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A Sociological Reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Conduct of Life*

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UNIVERSITÉ DE LAUSANNE
FACULTÉ DES LETTRES

Mémoire de Maîtrise universitaire ès lettres en Anglais

A Sociological Reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Conduct of Life*

par

Florence Chollet

sous la direction du Professeur Boris Vejdovsky

avec l'expertise du Dr. Benjamin Pickford

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PREFACE

This mémoire is focused on Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1862 book *The Conduct of Life*.¹ I argue that *TCoL* is a text that contains a distinctive sociological thinking that offers an insight on the themes and methods of 19th to 20th century sociology, as well as Emerson's place in this context. This approach of *TCoL* has never been studied extensively; indeed, Emerson is not usually considered as a sociological thinker, and therefore this mémoire offers a basis for a new understanding of the text.

Emerson brings our attention to a time of change and transition in America, which he reflects on in his writing. I argue that *TCoL* echoes the concerns of sociological thinkers, who also interrogate the nature of society, its foundational elements, and the ways its mechanisms operate. The book's contents fit the traditional definition of sociology; however, its structure and language differ from the academic norm upheld by the field. It also offers a significant emphasis on the individual, which diverges from the work of other major early sociologists and is part of what makes his understanding of society particularly alluring. His sociological thinking deserves reappraisal because the elements that set him apart from 19th century sociology are the same that continue to shape our contemporary academic tradition. Rethinking the value of *TCoL*, a book which does not fit the academic mould of sociology, asks us to interrogate the nature and purpose of this mould instead of focusing on dismissing what lies outside of it.

Emerson was chosen as an author because he has been the focus of several of my BA and MA essays and has fascinated me throughout my studies. The transcendentalist movement is one that I find distinctly profound because of its hopeful universal relevance, and the way it

¹ Hereafter referred to as *TCoL*.

interacts with Emerson's departure from institutionalized religion brings a layer of complexity that resonates with my own experience and that I have enjoyed exploring. Emerson is a writer who suffers from, and is ill-served by, academic compartmentalization. His style of writing allows for a multiplicity of reading experiences, as each study reveals another layer of ideas, references, and connections. In the case of a *mémoire*, I wanted to be able to return to the text at different stages of my exploration and build my thesis through the repeated analysis of the book through different lenses, which is why Emerson's work is optimal for this purpose. This author is also situated in a context that is compelling to engage with. The way he expresses and reflects on the anxieties of his time sets him apart from his contemporaries and brings a new understanding of this period of history. His work offers a perspective that does not fit the traditional academic mould of his time, nor ours. Studying Emerson continues to be relevant and challenging, which is why I used the opportunity of writing a *mémoire* to deepen my understanding of this author.

To permit my radical rereading of Emerson from the ground upwards, I used an unconventional methodology in writing this thesis. My first step involved reading *TCoL* without any reference to critical work on Emerson, analyzing the text only on the basis of the sociological ideas found within it. The reason for working in this way was to break out of the habits and presuppositions of criticism of Emerson, which circumscribes the scope of his work and limits its applications and usefulness. From this first step I built the first chapter of the *mémoire*, which explores a subtle dichotomy present throughout the nine chapters between social constructs and their supposed origins. Throughout chapter one, I highlight how Emerson develops a reflection that answers sociological questions, which leads to thinking about the implications of considering *TCoL* as a sociological text. My second chapter develops this exploration of *TCoL* as a sociological text by comparing it thoroughly with the works of authors who are now recognized as major figures of the sociological landscape of Emerson's time –

Auguste Comte, Hebert Spencer, Adolphe Quetelet, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. The analysis is divided into three sections, focusing on different aspects of sociological thought: firstly the methods used and promoted, secondly the different identifications of the social elements of society, and thirdly the ideas concerning the place and impact of the individual within society. Finally, chapter three explores the consequences of reading *TCoL* as a sociological text, and how its points of divergence with the sociological academic tradition offer a valuable perspective on that tradition.

The incorporation of sociology in this study of Emerson's literary work has several implications, which are all equally relevant and important to the development of this mémoire. On the one hand, one implication of this sociological reading is that it can use the rigorousness and academic reputation of sociology to enhance *TCoL*'s own value as a text within academia. The credibility of the field is a tool for me to show that because Emerson's ideas do conform to the expectations of the sociological thinking of his time, this work is worthy of serious academic consideration. While this mémoire cannot by itself change academic consideration of *TCoL* for the better, it can lay a serious foundation for deepening the understanding of the issues that Emerson's book explores. By using a comparative method to resituate *TCoL* amidst the work of Emerson's contemporaries, I show that it is a complex and valuable book that reflects on sociological issues in ways that are comparable to the work of recognized sociologists such as Comte or Durkheim. It also shows how Emerson explores topics that fall outside of the concerns of these other sociologists, which can offer a new perspective on the study of society during this time.

On the other hand, the decision to compare a literary text to sociological ones is motivated by the importance of interdisciplinarity in Emerson's method. As this thesis will find, interdisciplinarity is a core aspect of Emerson's work that develops exponentially towards the second half of his career. The work of Emerson is discarded by some critics as unacademic or

undisciplinary, and this same criticism is only stronger with his later work. These criticisms come from a purely literary perspective, which is why a cross-disciplinary study of *TCoL* can bring a different understanding of its message and its place within the emergent academic disciplines of late-19th century America.

I. CHAPTER ONE

1.1

My first step in this project is to place the author, the text, and my research in their respective academic contexts. To do so, in a first time, I go over how critiques of Emerson have impacted the way his texts are –or are not– studied, showing that sociology is a field that has often been argued to be outside of Emerson’s concerns. I also give an overview of some of the literature that explores Emerson’s work with a sociological perspective, showing that while some of his earlier texts have been studied with a perspective that shares ideas with sociology, a distinctly sociological reading of *TCoL* has yet to be written. After defining the scope of my research, I present one of the sociological ideas found in *TCoL*, which is that Emerson explores a subtle dichotomy between social constructs and their supposed origins. This then allows me to show that there is potential in the exploration of the book from a sociological perspective, and to also indicate some first links between Emerson and the sociologists of his time. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines sociology as “a social science that studies human societies, their interactions, and the processes that preserve and change them. It does this by examining the dynamics of constituent parts of societies such as institutions, communities, populations, and gender, racial, or age groups.” (Faris and Form) This retrospective definition encompasses the ideas of the 19th to early 20th century sociologists of my corpus, and it is the one I use to explore the contents of Emerson’s *TCoL*. However, the authors from my corpus, Emerson included, did not live in a time period where sociology was as clearly defined; in fact, defining sociology as a distinctive discipline –one that would allow their work to be seen as something different from philosophy or statistics– was an important part of their projects. In my second chapter, I will be able to explore in detail the different definitions of sociology that were debated during the 19th to early 20th century, but for what follows and as a starting point, I use the *Encyclopedia*’s definition.

Literary critiques of Emerson vary vastly on their standpoints, but their impact on his reception remains very consequent. In Lawrence Buell's edition of *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Mary Kupiec Cayton writes: "Reception theory suggests that Emerson's cultural impact may have depended less on what he intended than on what key communities of interpreters made of him." (77) While of course Emerson's work is still studied in academia, Emerson seems to be suffering from a double standard. Michael Lopez identifies in his chapter of the *Cambridge Companion to Emerson* a "long line of critics who have elevated Emerson to unquestioned canonical status, all the while dismissing his work as unworthy of serious attention as either philosophy (even as morally complex thinking) or coherent prose." (245) Lopez also quotes several critics of Emerson who wrote that "Emerson's ideas were 'too utterly fantastic to be any longer taken seriously'" or have qualified his writing as "a notable monument to an insufficient view of life". (245) These criticisms, he explains, are typical of a certain critical tradition that discredited Emerson's work as only worthy of "what D. H. Lawrence called 'museum-interest'." (245) However, this current of dismissive critique of Emerson as a writer and a thinker does not affect my study as much as the movement that has labelled him an individualist and subsequently used that label to place him in complete opposition to any form of valuable sociological thinking. While this precise critique was originally a response to his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance", it has rapidly expanded to Emerson's image as a whole. In 1996, Christopher Newfield argued in *The Emerson Effect* that Emerson's thought and the way it was presented to the public by his supporters contributed to making submission to an unappealable authority the unquestioned reality for many American citizens today. (Castiglia 625) His argument goes further than simply claiming that Emerson's individualism is incompatible with life in society; it argues that his perspective on individuality encourages mindless submission, thus helping corporate authority gain influence over individuals. Because of its alarming severity, such an accusation has the power of negatively

impacting future reception of Emerson's work, regardless of its veracity. In another essay from Buell's *Collection*, Stephen E. Whicher writes: "The opposite and enemy of the sovereign self, as Emerson recognized in 'Self-Reliance', is the community." (68) In the rest of the text, he discredits Emerson's uses of Self-Reliance as blindly utopian, and insists on his own belief that individualism is entirely opposed to society.

Following this logic and from this point of view, a sociological reading of *TCoL* seems irrelevant from the start, thus discouraging any research in the field. Standing against this reductive perspective of Emerson's writing is the first step that opens me to discuss the potential for a sociological reading of *TCoL*. On the other side of this debate are George Kateb and Stanley Cavell, who both study Emerson and have discussed his distinctive idea of individualism in a political context. Their position is that "Emerson is a figure of democratic inspiration and aspiration" (Cavell, "What is the Emersonian Event?" 951), and they share the central idea that "Emerson's guiding sense is that society exists for individuals, not the other way round. Only democracy, among societies, is devoted to this precept." (Schoolman x) While it is centered on Emerson's individualism, their work does not focus on the "individualism-communitarian debate", as it is called by some. (Schoolman xi) In his introduction to Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, Morton Schoolman writes that Kateb is refusing to write yet "another defense of the individualism targeted by a history of deadlocked criticism." (x) Instead, he wants to build a "reconstructed theory of individuality" in order to go further in his readings and analysis of Emerson's work. (xi)

I agree with Kateb and Cavell on the idea that the definition of individualism in the debate might be the unacknowledged central issue. As Kateb's editor explains, the arguments surrounding Emerson's individualism are based on the critics' own definitions of –and perspectives on– individualism, instead of considering the distinctiveness of Emerson's own form of individualism. In order to make theoretical progress on the impact of Emerson's

theories of individualism, more research needs to be put into the concept itself, instead of taking for granted this poorly argued claim and using it to discredit his thoughts on society. The way he explains this runs as follows: “Further development of the theory and practice of both individualism and its critics beyond these limits would require that individualism be extricated from this adversarial structure. In effect, individualism would have to undergo a transformation that frees it from, or at least relaxes, the obligation to define and redefine its position in reference to its opponents’ discontents.” (Schoolman x) The adversarial structure, which upholds a binary vision of individualism (either one is an individualist, or one is not; either being an individualist is good or it is bad) is not focused on the content of the debate, which is individualism. It is not interrogating the label, its definition and certainly not Emerson’s definition of it, which makes it an empty conversation. As Kateb explains, the only way to actually move this conversation forward is to “define and redefine” individualism. (Schoolman x) This is why in my research I come to explore the notions of the individual in the work of five sociologists and compare them to Emerson’s own views on the topic. Through this, I interrogate the representation of individualism in sociology, as well as Emersonian individuality, which partly contributes to the reconstructed theory of individuality for which Kateb and Cavell advocate.

