinction between slave and free, arguing that the emphasis on a clear distinction between the two is not an automatic result of the significance of slavery in Athens. It also shows how the sources render invisible the large numbers of freemen that did not live as independent producers, and argues that there was a significant gap between the theoretically clear-cut distinction and its application in practice. A renewed approach to Athenian society needs to account for the dimensions that remain systematically beyond the sources’ field of vision. It must also take major conceptual distinctions like that between slave and free not as reflections of reality but as choices which relate to Athenian society’s view of itself and require historical explanation.

Paul Cournarie

Authority between Mask and Sign: The Status of the Royal Body in Ancient Greece (Fourth to Second Centuries BCE)

What kind of body was the body of a Hellenistic king? To consider kings in antiquity is to necessarily reach back beyond Ernst Kantorowicz’s schema and explore the body before the

concept of the “king’s two bodies.” An analysis of Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* sheds light on this configuration, in which the problem was not so much the (unachievable) conformation of a royal super-body as the obscure point at which the natural encountered the ceremonial, the latter absolutely essential to the former in the context of a sprawling empire, but nevertheless threatening to engulf it in the luxury with which the sovereign surrounded himself. Neither transparent nor opaque, at once a sign and a mask, this model was further honed by Alexander the Great. While his persona was bound up with the same alternative, the criticisms that he faced obliged Alexander to make a tactical distinction between his person and ceremonial luxury. This separation in no way implied a duality but rather depended on shifting boundaries, sometimes insisting on his naturally royal body, sometimes on the luxury reconfigured by the sovereign’s extreme mastery. The Hellenistic kings inherited these questions, and alternated between a symbolization of their natural being and a naturalization of the symbolic in a constant interplay that resisted stabilization. Only the rise of Rome would bring an end to this vision of the royal body in a process of perpetual construction, as though the incarnation of royalty itself was inconceivable.

Annick Lacroix

The Postal Service in the *Douar*: Noncitizen Users and the Colonial State in Rural Algeria from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Second World War

Throughout the colonial period, Algerian users are largely absent from the administrative archives of the Postal, Telegraph, and Telephone Service (PTT). If the French conquest did not spur colonized populations, with their ancient writing practices, to “enter into communication,” should this absence be understood as the refusal of a progress that was itself colonialist? The period between the two world wars marked a turning point: pressure from local representatives and a wave of petitions from noncitizen (Algerian) villagers reconfigured a public service previously monopolized by European users. Belatedly, and with as little expense as possible, the administration finally supported postal services for isolated areas.

Observing the colonial configuration in the most situated and ordinary of its manifestations, this article sheds light on everyday writing practices and reinstates the “thickness” of a local service. Rather than limiting the study to the French presence in Algeria, this depends on pressing the colonial documentation to reveal the workings of Algerian society and the reorganizations prompted by the colonial encounter. Complaints and petitions thus illuminate the relation of noncitizen, rural, and mostly illiterate populations to the colonial state. The unexpected utilization of the postal service and subversive demands for access to it led colonized populations to piece together a political identity that borrowed certain practices from active citizens and drove the French authorities to propose unprecedented adjustments.