Louis de Bonald’s Univocity of Being:
The Mythos of the Fait Sociale and the Rise of French Sociology

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Introduction

Eminent American sociologist Peter Berger once asserted that “Today the sociological perspective constitutes the ‘fiery brook’ through which the theologian must pass.”¹ Bryan Wilson, one of the most influential sociologists of religion in the twentieth century, notes with reference to Auguste Comte, that “As a methodology for interpreting society, sociology was, from its first enunciation, directly set over against theology.”² Are these claims true? In what follows we intend to argue, against Wilson, that the French sociological tradition, springing from Auguste Comte, was in fact intimately aligned with the secular, univocal theology of Louis de Bonald. Against Berger, we will show that Bonald’s theology played a definitive role in shaping the ontological framework within which French sociology emerged, a framework whose broad contours marks the “scientific” discipline of sociology to this day, built as it is upon Bonald’s theological invention of the fait sociale. Through this genealogical study, we hope to show that theology need not pass through a “fiery brook,” but only recognize sociology as an alternative mythos to a theological one.

In what follows we will offer a close reading of the conservative, “Counter-Enlightenment,” Counter- French Revolutionary thinker, Louis de Bonald, a French Catholic nobleman who invented the concept of the fait sociale (“social fact”).³ It has been well-


³ In his Essai Analytique, Bonald states that “La question ainsi posée se réduit à des faits sociaux ou généraux, c’est-à-dire extérieurs et visibles” (86). Cf. also 108: “La société est un fait extérieur, visible par certains caractères qui la constituent société.” Louis de Bonald, Essai analytique sur les lois naturelles de l'ordre social, ou Du pouvoir, du ministre et du sujet dans la société. Reproduction de l'édition de Paris: 1800, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Accessed online at the University of Quebec at
established that the founder of the discipline of sociology, Auguste Comte, turned Bonald and others on their heads, constructing his new discipline as a secularized mirror-image of conservative counter-Revolutionary French theology. In examining Bonald, our main question will be this: what specifically made Bonald’s Catholic theology so readily convertible to Comte’s secular sociological positivism? Though there are many explanations for why this reversal transpired, we will show that one central reason was Bonald’s presupposition of the univocity of being and meaning, aligning ultimately with the Scholastic theology of John Duns Scotus, but deriving more immediately from Malebranche. We will argue that Bonald’s uniquely “thick” account of univocal predicates shared between God and creation is one major factor funding the Comtean reversal.

Following this, we will briefly show how the main features of Bonald’s methodology and metaphysics pass through Comte and into Durkheim’s “refounding” of sociology on empirical and experimental foundations. We will suggest that like Bonald, Durkheim, and sociologists in his wake who build upon the “social fact,” remain heirs to the univocal Scholastic theology of Scotus and advance an alternative mythos, rather than a “science.” One implication of this argument, we hope to show, is not only that religion cannot be reduced to or functionally situated within “the social,” but also that, as an ontological conjecture of positivist discourse, the very existence of “the social” itself can be questioned.4

Chicoutimi website: http://classiques.uqac.ca. Hereafter citations from this text will be abbreviated as Essai Analytique.

The conservative Catholic roots of the French sociological tradition have been explored especially by Robert Nisbet, but more recently and exhaustively by Jay Reedy. While we will rely on Reedy’s account of the robust positivist and theological correspondences between Bonald on the one hand, and Comte and Saint-Simon on the other, we will offer a theological account in distinction from Reedy’s emphasis on historiography. Also, we will examine a crucial omission in Reedy, namely, the origins of the *fait sociale* in Bonald. As for Nisbet, we will follow the primacy of place he gives (as does Reedy) to the French Revolution as a catalyst of French Catholic conservatism. However, in his adept analyses of Bonald’s re-establishment of “intermediary” social groups between the *philosophes*’ stark polarities of individual and state, Nisbet fails to recognize the significance of Bonald’s metaphysical and theological claims, through which he invents the social whole within which these groups function. Finally, we are indebted to and draw significantly upon John Milbank’s overall argument regarding the metaphysical foundations and continued assumptions of sociology, as well as upon his “strong” case for a clear path from Bonald, through Comte, to Durkheim. And, while our final critique of social “science” draws explicitly upon Milbank, our unique contribution will be an extended treatment of Bonald’s nominalist assumptions of the univocity of being, drawn from its source in John Duns Scotus, a connection only mentioned in passing by Milbank.

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7 Robert A. Nisbet, “De Bonald and the Concept of the Social Group,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 5 no. 3 (June 1944), 315-331.

