Everyman his own sociologist

Henri Pirenne and disciplinary boundaries around 1900

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"My dear honoured Director," wrote the Brussels historian of religion Eugène Goblet d'Alviella in January 1919, addressing Henri Pirenne as President of the Belgian Royal Academy:

> "Mr René Worms, General Secretary of the Société Internationale de Sociologie has asked me to inform you of the death of his father Emile Worms, one of our own members, who died on 8 May 1918 at the age of 80. I imagine that a letter of condolence will be sent to the family on behalf of the Society as is customary".[2]

Although the notice of death was somewhat after the event, Goblet d'Alviella made it clear in his letter that it was *not* his President but he himself who was in contact with the head of the *Société Internationale de Sociologie* – at the time the only international sociological association, which also published the oldest journal of sociology in the French language (Geiger, 1981; Heilbron, Guilhot, & Jeanpierre, 2008). Goblet d'Alviella was not the only member of the Academy who maintained contacts with Worms. Various fellow academicians, including the Brussels lawyer Maurice Vauthier, were members or associate members of Worms' Institute. Emile Vandervelde – who in 1919 was still only a 'corresponding' member of the Academy – had been involved as Vice-President; the Brussels sociologists Guillaume De Greef and Hector Denis had both held the office of President for the customary period of one year. Denis had repeatedly presented Worms' work at the Academy, and had a warm personal friendship with Worms.[3] Like many other foreign intellectuals, Worms had taught at the *Institut des Hautes Études* at the Université

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2. "Mon cher et honoré directeur, Monsieur René Worms, secrétaire général de la Société Internationale de Sociologie me prie de vous informer de la mort de son père Emile Worms, un de nos associés, décédé le 8 mai 1918 à l'âge de 80 ans. Je suppose que, suivant l'usage, une lettre de condoléances sera adressée à la famille au nom de la classe." (Eugène Goblet d'Alviella to Henri Pirenne, 15 January 1919. Henri Pirenne Fund, Archive of the Royal Academy of Belgium, no. 012264.)

3. On Hector Denis, see e.g. Worms (1897, 752-754; 1913, 425); Denis (1903, 209-211, 447-448; 1904, 411-414, 434-437).

Nouvelle in Brussels, giving a series of lectures on the sociological thought of Auguste Comte in 1909 (Despy-Meyer & Goffin, 1976, 62-63). He had also been invited to the *Institut Solvay de Sociologie*, which was attached to the University of Brussels.[4] Finally, in Leuven, the new *Société belge de Sociologie*, which arose on the fringes of the university's Institute of Philosophy, had enjoyed regular warm contacts with Worms and his journal soon after its creation in 1899 (Deschamps, 1901, 189-190).

Like most professional historians in Belgium, Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) was not involved in these links, or in those with other foreign sociologists. That does not, however, mean that the emergence of sociology completely passed him by. As a renowned medievalist with an extensive international network and a chair (since 1886) at the university of Ghent and, after the First World War, in Brussels, he witnessed the attempts to gain academic acceptance and visibility for the new field of sociology. He was fully aware of the intellectual and political attractiveness of this new and ambitious discipline, and he understood the challenges it presented to history. Moreover, the kind of social and economic history he envisaged came very close in its content to the boundaries of sociology. Some reflection on the relationship between the two was hence inescapable.

1. SOCIOLOGY AND ITS AMBITIONS

In 1919 Pirenne operated in an intellectual landscape in which sociology enjoyed a high level of visibility – a characteristic that was not reflected fully in its institutional position and which did not necessarily imply that its reputation was universally positive. In Belgium the first attempts at a systematic analysis of social phenomena date back to the mid-19th century and are seen in the work of Adolphe Quetelet. Quetelet was not an advocate of sociology as a science with a theoretical foundation, but through his mathematical 'social physics' he had had the ambition to introduce a new science. His work made a great impression on the first proponents of sociology as an independent discipline in Belgium. These proponents of the subject essentially had two interpretations of sociology. The first group was inspired by Comtean positivism and from the 1860s sought to create a new science of society which was historical, explicitly social and indeed often socialist. From the 1880s onwards they were joined by a second group who started out from the principles of biology, physiology or medicine. These two groups

[4] "Réunions des groupes d'études. Groupe d'études sociologiques" (1910, 278).

moved in free-thinking circles, often linked to the University of Brussels. In the Brussels as well as in the other three universities there was significant resistance to this new discipline which was associated either with socialism or with biological reductionism (or both). An alternative, more empirical and at the same time more policy-oriented vista was represented by the mainly catholic proponents of the 'monographic' method of family-budget studies as developed by the French social scientist Fréderic Le Play. Like in France, this group of scholars hardly participated in the debate on the identity of sociology as an academic discipline (Kalaora & Savoye, 1989). The *de facto* introduction of sociology into political science curricula took place during the 1890s. The specific ways in which these subjects were taught at the various universities were of course quite different, but they had in common a strong methodological and social/theoretical rather than an empirical approach (Wils, 2001).

Due to all these factors there was little interest in sociology among historians, at least until the 1890s. Although some attempts were made on the margins of the developing professional field to develop a universal form of historiography that was grafted onto the natural sciences, academics showed only scant interest in such ambitious projects. The increasingly scientific approach that had driven historians to engage in critical philological research over several decades was in line with an older, more erudite tradition. More than ever before, this upheld the ideal of empirically precise, detailed research. In other words the tradition of historiography, even in its renewed form that was organically bound to German historical science, ran counter to the longing among sociologists for large-scale abstract visions of history that would expose the laws of social development (Tollebeek, 1994; Wils, 1999; Dorsman, 2002; Warland, 2010).

