

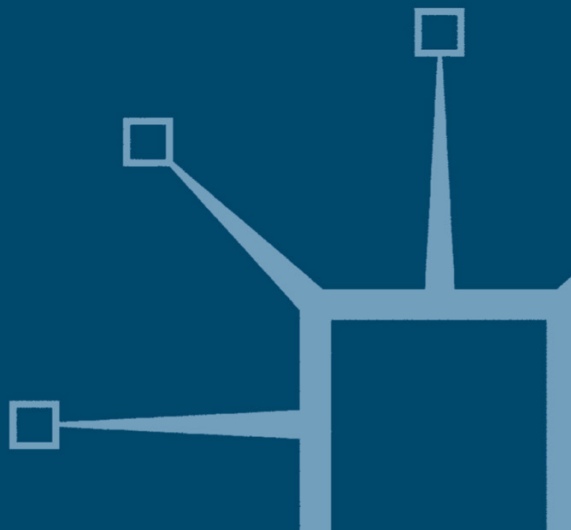
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New Social Connections

Sociology's Subjects and Objects

Edited by

Judith Burnett, Syd Jeffers
and Graham Thomas



New Social Connections

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New Social Connections

Sociology's Subjects and Objects

Edited by

Judith Burnett

University of Wolverhampton, UK

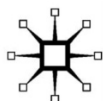
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-57598-1

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First published 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-36594-4 ISBN 978-0-230-27487-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230274877

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

New social connections : sociology's subjects and objects / edited by
Judith Burnett, Syd Jeffers, Graham Thomas.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Sociology – Congresses. I. Burnett, Judith. II. Jeffers, Syd. III. Thomas, Graham, 1951–

HM421.N495 2010
301.0941—dc22

2010002685

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

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Acknowledgements

We would first like to thank our colleague Barbara Harrison, who instigated our bid to host the 2007 BSA conference and was our co-organiser in what proved to be a very rewarding experience. Had she not been already committed to other projects, Barbara would also have been our co-editor.

We would like to thank everyone who made the 2007 conference so successful, including the staff at the British Sociological Association (with special mention to events organiser Liz Jackson and her predecessor Nicky Gibson) and a large number of people at UEL (with special mention to conference coordinator Anne Barritt and our band of enthusiastic and diligent student helpers).

We are grateful for the skill and patience of the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan, especially to Philippa Grand and Olivia Middleton, who have seen this project through from start to finish, and we would also like to acknowledge the often unsung efforts of the copy editors and typesetters at Newgen in Chennai, whose work provides a small illustration of Saskia Sassen's concept of 'global assemblages'.

Finally, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the authors who agreed to have their work become part of this collection. We hope that they, along with other readers, will find the writing of the various contributors interesting, provocative, and insightful. We certainly do.

Contributors

Michael Banton was Professor of Sociology in the University of Bristol, 1965–92. His most recent book is *The International Politics of Race* (Polity, 2002).

David Beer is Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of York, UK. He has research interests in music and popular culture, social informatics and social theory. His publications include *New Media: The Key Concepts* (2008), co-authored with Nick Gane.

Gurminder K. Bhambra is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. In challenging the dominant Eurocentred accounts of the emergence of modernity, she argues for the recognition of ‘connected histories’ in the reconstruction of historical sociology from a post-colonial perspective. Her monograph, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (2007) won the BSA Philip Abrams Memorial Prize for best first book in Sociology. She is also co-editor of *Silencing Human Rights* (with Dr Shilliam), and *1968 in Retrospect* (with Dr Demir).

Judith Burnett is Dean of the School of Law, Social Sciences and Communications at the University of Wolverhampton. She is the author of articles on the problem of researching generations and social cohesion as well as work in the field of education and biography. She has published *Doing Your Social Science Dissertation* (Sage 2009) and with P. Senker and K. Walker *The Myths of Technology: Innovation and Inequality* (2009 Peter Lang) and is editor of the volume *Contemporary Adulthood: Calendars, Cartographies and Constructions* (Palgrave 2010, forthcoming). Judith is Vice Chair of the British Sociological Association.

Roger Burrows is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of York, UK. His current research interests include social informatics, urban studies and the sociology of health and illness. He is the author of over 100 articles, chapters, books and reports on these and other topics.

Joyce E. Canaan is Reader in Sociology at Birmingham City University. She was the Sociology Coordinator at C-SAP (2007–2009). Joyce co-convenes the ‘Researching Students’ Study Group of the British Sociological Association and the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education

group. Joyce has written extensively on education, with a recent focus on Higher Education. Her current areas of interest include critical pedagogy, higher education lecturers' teaching in the contexts of neo-liberalism and managerialism and students' experiences of learning in these contexts. She co-edited *Why Critical Pedagogy and Popular Education Matter Now* (in press), *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University* (Routledge 2008), *Learning and Teaching Social Theory* (C-SAP 2007) and a special issue of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2004). Joyce has also published in *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, *ELiSS – Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, *Learning and Teaching in the Social Science* and *Teaching in Higher Education*.

Erika Cudworth is Senior Lecturer in International Politics and Sociology in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of East London, UK. Her research interests include social and political theory, particularly feminisms, ecogisms and complexity theory, food consumption and production, human relations with non-human animals and social educational inclusions/exclusions in the areas of education and work. She is author of *Environment and Society* (Routledge 2003), *Developing Ecofeminist Theory: the Complexity of Difference* (Palgrave 2005) and *The Modern State: Theories and Ideologies* (with Tim Hall and John McGovern, Edinburgh University Press, 2007). She is currently writing a sociology of human relations with non-human animals, *Social Lives with Other Animals: Tales of Sex, Death and Love* (Palgrave 2010, forthcoming).

Max Farrar is Emeritus Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University. Previously he was Professor for Community Engagement at Leeds Met, where he taught and researched from 1989. He co-convenes the Race and Ethnicity Study Group for the British Sociological Association and is a Friend of the Abraham Path and adviser to the Dialogue Society. His sociology PhD research on the multi-ethnic inner-city area of Leeds known as Chapeltown was published as *The Struggle for 'Community' in a British Multi-Ethnic Inner-City Area Paradise in the Making* (Edwin Mellen 2002). He has worked in adult and community education, at the Harehills and Chapeltown Law Centre, for the Runnymede Trust, and as a freelance writer, photographer, and consultant, which is what he does now, when not playing with his grandchildren and watching HBO. Much of his work can be accessed at www.maxfarrar.org.uk.

David Inglis is Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, UK. He is a graduate of the University of Cambridge and the University of York. He is an Academician of the UK Academy of the Social Sciences.

He has written in the areas of the history of social thought, the sociologies of culture, art and aesthetics and the cultural sociology of globalization. His books include *The Globalization of Food* (Berg 2009), *Art and Aesthetics: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Routledge 2009), *Food and Society: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*, (Routledge 2007), *The Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing* (Palgrave 2005), *Nature: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Routledge 2005), *Culture and Everyday Life* (Routledge 2005) and *Confronting Culture: Sociological Vistas* (Polity 2003). He has been on the editorial and advisory boards of a range of journals, most recently *European Journal of Social Theory* and the *Journal of Sociology*. He is founding editor of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, published by Sage.

Syd Jeffers is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of East London. He formerly taught at the University of Leicester and was a Senior Research Fellow at the School for Advanced Urban Studies at the University of Bristol. He is currently a trustee of the BSA and is a member of the Editorial Collective of the journal *Critical Social Policy*.

Gayle Letherby is Professor of Sociology at the University of Plymouth. She researches and writes in a variety of areas including reproductive and non/parental identity; working and learning in higher education; crime and deviance and travel mobilities. She is also interested in all things methodological, particularly feminist approaches, auto/biography and wider concerns relating to the politics of the research process and product. Publications focusing on working and learning in higher education and/or methodological concerns include Letherby, G. (2003) *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice* (Open University); Letherby, G. and Bywaters, P. (eds) (2007) *Extending Social Research: application, implementation, presentation* (Open University) and Cotterill, P., Jackson, S. and Letherby, G. (eds) (2007) *Challenges and Negotiations for Women in Higher Education* (The Netherlands: Springer). In addition, Gayle has guest edited editions of *Women's Studies International Forum* (with Pamela Cotterill, Staffordshire) and *Studies in Higher Education* (with Pamela Cotterill, Staffordshire and Christina Hughes, Warwick) focusing on gender and the academy. With Ross Coomber (Plymouth) she is currently the editor of *Sociological Research Online* <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/>.

Bruno Latour teaches at Sciences Po in Paris, most of his articles and all references to his work may be found on his web site www.bruno-latour.fr

Gregor McLennan is Professor of Sociology at the University of Bristol. His writings and interests chiefly concern questions of Marxism, pluralism, the nature of sociology, and philosophy of social science, his latest book being *Sociological Cultural Studies: Reflexivity and Positivity in the Human Sciences* (Palgrave 2006). His current work involves a series of critical engagements with post-secular social theorists.

Michael Rustin is Professor of Sociology at the University of East London. His books include *The Good Society and the Inner World* (1991), *Reason and Unreason* (2001), and, with Margaret Rustin, *Mirror to Nature: Drama Psychoanalysis and Society* (2002). He is author of many papers on Sociology and politics, and with Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey is a founding editor of *Soundings*.

Saskia Sassen is now Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University after a decade at the University of Chicago and London School of Economics. Her recent books are *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2006) and *A Sociology of Globalization* (Norton 2007). She has now completed for UNESCO a five-year project on sustainable human settlement for which she set up a network of researchers and activists in over 30 countries; it is published as one of the volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (EOLSS) (Oxford, UK: EOLSS Publishers) [<http://www.eolss.net>]. Her books are translated into sixteen languages. She has written for *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek International*, and the *Financial Times*, among others.

John Scott is Professor of Sociology at the University of Plymouth, having previously held Chairs at the University of Leicester and the University of Essex. He is the author of numerous books on social theory, research methodology, social stratification, and economic sociology, and his most recent publications include *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology* (Sage Publications 2006) and two volumes on *Fifty Key Sociologists* (Routledge 2006). He is currently an Honorary Vice-President of the British Sociological Association, having been Newsletter editor, Secretary, Treasurer, Chairperson, and President. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), and an academician of the Academy of Learned Society in the Social Sciences (AcSS).

Graham Thomas is Senior Lecturer in Innovation Studies at the University of East London. Before moving into the interdisciplinary area of the study of science, technology and society, he identified

himself as a sociologist and is now pleased to be administratively as well as intellectually joined to Sociology colleagues at UEL. His research interests focus on the relations between innovation and policy-making (and policy shaping) in the area of networked infrastructure and services. He is Secretary of the European University Association for the Study of Society, Science and Technology which, for understandable reasons, is usually abbreviated to ESST.

Introduction

Judith Burnett, Syd Jeffers, and Graham Thomas

This book emerged from the annual British Sociological Association Conference 2007, one of the most highly attended ever held in the United Kingdom, with no less than thirty five streams.¹ It took three days and a large area of the University of East London's campus to get through them, yet we say a potentially unpromising beginning for a book because one of the first things which publishers, and indeed a few of the attendees, said to us when we proposed a book to come out of it, was 'Oh no! Not a conference volume! Think how disparate (and dispiriting?) the papers will be! Think how incoherent such a book would be! Who would *read* such a book? Who would *contribute* to such a book? What would such a book *show* other than a discipline in flux?' Yet the idea lingered. With the passage of time the initial desire to trap the excitement of a real, live conference, the birth of which you have personally and painfully endured as the organising committee wore off, to be replaced with a more serious project at the heart of which lie real questions. Sociological questions which have, at best, uneasy answers grew between the paving slabs of the university precinct and blossomed in the urban air of the dockside campus.

What does such an event signify? What can we learn about the state of sociology from the chapters compiled? What are the borders of the discipline and its major currents? What sense can we make of its diversification, its transgressions into biology and informatics, psychology and economics? What of the poachers who hunt down sociology and what of our fellow travellers? Then there was the small matter of the assembly of attendees. What structures, identities, and processes had led them to such an assembly? Why do *some* people do sociology like *this*, while others do it like *that*? How and why do we ask the questions which we do? Whose sociology is it, and what, if anything, can we

say it is good for? In spite of ourselves, and possibly against our better judgement, we thought we could and should do a book. Possibly against their better judgement, Palgrave Macmillan gave us a contract. And so here we are. The cargo lies ready for your selection, erudition, mystification, deconstruction, and musing. The perspectival gaze of the sociologist awaits you. Welcome to our world(s). There's a lot going on in here you know; it's almost as bad as being out there. By and large, it's much more fun.

This book addresses, or at least throws up, some of the substantive questions of sociology and its place in the world. It sets out to explore the reconfiguration and fragmentation of sociological thought and action, exploring how current thinking brings together and pulls apart sociological enterprises, so that we can say that the book explores contemporary *sociologies* rather than sociology. The book presents sociological work within a range of frameworks, juxtaposed to present debates and social understandings from locations which include directly autobiographical work through to flights in abstract sociological theory.

We want the book to do two things: first, to explore the various ways of thinking about the subjects and objects of sociology and make new connections within and across boundaries, actors, disciplines, and practices. Second, to show something about how the circumstances of production and the historical settings of sociological work become expressed within and through structures, identities, and discursive practices which in turn shape the lines of enquiry pursued and the kinds of theory produced. We wanted to make a space to explore the experience of becoming or being 'sociologist', seeing this as historically specific and contingent on the one hand, and both personal and impersonal on the other. We wanted to show Sociology in all its forms and the ways in which it is experienced.

Not that this book is unique in such a task. Books abound about what makes sociology sociological and what sense, if any, we can make of the state of the discipline. There is a rich vein of literature on which the contributors have drawn, which include classics such as C. Wright Mills' (1959) much quoted work which veers towards the humanities and arts, with its viewing of (apparently) personal problems as social things. Other threads seek to narrate the changing directions of the discipline, tracing its origins to modernity and the pursuit of unitary science, which led to the discovery of the social as opposed to the natural world. Not that the discovery of the social settled the vexed question of what sociology could be said to be, or of what its subject matter properly consists, a matter clouded by the relationship between social research

on the one hand and social sciences more generally on the other. Philip Abrams in his classic account *The Origins of British Sociology 1834–1914: an essay with selected papers* (Abrams 1968/1981) points out that

Already by 1906 there were as many divergent definitions of sociology as there were sociologists. Already one could hear loud complaints about the uselessness of this variety of sociology, the arid pedantry of that, the misty philosophizing of another, the political tendentiousness of yet another.... (1981: 5)

The twentieth-century discovery of social structures constituted by nations and classes about whom statistics could be collected and diagrams drawn was to lead to a kind of heyday of sociological enterprise, roughly split between Marx and the social theorists and empirical sociology – which became closely associated with the construction and use of objects made for other purposes, including the political struggles for social policy; and the development of techniques and institutions of surveillance; and the invention of social categories: the unemployed, the family, the school, particular neighbourhoods and so on. The position of sociology in the first half of the twentieth century, with its competition found in anthropology, social research, politics and economics was markedly different to its development in the modernisation which followed the World War II, where sociology simultaneously became institutionalised, with a cultural place in the academy and resources flowing towards it on the one hand, while managing to become trendy, if not in some quarters critical of and ‘against’ what the academy stood for, on the other.

The so-called red brick universities in the United Kingdom and their counterparts abroad scored well in this era yet Gouldner (1970) claimed a crisis of sociology, since from the womb that bore this modernising sociology sprang other children: institutionalisation, the rise of an expanded professoriate and salaried academics, the concept of careers, and in the end the risk of what in those days was termed ‘selling out’. Gouldner couldn’t foresee the neo-liberal untying of welfare capitalism and the rise of deregulation, nor globalisation and the end of the Cold War, bringing us to our contemporary calamities such as war and the ‘credit crunch’ with its implications for sociology and universities everywhere, but he would surely have written an interesting book if he had. The audit culture, diversification, postmodernism, the integration of feminism, post-colonialism, the persistence of social class, and the expansion of access to sociology, all collided to produce new materials

for the discipline, and with it arguably both its fragmentation (see *Sociological Research Online* (2005) and liberation from the shackles of the university department (Savage and Burrows, 2009). Not that the departments of sociology had entirely become devoid of interest, at least to the sociologists based in them, if no one else, nor the role of the sociologist in public life (Halsey and Runciman, 2005; Holmwood and Scott, 2007) or in the panoply of a discipline, the learned societies, the professional bodies, its journals and networks (see, for example, an account of the British Sociological Association in Platt, 2003). The development of such panoply was to leave one activity undiminished, the sociologists' capacity to make sociology itself the object and ourselves as sociologists the subject of our enquiry. So what kinds of subjects and objects are at play now? This book brings together some of the classic lines of enquiries and show us in practice the riffs of sociology today.

In Chapter 1, *Sociology and the Sociological Imagination: Reflections on Disciplinarity and Intellectual Specialisation*, John Scott discusses two contrasting views of sociology. One is that sociology is the overarching and integrating framework for organising studies of human activity. The other is that sociology is a residual discipline, exploring phenomena not studied elsewhere. On the first view, sociology is the parent discipline for more specialised branches of enquiry, and the many other 'social' disciplines are merely subdivisions of this larger science. It is argued that this view can be defended, but only by recognising an important distinction between intellectual mappings and disciplinary mappings. Intellectually, the case can be made for a distinctive and general science of the social, understood as the study of intersubjective phenomena in their spatial and temporal contexts. This has been regarded as the disciplinary core of sociology since the late nineteenth century. It stands in a close, but autonomous relationship to the specialised investigations of cultural, political, economic, religious, and numerous other areas of study. Disciplinary distinctions, however, are historically contingent divisions of the academic world, with boundaries shifting and altering over time and from one country to another. The particular pattern of disciplinary differentiation found in a society reflects a division of scientific labour that is the negotiated outcome of a balance of power among socially organised academics, each discipline laying claim to its particular intellectual territory. The views of sociology as overarching or residual relate to particular conceptions of the disciplinary division of labour. Advocacy of the need for interdisciplinarity or for post-disciplinary studies do not necessarily negate the

intellectual recognition of a distinctive sphere of the social and its various specialised or differentiated subspheres. The chapter attempts to set out an intellectual mapping that shows how disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns can be reconciled. It is argued that recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity does not undermine the case for the promotion of a general study of social phenomena that is primarily, though not exclusively, sociological in character.

