Inventing the Social

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THE SOCIAL AND ITS PROBLEMS: ON PROBLEMATIC SOCIOLOGY

Martin Savransky

Ce qui oblige à changer d’optique théorétique, ce sont des problèmes à résoudre

Judith Schlanger (1975)

INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL AND ITS SOLUTIONS

Yet again, the perennial question: What is ‘the social?’ If there is one commonplace that seems to traverse the multiplicity of practices we have come to associate with the so-called ‘social’ sciences, it is the implicit sense that the nature of ‘the social’ constitutes a problem. Indeed, far from serving as an agreed first principle capable of articulating a scientific community, the definition of the social has become a problem which persists in the many attempted solutions that have been proposed as a response to it over and beyond the history of the social sciences. In this sense, as intellectual historians have attested, struggles with the problematic nature of the social by far predate their emergence. Keith Baker (1994: 95), for example, notes that already in 1775 the Comte de Mirabeau characterised the social as ‘a dangerous word’ whose senses were multiple, while some early attempts at solving the problem – in the sense at least of providing an authoritative definition for the
term 1 – can already be found in the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D’Alambert (1779).

By the late nineteenth century the problem of the nature of the social may be said to have found scientific expression, thereby giving rise to more systematic endeavours to capture it through the emerging disciplines of sociology, anthropology, economics and psychology (Wagner 2000). It is evident, however, that this modern expression did not, by itself, make the problem disappear. Many of the so-called ‘founding fathers’ of such disciplines and the various traditions they gave birth to disagreed about the nature of the social, finding possible solutions to the problem in – to name but a few – the mode of solidarity and sociability that emerges from the constraints of a collective morality, as in Émile Durkheim’s case; the orientation of human behaviour and meaning-making to the existence of others, as Max Weber would have it; or indeed, in a more Marxist vein, in the historical forms of production and exchange by which individuals become organised into classes (for a detailed study of such attempts, see Halewood 2014).

The nature of the social has been, and still is, widely recognised as a problem, but only to the extent that it poses a problem for thought or knowledge, and therefore for particular kinds of scientific inquiry concerned with it. And insofar as the nature of the social seemed to pose a problem for knowledge, the fate of the social sciences became inescapably tied to the discovery, or the fabrication, of solutions to it. Thus, in his Sociology, Georg Simmel (2009: 27) began his exploration of the study of social forms as a means of coming to terms with, and clarifying, ‘the fundamental problem’ that called for the development of sociology. Similarly, Max Weber (2011 [1949]: 68. Emphasis in original), who was convinced that ‘it is not the “actual” interconnections of “things” but the conceptual interconnections of problems which define the scope of a science’, and on this basis suggested that a new science emerges in the pursuit of ‘new problems’ by new methods, complained about the ambiguity and generality of the ‘social’.

The various functionalisms and social constructivisms that for a period of time in the second half of the twentieth century dominated much of the social sciences did attempt to break away from this problem. They did so,
though, by equating ‘the social’ with reality tout court. In this way, if the very existence of ‘nature’ was to be conceived as a ‘social construction’, then surely to ask what the nature of the social may be was rather absurd, the mere product of a weakness of thought. As a result, a generation of social scientists was cultivated who, when confronted with the question of the meaning and purpose of the social sciences, were ‘much more articulate […] about the science half of this lexical couple’ than about the social half, and became ‘satisfied to let the “social” in social science take care of itself’ (Sewell 2005: 319).

More than a solution to the problem of the social, then, theirs was arguably a dissolution, an active forgetting of the problem that only rendered the social tautological, the pervasive product of a circular play between nouns and adjectives. In this way, ‘society’ came to be defined in terms of ‘social relations’ and ‘social constructions’, and these, in turn, were defined in terms of ‘society’. The social became dissolved into everything, and apart from it, there was nothing, bare nothingness.

Nevertheless, as problems do, the problem of the social has stubbornly persisted in its attempted dissolutions. Its persistence becomes apparent in more recent discussions by those who claim to have witnessed its demise under the auspices of advanced liberal forms of government (Rose 1996) and are now witnessing its reemergence under different media devices (Davies 2013); by those who have attempted to put it down themselves (Baudrillard 1983); and even by those whose aim has been to ‘reassemble’ it by restituting a tradition – that of Gabriel Tarde – that had itself fallen prey to the amnesiac solutions that often seem to characterise the so-called ‘progress’ of the social sciences (Latour 2005; Candea 2010).