Even when unrelated to the individualism-communitarian debate, Emerson’s individualism is a subject in many studies of his work, and the few texts that do offer a sociological perspective on his writings also tend to be primarily focused on that topic. In *Individuality and Beyond, Nietzsche reads Emerson* (2019), Benedetta Zavatta discusses the notion of individuality in both thinkers. The book includes passages about the dynamic between individuals and society, but while she does get into Emerson and Nietzsche’s different conceptualization of society in general terms, her work does not treat any of the texts as sociological material specifically. Sandra Laugier’s 2019 book *Disobedience as Resistance to Intellectual Conformity* is based on the literature surrounding Emerson’s sense of individuality

in relation to society, with a focus on Cavell's work. While Laugier discusses sociological themes in Emerson's texts, she does not consider Emerson's work as explicitly sociological and remains centered on the question of individuality. Neal Dolan's 2009 *Emerson's Liberalism* also touches on sociological themes but places *TCoL* in a political context, describing the book as a "handbook for how individuals may most fully realize the unprecedented opportunities for personal flourishing newly opened to them by the emancipating institutional arrangements of a liberal polity." (284) Published thirty years earlier, Barry Schwartz's 1985 *Emerson, Cooley, and the American Heroic Vision* offers a comparative study of Emerson with the American sociologist Charles Cooley. However, it is centered on Emerson's 1850 *Representative Men* and focuses on the idea of the hero as a symbol of a society's power, as opposed to its source. Schwartz anchors the text in a political context and argues that "an assessment of the limits and possibilities of democracy was an important part of [Emerson's] message." (113) Also focusing on *Representative Men* is Hans von Rautenfeld's 2005 article "Thinking for Thousands: Emerson's Theory of Political Representation in the Public Sphere". There, the author discusses Emerson's representation of the public sphere, but also considers the text with a strictly political perspective.

A text that seems to promise a distinctly sociological reading of *TCoL* is Maurice Gonnaud's 1964 *Individu et Société dans l'oeuvre de Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Unfortunately, it focuses almost exclusively on "Fate", the first chapter of the book. Nevertheless, he makes a noteworthy link to sociology in his book when he encourages the interdisciplinarity of the text and calls Emerson a "spécialiste des généralités", a label which he then also attributes to Auguste Comte. (447) This, however, is the only point of contact between Emerson's *TCoL* and the field of sociology that we find in Gonnaud's text. Finally, what comes the closest to a sociological reading of Emerson's *TCoL* is Michael Lopez's 1999 essay "*The Conduct of Life: Emerson's Anatomy of Power*", which argues that Emerson writes with the goal of social reform

in mind. Lopez compares Emerson to Hegel, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche throughout his essay, and calls Emerson “the modern era’s first philosopher of power.” (260) Despite a stronger focus on “Fate”, Lopez offers an analysis of the theme of power in the entirety of *TCoL*. His reading of “Fate”, “Wealth” and “Worship” has supported my own analysis of these chapters, especially when focusing on the question of individual agency in the third part of my second chapter.

It is noticeable that *TCoL* is an understudied text in Emersonian studies, and I have found that the few existing works with a sociological perspective are for the most part focused on either “Self-Reliance” or *Representative Men*. This makes a sociological reading of *TCoL* – in its entirety– an essentially unexploited topic. What also differentiates my research from the works I have cited before is my scope and my focus. While the question of Emerson’s thoughts on society and how they interact with his sense of individuality has been discussed in numerous publications, none of them make the argument to valorize them as sociological material.

The existing research focused on the question of individualism in society is not enough to legitimize a sociological reading of *TCoL*; indeed, Emerson’s ideas need to be framed and contextualized much more precisely in the sociology of his time to make this argument. This calls for a thorough exploration of his conceptualization of individualism within society –to understand if it really is antithetic to sociological thinking– but also of the other elements that are central to sociological inquiry: an analysis of his method and what he considered central elements of society.

1.2

Before I do so, in the second part of this first chapter I want to present an example of sociological thinking in *TCoL* to begin to illustrate my claim that his work has a sociological quality and would benefit from a recontextualized analysis. Throughout the nine chapters of *TCoL*, Emerson highlights the difference between the way social actions, structures and patterns manifest themselves within society, and the impulse that brought them to life in the first place.

Each chapter focuses on a different idea and exposes the difference between the way this idea is represented in society, and its origin. For example, the third chapter examines wealth and money. Emerson writes that “money is representative, and follows the nature and fortunes of the owner. The coin is a delicate meter of civil, social, and moral changes. [...] It is the finest barometer of social storms, and announces revolutions. [...] A dollar is not value, but representative of value, and at last, of moral values.” (200) Emerson then glosses the way the value of money fluctuates depending on the times, the environment, and the social climate. After highlighting the influence of individuals and society in the value attributed to a dollar, Emerson concludes: “The value of a dollar is social, as it is created by society.” (201) In comparison, wealth is described as a natural force; in the chapter, Emerson mentions different kinds of wealth, such as physical wealth –taking the shape of a healthy body or strong arms– or intellectual, in the shape of specific knowledge. Wealth is also described as putting certain capabilities to good use for oneself or for others: “Wealth is in applications of mind to nature, and the art of getting rich consists not in industry, much less in saving, but in a better order, in timeliness, in being at the right spot. [...] Steam is no stronger now that it was a hundred years ago; but is put to better use.” (192) We understand that with or without the existence of money, the idea of wealth is self-evident. Its main representation in society, however, can be challenged as it only exists on the condition of a social consensus. If money nonetheless feels like a non-negotiable part of our reality, it is because it has been carefully and thoroughly implemented in our society. This reflection on the nature of money allows us to clearly identify that Emerson highlights a difference between money as a social structure that has the ability to shape our societies in tangible ways, and the abstract force that gave birth to it in the first place. Essentially, we can find in this example –as in the rest of *TCoL*– the idea that all social constructs first existed in a more nebulous form. If they were shaped into what they are today, there must have been something to shape them out of. This nebulous concept is referred to in

Durkheim's work as a "prior force." (Durkheim, *Rules* 79) In my work, I have chosen to call this same concept an "abstract force", because I want to insist on the shapeless nature of that element, as it accentuates the contrast between the abstract force and how it expresses itself in society. The result is a tangible expression of the initial impulse, which is created and maintained by the social collective. I call this element a "social incarnation", which is similar to how Emerson refers to it ("The strongest idea incarnates itself in majorities and nations, in the healthiest and strongest." (157)).

In *TCoL*, Emerson develops his thoughts on the idea of abstract forces and social incarnations in two stages: in the first five chapters he focuses on establishing the distinction between the two elements. He differentiates fate from causality, power from success, wealth from richness, culture from education and behavior from manners. Throughout these five chapters, he draws attention to the idea that each social incarnation is the arbitrary product of its social context, and heavily depends on the continued validation of the collective to remain in place. At the end of the fifth chapter, Emerson makes it clear that he sees a distinction between the distinctive quality of a concept, and the way it is practiced in society. This implies that there are multiple ways for an abstract force to be expressed, depending on the social context. As we will discuss later, this same idea is also theorized by Durkheim, who argues that social facts have the characteristic of being "refracted" by individuals. (*Rules* 23) In the last four chapters, Emerson argues that there is an issue with the fact that these evidently arbitrary structures are often accepted as an unquestionable truth, even when they prove to sometimes have negative impacts on individuals. His stance is that there is an important element of subjectivity in social incarnations, which does not mean that they are not real, but that they should be acknowledged as social constructs. In "Illusions", Emerson makes it clear that the subjective nature of our social reality does not make it any less impactful and essential to the structure of society. In fact, illusions are an inherent part of the way we experience life, and his goal is not to destroy

them, but to challenge them. “We live by our imagination, by our admirations, by our sentiments. [...] we rightly accuse the critic who destroys too many illusions. Society does not love its unmaskers.” (301-302) Instead of entirely unmasking our reality, Emerson suggests a more nuanced solution, which is the practice of “a good-natured admission that there are illusions” (227) and that truth can be found behind it. In Emerson’s idea of sociological education, understanding that illusions can be shaped is a crucial step to begin to challenge detrimental social constructs.

The overarching idea that Emerson explores in *TCoL* is the role and impact of social constructs. It recontextualizes all social incarnations as equally subjective –time, beauty, power, and manners are all qualified as equally illusory– and his tone and attitude show that this arbitrariness can create a sense of alienation if these constructs do not align with the individual’s core values. For example in “Illusions”, he writes about how individuals are acting in disconnect with what he believes truly matters: “At the top or at the bottom of all illusions, I set the cheat which still leads us to work and live for appearances, in spite of our conviction, in all sane hours, that it is what we really are that avails with friends, with strangers, and with fate or fortune.” (“Illusions” 307) In response to this disconnect, he suggests that we focus on our individual truths to seek individual solutions. Emerson’s way to this truth is through the self: “In this kingdom of illusions we grope eagerly for stays and foundations. [...] Whatever games are played with us, we must play not games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth. I look upon the simple and childish virtues of veracity and honesty as the root of all that is sublime in character. Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds.” (307) His ideas for social progress are purposely shapeless, to insist that individuals must find their own solution. This same idea is present in “Worship” with Emerson’s new religion, built around a nameless trinity (“The nameless Thought, the nameless Power, the superpersonal Heart, – he shall repose alone on that.” (268)). This is also what Emerson opens

TCoL with, referring here to the debate about free will versus determinism: “The riddle of the age has for each a private solution.” (“Fate” 152) As I develop further in the next chapters, a private solution is also what Max Weber hoped that individuals could find.

1.3

As shown with the example of Emerson’s theory of social incarnations and abstract forces, *TCoL* contains ideas that fit the definition of sociological thought, and resonate with other sociological theories of his time. He argues that all social constructs find their roots in universal abstract concepts, showing that while their purpose is essential, their shape is arbitrary. The nine chapters focus on eight main topics, questioning each time what part belongs to the abstract force, and what part is socially constructed. Throughout the book, Emerson argues that a stronger focus on the essence of our social actions could lead to a more harmonious life in society. The central issue that he highlights is a disconnect between one’s values, and the supposed values of the collective. Instead of arguing against social integration, he explores the universal elements of these eight social constructs in order to find a common ground on which to build a society where individuality does not have to lead to reclusion. As I will develop further in the third chapter, Emerson’s sociology offers an uncommon perspective in the way it does not place individual divergence from a supposed norm as the exception, but as the norm itself. Subjectivity is seen as non-negotiable and valuable, instead of something to minimize or even eradicate. Instead of presenting the individual as a distinct element, remote and sometimes alienated from the mass of society, he argues that there is no mass, only individuals. He does not presuppose that a part of the population blindly follows social norms and that the individual is an outlier; he shows us that questions of purpose and meaning are universal and that they need individual solutions. This way of thinking about society, when studied as sociological material instead of philosophical or fictional, could offer new perspectives on the questions of early sociology.

The relationship between individuals and society is an important part of sociology, but a comparative study that only focuses on this aspect cannot offer sufficient proof of the presence and relevance of Emerson's sociological thought. Because my goal is to create a strong basis for arguing in favor of a sociological reading of Emerson's *TCoL*, I compare it in my second chapter to the work of five influential sociologists of the same era as Emerson: Auguste Comte, Adolphe Quetelet, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. While others have only focused on ideas relating to individualism, I expand my analysis to three central elements of sociological studies. First, their method and views on methodology within the field. Second, their analysis of social facts and the dynamics involved, and finally, their perspectives on the role and impact of the individual within society. Here, Emerson's work is compared to the work of the five sociologists on each theme, letting me see exactly how his thought compares to theirs. The goal behind this extensive comparison is to offer a strong basis for any further discussions of Emerson's thoughts on society, individuality, and any topic that would have otherwise been discarded as outside of Emerson's scope.

II. CHAPTER TWO

This chapter's goal is to present Emerson's sociological thought by first looking at what the main focuses and ideas of 19th century sociology were. I explore those through the study of five sociologists who played important roles in the field at the time, and whose work will give me a wide context for Emerson's own sociological thought. Because I present *TCoL* as a text with sociological qualities, it is important to know what was considered a sociological text in Emerson's context, how sociology as an academic discipline was –or was not– recognised, and why. In this chapter, I focus on providing contextual information that will show that Emerson has a place in the epistemology of sociology, because of the way he echoes similar concerns and focuses as other sociological thinkers of his time. By showing the way these sociologists have written about their different focuses and how they have interacted with each other, I show that Emerson has a place among them. He does not simply write about similar topics; he interacts with certain ideas that are prevalent in the field and actively contributes to the debate. Looking at *TCoL* as a sociological text not only reminds us in certain aspects of late 19th to early 20th century mainstream sociology; it also sheds a light on certain aspects of sociology that have either been overlooked or stunted by other ideas that were more valued and recognized at the time. Emerson echoes the sociological debates of his time and asks follow-up questions. These new elements will be the object of the third chapter, where I will be able to discuss the impact of a sociological reading of Emerson's thought.