In Chapter 2, *Nouns and Verbs: Old and New Strategies for Sociology*, Michael Rustin argues that sociology's history can be traced from its roots in the formulation of social facts through its transformations of understandings of processes and actions. The legacy of classical sociology is based in the former, but today reference must be made to what Isabel Stengers has called the philosophies of process, this to include in Rustin's view the process by which sociology itself moved from a formulation of thing-like objects to a reflexive grasp of subjects operating in flux as part of more fluid and mutable structures which conceptualise individuals in global entities. However, Rustin locates the various formations of sociological and social theory with the historical moment, pointing out that the relationship between the two is synchronous and that much of the sociological enterprise attempted to model society and to explain apparent transitions between different versions of the kinds of societies which were identified. But the so-called cultural turn of the 1970s and postmodernism since has disrupted this process. Today, the focus on actions, practices, and processes as explored by Goffman, Foucault, Bourdieu, Latour, and Marx may be better able to capture the flow of a changing state of social order and disorder by identifying actions and practices which can be shown to exhibit a coherent order. In this way, we may be able to identify social order with its pattern, regulatory, predictability, and constraining forces.

In Chapter 3, *Sociological Theory: Still Going Wrong?* Gregor McLennan picks up on the catchphrase of Mouzelis's (1999) book of over a decade – *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong?* This chapter notes that there is still little consensus in the discipline/profession about what sociological theory is, and if/how it differs from other notions, such as social theory or cultural theory. All manner of discourses, styles, and levels of analysis can be found posing as theory, with no obvious unifying schema to give shape to this rampant plurality. Indeed, there appears to be no agreement about whether the cacophony of theoretical modes *needs* to be given shape. The chapter then comments on the recent attack by 'specialist' figures in sociology, such as Goldthorpe and Abel on popular 'generalist' theorists, such as Castells, and goes on to

raise similar points in relation to some other currently favoured theoretical reference points: reflexivity, complexity theory, and cosmopolitanism à la Beck. One kind of meta-analysis of the elements of social theory is then sketched, amending earlier suggestions by Runciman. However, such codifications are always contestable and formulaic, and in the end we have to wonder, rather unsociologically and unscientifically, whether it is simply *quality of thought* that marks good social theory.

In Chapter 4, Bruno Latour also urges us to extend the horizons of the sociological viewpoint. His Plea for Earthly Sciences launches a radical attack on traditional – by which he means modernist – concepts of the ‘social’. He invokes the work of James Lovelock in highlighting the war between humanity and Gaia (the feedback mechanisms of our planet), a war which humanity is bound to lose and which forces us to reassess our preconceptions. The usual idea of the ‘social’, he claims, is a product of the fictions we have told ourselves in our descriptions of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘modernisation’. What has been viewed as processes of emancipation from constraints has now been shown to be a progressive ‘explicitation’ of the attachments that bind humanity to our environment. The social, in one sense at least, is too limited a concept to enable us to understand how to interact with our various earthly attachments and should therefore give way to a new understanding of ‘associations’.

Here Latour connects with the body of work known as actor-network theory (ANT) which emerged from science and technology studies and with which he himself has long been associated. It implies a different idea of the social, one that ‘establishes connections...between all sorts of heterogeneous domains.... [S]ocial is not the name of any one link in the chain, nor even that of the chain, but it is that of the *chaining* itself’. This idea connects to an old debate between Durkheim and Tarde about whether the social is cause or consequence of other types of connections. Latour is firmly on the side of the latter: ‘society is nothing but the empty word we use for the superposition of all of the heterogeneous connections produced by non-social elements like law, biology, economy, politics, physics, etc.’

In Chapter 5, Complexity, ‘Nature’ and Social Domination: Towards a Sociology of Species Relations, Erika Cudworth argues that the ‘natural environment’ is characterised by incredible difference, but this is often homogenised in sociological understandings and, until recently, has generally been seen as beyond the social. This chapter argues that social formations are ecologically embedded in inter-species networks,

and that sociological work needs to reflect this more strongly if the discipline is to move away from its history of exclusive humanism. Non-human ‘animals’ have raised some interesting questions for what it means to be human and for our consideration of the boundaries of the social. Work on companion species in particular has illustrated the extent to which we have co-evolved with certain species and have entangled histories resulting in specific social forms – ‘nature cultures’ or ‘social natures’.

The chapter considers the burgeoning literature which seeks to understand the co-constitution of the ‘social’ and the ‘natural’, whilst developing its own understanding of non-human nature as subject to a complex system of domination which privileges the human. Cudworth evaluates the work on systems thinking and suggests how some concepts informed by complexity theory may be deployed in the analysis of relations between human communities, non-human species, and environmental contexts. It suggests a complex social system of natured domination, ‘anthroparchy’, which can be understood as a network of institutions, processes, and practices that can be evidenced in various social forms. The social formations implicating certain non-human animals in contemporary Britain provide a case study, and the chapter considers the institutions and practices of animal farming as a network of social relations. Within a complexity frame however, ‘anthroparchy’ cannot stand alone. Formations of social natures are emergent as a result of the interplay of a range of systems of domination, as illustrated by the intersections of nature with gender.

In Chapter 6, *The Death of History in British Sociology: Presentism, Intellectual Entrepreneurship and the Conundra of Historical Consciousness*, David Inglis argues that intellectually satisfying sociology constantly makes connections – between individual agency/biography and social structures, between micro-level activities and macro-level forces, between different sorts of institutions, between different parts of the world, and so on. Making such connections does not just involve reflecting at the conceptual level the nature of linkages between phenomena that are connected to each other in the empirical world, it also involves leaps of the (sociological) imagination, finding linkages that may not immediately be apparent or may indeed at first glance seem unlikely. While contemporary sociology, in Britain and elsewhere, has increasingly become very good at discerning often subterranean modes of connectivity between heterogeneous elements in social space, it has signally failed systematically to link and relate present-day activities and processes to human affairs of the past. The

classical sociologists, by reasons of both training and temperament, were very aware of historically existing societies, their similarities and differences in relation to modernity, and their effects upon, and legacies for, the latter. By contrast, much sociology today is guilty of intellectual presentism, whereby historical modes and means of human sociality are either ignored completely or are lumped together into the catch-all category of 'pre-modern' social order. When forms of society that existed before early modernity are dealt with, this is usually by specialists working in the relatively rarified realm called 'historical sociology', a sub-field which arguably has more influence in historiographical circles than in 'mainstream' sociological ones.

This chapter challenges sociologists to face up to, and to endeavour to transcend, the historical myopia that characterises much of the discipline today, through the means of connecting – more effectively and systematically than has hitherto been the case – the nature and dynamics of historically existing societies to the understanding of present-day human affairs. The chapter offers an example of one way of achieving such a purpose, by providing a critique of the presentism in many (sociological and interdisciplinary) theories of globalisation. An account is offered of the already significantly well-developed understandings of the 'world as one place' and 'global compression' that were expressed in ancient Greece and Rome. By considering both the apparently remarkable 'modernity' of these accounts of what we today call 'globalisation', and also the social conditions which gave rise to them, the chapter shows that sociology in the present day would do well to remember that many of the ideas and intellectual dispositions it currently believes to be very recent in nature have in fact already been anticipated within social orders that are all too often written off as archaic and as having little to offer by way of informing the analysis of present-day social conditions. By attending to ancient voices whose tone and tenor seems in many ways remarkably 'sociological' to our ears, contemporary sociologists can more effectively understand what precisely is novel about their own modes of thinking, and what by contrast is merely the naive pouring of some very old wine into some shiny new bottles.

In Chapter 7, *Sociology and Post-colonialism: Another 'Missing' Revolution?* Gurminder K. Bhambra challenges the familiar narratives about the origins of sociology which she argues are rather Eurocentric and largely ignore the colonial underbelly of European modernity. The apparent failure of feminist critiques of the 1970s to fundamentally transform sociology lead Bhambra to consider the ways in which the

discipline has showed itself to be peculiarly resistant to critiques from the 'margins', be they from feminists, or queer theory. She argues that the post-colonial problematic presents an opportunity to engage with the core assumptions of the discipline and its relationship to Western modernity in a way that challenges its basic concepts because they are seen as coming from somewhere outside the West, which at the same time has an intimate and complex set of connections to the West.

In Chapter 8, *Towards a Multiplication of Specialized Assemblages of Territory, Authority and Rights*, Saskia Sassen argues that a key feature of the current period is the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialised, cross-border assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights that used to be lodged in national institutional domains. These vary considerably in form, and in aggregate they are a partial but deep transformation. They do not represent the end of nation states but they do begin to disassemble bits and pieces of the national. We see a novel type of segmentation inside the state apparatus, with a growing and increasingly privatised executive branch of government aligned with specific global actors, and we see a hollowing out of legislatures which increasingly become confined to fewer and more domestic matters. This has implications for citizenship and the political, eroding the privacy rights of citizens and their ability to demand accountability. This represents a historic shift of the private-public division at the heart of the liberal state, albeit always an imperfect division. Sassen argues that we can no longer speak of 'the' state, and hence of 'the' national state versus 'the' global order, but rather of novel assemblages of territory, authority, and rights. They are profoundly unsettling of prevalent institutional arrangements within and among nation states and between citizens and their national states. They are also profoundly unsettling for how we think about them, and more widely, how we can conceive of society and social change today.

The next few chapters explore autobiographically what it means to be a sociologist both as lived experience at the level of becoming sociological and in terms of the kinds of problems and lines of enquiry which are developed in the process.

In Chapter 9, *A Changing Life-Course in British Sociology*, Gayle Letherby argues that sociology as a discipline has its own life-course which is affected not only by new empirical findings and the development of theory and method but by external discourses both within and outside higher education. With reference to reflections on the history and health of the discipline, the recent debate in *Sociological Research*

Online considers, amongst other things, the fragmentation and/or diversification of Sociology. As John Scott (2005) notes, debates about what sociology is are nothing new, indeed they have been characteristic of the discipline since its beginning. In this chapter, she briefly revisits this discussion before focusing specifically on her own sociological life-course as a feminist sociologist. She situates her story within wider theoretical and epistemological concerns and details her initial and continuing sociological ambitions with particular reference to professional activities within and outside of the institution and research and writing concerns. She came to higher education and sociology later than some (as a 28-year-old-mature student in 1987) not least because of her class and gender. Over twenty years in the academy she has studied at undergraduate and postgraduate level, worked in three different institutions, progressed through the ranks from fractional lecturer to professor, and written and researched in a range of areas including issue of method, methodology, and epistemology; reproductive and non-parental identity; the sociology of travel and transport and working and learning in higher education. Here she reflects upon the relevance of her experience to wider debates of concern to the discipline in particular and higher education in general.

In Chapter 10, *Aspirations and Opportunities: A Career in Sociology*, Michael Banton suggests that one model of the human life-course is that set out in the Christian sacraments: baptism and communion, plus the five lesser sacraments. He was *baptised* a sociologist by Edward Shils at LSE in 1947, and *confirmed* by a notional laying on of hands at a graduation ceremony three years later. According to Halsey's *History of Sociology in Britain*, thirteen of his generation became apostles. They were sustained in their membership among the faithful at meetings of the University Teachers section of the British Sociological Association (BSA) and at other conferences (Platt, 2003). They were our *communion*. They were *ordained* as teachers of doctrine by various universities; in Banton's case, by Edinburgh and Bristol. Sociology, like the church, is troubled by scandalous doctrine; teachers can make students do *penance* for errors and give them absolution, but, again like the church, they have only limited powers to correct the heresies of their peers. The analogies are weaker with respect to *matrimony*, though his wife has sometimes protested that he is married to her and not to sociology. Whether any of us enter into the sociological hereafter depends not upon *extreme unction* but upon the possible conferment of a place in accounts of the growth of sociological knowledge.

In Chapter 11, *Cracking the Ivory Tower: Proposing 'An Interpretive Public Sociology'*, Max Farrar analyses his love–hate relationship with academic sociology over the past forty years. Having rejected sociology when he positioned himself as a revolutionary in the early 1970s, embraced it in the mid-1990s when he positioned himself as 'a born again sociologist who needed a pension', and experienced in the mid-2000s a resurgence of his former antipathy, he argues that these personal troubles are related both to public issues and to the inherent contradiction in the discipline itself. But personal troubles – ethical, egotistical, and narcissistic – are not to be dismissed sociologically, since the absence of the first and the preponderance of the other two are evident among most sociologists and require scrutiny. The lack of serious engagement with public issues among most sociologists is related to the failure to resolve the discipline's contradiction: its claim to be an impartial science, despite the intellectual and practical roots of its founding fathers and mothers, who were civic-minded, engaged citizens. Via an analysis of Bauman's *Interpreters and Legislators* and Burawoy's 'public sociology' the chapter makes the case for a humanistic sociology which acknowledges the neuroses of its practitioners and the contradictions of academic life, but is unashamed of its public support for radical social, political, and cultural projects.

In Chapter 12, *Sand in the Machine: Encouraging Academic Activism with Sociology HE Students Today*, Joyce E. Canaan reminds us of the simple fact that a large proportion of workers in sociology work primarily by teaching it, and spend a lot of time working with students.

This chapter explores her pedagogical efforts to date in encouraging students to engage critically and sociologically with the world, using insights from critical pedagogy. She explores how she began to develop and deepen popular education insights on a new module first taught in autumn 2005. Canaan considers how her pedagogy was, contradictorily, enabled by opportunities offered by new neo-liberal initiatives and considers the degree to which she could subvert the ends imagined by the architects of these initiatives. She suggests that the fact that progressive interventions could occur at a time when HE is being marketised and commodified, and when academic freedom is under threat indicates that critical pedagogy is not just still possible but is of vital importance in mainstream HE – although how far it can be taken is an open question. Canaan argues, nonetheless, that in the current climate of crisis in HE and in the world more generally, those of us committed to critical pedagogy must continue to act as 'the sand, not the oil, in the works of the world' (Eich in Kotze, 2005: 19). Thus we can encourage

students to learn in ways that work against them by becoming future lubricants of the machine and towards building a future that affirms their own and others' human dignity.

Finally, in Chapter 13, *The Sociological Imagination as Popular Culture*, David Beer and Roger Burrows turn their attention to the relationship between sociology, the academe, and the outside world, in particular the public, and how sociology is both received by the public and produced and enjoyed or consumed by the public in the contexts of popular culture, which is the yardstick by which its successes and failures will be judged and a source of sociological understanding in its own right. They argue that the relations have shifted to such an extent that it can be likened to a second 'coming crisis', this time one rooted in popular culture. The concept of a sociological imagination can today be used to illustrate how far the interests of sociology have spread beyond the confines of the discipline. So something that might seem as inconsequential as the TV show *Beauty and the Geek* might already be affecting the attitudes of people who encounter sociology, either when selecting a degree to study or when encountering our attempts to *go public*. It might even be that our existing students draw as much from these popular cultural sources when thinking about how to do sociology as they do from professional sociologists and 'official' sociological resources. Beer and Burrows argue that activities on the social networking site *Facebook* or the 'research methods' on a TV show like *Beauty and the Geek* or *Vanity Lair* are as likely to inform the type of work students do as Durkheim's (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

However, this might be a way to invigorate and change sociology. New ways of doing sociology might come from these alternative sociological forms; new ways of connecting with intended audiences might be found by appropriating selected elements from these forms. Sociologists should perhaps also be pleased that the forms of popular culture discussed here reveal such a strong and widespread interest in things sociological, even if this interest is not entirely contained within the discipline itself. It suggests an opportunity to make some new connections if sociologists are able to find a way of tapping into the broader interest in 'thinking sociologically'.

Note

1. The papers/chapters in this book arise out of conference papers originally presented to the British Sociological Association Conference, University of East London, April 2007. The views and opinions of speakers at the BSA

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1

Sociology and the Sociological Imagination: Reflections on, Disciplinarity and Intellectual Specialisation

John Scott

Sociology always used to be described, unproblematically, as the science of society.¹ Many sociologists have expressed self-doubts about the appropriateness of designating their discipline as a 'science', and increasing numbers have begun to express similar concerns about describing their subject matter as 'society'. While disputes over the scientific character of sociological method have largely been resolved through the use of alternative words (such as discipline, study) or through circumlocution – simple avoidance of the disputed word – rejection of the word 'society' seems to point to something deeper, to issues that lie at the very heart of the discipline.

References to the study of society were meant to imply that Sociology is concerned with the most general processes that tie people together into cohesive social units. Those who are concerned about this idea have made two points. First, they hold that the growing global connections among national states and economies have undermined the idea that there are still, if there ever were, distinct national societies. Second, they hold that Sociology is simply one among a number of social sciences and that it cannot claim any special status as a discipline responsible for studying 'social' phenomena *per se*.

These claims reflect the duality in the idea of society itself. The word was used, rather ambiguously, to refer both to human association in general and to the bounded, often national, groupings that sociologists investigated. From this point of view, Sociology, in principle, can study anything and everything that happens in and through society. This was

the basis of the Comtean view of Sociology as the queen of the sciences, as the overarching and integrating framework within which all studies of human activity could be organised (Comte, 1848). Those concerned with economic, political, religious, and other forms of human action could be seen as applying a sociological imagination in their work and could be regarded as working in specialised branches or subdivisions of Sociology.

