



**"The laws of the phenomena of society." How would Weber and Durkheim have responded to John Stuart Mill's famous quote?**

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Essay aus dem Jahr 2012 im Fachbereich Pädagogik - Wissenschaft, Theorie, Anthropologie, Note: 66, University of Cambridge, Sprache: Deutsch, Abstract: 'The Laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings . . . Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance' (John Stuart Mill). Compare and contrast how Weber and Durkheim might have responded to this statement.

What John Stuart Mill means seems straightforward: society functions as a unidirectional interplay of individuals. The rules, that govern those individuals in isolation also dominate in situations of collective character. Mill expresses a deep belief in the overarching importance of the individual in comparison to collectives that in turn do not change the actor's behaviour. When we place Mill in his liberal and utilitarian context, this opinion does not surprise; for him, self-interest seemed to rule both the individual and society. To put it crudely: individual > society. Contrasting the 'laws of the phenomena of society' with 'the laws of the actions and passions of human beings', the main difference lies in the society-individual dichotomy, i.e. the level of analysis. The former refers to situations in which more than one actor participates, such as religion, economy or administration. The latter alludes to the personal behaviour, feelings and ideas of a human being, almost to psychology. Without questioning this dichotomy in its foundation, both Weber and Durkheim, differ widely from the view that both spheres of law are approximately congruent. For both scholars, society has a life on its own, rules on its own that are at least partly independent from the individual. Durkheim much more than Weber even ascribes an influence to society that is able to dominate the individual behaviour. For Weber, the overarching force of capitalist society is a particular condition in modern society that he reveals and criticises. The laws of the individual are not without importance in his scheme – but need to be strengthened. Let me introduce his thesis in more detail in the following paragraphs.

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