In light of the persistence of this problem, the aim of this chapter is neither to simply add another case of solution – or of dissolution – nor to argue that ‘we have never’ really known what the social is. It is not here a matter of explaining the problem away by repeating what, pace social scientists’ own embracing of his concept of the ‘paradigm’, Thomas Kuhn (2012 [1962]: 48, 159–60) had already observed. That is, that the social sciences remain pre-paradigmatic – hence pre-scientific – endeavours whose histories are ‘regularly marked by
frequent and deep debates over the legitimate methods, problems, and standards of solution’ that ‘serve rather to define schools than to produce agreement’. Instead, in what follows I will attempt to take the commonplace seriously, and to take the risk of thinking from and with it by opening it up to a different sense. A sense that perhaps might, in its turn, open up what it is that we do when we engage in inquiries into the social – or what, for want of a better word, I shall here speculatively dub ‘sociology’.

In other words, it is not so much that we have never known what the social is, but that perhaps we have known it all along – the social is a problem. Taking this commonplace seriously forces us to move carefully, but it also demands that we take a risk, which is to shift our mode of attention with regards to the sense of this assertion. In other words, it is no longer a matter of asking again what the nature of ‘the social’ is. As I will show, to suggest that the social is a problem has the paradoxical effect of launching us beyond the question of what may constitute the essence of the social, that is, beyond the question ‘What is the social?’.

The task, rather, is to begin from the other half of the proposition. That is, to ask what a problem may be, once we resist the longstanding habit of assuming that problems are only of knowledge or thought, that they only have a subjective, epistemological, or methodological existence. In contrast, as I will suggest, problems have an existence of their own, a mode of existence that is never just immanent to thought, but to a historical – which is to say, unfinished – world; as such, they can never be reduced to a matter of human psychology, epistemology, or methodology. Problems, in other words, are not that which a certain mode of thinking or knowing encounters as an obstacle to be overcome, but that which sets thinking, knowing and feeling in motion.

Conceived thus, to say ‘the social is a problem’ may cease to be a euphemism for ‘we are not sure what the social is’ and become instead a provocation to develop a different kind of sociology. How might we envisage a manner of doing sociology that would take the social not as a rallying flag, not even as its central foundation or ontological ground, but as an open problem to be developed here and there, in the heterogeneous cultivation of a world in process? What kinds of knowledges might emerge from such adventures?
Would we still need to call them ‘knowledge’? What might we mean by it if we did? My hope is to suggest that as soon as we come to terms with the mode of existence of problems, what was once a commonplace may become a novel source of perplexity, and a new lure for thinking, knowing, and feeling. For, at the same time, as soon as we affirm that the social is a problem, being becomes an entirely different thing.

In this way, what follows is animated by the hope that this coming to terms with the problematic existence of the social might contribute to opening up, simultaneously, the possibility of a different understanding of the nature of problems, a different orientation to the nature of the social as such, as well as some preliminary steps to imagining a mode of social inquiry that is fundamentally problematic. That is, an inquiry at once singularly sensitive to the heterogeneous events by which the problem of the social may and does come to matter in diverse ways, and experimentally oriented towards the creation of novel forms of sociality. It is this mode of inquiry that I will here tentatively call a ‘problematic sociology’.

Open the Social: On the Mode of Existence of Problems

Perhaps the first step required for the task of imagining a problematic sociology is to attempt to come to terms with what Gilles Deleuze (1994: 165) once referred to as ‘the coloured thickness of the problem’. Indeed, as intimated above, my sense is that one of the reasons why the commonplace has never succeeded in becoming a different kind of lure might be related to the fact that we insist on treating problems negatively, as diaphanous, subjective conditions that testify to the limits of our knowledge, our certainty, and to the imperfections of our methods. Problems, it would seem, are what we are confronted with at those unhappy moments when we do not yet ‘know’. Moreover, this requirement to come to terms with the thickness of problems seems particularly pressing for some fields of study that, in the process of trying to dissolve the problem posed by the coming into being of the
social, in the 1970s and 1980s proclaimed a certain expertise in what were then termed ‘social problems’ (e.g. Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 2009 [1987]). Following the strategy of dissolution referred to above, the turn from the question of the problem of the social to the study of ‘social problems’ had the effect of melting the thickness of problems themselves, turning problems into nothing but definitional activities, into the products of subjective and intersubjective human acts of claim-making. Indeed, one consequence of the then ‘new’ study of social problems was to undermine the objective nature of problems as such, confusing the actual, progressive determination of problems with the various manifestations and practices by means of which they acquire public expression.

