DIALOGUES OF THE NATIONS: 
Revisiting *Visions* and Its Critics

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ABSTRACT

Critics of Visions in this symposium raise three general questions. The question of inclusiveness is addressed by linking pertinent criteria to the book’s aims; that of justifying national traditions by reviewing pertinent evidence; and that of the viability of dialogue by arguing that responsive communication does not entail full agreement. A number of particular issues the critics raise are addressed by the book’s arguments regarding the relation of the discipline of sociology to its philosophical background, the international setting of early sociology, Durkheim’s individualism, Weber’s distinction between naturalism and interpretability, Marx’s treatment of Feuerbach and of nationalism, and the relation between power and knowledge. This response concludes by explicating the proposal that the time may be ripe to rejoin a number of the elements of Aristotelian social science that had been delegated to various national traditions of social theory in the modern era.

Three questions spring from this set of thoughtful readings of Visions of the Sociological Tradition: How thorough are the book’s representations? How credible is its talk of national traditions? And how plausible is the notion of dialogue it advances? In responding I shall address these broad questions first, then consider some particular issues the discussants raise. To close, I shall hazard a fresh interpretation of one thing I think the book is about.

GENERAL QUESTIONS
Many book reviewers point out sins of omission. Often their points are instructive. Lawrence A. Scaff supplies a list of Germanic authors who were salient for Simmel and Weber--most notably Roscher, Knies, Hildebrand, Brentano, Schmoller, Menger, and Böhm-Bawerk--but are not discussed in Visions. He is absolutely right about their significance, and in other publications I have discussed many of them (Levine 1998; 2000a; 2000b). One could mention other significant figures who were omitted, from both Scaff’s list and Visions, including Fischer, Frobenius, Ehering, Jellinek, Lazarus, Oppenheimer, Otto, Radbruch, Schäffle, Sohm, Stammel, Steinitz, Troeltsch, von Wieser, and Wundt. All these and others must be included if the task is to offer a comprehensive history of the founding of the social sciences in Germany.

With an eye to the British tradition, David Norman Smith mentions other omissions, including “Tylor, Robertson Smith, Harrison, Radcliffe-Brown, and Evans-Pritchard, . . . Godwin, Wollstonecraft, the Shelleys, Burke, Owen, Chartism, the Pre-Raphaelites, Carlyle, Froude, Ruskin, Morris, Green, Bosanquet, Rivers, Ridgeway, Hocart, Cornford, Rose, Ginsberg, [and] Bernal” (in this
issue). In other symposia—in the *Journal of the History of the Human Sciences* (10, no. 2) and *Sociological Forum* (11, no. 4) and at conferences—*Visions* has been faulted for neglecting not only the German authors listed by Scaff, but also Arabs, Austrians, Church Fathers, Darwin, Giddings, Russians, women, and others. Kevin Anderson notes yet another type of omission. Although he applauds the emphasis *Visions* gives to the influence of idealist philosophers on Marx, he notes, again quite correctly, its failure to consider the dialectical logic that Marx borrowed from Hegel.

Since any ambitious work could be charged with a long list of omissions, it is essential for authors and critics to clarify their criteria of inclusion. Should *Visions* be assessed as purporting to offer a comprehensive history? Its prologue suggests otherwise. Rather, it asserts that the part of the book concerned with national traditions is organized to explain one "massive fact." The fact is this: "When it came time to set forth the theoretical underpinnings of the new science of sociology at the turn of the last century, the preeminent British, French, German, Italian, American, and Marxian scholars did so in radically different ways" (1995, p. 3). To this date, no one has come forth to deny that that was the case, nor that it is interesting. Even the most outspoken critic of *Visions* in this symposium affirms that "on one level, this statement is obviously valid" (Smith, in this issue). Given that fact, the prologue goes on to ask, "Why was this so? What has come of it?" That being the problem, judgments about whether something should be included or not would do well to consider whether the item in question has some evident bearing on resolving that problem. To apply a criterion of comprehensiveness to *Visions* is to ignore that it was meant to be an ideal-typical reconstruction of certain central tendencies within selected traditions, not an empirically detailed history of the development of sociology (pp. 100-102). On the other hand, in the spirit of dialogue which the book advances, the identification of omissions serves a useful function in reinforcing its point that many other perspectives on the tradition can be valid and useful.