Few sociologists drew such a radical conclusion from Comte's charter statement, preferring to recognise the legitimacy of other social science disciplines. In practice, Sociology was seen as concerned with those social phenomena that had not already been claimed by Economics, Political Science, Jurisprudence, and the other 'social sciences' and humanities that focused on particular, specialised activities. Sociologists might stress that their discipline has a general concern for the interconnections of social phenomena into social wholes, within which specialised social phenomena are embedded, but they have generally been content to study a diverse range of 'unclaimed' topics that are 'left over' as other, more autonomous disciplines have developed. As a result, it has often been left unclear exactly *which* social phenomena might be specific to or distinctive of Sociology. 'Society' dissolves into its myriad specialised components and Sociology came to be seen by many as a subject without a defining centre or distinctive set of concerns. This led John Urry (1981) to ask at one annual conference of the British Sociological Association whether Sociology might be a mere parasite or scavenger that lives on the intellectual remains and waste products of other disciplines.

This view allowed that Sociology could give rise to new areas of investigation, studying topics yet unstudied elsewhere, but it was always possible that these specialisms would grow to become established as independent disciplines in their own right. Sociology, therefore, seems to have no control over its own content. From this point of view, Sociology has to be seen, at any one time, as an uncoordinated collection of 'sociologies of' this or that. There can be no 'mainstream' of 'social' activity to define the discipline.

Despite this lack of confidence in the claims behind the idea of Sociology as the science of society, it has been widely recognised that one important feature of the discipline is the articulation of a body of 'sociological theory' – though this has increasingly been seen as 'social theory'. It is within this theoretical discourse that sociologists have explored the interconnections of social phenomena into social wholes. Works in theory have been concerned with the nature of the 'social'

in general, with human society or human association in all its various facets. The Comtean vision, then, became an unacknowledged feature of the theoretical work of the discipline.

A crucial issue to explore is the ongoing relationship between a discipline with such (implicit) generalising claims and the other social sciences that exist on its borders. What forms of coexistence and what kind of division of intellectual labour can there be? What forms of 'interdisciplinary' research can be established through intellectual cooperation, and, most significantly, can there be a 'post-disciplinary' system of social sciences (Sayer, 2000) that would have no need for a separate Sociology? I will explore these questions by showing that there is, indeed, a disciplinary core to Sociology, and that this core activity is central to the development of a wider body of social sciences. I will set out a view of Sociology as the study of the social – of the intersubjective association of human beings – and I will show that the maintenance of this is essential if complete intellectual fragmentation is to be avoided. I will also show that the maintenance of a strong discipline of Sociology is a precondition for interdisciplinary collaboration and the building of vibrant new disciplines.

The nature of the social

Comte saw Sociology as the foundational social science, the science that is able to conceptualise the central elements of social life. With some reservations this can be said to have become a primary assumption for most, if not all, of the sociologists of the formative period and as a view that gave rise to what is called 'classical sociology'. It was held that the distinctive object of sociological study is the sphere of intersubjective, culturally formed relations of interaction and interdependence formed through human association. The distinctively 'social' aspect of human existence cannot be reduced to the minds and acts of particular human agents without losing sight of the most distinctive features of human existence.

Durkheim (1895), for example, held that 'social facts' have an autonomy *sui generis* and form the disciplinary core of Sociology. Similarly, Simmel (1908) saw forms of 'sociation' as irreducible to the subjective meanings that actors give to their actions.² For both Durkheim and Simmel, social forms are to be seen as the irreducible interpersonal outcomes of the subjectively meaningful orientations that agents take towards each other. 'Society' emerges through the symbolically constituted and linguistically mediated encounters and interactions through

which meanings and representations are communicated from one mind to another in the course of human association.

This sphere of the social is not an ethereal realm beyond individual minds and without substantive existence. Neither is it a separate 'group mind'. The social consists rather of shared meanings that constantly circulate among minds. As institutional and relational structures (López and Scott, 2000), the social is reproduced by and is the condition for individual and collective actions. Social structures are, at the same time, inscribed in the bodily habits and dispositions of agents as the socialised dispositions that generate tendencies to act in one way rather than another. The individual and the social are articulated through this means.

While intersubjectivity is the essential characteristic of the social, the social cannot be regarded as exclusively intersubjective. Even the 'pure' sociologist Simmel realised – and explicitly stated – that the intersubjective exists only ever in concrete contexts and under the material conditions through which its meaning and significance are shaped. The fields of meaning and interdependence that constitute the social have a substantive existence in and through the material objects that contain them. There is the materiality of the human bodies in which social structures are 'embodied' and the materiality of the physical environment within which human beings live and move. The embedding of social meanings and relations in the physical world constitutes a social 'morphology', a spatial arrangement of material objects that constitutes the landscapes, settlements, and technologies to which human actions relate. As spatial phenomena, social structures are also temporal phenomena. They are produced and reproduced in interaction, and they are subject to constant transformation as individuals innovate and improvise under the given conditions inherited from the past.

This view of the social as a temporally organised and materially embedded intersubjectivity highlights the complex relationships between Sociology, History, and Geography, which can be regarded as the three foci of social science with their particular and distinctive *focus* on, respectively, the intersubjective, the temporal, and the spatial.

Of course, the relationships among these disciplines have been, in practice, marked by important yet contingent intellectual differentiations. History has tended to be defined by its practitioners as having a concern for chronological narrative and as emphasising 'individualising' or 'particularising' rather than generalising accounts of human activity. As it has developed as a university discipline, History has also tended to draw on psychology and other disciplines in its explanations, rather

than seeing itself as exclusively 'social' in character. Geographers, for their part, have defined their discipline more analytically by a concern for the specificity of place and the materiality of space, a concern that has most easily been sustained through its continuing (if sometimes uneasy) association with geology, geomorphology, and climatology in a disciplinary structure that is often divided into 'physical geography' and 'human geography'.

This argument does not, of course, resolve the problems raised by those who question the idea of 'society' as a focus for sociological work. Their arguments imply that the space that I have allocated to Sociology as the science of the social might be occupied solely by specialised social sciences and that an investigation of social facts *per se* might be a chimera. Disciplines concerned with intersubjectivity, materiality, and temporality are essential to the very idea of 'social' science, but need this require the existence of a general sociology separate from specialised subjects?

Disciplinary, specialisation, and the social

Disciplinary distinctions are rarely direct reflections of the logical divisions within knowledge and they do not generally correspond to essential forms of understanding. They are historically contingent products of the development of educational systems within particular national contexts. They develop alongside other, already established, disciplines, and often in response to practical academic and political concerns. Disciplines are established as competing groupings of teachers and researchers whose characteristic methods and concepts change over time in response to both internal and external conditions. The specific kind and combination of disciplines which exist at any moment in time express a division of labour which is the negotiated outcome of the balance of power that exists between the socially organised academics.

Any attempt to differentiate disciplines solely by their concern for particular and exclusive intellectual problems is, therefore, doomed to failure. There are areas of common intellectual concern that unite adherents of different disciplines and, equally, areas of disagreement that divide them. For this reason, it is impossible to characterise a discipline by any simple and logically coherent set of intellectual issues or to give it exclusive jurisdiction over particular phenomena.

This is clear from the three classical disciplines considered so far. The nineteenth-century founders of Sociology, History, and Geography rarely drew exclusive borders around their concerns, and in their

substantive empirical research, Geography and History are still often indistinguishable from Sociology. It is not possible to make sharp and absolute distinctions between these disciplines and the concerns of their practitioners. Sociology has grown and expanded through a dialogue with other disciplines that have made possible the building of an awareness of the interdependence between the intersubjective, the material, and the temporal. Sociologists have, for example, long been concerned with nature, environment, and spatial organisation, and they have engaged in debates with geographers, ecologists, and others about these processes. These debates have also allowed ideas about the intersubjectively organised construction of material conditions to enter more fully into geographical debates.

This kind of debate and dialogue has also marked the relationship between Sociology and more specialised social science disciplines. The work of sociologists in general theory and in particular specialisms has informed the arguments taking place in other disciplines, and the work of those in other disciplines has, in turn, influenced that of sociologists. It is for this reason that a concern for the social is not found only in Departments of Sociology. The sociological imagination is a way of thinking about social phenomena that can be found in many other disciplines: in Political Science, Law, Business Studies, Religious Studies, Cultural Studies, the study of Education, and in numerous other special areas of investigation. Each discipline may define itself in relation to certain specific concerns and may employ other forms of intellectual imagination, but they have, since the growth of sociology, tended to have a sociological dimension to their work. Some of these specialised disciplines are organised around the investigation of autonomous social objects that can often be analysed without the need for any direct and continuing reference to the contextual social relations that give rise to them. Economics, for example, is typically based around claims that the social processes of exchange and market transaction exhibit *sui generis* relationships among financial variables that make it realistic to investigate them with little or no reference to the specifically human relations that make this possible. More typically, the social character of the phenomena studied is essential to the specialist discipline. Even Economics cannot completely ignore wider social processes and recognises that its models of rational action are to be seen as types of social action.

A crucial achievement of those in the formative generation of classical social theorists was that they infused a whole range of disciplines concerned with a wide variety of specific objects with a new, sociological mode of investigation. This often reflected their initial disciplinary

commitments. Durkheim, for example, spent most of his academic life as a Professor of Education, while Weber worked as a legal theorist and an economic historian, before, all too briefly, becoming a Professor of Sociology. However, their work was no less 'sociological' because of their disciplinary affiliation and a general conception of sociology was articulated and carried forward in a number of different disciplines.

It is true, nevertheless, that the various specialised disciplines cannot simply be claimed by imperialistic sociologists as branches or subdivisions of Sociology and marked out as parts of its essential territory. Specialised disciplines cannot be organisationally assimilated into Sociology. Whatever the intellectual linkages, their institutional autonomy must be respected. What is implied by the relationship described, however, is that the generalising theories of social actions produced within these sciences are specialised forms of *social* theory, and work in any one discipline cannot ignore more general forms of social theory, any more than the general theories of sociologists can afford to neglect the arguments of economists, political scientists, and others. A social theory that ignores the economic, for example, would be seriously inadequate, and an economic theory that becomes too detached from wider arguments in social theory is equally inadequate. A crucial role for Sociology, then, is to hold a central position within the debates that connect the various social sciences and that generate disciplinary fissions. Economic, political, religious, and other forms of action are always embedded in a larger social context, to a greater or lesser extent, and they cannot be sharply distinguished from other sociological concerns.

It is also the case, however, that the substantive empirical work engaged in by sociologists and others can rarely be contained within existing disciplinary boundaries. Any adequate investigation of a particular social phenomenon is likely to require those who study it to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and to consider the relationship of their work to that of those in neighbouring disciplines and specialisms. Indeed, it is for this reason that many new 'interdisciplinary' areas of study arise: specialists within established disciplines begin work on a particular topic that draws them together and, on occasion, new disciplines are born precisely from this interdisciplinary overlap and collaboration.

Specialisation, dissolution, and renewal

Where, then, does this leave sociology as institutionalised and actually practiced in Departments of Sociology? A professional Sociology

originated as a specific institutionalisation of the general conception of sociology that I have outlined. It has been the basis for the articulation of a sociological imagination that had been, until its emergence, an underdeveloped aspect of specialised intellectual discourse: social theory developed in Economics, History, and Ethics, for example, before it developed within 'Sociology', yet it did so in diffuse and unfocused ways. Professional Sociology has also nurtured the application of the sociological imagination in areas ignored by existing disciplines and areas that are of growing importance today in relation to neighbouring and cognate disciplines. As a consequence, the intellectual content of professional sociology, as institutionalised in its disciplinary practices, cannot be fixed and given for ever but must be continually restructured and reformed in relation to its disciplinary others.

There is also, of course, a continual restructuring of the field of disciplines to which Sociology relates. Indeed, sociological work is often so profound and informative that many of its specialist areas have, over time, crystallised, expanded, and then differentiated from the parent discipline. Educational Studies, Criminology, Health Studies, Business Studies, Media Studies, and so on have all grown at the expense of pre-existing sociological specialisms, and they have recruited many of their practitioners from the ranks of actual and potential sociologists. The growth of Sociology has been marked by a tendency towards the fragmentation of its disciplinary concerns.

This openness and flexibility in sociological specialisms might seem to imply that Sociology is doomed to disappear as it loses one after another of its specialist areas to new disciplines and interdisciplinary formations. It is clear, however, that this has not been the case, despite the loss of many specialisms. One reason for this is that new specialisms have sprung up within Sociology. As human social life has become more complex and differentiated so new areas for sociological enquiry have become apparent. New sociologies of gender, consumption, leisure, the body, popular culture, travel, and so on have emerged in the past thirty or so years. For example, as the salience of social class has declined within contemporary societies, new specialisms concerned with divisions of gender and ethnicity have become more prominent in an attempt to grasp contemporary forms of inequality. The loss of established specialisms opens up spaces that can be filled by new specialisms, allowing Sociology to show a great flexibility in its response to a changing world.

Because there can be a Sociology of anything, new phenomena that are marginalised or ignored by specialised disciplines find their

natural home within Sociology, and Sociology has established an openness to the formation of new specialisms, investigating neglected areas and concerned with issues of growing importance. As many concerns of industrial and organisational sociology have disappeared with the expansion of Business Studies and Management Studies, new Sociologies of consumption, retailing, and informal work have been formed as lively new specialisms. While traditional political sociology has largely disappeared into Departments of Government and Political Science, a renewed concern for 'political' issues has been taken up through such novel concerns as the study of surveillance and in new specialisms concerned with citizenship, human rights, and migration. There has, therefore, been a constant renewal of the discipline as ever-new specialisms split off to live a life of their own and new ones emerge to take their place.

In many sociological specialisms, cooperation with those working in established disciplines and interdisciplinary areas has been necessary and has been an important feature of their intellectual vitality. Sociologists working on travel and transport, for example, work closely with geographers, planners, and those in Urban Studies to develop their arguments. Those interested in the body have worked closely with social psychologists and psychoanalysts, researchers in Cultural Studies, feminist theorists, specialists in health care, and biologists. The transformed sociological imagination brought about by the introduction of a sociology of gender has been taken up in many other disciplines and has been the basis of a massive growth in Women's Studies, where researchers from History and Literature have worked fruitfully with sociologists.

Such specialisms, I have shown, have often split off from the parent discipline to become new disciplines in their own right. Whether they become established as new disciplines with their own organisational structure within the university system or remain as looser areas of 'interdisciplinary studies' is often arbitrary, and relatively unimportant for the character of the work undertaken. The consequence for Sociology, however, is that as a discipline, it tends to become an ever-shifting system of diverse specialisms, serving as a mere nursery or seed bed for new specialisms.

The transformation of new sociological specialisms into autonomous interdisciplinary ventures becomes a basis for both disciplinary fragmentation and renewal. The constant renewal of Sociology as its one-time specialisms become its current others is integral to the very nature of Sociology as a mode of intellectual investigation. If professional

sociology were to lose its openness to contemporary social change, it would be in danger of stagnation and extinction. It is an openness and flexible response to new opportunities that keep Sociology alive as a discipline. The discipline is, it would seem, cursed with eternal youth, as it is forced to respond creatively to social change and to the intellectual expansion of its others.

A core for Sociology?

This image of a discipline in constant flux highlights the question of whether there is any sense in which Sociology could be said to have a core of subject-specific content. Might it not, in fact, consist simply of a constantly shifting set of specialisms? Might it even be possible to imagine these specialisms as existing independently of the parent discipline? Might Sociology disappear, leaving the sociological imagination to be pursued only through a myriad social science specialisms? Perhaps the sociological approach has been so successfully established in the human and social sciences that professional, disciplinary Sociology has done its job and there is no need for any concern about the disappearance of the particular collection of specialisms currently linked together as professional sociology.

I do not believe that this is the correct conclusion to draw. Without Sociology, no discipline would take intellectual responsibility for the social *per se* and make this its own distinctive concern. Without such a discipline to nurture the sociological imagination, the social sciences would be impoverished and would be unlikely to continue to exhibit the intellectual dynamism that has characterised them over the past century or so. While specialist bodies of social theory might be developed within particular social sciences, there would be no general social theory and, in the long term, the various specialised social theories would be diminished and their disciplines would be weakened. The ability of professional Sociology to follow a strategy of openness and intellectual renewal and to contribute to the development of the social sciences and interdisciplinary work depends on its ability to maintain the core ideas that are central to the sociological imagination. Indeed, interdisciplinary cooperation among the social sciences depends on the existence of a discipline in which the idea of the social has a central position.

Some such as Urry have argued that it does not matter whether disciplinary sociology disappears, so long as sociological ways of thinking are apparent in other disciplines, in transdisciplinary work, and in practical affairs. To substantiate his case Urry employs the Foucauldian

image of the archipelago, holding that 'sociology has gone underground and pops up like the islands of an archipelago in unexpected places' (2005: 1.7). However, his analogy belies his conclusions. If sociology had indeed 'gone underground', it would still exist somewhere apart from the 'islands' in which it is manifested. Islands in the ocean exist only as the pinnacles of the submerged land mass that connects them: they cannot exist as an archipelago without the existence of that land mass. In fact, a better image is the Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome: apparently, isolated plants grow and prosper because they spring from the underlying tuberous root that gives them their life and allows the plant to spread. If we are to let a 'hundred flowers' bloom, as Urry's mixed metaphor requires, then the sociological rhizome must be cultivated in its nursery beds so that it can continue to spread and transplant itself to other, less well-cultivated fields.

This points to the crucial flaw in the view of those who argue for the abandonment of conventional disciplinary concerns in the name of interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary work. New interdisciplinary work, and interdisciplinary cooperation must of course be encouraged, but this cannot be at the expense of the very disciplinary formations that are crucial for their survival. Professional sociology cannot serve merely as the hatchery and nursery of new disciplines. It must remain the basis of the distinctively sociological perspective that is the means through which new interests and concerns can be identified. The core sociological ideas must be maintained and allowed to mature, like the portrait of Dorian Gray, if its specialisms are to maintain their youth and vitality. Professional sociology must persist as a discipline that combines *both* constantly shifting specialisms *and* a general foundational theory of the social.

