Social Figures-Between societal experience and sociological diagnosis

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The text

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Abstract

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Keywords

Social Figures; Sociological Representations; Ideal Types; Exploratory Research; Social Figuration; Figurative Sociology

Figures sociales - Entre expérience sociale et analyse des temps présents

Résumé

Les figures sociales sont un élément indépendant de la recherche sociologique - telle est la thèse initiale des auteurs. Au centre de l'analyse des temps présents nous trouvons souvent des figures emblématiques; ceux qui incarnent des caractéristiques essentielles de la société contemporaine. Pour donner un aperçu plus précis de la signification sociologique des figures sociales, le concept est placé dans le contexte de catégories sociologiques établis. Sur la base d'une analyse comparative, les caractéristiques d'une telle approche seront identifiées. Les auteurs démontrent ce que font les figures sociales dans le contexte des études sociologiques, comment elles génèrent des preuves, comment elles peuvent être utilisées de manière exploratoire dans un contexte de recherche empirique, ainsi que les limites de leur potentiel analytique.

Mots-clefs

figures sociales ; représentations sociologiques ; types idéaux ; recherche exploratoire ; configuration sociale ; sociologie figurative

Summary

Wittgenstein said: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should remain silent.

I believe it could be said with equal justice: Whereof one cannot speak, thereafter one should seek.

Norbert Elias[1]

Social figures are a genuine element of sociological studies. As of yet, however, there has been no in-depth reflection on what, precisely, distinguishes social figurative representations from other sociological approaches. The aim of this article is to elaborate the epistemic potential and limitations of this form of representing the social. We hypothesize that social figures are a suitable means of pursuing the questions that people in present-day society are itching to answer but for which there are no clear or even institutionalized answers so far. Sociologists rely on social figures to articulate critical experiences that need to be dealt with in a socially appropriate and accepted way. They can thus facilitate the explorative investigation of crises-laden social developments. Portraits of individual social figures have a long tradition in sociological research and come into play especially while researchers tried to make social change tangible. Examples include "the stranger" (Georg Simmel), "the hobo" (Nels Anderson), "the salaried masses" (Siegfried Kracauer), "workers' children" (Ralf Dahrendorf), "the simple people" (Pierre Sansot), "the flexible self" (Richard Sennett), "the tourist" (Zygmunt Bauman), "the artist" (Pierre-Michel Menger), or "the migrant" (Thomas Nail).

We will begin by tracing the forms that the notion has taken on up to now in sociological studies. In doing so, we will consider, among other things, its use in the English, French and German languages, which already reveals important differences. In the second part, we will place the concept of the social figure side by side with related sociological categories (ideal type, social role, social character, and social figuration) and compare them for similarities and differences. The results of this comparison constitute the starting point for an elaboration of the essential characteristics of social figurative representations in the third part. The article will close with an outline of questions for further research.

Characterizing, Typifying, and Figuring: Precursors of the Concept of Social Figures

Social figures do not constitute a fully developed sociological concept; one searches in vain in the literature for reflections on the epistemic status or the methodological tools for their construction. In contrast to the almost offhand way one refers to "habitus" or "social roles," the social figure has not yet found its way into the canon of established categories. Nevertheless, descriptions of individual social figures appear in numerous studies; first and foremost, in the context of sociological diagnoses of the present (cf. Schlechtriemen T., in press).

The term "social figure" has long been in use in the social sciences, albeit with varying meanings and usually only in passing[2]. It was Ralf Dahrendorf who began using the term more frequently in the 1960s, such as when he investigated the "English workers' child" as a "social figure" that had "characterized the image of English universities as well as that of English literature since the year 1944" (Dahrendorf R., 1965 : 4, *our translation*). However, Dahrendorf uses "social figure" to refer to something roughly equivalent to the concept of the social role, as we will demonstrate later on. Starting in the 1980s, the term social figure appears in sociological sports studies (such as in Bette K.-H., 1984), among other places, without being defined more closely. The same also applies to the French sociologist Patrick Tacussel, who pursues the project of a "figurative sociology" (1991) on the one hand, while using the term "social figure" on the other – albeit in terms of the Weberian ideal type, which he refers to as the "sociological version of hypotyposis in classical rhetoric" (2016 : 10, *our translation*).

Since the beginning of the new millennium, various compendia presenting a collection of

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1. This note is written on a page belonging to the Mozart material (cf. Elias N., 1993 : 141).

2. Arnold Gehlen, for example, uses "social figure" more generally in terms of cultural forms in a biographical-anthropological treatise from the year 1950.

social figures have appeared. The most prominent example is a German anthology of social figures, edited by Stephen Moebius and Markus Schroer (2010a). It presents a large number of social figures: from the gunman, consultant, world citizen, and fundamentalist to the creative, speculator, and many more. According to Moebius and Schroer, social figures are characterized by the fact

> that they extend over several [social, S.J.M./T.S.] spheres. They typically originated in particular fields but became more and more independent in their activities: Consulting, managing, speculating – these are activities that have become practices which have long since left their original field to drift through society as a whole (Moebius S. – Schroer M., 2010b : 8, *our translation*).

In the English-speaking world, "social figure" is not used in everyday language. This is also true of the corresponding terms in colloquial German and French. The English term is used as a synonym for "public figure" which is not the case for German. In French, on the other hand, both meanings are present. The expression "figure sociale" is used in a sociological sense yet also appears in contexts referring to public figures (cf. Lilti A., 2014). In addition, the French term "nouvelle figure" is sometimes used in the sense we intend to focus on in this article (cf. Pierron J.-P., 2007; Paugam S. – Martin C., 2009).