The idea that history as a discipline should set itself the aim of searching for such laws was probably first expressed at the University in 1880. In that year historian Léon Vanderkindere, in his role as Rector of the University of Brussels, indicated that he was willing to address the challenges raised by Comte in the field of historiography. Vanderkindere began his (second) speech as Rector in 1881 by stating that Comte had been right to label most works of historiography as incoherent compilations. According to Vanderkindere, both the historians' traditional focus on the individual and his excessively modest approach to the discipline had a part to play in this. Historians needed to change track. If history were to study the development of societies, it would have to integrate social and economic factors as well. Moreover, it would also be able to draw on new ancillary sciences such as physiology and ethnography (Vanderkindere, 1880; Vanderkindere, 1909, 1-

21). This brought Vanderkindere back to his first love: as early as the 1870s he had combined in his work a relatively traditional, romantic interpretation of the idea of race with an ethnographic approach which was geared towards the natural sciences (Wils, 1998).

The call for a debate on methodology that Vanderkindere had sounded was not really taken up until the end of the century. This took place in discussions on the work of German historian Karl Lamprecht, whose comprehensive *Deutsche Geschichte* became the subject of fierce controversy in Germany soon after the first part was published in 1891. Lamprecht's focus on social, cultural and economic factors, his interest in collective historical actors and his ambition to use social psychology to expose the laws of historical development broke with the tradition of a strictly empirical and political form of historiography that focused primarily on individuals. It is well known that his conviction that history was able to uncover patterns and even laws gave rise to the fierce *Methodenstreit* within the historical world in Germany (Chickering, 1993, 175-253). In Belgium this debate was opened by Pirenne in 1897. At the same time the 35-year-old professor in medieval history raised the question, albeit more or less obliquely, of the relationship between history and sociology – a question that Vanderkindere had not brought up.

2. HISTORY AS A PROFESSION

Pirenne had met Lamprecht as early as the 1880s, even before travelling to Germany to specialise in ancillary historical sciences and in economics, thereby continuing the studies he had begun at the University of Liège and which he was to complete in Paris. In the years to come, he would admire in particular Lamprecht's interest in socio-economic history and the weight he gave to social and economic factors within a synthetic approach of the past (Sproemberg, 1971, 406-407).[5] In 1897, at Lamprecht's request and not without hesitation, Pirenne devoted an article to the controversy surrounding the German historian's work in the *Revue historique*, the journal published by his Parisian master Gabriel Monod (Warland, 2011, 246). Without offering a eulogy of Lamprecht's theoretical ambitions, Pirenne presented his method as a healthy approach to history from the perspective of the social sciences. Both the *"psychologie des peuples"* (probably Pirenne's translation of Wilhelm Wundt's concept of *Völkerpsychologie*) and sociology itself were

[5] See for instance the letters of Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht of 21 December 1902 and 26 February 1905 (Lyon, 1966, 215-216, 219).

said to demonstrate that social development was determined not only by physical factors such as climate, but also by ways of acting, thinking and feeling that are external to the individual but definitely still have an impact on him. Pirenne therefore contended that both (collective) psychology and sociology should ideally be viewed as ancillary historical sciences, just as mathematics was ancillary to physics. By stating this, he immediately clarified the hierarchy between sociology and history. History did more than sociology (and was therefore ranked higher), because – as Pirenne assured his reader – it still took an interest in the role of the individual. The rich and prominent tradition of erudition and criticism that was so specific to history and enjoyed such powerful interest would protect it from 'drowning' in the sea of sociology. Clearly such an outcome had to be avoided. Reading between the lines, there were two fundamental dangers associated with sociology, paralleling its indeed twofold, both empirical and synthetic ambition: on the one hand it seemed to result in the restoration of a vague, arbitrary form of philosophy of history, but at the same time it cherished an overweening ambition to transform history into an exact science.

Pirenne was clearly concerned that history should not fall into the latter trap. Historical criticism was making progress, as were the other sciences – but this still did not say much about the essence of history. The past had to be understood and narrated as well, and that could only be done from the perspective of the historian, who was – and here Pirenne showed himself to be a student of sociology – influenced by the 'social milieu':

> "While progress is continually being made in the sciences, history obeys a kind of law whereby it perpetually begins again. Successive generations do not reinvent mathematics, physics or chemistry, but each age reinvents history, in some sense transposing it into a key that it finds appropriate".[6]

He continued by stating that each specific social phase inevitably corresponded to a different concept of history (*"conception historique"*). In other words Pirenne was not afraid of using ambitious, sociologically coloured language to create a special safe haven for history that would protect it from becoming encapsulated within a logical structure originating from the natural sciences. In Pirenne's review of the famous *Introduction aux études historiques* by Charles Langlois and Charles Seignobos that was written one

6. "Tandis que le progrès des sciences est continu, l'histoire obéit à une sorte de loi de recommencement perpétuel. Chaque époque ne refait pas les mathématiques, la physique ou la chimie, mais chaque époque refait l'histoire, la transpose, en quelque sorte, dans un ton qui lui soit approprié." In a footnote, Pirenne added: "Je ne parle naturellement pas ici de l'érudition, dont les progrès sont aussi continus que ceux des sciences" (Pirenne, 1897, 2).

year later, he again strongly emphasised the specific character of history. He suggested that the excessive and rather sterile attention that the two authors had devoted to the very technical aspects of historical criticism was the result of a complex about the exact sciences. While they lamented the fact that historical syntheses would never be able to free themselves from subjectivity, Pirenne saw grounds for rejoicing here: each great mind could shed a new light on the past, discover new perspectives and contribute new ideas. Once again Pirenne attributed to sociology and psychology the status of necessary helpers, but qualified them as "far from complete sciences" (Pirenne, 1898a, 34-38).