In marshaling evidence to support my interpretation of the central tendencies of selected traditions, *Visions* appeals to the notion of national traditions of secular thought. By what warrant, asks Smith, can such a notion be justified? And how, Jennifer Lehmann joins him in asking, dare one forget the enormous amount of discord and disagreement within something like the French tradition?

To the question of how one could justify reconstructing national traditions of social thought, *Visions* supplies three kinds of evidence. The figures who were seminal founders of modern sociological science—Spencer and Marshall, Durkheim, Simmel and Weber, Mosca and Pareto, Park and Thomas—appear at the end of multigenerational national networks whose members read one another, taught one another, commented on one another, befriended and fought with one another, to a far greater extent than they did with figures outside those networks. Second, beyond the evidence of these social networks is the evidence of reproduction, generation after generation, of the central symbolic themes that part 2 of *Visions* abundantly documents.

Finally, there is the perception of the players themselves—beyond the epigraph to part 2. Durkheim’s dictum that "every nation has a moral philosophy that is in harmony with its character." In a section entitled "A Tale of Two Traditions," *Visions* shows how, for more than two centuries, British and French social theorists faulted one another in terms that included reference to the other’s national characteristics as accounting for some of the faults in question. One set of the founders of the social sciences in Germany saw themselves as defending political economy and cultural studies against the distortions of British thought, glossed tersely as Manchestertum. Charles Peirce founded pragmatism as an effort to provide philosophic expression for Yankee ingenuity; later scions have described pragmatist philosophy and sociology as authentically American. Émile Durkheim and Wilhelm Dilthey each interpreted the traditions they embodied as expressing national cultural characteristics.
To the question of how one could characterize these national traditions as unific, *Visions* offers the kind of response that concludes its analysis of the British tradition:

Its participants held widely divergent political ideologies, from the centralism of Hobbes to the libertarianism of Spencer; from the radicalism of Bentham to the cautiousness of Marshall. They pursued a wide range of substantive interests: far from attending to the problem of civil order like Hobbes, as Parsons’s account of utilitarianism suggests, the others focused on such diverse problems as increased commerce (Mandeville), human psychology (Hume), living standards (Smith), legal reform (Bentham), population pressure on resources (Malthus), distribution of wealth (Ricardo), and the enhancement of liberty (Mill and Spencer). Far from subscribing to a common model of action—a model which depicts actors as oriented toward the instrumentally rational pursuit of selfish interests, as Parsons argued—some of them, like Hobbes and Hume, stressed the primacy of the emotions while others, like Bentham and Jevons, emphasized man’s calculating powers, and still others, like Smith and Mill, treated rational and affective dispositions with equal seriousness. They included many, like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Smith, and Mill, who celebrated the power of social sentiments and of moral ideals, as well as Hobbes, Mandeville, and Bentham who highlighted human egoism, and Spencer, who supposed an evolution of human character from egoism to sociality. On the face of it, British moral philosophy consists of one long string of disputations. What could be more biting than Mandeville’s attack on Shaftesbury, more robust than Hutcheson’s rebuttal of Mandeville, or more edifying than John Stuart Mill’s respectful but devastating critique of Bentham? (pp. 149-150)

What the book then goes on to say is that all of these disputants shared a quest for a humane secular ethic that took its bearings from assumptions about the natural properties of human individuals. More specifically, "viewed from a distance . . . the noisy disputes of the British tradition consist of nothing so much as a continuous set of variations on themes enunciated by Hobbes" (p. 151). For each of the national traditions represented, *Visions* attempts to highlight the range of disagreements among the participants. Lehmann’s point that the thinkers in the French tradition are "marked as much, if not more, by their theoretical and political differences as by their theoretical commonalities" seems right on the track (in this issue). What *Visions* adds to that observation is curiosity about those commonalities—what they are, where they stem from, and how they differ from the theoretical commonalities in other traditions. So I heartily agree with Smith, for example, that the differences between Maistre and Comte were and remain real. (Scaff’s comparable point about nontrivial differences between Simmel and Weber can be bolstered by Levine [1957] 1980; 1985, pp. 94-103; and 1991). Nevertheless, the fact remains that Comte explicitly drew on themes from Maistre—which fed into the *influences that nourished* Durkheim. As Lehmann says:

Levine’s reading of the French social theorists confirms that social determinism, in some form, is common to Montesquieu, Rousseau, Bonald, Maistre, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, and Durkheim. This commonality is not immediately apparent, easily discernible, or generally understood. (in this issue)

And that, far from representing a puzzling, idiosyncratic selection, returns us to the presenting problem with which the book opened.

This brings us to the third issue raised by these essays—chiefly, once again, by those of Smith and Lehmann. Smith claims that *Visions* "reveals a tendency to think that reasonable people must and will agree" (in this issue). Well, I consider both Lehmann and Smith as well as myself to be reasonable folks, and I accept that we disagree on a
number of points. I do not think that this acceptance differs from the informing message of *Visions*, which begins by discounting both the wish for, and the promise of, general agreement: "For too long it has seemed as though consensus could be built only from a great fund of common beliefs, whereas theory and experience alike indicate that uniformity of belief produces stagnation if not repression. The remedy for fragmentation is communication, not uniformity" (p. 2). *Visions* then notes that dissensus among social scientists can be productive and energizing and cites with approval Imre Lakatos on the positive effects of competition and conflict among scientists (p. 288). It closes with an appeal to a model of dialogue that relishes difference:

Dialogue connects without enforcing uniformity. It promotes, as Buber held true for "genuine conversation"--and therefore for every actual fulfillment of interhuman relationship--the "acceptance of otherness." (p. 328)
PARTICULAR ISSUES
With that model of dialogue in mind, let me consider a few particular points raised by these essays. With some I agree, with some disagree, yet each prods me to articulate those points with greater clarity than in the original text. That, I have argued, forms one of the great benefits of dialogue, and saying this prompts me to reflect below on some other points about dialogue made by Lehmann and Smith.

Scaff’s essay includes two statements that purport to be a rejection of my argument but which in fact fully support precisely what Visions is saying. About early German sociology, he contends that “the deep philosophical background formed out of the thought of Kant, Hegel, and Dilthey has indeed faded into the distance. Left in its place is an independent and distinctive sociological project” (in this issue). That nicely concretizes the general formulation with which Visions concludes:

The quest for a rational ethic was the booster that launched the social scientific disciplines into orbit. Once the disciplines were launched, the booster dropped away and disappeared. Yet the trajectory of those disciplines continues to be determined by the direction and programming that first set them into motion. (p. 317)

What is more, his claim that there is a “trans-Atlantic dialogue . . . [that] should be seen at least as a powerful counterweight to any national peculiarities” iterates a piece of the argument in Chapter 13 of Visions. For example

The institutionalization of sociology was a truly international process. The era when professional sociology took shape was a time of international and multilingual scholarship. . . . There were so few sociologists anywhere in the 1890s that they looked eagerly to colleagues in other countries for stimulation and moral support. . . . Sociologists created international associations before they had formed any national sociological associations. (p. 277)

Lehmann’s essay brings out an important point—that Durkheim’s institutional success must be understood as affected by the ideological implications of his social theory. Her formulation that “Durkheim’s institutional success was part of a politico-economic historical context, as well as an intellectual historical context” nicely concretizes what in the more general terms provided by Visions would take the form of saying that a full understanding of Durkheim must include analyses from the perspectives of contextual as well as dialogical (and positivist/pluralist/synthetic/humanist) narratives.