If we limited ourselves to instances in which the word social figure is used explicitly, however, it would lead to misunderstandings with regard to the concept. What we are more interested in is rather attempts to differentiate and categorize people in a typology, to work out more general characteristics on the basis of a single figure. The units of reference here range from humanity as a whole over society to a generation (cf. Doerry M., 1986 : 36-43); older theories also referred to a people or a nation (Mead M., 1961; Meisenhelder T., 2006 : 57f.)[3]. Literary portraits should also be counted among the precursors of studies on social figures. If one understands literature as consisting not least in the

description of real and fictitious people (cf. Koch T., 1991 : 8), the similarities between literary and sociological representations spring to mind (cf. Carnevali B., 2010 : 6). Balzac, for instance, described types as follows: "It was not a small task to paint the two or three thousand prominent figures of an epoch, for such is, ultimately, the sum of the types that each generation presents and that *The Human Comedy* includes" (quoted by David J., 2010 : 66, *our translation*). And for Balzac, every epoch produces several thousand such types, which may be used to describe society in all of its facets (cf. David J., 2010 : 66-83). Social figurative representations in sociology bear close relations to literature. Included among the data David Riesman draws on to work out his "other-directed characters" (Riesman D., 1950) are novels as well as children's books, films, and music. Social figurative descriptions hence operate at the interface between literature, public discourse, and sociology[4].

Social figurative representations claim implicitly to provide a good description of collective experiences of present-day society, meaning that social figures depend on recognition from their contemporaries. If the members of a society find the condensed figurative portrayal of their experiences inappropriate, they will not adopt it for social self-descriptions. It is therefore possible only in retrospect to determine which figures have achieved the status of a social figure – a problem with methodological consequences we will explore further below. What the numerous descriptions of concrete social figures still lack, however, are specific reflections on what it means to tackle these social figures from a scientific – or more precisely, sociological – perspective.

Social Figure Compared to other Sociological Concepts

To characterize strengths and limitations of the social figurative form of representation in more detail, we will compare it with other sociological approaches in the following and draw distinctions where necessary. In doing

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3. Gerd Stein refers to the protagonists of his extensive collection as "cultural figures and social characters" (Stein G., 1985, *our translation*).

4. On the historical relationship and the allocation of tasks between literature and sociology, cf. Lepenies W., 1985.

so, we will concentrate on concepts that exhibit systematic or theoretical similarities to social figures, namely ideal type, social role, social character, and social figuration. The intention of this comparison is to point out the areas in which these concepts intersect and where the social figure exhibits distinctive features. The necessity of an analytical separation of this kind is made clear in the following quotation by Ralf Dahrendorf – doubtlessly one of the most well-known exponents of role theory in Germany –, in which he gives a brief account of his own approach[5]:

> Dahrendorf calls his concept of the "German *character*" more sociological than social psychoanalytical. It is not the individual as such, not the individual character, that is the necessary analytical construct for Dahrendorf, but only his social figure, or more precisely, the behaviors demanded of him by his society. […] The German character is hence nothing other than a role pre-defined by German society which every member is expected to take on" (Dahrendorf R., 1985 : 376, *our translation and emphasis*).

Social figure and ideal type

In contrast to social figures, ideal types are a fundamental part of the methodological repertoire of sociology[6]. As Udo Kuckartz (2010 : 553) writes, classification into *types* has a long tradition within sociology, reaching all the way back to classical researchers in the field like Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, or Alfred Schütz, as well as the first ethnographical studies of the Chicago School. According to Max Weber, ideal types are thought constructions combining individual aspects of social reality "which our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated and hence as 'objectively possible' and which appear as *adequate* from the nomological standpoint" (Weber M., 1969a : 92, *emphasis in original*). These "imaginative constructs" (Weber M., 1969b : 173)

focusing on selected aspects of sociohistorical cultural phenomena fulfill a heuristic function – they help the sociologist to "open up" reality. In scientific policy, the concept of ideal types was brought up in opposition to the approach of positivism, which was oriented toward the natural sciences (cf. Gerhardt U., 2001 : 16f.). The same seems also to apply to social figures, as they are not positivistic but interpretive and heuristic.

In contrast to ideal types, the birthplace of social figures is not necessarily science – they occasionally appear first in novels, films, or public discourses. Their origin is therefore often difficult to reconstruct. Moreover, they are not developed primarily as a heuristic instrument but spring from the desire to articulate and visualize influential social experiences. One point on which ideal types and social figures converge, however, is that they both combine striking characteristics and represent them in exaggerated form. Weber describes this process as the "*accentuation* of one or more points of view" that lead to a "unified *analytical* construct" (1969a : 90). The reduction of complexity is thus the main task of both ideal types and social figures. Whereas ideal types are bound closely to an epistemic interest, the "intensification of one or more aspects" involved in social figurative representations relies on the relevance of the social experience articulated in the figures as well as on criteria of narrative and figurative coherence. The uniformity of the thought construct that Weber is speaking of is here guaranteed through the figure and its form as well as its references to the lifeworld.

Alfred Schütz took up Weber's concept of ideal types within the context of his interpretive sociology and developed it further (cf. Gerhardt U., 2001 : 425-434). In his conception, ideal types do not just serve to promote scientific understanding but may be found even in daily life. In everyday interaction, they function as typological classifications given to each other by interaction partners[7]. This extension of the concept gives ideal types an orientation function in social action that is also found in social figures[8].

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5. For greater legibility, we have not reproduced the actually more precise punctuation of citations within citations in this quotation: Dahrendorf is quoting himself here.

6. The connection suggests itself already for etymological reasons, as *figura* is the Latin translation of the Ancient Greek *typos* (cf. Frye N., 1988 : 65).

7. Cf. the chapter "D. The World of Contemporairies as a Structure of Ideal Types" in Schütz A., 1967.

8. Schütz wrote articles that exhibit a closeness to so-

Like social figures, ideal types as understood by Schütz provide concrete models of how a person typically behaves in a particular context, and in this respect they figure expectations as well as understanding.