My second and third chapters work together in showing that in *TCoL* Emerson discusses aspects of society and social phenomena that have been overlooked or ignored by members of the canon of mainstream sociology, making it a valuable piece of sociological literature. This second chapter builds on my first chapter, providing new reading keys for the idea highlighted there and putting it in this precise sociological context. The sociologists I have chosen to study and compare to Emerson in this portion of my mémoire are Auguste Comte, Adolphe Quetelet,

Hebert Spencer, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, who I present in historical order. Comte, Spencer, Weber, and Durkheim are commonly known as members of the canon of mainstream sociology. They all heavily influenced 19th and 20th century sociology, and so their work encompasses many of the central ideas that were valued in the discipline in Emerson's time. I have included Quetelet in my contextualizing group despite his lesser-known role because his work is known to have been studied by Emerson and to have made an impact on the way he approached his own sociological questions. In order to structure this contextualization, I have chosen to focus on three aspects of what constitutes the practice of sociology during Emerson's time. First, the methods used and promoted by each author, then their perspectives on what constitutes social action, and finally, their treatment of the question of individuality within society. These three elements will give me an extensive insight into the perspectives of each sociologist and will allow me to precisely compare them to the way Emerson writes about the same topics.

2.1 Methodology

In the first section of this chapter, my attention is focused on the different methods used by each sociologist. I begin with this topic because methodology, and more precisely the use of a distinctly scientific method in sociology, plays a central role in the credibility of the discipline at the time. Because my goal is to show that Emerson can be considered a valuable sociological thinker, I want to begin my argument by showing that his method can be compared to those practiced by canonical sociologists. Moreover, looking at methodology tells us a lot about what these sociologists wanted from their studies, what they were mainly concerned with when observing societies, thus giving us a good overview of the scope of their research. After having explored the methods of each sociologist, I will link them together and compare them to Emerson's. This will let us see how the author compares to these central figures of 19th and

early 20th century sociology in the way they approach questions about society and social phenomena.

COMTE

In the early 19th century, Auguste Comte made a point out of practicing sociology in a scientific manner. Out of his 1830 *Positive Philosophy* essay came the notion of “positive science”, which guided the rest of his sociological studies. The first claim of Comte’s sociology is that all social phenomena are subject to a series of “invariable natural laws” which he focused on identifying. He writes, “our real business is to analyse accurately the circumstances of phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance.” (*Positive Philosophy* 31)

While he is interested in causality, he explains that speculating on causes is not an efficient way to understand how these laws work. Instead, he wants to focus on the existence of the laws themselves. To do so, he uses empirical observation to formulate a series of social laws which he calls the “three-stage law” and claims that all societies go through three successive stages: first, the theological stage, then the metaphysical stage, and finally the scientific stage, also known as positivistic. To each stage is attributed a category of ideas, as well as a type of social structure and social actors. For example, in the theological stage, ideas are said to “focus on nonempirical forces, spirits, and beings in the supernatural realm.” (Turner et al. 39) In the metaphysical stage, there is a rejection of the ideas from the previous stage and a focus on the essence of phenomena instead. Finally, in the positivistic stage, ideas are understood to develop from “observation and constrained by the scientific method”, while speculation that is not based on the observation of empirical facts is rejected. Comte also assigns a type of leader to each stage: in the positivistic stage they are identified as scientists, when before in the metaphysical stage they were philosophers, and in the theological one, priests. (Turner et al. 39)

The details of the three-stage law tell us a lot about Comte, about the role he saw for his sociology, and why his method had to be scientific. He studies sociology with what he calls the

“positive” science, identifying it as a part of the superior stage of thought. Using the scientific method is not simply a question of academic rigor in Comte’s eyes, it is a requisite for one’s ideas to be considered fully accomplished. However, despite Comte’s dedication to making his sociology a science in the strict sense, his method was criticized as subjective and rudimentary by later sociologists, most notoriously by Emile Durkheim. In fact, we do notice that there is a strong teleological aspect to Comte’s method, as his three-stage law holds the principle that all societies are aimed towards the same superior ideal. It also contains a set of preconceived notions about what a society should look like, in that other forms of thought are presented as under-developed versions of the same ideal. As we will see later in Durkheim’s criticism of Comte, his method contains a heavy part of personal biases and preconceptions, which does make it in part subjective. Still, it is important to highlight the value that Comte attributed to the scientific method, as the way he applied it to the social sciences played an important role in how sociology will come to be practiced in the future.

QUETELET

In Belgium during Comte’s time, Adolphe Quetelet also worked on applying scientific rigor to the social sciences. And while he is rarely mentioned today in histories of the development of sociology, he played an important role in making it into a discipline with a precise set of concerns and ideas. In his work, Quetelet shows a strong interest in statistics, and works on applying “probability theory and statistical analysis to data on crime, suicide, and anthropometry.” (Wright 66) While his research is valued by academic circles of his period, his motive is not to add new theories to the discipline for the sake of it, but to act for social reform. Quetelet studies crime because he wants to end it, he studies mortality in the hopes of finding ways to delay it, and education because he wants to maximize it. (Wright 67) The goal of his research is to find solutions to the problems of human societies, with less of a focus on building theories that would be recognized and valued by other academics. Because the goal of social

reform is practical and ambitious, his method has to be seen as valuable and solid, which is why he bases it on “detailed, empirical, quantitative descriptions of the problems of the human condition.” (Wright 67) As we will later see in more detail, Quetelet looks at society through the lens of what he calls the “Average Man” which allows him to encompass complex and nuanced situations into one theoretical figure.

When it comes to methodology precisely, some actually place the work of Quetelet above Durkheim and Weber’s in terms of accuracy and thoroughness: “it is not unfair to say that this vision of ‘a true science of society’ finds more and deeper expression in any given issue of the *American Sociological Review* than anything one will find in Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* or Weber's famous essay on ‘Politics as a Vocation’.” (Wright 67) We can link this “deeper expression” to the ultimate goal of Quetelet’s research, which is social reform. Because his aim is to find practical solutions, the method that grows from this goal finds a deeper meaning than a method that aims to understand society without a precise objective in mind. In France at the same time, Comte wants to identify the laws of society in order to understand society, knowing that there might be ways to then influence it through these laws. Quetelet wants to influence society, which prompts him to look for the ways he could do so. The purpose is similar, but Quetelet has practical objectives in mind and makes them his priority instead of a possible consequence of his study.

SPENCER

In his 1878 three-volume *Principles of Sociology*, Herbert Spencer defines sociology as “the study of superorganic phenomena—that is, of relations among organisms.” (qtd. in Turner et al. 64) Unlike Comte or Quetelet, he builds his ideas through the natural sciences instead of the hard sciences, and is particularly interested in the way these natural sciences study development. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution had an important influence on Spencer, who “warmly welcomed” Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and who, in turn, also acknowledged and

highly valued Spencer's work. (Kon 43) Spencer's own theory of evolution claims that throughout history, societies have become increasingly complex, going from small and homogeneous masses to more complex and heterogeneous ones. With this, he decided to define evolution in a sociological context as the process of "increasing differentiation of human populations as they grow in size." (qtd. in Turner et al. 64) In addition, Spencer learns from the ethnography of his time and uses the comparative method to study societies. He takes single elements and isolates them from their connection with the cultures in which they have a meaning, and compares them with one another in order to discover parallels and uniformities. His end goal is to show that society represents a cohesive whole in which one could find the same laws anywhere in the world. (Maus 21)

This method shows the same teleological problem as Comte's three-stage law, even with Spencer's efforts to widen the scope of his research through his comparative method. Spencer still sees the world as aiming towards a preconceived ideal society, which dismisses any other social structures as underdeveloped societies. Nonetheless, Spencer's cardinal facts identify central aspects of a society's growth, of its structures, its functions, and its different systems of regulation. He also studies the way these facts co-exist, and argues that social phenomena have a general order of co-existence and sequence. Spencer also highlights the importance of causality because its presence in social actions means to him that a deductive science could grow from the observation of these actions. (Spencer, *Principles* 597) This is precisely what Comte refused to do, as he saw this method as too speculative.

WEBER

Max Weber's method and attitude towards sociology are similar to his predecessors' in the sense that he also wishes to make sociology a fact-based science. In an essay published posthumously in 1949, Weber asks: "In what sense are there 'objectively valid truths' in those disciplines concerned with social and cultural phenomena?" ("Objectivity in Social Science" 51) He works

to find aspects of society that could be described as objective facts, and builds his method on them. The key elements in Weber's perspective are the "ideal types", which are a series of categories of social actions that allow him to see the broad strokes of the development of society. Through this, he is making society "subject to lawful regularities" and so, objective. (Gerth and Wright Mills 60)

With this, Weber aims to give the discipline the tools to understand society through a logical understanding of its components. Unlike Comte who saw the positive science as the only truly accurate method, Weber does not want to present his method as the only valuable one. He accepts that the meaning of social phenomena is subjective and so, that it is pointless to theorize a unique way of studying it. Weber sees his method as one possible interpretation of society, and calls it "interpretative" or "understanding" sociology. (Gerth and Wright Mills 56) He places value in personal interpretation, arguing that "[m]an can 'understand' or attempt to 'understand' his own intentions through introspection, and he may interpret the motives of other men's conduct in terms of their professed or ascribed intentions." (Gerth and Wright Mills 56) In this aspect, Weber differs from all of the sociologists presented thus far by focusing on the individual's motives and presenting introspection as a valid tool to better one's understanding of society. He does not try to eliminate all subjectivity, but instead includes subjectivity as an inherent part of social action.

There is an emphasis on the interpretative –and therefore possibly inaccurate– nature of sociology in all of Weber's work. In *Economy and Society*, he argues that there is a central value in the subjective meaning of human actions, as he claims that it is what makes them *social* actions: "Sociology [...] is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective

meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” (Weber, *Economy and Society* 4) While he is embracing subjectivity, Weber still argues that without a set of clear and precise concepts, systematic social scientific research would be impossible. (Turner et al. 161)

DURKHEIM

In the latter half of the 19th century, Emile Durkheim founded what we now recognize as modern sociology. The original table of contents of his 1895 *Rules of Sociological Method* reads under introduction: “The rudimentary state of methodology in the social sciences. The objective of the book.” (115) His work is built in contrast with his predecessors’, criticizing their lack of method as a way to promote his own. If we focus on the method itself, we notice that even though Durkheim claimed to be doing something drastically different from his predecessors, his perspective seems to actually be very similar.

The principles of Durkheim’s theory all build on the concept of “social facts” to explain society, with the main rule being that “social facts can only be explained by social facts.” (118) By presenting and defining social phenomena as facts, Durkheim follows the same direction as his predecessors who tried to find objective elements in society. He does go a step further by building a series of rules for the observation of these social facts. The goal behind these laws is to make sociology a science that one studies in the same way one studies biology or chemistry. If social phenomenon is seen as a distinct element, he can then find out and attribute to it a set of properties and characteristics and, most importantly, “draw verifiable conclusions about its nature.” (Turner et al. 272) He wants to introduce a strictly scientific method to sociology in order to help define it as a discipline, which is an idea that Comte, Quetelet, Spencer and Weber all share. The importance of objectivity and rigor in the social sciences is an idea which they all agree on and in this sense, there is not a drastic change in methodology with Durkheim’s work.