8 Milbank, 51-74.
Counter-Revolution and the Rise of Positivism

Since at least the Council of Trent, Catholic theologians had been referring to the church as a “society,” and with the increasing dissolution of traditional social structures brought on by the Enlightenment, many sought to uphold the hierarchy of the Church, as well as society itself, as a hierarchical reflection of the divine order.9 However, this dissolution of traditional hierarchical social structures reached an unprecedented apogee in the French Revolution. This Revolution was an embodiment of the chief principles of the Enlightenment, rallied around Rousseau’s “social contract” that aimed at thorough annihilation of all intermediary groups between the individual and the state.10 Not only were institutions or classes like the church, aristocracy, or monarchy overturned, even the legal status of the family was threatened.

As Nisbet, Reedy, Wallerstein and others have shown, the unprecedented, “cataclysmic” character of the French Revolution made it a watershed event for the origins of French sociology. Philip Abrams aptly captures the seismic experiential and cultural fallout of the Revolution:

[T]he generation that gave birth to sociology was probably the first generation of human beings ever to have experienced within the span their own lifetime socially induced change of a totally transformative nature—change which could not be identified, explained and accommodated as a limited historical variation within the encompassing order of the past.11


10 Rousseau proclaims that “each individual should be absolutely independent of his fellow-members and absolutely dependent upon the state. For it is only by the force of the state that the liberty of its members can be secured.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Du Contrat Social ou Principes du Droit Politique, II, 12. Accessed online at: http://un2sg4.unige.ch/athena/rousseau/jjr_cont.html#L2/12.

These transformative events of the Revolution engendered a vehement response on the part of several French Catholic thinkers who formed the core of the “Counter-Revolution” or “Counter-Enlightenment” movement, and were highly influential as proto-sociologists. In these thinkers, Reedy notes, the seemingly incompatible “reactionary traditionalism” on the one hand, and “social scientism” on the other, both appear to have merged in the search for new or renewed social stability.

The four main French thinkers at the heart of this counter-Revolution, all ardent monarchists and Roman Catholic aristocrats, included Joseph de Maistre (1754-1821), Hugues Felicite de Lammenais (1782-1854), Francois Rene de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), and Louis-Ambroise vicomte de Bonald (1754-1840). While all of these thinkers exerted a considerable.

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12 I. Wallerstein, “The French Revolution as a World-Historical Event,” in The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity, F. Faber ed., 117-32 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Also, in his argument for the conservative origins of sociology, and notably changing the name from theological to philosophical conservatism, Nisbet says the following: “Philosophical conservatism is the major source, historically, of sociological interest in the social group, status, integration, social function, and processes of disintegration and insecurity. In its reaction to the French Revolution, industrialism, and secularism, conservatism redirected attention to those traditional and communal areas of society that the rationalists had neglected or disparaged.” Robert A. Nisbet, “Conservatism and Sociology,” in The American Journal of Sociology, vol. 58 no. 2 (Sept. 1952), 167.

13 Reedy, 2. Reedy notes that “Beyond being the breeding-ground of the familiar ideological ‘isms’ of the modern world—conservatism, liberalism and socialism—the decades following the French Revolution witnessed a serious weakening of premodern customs of governance and belief in Europe. In the cultural vacuum that resulted from the Revolution…. Reactionary traditionalism (i.e. the restoration or even invention of vanquished tradition) and social scientism (i.e. the application of the assumptions and methods of natural science to studying society) were also products of that period of insecurity.” Ibid.

14 Tom Bottomore and Robert A. Nisbet, eds., A History of Sociological Analysis (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 83-84. Also, Jean-Yves Pranchere helpfully places Maistre and Bonald within the larger context of the Catholic Church: “ Properly speaking, Maistre and Bonald are theoreticians of the Catholic Counter-Revolution. It must not be understood by this that they express the positions of the Catholic Church: although it had been for a very long time hostile to the principles of the French Revolution, the Catholic Church never fully accepted their political philosophy. From the pontificate of Leo XIII, marked by the restoration of Thomism and by a policy of rallying to the French Republic, Maistre and Bonald appeared more and more clearly as heterodox Catholics and their influence in the bosom of the Church never ceased to diminish.” Jean-Yves Pranchere, “The Social Bond in Maistre and Bonald,” in Joseph de
influence on both Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon, Maistre and Bonald stand out the most, the former being the most intellectually and rhetorically gifted, while the latter being the most learned and philosophically oriented. Comte and Saint-Simon drew from and shared with these two Catholics an antipathy toward individualism and individual rights, popular sovereignty, the social contract and liberal political reforms, and all sought a remedy for France through a general, totalizing theory bolstered by an immutable spiritual authority that could curb these excesses and instill moral fibre. And, while Comte once suggested that Maistre was the chief Catholic “reactionary” who had influenced him, his praise for Bonald was no less impressive. Like Bonald, Comte sought to focus on the external, collective “facts” about society, recognizing positivist principles in Bonald and crediting him with having founded the science of social statistics. Most importantly however, in the second volume of his Cours de philosophie positive, Comte distills the development of the West using a variant of Bonald’s tripartite schema, a triadic format employed also by Saint-Simon.