Social figure and social role

This aspect of the stabilization of behavioral expectations also applies to social roles. In its functionalist variant, the concept of roles was introduced to sociology by way of cultural anthropology as a means of explaining how society and its subsystems maintain their ability to function through the division of labor. Talcott Parsons assumes that roles have the function of "bringing out those possibilities of behavior which 'fit' the needs and the tolerances of the particular patterned structure and by-passing or repressing the others" (Parsons T., [1945]1958). Adherence is controlled by sanctions. A similar conception may be found in the works of Heinrich Popitz, who understands roles as impositions of particular bundles of behavioral norms. They are positionally stable and may be seen in certain members of society, because they are forced to conform to the prevailing norms (cf. Popitz H., 1967 : 21). The criterion is consequently the obligation to follow what is normatively expectable, or more precisely: their in fact existing, unconditional validity.

Social figures, by contrast, are social positions that are either not yet or no longer institutionalized. Where social figures appear, it must be assumed either that a societal understanding of what *is not yet stable* is imminent or that the realm of the normatively expectable is beginning to crumble. Their appearance therefore suggests normative conflicts that can potentially lead to a realignment of the relationship between individual and society[9].

cial figures, such as "The Stranger" (Schütz A., 1971a), "The Homecomer" (Schütz A., 1971b), or "The Well-Informed Citizen" (Schütz A., 1971c). These are not social figures in the narrow sense, because they largely lack a temporal index and thus a connection to a specific social experience – even though the articles were written at a time [1944] in which migrants and returnees might have very well functioned as social figures.

9. However, this should not be confused with the conflict-theoretical version of role theory, as presented by Ralf Dahrendorf ([1958]2010) in the "homo sociologicus." For him, too, roles are a bundle of normative expectations that are followed as a means of avoiding negative sanctions. As society limits individual liberty

Helmuth Plessner provides a further indication of how social roles differ from social figures. In an unknown paper on sport, he assumes that human beings are forced to *embody* their selves:

> We need to embody – but whom? The person we are, with a name, a background, among our fellow human beings whom society, depending on its structure, dictates or makes available certain roles. In embodying these roles, we figure. [...] We are thus all actors and spectators in a game [...] whose role concept is largely functionally faded today yet still recalls its baroque theatrical version in expressions like "to go over the stage" or "to make a representative figure" (1967 : 19f., our translation).

Hence, (social) figures necessarily relate to bodily aspects. As Robert Gugutzer writes (2012 : 9), most theories of action ignore the fact that social action is a bodily-physical action. In contrast to the bodiless, norm-oriented role-bearer, the representation of social figures needs to take into account the somatic-aesthetic dimension. It is only through a description of their performative "self-presentations" (Goffman E., 1959) that social figures can *illustrate* the social.

Social figure and social character

For everyday understanding, it initially seems unusual that sociology falls back on the concept of character[10]. As Barbara Carnevali (2010) demonstrates, however, the concept of character goes back to rhetoric, where it refers to descriptive and normative portraits of human behavior (*ethopoeia*). What this involves in epistemological terms is arriving at a correct description, and from an ethical perspective the represented behavior should then function as a model to emulate[11]. This

in this way, this appears as an "annoying fact" (Dahrendorf R., 2010 : 21, *our translation*). For just this reason, conflicts in which the normative content is available for use may arise.

10. It should be noted here that the English "character" can of course mean not just an individual quality but also a character in a drama. The semantic proximity to social figures is also present in the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman.

11. According to Aristotle, characters ("character" is the translation of the Ancient Greek ethos) should be imitated in a tragedy. "We tend to think of character

tradition of the concept of character is fundamental for social figures, because they represent exemplary behaviors, too. On the one hand they claim to describe social realities, and on the other they provide an opportunity for social self-understanding and ethical positioning.

In sociology, the concept of social character or character of society was introduced in the social psychology approach of Erich Fromm (1932; 1941; Maccoby M., 2001). He understands social character as a part of the character structure shared by all people in similar social situations. With reference to Freud, Fromm emphasizes that the internalization of external normative and emotional necessities makes man "*desire* to act as he *has* to act" (1941 : 283, *our emphasis*). It follows that action and thought are motivated by the social character and that the associated fulfillment of norms is at the same time a satisfying experience.

This aspect highlights an important difference between social characters and social figures: Whereas the main issue in the former is how the individual emotionally experiences that he acts conformably to normative requirements, this plays more of a minor role in the latter. Social figures do give rise to emotions when they appear in public discourses – this is why they might cause irritation, admiration, or anger. But it is not yet settled how society should deal with them.

The concept of social character was later used by David Riesman in his famous study *The Lonely Crowd* ([1950]1967), with reference to Fromm. Yet, despite its broad currency in American sociology until the 1960s, social character never succeeded in achieving acceptance "as a sociological concept" (Ozanne H., 1943). For Thomas Meisenhelder, however, the social character approach in sociology was continued in Pierre Bourdieu's

concept of habitus. The habitus involves generative, temporally stable, and embodied dispositions that "are internalized as a result of early socialization experiences which in turn are conditioned by family's location in the fields that compose the structure of society" (Meisenhelder T., 2006 : 62). The reference to Bourdieu is of fundamental importance in our case: As already stated in relation to Plessner, social figures possess a physical component. They thus have and are body. These bodies are used to carry out figure-specific practices and to establish figural connections to other bodies. Sociality can consequently (also) be sensed and felt.

Social figure and social figuration

An examination of social figures would of course not be complete without a consideration of Norbert Elias's figurational sociology. In his writings, Elias mentions again and again concrete figures[12] or even names his sociological concepts after such figures (the king's mechanism, the established-outsider figuration). He develops the concept of social figuration in the context of fundamental reflection on the object of sociology and combines it with a clear heuristic concern: Individual and collective developments (psycho- and sociogenesis) are mutually dependent; they accordingly involve overcoming individualistic or holistic perspectives toward a focus on interdependent *relations*; mutual dependencies or balances of power both extend and limit the freedom of interaction; figurations should not be thought of as a state but must be conceived as social *processes* (Elias N., 1997). All aspects of the approach – the position beyond individualistic and holistic perspectives, the relationality, and the processuality – may be transferred to the concept of the social figure.