However, it is his attitude towards sociology as a discipline that places him apart, as he makes it one of his main goals to make sociology a discipline that would be recognized and valued in academic circles most of all. This contrasts with Weber, who recognizes that he cannot fight against the subjective aspect of theoretical work in the social sciences, and builds his theory without needing it to be recognized by others as the only path to follow. Durkheim blames the lack of rigorous methodology in his predecessors for the way sociological inquiry has been often dismissed by academics so far. As Turner & al. explain, topics that touched to society, ideas, and values were still often dismissed as unscientific and instead of being seen as a social science, they would be categorized as a “subarea in the study of individual psychology.” (272-273) In his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim cites Comte and Spencer as examples of poor methodology, claiming that they “hardly went beyond generalities concerning the nature of societies, the relationships between the social and the biological realms, and the general march of progress.” (27) Durkheim defines his sociology in contrast against that of his predecessors by rejecting all previous theories, thus creating a clear difference between sociology as it used to be and sociology as it should to be, going forward. This helps Durkheim build a method that he claims would not recreate previous research mistakes or blind spots, and also could let him escape from the academic prejudice that social research suffered from at the time.

EMERSON

Emerson opens his seventh chapter, “Considerations by the Way”, with the idea that “although this garrulity of advising is born with us, I confess that life is rather a subject of wonder, than of didactics.” (269) As he continues his chapter, he writes: “All the professions are timid and expectant agencies. [...] The physician prescribes hesitatingly out of his few resources, the same tonic or sedative to this new and peculiar constitution, which he has applied with various success to a hundred men before. If the patient mends he is glad and surprised.” (269) Emerson

begins his chapter by emphasizing the lack of control that any of us have over the world, including in the hard sciences. Comte, Quetelet, Spencer, Weber and Durkheim look up to hard sciences as models of objectivity and exactitude, but Emerson does not. However, his attitude towards this lack of certainty is one of wonder, rather than desperation: “What we have, therefore, to say of life, is rather description, or, if you please, celebration, than available rules.” (269) The use of the word “celebration” encapsulates Emerson’s distinctively open and positive attitude in his sociological thought. He is not judging whether a society is good or not, nor is he trying to impose an ideal standard; he is simply observing it as it is.

This attitude is similar to Weber’s in the way they both embrace the subjective elements in society. We also find affinities in the way they both use individual perspectives and speculation as valuable tools in social inquiry. Weber writes that “man can ‘understand’ or attempt to ‘understand’ his own intentions through introspection, and he may interpret the motives of other men’s conduct in terms of their professed or ascribed intentions.” (qtd. in Gerth and Wright Mills 56) Introspection is shown in *TCoL* as a central tool to understanding social dynamics; in the chapter “Culture”, he explores the idea of individuality and self-knowledge and writes: “This individuality is not only not inconsistent with culture, but is the basis of it.” (215) Weber identifies personal subjective motives as key in the chain of causality that leads to social action, and making this link between understanding one’s motives and understanding one’s social actions is central to both of their sociological methods.

While he remains critical of their accuracy as we see from the opening of “Considerations by the Way”, Emerson still believes in the existence of laws in the social world. In “Worship”, he writes: “Tis a short sight to limit our faith in laws to those of gravity, of chemistry, of botany, and so forth. Those laws do not stop where our eyes lose them, but push the same geometry and chemistry up into the invisible plane of social and rational life.” (257) This blending between the laws of the scientific world and those of the social world is also

found in Spencer's work, who looks at Darwin's law of the evolution of species and applies it to societies. He also presents his theories as being applicable to non-human societies too, showing that theories of the natural sciences could be a valuable tool in sociological studies. Moreover, we also find similarities between Spencer's comparative method and Emerson's attitude in *TCoL* in the way they both support their ideas with historical examples from widely different cultures and time periods. Emerson ties important figures together and presents them as being made of the same "material". In "Worship" for example, Emerson illustrates his point on deity with examples from "the Pacific islanders," the Greek poets, the Norse king Olaf, and European Christianity in the same paragraph. (249-250)

Quetelet thought that exact conclusions were only possible with large numbers, so that "nothing fortuitous could affect the value of the averages." (*Treatise* 105) This echoes Spencer's use of the comparative method which focuses on large sample sizes, but also with the way Emerson reaches for a wide array of examples to illustrate his laws of society. In all three cases, there is an intent to widen the scope of what is being observed in order to ensure that their findings are truly universal and not a local consensus. Quetelet and Spencer do it by using larger samples for their study, and Emerson does it by illustrating his ideas with examples from different societies geographically, culturally, and even temporally. We also find that Emerson joins Quetelet in his disregard for "Grand Theories of Society", as Quetelet phrases it. They are both trying to find something that can be true for most people, or true in theory at least, but are not claiming that there is –or should be– definable laws that rule society in a practical way. Furthermore, we notice that Quetelet and Emerson are also linked by the importance of social reform as the ultimate goal behind their sociological work. If Quetelet wants to study crime to end it, Emerson wants to study the laws of the world to harness their power. While the first is more practical, they both have the objective to make their findings a tool for social change. We have also noticed that this influences the way Quetelet's work is received, as he focuses on

making his theories applicable but does not strive for them to contribute to the academic sociological debates. As established in my first chapter, this also affects Emerson, whose tone and disregard for academic validation certainly contributes to the misrecognition he is suffering from when it comes to his sociological thought.

2.2. Social Action

The goal of this next subchapter is to present the way each sociologist conceptualizes social action in society, and how they develop their vision of it in their work. The precise question of social action and the importance it is given shows more precisely what the main sociological focus points are in Emerson's time, which includes human agency and the role of external forces in it. While Spencer presents external forces as immovable and something that must be accommodated, Weber and Quetelet argue that on the contrary, there are ways to make the external forces positively influence one's own actions. Comte and Durkheim on the other hand are looking for ways to understand external forces in order to measure their impact and potentially change it. Their different perspectives and attitudes help frame Emerson's own sociological thought, and allow us to better understand the practice of sociology at the time. This study also provides a first insight on the role and value attributed to the individual by each author, which is what chapter 2.3 explores in detail.

COMTE

One of the main elements of Comte's sociological method is the identification of the laws of society through observation. Because these laws are identified in a scientific manner, they are presented by Comte as objective data and as a strong basis for sociological study. In the second volume of *Positive Philosophy*, he discusses the existence of "social phenomena" which are the product of these laws of society and which makes them possible to predict, depending on their

level of complexity. (181-182) Comte focuses on the nature of the laws of society and on the social phenomena that they produce, and makes it the basis of his sociological work.

Comte distinguishes two sides to the study of social phenomena: the statical and the dynamical. He associates the statical side to the “permanent harmony among the conditions of social existence” and the dynamical side to the development and movement of these conditions. (182-183) Both aspects are studied in different but complementary ways: the statical study of sociology focuses on the laws of action and reaction in the social system. It sees society as a set of interconnected combinations of social elements that influence each other constantly. As the name indicates, it observes society in a static way and does not reflect on the way elements succeed each other, but how they coexist. The dynamical study of sociology is qualified as more philosophical by Comte and has a stronger focus on the role of causality in society. “The true general spirit of social dynamics then consists in conceiving of each of these consecutive social states as the necessary result of the preceding, and the indispensable mover of the following.” (190) The dynamical view aims to discover the laws of this continuity in order to identify the ones that determine the course of human development. In essence, the statical side studies the laws of co-existence, and the dynamical side studies the laws of succession. (*Positive Philosophy* 3: 193)

Social structures are another of Comte’s key elements of society. They are the result of social phenomena; he explains that they cannot be reduced to the actions of individuals, but instead are composed of different substructures and develop into a social structure from a group of simpler ones. This is a similar reflection to Durkheim’s –who states that social facts can only be explained by other social facts– in the sense that the social structure is not seen as the result of individual action, but as the result of the development of a subtype of the same social structure instead. As we will see later, they both see social action as the result of forces that are

external to the individual and can be influenced by imposing certain moral and social structures onto the population.

QUETELET

To Quetelet, society can be analyzed through statistics, but it is understood through the observation of forces. He wonders about the forces that characterize human beings, about their origins and about the possibility of the existence of analogous forces in the natural world. He opens his *Treatise on Man* with a preface that discusses at length the question of predetermination in social actions: “[...]we are under the domination of our habitudes, our wants, our social relations, and a host of causes which, all of them, draw us about in a hundred different ways. These influences are so powerful, that we have no difficulty in telling, even when referring to persons whom we are scarcely acquainted with, or even know not at all, what is the resolution to which they will lead such parties.” (vii) He holds the idea that human agency is influenced by external forces so strongly that it makes us able to predict how other individuals would act in any given situation. Quetelet studies society with the belief that there are limits to the action of individuals, as if humanity was acting against other natural forces, which is why he often discusses “the disturbing force of man”, “that is to say, the differences, more or less great, which the social system produces, from that state or condition in which he would be placed if left to the forces of nature alone.” (8) To him, the potential of human agency is seen in the difference between the current state of society and its hypothetical state if no purely human action had ever taken place. When questioning the extent of these forces’ influence, he is trying to understand what exactly human action is made of in order to see what belongs to the “disturbing force of man”, and what belongs to nature.

His goal with this focus is to find a way to optimize the use of the force of the person in order to understand how to influence society, and draw conclusions about its direction. This idea of an equilibrium of forces that can be optimized in favor of human action is an aspect of

Quetelet's sociology that clearly influenced Emerson's own sociological thought. They both acknowledge a mutual influence between nature and man, but Emerson presents human agency as the product of an equilibrium rather than a resistance or "disturbance" like Quetelet does.

SPENCER

Spencer works with a similar general vision of society to Quetelet, stating that "social phenomena depend in part on the natures of the individuals and in part on the forces the individuals are subject to." (*Principles* 14) To him, social action is the result of both individual action and the influence of forces exterior to the individual. Spencer establishes that the social universe contains invariable laws, similarly to the physical and biological universes. His goal, once these laws are identified, is to encourage individuals to act in accordance with these laws. His idea is that these laws cannot be violated –in the same sense that human beings cannot violate the laws of physics– and as such, they have to be obeyed in order to avoid creating too much tension between society and these invariable laws. While Quetelet presents this relationship as affected by the "disturbance" of human agency, and Emerson presents it in equilibrium, Spencer thinks of the laws as largely superior to human action and so, undisturbed by human action. However, he sees the influence of these exterior forces as being gradually easier to accommodate to as a society evolves, in the same way that humanity has been able to accommodate itself –to some extent– to the laws of biology through the development of science and medicine. He explains that as a society grows, it increases its complexity and its power, which to Spencer means that society increases its ability to accommodate to the influence of these external forces. However, unlike Comte and Quetelet who aim to understand the laws of the social world in order to change them, Spencer's goal is not to act against these forces but to accept their existence and find the way of least resistance. (Turner et al. 54) Unlike them, Spencer also does not specifically theorize on social phenomena and their origin; he is less interested in the process through which the laws of the social world came to be than in the laws

themselves. In fact, he mainly seeks to understand how society can adapt to these self-evident laws in the most efficient way possible. In this aspect Spencer has a functionalist mindset; he also sees societies and individuals as having “survival needs” and illustrates social structures as “specialized organs emerging and persisting to meet these needs.” (Turner et al. 50) In this case, the health of a society is defined by how well the organs work to meet the needs of the social body. Illustrating this same mindset, Spencer explains in *Social Statics* that the happiness of the individual in society is dependent on his ability to satisfy his needs and desires without restricting others’ abilities to satisfy their own needs and desires. (410) Through this and through his views on individual agency, Spencer brings forward the idea that a better way to live in a society is to understand that there are laws that should not be violated, and find a way to live within these limits instead of fighting against them.

WEBER

One of the key elements of society according to Weber’s sociological studies is social action. He studies it closely and works to categorize it into a series of different “ideal types of social actions”, often simply referred to as “ideal types.” Clearly describing and categorizing the key elements of social phenomena is what helps Weber reach a better understanding of why societies are the way they are, and how they are evolving. As such, he uses the concept of social action categorized into ideal types to study patterns and causality, which makes social action central to his study of society.