Hence, although Comte leveled plenty of criticisms against this “reactionary” Catholic group of thinkers, he nonetheless retained “both a dualism of irreducible social whole over

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15 De Maistre is often considered to be the strongest influence on Comte. However, though his influence was great, says Mary Pickering, “the influence of Maistre on Comte should not be exaggerated, for he said that, before reading Dup Pape, he had ‘already produced…the essential equivalent from the progressive point of view’ and thus could have ‘easily managed without it.’” Mary Pickering, Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 265.

16 Ibid., 265.

17 Comte to G. d’Eichthal, August 5, 1824, CG, 1:106 (cited in Pickering, 261).


19 Reedy, 9-10.
against particular constituent parts, and the association of the former totality with religion.”

Hence Boas is right to say that “Positivism is Catholicism of the Bonald-Maistre type expressed in more or less novel and secular language.” As T.H. Huxley puts it, the Positivism of both Comte and Saint-Simon is “Catholicism minus Christianity,” a positivist religion complete with its own pastoral roles, liturgy, medieval-like symbols and institutional structures, and a new secular Pope, a title which Comte bestowed upon himself as “the Pontiff of a new sect of social scientific salvation.”

**Central Themes of Louis de Bonald**

We now turn to our central question. What was it about Bonald’s “traditionalist” Catholic theology that made it so easily convertible to the Positivist philosophy and sociology of Comte? Bonald, himself an early sympathizer with revolutionary aims, was exiled to Heidelberg where he began, at the age of forty, writing with vehement opposition against the *philosophes* and post-Revolutionary social ideals, Rousseau being one of his main targets throughout. Bonald’s thought centers around a divinely revealed triadic schema which he sees as “naturally” infused throughout the physical, political, social and religious structures in the world in a *general* way, as an immutable series of *faits socialement* (“social facts”), a divinely given order of *rapports* (ratios/relationships) which constitute society. In his introduction to *On Divorce*, Bonald discusses that which funds his social vision:

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20 Milbank, 62. For an exhaustive list of Comte’s criticisms, none of which usurp the main trajectory of the influence of these Catholic thinkers upon him, see Pickering, 267.


22 Cited in Reedy, 16.

23 Ibid., 13-14.
It is therefore necessary to return to the universal supreme power over all beings; that is, to the knowledge of a supreme power over all beings; that is, to the knowledge of a being superior to man, existing before human society, whose will, conservative of created beings, manifests itself in a given order of relationships, which, expressed by laws, constitute human power, and therefore society....

A developed reason comprehends all beings, and their existing and even possible relationships, under these three general ideas, the most general the mind can conceive: cause, means, effect, whose perception is the basis for all judgment, and whose external reality is the foundation for all social order.²⁴

It is notable here that while cause, means, and effect are the most “general” ideas a mind can conceive and the basis for judgment, it is only the “external reality” of these general ideas, as they are found in the world, that form the basis for all social order. For Bonald, the externalization of the first triad, cause/means/effect, appears in the social realities comprising a second triad: pouvoir/ministre/sujet (power/minister/subject); it is the latter which forms the categorical basis for any society.

This triad is an immediately revealed, divinely given set of rapports or faits sociale that pervade reality in tripartite relations like God/Christ/humanity, God/humanity/society, sovereign/executive/subject, father/mother/child or even grammatical relations like I/you/he.²⁵ In Bonald’s view, without at least the basic “hierarchy of authority” comprised in “power/minister/subject,” a society cannot even exist.²⁶ And, inasmuch as these rapports or faits generale are wholly “natural,” they are subject to full scientific analysis:

I thus treat society, which is the science of the ratios/relationships of order between moral beings, in the same way the analysts treat ratios/relationships of quantity (numerical or

²⁴ Louis de Bonald, On Divorce, translated and edited by Nicholas Davidson, foreword by Robert A. Nisbet (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 3, 4. The French edition of this text was unavailable. When other works are quoted extensively, I will cite the French in the footnote.

²⁵ Bonald, Essai Analytique, 1ff.