In other words, in both texts Pirenne expressed a clear and also original vision of the uniqueness of the historical enterprise. Nevertheless this certainly did not imply that he had a major interest in theoretical or methodological debates. There was no recipe for writing history, as he emphasised; history was a question of experience and tact, and those were 'sovereign'. His suggestion was that authors who wrote methodological or reflective works should simply accept this fact. A similar comment can be made about Pirenne's treatment of sociology. The popularity of sociology certainly had not escaped Pirenne, and he recognised the relationship between the wide-ranging, synthetic approach to history with an eye for social, economic and 'mental' factors – which he favoured – and the concerns of sociology.

That did not, however, mean that he placed the emphasis on sociology. Neither of the two texts by Pirenne – and this applies equally to his later work – demonstrates a lively interest in the subject for its own sake. He never referred to sociologists that might have inspired him. The only intellectual mentioned in these early texts in the context of the 'new sciences' was Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt was widely regarded as the founder of modern psychology due to his experimental reaction-time studies, but he was equally a philosophical mind who developed an ambitious theory of knowledge which was to ground all *Geisteswissenschaften*. To enable the analysis of the higher forms of mental life, he called for a social psychology based on ethnological and historical knowledge. From 1894 on, Wundt's theoretical work strongly influenced Lamprecht, his younger colleague at Leipzig. Lamprecht now became convinced that 'socio-psychic' rather than economic factors constituted the motor of history, arguing that collective ideas were immanent in nations and should be studied in a historical and comparative vein, echoing Wundt's vast project of writing a *Völkerpsychologie,* a study of the grand laws of cultural development (Chickering, 1993, 195-202). If sociology as a notion seemed to Pirenne interchangeable with *psychologie des peuples* and even sometimes with psychology as such, this was certainly

due to his familiarity with Lamprecht's work. But it equally reflected the real affinities between the nascent disciplines of social psychology and sociology. In France, for instance, Emile Durkheim, who was soon to become the leading figure of French sociology, was inspired by Wundt and approached sociology as a study of collective mentalities (and by doing so, denied the legitimacy of social psychology as an autonomous discipline) (Lukes, 1977, 86-92; Mucchielli, 1994).

In other contexts, Pirenne would identify sociology quite loosely with economics. This again was indicative of his distance vis-à-vis current debates on the specificity of sociology, debates which testified at the same time to the interconnections between both fields. When in 1901 Pirenne in a letter to Lamprecht expressed his admiration for the way in which the German historian wrote on "the psychological seeds *('ferments')* of economic life" and added that he had glanced through Gabriel Tarde's *Psychologie économique* with interest, he was referring to an author who exemplified well the connections between social psychology, sociology and economics around the turn of the century, but who, at the same time, would not make school as a sociologist (Lubek, 1981; Mucchielli, 2000).[7] Pirenne's interest in works that could be qualified as sociological was, first of all, rather limited and in any case instrumental to his own daily work as a historian.

3. MATERIAL FOR SOCIOLOGISTS

Even in circles that were primarily concerned with sociology there was uncertainty about the boundaries and specific nature of sociology. Epistemological debates on the purpose and method of sociology were part of the core activity of the developing discipline. As a practical man immersed in the historical *métier*, it was precisely this aspect that will have repelled rather than attracted Pirenne. He also did not take a stand in the explicit debate on the relationship between sociology and history that was to take place soon afterwards in France at the instigation of the Durkheimian sociologist and student of economic history François Simiand. Consequently he did not write a review of Seignobos' *La méthode historique appliquée aux sciences sociales* which appeared in 1901, three years after the publication of his companion to the historical method (co-authored with Langlois) which

[7] Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht, 31 December 1901 (Lyon, 1966, 211-212). The first volume of Tarde's *Psychologie économique* is dated in 1902, but it must have been accessible earlier, as Pirenne wrote on the 31st of December.

Pirenne had reviewed. In this new work, Seignobos formulated an answer to Simiand's criticisms of the first book in which history and its specific methodology (and *not* sociology) were given the role of organising and providing an overarching structure for the social sciences (Besnard, 1983, 251-252; Rébérioux, 1983; Weisz, 1983, 109-110; Mucchielli, 1998, 415-452).

Nevertheless an attraction did exist in the opposite direction: Pirenne's work was recognised and praised by many who were promoting sociology as an independent discipline. This was true, for example, of the *Société belge de Sociologie*. That association had been founded in December 1889 on the fringes of Leuven University's Institute of Philosophy by lawyer and Christian Democrat Cyrille Van Overbergh. Van Overbergh's aim was to bring together Catholic intellectuals to address modern sociology in a spirit of undivided enthusiasm – more enthusiastic than the *mainstream* and plainly hostile Catholic attitude, and with more *'undivided'* enthusiasm than the efforts by the influential Désiré Mercier, the director of the neothomist Institute of Philosophy, to make strategic appropriations of the subject. The ultimate aim was to foster the development of empirical research. The decision by the *Société* to take the broadest possible interest in all manifestations of international sociology led to a particularly broad and eclectic approach, even permitting major differences of interpretation within the circle itself. In practice, the model of sociology put forward by Comte as a synthetic, theoretical science of social phenomena that were studied empirically, served as a reference point. Durkheim's school – Durkheim was the most obvious heir to Comte's sociology – offered the most important source of inspiration for the practical organisation of their own activities and publications (Wils, 2001; Wijns, 2003).