There are two main categories of ideal types in Weber’s theory: historical ideal types, and general ideal types. Historical ideal types can be used to describe historical events, in the sense that historical ideal types of social action accentuate the key properties of events in history. An example of this practice is found in Weber’s analysis of the spirit of capitalism, in which he identifies the features of the belief system to highlight its essence and try to understand the causes for its emergence. (Turner et al. 165) On the other hand, general ideal types of actions

are anchored in the present and define the different “types of phenomena that are always present in human action”. They do not describe historical events, but “accentuate certain key properties of actors, action, and social organization in general.” (Weber, *Economy and Society* 135) The general ideal types are subcategorized into four groups: instrumentally rational, value-rational, traditional, and affectual. The first, –instrumentally rational action– is based on “objective, ideally scientific, knowledge”. The second type of action, called value-rational, is motivated by the actor’s basic values, such as religious beliefs, parental duties, or professional integrity. The third type, called traditional, finds its source in ingrained habits; behaviors and patterns that have been stable for years or even generations. Finally, the fourth type, affectual action, is determined by people’s emotions in a given situation, often impulsively. (Weber, *Economy and Society* 135-136)

Weber uses these ideal types to systematically compare against different empirical cases. He presents them as pure forms of social action and is aware that practical situations would not reflect the exact same results. The ideal type essentially serves as a form of control group in his method, and allows him to see variations and deviations. He sees these changes as the result of causal forces which he then wants to try to understand too. Thus, basing his sociological inquiry on social actions which can be compared to a series of ideals is what makes Weber capable of identifying and analyzing the elements of social action and finding the root causes of different types of social phenomena. (Turner et al. 166) This is similar to Comte and Quetelet’s conceptualizations of social action as they are all looking at the root cause of it to understand the role of external influence.

DURKHEIM

In Durkheim’s sociology, the key element of society is the “social fact.” He defines it in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* as “any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint, which is general over the whole of a given

society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations.”

(27) He finds in his study that the beliefs and norms of the social world are able to compel certain thoughts and actions in the individual which they would not have experienced without these external influences. To illustrate this in the introduction to his *Rules of the Sociological Method*, Durkheim writes about the commitments that one takes as a brother. Being born from the same parents as someone else comes with a series of social behaviors that are defined by the laws and customs of the individual’s socio-politico-cultural context, which are all external factors. Even if the individual feels that they are in agreement with their own actions, Durkheim points out that these convictions have been received through education, which also makes them exterior to the individual. (*Rules* 20) Durkheim also finds that this influence is not willfully accepted by the individual, but that the social fact is internalized in a coercive way. His study does not focus on ways to resist or adapt to this influence like Comte, Spencer and Quetelet do, but rather it accepts that social facts are imposed on individuals and questions their nature and the extent of their influence.

Going further into his reflection, Durkheim argues that the social fact cannot be defined solely by its current context and use. He notes that demonstrating the effects of a social fact does not explain its origins, and that it will not show us what it does to society. The usefulness of a fact does not explain or justify its existence to Durkheim. He argues that need, will or desire are not enough to create the social fact, and as such “prior forces must exist, capable of producing this firmly established force.” (*Rules* 79) He describes these prior forces as long-established traditions or common ideals, and defines them as “the sole sources from which all authority is derived.” (79) His idea of the prior forces is that there is an essence to our social structures that remains unchanged, even if their shapes do evolve. “The swearing of an oath began by being a kind of judicial ordeal before it became simply a solemn and impressive form of attestation. The religious dogmas of Christianity have not changed for centuries, but the role

they play in our modern societies is no longer the same as in the Middle Ages.” (79) While it does not give us answers as to the origin of social facts, Durkheim’s idea still reframes the social fact as an element of society that is not specific to one society during one time, but is more akin to an essence which can be found throughout time and in different social contexts. Like Emerson, he argues that the same force can be incarnated in different ways by different societies: “The type of dwelling imposed upon us is merely the way in which everyone around us and, in part, previous generations, have customarily built their houses.” (Durkheim, *Rules* 26) He also explains earlier in *Rules* that social facts are “refracted” through individuals. Certain thoughts and actions can become consistent through individual repetition and take a tangible shape that becomes distinct from the way other facts manifest themselves in other individuals. (23) However, the rest of his theory aligns more with the ones of Comte and Spencer, explaining that these different ways of expressing the same social fact are the result of different levels of “crystallization” of the same force. This echoes a more unidirectional vision of social evolution like the one in Comte and Spencer’s sociological thoughts, where the development of society is marked by constant evolution towards one ideal. While Durkheim sees social structures as somewhat malleable like Emerson does, he still seems to see certain expressions as underdeveloped versions of others: “Thus there exists a whole range of gradations which, without any break in continuity, join the most clearly delineated structural facts to those free currents of social life which are not yet caught in any definite mould. This therefore signifies that the differences between them concern only the degree to which they have become consolidated. Both are forms of life at varying stages of crystallization.” (26-27) This aspect of his thinking reminds us more of Comte and Spencer than Emerson, because of this insistence on gradation and stages, which we found in the three-stage law.

EMERSON

Emerson also uses a form of social fact as his basis for understanding society. In his case, it is represented by a series of abstract forces which can take different shapes in different social contexts, similarly to Durkheim's "prior forces". In the first chapter of the book, Emerson discusses the notion of agency and establishes that human action is the result of a balance between two of these abstract forces: Fate and Power. "If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate." (161) This is similar to Quetelet's idea of the "disturbing force of man", in the way it sees human agency as the result of a balance between the antagonizing forces of nature, and man's willpower.

Like Quetelet and Spencer, Emerson also believes that this resistance can be optimized, but he goes one step further when he claims that even objectively antagonizing forces can be used to the person's advantage if they can understand them: "every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us, is convertible by intellect into wholesome force." ("Fate" 166) The conclusion of Emerson's second chapter contains the idea of an "Economy of Power", in which Power "may be husbanded, or wasted" and that the individual is only efficient as a container or vessel of this force. ("Power" 189) This perspective contains the idea that individual action, while it can be consciously directed, always comes from the same source. In *TCoL*, he argues that our affinities with the different forces of nature are out of our control; writing about successful men (men who have affinities with Power) Emerson states: "One man is made of the same stuff of which events are made; is in sympathy with the course of things; can predict it. Whatever befalls, befalls him first; so that he is equal to whatever shall happen." ("Power" 177) Because of this, our goal should be to find what our strengths and weaknesses are in order to focus our energy on the right area. While the laws of Power can be understood and harnessed to serve one's own power, Emerson also claims that certain people might be acting entirely as representatives of certain forces. He develops this further in *Representative Men*, where he

brings out the idea that individuals carrying world-changing ideas are not the true creators of said idea, but instead are the incarnation of an abstract force which contains the essence of the idea. This makes Emerson's "social facts" especially powerful, as they are said to be the product of natural forces that were mastered in some way. While Spencer encourages us to accept the limits of our influence on the forces of society and Quetelet hopes to alter them, Emerson presents a nuanced in-between vision where forces and individuals can mutually affect each other. Similarly to Spencer who encourages his readers to accept that there are unfringeable laws in society, Emerson tells us that knowing one's areas of strength and weakness is essential to an efficient use of one's power.

Emerson's conceptualization of society as a balance of abstract forces which find themselves embodied under different forms by the collective as well as the individual echoes Durkheim's ideas the most. They share the idea of "prior forces" being at the origin of social facts and both discuss the idea of different embodiments or "refractions" of abstract ideas in individuals. (*Rules* 79) We find however a deeper reflection about how these forces impact the individual in Emerson's work, showing us ways to adapt to these forces but also ways to find meaning and contentment in our lives within society.

2.3 Individuality

The following section focuses on the notion of individuality as seen by the same five sociologists, before comparing it to Emerson's. Their differences on a practical level were highlighted through the comparison of their methods in the first section of chapter two. In the second section, the focus on social action allowed for an in-depth look at the components of society on a global level; social action being often presented as the result of an entire community's behavior. In this third section, looking at the place of the individual and how individuality is considered by each author is leading us to explore the complex question of the relevance of individual contentment when working towards the betterment of society as a

whole. While some consider self-affirmation to be integral to individual contentment and needs to be included in their vision of a better society, others argue that a strong expression of individuality is detrimental to the melioration of society. Looking at the treatment of individuality in each author highlights the strongest differences between them and provides a precise context for Emerson's ideas surrounding individuality.

COMTE

Comte describes the individual in *Positive Philosophy* as “a series of capacities and needs, some innate and others acquired through participation in society” whose relationship to the group exists out of necessity. (qtd. in Turner et al. 36) In the same book, Comte also describes the individual as an animal compelled to amend his primitive condition of physical imperfection and moral necessities by attaching itself to a group. (*Positive Philosophy* 2: 231) The individual and their dependence to the group is seen as a motor for society (“a series of capacities and needs”), which is central to Comte's vision. His sociological work focuses on the development of a science that would advance the theoretical understanding of the structures that make up society and since the relationship of dependence between the individual and the collective is at the basis of these structures, this dependence is a non-negotiable element in Comte's perspective. When he briefly discusses the notions of self-determination and agency, he describes it as “very limited, in spite of all aids from concurrence and ingenious methods.” (*Positive Philosophy* 2 : 196) Comte continues by explaining that this limitation is simply an “inevitable consequence of the existence of natural laws” and moves on from the topic entirely.

In a later work called *System of Positive Polity*, Comte argues that this dependence asks for an external power to bring unity to society. (xii) He establishes that this role would be best taken by religion, claiming that its function is “to regulate individual life, and to combine collective lives.” (xii) What transpires from Comte's discussions of individuality is that individuality has a potential for disruption if individuals are left without any guidance and

structure. However, if it can be regulated, it also has the power to create unity between members of society. This is an idea that we also find in Spencer and Durkheim's work and which we will develop further later. Comte's thoughts on the regulation of individualism and individuality through religious structures specifically –which he develops in *System of Positive Polity*– have been partially discredited on account of Comte's declining mental health. (Turner et al. 29, 42) He nonetheless brings up in this book elements that inspired further research, such as the concept of the division of labor which Durkheim developed in his 1893 book of the same title. (*Division of Labor* 364)

QUETELET

Quetelet presents the individual as the center of society and the basis for his practice of sociology: “he is the centre around which oscillate the social elements [...] It is this being whom we must consider in establishing the basis of social physics.” (Quetelet, *Treatise* 8) However, this individual is not representative of every man: in the first chapter of the *Treatise on Man*, he explains that his statistical method means that he will need to set aside “individual peculiarities, which exercise scarcely any influence over the mass.” He argues that by examining the laws of the world too closely, “it becomes impossible to apprehend them correctly, and the observer sees only individual peculiarities, which are infinite.” (5) Thus, while Quetelet's sociology puts the individual at the core of society, he needs to use what he calls the “Average Man” in his method for it to make mathematical sense. This is similar to what Weber does with the concept of ideal types, and as we will see this perspective allows for valuable nuance when comparing tangible situations with sociological ideals. While Quetelet has to reduce individuals to the “Average Man” in his methodology, he does not seem to express any intention of extending this idea to society itself. The gap between theory and practice is acknowledged and accepted.

In a comparative study of Durkheim and Quetelet, Theodore Porter argues that Quetelet's perspective on individuality is that “man possesses individuality but is eminently

sociable.” (17) He quotes his 1848 book *Du système social et les lois qui le régissent*: “he voluntarily gives up a part of that individuality to become a fraction of a large body, a people, which has its own life.” (Quetelet 72-73, qtd. in Porter 17) There, Quetelet presents individuality as a force that needs to be carefully balanced. He discusses that idea in relation to “Great Men” specifically, which is a concept similar to Emerson’s “Representative Men” and refers to certain individuals who are said to be acting as vehicles for greater ideas in society. There, he writes that the Great Man is “not simply one individual, but he has reference to a general idea, which communicates a superior power to him, at the same time that it gives him the distinctive and real form of individuality. Too much and too little individuality equally destroy the great man.” (Quetelet, *Treatise* 100-101) While this balance seems essential to the existence of the Great Man, there is not much else said about the specifics of if, how, and why this individuality should be managed. Unlike Comte who supports the idea of an external structure to manage individuality, Quetelet seems to be leaving that responsibility to the individuals themselves.