In contrast to this habit of understanding problems in terms of non-being or lack, in terms of subjective or intersubjective (confused) states of mind, ‘as though problems were only provisional and contingent movements destined to disappear in the formation of knowledge’ (Deleuze 1994: 159) or by the moral resolution of ‘putative’ – hence not quite real – conditions (Spector and Kitsuse 2009), coming to terms with the thickness of problems requires that we endow them with ‘a minimum being’ of their own (Deleuze 2004: 67). It requires that we affirm that they do not simply exist in our heads but are ‘a state of the world, a dimension of the system and even its horizon or its home’ (Deleuze 1994: 280).

But does this invitation to think of the social as a problem and to assign a positive ontology to problems, to endow them with their own thickness, not throw us back into that paralysing habit of trying to determine the ultimate nature of the social as such, of seeking a final word on what constitutes the social? Does this not promote a form of essentialism that rejects that the social could be, in any non-trivial way, invented? Is this not, at the end of the day, an invitation to stick with the perennial question ‘What is the social?’ as if the nature of the social could finally be captured in a single clenching of a mental fist? The answer, as I have already anticipated above, is a resolute ‘no’ – because to affirm that problems exist does not imply that their existence is essential, nor that a problem comes ready-made and is simply awaiting its one true solution.
Rather than existing as fixed essences, problems ‘occur here and there in the production of an actual historical world’ (Deleuze 1994: 190). Thus, it is not just that problems are, but that they become: problems are posed by events. Rather than emerging from ignorance or from so many other negative mental or epistemological states, in this alternative sense, problems are the noise the future makes as it is folded into the present. Problems are, literally, ‘com-pli-cations’—relational foldings of tension and transition, of entangled incompossibles that events introduce into the world as they demand to be implicated in it. Thus, the mode of existence of problems belongs to the call, and the process, of inheriting an event; they exist as a reality-to-be-done. This has happened, or is about to happen; it cannot be taken away: how to inherit it? For this reason, Deleuze (1994: 64) argues that, ‘the mode of the event is the problematic. One must not say that there are problematic events, but that events bear exclusively upon problems and define their conditions […]. The event by itself is problematic and problematizing’.

In other words, insofar as problems are brought into existence by the differences that emerge from, and subsist in, those happenings that mark the pulse of reality; if they are the result of time being thrown out of joint, marking a difference between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ (Savransky 2016); then problems are real, but they are not for that reason finished, complete or closed. For if the force of an event is the production of an irreversible call for a future—and an equally irreversible past—then this future comes always undetermined, posed in the form, not of a prescription, but of a noisy, complicated question. In other words, events happen whether we want them to or not, but they are not the bearers of their own signification (Stengers 2000). They demand to be inherited, but they do not dictate the terms in which their heirs might inherit them. Events pose problems, but they never determine how those who are faced with the problems they pose will come to develop them.

Thus problems and questions go hand in hand, the former emerging in fact ‘from imperatives of adventure or from events which appear in the form of questions’ (Deleuze 1994: 197). Therefore, like James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (2012 [1939]), which begins and ends in the middle of the same sentence; or like Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1966), which ‘[i]n its own way […] consists
of many books, but two books above all’, and where the reader, by confronting the possibility of reading the chapters of the book in many different orders, is invited to create her own sense of the development of the story; like these works, the mode of existence of problems is fundamentally ‘open’. Open, that is, in the way that a good debate might be said to be open. Not because it is made of indefinite suggestions and propositions, or because it is thoroughly transparent, but because while the problem demands solutions, these must be produced by the collective practices of those who partake in the task of determining its sense (on the open work, see Eco 1989).

Thus, because problems exist yet do so as the open, incorporeal, troubling effects of events that make up our historical, natural-cultural worlds, to come to terms with the thickness of problems is not, cannot be, a matter of defining their true ‘essence’. Rather, the being of problems is difference itself. In this way,

[o]nce it is a question of determining the problem […] as such, once it is a question of setting the dialectic in motion, the question “What is X?” gives way to other questions, otherwise powerful and efficacious, otherwise imperative: “How much, how and in what cases?” […] These questions are those of the accident, the event, the multiplicity – of difference – as opposed to that of essence, or that of the One, or those of the contrary and the contradictory (Deleuze 1994: 188).