The figuration integrates the individuals and transforms them into something they would

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as an attribute of a person's identity: it refers to the whole range of qualities that make up the irreducible individuality of that person. Aristotle, instead, considered characters to be pre-individual or trans-individual attributes: passions […], ethical disposition or virtues and vices […], different ages or stages of life […], or even social conditions […]. Such attributes do not correspond to the individual subject, but pass through, encompass, or transcend him or her. They can be represented as conditions, 'ethical spaces' occupied by a number of people" (Carnevali B., 2010 : 5)

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12. "The clergyman and the professor – these are indeed two of the most important representatives of the middleclass administrative intelligentsia, two social figures who played the decisive part in the formation and diffusion of the new language of educated Germans." (Elias N., 2007 : 22) Elias assumes that "a quite definite social situation" (ibid. : 24) emerges in them. Hence, there are many similarities here to social figures and to the way in which social experiences are articulated in them

not be without the figurative connection. What matters in considering them is therefore the relations between the individuals and the resulting "form" (Elias N., 2006 : 74). Social figures are initially, if not historical persons, then at least individual human figures. They are exemplary individuals that embody a socially relevant aspect emblematically. Yet they are related to other striking figures, such as the antagonist, and are thus embedded in a particular field of action. Although the focus is on a single social figure, it never appears alone.

> The concept of figuration may be easily illustrated through reference to social dances. They are indeed the simplest example one could choose to make it clear what is understood by a human-created figuration. One might think of a mazurka, a menuett, a polonaise, a tango, a rock 'n' roll. The image of the movable figurations of interdependent people in a dance perhaps makes it easier to imagine countries, cities, families or also capitalist, communist, and feudal systems as figurations. (Elias N., 1997 : 71, *our translation*).

The "dance figurations" (ibid. : 72) are a particularly suitable example, because they also evoke the moveability, the processuality of figurations. Regarding the processuality of social figurations emphasized by Elias, it should be underlined for the conceptualization of social figures that *processes* play a fundamental role in their formation and establishment, as well as in any loss of the amount of attention they attract in society. Social figures are not static entities but should rather be understood as moveable figurations involved in a process.

On the Characteristics of Social Figures

Social figures – *on the history of the term* figura

The starting point for formulating our understanding of social figures is figurativity, which does not play a central role in any of the concepts drawn upon above[13]. In our view,

however, it is crucial that the access to social reality is established by way of *figures*. Below we would like to pursue the following questions: What figurative characteristics do social figures exhibit? How do they create plausibility? What methodological consequences does this entail for sociological work? We will begin by outlining the history of the term figura to show what units of semantic meaning the concept of figure contains[14].

The etymological root of "figure," *fig-* (lat. *fingere*), refers to modeling, to the act of giving a form to a material (cf. Dubois P., 1999 : 12f.; Auerbach E., 1967 : 55). The Latin *figura*, in turn, is derived from the Ancient Greek *skema* – and is more rarely also the translation of *typos*. Both of these starting points contain the meaning modeling, the act of giving something a form, but also the model-like and schematic character. Figura initially has a very broad meaning:

> *Figura* originally has the very general meaning of "plastic form" and is introduced to the Latin language with the construction "nova figura." "Figure" is hence everything that can appear as a form with clearly defined contours and that shows the plasticity of its appearance by the fact that it can always appear in a new and thus different way than it initially seemed (Friedrich L. – Harrasser K. – Tyradellis D., 2014 : 55, *our translation*).

Figures are hence everything that may be perceived as possessing a clearly defined form. In the compound *nova figura*, the shape of the figura is also subject to constant changes – and is accordingly perceived as contingent. In contrast to *forma*, which is more closely bound to ideal aspects, figura is also oriented more toward sensory qualities. "The idea of the trace, the impression, the fashioned object – by hand (modeling) or by contact (casting) – is originally bound very closely to the concept of the *figura*" (Dubois P., 1999 : 20, *our translation*). This demonstrates the semantic link between figura and materiality. In addition to the units of meaning named

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13. Even Elias who writes about ‚figuration' does not highlight explicitly figurativity in our understanding. A first sketch of the characteristics of social figures can

be found in Schlechtriemen, in press.

14. On the history of the term "figure," cf. Auerbach E., 1967; Aubral F., 1999; Dubois P., 1999; Brandstetter G. – Peters S., 2002; Friedrich L. – Harrasser K. – Tyradellis D., 2014.

above, it may be stated that figures always communicate the fact that they are formed (cf. Friedrich L. – Harrasser K. – Tyradellis D., 2014 : 56f.).

Human figurations

In the case of a social figure, the contoured form (figura) receives a human face with a name, gender, age, etc. Oftentimes the human figure appears as the protagonist of a story. When Richard Sennett (1998) tells the story of the increasing flexibility of the working world, for example, he uses Rico, a young man, entrepreneur, and father, as an exemplary embodiment of the flexible self.

Social figures appear in illustrative scenes. Sennett does not just portray Rico but also presents the generational difference between him and his father Enrico or Bill Gates, the model entrepreneur. The characters accompanying the protagonist in the descriptions thus form a figurative setting. In his descriptions of courtly culture, Norbert Elias (2002) includes a range of characters in addition to the king, such as courtiers, valets, or herdsmen. The characters take on various positions by representing neighboring figures or antagonists.

Besides the constellations of figures within the story, one can also work out references to historical precursors (prefigurations) to illustrate continuities or a break with the past. More recent social figures of the working world refer implicitly or explicitly to corresponding models. For example, Ulrich Bröckling makes explicit reference to the capitalist entrepreneur as a "creative destroyer" (Schumpeter J., [1934]2010) in his *The Entrepreneurial Self* (2015). The prefigurations thus form a part of cultural memory (Assmann J., 2008), are stored there, and can be "refigured" in a particular societal constellation. Reconstructions and reenactments of the past are also a part of the figurative constellations in which the social figures are located.

Moreover, social figures are located in specific lifeworlds, such as Kracauer's employees. They move in the world of the company, the office, and, in their leisure time, the "pleasure barracks" (Kracauer S., 1998 : 91). Their description leads to the creation of a vivid stage setting full of graphic sensory impressions.