²⁶ Ibid., 7.
extensive) between physical beings. They use a, b, c, y, x, to express the same indefinite series of proportions of number and extent, and by means of these same characteristics to obtain and represent all the denominations of partial and finished quantities. Authority, ministry, subject also express the generality, even the infinite one, of the possible ratios/relationships between beings which form society…. 27

The combination of this text with those already cited demonstrates that for Bonald, theology, politics, scientific analysis and philosophical reflection all form a singular whole. In this sense, then, we can see Bonald as an heir, the Revolution notwithstanding, to 16th-17th century tradition of what Funkenstein calls “secular theology” performed by laymen who consistently collapsed the discourses of science, theology and philosophy. This group of thinkers included those whom Bonald repeatedly admires, like Descartes, Kepler, Newton, Leibniz and Malebranche, but also Galileo, Hobbes, Vico, Spinoza and More. 28 As Funkenstein shows, the nearly universal drive in these thinkers for a mathematical univocity of language—“a mathesis universalis: an univocal, universal, coherent, yet artificial language to capture our ‘clear and distinct’ ideas”—later issued in a demand for the homogenization of nature: “that it be homogenous, uniform, symmetrical. The same laws of nature should apply to heaven and earth alike.” 29

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27 “Je traite donc de la société qui est la science des rapports d'ordre entre les êtres moraux, comme les analystes traitent des rapports de quantité (numérique ou étendue) entre les êtres physiques. a, b, c, y, x, leur servent à exprimer la collection même indéfinie des proportions de nombre et d' étendue, et sont par cela même propres à recevoir et à représenter toutes les dénominations de quantités partielles et finies. Pouvoir, ministère, sujet expriment aussi la généralité, même l'infini, dans les rapports possibles entre les êtres qui forment société....” Bonald, Ibid., 10 (translation mine).

28 For instance, Bonald says that “In our century, in which a dismal ideology—which is only a chapter in the science of man—has been substituted for the lofty metaphysics of Plato, Saint Augustine, Descartes, Malebranche, Fenelon, and Leibniz....” Bonald, On Divorce, 24.

To a man, Funkenstein argues, these thinkers presupposed the Scholastic theological principle of the univocity of being established by John Duns Scotus. Following Milbank’s undeveloped suggestion, it seems clear that Bonald also operates with an assumption of such Scotian univocity, collapsing together “empirical discussion of finite realities and invocation of the transcendent.” Likewise, Bonald’s univocity contains the drive for the homogenization of nature in terms of social realities that ensure comprehensive, harmonious order. In our view, Bonald’s univocal presuppositions hold a central key not only to his entire system of thought, but also to its naturalistic reversal at the hands of Comte; hence, the concept of univocity merits closer attention here.

**Univocity: From Scotus to Bonald**

Rejecting Aquinas’s analogy of being and the attendant analogical character of human language and meaning, John Duns Scotus insisted that the essential order, the *ens commune* of being itself, is an order within which both God and creation subsist. While God is infinite and creatures are finite, nonetheless they share common transcendental predicates since they both belong to “being,” which itself “remains indifferent to finite and infinite.” While God and creatures share the *ens commune*, transcendental predicates are infinite when applied to God, and

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30 “…the absolute medieval commitment to an idea of God radically purged from all material connotations, however abstract and remote, was broken in the seventeenth century…. nearly all important philosophical discussions on the nature of God sinned against the classical, medieval-Thomistic tradition. Not only More or Spinoza were guilty; to all of them, including Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz, God shared with his creation some genuine predicates literally and univocally.” Funkenstein, 88.

31 Milbank, 55.


finite when applied to creatures, yet nonetheless univocally applied to both.\textsuperscript{34} Hence, Scotus affirms that: “God is conceived not only in a concept analogous to the concept of a creature, that is, one which is wholly other than that which is predicated of creatures, but even in some concept univocal to Himself and to a creature.”\textsuperscript{35} For Scotus, this univocal predication between God and creatures even includes the \textit{transcendentalia} of the \textit{unum}, \textit{verum}, and \textit{bonum}.\textsuperscript{36}

This univocity establishes, for Scotus, a foundational correspondence between the human mind and reality or being, and is essential for any meaningful human language about God. Metaphysical inquiry about God can then proceed in this way: because the formal human notions of “wisdom,” “intellect” or “will” contain no inherent imperfections or limitations, we can conceptually remove any imperfections associated with creatures, and then apply the three notions to God in an infinite and “most perfect degree.”\textsuperscript{37} In other words, says Scotus, “every inquiry regarding God is based upon the supposition that the intellect has the same univocal concept which it obtained in creatures.”\textsuperscript{38} The result of this is that through their univocal connection to God himself, the denotative linguistic constructs of the human mind no longer

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\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 2

\textsuperscript{35} "...\textit{dico quod non tantum in conceptu analogo conceptui creaturae concipitur Deus, scilicet qui omnino sit alius ab illo qui de creatura dicitur, sed in conceptu aliquo univoco sibi et creaturae.}" Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{36} Funkenstein notes that “All \textit{transcendentalia} are predicated univocally of God and his creation, whereby \textit{unum}, \textit{verum}, \textit{bonum} are \textit{passiones entis unicae}, others disiunctae; Scotus, \textit{Expositio in metaphysicam} 4, summ. ii c.2 n.9 (Walding 4:112), and in many other places.” Funkenstein, 26 n.13.

\textsuperscript{37} Scotus, \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 25.