SPENCER

For Spencer, the core of society resides in the interconnectedness of the units that make it up. He explains in *The Principles of Sociology* that although society is separated into different units, the presence and persistence of arrangements among these units creates a togetherness that make it a society. (448) It is the effects of this interconnectedness that are important to Spencer; making a parallel between sociology and the natural sciences, he writes in his introduction that “the behaviour of a single inanimate object depends on the co-operation between its own forces and the forces to which it is exposed.” (8) Giving the examples of piles of bricks or gravel, he explains that the behavior of the group of units is determined “partly by the properties of the individual members of the group, and partly by the forces of gravitation, impact, and friction, they are subjected to.” He continues his argument by bringing his illustration back to society

and explaining that the same rules also apply to groups of people. Spencer argues that “every society displays phenomena that are ascribable to the characters of its units and to the conditions under which they exist.” (8)

However, this does not negate the existence and importance of individualism in Spencer’s sociology. On the contrary, in *Social Statics*, he considers the evolution of civilization as “a progress towards that constitution of man and society required for the complete manifestation of every one’s individuality.” (434) Spencer sees individuality as essential because he believes that it is what allows for individual happiness, which is what then leads to the happiness of the whole, which is one of his main goals for society. As such, finding a way to organize society in a way that would allow each member to express their individuality is key to achieving Spencer’s goal of a happier society. As he puts it: “in virtue of the law of adaptation, our advance must be towards a state in which this entire satisfaction of every desire, or perfect fulfilment of individual life, becomes possible.” (435-436) The way Spencer sees the evolution of the place of individuality in society is as follows: at the primitive stage, man’s instinctive individualism is said to only lead to anarchy and as such, it needs to be tamed. He states: “Either his individuality must be curbed, or society must dissolve.” (435-436) As a society progresses, Spencer claims that we can observe an increase in the “sacredness of personal claims” and an intention to overcome the elements that limit the importance and influence of said claims. He identifies “all despotisms” as limitations of individuality which are bound to be removed as society evolves further. Monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy are cited as the following stages through which society progresses towards an ideal form of individuality. He then identifies the proliferation of sects which divide larger religious currents as one of the ways a “growing assertion of individuality comes out.” (435-436) As these groups continue to subdivide themselves, the process will eventually lead to the disappearance of sects and their associated “artificial uniformity, obtained by stamping men after an authorized pattern” in order to leave

space for Spencer's ideal form of individualism, which he describes as "a general similarity, with infinitesimal differences." (435-436)

If at first individuality was said to produce anarchy, it was because it had not gone through the filter of society yet. The individuality which Spencer encourages is not instinctive; it is the product of a long process of repression, followed by a progressive rehabilitation through the creation of social structures that make space for divergent –but socially acceptable– opinions. The creation of new political parties, new churches, new workers' unions, is seen as the emergence of individuality in Spencer's perspective. The penultimate step, which he describes as an "artificial uniformity, obtained by stamping men after an authorized pattern" shows that Spencer is conscious of the negative effects of repression but fails to acknowledge that the supposed freedom that emerges from it is still the product of repression.

The individual still defines themselves in contrast to the collective and through the socially recognized channels of communication: politics, religion, and work. As such, while Spencer does argue in favor of individuality, the shape it takes shows a rather narrow definition of individuality. His "general similarity" is what survives the process of repression that he describes in his work. Regardless of the truthfulness of this individuality, the fact that it is born out of a process of heavy repression shows that Spencer's attitude is one of external control. Going forth, we will see how this is a perspective that both Weber and Emerson distinctively depart from, despite sharing the wish to incorporate and value individuality within society. Furthermore, as opposed to Emerson's work where individuality is a practice that asks for self-awareness, Spencer sees this socially acceptable and efficient form of individualism as the natural product of society, which is an external form of control. While he does dedicate a chapter of *Social Statics* to morals and how they shape the expression of our individualism, the notion remains a desired consequence of the good development of a society. Spencer's vision of individuality is similar to Comte's and Durkheim's, both in the way it is presented as potentially

disruptive unless channeled correctly through external structures, and in the way it only allows for variation within the mould shaped by the collective.

WEBER

Weber's work sheds light on the parts of individuality that could not go through the filter that Spencer runs it through. In Weber's terms, Spencer's vision of the individual is restricted to his identity as "an actor of social roles", while on the contrary the German sociologist is most concerned with the parts of the individual that exist outside of their performance in these social roles. He explores the individual outside of who they should be according to society, and discusses the tension between this form of individuality and the identity they shape according to "the external demands of institutional life." (*Essays in Sociology* 73) This follows the same logic as Weber's theory of ideal types, which he uses as a way to understand social action better while still acknowledging that reality cannot actually fit into these theoretical categories. Weber accepts the idea of a gap between his ideal types and reality, which makes his work more inclusive of individual variations and so, more open to a freer type of individuality. In fact, he presents social life as the result of "a polytheism of values in combat with one another" which all include different possible choices. (*Essays in Sociology* 73) This means that there are many different possible combinations of values and choices for each individual. Because of this, creating a unique best way to act in society does not make sense in Weber's idea of society; instead, he argues that the individual should be educated on sociological theories in order to make better, more informed decisions in their own particular contexts.

He hopes that this would expand the role of the individual: "This man can be more than a mere cog in his occupational groove. If he is responsible, he will have to make informed decisions." (*Essays in Sociology* 70) According to Weber, the complexity of modern civilization asks of sociology to support the individual in taking "intelligent stands on public issues." (*Essays in Sociology* 70) With this, Weber presents the individual as an active participant in

society, instead of a passive one who only exists within the limits of the social structure (“more than a mere cog in his occupational groove”). (70) This perspective implies a degree of responsibility for one’s actions, and as such Weber argues that it is important that sociology be used as a medium to educate individuals on how to practice “responsible freedom.” This pedagogical position and the notion of a responsible freedom are also found in Emerson, as I explore further in the next chapter. This attitude not only values man’s individuality: it also trusts in his ability to learn and improve. While Spencer sees the rules as limits, Weber and Emerson see them as tools and guides to optimize one’s own power. With this, we can see that Weber’s approach considers individualism as a tool to build a well-functioning society, as long as individuals can accept the responsibilities that come with it. In this sense, we see some of Comte and Spencer’s perspectives shared by Weber, as individuality needs to be tamed in some respect in order to make it a useful tool for society. However, Comte and Spencer’s methods use external constraint to achieve that goal, upholding moral and social structures that filter what individuality can be, while instead Weber encourages knowledge in order for the individual to consciously restrain the potential negative impact of their own individuality in society.

DURKHEIM

In *Rules of the Sociological Method*, Durkheim claims that the individual’s need to participate in society “springs from the heart of reality itself”. “There is no need to resort to deception. It is sufficient to make him aware of his natural state of dependence and inferiority. [...] Because the superiority that society has over him is not merely physical, but intellectual and moral, it need fear no critical examination, provided this is fairly undertaken.” (98) The elements of spontaneity and dependance both remind us of Comte’s perspective, as he also argues that the individual’s relationship to the collective is unquestionable and inevitable. In Durkheim’s view, social integration is achieved by making individuals believe that the only responsible choice is

to join the collective because of their “natural state of dependence and inferiority”. However, the relationship between the individual and the collective remains a complex one, and one that requires extensive structure and control, according to Durkheim. In *The Division of Labor* and *Suicide*, he focuses on the fact that the occupations of individuals in society are becoming increasingly specialized both as a way to promote societal growth, and also as a consequence of it. This threatens the relationship between the individual and society by creating a sense of meaninglessness and disconnect from the collective. Durkheim comes back to Comte’s thoughts about the concept of the division of labor to study the process and outcomes of the increase of specialization in society. Throughout his work in *Division of Labor*, Durkheim argues that a successful division of labor should create a strong sense of solidarity between individuals, as well as reduce the amount of individual deviance. His goal is to avoid the type of individualism which appears as a result of abnormal forms of the division of labor (here in the sense of the absence of solidarity). These unregulated forms of labor division are important to understand according to Durkheim, as his study allows him to understand the contrasting conditions necessary for a functional form of labor division. “When we know the circumstances in which the division of labor ceases to bring forth solidarity, we shall better understand what is necessary for it to have that effect.” (*Division of Labor* 353) Later, he explains: “If the division of labor does not produce solidarity in all these cases, it is because the relations of the organs are not regulated, because they are in a state of *anomy*.” (368) The notion of “anomy” tells us more about the role of the moral structure that Durkheim sees in the regulation of individuality. A state of anomy refers to an unregulated state of society where moral guidelines are weak, and individuals find themselves lost to a pathological degree. In *Suicide*, Durkheim defines it as the consequence of “the lack of collective forces at certain points in society; that is, of groups established for the regulation of social life.” (350) To avoid anomy, it is important to maintain regulation in society through structures that uphold an efficient division of labor. In *Suicide*,

these structures take the shape of social regulators focused on morality. There, he explains that in the past, religion served as one of the main moral regulators of society and helped society avoid the chaotic movements that can spring from anomy. The same idea is presented in Comte's *System of Positive Polity*, where he claims that the function of religion is to "regulate individual life and combine collective lives." (xii) But where Comte stayed with religion in mind as the ultimate tool, Durkheim realized that it was not compatible with the current values of society: "But this passive resignation is incompatible with the place which earthly interests have now assumed in collective existence. The discipline they need must not aim at relegating them to second place and reducing them as far as possible, but at giving them an organization in harmony with their importance." (*Suicide* 351) Because of this, he suggests that workplace authorities should now take the place of religion for moral regulation, as it has a better reach on all aspects of the individual's social life. "From another point of view, the occupational group has the three-fold advantage over all others that it is omnipresent, ubiquitous and that its control extends to the greatest part of life. [...] Thus the corporation has everything needed to give the individual a setting, to draw him out of his state of moral isolation; and faced by the actual inadequacy of the other groups, it alone can fulfil this indispensable office." (346) This perspective shows us that while Durkheim focuses on the wellbeing of the individual, he still encourages a high degree of moral control over them. The question that frames *Division of Labor* echoes the one from *Rules*: "Is it our duty to seek to become a thorough and complete human being, one quite sufficient unto oneself; or, on the contrary, to be only a part of a whole, the organ of an organism?" (*Division of Labor* 41) Comte and Durkheim both oppose individuality to society, and like Spencer, they encourage external constraint in order to reconcile the two.

EMERSON

Emerson's perspective on individuality and individualism within society is a rich and complex topic that I come back to in the third chapter. For what follows, I focus on studying how it contrasts with what Comte, Quetelet, Spencer, Weber and Durkheim have written about it. First of all, we notice that Spencer and Durkheim think of society and individualism as opposed ends of a binary equation. Durkheim writes in *The Division of Labor*: "Is it our duty to seek to become a thorough and complete human being, one quite sufficient unto oneself; or, on the contrary, to be only a part of a whole, the organ of an organism?" (40) Also placing individuality in opposition to society, Spencer writes in *Social Statics*: "Either his individuality must be curbed, or society must dissolve." (435) Weber and Quetelet offer a more nuanced perspective on individuality through their acknowledgment and acceptance of variety within society. Their two methods are built on ideal scenarios (the "Average Man" for Quetelet, and ideal types for Weber) which they need in order to map out the broad strokes of society, but these scenarios do not perfectly represent neither society as it is, nor society as it should be. This ideal society is not a goal, it is a tool to understand different social realities. While they both recognize that individuality has to be partly given up in order to take part in society, they do not oppose individuality itself to life in society in the way that Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim do.