Social *figure – articulation of social experience*

A social figure is not simply a historical person (cf. Langenohl A., 2011 : 87). Rather, it presents social experiences figuratively in concentrated form. Its appearance provides the opportunity to communicate aspects of events or occurrences that were experienced and shared by members of society at a particular historical point in time. According to Wolfgang Eßbach, it is precisely this act of speaking about an experience that transforms "individual experiences of the isolated subject of cognition" into a "social experience" (2014 : 19, *our translation*). The events that happen to social figures mark breaks with what has hitherto been the case; they describe the state of no longer being able to grasp routine forms of world interpretation. This is precisely what the "pathic moment" (ibid.) of social experience emphasizes: People are affected negatively or positively by what happens to them. Viewed in this way, social figures are expressions of latent societal tendencies on which contemporaries have not (yet) succeeded in finding a clear stance. Accordingly, social figures may be seen as emergence phenomena[15]. They no longer or do not yet belong to the inventory of roles available to members of the society but rather point, by virtue of their appearance, to a change. In the field of medicine, for instance, the new possibilities of genetics and imaging methods led to preventive and predictive approaches. Correspondingly, figures like "risk persons" and the "potentially sick" (Lemke T., 2006) appear in this context.

Social figures hence emerge within fields of practice in which a structural transformation is close at hand or already underway. It is on account of this moment of transition that the individuals do not yet have any stable norm expectations at their disposal, as would be

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15. According to Ulrich Oevermann, every new phenomenon is already practically motivated in the past (cf. Oevermann U., 1991 : 304). Gert Albert, who developed a theory of emergence following Elias, also assumes that emergent attributes of social entities can originate in characteristics of individual parts which, for their part, "appear only in particular (con-)figurations of social wholes" (Albert G., 2013 : 211, *our translation*).

the case with social roles. In latent crisis situations, social figures point out possible new reactions and behaviors that can be discussed through them[16]. *As emergence figures – with a close link to a specific sociohistorical constellation – social figures possess a special time index*. This temporal boundedness sets them apart from theoretical concepts and their claim to universal validity. This last aspect underlines their connection to the tradition of the *nova figura*.

With its character traits, a social figure therefore embodies something that occupies and worries the contemporaries. The intent is not psychological but sociological: It is not a matter of a portrayal of personality but of an *exaggerated description of situations which are socially problematic*. The "caring relatives" (Blanc A., 2010), observed increasingly in the 1990s, articulate experiences, qualities, and behaviors that constitute an important aspect of the reality of family life for many people. Although this form of representation is an individual figure, what it ultimately expresses – as implied by the prefix social – is social time experiences[17].

Configuration, refiguration, defiguration

Social figures do not exist "once and for all." Rather, they attract attention in specific historical constellations – in "in-between times" – because they effectively condense virulent social experiences and are hence in the focus of mass media. The following quotation, in which Dieter Thomä paraphrases Hegel, provides a fitting illustration of this point: "A 'form of life' has 'become old' […] before we have become familiar with a new 'form.' We are still in the dark about our situation […], live a life that we are only just getting to know, and are necessarily uncertain about ourselves" (Thomä D., 1992 : 23, *our translation*).

However, this quality of being in an "in-between time" also means that existing figures that have meanwhile become uninteresting can be taken up once again. They advance in modified form to the status of a current point of reference and hence to a social figure. The figurative representation thus re-presents the past situation. Moser, for instance, compares the practice of collecting returnable bottles that appeared in Germany at the beginning of the 21st century with collectors of leftover crops, wood, and rags from the past and ascertains a "return of the gatherer" (2014)[18]. Following Paul Ricoeur, one might describe the process of establishing new figures as "configuration" and that of reviving old ones as "refiguration" (cf. Ricoeur P., 1984 : 76).

As soon as a society has succeeded in elaborating new normative behavioral standards to reflect the changing times, the social figure, as well as the pronounced interest in it, disappears. It becomes unattractive and is forgotten, because there is currently no demand for a figurative focus of self-understanding. The process by which social figures fall into disuse may therefore be termed "defiguration." The key point for all three is that they describe constant changes – which constitutes a semantic layer of figura – and are *processes* of figuration, as Elias characterizes them. Hence, social figures represent the (provisional) result of a process of figuration that passes through several stages (configuration, refiguration, and defiguration).

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16. In comparison to role theory, it may be stated that social figures lack normatively binding expectations on the one hand and that there thus exist no sanctions with which one could react to the respective practices on the other. They therefore possess great potential for irritation.

17. The characterization of a social figure also involves formulating the relationship of the individual to society: for instance the freedom of the "manager" (Burnham) to shape society or the "clerk" (Mills) as a "cog in the machine" that, in contrast to the former, cannot bring any social influence to bear but is governed by social structures.

18. In crisis situations, possible solutions are sought in the repertoire available from the past. As routine behaviors no longer work and are dismissed as unsuitable, people take recourse to historically evolved semantics or practices and reinterpret them in the current context. This is precisely what the affective potential of social figures emphasizes: On the one hand they enrage and irritate, as their prefigurations reawaken connections to aspects of the past that are believed to be outdated and thus seem outdated. On the other hand, social figures can inspire admiration: They do something that needs to be done, i.e., they overcome the state of latency, thus offering orientation by illustrating particular values. In addition, prefigurations with positive connotations (such as hero figures) establish the connection to a "better time."

Aesthetic-somatic aspects

We have already touched on the corporal aspects that social figures outline with reference to Helmuth Plessner. Social characters, social roles, or ideal types may have bodies as well, but they are not a topic of sustained interest for the respective theorists, at least not in the formulations of the approaches described above. However, Elias took into account social influence on the body from the outset in his figurational sociology[19]. Although he did not leave behind a fully formulated theory of the body, his analyses of etiquette books focus explicitly on changes in the way the body is applied in specific practices like blowing one's nose or spitting (cf. Elias N., 2007). He is also interested in how the knightly body is transformed into that of a courtier through increasing suppression of aggressive impulses. The body is hence significant for Elias for two reasons: On the one hand it provides an appropriate means of describing the influence of society on the individual, and on the other hand the corporeality of the figures included in his studies makes society *experienceable*.