\textsuperscript{38} "...\textit{omnis inquisitio de Deo supponit intellectum habere conceptum eundem univocum quem accepit ex creaturae.}" Ibid., 25.
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need the mediation of the transcendentals—which for Aquinas were predicated only of God—either for their existence or for our *immediate* intuitive cognition of them (*notitia intuitiva*).³⁹

That Bonald reinstated Scotus’s univocal nominalism, in a form inherited through the “nominalistic revolution” of the seventeenth century outlined by Funkenstein, is undeniable.⁴⁰ While there are many lines of nominalist influence reaching Bonald, notably through Descartes and Leibniz, it is Malebranche who provides the most direct link. For Malebranche, “we are not our own light” in the sense that our ideas, in every act of sense perception, are caused solely by God and partake in a univocal way in the divine idea. Our ideas are a “vision in God,” as Malebranche puts it, an “intelligible extension” of infinite divine ideas immediately accessible to us by virtue of divine efficient causality.⁴¹ Just as Descartes had claimed that the *idea of God* within a finite mind is sufficient proof of God’s existence, so too Malebranche thought that the “clear and distinct” *idea of infinity* was proof of God’s existence.⁴² In either case, univocity of being is presupposed; there is some univocal point of contact, however small, between finite creatures and an infinite God who together share an *ens commune*.

Himself an advocate of Malebranche, Bonald essentially took this thinker’s immediately accessible divine ideas and externalized them, locating them instead in “general,” “external” and “visible” facts of human language and social structures.⁴³ This was evident in the passage quoted

³⁹ Funkenstein, 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26-7

⁴¹ Ibid., 87-88.


⁴³ Cf. Bonald, *Essai Analytique*, 46, 86, 104. Milbank puts it nicely when he says that for Bonald, “It is only human beings in relationship who have access to the realm of ‘general ideas’, which like gravity in
above, where the general ideas of cause/means/effect are externally translated into the social relations of power/minister/subject. The French Revolution and its aftermath gave Bonald unprecedented impetus to create a thick univocity, a direct ubiquitous and immutable series of correspondences between God and the world, revealed through divine laws and Scripture to the mind, but located in “external” or “general” faits sociales. One could very easily say that Bonald effects a sociologizing of Scotian univocity, the Cartesian and Malebranchian ideas of God pouring out into all societal relations:

If God made man, then there is in God, as in man, intelligence which willed, action which executed. There is thus similarity, and man is made in his image and likeness. There are thus relationships, a society; and I see, throughout the universe, religion as soon as the family, and the society of man and God as soon as the society of man and man.

There is a “similarity,” for Bonald, between not only divine and human intelligence and will, but also relationships resulting from their operations, namely, a society. However, the univocity expands even more. In the following quotation, especially notable is the interchangeability of the systeme of Christianity, natural human thought, the action of God, and societal relationships and operations:

Everything in the system of the Christian religion is natural to man’s thought, because everything in it resembles his action. If man sees a supreme cause or universal power in the universe which willed everything that exists, a universal minister, means or mediator by whom everything was made, and universal effects subject to this great action called the universe; if he perceives general laws, and a universal, general, immutable order, punishments and rewards, he also sees himself as the cause of many effects, and as a

the Newtonian universe, is to be regarded as the direct conserving presence of God—so that, indeed, society is literally a ‘part of’ God, just as ideas were ‘part of’ God for Malebranche.” Milbank, 58.

Bonald, On Divorce, 3-4.

Ibid., 49.
power (domestic or public) acting through his ministers, upon his subjects and for his subjects; he sees a particular order, laws, punishments, rewards, etc.\textsuperscript{46}

Repeatedly throughout his corpus, Bonald stresses that the “Christian system” is wholly natural to human thought because of its correspondence with human action. In the above paragraph, the divine triad of power/minister/subject (God/Christ/universe) naturally corresponds to the human triad of power/minister/subject in the public political or domestic sphere. Human beings can, in discerning general laws and an immutable universal order, immediately recognize their correspondence with particular laws and particular order found in human society. Thus does Bonald affirm, in his defense of the domestic hierarchy of husband/wife/child, that “the expressions power, minister, and subject carry the enunciation of their functions and of the duties of each member of society.”\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, for Bonald, in this triad is constituted the “social characteristics of any society.”\textsuperscript{48}

However, this is not to say that autonomous human reason can discern, de novo, this natural law of triadic relationships. For Bonald, the creative primacy of divine speech issuing from divine “first laws,” means that every thinking individual is already situated in a social or linguistic context that has preceded them, and their reflection on these matters presupposes a prior, external social embodiment.\textsuperscript{49} What is more, it is precisely in societies in which the “Christian system” has taken root that these “natural” social relationships most fruitfully align