If professional sociology, as hitherto practiced, were to disappear, the very survival of the sociological imagination – the exploration of the social – would be threatened. This general conception of the social became established in discipline after discipline *only* because, at the same time, a professional sociology served as its guardian discipline. The sociological imagination has been sustained by professional sociologists who have seen it as their obligation to do so. Without the institutionalisation of sociology as a discipline, the sociological imagination and its framework of fundamental concepts could never have been so firmly established and sustained and it would not have had the influence that it has had in more specialised disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. Historians, economists, political scientists, cultural theorists, to mention only a few disciplinary practitioners at random, have no

professional obligation or commitment to promoting and protecting the sociological imagination, no matter how useful they may currently find it in their work. It is only through the consideration and articulation of the general conception of sociology by professional sociologists that the survival of the sociological imagination can be ensured. It is through debates and dialogues between professional sociologists and other social scientists that the sociological imagination has achieved and maintained its presence across the human disciplines. Without a professional sociology, there could be no such dialogue.

Those who are most active in its specialist areas do not always recognise the need for a separate discipline of Sociology. The success of Sociology in spawning new disciplines and interdisciplinary work has enhanced the identification of researchers with their research specialism and with their colleagues in cognate disciplines and has made them less likely to identify themselves as 'sociologists'. For this reason, it is more than ever necessary to reaffirm the need for theoretical work that consolidates and maintains the sociological imagination. The general framework of ideas about the social may be the *common* concern of the social sciences but it is also, before all else, the specific concern of sociology in the sense that it is this focus which makes sociology sociological. Professional sociology is the specific guardian of these intellectual concerns. Professional Sociologists' vocational identity commits them to protect and promote those intellectual concerns. This intellectual task centres on the idea of what it is to talk about human 'society' in all its complexity. It is necessary to recognise the centrality of this particular intellectual endeavour for much of the work that is currently carried on in the human and social sciences and to build the institutional structures that will continue to sustain it. If sociologists do not protect and promote the sociological imagination, then who will?

The loss of commitment to the disciplinary core is also apparent in recent trends in the undergraduate curriculum. In many universities, the Sociology curriculum has been narrowed down to allow more time for specialist options. The growth of modularity and an increase in the range of options has transformed many degree courses into a collection of specialisms with only very loose and tenuous areas of integration. The great bulk of curriculum time is allocated to specialist modules from which it may be difficult to acquire a proper understanding of the interconnections among social phenomena. Modularity has reduced the space available for a core of compulsory courses covering the areas that are most directly related to the general conception of sociology. It is within social theory courses and in courses on comparative and historical sociology that the

general conception of sociology can be sustained, and the idea of the 'social' can be explored and articulated, yet general courses on comparative and historical sociology and on 'social structure' have almost completely disappeared. Courses in sociological theory have been reduced to the consideration of a very narrow range of social theorists, and these are often taught as purely historical figures. There is little or no engagement with the actual process of theorising the social. It is sometimes possible for students to complete their undergraduate studies without any significant exposure to the core sociological ideas that have defined the discipline since its earliest days. As a result, students can graduate with a very narrow view of the subject that they have studied. Nor is this problem rectified at postgraduate level, where a laudable attempt to enhance the teaching of research methods skills has reduced the amount of time that can be given to general and substantive sociological issues.

This tendency has been reinforced by changes in the teaching of sociology in schools. Modularisation has been well advanced in schools as the A/AS-level split has been established. Teachers can be very selective in their coverage of the sixth-form curriculum and need not be oriented towards a rounded and holistic view of the subject. Substantive areas of study – especially crime, health, and the mass media – are attractive to students and are, understandably, the modules on which teachers focus their attention. Increasing numbers of teachers have themselves now been trained in the shrinking university syllabus, and they pass on this restricted view of the subject to their students. When these students arrive at University they have an already narrowed conception of sociology and are impatient with courses covering areas regarded as 'old-fashioned' or unfamiliar. No wonder these courses are disappearing. The core concerns of the sociological imagination must be sustained within the sociology curriculum that will produce the next generation of sociologists. The design of Sociology courses must reflect the intellectual concerns of the discipline rather more than market pressures and specialized research interests. General ideas about social relations and the ways in which they have been explored by sociologists must figure centrally in the training of future generations of sociologists.

To argue in this way is not to espouse a disciplinary purism or to claim that sociologists have exclusive rights to theorise the social. It does not mean that Sociology must be promoted as an imperialistic discipline or that communication with those in other disciplines must be closed off. Disciplinary closure and isolationism would be both undesirable and unproductive. It is essential that sociology establish and maintain the transdisciplinary networks through which it can contribute to – and

learn from – intellectual debates across the social sciences. My point is merely that such engagement and interdisciplinarity can be most fruitful if it is undertaken from an intellectual base that involves a firm and clear awareness of the distinctive frame of reference that Sociology can offer.

Without such a firm and autonomous intellectual base, engagement with other disciplines is likely to result in the intellectual dissolution of Sociology as its practitioners attempt to learn from others without any appreciation that they also have something to offer. Dialogue cannot be a one-way process. To deny the distinctiveness and autonomy of the sociological perspective is to undermine the very possibility of debate and dialogue on an interdisciplinary basis. Only a secure discipline of committed proponents can contribute to the collective, interdisciplinary production of social scientific knowledge.

The science of society

Where does this leave the idea of Sociology as the ‘science of society’? One important point needs to be clarified immediately. In a comment on an earlier version of my argument, John Urry (2005) held that Sociology cannot take the idea of a national society as its object: ‘society’ and ‘nation’ should not be conflated (Urry, 2000; Walby, 2003). This is undoubtedly correct, but there is nothing in my argument that requires this conflation. There is no need to accord a privileged position to national societies, and certainly no need to privilege any particular national society. Sociology is and always has been concerned with a *diversity* of societal types in and through which human beings have lived their lives. These range from tribal bands through patrimonial empires to contemporary world systems. Such social entities are embedded in complex networks of relations that tie them to other systems, and to talk of such ‘societies’ is not at all incompatible with a recognition of the existence of transnational and inter-systemic relations. Indeed, the recognition of such relations is nothing new. Many social entities exist as the very dispersed, interpenetrating, and fragmentary structures that are held to characterise ‘post-national’ social life. Even if it is the case that many sociologists have unreflectively assumed the idea of a tightly bounded and isolated national society, this does not mean that the practice of sociology logically requires this assumption. If Sociology is the study of society, then it must take all types of society as its object and must recognise the permeability of all societal boundaries.

However, a deeper issue is also at stake. I referred earlier to the ambiguity inherent in the idea of society. As well as referring to specific bounded entities, the word society also refers to all of the intersubjective, relational contexts within which people interact. It does not designate only cohesive, integrated, and sharply bounded social entities. It is this general idea of society as the specific form of intersubjective association through which human beings are able to live their lives that remains the central concern of Sociology as a discipline.

The concept of 'society' must be brought back in to become the unifying centre of the discipline: Sociology needs once again to define itself as 'the study of society'. The sociological concept of society is the basis from which it is possible to recognise the diversity of social forms under which people have lived, and will continue to live in the future. It is the foundation from which a comparative analysis of cultural, economic, and political differences can figure as the central concern for any social theory worthy of the name.

Conclusion: the importance of disciplinary sociology

Before Sociology was established as a university discipline, a sociological imagination was only weakly developed and other disciplines could carry on their work without any significant consideration of the properly social dimension to their subject matters. The building of a sociological perspective and its establishment in Departments of Sociology during and after the classical period went hand-in-hand with its growing influence on other, more-established disciplines. The diffusion of sociological understanding was a hard-won battle, but this battle would be lost if sociology as a discipline – the guardian of the idea of the social – were to disappear through intellectual absorption into other disciplines and through the migration of its practitioners to interdisciplinary specialisms. If this were to happen, there would no longer be any strong intellectual base committed to nurturing a distinctively sociological perspective.

The social sciences depend upon the existence of a strong disciplinary Sociology, but a Sociology that is open to its relations with other disciplines. The commitment of sociologists to the development of a general social theory is crucial for the future of the social sciences. Such a theory encompasses not only the concerns currently taken up in sociological specialisms but also the central disciplinary concerns of other social scientists. It is for this reason that it is more plausible to describe it as 'social theory', rather than simply as 'sociological theory'.

Sociology is the science of the social. Its theories concern the social world as a whole and not merely those things that happen to interest empirical sociologists now. A social theory is necessarily outward looking: it is aware of the temporality and materiality of the social, and it recognises the multidimensional character of the social itself.

My argument has been that sociology as a discipline must defend and articulate a sociological imagination that recognises the distinctively intersubjective character of all social phenomena and human societies *and* that seeks to promote this sociological perspective in other disciplines, through interdisciplinary work, and in matters of practical policy. If it is to pursue this task, Sociology must maintain a firm disciplinary base from which the construction and promotion of its ideas and the recruitment and training of future generations of practitioners can be ensured.

To advocate a strong disciplinary sociology is not, then, to advocate an intellectual purism or a defensive conservatism towards new interdisciplinary areas. My advocacy of a disciplinary sociology that is centrally concerned with the development of general social theory must be seen as aimed precisely at the encouragement of fruitful, intellectual cooperation with other disciplines. A focus on the idea of the social makes it possible to both recognise and welcome the shifting intellectual contours of the social sciences. A concern for a general theory of the social – for the study of ‘society’ in all its complexity – is what lies at the heart of the intellectual landscape of the social sciences. A strong disciplinary sociology is the only real basis on which vibrant interdisciplinary collaboration can be envisioned and furthered. Sociology must, of course be reflexively critical of its own work, engaging with others in attempts to rectify lacunae in its understanding. However, it must also be proud of its own achievements. It should not deal with its others on the basis of an inferiority complex that is rooted in a misunderstanding of its own history and achievements. It must not assume that ‘we’ have all the problems and ‘they’ have all the answers. Intellectual collaboration must remain a dialogue of equals if Sociology is not to disappear entirely into an expansion of transdisciplinary or post-disciplinary work. It was the success of disciplinary sociology that made possible the sociologising of history and geography and the other specialist social sciences, and this was the basis on which it could make substantial contributions to the development of cultural studies and other interdisciplinary areas. It would be a disaster if the success of its intellectual progeny were to result in the death of the very parental discipline that can continue to nourish them in the future.

Notes

1. This paper draws on earlier statements of its central argument in Scott (2005 a,b,c, 2007).
2. Simmel's book has been partially translated in Wolff (1950).

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2

Nouns and Verbs: Old and New Strategies for Sociology

Michael Rustin

Ever since Durkheim's (1895) famous adjuration to 'treat social facts as things', sociology has been most comfortable with the work of identifying, classifying, and analysing the 'thing-like' entities which it has defined as society and its components. The idea of 'social structure' attributed a thing-like solidity to the sociological object of study. The constant but sometimes unexpected concomitants or effects of 'structures' – their generation of unequal life-chances between classes, genders, or races, for example – gave sociology a significant explanatory power. Since structures could be empirically shown to have consequences for aggregates of individuals, as in the sequelae of social stratification, it was possible to hold to the idea that there were entities specific to sociology as a discipline, while also keeping at least one foot on the solid ground of methodological individualism.

Propositions about the causal properties of structures could be tested by measures of what happened to individuals positioned within them. It was possible to construct a sociology which was respectful of the empiricist conceptions of science variously set out by Hume, J.S. Mill, and Karl Popper as the attribution of causal relations between entities from, or tested by, the evidence of constant conjunction. These descriptions of what caused what in society allowed ethical assessments, and political remediation. If inequality came about through the effects of social structures on individual life-chances, then sociologists could and did propose that one could amend the properties of these structures by governmental interventions.

This was the underpinning framework of empirical sociology in Britain in its earlier days, deriving from earlier demographic concerns. These were first with underpopulation (in the seventeenth century), then with potential overpopulation (in the eighteenth century, with

the writings of Malthus), and later in the twentieth century, in its concern with poverty and inequality. This latter tradition, with its focus on social mobility and unequal life-chances, became the most influential form of social democratic sociology in the post-war period (Hogben, 1938; Glass, 1954; Halsey, 2004).

Less solid, but also thing-like, was the sociological definition of society as having some of the properties of a biological organism. The idea emerged that societies were 'systems' which maintained their own equilibrium, regulated themselves through the normative or cultural analogue of a nervous system, had a metabolism (a system of production), and reproduced their own cells and structures (through socialisation). This quasi-organic model of society had explanatory possibilities which the mechanistic idea of 'structures' lacked. In particular, it made possible the identification of 'functional interdependencies' – causal relationships whose circular effect was to maintain a bounded system in a relatively consistent state – an addition to the one-way cause-effect linkages of mechanistic accounts. The idea that such relations could be regulated by flows of information – compared to thermostatic feedback loops – made it possible to reconcile 'functionalist' ideas of causation with linear Humean notions. This problem had created difficulties for functionalist models since elements of the social totality appeared to be defined as effects and causes at the same time, thus apparently defying the temporal flow of causal relations. So here were two thing-like entities: the social structure and the social organism, around which a sociology could be and was constructed.

One of the principal preoccupations of sociology in its first century or so was to classify the different kinds of society that could be identified, and in particular to elaborate comparisons between what were held to be the two contrasting kinds of greatest significance. Here was the sociological study of the 'transition to modernity', theorised in the familiar terms of the passage from status to contract, from traditional to rational-legal authority, from feudal to capitalist system, mechanical to organic solidarity, *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Understanding this transition was the great project of classical sociology, given its most ambitious theoretical synthesis by Talcott Parsons and his associates at the point when the transition in the United States seemed more or less complete.¹ The problem for functionalist sociology was then to show how other societies could catch up. Although this transition was of course conceived as a process, the main descriptive and explanatory energy of its sociologists was in the analysis of the contrasting structures of 'pre-modern', and 'modern' societies, rather than in the dynamics of

movement between them. The most informative way of displaying the finding of this sociology was in series of tabulations of the contrasting attributes of each kind of society as 'ideal types'. Indeed Weber's concept of the 'ideal type' indicates the priority given in classical sociology to the identification of actual and theoretical 'objects' upon which the classifications and theories of sociology could be constructed.

From the 1960s onwards, sociologists became aware of the limitations of the study of society as a thing-like entity, whether this was conceived mechanistically or in organismic terms. The dominant theoretical paradigm of functionalism in particular came under attack, for what was seen as its denial of conflict, and for its deterministic view of individuals as passive role players in society. Its concept of desirable social equilibrium was seen as both idealised and ideological. In the growing prosperity of the 1950s, American and British societies did indeed begin to see more diversity and tension, and thus, in response to these new stirrings, the societal 'thing' became complexified in various ways. Neo-Weberians drew attention to the conflicts between collective actors to obtain power within societies and deploy resources of all kinds for their own advantage. Symbolic interactionists prised apart role players and the roles in which they were placed, showing that societies were continually remade and reshaped in the encounters between individuals and the expectations placed upon them. The ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002) cast this interaction in more radical terms, describing the continuing process by which social scripts were invented, negotiated, and revised in everyday life. What had looked like a 'structure' or a 'thing' from a distance could be displayed in close up as a teeming mass of molecular life. There were, however, problems in relating this newly recognised 'micro-level' to any broader structural contexts, which generated methodological debate about the relations between the macro and micro in sociology (Alexander et al., 1992). Marxists too had to take account of the fact that the structures which they had classically theorised as in states of increasing tension and contradiction were not only more complex but also more persistent than they had imagined, with more divided collectivities of actors, more cohesive forces (the Gramscian idea of 'hegemony' theorised these forces in terms of civil society and culture), and more susceptibility to contingent circumstances (Althusser's 'conjunctures') than the classical mechanistic model had supposed.² Indeed the critique of mechanical materialism and its 'base-superstructure' model of determination was one of the major projects of late Marxist social theory. Even so, for a period the hope seemed to be that sociologists could hold on to the

idea that 'societies' could retain their distinctive things or objects of study, if they sufficiently refined and complexified their understanding of them. While the persistence and continuity of societies could no longer be taken for granted even by non-Marxists in the conflict-and upheaval-torn days of the 1970s, their persistence could at least be investigated, for example, through the theory of social reproduction in some of the work of Bourdieu, Althusser, and in Britain, Basil Bernstein. Anthony Giddens's reconciliation of the ideas of 'structure' and 'agency', in his theory of 'structuration' (Giddens, 1984) was an influential representation of this moment.³ It might thus be possible to hold on to the core sociological idea of structure, if its patterns of social production and reproduction could be incorporated.

But then, in the 1980s, Lash and Urry wrote (1987) of *The End of Organised Capitalism*, 'all that was solid' in the sociological universe began to 'melt into air'. Michael Mann, in his *Sources of Social Power* Vol. 1 (1986), Vol. 2 (1993), and Anthony Giddens, in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981) and *The Constitution of Society* (1984) proposed that it was no longer viable for sociologists to presume that their primary object of study should be societies contained within the boundaries of nations. Society was redefined as a plurality of entities unified by diversities of regimes of power, that is to say by collective actors imposing their will on other actors, deploying a variety of power resources to do so, and located within different 'power containers'. A more radical re-theorisation of the sociological project came from W.G. Runciman (1983, 1987, 1997), whose 'social evolutionism' proposed 'systacts', not societies, as the primitive term of sociological study and proposed that a Darwinian method of study of variation and competitive selection could allow explanation of the survival and development of 'systacts' of different kinds.⁴

The process of composition, dissolution, and recomposition of social formations was the common interest of these neo-Weberian and Darwinian sociologies. An ideological interest of several of these theorisations was to dismantle one particular theoretical model of society and its supposedly 'inevitable' transitions, namely Marxism, as a credible representation of reality. The struggle of Marxist sociology to make sense of an apparently decomposing social structure, and to incorporate each new axis of social division (class fragmentation, gender, race) along with each distinct form of power and agency (state, civil society, culture, ideology) into a coherent totality, continued until the neo-conservative triumph of the 1980s and 1990s, and the collapse of Communism seemed to make this theoretical project irrelevant.