On the other hand, I find problematic her reading of Durkheim as a de facto anti-individualist—“he qualifies the ‘individualism’ he apparently [sic] endorses until it is no longer recognizable as individualism” (Lehmann, in this issue). Although such a reading is fairly common, alas, it is difficult to reconcile with a number of core Durkheimian arguments, including 1) the place of human rights as the cornerstone of value consensus in modern societies, 2) the role of the state in protecting individual rights against intermediate organizations, 3) the trend to constitute criminal law entirely of crimes against persons and not collectivities, 4) the need for strong inheritance taxes to improve the life chances of individuals from underprivileged strata, and 5) the importance of individual differences as sources of innovation essential to progressive societies, such that to defend the right of the individuals to free expression of their ideas and feelings is to prevent the “criminal impoverishment” of the very soul of a nation (Durkheim 1973, p. 54).

Regarding the essay by John K. Rhoads, I find myself leaning toward disagreement. Yet that disagreement seems to me productive, for it prods me to make sharper distinctions on the way to clarifying my position.

In form, Rhoads’s comments exemplify the way his main protagonist, Max Weber, wanted ideal types to be used: as abstract constructs against which concrete realities can
be assessed. After sketching the ideal type of the German tradition of social theory proposed by *Visions*, he then asks: To what extent does this fit, to what extent diverge from, the historical reality? If the content of Rhoads’s answer does not persuade me, that is chiefly because it runs up against a Weberian point that my argument failed to emphasize. He argues, correctly, that Weber acknowledged the significance of hereditary factors such as race, senescence, and reaction time. However, far from questioning the verisimilitude of my ideal type of the German tradition, his observation fortifies the point I was trying to make. For no sooner does Weber acknowledge the empirical significance of biological factors of that sort than he asserts, “The recognition of the causal significance of such factors would naturally not in the least alter the specific task of sociological analysis or of that of the other sciences of action, which is the interpretation of action in terms of its subjective meaning” (Weber [1922] 1947, p. 94; [1922] 1968, p. 8; emphasis added). Indeed, Weber went further. While confirming the scientific value of naturalistic disciplines that border on sociology, he emphatically dissociated the interpretive sociology he was advocating not only from biology but also from discourse about psychological impulses: “Interpretive sociology is not a psychology,” he insisted (Weber [1913] 1981, p. 154; Levine 2000a).

So *Visions* never says that writers in the German tradition refuse to acknowledge the import of natural factors—indeed, how could anyone?—but that their moral ideals and epistemic constructs alike were geared to heed ways in which humans pursue goals and construct meanings that are not naturally determined. It would have helped prevent this kind of confusion if the book had honed this point more sharply. It would have helped as well if *Visions* had formulated a distinction between naturalism and interpretability, another distinction that Weber’s work helped to evolve. This failure abets the confusion whereby an astute reader like Rhoads is led to conflate natural with nonunderstandable. British discourse about such traits as the propensities to trade or to feel sympathy concerned traits that are naturally grounded yet open to interpretive understanding. (Here, the schematic outline of different types of theories of action provided in the famous note B to chapter 2 of Parsons [1937] would be worth consulting.)

With Anderson’s comments about the chapter on Marx, my disagreements may appear more complicated. At the outset, I must record how gratifying it is that a Marxian scholar of such care, erudition, and depth as Kevin Anderson has confirmed the main lines of my interpretation of Marx. I also concur with his comment that *Visions* neglects the place of dialectical logic in Marx’s borrowing from Hegel; that is an important omission for understanding the Marxian oeuvre, if not so important, arguably, for the interpretive concerns framed by the constitutive dichotomies of atomism/societalism and naturalism/voluntarism.

On two other points, I suspect Anderson and I will continue to disagree, in what I hope will be productive ways. I am puzzled that he rejects a reading of Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach as an indictment of Feuerbach’s “insufficient materialism”; I do not see what else can be done with Marx’s charge that, for Feuerbach, “sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice” (Tucker 1978, p. 143) As for the place of nationalism in Marx’s thought, I should defer to Anderson’s vast and superior knowledge of the literature on this question. However, two considerations continue to inform my divergent outlook.