As this experienceability is precisely what the social figurative approach endeavors to gain access to, engaging with the body is virtually unavoidable. The body is something that, as the sociologist Pierre Sansot (1986 : 14) remarks, is exceedingly difficult to speak about in abstract categories. Even in the imagination, the body techniques of deception, metamorphosis, or devotion are ultimately nothing but a meeting of bodies composed of flesh and blood, of bodies in the sense described by Merleau-Ponty. On account of its materiality, the body is the most immediate form of being in the world. Bringing it into play means appealing to one's own experiences and recalling images of them. The concept of *figura* already contained the special meaning of sensory-aesthetic qualities, which is highlighted again at this point.

In his approach, Erving Goffman emphasizes the physical co-presence and the sensory perception of the other as a constitutive condition for every interaction. The use of the body allows the individual to provide "a bodily enactment of his alignment to the events at hand" (Goffman E., 1971 : 125), i.e., it externalizes what can be expressed only with difficulty by using words or much more efficiently by corporal performances (a smile, a nod, etc.). Social figures are concrete precisely because they "embody" norm-controlled role-bearers and are therefore *observable*. The analysis of specific social figures hence also requires an examination of performatively expressed body ideals such as clothing style or body language. The "young elderly" (van Dyk S. – Lessenich S., 2009), for example, are characterized among other things by the fact that they break with former norms regarding the presentation of the aging body and are indicative of current biopolitical constraints concerning body manipulation or preventive healthcare.

Ethical positionings

Social figures constitute a figurative suggestion on how one might behave in the face of a virulent problem in society. They figure ways of treating a problematical situation or challenge and thus paint the picture of a possible future. This occurs, as presented above, by means of argumentative exaggeration and in accordance with what is called *ethopoeia* in rhetoric (cf. Carnevali B., 2010). By calling attention to a specific aspect, social figures depict a future in which society is populated by that concrete social figure and the related consequences. This form of conflation is simultaneously a research instrument and a contribution to a public sociology; it initiates and provokes, enables and supports ethical debates.

Just as Weber's postulate states that one cannot not act, one might claim for social figures that one cannot not take an ethical position on them. They enable a concrete discussion of the question of whether a society in which a specific social figure is part of the normatively expectable inventory of behaviors (i.e., with regard to social role) can (or should) come into being. By presenting the ongoing change of social conditions in the guise of a

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19. As already mentioned, this also applies to Georg Simmel's comments on the senses or jewelry (cf. Simmel G., 2013). However, as this is not the place to launch into a summary of the "sociology of the body," we would like to refer to the very recommendable handbook by R. Gugutzer, G. Klein, and M. Meuser (2017).

human figure and thus making it tangible to the senses, social figures force us to form an evaluative opinion on this change. They hence form the "gestalt-like focal point" (Plessner, quoted by von den Hoff et al., 2013 : 8, *our translation*) of social self-understanding. As a result, the latent becomes manifest, i.e., tangible to the senses, discursively comprehensible, and thus socially negotiable.

However, the ethical dimension of the social figurative approach does not lie in the normative structuring of behavior (as in the case of social roles) but in the fact that social figures point the way to options for acting and ultimately to possibilities for social coexistence. As described above, the question of whether and when social experiences are condensed in a social figure is not negotiated solely within the field of sociology. In our opinion, however, it is the task of sociology to play through or at least hint at the social consequences of social figurative models – and this also applies to the alternatives for social coexistence articulated in the social figures. Sansot, who himself referred to his work as figurative sociology, also calls upon sociologists to participate in the figuration of possible futures: "Sociologists […] can allow themselves to be creators of utopias, namely of utopias that allow us to better accept our existence" (1986 : 24, *our translation*).

How to Study Social Figures?

Social figures emerge in the context of social change. In a methodological sense, they therefore ask the questions of how the process by which these social figurations come into being may be studied in actu; or whether they can only be studied in retrospect, *after* their establishment. Can they be the object of academic inquiry at all if they are characterized by a tendency to articulate social experiential and emotional states rather than institutionalized and categorized social norms? What methodological consequences result from the fact that social figures are presented as figures in all manner of different media?

The goal in working with social figures does not consist in formulating a definition for them in the end. Social figurative presentations should rather maintain the proximity to the social reality they describe. Yet, this

proximity is not preserved one-to-one but rather represented in the form of figurative types. Sennett, for example, stresses in his study of the flexible self that Rico's story was constructed as a synthesis of widely differing concrete narratives (cf. Sennett R., 1998 : 12f.). Jérôme David provides an apt description of this process (based on Balzac's working method): "The typological classification takes on the spontaneously indistinct contours of lived experience but accentuates them in such a way that they are made understandable" (David J., 2010 : 82, *our translation*). It therefore involves an accentuation and combination of characteristic attributes. The social figurative description remains plastic and concrete in the process. *Meaning is configured here – not defined*.

Rather than claiming universal validity as compared to the particular, social figures function as examples: their specific character traits show something that possesses social relevance. Whether one finds them already existent or participates in their articulation, the point in both cases is to preserve their plasticity and concreteness in one's own presentation of them and to take their exemplary nature as the starting point for one's argumentation. What Weber formulates with reference to ideal types – that they are not concepts in a narrow sense and that they hence demand "our imagination, oriented and disciplined by reality" (1969a : 93) – also applies to the manner of dealing with social figures. It is less a matter of logical rationality or statistical methods than of fantasy and imagination, albeit of "exact imagination," as Theodor W. Adorno writes (1973 : 342).

We see ethnographical research methods as an appropriate means of giving due consideration to the experiential proximity of social figures. However, they need to be supplemented by methods for discourse and image analysis, because social figures can appear in a wide variety of media.