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 46.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 17-18, 52, 108. Cf. also Louis Bonald, \textit{Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux dans la société civile, démontrée par le raisonnement et par l'Histoire} (Paris: 1796), 25-29. Electronic ed. downloaded from the University of Quebec at Chicoutimi website at: \url{http://classiques.uqac.ca}. 
with divine speech and writing, achieving ideal societal order.\textsuperscript{50} For Bonald, the supernatural is interchangeable with what is wholly “natural” for society: constituted by divine laws that become human ones, the immanent power/minister/subject arrangements of a hierarchical society are divinely given “order of relationships” which is in perfect natural synonymy with Christianity.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{Faits Sociale: The Synchronic Totality}

What should be evident by now is that Bonald’s exceptional widening of Scotian univocity has established a series of “general or social facts,” a societal ordering of relationships that is, because divinely given, a categorically static and synchronically functioning whole.\textsuperscript{52} It is unsurprising, then, to find Bonald claiming that “[It is] possible to write the history of a society without mentioning any of the kings who governed it...because the political history of a society is only the history of its authority [arrangements].”\textsuperscript{53} Already in Bonald “the social” begins to take on a life of its own at the most general categorical level; all particulars are immediately related to and characterized by their function within the “external” and “visible” synchronic whole, the immutable relational categories of power/minister/subject that are the “facts” of society revealed by divine speech and writing.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50} Bonald, \textit{Essai Analytique}, 108.

\textsuperscript{51} Bonald, \textit{On Divorce}, 3, 49.

\textsuperscript{52} Bonald, \textit{Essai Analytique}, 86.

\textsuperscript{53} Bonald, \textit{Oeuvres completes}, 1859-64: Vol. 3, 1068-9; also Vol. 1, 1173 (Cited in Reedy, 21).

\textsuperscript{54} Bonald, \textit{Essai Analytique}, 108.
With this construct in hand, Bonald inevitably anticipates later sociologists of religion, with their predetermined discourse regarding the function that “religion” fulfills in relation to the synchronic social whole. Saint-Simon himself commented that in Bonald’s works one “profoundly senses the usefulness of systematic unity.” For Bonald, this unity belongs to religion, which “essentially encloses the principles of all order,” and thus necessarily “brings order to society” by explaining “the reason for power and duty to man,” and the absolute universality of those moral duties. Furthermore, inasmuch as “the Christian religion is in conformity with the order of natural relationships between beings,” it places people “naturally on the road of civilization which it opens to them.” Over and over, Bonald stresses what religion is good for, a theme perfectly fitted to the complete primacy he gives to functional causation.

Related to this functional language is Bonald’s repeated insistence on the conservative work that the Christian religion performs, precisely as it is embodied in a properly-ordered society. For Bonald, God-authored social order is the divine “means necessary for the conservation of mankind,” as well as the means for revealing absolute moral duties to people in conformance with “natural” power relations. However, given his univocal interchangeability of religion, the Christian system, and the general categorical structures of society itself, Bonald often personifies society in such a manner as to make of it a live creature, a gravitational force, or even a demigod of sorts. When the “natural” relationships of a proper, divinely given social order are upset by a “battle between man and nature,” society will react and correct the

55 Cited in Reedy, 13.
56 Bonald, On Divorce, 27.
57 Ibid., 29.
58 Bonald, Essai Analytique, 51-52.
anomalous sources of “unrest” brought about by aberrant human passions or philosophies.⁵⁹

Writing against the heresy of a man-made French constitution, Bonald opens his 1796 *Theorie du Pouvoir* with the following claim:

> I believe it possible to demonstrate that man can no more give a constitution to religious or political society than he can give weight to the body or extension to matter and that, far from being able to constitute society, man, by his intervention . . . can only delay the efforts that society makes to arrive at its natural constitution. ⁶⁰

Bonald’s society is “a great action…sensitive, local, successive, orderly, following some laws, toward one purpose which is the conservation of beings,” but there is a “social will” (*volonte sociale*) which directs this “social action,” progressively usurping any unnatural or disordered social state.⁶¹ And, while society is a divinely revealed reality, the univocal attribution of things like “effort,” “will,” and “reason” to the social whole—to that which Bonald calls a “jealous mistress”⁶²—invites an immanent autonomy that is quickly picked up in Bonald’s wake. ‘Society is *like* God,’ quickly becomes ‘society *as* God.’

Indeed, with the univocal predicates between divine and human realities opened this widely, it is in fact unsurprising that Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon were able to take over

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⁶⁰ “je crois possible de démontrer que l'homme ne peut pas plus donner une constitution à la société religieuse ou politique, qu'il ne peut donner la pesanteur aux corps, ou l'étendue à la matière, et que, bien loin de pouvoir constituer la société, l'homme, par son intervention, ne peut qu'empêcher que la société ne se constitue, on, pour parler plus exactement, ne peut que retarder le succès des efforts qu'elle fait pour parvenir à sa constitution naturelle.” For both directing me to this quotation, and for the translation, I am indebted to Jonathan P. Ribner, *Broken Tablets: The Cult of the Law in French Art from David to Delacroix* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 26.