By the same token, then, once it is a question of determining the problematic existence of the social, the logic of contradiction and closure involved in the perennial question ‘What is the social?’ ceases to take hold, and we are instead called upon to explore – not in the abstract, but as a matter of practical inquiry – the degrees, manners and scopes in which the social comes to matter as an open problem that demands to be developed. In other words, to say that the social is a problem is not simply to reiterate that it poses a problem to thought, or to particular kinds of knowledge. It is to assert that the social is the name for a problem that the world poses to itself, that certain events pose in the futures they create. Thus, rather than taking a general, unitary abstraction such as ‘society’ to be the ground upon which a special form of inquiry, a ‘sociology’, may be
founded, we may think of societies, in the plural, as the historically contingent, partial, and always provisional solutions to heterogeneous events that have here and there posed the social as an open problem to be developed.

To be sure, to refer to the plural genesis of societies as cases of solution for the problem of the social is not meant to imply that we need to speak of many different societies in the anthropological sense of the term. For such an invitation already assumes society to be a bounded entity, and as Marilyn Strathern (1996: 51) has rightly argued, this additive operation cannot free itself from ‘our mathematics of whole numbers, the tendency to count in ones’. Indeed, the mathematics of whole numbers that is presupposed by the concept of society as a bounded entity already betrays the open problem of the social as such. By counting in ones, such an understanding of the plurality of societies still rests on an opposition of abstractions – ‘society’ versus ‘individual’ – that closes down the problem of the social by conceiving of it merely as the shadow of a particular case of solution. For what is an individual if not itself a solution to a problem that sets a process of individuation into motion? When we begin from the opposition between society and individuals, we are left with the false problem, or the ‘unreal question’, as John Dewey dubbed it, of how individuals come to be organised in societies and groups:

the individual and the social are now opposed to each other, and there is the problem of “reconciling” them. Meanwhile, the genuine problem is that of adjusting groups and individuals to one another (1954 [1927]: 191. Emphasis in original).

Indeed, Strathern (1996: 51) already noted the mistake we make in projecting the problem of the social backwards from such abstractions, ‘in that we cannot really count them [societies] up’. As she put it elsewhere,

anthropologists [and many other social scientists too] by and large have been encouraged to think of number [in such a way] that the alternative to one is many. Consequently, we either deal with ones, namely single societies or attributes, or else with a multiplicity of ones brought together for
some purpose. […] A world obsessed with ones and the multiplication and divisions of ones creates problems for the conceptualization of relationships (Strathern 2004: 52–53).

Therefore, if we must begin somewhere, rather than doing so from the opposition that would allow us – or not – to add up and count Societies and Individuals as bounded entities, to speak of societies and individuals as plural, lower-case solutions to events that pose the social as a problem is to begin, like James Joyce, from the middle, that is, from the fact of togetherness (Whitehead 1978: 21) of the entities that compose every 'here' and 'there' in the becoming of an actual historical world. To begin in the middle, in the midst of togetherness, moves us away from the opposition between the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ and towards their reciprocal presupposition, such that

[t]he term ‘many’ presupposes the term ‘one’, and the term ‘one’ presupposes the term ‘many’ […] The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the ‘many’ which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive ‘many’ which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one, and are increased by one (Whitehead 1978: 21).

In this way, the problem of the social is not projected backwards from one of its possible solutions – namely, the upper-case, abstract concept of ‘Society’ – and it cannot be a matter of explaining the relation of individuals to Society. Instead, it forces us to inquire into the modes of togetherness, or the actual and possible forms of sociality, that ensue as solutions or ways of folding the events that pose the social as a problem. Coming to terms with the thickness of problems, with their own modes of existence, enables us to entertain the proposition that the mode of existence of the social is the problematic. That it is the open adventure of togetherness by means of which and in response to which, contingent, novel modes of sociality come into existence while giving the problem new means of expression.

In so doing we may understand, for example, the introduction of the terms ‘social’ and ‘civil society’ in the Encyclopédie – and obviously, beyond it – as
a historically contingent and provisional, but also conceptual and secular, enlightened solution to the problematic modes of human togetherness brought about by the reformist resurgence of Augustinianism in the religious sensibilities of the seventeenth century. Thus, as Keith Baker (1994: 119) reads it,

[i]n religious terms, then, it seems that société emerged, in response to the problem of Augustinianism, as a bearable middle-ground between grace and despair. […] A world from which God was hidden was a world in which authority was deligitimized and political order dissolved. It was a world condemned to civil strife and religious wars. […] But the Enlightenment evaded that choice. And it did so by recourse to the notion of society as an autonomous ground of human existence, a domain whose stability did not require the imposition of order from above, and whose free action did not necessarily degenerate into anarchy and disorder below.