As early as 1900, the very first year of the association's existence, it turned its attention to the relationship between history and sociology and animated debates took place on the subject at a number of meetings. It was Pirenne's future colleague in Ghent, the young historian Hubert Van Houtte, who gave a lecture on this theme. After his studies in Leuven, Van Houtte (like Pirenne) had studied in Germany not only with the economist Gustav Schmoller, but also with Lamprecht. During his professorship in Ghent, starting in 1902, he was to divide his time and interest between early modern economic history and contemporary history (De Moreau, 1951; Witte, 2007). In the report that he presented as a 28-year old student of history to the meeting of the *Société de Sociologie*, Van Houtte proposed a classification of the historical sciences in an ascending order running as follows: descriptive history (based on erudition), causal or scientific history (which investigates the mutual dependencies between events), dynamic (or historical) sociology

(which studies the relationships between social phenomena on the basis of scientific history), and, finally, historical philosophy (which searches for the deeper causes of the historical process). The fierceness of the debate which followed Van Houtte's presentation was due – among other factors – to the fact that not everyone was inclined to allow sociology such an 'elevated' place *above* scientific history, even though Van Houtte had been cautious to subordinate sociology to historical philosophy. But this also created problems from a neothomist perspective: breaking the close bond between history and philosophy of history as a search for 'ultimate causes' was considered by some participants to be dangerous. In the course of the discussion, Edouard Crahay – a former student of Mercier who taught sociology at the University of Liège – suggested that sociology could be replaced in this classification by the specific type of history that corresponded to it: the social history towards which Lamprecht and Pirenne were directing their efforts. Pirenne's work had, in other words, the strength of answering sociological research questions, without implying what was perceived by Catholics as the danger of a positivist philosophy of history.[8]

Van Houtte as well associated Pirenne's work with sociology as a method. Whereas his main criticism of the first volume of the *Histoire de Belgique* (1900) had been that it did not adequately take into account the individual, political factors in history (characterising the work as a combination of Marxism and Romanticism), he presented the second volume as a successful example of the sociological method as applied to history – thereby to some extent putting into perspective his own hierarchy, confirming the ancillary character of sociology towards history. In his review, he assured his readers that the work would be of interest not only to historians but also to sociologists (Van Houtte, 1900, 13-17; Van Houtte, 1903, 95-98).

He was right. In Durkheim's journal *L'Année Sociologique* Georges Bourgin ([G.B.], 1906-1909, 607-608; 1909-1912, 649-650) – one of the two historians from the team – demonstrated a powerful awareness of Pirenne's work and significant admiration for it. Emile Durkheim himself wrote reviews of the first two volumes of *Histoire de Belgique* in the journal he directed. The tenor of these reviews was clear: *"le détail de l'évènement"* occupied a very important place in Pirenne's work and yet were of particular interest to sociologists. In the first volume that was because the impact of the urban bourgeoisie on medieval society occurred nowhere as intensely or as 'purely' as in Belgium, making Belgium a better place than any other country to serve as a 'model' for that phenomenon. In volume two, "the general and

8. "Philosophie de l'histoire et sociologie" (1900-1901, 287-310). See also Van Houtte (1900-1901, 192-206; 1901, 301-306).

impersonal progress of institutions" was seen to be at work in the way political and economic changes supported and facilitated each other (Durkheim [E.D], 1900-1901, 567-571; 1902-1903, 453-454). Through this reading of Pirenne's work Durkheim implicitly confirmed his own interpretation of the relationship between history and sociology: the function of history was primarily as an empirical 'building block' for sociology. The moment it became explanatory and comparative – or scientific – it could no longer be distinguished from sociology.

That is not to say, of course, that the relationship between French historians and sociologists was harmonious. Indeed the opposite was true. Although there was considerable interest among historians in France in the social sciences with a view to the development of a social and economic form of history (Mucchielli, 1995), contact between Durkheimian sociologists and the guild of historians was rather limited and less than cordial. The polemical attacks by François Simiand on the *"histoire historisante"* with its conceptual poverty and its fascination with the individual, hardened positions and reinforced the image of (Durkheimian) sociology as an imperialistic science (Besnard, 1983; Rébérioux, 1983).

The asymmetry that existed in the relationship between Pirenne and the Durkheimian sociologists also seems to have characterised his relationship with the *Institut de Sociologie Solvay* in Brussels. The institute, which held close links with the Brussels university, was founded and financed by the industrialist and progressive liberal Ernest Solvay, who since the early 1890's stimulated and institutionalised research in the social sciences that would support and develop his own socio-economic and political theories. From its start in 1902, the research institute was directed by a friend of Pirenne, Emile Waxweiler, an engineer and social scientist, involved in liberal politics since his student years in Ghent. Waxweiler presented his own sociological theory as a form of "social ethology", a concept which he had borrowed from the French biologist Alfred Giard. Just like biologists study the adaptation of organisms to their environment, sociologists had to investigate how individuals adapt to their specific environment and to each other. To Waxweiler, who saw human beings as all equally rational in nature, the individual constituted the only possible access to the study of social phenomena. Sociology hence needed support not only from biology, but also from psychology. This position implied a critical stance towards the Durkheimian approach, according to which collective representations rather than individuals constituted the basic category of sociology (Frost, 1960; Crombois, 1994, 23-44; De Bont, 2008, 373-383). Waxweiler increasingly insisted among the members of the institute on applying his approach to all fields of research, hoping to unite

disciplinary perspectives into one sociological approach. In 1910, the institute was reorganised to that end in nine disciplinary or thematically defined study groups. One of them was devoted to history; most of its members – among whom Pirenne's former student and friend Guillaume Des Marez – equally participated in the sociology study group.