⁶¹ Bonald, *Essai Analytique*, 48: “je reviens à la société. Les theists la considèrent aussi comme une grande action, puisqu’elle est sensible, locale, successive, ordonnée, suivant certaines lois, vers une fin qui est la conservation des êtres. Toujours conséquents, ils voient une volonté sociale qui dirige cette action sociale, une cause qui produit cet effet.”

Bonald’s *systeme* and cut the divine out of the picture. Comte was at least kind enough to honor Bonald with the title of “secular saint” in his “Positivist Calendar,” yet notably, not under the first month, “Theocracy,” but under the eleventh, “Modern Philosophy.”

For Comte, as for Durkheim after him, the univocity of being between God and creation continues to underwrite their efforts. But, it is drawn down into immanent forms and reschematized as the relation between the synchronic social whole and the individual, with varying degrees of predicates shared between the two.

**Bonald to Durkheim and Beyond**

It is widely recognized that after Comte and Saint-Simon, Emile Durkheim gave to sociology a new shape as a social “science.” In particular, he turned aside from what he saw as residual normative, transcendent and metaphysical elements in Comte’s and Saint-Simon’s positivism and, following neo-Kantian influences, sought to ground the new discipline of sociology on strictly empirical methods. Yet, however diluted the positivist heritage may have become, it is nonetheless clear that Durkheim took in, through Comte, most of the main methodological and ontological presuppositions of Bonald.

Since Nisbet, Milbank and others have developed these connections already, we will simply note them in brief. First, Durkheim’s strictly scientific and empirical approach

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63 Reedy, 21 n.11


65 Bottomore and Nisbet, 110-113; Nisbet, “de Bonald and the Concept of the Social Group,” 322-23; Milbank, 54-55, 60-68; Reedy, 12.
presumed, *a priori*, the existence of general “social facts” that are “*sui generis*” and, as with Bonald, capable of subjection to scientific study. While Münch has shown that after Durkheim, countless changes and variations have been made to the role and explanatory power of the “social fact,” the “social fact” itself has remained the fundamental safeguard for any “scientific” sociological approach. Second, like Bonald, Durkheim prioritizes the synchronic over the diachronic, while stressing the primacy of functional causation, relating all particulars in terms of their function to the general categories of the synchronic social whole. Third, Durkheim closely identifies “the social” with religion and “the sacred,” and in his sociologizing of Kant places humanity’s highest moral ideals and demands within the external structures of the social whole. Finally, Durkheim consistently personifies “the social” as a kind of god, having a will of its own that compels conservation and order, curbs egoistic individualism, and rectifies threats to organic


67 Münch, 150.

68 Durkheim’s relativizing of particulars in favor of the social whole is at work in his a priori treatment of religious rites or ceremonies as dispensable husks, because they are “really” about functioning to enhance the solidarity of the group. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, when it comes to “religious beliefs and practices” or “rites,” says Durkheim, “one must know how to go underneath the symbol to the reality which it represents and which gives it meaning” (14). This is made even more explicit in his reductive “kernel” theory of religion: “Since all religions...are species of the same class, there are necessarily many elements which are common to all. At the foundation of all systems of beliefs and of all cults there ought necessarily to be a certain number of fundamental representations or conceptions and of ritual attitudes which, in spite of the diversity of forms which they have taken, have the same objective significance and fulfill the same functions everywhere” (17). Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. by Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

69 Cf. Giddens, 17, 91-93; Milbank, 67-68. I would add here that Durkheim’s implanting of Kant’s transcendental ideal within social realities, and his later association of those ideals with religion, clearly shows the metaphysical presuppositions built into his whole project.
balance. In Durkheim’s own words, “the god and the society are one.” Bonald’s shadow surely looms here.

Although we have only hinted at the main methodological and ontological impulses of Durkheim’s project, the similarities with Bonald’s are fairly clear. For our purposes here, Bonald’s theology is illuminating because it shows the explicitly theological creation of the synchronic social reality, its formation and contours predicated on a peculiarly “thick” version of Scholastic doctrine of the univocity of being. The brief connections between this theology and Durkheim’s sociology are also instructive. The fact that in Durkheim’s wake sociologists continue to rely on the “social fact,” reduce all particulars to their function within the social whole, and erase the divine referent, while plotting the religious “sacred” along a Kantian continuum of the transcendental sublime, does not make sociological discourse any less of a mythos than Bonald’s original invention of the faits sociale. As Milbank has suggested and the case of Bonald makes clear, the assertion that the social whole and its facts are the most fundamental aspects of human reality, can simply be countered by an opposite assertion, that society is the presence of God, the mythos of religion simply affirmed over that of sociology.