Moreover, as I have suggested above, like all problems the social insists and persists in the solutions or modes of sociality that are contingently created as a response to it. And it is renewed as solutions give way to possible futures that in turn problematise existing modes of togetherness, inducing novel expressions, differences and challenges. Think, for instance, of the ‘national’ socialites that emerged, according to Wagner (2000), as a result of the French Revolution, and in relation to which the problem would also later find seminal scientific expressions in the early discipline of sociology. Also, more recently, think of the heterogeneous modes of togetherness involving viruses, medical specialisms, novel modes of gay activist socialities, antiretroviral drugs, and new forms of treatment and intervention that became together as provisional, evolving cases of solution to the problem posed by the event of HIV/AIDS (Epstein 1997). These solutions have never ceased to mutate as they have become exposed to, and been forced to inherit, the problems posed by the events of novel subjectivities, practices of knowledge, technologies of communication, and forms of treatment and prevention to which they themselves gave rise (Rosengarten 2009).

In this sense, it seems to me that an advantage of approaching the thickness of the problem of the social from the middle of togetherness is that it prevents
us from presupposing ready-made Societies or Individuals, and that it does not force us to assimilate ‘the social’ to ‘the human’. Indeed, in one sense, both human and other-than-human beings are individuals, such that ‘for some purposes, for some results, the tree is the individual, for others the cell, and for a third, the forest or the landscape’ (Dewey 1954: 187). But in another sense, what are particular human and nonhuman individuals if not themselves contingent solutions to the problems posed by the togetherness of their internal and external, and natural and cultural, milieus (Simondon 2005)? What are they if not societies themselves, as Alfred North Whitehead (1967; 1978) would call all enduring organisms? 9

Undoubtedly, to think of the social as an open problem, and of modes of sociality as historically contingent cases of solution, presupposes the ubiquity and multifariousness of associations. Neither problems nor solutions, however, can be reduced to these associations. To begin from the middle of a togetherness of things is to affirm that there is nothing as such which is alone in the world, developing an isolated existence in separation from others. But to affirm that the social exists in the form of a problem is not the same as claiming, as some versions of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) would seem to suggest, that it is synonymous with the associations between humans and nonhumans (e.g. Latour 2005). For as Dewey (1994 [1927]: 188) argued, ‘while associated behavior is […] a universal law, the fact of association does not itself make a society’. 10 Rather, societies of diverse shapes and manners, with diverse capacities and interdependencies, emerge here and there as contingent solutions whenever the social is posed as an open problem by the events that make up our historical world.

This last point begs the question of what this attention to the social as an open problem entails for those practices of inquiry that we have come to relate to ‘the social’. In other words, it raises the possibility, but also the challenge, of wondering about the ethical constraints that might situate the adventures I have here associated with the notion of a ‘problematic sociology’. This, then, will be the aim of the following and final section of this chapter.
The relationship between problems and methods is far from straightforward. Just as solutions are not given in advance but emerge at the same time, or better, at the same pace, as the sense of a problem becomes determined and is articulated in one or other mode of historical expression, so must methods in practice adjust themselves to the thickness of problems, learning to pose questions at the same time that answers become amenable to development. Problems, I have suggested, are open, and they do not say how they should be developed. Thus, in a chapter titled ‘Method, problem, faith’, political theorist William Connolly (2004: 332) challenges the view that a mode of inquiry could be simply determined either by its methods or by the problems it attends to, and instead argues that an ‘intervening variable’ needs to be brought into play – namely, that of the different existential faiths that animate the tones and affective dispositions of any form of inquiry:

[a]n existential faith is a hot, committed view of the world layered into affective dispositions, habits and institutional priorities of its confessors. The intensity of commitment to it typically exceeds the power of the arguments and evidence advanced [which does not mean that] existential faith is immune to new argument and evidence […] rather, it is seldom exhausted by them (Connolly 2004: 333).

Elsewhere I have also called this faith an ethics (Savransky 2016), in the sense neither of the discernment of good and evil, nor of the production of a code of conduct for research, but of an ethos of inquiry – an existential orientation to a mode of knowing, thinking and feeling that makes inquiry not just a practice directed towards ‘knowledge’, but a matter and manner of cultivating a whole way of inhabiting the world. At the beginning of his chapter, Connolly (2004) suggests that it is through an examination of these existential commitments that we may understand the relationships between problems and methods in the conduct of inquiry. I fully agree with him that the ethical dimension of
inquiry, that which makes rationality more of a sentiment than a faculty, is in need of attention, as it often gets lost or suppressed in the rationalising hubris of debates around methods and methodology. On this occasion, however, I am less interested in the issue of the *priority* of the ethical than in the reciprocal entanglements through which ethics, methods, and problems become articulated in the practice of inquiry. In other words, I am interested here in the question of whether an attention to the open thickness of problems and the problematic existence of the social might become, not a foundation, but a lure for cultivating a different mode of social inquiry.