In a more recent phase of sociological theorising, as sociologists have come to terms with the new globalised and individualised environment, 'society' has become a still more precarious and questionable concept for sociology. The ideas of globalisation and the network society, formulated most influentially by Manuel Castells (1998), challenged the conception of social structures as contemporary objects of study. Nor were sociologists the only, or even the principal theorists, of this new globalised epoch. Although Castells was originally an urban sociologist and a Marxist, his later work seemed to belong as much to a reinvigorated social geography as to sociology. Unquestionably a geographer was David Harvey (1990), whose ideas of time-space compression, and the process of valorisation and devalorisation of urban capital, were fundamental to the understanding of the new environment.⁵

The ideas of 'the cultural turn' and postmodernism, which implicitly challenged the ontological realism and moral certainties of sociological (including Marxian) 'theories of the transition', emerged initially from studies in architecture and from European philosophy. New movements in scientific thinking – neo-Darwinism and complexity theory for example – also proved to be more powerful conceptualisations of change than sociology seemed to offer. The brief moment in which sociologists could persuade themselves that their discipline held the unifying key to the understanding of the human world seemed to have come to an end.

Some sociologists responded energetically to this situation, seeking to incorporate the new realities of globalisation, and new theoretical perspectives too, into their thinking. In *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000) and *Global Complexities* (2003) John Urry argued that if sociology is to make a pertinent contribution to understanding the global era, it must abandon its original project – the study of society as a set of bounded institutions – and switch focus instead to a study of physical, imaginative, and virtual 'movements'. Sociology needs become the study of mobilities, of networks, flows, not of things. Zigmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000) also described a social world characterised by mobilities and flows. Within the flows, it is held to be possible to identify points of crystallisation, areas of local coherence, and consistency. The foci of these may be the shared experience of space and location, time, and ritualised interactions.

The sociologists' theoretical interest in such points of crystallisation was paralleled by the hope placed by radical critics of globalisation (such as Harvey) in local pockets of resistance to capital. John Urry's (Urry, 2002; Sheller and Urry 2004) investigations of the

reconfigurations of space and time involved in the particular mobilities of tourism are an example of situated sociologies which are possible in the new 'space of flows'. Urry, Byrne (1998), Walby (2009), and others have also seen 'complexity theory' as a resource for understanding the generation of new patterns of order from situations that were apparently chaotic or from systems that had entered a state of crisis. A more radical discourse of mobilities came from the influence of Deleuze's ideas on political and cultural theory, the idea of 'rhizomatic' fields of transmission and influence, which altogether bypassed established notions of structure and hierarchy, providing a new vocabulary for imagining the potentials for change. Hardt and Negri's work (e.g. *Empire*) has been the most influential application of these ideas to political thinking (2000). Thus, 'societies' are no longer persistent enough entities to constitute the totalities, or provide the field for classification and explanation, on which sociology has hitherto depended.

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, or the sociology of sociological knowledge in particular, these phases of the sociological discipline's work are synchronous with the evolution of the dominant social formation in which these writings have been taking place. The emergence of modern industrial society, the project to regulate, reform, and stabilise it whose heyday was the Great Boom of the post-Second World War, and its disturbance and upheaval through social and cultural conflict during the 1960s and 1970s are reflected in the dominant modes of sociological theory and inquiry during these periods. Equally, the emergence of 'mobilities', 'flows', and liquidities as dominant sociological metaphors reflects what one might call 'the moment of globalisation'; this term also having become a pervasive explanation of the necessity to readjust both sociological and political visions to take account of the emergent situation.

This change of optic as we have seen coincided with the advent of a neo-conservative political hegemony in Britain and the United States, around 1980. Sociology had both explained, and to a degree provided intellectual advocacy, for the various movements and conflicts which exploded the social democratic welfare settlement in the 1970s, in the Anglo-American zones of influence in particular. It then saw its paradigm supplanted by a version of its old enemy, the paradigm of economic individualism, given a new formulation in neo-liberalism. It seems to have renounced its foundational idea of society at this point when the existence of society, hitherto the principal justification for the existence of sociology, became unfashionable (Mrs Thatcher famously

declared in 1987 that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families).

Earlier, during the late nineteenth century, formative era of sociology, the very existence of 'the social' had to be proclaimed against other disciplinary frames of reference (notably those of economics and psychology) which insisted that individuals and their exchanges and power relations were all that existed. Now, in an ideologically equally adverse climate, sociologists again struggle to reconstitute their primary object of study amidst the turbulent ebbs and flows of forces which they seem to think have made social relations unstable and precarious.

The limits of empiricism

Always latent as an alternative to the study of society as a more or less persistent object or entity was the idea that society might be better understood as sets of ordered social actions and interactions, as processes. Many of the most fertile areas in the field of sociology (which now has to be broadly defined, for reasons to be explained) in the past two decades or so are those which have taken processes as their framing topic, not structures or institutions *per se*. I shall suggest that the work of Goffman, Garfinkel and ethnomethodology, Foucault, Latour and actor-network theory (ANT), Bourdieu and his 'theory of practice', Luhmann and his adapted concept of autopoiesis, and the influence of Deleuze can all be understood in these terms. Whereas the objects of the earlier foundational phase of sociology were defined primarily in terms of nouns, those of the later 'postmodern' phase are defined as kinds of action, which might be best denoted by verbs. Of course this is a matter of balance and degree – there is presumably no grammar that does not have both nouns and verbs – but perhaps the contrast may be instructive.

Before proceeding to outline some of the sociological work of this later phase, something should be said about the deeper intellectual and societal origins of these phases of social science. In its foundational phase, sociology was greatly influenced by the precedents which had been set by the natural sciences, and aspired to achieve a status for itself comparable to that of a natural science. The natural sciences sought to discover and demonstrate order and causal connectedness in nature. The aspiration to assert control of nature, to liberate human beings from the constraints of nature by means of the advance of human knowledge through science was part of this project. There were thus very often close links between the 'pure sciences' and technologies. Sometimes what we

can call technologies provided the 'source analogues' (Harré, 1986) for the sciences, rather than in the conventionally assumed pattern of pure science finding its later technological application. (The influence of the artificial selection of plant breeding on Darwin's understanding of natural selection is an example.)

'Positivism' was the philosophical perspective which most fully embodied this ambition, influential in the work of Comte and Durkheim (especially his earlier work) also providing one of Weber's guiding principles in his aspiration for explanation to be 'adequate at the level of cause as well as at the level of meaning' (the latter criterion pointing of course in a somewhat more open-ended direction). Philosophies of science drawing on the ideas of Hume, Mill, and later Karl Popper, were legitimating and guiding principles of early sociology. Neo-Kantian ideas gave greater weight to the humanly constructed categories of explanation, and thus to the place of theoretical conjecture, but did not challenge the necessity for empirical validation. In Britain, anyway, the social and moral philosophy, and research methods, which were taught as the complements to sociological theory and empirical sociology, were mainly rooted in empiricist ideas, the different philosophical traditions of the continent being for the most part at the edge of the map, at best.⁶ Freud initially conceptualised psychoanalysis as an embryonic new science, seeking acceptance for his new paradigm in these Anglo-Saxon terms, though its basic assumptions are barely consistent with this framing, and later diverged from it in a hermeneutic direction.

Sociologists joined gleefully in the critique of 'scientism' in the 1970s, both in the proliferation of anti-positivist theoretical perspectives in sociology, and in an attempt by sociologists of science to show that the scientific truth was also socially constructed. But soon this critique of scientific rationalism began to call in question the modernising project of sociology itself. Bauman's *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987) and *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) were significant texts from this point of view, since they identified the will to control inherent in 'modernist' sociology as problematic, the root of oppression rather than of emancipation. Sociology found that its own claims to intellectual authority were being undermined by its own weapons. Developments in the history and sociology of science, from Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962, 2000) onwards, have generally brought recognition of the diversity of methods of understanding, which are necessarily adapted to their different objects of study. Sociology has however found it difficult to grasp the implications of this self-reflexive approach

to methods for its own discipline, and it has thus floundered as a discipline in the face of the fissiparous forces it has encountered and to a degree fostered.

In Britain in particular, more multidimensional and process-oriented approaches to social knowledge were largely absent or pushed to the margin. One might compare the neglect of A.N. Whitehead, the author of *Process and Reality*, as a philosopher of science, in Britain, with the greater influence of Bergson and vitalism in France, although Latour's advocacy of the tradition of Gabriel Tarde as a suppressed alternative to the hegemony of Durkheim indicates resistances in France too (Latour, 2005). When sociology in Britain did become open to new approaches which were less preoccupied than traditionally with goals of normalisation, prediction, and control, it found itself having to look for sustenance to Continental and American philosophical traditions, since ideas more attentive to process and action seemed unavailable within English culture. Indeed the opening up of British intellectual life in the 1960s and 1970s to 'foreign' philosophical traditions (Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, American culturalism and pragmatism) contributed to the partial engulfment of sociology by a variety of other claimants to its territory and to the loss of its collective self-confidence.

In Britain, the sharp division which had been established between the spheres of sciences and humanities (much more clear-cut than in German or French culture) was an important factor in earlier demarcating the subject matter of science in these over-ordered 'objectifying' ways. If one wanted to study human lives in more open-ended ways, more sensitive to complexity and multidimensionality, there were after all the alternative 'disciplines' of literature and history, and the kinds of biographical and documentary writing which were close to them, as alternatives to the social sciences – psychology, economics, political science, and sociology. Only sociology among these came anywhere near to the humanities in its sensitivity to the qualities of the lived lives, and that was usually not very near. (Anthropology was a different case, remaining closer to the humanities, and studied primarily in high cultural rather than utilitarian locations of the academy.)

Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) identified a tradition of 'social writing' which owed little to the norms of science, but which nevertheless could be shown to be formative in the self-understanding of British society. Wolf Lepenies, in *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology* (1988), argued that this tradition had held a place in Britain comparable to that of sociology on the Continent of Europe. In Britain, those interested to understand society would as readily turn to

the writings of Orwell or Hoggart, or for earlier periods to historians such as Hill, Stone, or Thompson, as they would to the writings of sociologists, little as the academic sociologists liked this fact. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University positioned itself on the borderlands of these different traditions, developing its cultural sensibility from its literary origins, and its theoretical framings from incoming theoretical traditions, not least those of a reviving Western Marxism. It had little time for 'British sociology'.

Thus when 'all that was solid' in the way of structures and organisms began 'to melt into air', social scientists found themselves turning to quite different 'process-oriented' traditions for resources to think about what was going on. I will now briefly sketch some of these influences on or parallels to sociological thinking.

Sociologies of process

Although they preceded the more general collapse of structural sociological thinking, Erving Goffman's studies of how interactions are staged to sustain individuals' identity and self-esteem, and how institutions could try and sometimes fail to remake their members' identities, make a major contribution to the emergence of a sociology of processes. The particular history of the United States, as the 'first new nation' escaping from and rejecting the structures of the 'old Europe', partly explains why it is that a conception of self-making, of active social construction enacting human interests and purposes, was vital to an intellectual element in that context. The ethnographies of the Chicago School, symbolic interactionism and its characterisations of subcultures and of the interactions between those labelled deviant and the mainstream, were present as a critical tendencies within the system-building of functionalism (they were its own 'sociology from below', as, for example, in the work of David Matza (1970)). These sociologies drew on the American traditions of pragmatism, and on the more 'interactional' stream of European sociology (notably Simmel), and later on the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. Radical American sociology was more interested in the subcultural (and later gender and ethnic) dissidence than in divisions of class, since class was less visible as a line of division in the United States than in Europe, where it retained its importance. Ethnomethodology, already referred to in the context of the dissolution of structural sociology, was a more radical departure in this same 'constructionist' direction, and drew upon phenomenological thinking in constructing its descriptions of the continuous re-creation of the life-world.

A second major 'sociology of processes' or transformations lies in the work of Foucault: One reason for the influence of Foucault's work in this period is that it was devoted to the investigation of deep-seated changes, both at the meta-level of changes in entire systems of social classification and understanding and at the intermediate level of institutional processes. In describing the inventions of the clinic, the prison, of the madhouse, and of different modes of defining and regulating sexuality, Foucault was characterising modes of social transformation, not static structures. A second reason was the change of moral and political optic in this work, from a previous Enlightenment optimism. The postmodern appeal of his work is that whereas earlier theorists of 'modernity' by and large conceived greater social rationality as a human advance, Foucault did not. But the idea that the social sciences, far from being bearers of enhanced freedom and choice for all, were in fact instruments of new and more pervasive forms of control of individuals was not easy to integrate within the existing sociological tradition. Here was the familiar 'transition to modernity', but now theorised in negative or at least deeply sceptical terms.

Niklas Luhmann's sociology (Luhmann, 1985) is also significant from the perspective of its attention to process. The idea of autopoiesis – the tendency of institutions to extend their boundaries and power by imposing their own definitions and categories on their environment – gave a dynamic form to Parsonian systems theory which it had hitherto lacked, except perhaps in its explication and endorsement of modernisation itself. According to Luhmann, systems do not rest in equilibrium, but tend to expand until their growth is resisted. This model is allied to complexity theory in its attention to self-organising properties, in this case of institutions, drawing on the biological theory of self-organisation, notably the work of Maturana and Varela (1980). The idea that institutions are constituted by their modes of classifying the information which comes to them, and that their power grows through imposing their classifying systems on parts of their environment, further incorporates into this sociological theory the role of information. The earlier Weberian model of bureaucratic organisation can acquire from this attention to innate power-seeking tendencies an expansionary and aggressive energy which in its classical modes it lacks. Luhmann's model also departs from its Parsonian predecessor in no longer taking so positive and optimistic a view of the modernising process. It is more Weberian in temper, and thus more consistent with the spirit of post-modern times. It has its specific applications to contemporary society too, as in the understanding of the growth of the audit culture.⁷

Another important example of a method of sociology which has defined its task as the study of social practice is that of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Practical Reason* (1998), for example, Bourdieu describes how differentiated fields of practice and value are reproduced within institutions, often against pressures to reduce all exchanges to those based on explicit instrumental interests. The norms of families, in their various forms, are maintained by insistence that exchanges take the form of gifts, or exchanges of not-precisely-predictable kinds and magnitudes. The Catholic Church maintains its 'field of practice' by insisting on definitions of services given which are valued in terms of devotion to its cause, of respect given to those who respect it, of rank accorded within the scheme of the Church. Although it is easy for participants to calculate the 'market value' of all such exchanges, this institution maintains its specificity by refusing to recognise such equivalence. Bourdieu here suggests that the 'universal' is to be found as the common or 'pure spirit' of each such practice – one is reminded of the good inherent in a social practice which Plato has Socrates elicit from his interlocutors in his dialogues, and also of Wittgenstein's 'language games'. 'The social' is the existence of such values, intrinsic as the 'universal' of each social practice. Even the hypocritical observance of such values, Bourdieu says, is the tribute vice pays to virtue.

An innate 'essence' of the social is thus postulated by Bourdieu, in terms quite close to those of Durkheim, though this is one which he locates not in a societal totality but in varieties of practices – the arts, sciences, games, families, religious or political communities – which manage to sustain their distinct and separate fields, their own accumulations of capital. The 'politics' of Bourdieu's account, at least in *Practical Reason*, concerns the value he assigns to these distinct fields, and the identities and values they confer on individual actors, in contrast to the utilitarian and instrumental value of market exchange, which he refers to at one point as the 'rot of money'.

Actor-Network Theory, whose foremost figure is Bruno Latour (1987, 2005), is another sociology whose primary interest has been in generative practices. The initial field of study for ANT was the process of scientific discovery, leading sometimes to extensive transformations of the social and economic world, where 'actants' are discovered which are able to mobilise enough powers to effect great changes around them. This is an anti-anthropomorphic way of thinking, which invites us to consider, for example, that monocultural species may be the beneficiaries of the agricultural revolution, as well as the humankind whom they feed; or 'bacteria', once 'discovered', are the makers of the

pharmaceutical, germ-killing, sanitation, and large parts of the medical industry, rather merely their chosen foes. But what is most interesting about ANT is that it proposes a way of identifying processes of change which are particular in their effects and in the networks and sources of power which are needed to understand them. Latour refuses to position himself on either side in the argument between scientists who deny any sociological dimension to their investigations of nature, and sociologists who claim that the outcomes of science are, when all is said and done, 'socially constructed'. Latour's argument has been that by blotting out of existence the specific material intermediaries and agents of social process (the electrons, genes, bacteria, viruses, electromagnetic forces) the sociologists had removed from the world much of what explained its actual transformations. Actor Network Theory aims to identify the mediating agents and networks which bring mankind and nature into relation with each other.

Latour and other ANT work has an implicit derivation from an alternative sociological tradition of 'process' – that of Tarde, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze – in opposition to the Durkheimian preference for social objectification (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984). Actor Network Theory has established its relevance in part because it is consonant with a cultural context in which the idea of persisting structures and totalities no longer seems tenable as the foundational basis for social science. Once the classical sociological ontology of 'the social' – as the primary entity on which the field is based – loses its credibility, the question of what might replace it becomes pressing. I shall argue that difficulty in achieving consensus about this, or even to frame the problem clearly, has contributed to the current fragmentation of the sociological discipline and the reversal of its role from influence to influenced.

And of course we must consider Marx, whose work belongs neither unambiguously to the modernising camp of objectification and structure, nor to the postmodern field of action and process, but in fact to both, in its different phases and moments. In the classical period of sociology, Marx was taken as one of the principal sources of an objectified and determinist conception of the world. Though this conception postulated transformative change between one social formation and another, its explanatory models were often set out in highly reductionist and mechanistic ways, which were then reinforced by their authoritarian political applications in the twentieth century. For these reasons, and because of the total defeat of European Communism, Marx has been widely rejected as an irrelevant theorist of dead structures.

But of course there are other aspects of Marx's work. The rediscovery of his early writings, and their conceptions of alienation and creative labour, led to the development of Marxist conceptions of active social agency antithetical to mechanistic determinism (e.g. in the historical writing of E.P. Thompson, and in the cultural theory of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall), and brought about a significant renewal of radical political culture. More recently, Marx has been defended as the most powerful theorist of the process of globalisation, which has become a general metaphor for a world whose structures are dissolving.