For one thing, Marx presents the development of capital as an inexorable solvent of nationalism. Not only does the famous passage from the Manifesto assert that “national differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world-market” (Tucker 1978, p. 488), but also in his more mature *Grundrisse* Marx (1973, p. 410) argues that “capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship.” What is more, Marx sees no future for national entities in a
postcapitalist world. Like social conflict, which he views not as an inherent feature of the human condition but as fully eliminable once the constraints of capitalism have been transcended, so with all particularisms. The Grundrisse passage just cited goes on to gloss national boundaries and prejudices as so many limits that capitalism posits in order to overcome them but implies that at a certain stage in economic development those limits will be fully suspended.

The other consideration concerns the intensity of Marx's own vituperations against the ethnic group from which he sprang—and his own repeated call for the "abolition of Judentum"—a matter that Francis Wheen's (2000) recent biography of Marx documents in greater detail than ever. Although the arguments that Anderson adduces to support a claim of Marx's sympathy for national movements of his time enrich our understanding of that complex thinker and tradition, they do not amount to legitimating the role of particularisms as enduring sources of cultural identity and social solidarity.

To my mind, at least some of the foregoing comments will have raised questions regarding other points made by Lehmann and Smith about intellectual life. One benefit of "hanging in there" to discuss objections such as those raised by these essays instead of dismissing them and cutting off further communication is indeed the consolidation of ties within an intellectual community. The point is not, pace Lehmann, that intellectual differences are so troubling that they must be overcome and, since reason will not serve, to overcome them we must address the class-ethnic-gender-power differences among the speakers, but precisely the reverse: intellectual differences provide occasions for strengthening our powers as free human thinking agents by engaging discourse about them. Nor does the persistence of these differences, pace Smith, invalidate the notion of cumulativeness in social science. For, to take a small example, Levine on naturalism before being prodded by Rhoads offered a less robust statement than afterward, just as Comte before being revised by Durkheim offered a less persuasive case about societal evolution, moral diversity, and the division of labor than after, or, reaching further afield, Simmel's essay on the stranger after the long sojourn of its commentators, critics, and investigators unquestionably offers a much more compelling charter for research and thought about strangerhood than before (Levine 1985, pp. 73-89). Of course, we iterate the point every day in requiring dissertation writers and, in nuce, paper writers to present a "review of the literature" before embarking on their own exploratory forays.

FROM DIALOGUE TO VIRTUE

As assigned, the contributors to this symposium each focused on a particular tradition. While this approach yields insights, it risks losing sight of larger interpretive themes. In a previous symposium on Visions, I set down for the record eight of its broader substantive arguments. These concerned the social functions of narratives, the types of narratives, the variable significance of the classics, the reasons for shifts in narrative form, the nature of dialogical narratives, the quest for a rational ethic, twentieth-century transformations of the social sciences, and the enduring resources of the sociological tradition (Levine 1996).

At this juncture, I would like to comment on one line of argument that has tended to get lost in the shuffle and that some readers have said they find to be Visions's single most daring and suggestive proposal. The argument is this:

The philosophical assumptions that organize present-day sociology represent the outcome of an age-old European quest to establish a rational secular ethic based on the nature of things. The quest is generally understood to begin with Socrates and Plato and to find expression in a schematic organization of the social sciences in Aristotle. In Chapter 6 I characterized the Aristotelian achievement as an effort to create a set of practical sciences of action with reference to a clearly-formulated view of nature, yet in a way that kept them distinct from the aims and methods of the natural sciences. Aristotle found the good life to be constituted by
happiness, the source of happiness in nature to lie in the individual's natural potential for virtue, and the cultivation of virtues to depend on social groupings that exist by nature. Yet the shaping of human virtues varies with the highly variable constitutions of communities, and the best ways to organize polities depend on particularities of circumstance and on judgments arrived at through deliberation, not rigorous proof. The ability to make such judgments draws on the distinctive human capacities for free choice and for communication through language, and the surest way to promote a good society is to have it governed by an aristocracy of well-qualified citizens. The intellectual revolution associated with Thomas Hobbes discarded nearly all of these postulates. (p. 272)