The Brussels' type of biologically oriented sociology no doubt held little or no attraction for Pirenne. Unlike historians such as Lamprecht, Charles Gide, Henri Hauser or Charles Beard or a historically oriented philosopher such as Henri Berr, and unlike his former student George Sarton or his Ghent colleague and lawyer Louis Varlez, Pirenne never became a member of the Institute's national and international communication network.[9] And when Raphaël Petrucci, one of the upholders of Waxweiler's ethological program of sociology within the Institute, asked Pirenne to offer his name in support of the creation of a new journal, the request went unanswered.[10] A number of scholars who were involved in the Institute nevertheless looked to Pirenne with admiration. Many of them were present at the academic celebration of Pirenne's quarter-century of teaching in 1912; Des Marez and Waxweiler were among the organisers of the manifestation.[11] In 1910, Waxweiler had devoted a long essay in the Institute's journal to Pirenne's *Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas*. When leaving out the "contingencies of history", Waxweiler argued, Pirenne's work could be read as a piece of true sociology. Moreover – and this was no surprise to the reader – it confirmed Waxweiler's own theories on the universality of the mechanisms of the '"aggregation"' of individuals and their adaptation to the environment. The stages in the development of urban 'regimes' and their social organisation which had been analysed so well by Pirenne, could nowadays be recognised by sociologists in young countries and in colonies, according to Waxweiler (1910).[12] As in the case of Durkheim's interest in Pirenne's work, Waxweiler's text served as a reminder of the hierarchy between history and sociology.

Historians who were involved in Waxweiler's Institute were not necessarily happy with the subordinated position that was attributed to history. The student of ancient history Josué De Decker ([J.D.D.], 1911, 992-996) for instance insisted in this context repeatedly on the autonomy of the historical

9. "Quatrième liste des adhérents de l'*Intermédiaire Sociologique*" (1914, 683-688).

10. Raphaël Petrucci to Henri Pirenne, 15 November 1903 (Petrucci repeated his request in this letter). *Henri Pirenne Fund*, Archives Université Libre de Bruxelles, 026PP/01/01/10.

11. *Manifestation en l'honneur de M. le professeur Henri Pirenne, Bruxelles, 12 mai 1912* (1912).

12. The fourth volume of Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* was discussed by De Decker ([J.D.D.], 1911, 988-992).

discipline, pointing to the technical competences in the treatment of archival sources and the 'creative imagination' as specific qualities of the historian – the latter an argument that was cherished by Pirenne as well. The same was probably true for Des Marez, who combined a position as an archivist at the Brussels communal archives with a teaching appointment in the history of law and in economic history at the Brussels university (Lyon, 1999). His participation in the study groups of the Institute was limited to the presentation of his work in economic history; odes to the superiority of sociology were not to be expected from him.[13] As in Pirenne's case, his work was primarily conceived by Durkheim (1898-1899, 393-395; 1900-1901, 397-399) and his colleagues (Bourgin [G.B.], 1903-1904, 542-545; 1906-1909, 676) as interesting 'material' for sociologists.

4. THE DECEPTION OF AESTHETICS

Even though Pirenne kept distance towards sociology and its ambitions, his work was certainly not insulated from what was happening in the broader areas of the social sciences. Since he had been a student of Gustav Schmoller in Berlin, the field of economics and in particular the historical turn it had taken within the German speaking historical world did catch his attention. In 1901, he wrote an introduction to the translation by his former pupil Alfred Hansay of *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft* (1893), a landmark publication by Karl Bücher, one of the German scholars known as the 'younger school' of historical economics gathered around Schmoller (Schefold, 1988; Vom Bruch, 1988; Kolář, 2007). As an empirically oriented historian, Pirenne did not take part in the *Methodenstreit* between this school and neoclassical economics. But he did sporadically reflect on the significance of the school's approach from the perspective of a historian, and by doing so, he inevitably touched upon issues concerning the boundaries and hierarchies between disciplines. He started his introduction to Bücher's work as follows:

> "Everyone knows how much the historical method, applied to the social sciences, has during this century deepened the understanding of those sciences and extended their scope".[14]

[13] "Réunions des groupes d'études. Réunions collectives. Les syndicats industriels. Le passé par G. Des Marez et le présent par G. De Leener" (1910, 212-223).

[14] "Tout le monde sait combien la méthode historique, en s'appliquant aux sciences sociales, en a, dans ce siècle, approfondi la connaissance et étendu le domaine" (Pirenne, 1901, V).

Historians themselves could subsequently benefit from the progress which political economy had made thanks to the application of the historical method. Bücher's famous *Wirtschaftsstufentheorie*, a division of economic history into a tripartite structure of family economy, urban economy and national economy, had become generally accepted, Pirenne stated. He clearly valued Bücher as an economist, and he said as much in other publications. Bücher was portrayed as the founder of a statistical method that allowed making historically justifiable calculations of the size of population groups on the basis of medieval administrative documents.[15] Nevertheless, Pirenne's references to Bücher also served to highlight the distinction between history and economics. Bücher might have been a convert to the historical method, but he was still an economist, and that meant: he reasoned on the basis of contemporary concepts and was a theoretician, searching in every historical period for something that could be seen as typical and general. Complexity and diversity had no place there, while these characteristics of historical reality were precisely what preoccupied historians.