In *Marx's Revenge* (2005), Meghnad Desai has defended Marx as having predicted (e.g. in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, and in *Capital*) better than any other social scientist how capitalism would continue its expansion until there was no substantial non-capitalist world left to incorporate within its sway. Globalisation, in Desai's view, has been ongoing since the beginnings of capitalism. It was merely interrupted by the hiatus of the 'short twentieth century' from 1914 to 1989. What is of lasting value in Marxist social science are not its predictions or prescriptions for a post-capitalist future (mostly hijacked by Leninism as these were) but rather its analysis of the changes which are continually being effected by capitalism, and by the reactions to and defences against it of many kinds. Here is one sociology that does take on the challenges of change.

Social ontologies

It seems that these various 'process-oriented' sociologies, though they are widely influential and esteemed, have yet to be integrated into a new sociological synthesis or 'frame of debate', of the kind that was securely established for sociological theory a generation ago. Sociological theory was widely learned as a debate between at least three major theoretical traditions – those of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx – with others such as symbolic interactionism later supplementing these. So while sociologists deeply disagreed with one another – their discipline was unusual in being virtually constituted by such theoretical disagreements – they agreed about the main frame within which these disagreements could be fought out. Why is this no longer the situation?

It seems to me that as the loss of confidence in the solidity of their formally 'structurally solid' objects of study of sociology began to wane, in the 1970s, a serious ontological crisis emerged. It ceased to be clear or obvious what was the fundamental object of sociological study, if there was one at all. If one could no longer assume an innate will to sociation,

the existence of a 'thing-like' society, denoted by various nouns, what could one assume?

Bear in mind that sociologists in the first instance had postulated the social as an alternative to the atomistic, individual interest-based theories of economists, and utilitarians in particular, as the ontological basis for their new discipline. Polemic against economists and utilitarians indeed continues to be found right up to the end, for example, of Bourdieu's work. Meanwhile the earlier atomistic individualist ontologies themselves continued to thrive, with new theoretical resources drawn from game theory and a contested version of evolutionary biology, and with powerful new applications in the forms of rational choice theory and public choice theory. In fact the sociologists' traditional disciplinary adversaries, in economics, individualist psychology, and political science, became more active and influential than ever, unsurprisingly given the global political sway of neo-liberalism.

Variou answers to the sociologists' basic ontological question were chosen, or in some cases emerged into the light from their hitherto somewhat covert presence as assumptions within sociological theories. One such was Nietzsche's concept of a will to power. In a world of social conflict, the idea that social agencies and institutions were ordered as power-seeking entities was a tempting one. Similarly if one was interested in domination (including from the perspective of the dominated), Nietzsche's conception seemed an applicable one. The Nietzschean (as contrasted with the classificatory, system-building) elements of Weberian theory began to be given greater emphasis. One can understand the ontology of both Foucault and Luhmann as deeply influenced by Nietzschean presuppositions, though they draw on others too. (Luhmann's system theory might be thought of as a Parsonian view of system invigorated by a Nietzschean concept of the will to power.) The evolutionist sociologist, Garry Runciman, seeking to theorise social change as the evolutionary competition between social practices or systacts, wrote a speculative paper 'Can there be a Nietzschean sociology' (Runciman, 2000) which explores how far a sociology could be constructed from these principles. (His answer seems to be that Nietzsche's preference for negative over positive thinking, for insight over system, makes this difficult unless many additional ideas are added.) Runciman's own answer to this question is to adopt an evolutionist approach.

For sociologists more interested in processes of creation and innovation than in domination, an alternative ontology was found in another tradition which saw society not as a kind of object, but as a process. This was the tradition of Tarde (whose reputation and influence was

later eclipsed by that of Durkheim), of Bergson and Whitehead, and later of Gilles Deleuze. Here the idea of continuous innovative processes, which were liable to be modelled and classified only after they had been transcended in practice, was the central core of an alternative way of thinking. Change was multiple in its forms – it could take place through metaphoric equivalences as well as through alterations of physical entities, or different collations of actors and their wills. These are ideas well adapted, to be sure, to the information age. This ontology has had considerable influence on ANT, for example through the influence of Isabelle Stengers (2000), since this also postulates that changes can take place in many different modalities, even simultaneously. There is none of the clunking mechanics here which tries to introduce the cultural through postulating causal relations between base and superstructure and the like.

The contribution of Freud to social thought is an interesting covert presence in these debates. Freud's assertion that the essence of orderly social life was the necessity for repression has been responded to in several different ways. As Zygmunt Bauman pointed out (Bauman, 1979) Norbert Elias in his great work presented the history of civilisation in the West as the embodiment of the thesis of Freud's 'Civilisation and its Discontents', seen as a narrative of social development. In his *History of Civilisation* (Elias, 1939/2000) he described the 'history of manners' and of regulated social conduct more generally as a key achievement of civilisation, or the sublimation of instincts as Freud saw it. Ernest Gellner (1985) eventually (after his famous 1985 critique of psychoanalysis) celebrated Freud's recognition that a society with less sexual repression (i.e. a consumerist, freer society) would be a better and a happier one. Foucault investigated the many institutional and discursive mechanisms of repression, viewing these mostly in negative ways. Deleuze, on the other hand, explicitly rejects Freud's conception of psychological and social necessity, arguing for the unrecognised potential of desire⁸ as a transformative creative agent in individual and social lives. The Oedipus complex (the necessity for patriarchal authority as a condition of social order) was represented by Deleuze and Guattari (1984) as an ideological defence of the authoritarian (and capitalist) social order itself. Here was a more 'anarchist' celebration of desire and creativity against the fetters of authority and repression, also drawing on another element of the Marxist tradition.

However, we can see in Bourdieu's work a continuation in some aspects of the ontology of Durkheim. That is in his postulation of the 'social' – the 'field of practice' in Bourdieu's terms the – as a good in

itself, as an entity beyond the self which is necessary if the self is to have identity and meaning. But for Bourdieu, the social has become a precarious entity, only sustained through continuing work to both fulfil the expectations of the social and at the same time to replenish and reproduce its meaning.

Norbert Elias, referred to above, was the sociologist who came nearest to avoiding the schism between structure and process which has created such difficulty for the discipline of sociology in understanding the plethora of changes which have transformed its object of study. Elias insisted that the proper objects of study were 'figurations' (Elias, 1978, 2001). By this he meant typical forms or patterns of social life, shaped in a historical process, nevertheless identifiable as enduring or typical entities. He not only rejected Parsonian system-building, as incurably ahistorical and over-schematic, but also the greater part of historiographical writing which he believed focused on actors' perspectives at the expense of those figurations whose period of gestation was longer than a generation but which gave shape to the experience and motivation of social actors. He had his own 'master-theory' of change, based on the long-term inhibition and sublimation of impulse, but perhaps more important than this is his vision of sociological method, which does not depend on his particular theory of psychosocial development. Yet although Elias's conceptions resolve many of the destructive binary oppositions (between structure and process, the individual and the social, stasis and change) which have bedevilled the development of sociology, they have not had the influence on this field that they should have had.

Elias's career seems to be like that of a man living out of his own time, in that although his great work was completed in 1938, and was published in German in 1939, it was published in English only in 1968, when he was already 71 years old, too late for it to have had the profound impact on sociology and history that it should have had. Although he acquired a following in his later post-retirement years, this was too late for him to have had much influence on a discipline which was already entering a period of crisis.⁹

It seems that sociologists have been drawn in recent years towards these various ontological options, and the kinds of sociological interest and perspective they lead to, without even much noticing that different and competing different ontologies are at stake. The consequence has been a subdivision of sociological theory into various non-communicating theoretical sub-paradigms, each with valuable research programmes, but together sharing very little in the way of

a common frame of debate. This does not make a strong foundation for the maintenance of an academic discipline, or for exercising influence on the broader definition of the social and political world. Indeed the risk is that 'sociology departments' become little more than holding companies for a variety of scholars and teachers who are barely able to agree or even talk about what they are studying. A retreat into empirical sub-specialisms, into the 'peripheries of the social' where such issues are less pressing than when one is debating the development of a whole society, but where there may be some interest taken in the local information generated, is another aspect of this situation.¹⁰

Note too that other ontologies and the disciplines built on them also clamour to invade the vacated explanatory spaces. The 'cultural turn' substitutes a symbolic or discursive object for a more solid social entity. Geographers as we have seen seem to be as good as or better than sociologists at theorising the flows of persons and materials in space. Since they were always definitionally interested in spaces and places, they had an advantage when social action became global. And since the main driver of globalisation has been the overwhelming power of capital and its powers, those economists who address that fact (which is a minority of that discipline) are back in the centre of things. Sociology, in fact, in the absence of agreement about what its field should be arguing about, finds itself in a weak and incoherent state.

Nouns and verbs

I called this chapter *Nouns and Verbs*, and now I return to its title. My argument, in summary, has been that sociology began as a field by attempting to categorise a new kind of thing as its object of study, to which it gave various names. It became interested in the transition between one kind of society and another, and set out various classificatory comparisons between these two kinds. It also debated different versions of this transition, notably the difference between Marx's revolutionary model, and the broadly gradualist and reformist models of mainstream sociology (Therborn, 1976, 2008). The dire consequences for 'bourgeois sociology' of the defeat of its Marxist adversary is an important topic for another day. From the 1970s, this object of study seemed to become more precarious and unstable. Once the 'modern' had arrived, sociology seemed unclear how it could think about it. Indeed other disciplines – geography, cultural studies, history – seemed to be more adept at thinking about its new forms that it was itself. One view was 'the social thing' was simply in a state of dissolution and had become an unstable field of movement.

Another sociological approach however has been to focus not on things – denoted by nouns – but on actions, practices, and processes – denoted by verbs. Goffman, Foucault, Bourdieu, Latour, and Marx are all concerned with such processes taking place in time. My argument is that we may be better able to capture the flow of a changing state of social order and disorder by identifying actions and practices which can be shown to exhibit a coherent order, than either by defending the earlier models of seeking to reify structures or by adopting the assumption that structures no longer exist. It may be that we can locate the social order (i.e., with its pattern, regulatory, predictability, constraining forces), that does exist, if we look to map the processes by which it constitutes itself in time.¹¹ Sociology will not have much claim on anyone's attention if it has nothing to say about the larger social totality and its potential development.

Notes

1. Robert A. Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition* (1966) described the development of sociological theory as a project to understand and map this tradition, leaving room for doubt about whether classical sociology could have any other coherent object of study.
2. On some twentieth-century developments in Marxist thinking, see Anderson (1979), Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001), and Therborn (2008).
3. Anthony Giddens's work has been a sensitive indicator, and indeed influence on, the changing conceptions of sociology as a discipline in this period. It began, in *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971) with an even-handed consideration of the different contributions of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to sociological theory, giving full weight to the strengths of the 'structural' conceptions of both Marx and Durkheim, in contrast to the agency-focused ideas of Weber. It then proceeded to a measured critique of the Marxist tradition, in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981) and the advocacy of neo-Weberian sociology based on different modalities of power, exercised over different social fields. Giddens's most influential concept of 'structuration' (Giddens, 1984) set out to resolve the antithesis between explanations based on determination by structures, and those based on determination by agents and their choices, by proposing that agency was invariably exercised within the contexts established by previously constituted structures, or as Marx had put it earlier, men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. More recently, Giddens's neo-Weberian models of structures in which different sources and forms of power contest for domination have been supplanted by a model of 'globalisation' in which discrete powers have become invisible or unnameable, and the problem is defined as one of regulating and managing the global flows to the maximum social benefit and the minimum cost. It seems that the primary source of agency and value is being seen as the 'new self-determining individual', 'disembedded from structures',

which without such embedded individuals must perforce lose their density and causal potency. Whether this is a persuasive description of our actually existing global society is however problematic.

4. 'systact' was defined thus: 'a group or category of persons in specific roles may be said to constitute a systact whenever the persons in question have, by virtue of their roles, a distinguishable and more than transiently similar location, and on that account a common interest ...' (Runciman, 1987: 50).
5. The discipline of geography took an important and unexpected role in theorising the idea of globalisation. Perhaps the previous paucity of theoretical resources of human geography gave it a comparative advantage, in now being able to grasp the changing relations of space and time that were reshaping the world. Harvey's great innovation, for example, came from his insight that the processes of valorisation and devalorisation of capital that were central to Marx's political economy could be understood through their changing impact on places – regions, cities, districts – as these gained and lost value.
6. One of the most radical challenges to the prevailing empiricism, which combined philosophical with social critique, was that of Alasdair MacIntyre, who drew on classical, Aristotelian perspectives, which had been a minority point of view in British philosophical culture. This was also a resource for the critique of positivist and utilitarian moral philosophy at this time, as in the writings of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch. These, and the Burkean conservatism of Oakeshott, made the only breaches in the solid empiricist walls until the 1960s.

A vast apparatus of audit and inspection has evolved in the recent decades, whose operations can be well understood through the Luhmannian perspective of autopoiesis (Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000; Rustin, 2004). The systems of audit operate through imposing their ways of classifying information on the institutions and practices that are subject to their assessment. It is the location of power in the classification of information that makes the Luhmannian model so applicable to this process. If activities and outputs do not fall within the criteria adopted (if they do not have boxes to tick on the inspectors' checklist) then for purposes of assessment they do not exist. Two problems thus arise: one, how do the outputs classified as relevant correspond to the purposes of the institutions and their members; two, how far does the force for standardisation and accountability inherent in these procedures work to reduce the diversity and innovative capacity of institutions? The activity of audit and inspection has greatly expanded in recent years, becoming a powerful institution of government in its own right. One could say that it now represents a major practice of routinised, Fordist social science – it is a vast gathering, accumulating and comparison of social information, without however either the intention or result of making any new discoveries whatsoever.

7. The process and system of audit itself – in its major spheres of health, schooling, universities, local government, prisons, social services and others – seem to be bereft of investigation, of study of the effects and efficacy of the systems themselves. Yet we know there is a difference between the knowledge-generating capacity of open-ended institutional investigation (such as Rutter et al.'s *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (1979) study of a sample of primary schools) and the barren outcomes of these routine studies.

8. I am indebted to Maria Tamboukou for pointing this out to me.
9. Antony Giddens's concept of structuration sought to resolve the same antinomies as Elias intended to do with his concept of figuration and 'figurational sociology', though Giddens focused on the overcoming and synthesis of differences between sociological theories, where Elias sought to embody his method of explanation in a series of empirical-historical instances, from the history of Western civilisation to the development of modern sport. Giddens studied sociology at the University of Leicester where Elias taught until his retirement in 1962, but surprisingly, Elias is one of the few major sociologists of his time whom Giddens scarcely considers in his own prolific work.
10. In earlier days, the teaching of social philosophy and the philosophy of social science often supported the teaching of sociological theory, usually starting from basically empiricist presuppositions about the nature of science and its causal laws, and examining how they might need to be qualified to take account of sociological approaches. A much more complex and conflictual philosophical underpinning would be needed to support work in contemporary sociological theory. Meanwhile the development of 'research methods' somewhat dissociated from theoretical paradigms has proceeded apace, as if sociology can find a legitimacy in its methods (within the current 'evidence-based' or neo-positivist climate) that may not now be accorded to its theories.
11. Sylvia Walby has pointed out to me that 'complexity theory' can make a significant contribution to this 'new sociology', which I agree with (for the application of these ideas to another area of emergent psychic structure, see Rustin 2003). Although John Urry has been an influential theorist of societal disintegration, his own engagement with complexity theory also clearly embodies a commitment to the discovery of emerging kinds of social order.

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3

Sociological Theory: Still Going Wrong?

Gregor McLennan

Understandings of the 'object' of sociological theory have changed over the years, such that teachers of the 'subject' – especially at graduate level – are now continually challenged in differentiating sociological theory from other designations, most notably 'social theory' and 'cultural theory'. One reasonable response might be to say that sociological theory forms an intrinsic *part* of social theory; but just what part that is remains a remarkably moot point. It is surprising too that, given the widespread awareness of the issue, little detailed discussion has taken place as to whether the (increasing) blurring of the boundaries between social and sociological theory is a good or bad thing, or the ways in which it might be both. This chapter seeks to contribute to the clarification of this matter and pursues some lines of assessment.

The scenario can be schematised as follows. There is a Specialist view, which also tends to be a *pessimistic* view, according to which what nowadays passes as sociological theory cannot be distinguished from opinionated and ill-disciplined general reflection. Specialists say that this expansive genre tells us little about the actual workings of the world, but nor is it good philosophy or knowledgeable cultural criticism. The Generalist rejoinder points out that from its inception sociological theory has been thoroughly immersed in philosophical and ethico-ideological projects. After a (failed) phase of professionalised positivism – of the sort that lingers on in the Specialist view – it is entirely appropriate that sociological theorists engage anew in evaluative public discourse; (reflexively) expose their metaphysical and ethnocentric inclinations; and welcome the merging of sociological understanding with wider interpretative angles.

With that kind of polarisation in play, bids for the middle ground could be expected to pour in. In the 1990s, for example, Nicos Mouzelis

(1991, 1995) wondered 'what went wrong' with sociological theory, preoccupied as it was, often, with largely unresolvable epistemological issues. Instead, he argued, 'proper' theoretical practitioners ought to be fully engaged in carefully crafting conceptual tools for use in definite substantive investigation. But Mouzelis's mediating call to go 'back to sociological theory', in that sense, rather fell on deaf ears. Amongst the Specialists, one suspects, Mouzelis's chosen candidate for the object of sociological theory – 'the rise and fall of social orders' – offered too many hostages to the woolly Generalists. On the latter side, the interest in epistemology quickly waned anyway – too rationalistic by far! – in favour of either a curiously inflated *pragmatism*, or a surge towards even more encompassing metaphysical and spiritual matters. The point has thus been reached whereby sociological theory appears not only to have been subdued by social and cultural theory, but the edges of those latter pursuits now cut thrillingly into the sort of 'non-representational' spaces where sociologists of many stripes will surely fear to tread: facing up to the Other, the post-secular unseen, vitalist fluidities, sensorium studies, and the like. To judge whether the stodgy-seeming middle ground (still) yields any traction, let us work through our scenario again.