Admittedly, the open nature of problems generates difficulties for outlining strict prescriptions for inquiry. The reason for these difficulties lies in the fact that, when this insight is taken to its limit, the openness of problems makes them different in kind from the solutions that may be provided as a response to them. While a solution is always already a manner of determining the sense of a problem, problems as such transcend any single field of solvability (Deleuze 1994: 179). This is why they persist and insist in their solutions, rather than being dissolved in them. And it is also for this reason that Deleuze claims rather enigmatically that we should not apply the test of truth and falsehood to solutions, but to problems themselves. For a ‘solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves according to *its own* truth or falsity – in other words, in proportion to its sense’ (1994: 159; emphasis in original).

Solutions are always dependent on problems, just as answers are always dependent on questions. Not the other way around. Thus, as Mariam Motamedi Fraser (2009: 76) has rightly argued, ‘[t]he best that a solution can do therefore is to develop a problem’. At the same time, however, problems become *actualised* by means of the determination of their sense, that is, by way of solutions. Thus, a problem is simultaneously transcendent and immanent with regards to its solutions. It is incarnated in the latter in such a way that it ‘does not exist, apart from its solutions’ (Deleuze 1994: 163).

The above situates any mode of inquiry in something of a bind with regards to problems. On the one hand, it must be said that no form of inquiry – no matter how methodologically sophisticated, how politically radical, or how ‘practically’
grounded (read policy/impact/etc.) it may claim to be – can ‘solve’ problems, if by that we mean making problems disappear. We live, it seems, in a world populated through and through by questions and problems. Indeed, as Dewey (2004 [1920]: 80) was always at pains to stress: ‘a life of ease, a life of success without effort, would be a thoughtless life, and so would be a life of ready omnipotence’.

‘And so would be a life of ready omnipotence’: In my view, cultivating an ethics of problems belongs less to the question of which methods to deploy, than to the development of humbler sensibilities with regards to the question of what a ‘method’ may be capable of. This, it seems to me, is a point that deserves to be stressed. Following a long period in which almost every reference to ‘method’ was associated with a reactionary and narrow-minded, positivist past, the last ten to fifteen years have witnessed a renewed interest in social and cultural research methods (e.g. Back and Puwar 2012, Law 2004, Lury and Wakeford 2012, Vannini 2015, among others). A considerable part of this renaissance of methods research has been animated by a particular interpretation of John Austin’s theory of the illocutionary force of performative utterances, according to which the claims that the social sciences make about the worlds they study – and therefore the means through which those claims are achieved – are said to bring those worlds into being, instead of merely representing them. As John Law and John Urry (2004: 392–393) succinctly put it in a programmatic text with the telling title ‘Enacting the Social’: ‘The argument, then, is that social science is performative. It produces realities.

There is much that I find unconvincing – and on occasion, misleading – about such propositions, but not all of my disagreements with these arguments are directly pertinent here. For our current purposes, suffice it to say that, in such performative accounts, the social appears to be seen as a product of, rather than as a problem for (and beyond), social inquiry. Accordingly, the renewed fascination with methods in social research is concerned less with the representational validity of the knowledge claims to which certain methods give rise, than with their inventive capacities for ‘enacting the social’ or for ‘problem-making’ (e.g. Michael 2012).

As I hope the discussion above makes clear, however, it is the becoming of problems that sets inquiries into motion, rather than the reverse. Thus, to the
extent that inquiry emerges in response to the problems posed in the indeterminate futures opened up by events, it cannot but remain on the side of propositions, of solutions, determining the senses of problems, failing and succeeding here and there in accomplishing its ends and effecting consequences. Thus, if we are overstepping the mark whenever we claim to have solved, or to be able to solve, problems, I fear we do so too when we assign to methods of inquiry the capacity to ‘enact’ the social, to ‘frame’ or ‘make’ problems, as if problems were yet another product of our omnipotent performativities. For the question is not whether methods ‘solve’ or ‘make’ problems, but whether or not the solutions that they articulate can enable problems to develop in alternative and valuable ways.