Pirenne had already qualified Bücher's general view of the medieval economy by stating that, prior to the modern period, there had been a class of people who lived exclusively by trade (Pirenne, 1898b, 5) In his famous London lecture *The stages in the social history of capitalism* in 1913, he went even further: capitalism was already so important during the Middle Ages that one must ask whether Bücher's straightforward theoretical classification of the medieval urban economy could be upheld at all. In this context, Pirenne was much harsher still on economist Werner Sombart, who seemed to lack all sense of systematic knowledge or criticism.[16] Pirenne clearly passed judgement *as a historian* on the historical-economic theories of Schmoller, Bücher and Sombart. The aesthetic value of a theory was no factor of concern.

For his colleague with sociological ambitions, Hubert Van Houtte, the beauty of an encompassing theory clearly carried more weight. A year earlier Van Houtte, too, had expressed criticism in the *Société de Sociologie* about the extent to which the tripartite structure identified by Bücher and Schmoller was true to reality. Contrary to the situation in Germany, England and France, he asserted, capitalism had only really become dominant in Belgium in the 18th century. Until then the medieval model of corporatism had even continued to grow stronger. For Van Houtte, however, this was no reason to

15. See for instance Pirenne (1903, 11).

16. Pirenne (1914a, 495; 1914b) was much harsher on Sombart in the extensively annotated edition of the text of his 1913 lecture in the *Journal of the Belgian Academy* than in the earlier publication in the *American Historical Review*.

abandon the theory – *"one of the most beautiful syntheses in dynamic sociology"*. It simply needed to be supplemented by a new theory, which he called the theory of survivals. When applied to the economy, this ran as follows: an economic form that was typical of a specific period did not necessarily have to be dominant; older forms that no longer matched the general structure of society could still survive. Van Houtte's new theory enabled him to do what for many people constituted the decisive characteristic of sociology: to predict the future. In his article he concluded that the bitter language struggle that was being fought in contemporary Belgium was nothing more than a 'survival' from the third, national era. It was destined to disappear in the emerging era of internationalism and cosmopolitanism (Van Houtte, 1913, 16-30). Despite the disappointments of two World Wars (and the transformation of his own university into a Dutch-speaking institution), Van Houtte (1944, 169-191) still expressed his hope of true internationalism as late as 1945, in a "historical law" which he proposed to the Academy. His belief in a sociologically inspired form of historiography, which could relate past and future through the formulation of laws, had not withered.

The distance between him and Pirenne was of course considerable. The notes made by Pirenne in 1918 as a prisoner in Creuzburg on Weber and Sombart – whose work he had first assessed in his London lecture – and their theories on the emergence of capitalism, sounded extremely bitter. They were now *"prétendus savants"*, the authors of dreams, looking down with disdain on the *"literati"*:

> "As for their criticism, it is sublime, since they are too great to have common sense and do not deign to consider the mere facts".[17]

On the same day Pirenne commented on the subject of sociology that it did not correspond to any historical reality; the society of sociology was an abstraction, since sociology could not take into account the unforeseen events that constantly occurred at the individual level. Two days later he wrote that social history was impossible without the observations of sociology; sociology could, for example, readily explain the emergence of political forms. A few months earlier he had described the function of sociology and psychology as a starting point for the study of the past; a careful study of concrete situations should then result in certain adjustments to the abstract rules (Pirenne, 1994 [1918], 215-216, 193-194).

[17] "Quant à leur critique elle est sublime, vu qu'il sont trop grands pour avoir du bon sens et se plier modestement aux faits" (Pirenne, 1994 [1918], 214).

The basic ideas behind these thoughts were in line with Pirenne's earlier comments: on an initial, technical level, history was about common sense and a modest approach to the facts – typical virtues upheld by the historical guild. But in the way it was ultimately presented history was as much an imaginative art as a science. Sociology and economics, on the other hand, were labelled as theoretical, abstract and excessively ambitious. They could, however, supply ideas or hypotheses to historians. Pirenne's assessment of Sombart and Weber as pretentious pseudo-scholars was no doubt coloured by his experience of the war, and, in the case of Weber, it may also have been influenced by the latter's referring to Pirenne after his London lecture as "that Belgian medievalist who knew no medieval economic and social history" (Lyon, 1974, 199). As Weber at that time was still generally seen as a historian, a judgment on him did not necessarily imply a judgment on sociology (Steiner, 1992). Contrary to what Brice Lyon stated on the impact of the war experience on Pirenne's intellectual outlook, Pirenne did not become more sceptical about sociology during the war. His opinion remained quite stable (Pirenne, 1994 [1918], 161; Lyon, 1998, 512-513).

5. SOVEREIGN HISTORY

Pirenne's desire to reach a thorough understanding of *general* historical developments did equally remain alive. The new and specific feature of his ambitious multi-volume *Histoire de Belgique* lay precisely in its attempt to internationalise national history. He did so in a twofold manner: by considering the factors that had differentiated Belgian history from other national histories, and by tracing what it owed to its neighbours (Tollebeek 2010a, pp. 188-189; Tollebeek, 2010b, pp. 209-213). During his German captivity from 1916 to 1918, Pirenne worked on a text on the problems that now seemed to him to be inherent in all forms of historiography from a strictly national perspective. Among other things those problems consisted in the fact that general developments or a "chronological difference in development" (and here he did seem to refer to a kind of *universal* development) were presented as a specific national phenomenon; or, conversely, that specific local phenomena (characteristics of the German cities, for instance) were treated as universal – a 'sin' of which he would keep accusing Bücher (Pirenne, 1994 [1918], 191-194). In his famous speech on this subject at the Brussels International Congress of Historians in 1923, he started from the observation that the comparative method had been used in the study of primitive cultures for

some time (Schöttler, 2004, 53-61). He did not mention, however, that Vanderkindere in 1880 and also Simiand, in his texts about sociology and history, had described the comparative method as offering the only possible access to truly scientific history (Besnard, 1983, 253). Neither did he seem aware of the fact that the value of the comparative method in history had been extensively debated around 1910 within the *Institut de Sociologie*, where his Brussels colleague Eugène Dupréel had been one of its most ardent defenders.[18] He did, however, make a general reference to possible support from sociology, although he did not expect much of a concrete contribution: until that time sociology had only offered hypotheses,