Sociological to social theory

One way of registering the steady convergence of sociological and social theory, or perhaps we should say the 'sublation' of sociological theory within the newer object of attention, is to examine the content and positioning of prominent textbooks. What we find is that, by comparison with lower-level primers, overviews of sociological theory aimed at upper undergraduates and postgraduates struggle to articulate disciplinary specificity.

The jacket blurb for John Scott's *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology* (2006), for example, highlights its 'consolidation of sociological theory' and its identification of 'distinctive sociological approaches'. This line is pursued in the Introduction (Scott, 2006: 1–6) in terms of 'the themes that define sociology as a discipline'; the aim to 'provide a comprehensive intellectual mapping of the sociological enterprise'; and the wish to convey the 'excitement and the ideas that have emerged from sociological debates'. Another perhaps typical 'sociological' trait in such works, by comparison with more promiscuous social theory texts, is the greater emphasis on the importance of the 'founders'. For all that, Scott's 'definitive' themes of 'cultural formation, systemic organization,

socialisation, action, conflict, and nature' are clearly exceptionally capacious, and so the 'formative views' canvassed on these matters include, reasonably enough, those of Boas, Gilman, Malinowski, Toynbee, von Mises, and Kautsky as well as familiar figures from the sociological canon (some of whom of course did not regard themselves as 'sociologists'). No wonder, then, that Scott's presentation see-saws between a Specialist thrust and a Generalist counterbalance. In former vein, the goal is to secure 'genuine advance' on the basis of 'a clear and systematic conspectus of ideas that provided a working basis for empirical research and for further theoretical investigations'. Also, theorists can and should be rejected if their accounts 'fail the scientific test of empirical adequacy'. However, seeing as how 'theoretical frameworks are grounded in value differences', our appreciation of them must involve a sense of deep and enduring *controversy* as well as of continuity, with no alternative but to adopt an 'inclusive approach to sociological theory'. That sense of ever-broadening debate is thought to be especially characteristic of *contemporary* theory.

A similarly precarious tightrope is walked in Austin Harrington's *Modern Social Theory* (2005). In the 'Note to the Reader' (xx–xxi) something of the Specialist mindset emerges in the demarcation that is suggested between sociological theory and social theory: the latter's greater interdisciplinarity and more acute sense of the 'widest context' of social thought are contrasted with the former's emphasis on 'social trends', 'historical legacies', and 'substantive' grasp. The text initially states its preference for the narrower approach, such that philosophy of social science issues and normative political theory has to be passed over. But this appearance of specialism soon dissolves, with parallel assertions emerging to the effect that social theory today is necessarily a matter of intense pluralism, diversity, and debate, and that 'theoretical thinking about social life' must be understood 'in its broadest sense', that is to say, as reaching beyond the 'technical concepts and vocabularies in the discipline of sociology' that are also covered in the book. As it happens, these 'technical' concepts barely surface in the volume, at least in any way that reinforces the demarcation between sociological and social theory. Meanwhile, and running quite against the initial priority given to substantive theory, the editor's 'Introduction: What is Social Theory?' (2005: 1–12) is strongly 'philosophy of social science' in temper, sweeping through such staple issues as scientificity, objectivity, theory's relationship to research, and the balance of detachment and involvement in analysis.

The title of Craig Calhoun et al.'s *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (2007) signals a stronger sense of disciplinarity, and quasi-Specialist

observations are soon made ('General Introduction', 2007: 1–22). The 'classical' emphasis is heavy; the relationship of theory with modes of empirical investigation is said to be one of symbiotic entanglement; rational choice theory and institutionalism are given some space in the book; and the scientific import of sociological analysis is thought to bring necessary discomfort to all whose 'investment' in 'social misunderstandings' is based on the structure of their 'interests'. Moreover, the suggestion is floated that sociological theory's most typical and effective level may be that of the 'middle range', where 'rigorous explanations' of phenomena that are 'concrete but generalizable' can be delivered. Yet before and since that Mertonian moment, social/sociological theory – the terms begin to mingle again – has primarily been about raising the 'big questions' concerning modernity (nowadays modernities) and democracy. Such questions and the thematics of investigation that accompany them (individual/society, cultural construction of knowledge, inequality, power, and difference) inevitably lead sociology fully into 'interdisciplinary fields', encountering innumerable contestable assumptions, 'contending and complementary perspectives'.

The fading shadow of specialism is hardly noticeable in full-on 'social theory' readers. For example, in the editorial visions of Steven Seidman and Jeffrey Alexander (2008), and to a lesser extent Anthony Elliott (1999), scientific or objectivistic thinking is declared to be finished, the reality of the social questioned, utter contestability accepted, and generality rendered entirely unbound. 'Debate' has replaced knowledge, normativity reigns, and performativity constitutes. Still, leaving aside the palpable unsustainability of some of these contrasts (see McLennan 2004a on Alexander/Seidman), it is interesting to note that, historical dimension apart, many of the themes, authors, and perspectives selected overlap considerably with those picked out for the *sociological* social theory volumes. Moreover, the traditionalist focus on explanation and rigour has not exactly been *overturned* in the new genre; rather it has been significantly supplemented by broader horizons, multidimensionality, and a greater sense of provisionality. Pursuing that path of inclusivity rather than outright challenge and overthrow, readings from quite a number of 'official' sociologists are featured. True, a number of sociologists have been dropped from the second edition of *The New Social Theory Reader* – Bellah on individualism, Brubaker on nationalism, Beck on risk, Giddens on globalisation, and Alexander on civil society. But amongst their replacements are Castells on network society, Rose on biopolitics, Beck on cosmopolitanism, Alexander on performance, and Giddens on the self. With Gilroy additionally replacing Bhabha on post-coloniality,

and Connell bolstering the sexuality section, professors operating out of sociology departments are not exactly thin on the ground (their ranks also, of course, include the three editors in this sample).

Overall, then, the differences between sociological theory and social theory are few and likely to diminish further in such teaching platforms. For Generalists/optimists, all this simply underlines sociology's essential, creditable, interdisciplinarity, and contestedness. But for Specialists/pessimists, what has long been a problem is getting worse.

Sociological theory to social science

In a *British Journal of Sociology* review of Max Steuer's *The Scientific Study of Society* (2002), John Goldthorpe asserts that when it comes to the 'pretend social science' that Steuer identifies as blighting the ability of general social theory to provide 'a firm structure for the explanations that are advanced of particular phenomena', sociology is the worst culprit (Goldthorpe, 2004: 124–5). This is because sociologists – as illustrated in the previous section – are particularly prone to resort to 'buzz-words' (like globalisation, risk, network society), rather than developing coherent specific explanations that can be robustly tested. The latter kind of work does take place, these Specialists agree, but it is being hugely undermined by the new social theory, its kudos, and textbooks. Goldthorpe singles out the reportedly popular 'Millennium' issue of the *BJS* itself as a *locus classicus* of pretend social science, and, relatedly, no longer feels inclined to defend the discipline of sociology as such. Teachers in university departments of sociology are now so ill-equipped and wrong-headed, he thinks, that progress in authentic theory and methodology can only be made through an interdisciplinary counter-coalition, based in research centres. In particular, sociology's boundaries with economics and (parts of) political science should become significantly more permeable.

Steuer came back to endorse Goldthorpe's dislike of the *BJS* Millennium issue, which included a piece by Manuel Castells summarising his network society theses. Three numbers on from that special issue, Peter Abell and Diane Reyniers (2000) launched a vehement diagnosis of 'the failure of social theory', with Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society* splayed out as its exemplary target. Taking no prisoners, passages and concepts from Castells's work are ruthlessly exposed by these authors to reveal its 'inept and selective (secondary) use of data'; its poor 'quality of writing'; its lack of 'careful and precise exposition'; its 'abuse' of proper network-theory terminology; its misunderstanding of sociological and

social theory as 'interchangeable'; its 'purely speculative' register of analysis; its 'alarming lack of familiarity with basic economic principles'; its 'utterly unhelpful not to say meaningless' definitions; its unconcern with 'elucidating latent causal mechanisms'; its evasion of 'serious technical issues'; its 'unendurable' pompous repetitiveness; and its 'entirely derivative', 'uncontroversial', and 'commonplace' observations, even when correct. The message is crystal clear: unlike 'spurious', 'obscurantist', and 'banal' social theory *a la* Castells, bent as it is on 'the coining of striking (although vacuous) phrases' and resulting in 'lamentable' consequences for 'generations of students', 'genuine' social theory is technically demanding, causally orientated, conceptually sophisticated, and economical in expression. What an appalling paradox, then, that instead of being clearly stamped as the intellectual liability that it is, social theory 'continues to attract the trappings of success'. The critics go on to provide a straightforward explanation for this parlous situation: a generation or so ago, large numbers of people from humanities backgrounds became social science academics, thereafter pulling new cohorts of like-minded students, colleagues, and publishers down the same barren track.

Replying to this onslaught, Castells (2001: 541–6) (more politely) bewails its lack of openness and hostility to dialogue. He emphasises that his network-society thinking was not intended to be an exercise in social theory *per se*, but rather something like 'meta-analysis'. Even if some of the findings gathered up are unsurprising, he insists, there is new information too, with the result that important real trends are suggested and an overarching synthesis offered. In any case, 'social theory is a vast, diversified, and contradictory field of enquiry', serving many different 'needs and projects'. If those purposes include the kind of social science represented by Abell and Reyniers, they need to realise that their mode is increasingly regarded as 'irrelevant'. We do not always need statistics to engage in construction and interpretation; and if the critics simply wanted textual economy, then they could have engaged with Castells's summative version in the *BJS* Millennium issue. Overall, he is 'not able to pinpoint any serious matter that could provide the basis for a scholarly discussion'.

This latter response cannot be right. But is it really worth seeking a way through such polemical exchanges, if in all likelihood they are bound to continue? The answer is 'yes'. First, we can agree with Castells that social/sociological theory inevitably comes in different modes, such that any heavy-handed Specialist attempt to police that diversity is bound to prove counterproductive. Thus, in *tu quoque* mode, we might

flag up the irony that the oft-reiterated 'neutral' or 'scientific' Specialist phraseology – technical, serious, demanding, specific, mechanisms, and so forth – is often just as principally affective and opinionated as that which they claim to out-think. Exposing the dubious use of the 'rhetoric of no rhetoric' in this way is less incisive than was once imagined in ultra-reflexive circles, because even (especially) if everything is rhetorically coded, validity and merit still remain to be decided. But there is a point to make here nonetheless.

Second, we need to distinguish between variant sorts of theoretical enterprise, none of which, in themselves, even in research centres, could be thought completely illegitimate:

- Synthetic overviews of the state of society (network society, late capitalism, postmodernity).
- Formation of particular concepts (social capital, banal nationalism) or applications of general conceptual frameworks (complexity theory) for use in social research.
- Analysis/development of particular scholars and lineages, whether already established or in the making (Foucault, Marxism, Whiteheadian process theory).
- Identification of areas previously 'missing' in sociology (sociology of the body, post-colonialism).
- Conceptual and normative thinking about meta-methodology, philosophy of social science, discussions of 'public sociology', disciplinarity.
- Substantive propositional/explanatory accounts of societal interaction and dynamics, whether at the macro, meso, or micro levels.

Third, we should re-articulate what is valuable in a modified Specialist reading of this menu (which could no doubt be lengthened). The message cannot really be that all but the last of these coexisting styles need to be eliminated, nor that the first five genres are somehow *intrinsically* suspect. The better argument is (a) that some/much of the work at some of these levels, or operating across different levels, is of questionable quality, even when hailed as brilliant; (b) that the above list gives the false impression that all levels have equal status; because (c) the first five enterprises are (logically) parasitic upon, despite draining resources away from, the sixth, which, (d) requires a concern with causal analysis and degree of methodological expertise that many theorists now either lack or disparage.

Now, even if we think that the first five ventures significantly bear on and influence the sixth, such that the latter simply cannot do without

the resources provided by the others, the situation remains that if social science is possible at all, discursive priority must be given to that substantive explanatory level and its (actually very varied) 'technical' apparatuses of investigation. Of course, in post-positivist times, no proof can be given that seals off the substantive from the reflective, or that protects our instinctive realism from discursive deconstruction. The issue is therefore more a matter of intellectual *values* and firmness of professional project than demonstrable epistemic security (see McLennan 2006: ch. 1). But put that way, many alleged 'pretenders', not least Castells, would willingly support the said priority.

Fourth, we need to address the Specialists' far from only 'technical' antipathy to the language and style of most social theory. Preferring precise, economical, stepwise, and propositional thinking to supposedly gestural phrasemongering, this is sociology's equivalent to – indeed it is a branch of – the 'analytical' versus 'continental' antagonism in academic philosophy. As it happens, the latter battle seems to have eased considerably in recent times, with an interesting degree of interpenetration going on, yet a still-characteristically-philosophical tone prevailing, whether the subject of discussion is Hume or Hegel. But in sociology the analytical mode has been less well established, and so for an equivalent, productive *rapprochement* to take place, that mode needs to be more highly esteemed. And it is by no means only outright 'positivists' who feel the need for this stylistic adjustment. Indicatively, John MacInnes (2004), reviewing for *BJS*, a group of books on gender and sexuality, sharply posed the need to keep distinguishing between social science and social *comment* when dealing in the dangerously plastic, omnipresent notion of *identity*. His point was not that comment is surplus to requirements, simply that in many discourses of identity (often couched in advocacy mode, but some statistically larded) moralistic or impressionistic conclusions pre-empt the full exploratory and analytical process; and that this is not right for a *sociology* of identity.

I want to underline and extend this fourth angle of consideration – that Generalist thinking needs to become more conceptually acute and discriminating/disciplined – by examining another *BJS* symposium centerpiece, namely Ulrich Beck and Nathan Sznajder's (2006) proposal for 'cosmopolitan sociology'. This chapter, which contains elements of several of the bullet point undertakings sketched above, appeared again in the *BJS*'s 'Sixtieth Anniversary Issue', which selected two articles from each decade on the basis that they exhibited the 'significance, impact, originality, and lasting importance' that we might associate with 'classic' work in the discipline. The editors go on to encourage readers to

debate the merits of their classic selections (Heidensohn and Wright, 2010: 1–2), and this is what I now do in the case of Beck and Sznaider, with a view to sharpening our sense of what we might expect from good, never mind classic, sociological theory.

Packing up cosmopolitanism

There are three phases in the case for cosmopolitan sociology: a critique of ‘methodological nationalism’ (MN), a diagnosis of the coming cosmopolitanism in social reality, and the establishment of ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (MC) as the (only) way forward in sociological research. However, as soon as we begin to follow the authors’ way of ‘unpacking’ this project, we are confronted by conundrums. From the Abstract and Introduction alone (Beck and Sznaider 2006: 1–3), cosmopolitanism is presented as having normative, methodological, and substantive dimensions which have to be drawn out and distinguished, yet which ‘ultimately’ cannot be separated out. This is perhaps why ‘methodology’ is being used in a ‘controversial’ way, and why the modestly posed ‘research agenda’ implies nothing less than an ‘intellectual movement’. Furthermore, MC must not be confused with globalization or other conceptions of world-societal change, yet it encompasses them in part. It is definitely to be contrasted with, and accepted as superseding, MN, but it does not follow that nation states or nationalism have been, or ever will, disappear as such. The cosmopolitan ‘outlook’ (aka ‘turn’, ‘project’) is held to possess the singular power to transform both society and sociology, yet it remains a ‘contested term’, having no ‘uniform interpretation’, and being ‘traversed by all kind of fault lines’.

Of course, introductions exist to set themes running, but the article never decisively gets round to clarifying the key concepts, or articulating their overlaps and contrast classes, or justifying the big-sounding inferences drawn from them. For an essay in theory, in other words, there is a dearth of studied *argumentation* in the piece, though assorted assertions and imperatives tumble all over one another. Distinctions said to be critical do not work terribly well, whilst other necessary distinctions are ignored. Crucially, the paper’s central formulations lack basic plausibility. The point, remember, is not that some forms of social life and thought today can in some sense be considered ‘cosmopolitan’ – no one can disagree with *that* – but to insist that *only* within the frame of something called methodological and normative cosmopolitanism can transnational phenomena (‘border crossings’, for example, or the sort of radically ‘internalised’ sentiments that go beyond merely ‘global’

awareness) be brought to light. This proposition receives little further substantiation, yet it is starkly unconvincing as it stands, because in anything other than an anaemic sense, we do not have to be normative or methodological cosmopolitans to empirically *observe* whatever symptomatic societal relevance these phenomena have, or to feel ethically *engaged* with them.

But perhaps this is a little harsh, and we need to look at the component moves in the case. According to the first of these, MN 'equates societies with nation-state societies', taking 'states and their governments as the primary focus of social-scientific analysis'. Beck and Sznaider believe that buried in this premise, and part of it, are the further 'socio-ontological' assumption that 'humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations', and the *normative* view that every nation has the right to self-determination. Thus has the 'main perceptual grid of the social sciences', including 'the sociological imagination', been formed, and perversely so in their view. Yet none of these claims is instantiated by reference to any actual sociological work, or any social theorist. They are also simply *tabled*, with no conceptual further ado. Vital questions arise nevertheless, especially if MC is supposed to be so ground-breaking. For example, does one *necessarily* become a normative nationalist if one's main data and 'exemplifications' of general societal structure/change are taken from particular nations? (Think of Marx's avid use of the English Factory Legislation and associated 'blue books'.) Moreover, how can it be completely *wrong* to suggest, even nowadays, that the nation state remains the 'primary focus' of social and political organisation, when it so palpably is? And is it at all feasible unequivocally to portray sociology as committed to a 'naturalised' view of national existence, when the discipline's most fundamental distinction (between traditional societies and modernity) and its most general critical tactic (social constructionism) routinely combine to historicise such naturalistic understandings? In spite of the direct pertinence of such queries, none are even discussed.