To suggest, then, that there are no ultimate solutions to problems, that our inquiries are incapable of making problems disappear, is not to say that everything is lost, that inquiry is the result of an error, or indeed, of a false problem that takes problems themselves to be confused states of mind susceptible to dissolution. The openness of problems is not the negation of inquiry, concerned as it inevitably is with the production of solutions. Solutions there must be, no matter how partial, provisional, and contingent these inevitably are. Deleuze expresses this paradox in the following way:

It would be naive to think that the problems of life and death, of love and the differences between the sexes [as well as the problem of the social] are amenable to their scientific solutions and posittings, even though such posittings and solutions necessarily arise without warning, even though they must necessarily emerge at a certain moment in the unfolding process of the development of these problems (1994: 107. Emphasis added).

The question, rather, is ‘what can solutions do?’ The short answer is ‘we never know’. But rather than inviting the laissez-faire and rather omnipotent attitude cultivated in claims that methods produce realities, this ‘we never know’ is instead an invitation to remain vigilant about the ways in which solutions – and methods – are proposed. Thus, I think that if this coming to terms with the open thickness of problems has any ethical implications – in the sense of
ethics defined above – then perhaps these involve an invitation to conduct a form of inquiry neither oriented toward producing solutions that could put an end to problems, nor toward the hubris of making its own problems. As I have argued elsewhere (Savransky 2016), an event constitutes a break in the order of causality, an effect that is irreducible to its cause. Thus, just as an event cannot be explained away by historical reasons, a science, a theory, or a method may will an event and work with a view towards its possible actualisation; but no one, no method or solution, can claim to produce events at will, nor to become the ‘condition of possibility’ for their becoming. An event is, after all, the transformation of the possible.

Rather than lend itself to methodological prescriptions, therefore, an ethics of problems invites us to cultivate a singular sensitivity to the manners and occasions where the social insists and persists in the form of a problem with its own thickness, its own folds and snags, consistencies and determinations, tensions and potentialities, as well as to the many different modes of sociality that emerge historically as contingent cases of solution. To engage the social as an open problem is therefore also to imagine a form of inquiry whose task is that of a permanent experimentation with problems themselves. An experimentation that trusts the possibility of developing problems otherwise, so that their solutions, always partial, provisional, and contingent, may themselves engender new differences that transform the sense of a problem. These novel differences may certainly be deemed events of invention, but it is to the event that such an inventiveness belongs. As Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (2012: 7; emphasis added) acknowledge in their Inventive Methods, what they refer to as the ‘inventiveness’ of methods, that is, ‘their capacity to address a problem and change that problem as it performs itself – cannot be secured in advance’.

Perhaps, then, the challenge for a problematic sociology is neither to dissolve nor to make problems but to cultivate an art of togetherness. An art concerned with producing, in the course of its own creative activity, intellectual, material and felt tools that emerge in the unfolding process of the development of problems. Tools that are necessarily insufficient with respect to any final capture of problems themselves, but that nevertheless may, sometimes, provide certain determinations and pathways for problems to find new means of expression.
Acknowledging this necessary insufficiency of any mode of inquiry with regards to the mode of existence of problems does not, however, entail viewing such inquiries as fundamentally lacking or flawed. Rather, it is a provocation to think of and engage in inquiry as an ongoing practice of experimentation with open problems. It is what makes sociology, like the development of problems themselves, an infinite task.

NOTES

1 As they defined it, the ‘social’ – which was classified as an adjective rather than a noun – was ‘a word recently introduced in language to define the qualities that render a man useful within society’ (Diderot and D’Alambert 1779: 216).

2 While Weber (2011 [1949]: 68; emphasis in original) suggested that ‘new problems’ were generative of new inquiries because they were capable of opening up new and ‘significant points of view’, he complained that the ‘social’, ‘when taken in its “general” meaning’, was too ambiguous and multifarious a reality to provide a ‘specific’ point of view. He thus rejected both the assumptions of the Marxist traditions that would reduce the social to the economic, and the very possibility of an ‘absolutely “objective” scientific analysis of […] “social phenomena” independent of special and one-sided viewpoints according to which – expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously – they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes.’ (2011: 72).

3 Speculatively, that is, because rather than serve as a reference to an actual, disciplinary state of affairs that could be contrasted with that of anthropology, psychology, economics, geography, or other social sciences, the term ‘sociology’ here is addressed to what could be, that is, to the creation of a possible (Savransky 2016). This is a possible whose seeds are perhaps contained in the challenge posed by the very composition of the term itself – the challenge, that is, of a logos of the socius, of a companion-talk, of addressing those we are with, those with whom we exist together.