> "which are suggestive and fertile, I concede, but too ephemeral and too provisional to build anything upon them".[19]

History had its own method, which it could not allow to be dictated by sociology (less still by economics or law). There was the technical work of criticism, but above all – as Pirenne had already argued during the 1890s – there was the challenge of historical construction and synthesis. The *whole* of history was its object, just as the *whole* of nature was evidently the object of the natural sciences. Rather than looking to sociology with its vague hypotheses, as Pirenne seemed to be suggesting in a brief footnote, inspiration for this endeavour was to be found in the excellent *Revue de synthèse historique* by Henri Berr. This journal, founded in 1900, certainly had the ambition of going beyond erudite history and introducing comparative history, while at the same time seeking to distance itself from Durkheimian sociology (Mucchielli, 1995, 73). Lamprecht was one of the first historians to whom this journal provided a forum. Berr's enterprise was in particular eagerly taken up by a new generation of students, the best-known of whom was Lucien Febvre.

For Febvre and Marc Bloch, the relationship between sociology and history was to be a continuing subject for reflection. They knew French sociology much better than Pirenne and considered themselves indebted to Durkheimian sociology, although this feeling seemed to be more genuine in Bloch's case than in the case of Febvre (Leuilliot, 1983).[20] They were also suspicious of sociological imperialism, which they saw as personified in their

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18. Dupréel (1910) and "Groupe d'études sociologiques" (1911, 747-752).

19. "Suggestives et fécondes, j'en demeure d'accord, mais trop flottantes et trop provisoires pour qu'il soit possible de bâtir sur elle" (Pirenne, 1923b, 27).

20. In an undated letter to Henri Pirenne in 1931, Marc Bloch called himself "less indulgent towards sociology than you", but he also referred to his intellectual debt towards sociology in general, and the Durkheimian school in particular (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 131).

Strasbourg colleague Maurice Halbwachs, the most Durkheimian sociologist of the interwar years (Craig, 1981; Craig, 1983). This tension also made itself felt when their journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* was launched. The decision to include Halbwachs on the editorial board and to work with sociologists more generally met with suspicion from the publisher, who associated sociology with methodological vagueness and political radicalism (Leuilliot, 1973, 320). As a member of the editorial committee of the journal, Pirenne took a similar approach. Six months before the first issue was published in 1928, he wrote to Bloch that the only way to guarantee the *historical* character of the journal was to devote adequate attention to antiquity and the Middle Ages. Pirenne felt that work in the field of contemporary history was too close to the boundaries of economics and sociology and that this would cause confusion (Demoulin, 1983, 275).

During this post-war period, in which economic history enjoyed official recognition and the 'hype' surrounding the new discipline of sociology had passed over, Pirenne himself seems to have been much more concerned about clearly establishing the distinction between economic history and economics than between history and sociology.[21] The nature of the latter relationship could serve to clarify the first, however. In a personal note on a recent article by Sombart on economic theory and economic history, Pirenne wrote:

> "I think that Sombart doesn't realise that the aim of economic historians is not to improve economics, but to improve history. In the same manner, one does not do social history in order to improve sociology. The aim is different".[22]

In his retrospective comments on the historical activities of the Royal Academy, the Royal Commission for History and on 50 years of historiography in Belgium, he simply did not mention sociology. The transformations of the discipline were presented as part of a rather autonomous process in which scientific history had been broadened by integrating social and economic history, processes in which sociology and economics as such were not attributed an explicit role (Pirenne, 1922, 171-196; Pirenne, 1927, 51-71; Pirenne, 1935).

[21.] See for instance Pirenne's notes in preparation of his lectures on economic history at the Écoles des Chartes in January 1929 (*Henri Pirenne Fund*, Archives Université Libre de Bruxelles, 026PP/01/04/5: Cours d'Histoire économique professé depuis 1894).

[22.] "Je crois que Sombart ne se rend pas même compte du but que visent les historiens qui s'occupent d'histoire économique. Ce n'est pas d'enrichir la science économique, c'est d'enrichir l'histoire. De même on ne fait pas l'histoire sociale pour enrichir la sociologie. Le but est autre" (*Henri Pirenne Fund*, Archives Université Libre de Bruxelles, 026PP/01/04/5: Cours d'Histoire économique professé depuis 1894).

Pirenne (1931b) was to address the specific nature of history as distinct from sociology in more depth one more time, in the text he wrote in 1931 for an American manual on the methodology of the social sciences.[23] The context was perhaps not insignificant: it was precisely during these inter-war years that 'social studies' emerged in the United States as a bold and highly successful competitor for history as an academic discipline and as a subject in schools (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 2000, 25-52). Pirenne characterised the distinction between the two disciplines in terms of concrete and in-depth versus abstract (and – it was suggested – superficial). His account of the function of history is reminiscent of his texts from the late 1890s: there was the technical level of criticism and then there was the much more interesting narrative level of history, a construction that demanded creative imagination and was therefore, by definition, subjective.[24] The ultimate aim was, just as had been argued 10 years earlier, the scientific elaboration of universal history.