This not only calls into question Berger’s contention (following Comte, Saint-Simon and Durkheim) that sociology is the “fiery brook,” the ultimate purgative arbiter of any theological or

70 “Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence. Since it has a nature that is peculiar to itself and different from our individual nature, it pursues ends which are likewise special to it; but, it imperiously demands our aid. It requires that, forgetful of our own interest, we make ourselves its servitors, and it submits us to every sort of inconvenience, privation and sacrifice, without which social life would be impossible. It is because of this that at every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts.” Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 237.

71 Ibid., 236.

72 Milbank, 143.
metaphysical claims, it also reveals the true status of sociology as itself a “faith,” a peculiarly
modern and narrative *conjecture* about reality.\(^{73}\)

**Milbank’s “Metacritique” of Social Science**

However, the assertion of a counter *mythos* of this type, in univocally tying God’s
presence to social constructs, would necessarily be a suspect Bonaldian variety of theological
positivism. Milbank has also shown that although such a move deconstructs the sociological
claim to be the ultimate arbiter of theological truth, such an option need not be entertained.
Instead, the very existence of “the social” can be called into question, a critique directed equally
at Bonald as at Comte or Durkheim, and the scientific sociology following in their wake.

Here Milbank draws upon J.G. Hamann’s “metacritique” of Kant in order to challenge
the viability of social science. Milbank contends that one cannot conduct a “science” on the basis
of the social whole, the individual act, or the combination of the two, since these are *always*, at
every moment, “mutually inflecting one another.”\(^ {74}\) The moment an explanatory grid is erected,
its object shifts and changes. The words and works issuing from human subjects perpetually
assume and construct culture such that the social order is neither “‘beneath’ human subjects,” as
for Durkheim, *nor* prior to human creative activity as a divinely revealed Bonaldian totality.\(^ {75}\)
Hence Milbank argues that “One never sees the social, except in the instance of its manifestation

\(^ {73}\) Ibid., 143.
\(^ {74}\) Ibid., 74.
\(^ {75}\) Ibid., 150.
in ‘individual’ (bodily and linguistic) action,” and such action cannot be interpreted apart from the context it both assumes, and modifies in the very linguistic or bodily act.\textsuperscript{76}

In Milbank’s view, a scientific approach to “the social” relies on the Kantian illusion that all of the categorical elements of finite reality can, at a micro or macro level, be exhaustively chronicled and analyzed, secured or anchored even if for a moment, beneath the aesthetic, narrative and creative social activity of human beings.\textsuperscript{77} However, says Milbank,

…if this cannot be done, if local and particular experiences always enter into our general conception of epistemological categories, making them endlessly revisable, and justifiable neither de facto and a posteriori, nor de jure and a priori, then these culturally particular categories can only justify themselves as a kind of ‘conjecture’ about the transcendent, and the relation of this transcendent to finitude. Comte and Durkheim have succeeded in instilling the illusion that sociological critique further ‘finitizes’ and humanizes religion, only because they endow the social and linguistic source of categorization with a transcendental colouring. They suppose, wrongly, that one can ‘round upon’ society as a finite object, and give an exhaustive inventory, valid for all time, of the essential categorical determinants for human social existence.\textsuperscript{78}

If social and individual elements remain at the contingent surface, as it were, perpetually in mutual modification, there is no place for a social “science,” says Milbank, but only for a discipline of narrative historiography.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 66. For an excellent contemporary example of this attempt to “round upon finitude” through exhaustive categorization, see Münch’s comprehensive graphs which capture, in his view, all the finite possibilities for social reality. Münch’s comments on these graphs are telling: “The advantages of the framework outlined here are its comprehensiveness in covering the widest area of social reality and its ability to be broken down into ever finer fourfold differentiations in an infinite process of repeating the four-area schematization of reality,” offering an “unrestricted refinement of concepts and statements that allow us to capture reality with an ever more finely woven network of concepts and statements.” Münch, 12. (cf. his diagram on p.10)

\textsuperscript{79} Milbank, 74.
Returning to Bonald, it is quite clear that his categories of finite reality were more than mere “conjecture” about the transcendent. His reliance on a Scotian univocal account of being, and thus of meaning, allows him to “round upon finitude,” naming all of the definitive “general” concepts of power/minister/subject and their “natural” relationships. If Milbank is right, then the traditional “scientific” discourse of sociology also falls into this univocal illusion. What Milbank’s critique through Hamann suggests, is that if narrative is the sole means of mediating the society/individual antinomy, univocal language is no longer a viable option. Consequently, when it comes to theology, no less than sociology or historiography, only some version of a Thomistic analogical account of being, and its correlative analogical discourse about God or of finite reality, allows for a properly narrative mediation of this reality. That, however, is another paper altogether.

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