In ethnography, it is advantageous to adopt a research attitude like that of the early Chicago School, with its affinity for social reportage. Getting one's hands dirty, acquiring a nose for things, and learning from people were the most important research maxims of Robert E. Park: "Park, who frequently strolled

through Chicago with his students, insisted that observation was just as important as rummaging around in libraries" (Lindner R., 1996 : 81). What this means for the social figurative approach is that its "appropriateness for reality" (cf. Elias N., 2006 : 75) stems precisely from the fact that the figures are experienceable, i.e., can be observed in their embedment in the social world and perceived with all of the senses. This involves, as with Kracauer, the inclusion of "speech, clothes, gestures, and countenances" (1998 : 39) as well as atmospheres and affects.

Ethnographic case analyses also take figures into close account: "By bringing specific figures into focus, the leader but also the outsider, the strange bird, or the mediator, one can analyze the social context" (Breidenstein et al., 2015 : 152, *our translation*). The figures crystallize into social practices and situative problems. The study of social figures can link up to these issues, but social figures have a broader social reach and relevance than the figures ethnography focuses on. What is important is hence an eye for affective and discursive focal points reaching beyond one's own milieu that describe not just local but also social problem situations. After all, it is only possible to speak of social figures if the issues they negotiate are not just important for a specific milieu but also relevant for society as a whole.

However, these methodological criteria proceed from the premise that it is owing precisely to this practice of letting oneself drift aimlessly: that our attention may suddenly become riveted on something that we previously failed to see. We hence need to go on exploratory walks or sauntering forays like those taken by Kracauer or Walter Benjamin (Legnaro A., 2010) to get a feeling for the "burning issues" of society. This means strolling not just through streets but also through literary as well as mass-media texts and images. Social figures may be found in such places, because they need both a physical and a "media" body to emerge (cf. Falkenhayner N., 2014). The particular medium – whether it be a text (academic, literary, journalistic) or a visual representation (book covers, diagrams, photographs, films, etc.) – determines the outward form of the social

figure with its own media conventions and characteristics. "Figures owe their lives to the media that create them"; they "should not be mistaken for lifeworld entities" (Friedrich L. – Harrasser K. – Tyradellis D., 2014 : 61, *our translation*). They generally also appear in the form of an intermedia composite. The social figure of the refugee is composed of photos that appear in newspapers and internet reports, of film sequences, statistics, etc., as well as of texts that sometimes report in more of a narrative vein on individual events or personal stories and sometimes formulate the situation in legal terms. It is accordingly necessary in analyzing them to take into account the media-specific transcriptions (cf. Jäger L., 2001): It has consequences for the social figure if it is presented primarily in visual media. At the same time, it is only in the interplay between the various media that a figure takes shape. The social figure cannot be pinned down or reduced to a specific presentation but rather constitutes a part of the social imaginary.

To determine which social figures appear in which media, how these media influence their presentation, and how they circulate through various media, the ethnographic approach needs to be supplemented by discourse and media analyses – for reasons of space, this is an issue we can only touch on here. What we should not fail to mention, however, is that it is possible from the perspective of visual studies to analyze the genuine way in which figures generate meaning (cf. Boehm G., 2007; and the following subchapter 5). Moreover, there is a special figurative hermeneutics that proceeds from the methodological assumption that images do not exist (just) as isolated images. They always refer to other images (figures)

> that are created aesthetically and thematically in imitation and in the vicinity of other images (which have models, form citation chains, or are rejected as failures), images that are set up, placed, or put next to other images or in isolation, images, in other words, that are always already created, seen, and understood with other images in mind" (Müller M., 2012 : 130, our translation).

For purposes of analysis, the objective is hence to develop typical figures by comparing images, arranging and contrasting them, conducting segment analyses, and testing compositional variations (cf. ibid. : 138-153).

How Social Figures Create Epistemic Plausibility

As a sociological instrument, social figures create plausibility by providing a concrete description of what is (yet) *incomprehensible* by means of argumentation. As human figures, they possess a special identification potential, because they convince not just discursively but also affectively. In sociological descriptions, it takes but a few formulations to evoke a social figure. The opening scene in Kracauer's study of the salaried masses outlines the characteristic features of its protagonists, which then appear clearly in the reader's imagination.

> 'But you can already find all that in novels', one private employee replied, when I asked her to tell me something about her life in the office. I got to know her one Sunday on the train journey to a Berlin suburb. She was returning from a wedding banquet that had lasted the whole day and, as she herself admitted, she was a bit tipsy. Without prompting she divulged her boss, who was a soap manufacturer; she had already been working for three years as his private secretary. He was a bachelor and admired her lovely dark eyes. (Kracauer S., 1998 : 28)

Such vivid descriptions are referred to in rhetoric as *evidentia or hypotyposis* (cf. Campe R., 2006). The speaker should create a mental image of the matter, describing it for the audience as concretely and vividly as possible to support his argument. Successfully bringing a social figure before the eyes of the audience involves two opposing processes: descriptions that are accurate in every detail on the one hand and contain central omissions on the other. The detailed descriptions present its characteristic features and behaviors as well as a typical situation. These characterizations must be sufficiently coherent among themselves to conjure up an image of the social figure as a self-contained

entity[20]. A description is sufficiently coherent and vivid if it engenders the feeling that one might have already come across such a figure before. However, the presentation of a figure concentrates on a few carefully chosen characteristics without painting a picture of social reality in all of its complexity.

As the example of Kracauer illustrates, authors occasionally describe themselves as part of the scene depicting the social figure. The demonstrated presence of the researcher in the field and his or her encounter with the social figures guarantees – similarly to ethnographical research – a form of plausibility by providing an account of the process of observation. This might be described as the "I-am-you mechanism". In this way, the sociologist conveys the impression that the readers too could observe what is being described in their own environment if they only took the time and made the effort. At the same time, this ensures that the description of the social figure is the product of real observations.