6. CONCLUSION

> "If the sun of sociology, emerging from the mists in which it is presently shrouded, should one day rise upon the summits of science, we may be the first to contemplate it, admire it, and bathe our intelligence in its life-giving rays."

This was the hope expressed in 1899 in the founding charter of the Catholic *Société belge de Sociologie*. Two years later, when the *Société* ventured to publish that charter in a Journal of its own (which it probably would not have dared to do in the annexes to the Leuven *Revue Néo-Scolastique* in which it had published until then), the authors looked back approvingly upon this enthusiasm and added:

> "We have even more faith in the future of sociology than we had two years ago".[25]

Unlike the members of the *Société*, Pirenne had never been inclined to waste time waiting for the moment when the sun of sociology would bathe the other sciences in its rays. For him, sociology was a discipline that was essentially a

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[23] It was translated as "La tâche de l'historien" (Pirenne, 1931a).

[24] See also Pirenne (1923a, 173-174).

[25] "Si le soleil de la sociologie, se dégageant des brouillards qui l'enveloppent actuellement, se lève un matin sur les sommets de la science, nous pourrons être des premiers à le contempler, à l'admirer et à baigner nos intelligences de ses vivifiants effluves"; "Plus qu'il y a deux ans, nous avons foi dans l'avenir de la sociologie" (Jacquart, 1900-1901, 6).

promise, and it was a promise that, at least in concrete terms, remained unfulfilled. The high intellectual visibility and the attractiveness of sociology as a field bursting with high ambition encouraged Pirenne, with his not very theoretical attitude, to focus and clearly define the specific character of his own discipline. Meanwhile, Pirenne's approach to history was not that different from that of many (self-declared) sociologists. Precisely because no specific content or method corresponded to the very diffuse field of sociology, the borders between both disciplines were unclear, and much energy was initially invested in reaffirming or constructing disciplinary identities. In the case of Pirenne, a pragmatic approach prevailed on extensive 'boundary work', however.[26] His approach can rather be seen as an illustration of Weber's pragmatic opinion on the division of labour between history and sociology (as described by Sam Whimster): the historian can be, and usually is, his own sociologist (Whimster, 1980, 359). A variation, in other words, on Carl Becker's famous dictum "Everyman his own historian" (Becker, 1932, 233-255).

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[26] The concept "boundary work" was initially used by sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn in 1983, who coined the term to describe the discursive practices by which scientists attempt to attribute selected qualities to scientists, their claims and methods in order to draw a rhetorical boundary between science and 'some less authoritative residual non-science'. It has since then equally been used in the context of the formation and institutionalisation of disciplines and specialties within science (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, 178-181).

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Everyman his own sociologist: Henri Pirenne en disciplinaire grenzen rond 1900

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SAMENVATTING

Als befaamd mediëvist met een uitgebreid internationaal netwerk was Henri Pirenne getuige van het streven naar academische zichtbaarheid en erkenning vanwege de sociologie. Pirenne was zich bewust van de intellectuele en politieke aantrekkingskracht van deze jonge en ambitieuze discipline en begreep welke uitdagingen zij aan de geschiedenis stelde. Zijn eigen benadering van de sociale en economische geschiedenis sloot bovendien nauw aan bij wat de eigentijdse sociologie beoogde, en werd ook door heel wat pleitbezorgers van de sociologie enthousiast onthaald. Dit impliceerde echter geen onverdeeld enthousiasme aan Pirennes kant. In zijn ogen slaagde de sociologie er nooit in méér te worden dan een belofte. De grote intellectuele zichtbaarheid van de sociologie dwong hem wel na te denken over de specificiteit van geschiedenis als discipline. Net omdat de sociologie geen eigen object of methode kon claimen, bleven de grenzen tussen beide disciplines diffuus, en ging er in de intellectuele wereld waarbinnen Pirenne zich bewoog veel energie naar het construeren of herbevestigen van disciplinaire identiteiten. Pirenne stelde zich hierbij veeleer pragmatisch op en investeerde weinig in dergelijk *boundary work*.

Everyman his own sociologist: Henri Pirenne et les frontières disciplinaires vers 1900

KAAT WILS

RÉSUMÉ

Médiéviste réputé, disposant d'un large réseau international, Henri Pirenne a été le témoin des efforts faits par la sociologie pour conquérir une reconnaissance et une visibilité académique. Il se rendait parfaitement compte de l'attrait intellectuel et politique de cette discipline nouvelle et ambitieuse, et comprenait les défis qu'elle posait à l'histoire. En outre, le type d'histoire sociale et économique qu'il défendait était proche, par son contenu, de la sociologie, et plusieurs des promoteurs de la sociologie le tenaient en haute estime. Ceci n'entraînait toutefois pas un enthousiasme sans partage de la part de Pirenne. À ses yeux, la sociologie n'était encore qu'une discipline en promesse. La grande visibilité et l'attrait de la sociologie l'encourageaient cependant à définir plus clairement le caractère spécifique de sa propre discipline. Précisément parce que la sociologie ne pouvait se prévaloir d'un objet ou d'une méthode propre, les frontières entre les deux disciplines demeuraient vagues, et beaucoup d'énergie était consacrée, dans l'environnement intellectuel de Pirenne, à la réaffirmation ou la construction d'identités disciplinaires. Pirenne pour sa part se montrait plus pragmatique et s'investissait peu dans la défense de ces frontières disciplinaires.