4 For a more recent approach that, although not in direct conversation with this literature, reverses this sociologising tendency in order to think about how publics are made by, instead of making, problems, see Marres (2005, 2012).

5 It is perhaps no coincidence that terms like ‘complication’, ‘implication’, and ‘explication’, all crucially retain the presence of the morpheme ‘pli’, which is the French word for ‘fold’.

6 Instead, closed or overdetermined problems would be a case of ‘false’ problems, as in the conventional pedagogic scenario when a teacher poses a problem the solution to which is known in advance, and the student is assigned the task of solving it. Despite the notable
efforts of John Dewey (see e.g. 2009 [1909]), this conception not only pervades much research in education on – tellingly – ‘problem-solving’ but, more disquietingly, it still pervades pedagogical practices at all levels, as it incarnates itself in the situation of exam questions. This is the scene that constitutes ‘the problem as obstacle and the respondent as Hercules’ (Deleuze 1994: 158). Deleuze calls this an ‘infantile prejudice’ but I wonder whether this would not be better called an ‘adult’ prejudice, pivotal as it is in the jealous demarcations of ‘expertise’ and in the entire economy of seriousness that sustains them. Thus, the philosopher of individuation Gilbert Simondon (2005), who was a source of inspiration for Deleuze, would describe the various phases of individuation (physical, vital, psychic, collective) as cases of solution to problems posed by relations of tension at a previous phase. For example, the becoming of a living individual is thought as a solution to the tension emerging in the relations between a physical individual and its milieu, while this solution would subsequently pose its own problems by introducing a new tensed relation between perception and affectivity, thereby giving rise to a new solution that involved a process of ‘psychic’ individuation, and so on.

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My sense is that, from the point of view of practical, empirical inquiry, it is not clear that we must begin at all. Rather, as I will argue in the next section, inquiries always ‘begin’ after events that have posed a problem, and their challenge is always how to inherit the event and how to develop the problem (Savransky 2016). The question of beginnings is thus entirely speculative, in the best sense of the term.

On Whitehead’s concept of ‘society’ see also Savransky (2016) and Halewood (2014).

As far as STS is concerned, the problem of the social may arguably make itself felt more keenly in what Bruno Latour (2004) has called ‘matters of concern’. From this perspective, moreover, the insistence and persistence of problems is what makes Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2010) concept of ‘matters of care’ vital for the development of a problematic STS.

Or else they may give rise to false problems, to imposed problems that emerge not out of real historical situations but out of an excessively rigid, dogmatic ethics of method.

As indeed has Connolly (1995) himself.

This difference in kind is, of course, the ontological difference stressed by Bergson and Deleuze between the actual and the virtual. Problems are ultimately always virtual with regards to their ‘actual’ solutions and thus can neither be contained by, dissolved into, or reconstructed from the latter. Although the virtual dimension of problems in Deleuze is philosophically important and intellectually stimulating, it introduces a transcendental dimension that, I fear, risks situating problems well beyond the remit of whatever we might take ‘sociology’ to be, or indeed, beyond that of any other science (a risk also noted by Fraser [2009: 76]; for an account of the transcendental in Deleuze’s thinking see Bryant [2008]). Worse still, overemphasising the virtual, elusive character of problems in approaching the social bears the enormous danger of opening the door to familiar social theory rhetorics of ineffability, excess and unknowability, whose consequences are, to my mind, counterproductive for practical, ethically committed forms of inquiry. Surely,
there are things that are ‘unknowable,’ in the sense that they have nothing to do with knowledge as such. But to acknowledge this is quite different, I think, from celebrating ‘unknowability’ in relation to a ‘knowledge-practice.’ When it is a matter of the latter, I stand with Whitehead (1978: 4): ‘the unknowable is unknown.’ Moreover, as I will show below, placing problems entirely in the realm of the virtual is indeed a betrayal of the problem itself, for problems are also crucially immanent to their solutions, insisting only in the latter, and being developed as solutions are produced (Deleuze 1994: 163).

14 This is why a problematic sociology should not concern itself simply with something called ‘social problems’, as if some problems were ‘social’ to begin with. As I have suggested above, it is the social that is a problem, and not the problem that is social.

15 For a more in-depth, critical exploration of contemporary social science debates about the ‘performativity’ of knowledge see Savransky (2016. Especially the chapter titled ‘Modes of Connection’).

16 Which does not mean that it does not tolerate that stories about it be told.

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