In the context of sociological argumentation, social figures possess their own form of coherence. Plausibility is generated by logical conclusions in the context of sociological theories and is correspondingly judged on the basis of clarity and conclusiveness. Empirical studies are considered to be statistically proven when the underlying data are valid and have been interpreted with methodological precision. When sociological descriptions evoke social figures, however, they link these presentations to the world of experience. The way the author "proves" sociological hypotheses is by being able to refer again and again to the social figure that has been brought to the reader's eye and their lifeworld. This is not a matter of conceptual stringency but of the vividness of the account, the figurative coherence (not all characteristics can be united plausibly in a figure), and appropriate descriptions (with regard to the social experiences being articulated).

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20. In contrast to conceptual stringency, social figures offer a certain amount of freedom for contradictions, incoherencies, etc. However, it must still be possible to perceive these aspects as characteristics of a single figure. On the literary portrayal of humanity, cf. Koch T., 1991.

An aspect inherent to the social figurative means of representation is that it is clear that it is "merely" a representation – and not reality itself. Nevertheless, the description oscillates between a reality effect – "It could be just so" – and the knowledge that this specific account combines the characteristic elements of reality and presents them in concentrated form. Social figures are in this sense neither clearly "scholarly" nor "ficticious" but alternate between descriptions of reality and fiction.

In contrast to the social psychological concept of modal personality, whose characteristics are calculated through statistical means[21], social figures and their characteristics are articulated on the basis of a social emotional and experiential state. They are created in close coordination with the society that is, on the one hand, described through the social figures and in which, on the other, the social figures are placed into.

The questions of whether contemporaries can identify with the descriptions and whether they find their own experiences or those of others represented in them, are crucial to this process. All sociological representations may be understood with Luhmann as societal self-descriptions (of the academic subsystem) (cf. Luhmann N., 1990). Yet within the field of sociology, social figures make up the part that is formed in immediate response to society and is also evaluated by it[22]. This leads to sociological descriptions that – providing they are good – can achieve a high degree of plausibility for the broader public and that many people can relate to – in contrast to what is possible when only working with sociological terminology. "If one accepts that the production of the social sciences must have a social utility, based on its scientific contribution, then one must recognize that their relevance lies in what will be done with this contribution in other spheres than theirs."

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21. Social psychologists like Geert Hofstede take up cultural anthropological ideas from the first half of the 20th century, like national character or social character, but use them in the framework of quantifying and supposedly objectivizing methods. One of the authors they refer to is Ralph Linton, who we discussed above in relation to social role theory (cf. Hofstede G., 2001).

22. In this respect, they resemble images of the social, which also constitute visual self-thematizations or self-descriptions (cf. Schlechtriemen T., 2014).

(Calhoun C. – Wieviorka M., 2013 : §43, *our translation*) At the same time, this raises the question within sociology of what quality criteria should be used to judge social figurative descriptions.

Perspectives for Social Figurative Research

Patrick Tacussel states his ambition "to found a figurative perspective in the human sciences" (Tacussel P., 1991 : 251, *our translation*). However, he leaves the matter of how the practical research might look largely open. Our attempt in this paper to elaborate the concept of social figure could doubtlessly be combined with Tacussel's ambition, as it is our aim too to investigate the specific potential of the figurative. An important difference, however, is that our discussion is limited to social figures as an object and instrument of sociological research. If we wish to investigate social figures from a sociological perspective, we need to answer the following question: Which social figures appear in which social context? Then we need to consider questions regarding spatiotemporal reach: How long has a specific social figure been in circulation? In which social subdomains and geographical contexts may it be found – did it emerge within a national frame or does it delineate global societal experiences? Which media is it taken up in, and what are its itineraries within these media? Above all, however, we need to clarify what social experiences it articulates, what changes in social structure its appearance enables, and what "proposals for a solution" are formulated through it.

Social figurative representations can serve as means of exploring situations that are socially unresolved, which can then be studied in more detail with qualitative as well as quantitative research instruments. For example, Riesman's social figure of the other-directed character inspired numerous empirical studies (cf., for example, Lipset S. M. – Löwenthal L., 1961) that explored the viability of his figure. By virtue of the synesthetic character of social figures, many different relevant interconnections for research suggest themselves here: What anxieties are people preoccupied with in a particular field of practice? What norms and values are important or

undergoing deep-rooted changes in this area? What objectives and ideals are circulating? In a historical study of the discipline, one might reconstruct what social figures appeared in sociological writings in the past, when they disappeared again, and at what times they were taken up again and updated. Historical aspects of sociology converge with theoretical aspects here.

In the second part of this paper, we conducted an initial comparison of the social figure with other relevant social concepts. It would take more historical, conceptual, and methodological studies to further determine how the social figurative approach is embedded in the sociological discourse. Its relation to the concept of habitus, for instance, could only be hinted at here. A connection with Andrew Abbott's proposal for a "lyrical sociology" (2007) might be very fruitful. This may also be seen in the inter- and transdisciplinary potential of social figurative research approaches. A further question concerns the form in which the field of sociology itself was or is involved in the creation as well as in the dissemination and establishment of social figures. In their descriptions of the "stranger", the "hobo", the "simple people" or the "migrant", Simmel, Anderson, Sansot and Nail put the focus on marginalized modes of existence. Through these kinds of sociological texts, these figures turn thus into a point of reference for social self-understanding.

Since social figures need to evoke a response – they can only be termed as such once they have reached society as a whole – but are also tied to emergence – they appear in the context of social change –, they can serve as tools for sociological exploration and diagnosis but not for a reliable prognosis. Social figures are close to what one can experience: this grants insight into the problems and mindset of society but represents also a lack of distance that allows for neither abstract conceptualization nor clear negotiation. This might be seen as an indicator for the evidence orientation of this approach, rather than an orientation towards truth.

Society figures, that is, it takes things in hand, as the etymological link to the modeling of forms implies, and thus creates social figures. In this way, society articulates what is affecting and worrying it without negotiating a societal response to it. Societies avail themselves of social figures to discuss how they see change and where this change could lead to in the future. This is the ethical dimension of social figures and thus also their political function. They can serve to express an existing problem situation for a collective. In this way, they make the problem concrete and frame it in such a way that the people can identify with this figuration and draw appropriate political consequences (cf. Kracauer S., 1998 : 25).

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