Emerson's sociological thought also rejects this binary opposition of individuality and society, as he brings forth the idea that a strong and stable form of individualism is not only compatible with society, but is its basis. In "Behaviour", he writes: "Self-reliance is the basis of behaviour, as it is the guaranty that the powers are not squandered in too much demonstration." (243) Later, in "Culture," he writes: "[...] egotism has its root in the cardinal necessity by which each individual persists to be what he is. This individuality is not only not inconsistent with culture, but is the basis of it." (215) However, we understand that in these quotes he is referring to a specific form of individuality, as only a few lines before this last quote he writes: "Nature

has secured individualism by giving the private person a high conceit of his weight in the system. The pest of society is egoists.” (214) Similarly to Spencer, who rejects individuality in its primitive form and encourages it in its socially acceptable one, Emerson makes a personal distinction between “good” and “bad” kinds of egotism here. Spencer and Emerson are similar in the way that they both recognize that individuality can be altered in a way that makes it compatible with a harmonious life in society, but they differ in their method to alter it. Spencer explains that “good” individuality will emerge as the result of the formation of increasingly specific subgroups. Their existence is dependent on their recognition by the collective, and imply an important degree of conformity with the moral and political authorities that rule the collective. The shaping of this socially acceptable individuality comes from an external authority, which exerts moral control over it. With Emerson, this “good” individuality is shaped by internal authority, as “self-reliance is the basis of behaviour.” (215) Similarly to Weber who discusses the idea of responsible freedom, Emerson wants individuals to act knowingly and responsibly. While Comte, Spencer and Durkheim maintain the idea that moral control is necessary to keep individualism from being a destructive force, Emerson and Weber place the responsibility of self-control on the side of the individual.

While all of these sociologists have taken the stance that individualism can only be productive in society if it takes a collectively approved shape, the manner in which this individualism is shaped reflects two drastically different perspectives. On the one hand, when individualism is repressed until it can emerge in socially conventional ways, it risks being narrowed down to what the moral authorities define as socially conventional individuality, and ultimately repressing true individuality. On the other hand, while we cannot exclude the role of self-censorship and the internalisation of moral codes, placing the responsibility of nuancing one’s individuality on the side of the individual shows a more open approach to individuality within society. There are two main paths through which individuality goes in the work of these

authors. For Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim, it is external regulation that allows for a “good” individuality to emerge, and for Weber and Emerson it is through internal regulation that the individual finds their own personal way of expressing their individuality in society. The latter two argue for better self-knowledge and take a pedagogical stance in their writing, which is congruent with this path of internal regulation. As I come back to in detail in the next chapter, Weber’s responsible freedom and Emerson’s idea of voluntary obedience all uphold the idea that individuals should be able to make informed decisions within society. On the other hand, the first three insist on the importance and impact of external control, with Spencer claiming that social laws are as immovable as the laws of physics. Comte and Durkheim explore the impact of external forces in order to find ways to understand how they can be used to influence society as a whole. With this perspective, it is also congruent of them to argue for an external regulation of individuality and taking an authoritative position to impose a structure to the collective.

III. CHAPTER THREE

This mémoire began with an exploration of the reception of *TCoL* and how this impacts its recognition as relevant to the academic discipline of sociology. I establish that the influence of this image of Emerson that was built through critical theory, chiefly his reputation as an individualist in an anti-communitarian way, is a major obstacle in the reception of *TCoL* as a sociological text. The second chapter compared the content of *TCoL* to the work of my corpus of 19th to early 20th century sociological works, provoking a series of observations showing that its ideas and its method possess sociological qualities/significance. In this third chapter, I explore the intersection of these two aspects, by arguing that *TCoL* can be considered a sociological based on its content and despite its reception. To refine our understanding of the text, I focus on its tone and approach, as they affect both the content and the text's reception. While I could argue that the critics that rejected *TCoL* as unsuited for serious academic consideration were misjudging the book based on a biased understanding of its value, I find that a deeper understanding of the evolution of Emerson in regard to academia shows that his intent was not to write a book that would be esteemed by academics. On the contrary, this chapter demonstrates that there is more reason to believe that *TCoL* was consciously aimed at a non-academic audience, which was at the expense of academic attention. It is from this point that I then argue that considering *TCoL* a sociological text and valuing his attitude towards social change goes against both 19th century academia and contemporary academia. However, and because of the nature of the points of divergence between Emerson in the second half of his life and what academia was developing into at the time, I consider this valorisation of *TCoL* a positive step in the direction of a more holistic way of conceptualizing university studies and countering the institutionalization of knowledge in our society.

In this third chapter, I begin by presenting my takeaways from the exploration and contextualization made in the two preceding chapters. I go over the general differences and

similarities that I have highlighted among Emerson and the five sociologists of my corpus, showing that their stances on subjectivity and individualism show the strongest division. Then, I focus on all six authors' methods of social analysis and explore what their differences are in this aspect, showing that the degree of applicability of the different sociological methods and practices separates Emerson and Weber from the rest of my corpus. While the latter two present a bottom-up approach, the other four work in the opposite way and suggest a top-down approach. A correlation between the type of approach and the type of targeted audience is highlighted. The last step of this chapter is to explore the attitude of Emerson in regard to Harvard in the mid-19th century, as it shows a certain departure from the culture of expertise and specialisation that the university was developing during the same period.

3.1

To begin, we see that sociological attitudes regarding subjectivity show the most striking contrast, especially on the topic of methodology. Comte, Quetelet, Spencer and Durkheim reject subjectivity entirely, as they believe including it in their theories would risk rendering their work unscientific. In fact, avoiding subjectivity is one of the primary goals of the proposed methods of these four authors. However, in the perspective of Weber and Emerson, a scientific method does not necessarily exclude the presence of subjectivity; in fact, Weber even presented it as intrinsic to social action: “the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” (*Economy and Society* Weber, qtd in Turner 161) Because Weber sees the topic of his work as precisely subjective, he argues that his method cannot and should not avoid it either. In the same way that they are rejecting subjectivity in their method of analysis, Durkheim, Spencer, and Comte also reject the subjective nature of social action, making the lived experience of individuals essentially irrelevant to their conception of society. In comparison, Weber makes

sure to acknowledge in his theory that his “ideal types” are not reflective of the reality of individuals and social phenomena, but a theoretical version of those. Quetelet also writes about his “Average Man” as a means to an end, as he explains that his studies had to be based on large numbers so that “nothing fortuitous could affect the value of the averages”, while still being aware that variation exists and should not be overlooked. (105) In Emerson’s case subjectivity is said to be inherent to all sciences, as he argues in the opening of “Considerations by the Way”: “All the professions are timid and expectant agencies. [...] The physician prescribes hesitatingly out of his few resources. [...] If the patient mends he is glad and surprised.” He writes the same about a priest and a judge, who all make decisions based on limited experience and knowledge. (269) In his series of examples, Emerson makes subjectivity a part of any type of science and thus including sociology in that group of subjective sciences.

Individuality within society and the subjective concept of individualism comprise the second main topic that divides the authors of this corpus. While all of them acknowledge that without some form of guidance individuality could become disruptive to life in society, their attitudes towards this potential issue fall into two categories. On the one hand, Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim argue that to avoid disruptiveness, individuality should be shaped by moral and political authorities that exert external control over individuals. They insist on the importance of a strong social structure to provide guidance over members of society, as they suggest that external constraint is the most efficient way to ensure social harmony. While they do leave space for individuality, it is filtered through societal norms: Spencer’s way of integrating individuality in society is through the creation of increasingly specific social groups that allow for diverse but controlled forms of individuality and, as previously argued, this cannot be considered a genuine expression of individuality.²

² In the third part of chapter two, I argue that Spencer’s theory of a socially adapted form of individuality goes through a process of repression and that as such it does not encompass the form of individuality that Emerson and Weber incorporate in their work.

On the other hand, Emerson and Weber argue for internal self-regulation, explaining that individuals should be able to act responsibly if given the right tools to do so. They discuss notions of responsible freedom, self-reliance, and self-knowledge as tools to express one's own individuality in a way that is not detrimental to the good functioning of society. Emerson's idea of self-reliance "must not be confused with arrogance or with a desire for self-aggrandizement. It must instead be understood as a defense of human dignity." (Zavatta 83) Self-reliance is described by Kateb as "the steady effort of thinking one's thoughts and thinking them through". (Kateb 31) This notion is rooted in Emersonian individualism, in which "to be an individual means not eccentricity but centrality. To be an individual means, above all, to see life and the world with one's own eyes, with eyes cleansed of the effects of the group mind and institutional constrictions. His aim is not to get us to agree with his judgments but to persuade us to take a chance and think for ourselves." (Kateb xlii) On his side, Weber also argues for individual responsibility and, as a corollary, for the education of the individual: "If he is responsible, he will have to make informed decisions." (*Essays in Sociology* 70) His aim is to support the individual in taking "intelligent stands on public issues." (*Essays in Sociology* 70) With their attitudes, Weber and Emerson put the duty of regulation in the individual's hands, and do so through education instead of repression, which sets them apart from the rest of my corpus in a significant way. I come back to the topic of self-reliance and its pedagogical implications in the second part of this chapter.

The issue of the regulation of the expression of individuality within society is inscribed in the larger debate of whether a positive focus on the individual is antithetical to the practice of sociology. The improvement of the state of the collective is a central goal for Comte, Spencer, Durkheim and Quetelet, whereas we notice that Weber and Emerson (while still focused on collective issues) leave more space for individual concerns in their work. Weber's concerns with the individual are seen in his insistence on the subjective nature of social phenomena. The

combined topics of subjectivity and individuality set apart Weber and Emerson from the group, making Weber the most important sociologist of this corpus for reassessing Emerson as part of the discipline.

The issue of Emerson's focus on individuality is central because one of the determining factors in the academic identification of a text as either sociological or philosophical is centred on the way the issues are presented and received as either collective or individual. The questions of philosophy and sociology do overlap frequently and because of this, the choice of topic is not enough to qualify a text as sociological rather than philosophical. Meaninglessness for example can be discussed on a philosophical level as much as a sociological one. However, when a feeling of meaninglessness is said to affect an entire group it will be seen as a sociological issue, whereas in philosophical works it is most likely to be identified as a personal or individual issue. This particular question has even led to a change in terminology depending on the field; take the example of Durkheim, who in his work on suicide created the term "anomie", which is one of the only terms that remain proper to the field of sociology. (Hilbert 1) Anomie refers to a sense of meaninglessness to a pathological point, which happens when a society loses all form of moral structure. Because the issue is presented as a collective experience, the solutions offered to mitigate this problem involve changes made on the structural levels of society. These solutions show a top-down perspective, as change is coming from political and social authorities and is then applied upon the collective by these authorities.

3.2

By looking at the issue of meaninglessness as it is treated in my corpus, I notice two opposite attitudes: on one side, there are approaches that resemble Durkheim's: Spencer, Comte and Quetelet all approach the issue of meaninglessness as Durkheim approaches anomie, which is as a collective issue that asks for global, top-down solutions. On the other side, in discussions of meaninglessness outside of this sociological label, the root of the issue is most often

attributed to the individual's own reactions to their environment. The responsibility for the resolving of this issue is not put on authority figures, and does not imply any large-scale social restructuring. Instead, it suggests that the individual should solve the issue by changing their environment or their perspective on their environment. However, while in *TCoL* Emerson primarily suggests individual solutions ("the riddle of the times as for each a personal solution") (Emerson 152), he still aims for social change but from a bottom-up perspective. By educating the individuals, he is hoping to create a better society where better individual behavior can positively impact the lives of the collective. While Spencer does explore a similar reflexion (the happiness of the individuals being the source of the happiness of the collective), his approach is different in the way it uses repression instead of education. He does not use a pedagogical stance in his work and does not value self-knowledge, but instead argues in favor of external constraint in order to achieve harmony on the collective level. This pedagogical dimension is another element that links Emerson to Weber and sets them both apart from the rest of the corpus.