The passage goes on to say that there was too much human experience that supported Aristotle's ideas for the various components of the Aristotelian position not to be recovered. And this recovery, Visions suggests, took place in the series of modern efforts to establish a rational secular ethic as follows:

1. Aristotle's idea of a naturally sociable disposition in humans came to be emphasized by the British critics of Hobbes;
2. Aristotle's notion that societies represent naturally grounded suprapersonal formations whose variable structures determine variable moral habits became the leit-motif of the French tradition;
3. His emphasis on human freedom as essential to moral decision making and on the creative power of language as a distinctive feature of human action and morality came to distinguish thinkers in the German tradition;
4. His view of nature as directed toward the transformative actualization of a potentiality was embraced by the Marxian tradition;
5. His notion that good societies require good elites was restored through the Italian tradition; and
6. The Aristotelian notion that practical inquiry should be envisioned as open-ended and ongoing, and that the quest for certainty in moral matters was grievously misguided, was restored by thinkers of the American pragmatist tradition.

What I failed to say in Visions was that the time may be ripe for someone to try to put all of these pieces back together. The Aristotelian vision, updated as it obviously must be in many respects, remains to my mind the single most compelling vision of what sociological inquiry should be about. Although Visions suggests that Durkheim himself was the only originary sociologist who appears to have consciously striven to recover the Aristotelian program, scholarship on Weber unknown to me earlier suggests that the most powerful mind in the social sciences of the past century was to some extent also trying to pursue the program of the Ethics and the Politics. According to the stunning reconstruction by Wilhelm Hennis (1988), one (Hennis says "the") unifying theme of Weber's thought was a lifelong quest to investigate the effects of different kinds of social orders on the formation of character. What is more, Wolfgang Mommsen (1974) had offered a benign construction of Weber's appeal for charismatic rulership in modern societies. If Weber did not himself speak about, or identify with, Aristotle, his formulation of the goal of economics as a science of action--a discipline concerned not so much with the economic well-being of people but above all with "those characteristics that give us the sense that they make up human greatness and the nobility of our nature" ([1895] 1980, p. 13; 1994, p. 15, translation altered)--resonates eerily with Aristotle's dictum that the primary concern of oikonomia is "human excellence rather than the administration of wealth" (Politics I, 13, 1059b).

There was surely enough rashness in what Visions did say that a supererogatory appeal of this sort could be finessed. However, built into the very fiber of the book was a more modest argument that I should like to highlight at this point. Visions closes by suggesting that the original quest for a secular rational ethic that provided the booster
for modern sociology has to this date apparently not achieved its goal. It even suggests that what it has accomplished—the construction of a multinational, multigenerational dialogue—may in fact be considered a substitute attainment of that goal. These hints of resolution surely cry for elaboration. Smith may have put his finger on the lacuna by accusing *Visions* of dismissing the possibility of a religious sociology. What in the world might that mean? If by that he means a sociological program that departs from religious assumptions about humans and society and that serves religious goals, there is nary a word in *Visions* that would oppose such a project. What *Visions* says is that *historically* the thinkers who provided the philosophic foundations that underlay the project of sociology were striving to establish doctrines about human nature and the good society that were not sanctioned by religious authority. However, the failure of the traditions of moral philosophy that launched the modern social sciences to secure consensus on a purely secular basis could be taken as an invitation for a chastened and newly awakened religious sensibility to move back in.

Nevertheless, if the quest has not produced consensus, it has not, I must repeat one more time, it has not been a failure even in its own terms. By constituting an enriching dialogue, it has offered much more than a phony substitute, if one can accept dialogue as the answer. Perhaps the virtues that it takes to participate in such a dialogue—clarity, courage, moving from one’s center, openness, embracing the other, genuine love—comprise the excellences that enable humans to achieve that state of living with good spirit, *eudaimonia*, which Aristotle says is what we all seek. Such a vision plausibly follows from *Visions*.

**REFERENCES**