Another aspect of this process of identification of texts as either sociological or philosophical is the quality of their reception by academic audiences. Because Comte, Spencer and Durkheim wrote with academic audiences in mind and succeeded in being read by them, the communication of their ideas was most likely to be productive. When Comte described an issue that he saw as relevant to an important part of society, his readers also understood it as such. On the contrary, Emerson was received less clearly by academic audiences, and while he might have conceptualized the issues he discussed as relevant to great numbers, academic audiences did not and this contributed to his lack of recognition as a sociologist. Despite his Harvard education, Emerson's worldview in his later work differed enough from the academic readers' that there seems to have been a breakdown between the authors' idea of a collective issue, and the audience's. As Sean Ross Meehan explores in his 2019 book *A Liberal Education*

in *Late Emerson: Readings in the Rhetoric of Mind*, Emerson's later work departs from the increasingly specialized academic way of thinking and learning in significant ways. While the Harvard of the late 19th century shifts from a traditional liberal arts college into a modern university, Emerson's work and method become more and more generalized and less disciplinary, which makes it difficult for him to be well received by academic audiences. In his discussion of Emerson's 1870s classes, Meehan mentions that his analogical style of writing – his free association of concepts and ideas – was the opposite of the academic analytical and systematic style, and describes it as “decidedly not a method for the new university of original and pure research.” (Meehan 35) Even if *TCoL* was thought out and written before the 1870's, it already possesses this undisciplinary, unacademic tone mentioned by Meehan. This indicates that Emerson's focus and concerns had already begun to shift away from the modern university and into a more pedagogical and social way of sharing thoughts. Meehan suggests that this shift in attitude has the double effect of moving his audience outside of university auditoriums, and becoming a statement against academic over-specialization. “The problem with Emerson's unspecialized and undisciplined rhetorical method of mental philosophy may be that it succeeded in reaching the outsiders who, before the century's end, would have even less of a place in the new academic community of expertise. [...] [It] counters an intellectual specialization already emerging.” (Meehan 111) In Meehan's opinion *TCoL* was not considered to be addressed to an academic community of experts, and from what we know about its reception it was in fact not received by them as such either.

This discordance between this new mindset developing in academia and the Emerson who wrote *TCoL* certainly contributed to why his concerns were not received as relevant to the academic audiences' idea of the norm nor of the collective but instead categorized as individual and marginal issues. Moreover, a calculated coherence between the authors' targeted audiences and their effective audiences also plays a role in the potency of their work in terms of social

change. These authors present their ideas in the way that would make them most potent in the context of their reception and so, for Comte and Durkheim who aimed for academic audiences and were successfully received by them, offering this top-down perspective was the most relevant attitude to adopt. These elite audiences technically were most likely to have the political and intellectual power to apply those measures, and as such, the work of these sociologists was most useful under this form. On the contrary, Emerson's audience for *TCoL* was significantly less academic and therefore less likely to have the power to apply top-down measures, which makes a bottom-up approach more relevant. Emerson uses his rhetorical method as a pedagogical tool, with the aim of educating his audience in social responsibility and individual agency. The bottom-up attitude of Emerson's sociological method in *TCoL* is perfectly coherent with his drifting away from the new Harvard and his resistance against its culture of expertise. Emerson's shift towards a layperson audience explains why the message of *TCoL* is certainly most potent with a bottom-up perspective, as it empowers the individual in order to emphasize their ability to enact change. The adverse effect of this perspective is that the work is less likely to be seen as relevant to an audience of academic sociologists, which means that the solutions offered are also less likely to be applied on a systemic level.

Emerson's attitude in *TCoL* does play a role in the reception of his work as philosophical rather than sociological, however I have found that Weber presents his ideas in a way most similar to Emerson's but is still received as a sociologist by academics. The two authors have similar attitudes on the three main topics explored in my second chapter (methodology, social action, and individuality). More specifically, they both value the education of the individual on social matters in order to create a better harmony, working from a bottom-up perspective instead of a top-down one. Weber insists that man "can be more than a mere cog in his occupational groove. If he is responsible, he will have to make informed decisions." He believes that the intricacy of modern civilization requires sociology to assist individuals in taking "intelligent

stands on public issues.” (*Essays* 70) Emerson and Weber both describe the individual as resourceful and good-natured, while also arguing that individual agency has the potential to make a significant impact on the direction of society, both positively and negatively. As Kateb notes, Emerson “believes in his genius, which is the power to see and say freshly. But he also believes in the genius of all other persons. He therefore does not want to tell them what to see and say.” (Kateb 52)

To Emerson, this asks for a strong individual foundation, which he suggests can be built through “self-reliance,” which he describes as “the basis of behaviour” (Emerson 243). Kateb describes it in his study as “the steady effort of thinking one’s thoughts and thinking them through.” (Kateb 31) As a practice, self-reliance aims to better the connections between individuals, not avoid or minimize them: “all self-reliant activity is a service or a contribution to others. [...] The plain fact is that Emerson’s conceptualization of individualism –his philosophy of self-reliance– is always concerned to connect the individual to the world, but only in ways suitable for the individuality of all persons.” (Kateb 31) This is all tied to the overarching concept of “democratic individuality”, which Kateb focuses on in his 1995 book *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. There, he explains that this conceptualization of individuality upholds the idea that “a society of individuals is a society made up of individuals serving or contributing to other individuality. Each person is one self; each person gives and receives as oneself.” (Kateb 136) This coincides with most theories of social contracts, albeit under a more individualised point of view. The impulse of being of service to others, however, is not morally driven and does not come out of coercion as it does in other theories: “Mutual but indirect service is the norm of self-reliant equals. So tenacious is Emerson on this point that he interprets apparent selfless devotion not as a wish to serve but as a commitment to one’s own integrity.” (Kateb 137) To understand the nature of this rapport better, we can look at Emerson’s theory of gifts, which stipulates that exchange should not be the basis of a truly given gift. A gift should

not be received with an expectation of reciprocity or even gratitude: “the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person” (*Second Series* “Gifts,” p. 95). “If a gift is to be a gift, it must be received without the sense of receipt, without the recipient entering a cycle of exchange by being obliged to the benefactor—with indifference, in other words.” (Pickford 51) This also resonates with Jacques Derrida’s thoughts on gift giving as a rupture of the circle of economy: “If there is gift, the given of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure.” (Derrida 7). Emerson’s theory of gift giving echoes his perspective on acts of service within a community, as both are presented as aneconomic exchanges between equals. The self-reliant individual does not participate in society because of a sense of moral duty or obligation, or even out of coercive necessity as Comte, Spencer and Durkheim argue. This individual participates in society because it aligns with their sense of integrity and vision of a humane society.

Far from preaching egoistical individualism, self-reliance is presented as a tool for the betterment of community. The underlying promise in Emerson’s theory of self-reliance is that society will improve “without the deliberate attempt to make it better. It will be better because it will be more moral, but also more human. It will be more human because the world will be made up of individuals rather than masses, of individuals, not dependents and recipients, not instruments and followers.” (Kateb 139) This follows the same logic as Weber’s promise that the individual can become more than “a mere cog in his occupational groove.” (*Essays* 70)

3.2

In the preceding, several links between Emerson and Weber have been highlighted. From a methodological point of view, they are linked by their incorporation of subjectivity in their method, as well as the importance of individuality in their conceptualizations of society. Then, in the substance of their work, they can be associated by their bottom-up perspective on social change, which is accompanied in both cases by a distinctly pedagogical position. This is rooted, for both authors, in the trust that individuals can effect meaningful change without having to comply with premade rules, but through the learning of tools of self-regulation. While the substance of their work is comparable on these central themes, their formal aspect is not. Given the impact of reception and recognition, this makes Emerson and Weber's work difficult to present as equivalent. What this comparison brings is a legitimisation of Emerson's ideas as relevant to 19th and early 20th century sociology since many of them are also present in Weber's work. As Meehan explains, the fact that Emerson's later work is not received as academically adequate by Harvard is inscribed in a larger movement of discreditation of analogical and rhetorical thinking in American academia. While Weber presents similar ideas to Emerson, he does so in a much more analytical and academic manner, and does so in the context of late 19th century Germany. While these links between Emerson's thought in *TCoL* and Weber's work are not enough to affirm Emerson's status as a sociologist, they help us emphasize the relevance of their common ideas within the field of this time. By reading *TCoL* along with Weber, the concept of responsible agency present in both cases becomes a topic which can be explored under two different perspectives. With Emerson's input, Weber's thoughts on the subject find an echo that allows us to think about individualism in society under a new light.

Emerson's method of sociological thinking is distinctively pedagogical, which explains both why it has been so poorly recognized by the field, and why I believe it is so valuable to consider. We should acknowledge that while Emerson's attitude in *TCoL* was not a welcomed

one in academic circles of his time, it can be argued that it is still not a welcomed one in today's universities. "In this model still guiding the American academy, pedagogy is irrelevant" writes Meehan. "Successful scholars are still rewarded for their research with time off from teaching." (58-59) Emerson's pedagogy is centered around his practice of metonymy, which is a fluid pattern of thinking through association, by contingency. He understands and argues that "we learn by rhetorical thinking and we think by rhetorical learning." In consequence, Emerson's idea of higher learning is communal and interdisciplinary; it reaches across the boundaries of one field in order to teach the student how to think widely and by associations. The act of thinking itself is even viewed as a collective experience, with Emerson qualifying his lectures as laboratories, where the audience is a part of a creative process and sharing a "co-energizing of minds, a charge between the orator and the audience." (Meehan 106-107). Making connections between the reader and the writer is central to Emerson's practice of rhetoric, and in a university that values originality, exclusivity and specialization, this attitude is quickly dismissed as irrelevant. Emerson's ideas, as transmitted in his journals as much as his lectures and essays, make more analogical sense than analytical sense. (Meehan 18). As established numerous times in this *mémoire*, Emerson's work is respected but not engaged with in a serious manner; it is often presented as worthy of "museum interest" instead of academic interest. (Porte & Morris 245) However, Emerson notes in one of his journals that this is not a negative trait in his perspective: "This is my boast that I have no school and no follower. I should account it a measure of the impurity of insight, if it did not create independence." (*Journals of Miscellaneous Notebooks* 14 : 258) Emerson's goal was never to build an academic discipline in the way Durkheim wanted to. Emerson does not have a school or a following, but he has students, which is a more transitive position. The ultimate goal in this optic is for the students to learn how to think for themselves and eventually get out of a teacher-student dynamic; to become independent from the source of their insight.

Furthermore, while Durkheim wanted his following to be strictly academic, Emerson's lessons are not restricted in terms of their audience. As Kateb writes about *Self-Reliance*, Emerson "preaches self-reliance because he thinks that all people already have self-reliant moments and could more successfully become self-reliant if they tried. Self-reliance is thus not a doctrine of superiority to average humanity." (18) He also writes that Emerson's "aim is not to get us to agree with his judgments but to persuade us to take a chance and think for ourselves." (xlii)

Essentially, this wide-ranging approach and pedagogical attitude are what contributed to *TCoL* mis-reception as a sociological text, but the audience of non-academics that progressively casts Emerson out of academic circles is also what makes this work a powerful tool for social change. Recontextualizing it in 21st century academia asks us to jump through the exact same hoops that Emerson would have jumped through in the mid-1800's: advocating for the relevance of generalization in higher education, arguing that a lay audience should not be detrimental for academic attention, and explaining that a pedagogical approach is central to the communication of knowledge, which should be the goal of universities in the first place. As Meehan points out about the American academy specifically, the model born in the late 19th century –in which pedagogy is seen as irrelevant– is still practiced in 21st century universities around the world. (Meehan 58-59). I would argue that taking *TCoL* seriously means attributing value to a less capitalistic and elitist way of thinking, learning, and teaching. Emerson's teachings are not meant to create schools nor followings; they are not even meant to create eternal students. He trusts in the individual's ability to become self-reliant and delivers them a nine-chapter rulebook to a more harmonious life in society.

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