Unsurprisingly, caveats are soon entered. Against the literal meaning of normativity, the ethico-political dimension of MN – nationalism – is found to be implicit rather than explicit amongst social scientists. Against the grain of sentences which suggest the complete overthrow of MN by MC, the latter does not after all entail that 'the end of the nation state has arrived', nor that MC can 'ignore different national traditions of law, history, politics and memory'. Indeed, given that 'so many statistical categories and research procedures are based on it', a refutation of MN is 'difficult, if not impossible', and with the consequence that

MC needs to be positioned more as a matter of 'future development' than rectification of the distant or immediate past. It then becomes more comfortable to accept, no doubt in anticipation of Bryan Turner's easy refutation of the charge later in the symposium, that the classical sociologists, for their part, cannot be convicted of MN in the sense required. Turner (2006), in fact, makes just as good a case for the exemption of Parsons and other later thinkers, and for the retention, in any perspicuous political and analytical perspective, of purportedly suspect MN notions like *citizenship*. But to be comfortable with all these qualifications, Beck and Sznaider would be left with nothing to say. Instead, they try to establish that MN illegitimately and surreptitiously adopts 'categories of practice as categories of analysis', thus disguising its profound value-basis, whereas MC is at least up-front about its commitments. A few pages later, however, it turns out that this distinction between an 'actor perspective' and an 'observer perspective' is fully applicable to both MC and MN.

Glaring inconsistencies aside, the high stakes involved in defining and defending MC principally as 'not-MN' mean that if the case against MN is poor, or its categorical invention questionable, then MC itself comes to grief, at least as envisaged. I say 'at least as envisaged' because following Elias, Foucault and many others, we need hardly *deny* that in certain key respects sociology and its methodological apparatus have been historically formed by the growing needs of the modern European nation state to observe, control, and 'care for' the population within its increasingly firmed-up territory. This has been Sociology 201 material for many years, after all. The point is rather that there is no theoretical *news* in Beck and Sznaider's postulations, and that in their efforts to prove otherwise, they resort to manoeuvres that do them no credit, such as committing the 'genetic fallacy' by reducing MN to a kind of originary project that had only one (bad) side to it, and indulging the unsociological fantasy that somehow it should all have been very different.

But, if that was then, what about now? In the second phase of their presentation, Beck and Sznaider (2006: 6–13) describe an ongoing 'cosmopolitan condition' that is not to be confused with the emergence of a more energised 'cosmopolitan moment'. Furthermore, in relation to *both* these ideas, the authors are at pains to distinguish a purely normative-philosophical understanding from their preferred sociological one. They also seek to demarcate sociological cosmopolitanism from the reception of globalisation *per se*. The most useful aspect is Beck and Sznaider's identification of 'banal', 'lived' cosmopolitanism,

which is said to be working away through various sorts of rituals and emotional bondings within and across national existence. Remarkably, no examples are given, but we take it that this refers to the slowly percolating effect of events like the Olympic Games, the increasing familiarity with other cultures through migration and music, and so forth. So this is happenstance cosmopolitanism, an everyday experiential condition that cannot be approximated by the philosophers' sense of a rational consciousness that accords primacy to world citizenship's 'over all national, religious, cultural, ethnic and other parochial affiliations.' Backsliding on earlier complaints, the authors acknowledge that such 'forced' or 'unintended' cosmopolitanism has actually been around 'from the very beginning'. But even if it is nothing new, banal cosmopolitanism does now seem to be 'of growing importance', to the point where it might be burgeoning into an active and concentrated 'cosmopolitan moment'. The latter refers not only to a greater sense of 'interdependence amongst social actors across national borders', but to heightened *reflexivity* concerning the new public spaces and subjective mindsets that might become 'institutionalised', thereby heralding the prospect of 'achieving a cosmopolitan political order'.

Sometimes, Beck and Sznaider appear concerned just to posit elementary questions and sketch some hypotheticals. *Is* something like a cosmopolitan moment occurring, beyond the confines of banal cosmopolitanism? *If* banal cosmopolitanism keeps growing, *might* it develop into a stronger consensual normative movement, in spite of the obvious possibility of 'resistances'? These are decent enough questions and the authors make a decent enough case for thinking that it might well so develop. However, if cosmopolitanism is taken in any very strong political sense, it might equally well *not*. Puzzlingly, although the authors sneer at the philosophers' 'noble' and 'strutting' ideal of world identity and world government, they absolutely require either that notion, or some such strutting alternative (never supplied) to make good the claim that it is the 'translation' of 'cosmopolitan principles' into 'practice' that will constitute the cosmopolitan 'moment' as something over and above banal cosmopolitanism. So the tension spotted earlier, between the relatively non-committal laying out of a research agenda and the highly constraining – but quite implausible – injunction that these issues cannot even be registered outside determined commitment to MC goes unrelieved.

The further distinction between cosmopolitanism and awareness of globalisation gains little traction either. The authors give a resounding 'no' in answer to the question of whether cosmopolitanism is 'simply a

new word for...“globalization”’. This is because globalisation is held to represent an inadequate *externalist* conception of social processes, something that sustains false ‘dualities’ between local and global, national and international, and so on. Cosmopolitanism by contrast, while it can be seen as the required response to ‘the challenge of globalization’, is to be taken as an *internalised* perspective, that is to say ‘globalization from within’. But these are threadbare distinctions that make no significant difference, because (a) many writers on globalisation refer to just such ‘internal’ processes of change, and (b) the account of cosmopolitanism has itself depended upon the same rigid ‘duality’ between national and non-national.

But maybe we have picked up a large red herring in our initial reading of the demolition of MN? It appears we must have, because in the revised formulation, cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not after all ‘mutually exclusive, neither methodologically nor normatively, indeed they live “side by side in the global world”’. With the main conceptual fault line crumbling again, the subsumption of routinely cited phenomena under cosmopolitanism *rather than* globalisation-awareness fails: intensifying relations of interdependence across the world, proliferation of multiple cultures and cuisines, emergence of non-state political actors and supra-state institutions, global protest movements, global mass media, diasporic communities, and the rest. True, Beck’s own earlier global risk society writings have underscored the overarching context of all these phenomena – ecological crisis, economic interpenetration, terrorist threats, the spread of human rights discourse – but so have many other commentators on globalisation.

The third section of Beck and Sznaider’s paper, ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (2006: 13–23) is the longest, partly because it comprises a long list of questions (eighteen of them appear in just over one page). Some of these are merely rhetorical, seemingly designed only to ‘save’ MC in the face of pending incoherence (e.g. it is asked how cosmopolitanisation and anti-cosmopolitanisation can both be accepted as expressions of cosmopolitanisation). Some are empirical issues set for a slightly later time. (Is the cosmopolitanisation of national societies *irreversible?*); and some seek out the alternative unit of research that can best replace those of MN. The answer to this last appears to be ‘the transnational’, allowing us to pursue new concerns: transnational spaces of culture and memory, transnational regimes of politics, and so on. Once again, the investigation of such phenomena is entirely legitimate, but it has no necessary relationship with normative or even ‘methodological’ cosmopolitanism, except tautologically.

With quasi-epistemological matters coming to the fore in that third section, it is hinted (2006: 13), in standpoint theory mode, that the cosmopolitan research agenda cannot be pulled off without an 'epistemological turn'. But this remains a statement of inclination only, lacking any treatment of the well-known difficulties facing that meta-theoretical tendency. One of those problems is the philosophical incapacity of standpoint-ism, once generalised, to prevent the endless proliferation of equally 'valid' ethical and philosophical positions, including ones directly contrary to the initially privileged position. Beck and Sznaider mirror, but signally fail to advance, such issues in a series of statements about how cosmopolitanism, whilst a firm and coherent lens of analysis in its own right, is nevertheless 'not mono-but multi-perspectival'. Thus, 'realistic cosmopolitanism' is found to be compatible with 'world systems' and 'world polity' theories whilst remaining distinct from them, just as, philosophically, cosmopolitanism is conveniently 'inclusive' with respect to both 'universalist' and 'relativistic' outlooks. And such congenial inclusivity applies in the domain of social agency too, because a durable 'cosmopolitan common sense' is asserted to be politically viable over and above a hotly contested 'politics of perspectives' (2006: 18–19). All this is put forward as if the stating itself constitutes the solution to such a 'host of problems'. But the affirmation statements once again, understandably, spill out into many more questions as the paper approaches its finale: How can complexity and contingency be tamed? What are the 'substantive, thematic-theoretical...social and political consequences' of the juxtaposition of all the various 'lenses'? Are we talking here about the 'subjectivization' of the social sciences here, or 'should we not rather expect just the opposite?' And in the absence of any cogent or detailed *development* of these issues, we are left with jejune flourishes – in the cosmopolitan 'vision', if you really want to know, "'society" no longer appears under anyone's control' (2006: 20). In sum, the whole presentation and defence of methodological cosmopolitanism – regarded as an intervention in *sociological theory* – is strikingly thin, vague, and muddled.

Explanation: an old tune in a new key?

Lest my critique of cosmopolitanism be read as overzealous rather than forensic, I reiterate that I am recommending the Mouzelis, and not the fully Specialist pathway, towards better sociological/social theory. And to counter any impression that I am dangerously elevating matters of style over substance in my emphasis on the necessity for analytical *quality of*

thought in social theory, I repeat that the purpose of that warning is to become clearer about what it means to prioritise substantive explanation over critical questioning (without diminishing the latter). In the framing of this issue, W.G. Runciman's elegant, neglected, schema proves helpful, distinguishing between four aspects of social-theoretic comprehension: reportage, explanation, evaluation, and description (Runciman, 1983). The full rationale for this cannot be examined now, but suffice to say that even after reflexive interrogation, this conceptualisation enables us heuristically to assign sociological theory to the 'explanation' component of the bigger amalgam, whilst various sorts of general theoretical advocacy can be clustered mainly under 'evaluation'. Bringing these aspects together in the kind of composite 'description' that comes *after*, but not *before* 'explanation', we get a fruitful encapsulation of best practice in the human sciences (including, for example, *cultural-studies* best practice (McLennan, 2004b, 2006: ch. 3)).

But this version of the specificity of sociological theory, profiled as a core *part* of social enquiry without exhausting the whole of it, confronts significant problems when the arguments of Bruno Latour come into view. Latour's contribution to the *BJS* Millennium forum, together with his chapter in the present volume, suggest that he might want to scupper any utilisation of the 'Specialist/Generalist' couplet, and to bar any resort to standard notions of explanation as a means of cleaning up sociology's baseline. In closing, it is worth sketching Latour's self-described raid on the mainstream from the margins, to see if his concerns can be construed to fit rather than overturn the terms set for this chapter. (On the overlaps between ANT and the sort of scientific realism to which I remain minimally attached, see Elder-Vass, 2008; on why that attachment can only be rather minimal, see McLennan, 2009.)

Latour's raid needs to be placed in the context of previous phases of Science and Technology Studies (STS). At one point, it seemed that, in full confluence with 'new literary forms' approaches and outright 'constructionism', Latour appeared to regard the notion of explanation itself almost wholly suspiciously (Latour, 1988). Then, agreeing that constructionist and postmodernist excesses required a corrective dose of something like realism – or, better perhaps, positivism (Latour, 2003) – the principal task became to reconfigure the object and modality of sociological explanation (principally in relation to STS of course, but we can extend the brief for our purposes). Nevertheless, what Latour is now suggesting still seems to run against the drift of this discussion, because he accuses (in my jargon) Specialists and Generalists *alike* of being profoundly mistaken in their understanding of the form and the

'substance' of social explanation. Amongst the Generalists – including all manner of hermeneuticians, ethicists, and discursivists – humans and their ideas are deemed inaccessible to scientific explanation, and thus protectively sealed off, via a purely *internalist* vein of theorising, from the harder things of the world. When this tradition takes on a post-modern form, and appears to take an interest in the social world around us, the result is often 'globalonney', with its 'endless talk about fluidity, diversity, multiplicity, fragmentation, open-endedness' (Latour, 2000: 120). We can perhaps assume here, by extension, that Latour might go along with my critical assessment of 'cosmopolitonney'.

But in a challenging move, Latour wants to say that sociological Specialists are unacceptably woolly too. This is because, first, the 'substantive' explanation they prioritise typically involves reference to the causal action of the (hidden) structure of 'society' at large, or some subset of 'social factors' pertaining to it. Yet society as an ultimate *stratum* or all-covering *substance*, Latour argues, especially if conceived as excluding intercourse with all 'natural' and 'technical' elements, simply does not exist; only particular (hybrid) *objects* and forms of *association* do.

Second, explanation is not a matter of stripping away the constituted objectivity of the phenomenon under examination and showing it to be illusory or derivative of some more deeply constituted, more deeply objective social *reality*. Contrary to misleading philosophical models of how the natural sciences explain things, the right way of sociologically accounting for the facts and ways of social things is to *represent* them in their 'unique adequacy', not seek to *replace* them by supposedly less evanescent social functions. Thus corrected, we can finally begin to appreciate how social things do, or can be made to, possess the sort of *recalcitrance* (rather than *generality*) that scientists find in or endow upon natural objects (Latour, 2000: 112–19). Social order, it follows, is continually composed not discovered, and the intellectual task then becomes to give 'due process' to the ways of social things (which are never uniquely '*social*' things), such that whatever unity they have can only be ascertained the '*at the end*, not at the beginning' (2000: 120).

As indicated, if Latour's ploy undermines both Generalist and Specialist aspirations, then it would also seem to block any 'third way' manoeuvre derived from that problematic. It also mars the Runciman schema, because in figuring 'explanation' as 'accounting', 'translating', and 'redescription', Latour is making it difficult to grant even *logical* priority to any 'moment' of explanation outside practices of composite description (2000: 107, 113). However, these issues may not be completely

intractable. Latour's 'objects', one imagines, can be read to include or incorporate specific sorts of reiterated relations between people, and between people and things. And his modes of 're-presentation', whilst they take on a 'political' character in their resistance to any separation of primary solid background qualities from secondary subjective percepts, are nevertheless supposed to be projecting 'to the people' whatever good indications we can muster of the 'consequences and uncertainties' of things. With further delving, these conceptual translations could be deepened. But meanwhile, just *prima facie*, analogues of the routine causal and functional senses of explanation appear to remain in business, even if they have been compounded. Of course, we may not finally buy into second-phase ANT, feeling the need instead for something more conventionally unitary and 'scientific' (Runciman (2008), for example, has strongly called again for 'evolutionism or bust' in sociological theory). Equally, though, Latour's concern for real particularity, and his construction of a system of distinctive categories designed to illuminate it, marks him out as simultaneously pursuing the kind of *determinate* conception of specialism and vigorously *analytical* version of generalism that I have been arguing needs to be praised and cultivated if the looseness of other current forms social theorising is to be surpassed.

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4

A Plea for Earthly Sciences

Bruno Latour

The mood of this chapter is entirely James Lovelock's fault. In his latest book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, Lovelock – apparently a kind, decent, serious, wholly pacific scientist – transports his readers into the midst of a front line of terrifying intensity (2006). Yet, he is not talking about one of those antiquated wars that so many humans wage against one another, but of another war, the one that humans, *as a whole*, wage, without any explicit declaration, against *Gaia*.

As you all know, I am sure, 'Gaia' is the mythical name that Lovelock has given to the life support systems of our planet. In spite of the goddess's name, Lovelock knows fully well that 'she' is not a person, not even an organism, but the emergent property of all the feedback mechanisms that, on the whole, have balanced themselves well enough over the past billion years to maintain life on Earth inside some fluctuating albeit restricted limits. What he shows, chapter after chapter, is that those limits have been trespassed by our own human collective action to such a point that all the feedback mechanisms are now oriented in the same direction: there are no longer any negative mechanisms able to balance the self-reinforcing positive ones.

This is why he derides the timid ecologist who promotes 'sustainable development' as a solution. Lovelock mocks the ecologist's naiveté and uses an alternative metaphor that is especially telling to all of the British: the human race is in such a state of urgency that it is like a defeated army stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk! 'Hasty Retreat' is the name Lovelock gives to what will have to happen on the front line if we were ever to be held up in a June 1940 of truly global proportion. He speaks of a *World War*. Those of the twentieth century were little provincial conflicts compared to the one that awaits us. Retreat! Retreat! Before it's too late and we lose everything.

We will lose especially because this war against Gaia has one trait in common with that rather local fight ridiculously called the 'War on Terror': it cannot be won. Either we come out on top of Gaia, and we disappear with her; or we *lose* against Gaia, and she manages to shudder us out of existence. Now that's 'terror' for real, and I am not greatly reassured when Lovelock punctuates his pedestrian yet hair-raising prose from time to time, with a few half-hearted instances of 'I hope I am wrong'. Well, I hope so too.

The reason why I have been so unsettled by Lovelock's book is not because it has been continuously reinforced and documented by every new meeting of the various international committees on global warming, but rather because there is an utterly mysterious hole in the book that Lovelock, this kindly gentleman, does not even bother to point out: in 2050 (and that's tomorrow, really), he says civilisation will have disappeared (not, mind you, the human race, there will be scattered people in Kamtchatka and Terra de Fuego, although, by the way, not much of the British Isles will be left). Disappeared, that is, if Gaia does not succeed in obtaining a cool planet from us with only five hundred million humans. Yes, you heard me, that's what he says: '500 million', and by then, if projections are right, we will be well over 9 billion. Now, that's quite a retreat to ask for and in less than 50 years! Nowhere in the book, however, does Lovelock bother to explain how we could possibly manage to move from one figure to the other. Nowhere does he mention that the crimes of the twenty-first century might have to be at least one order of magnitude *greater* than those of the twentieth century. He quietly, and almost absent-mindedly *implies* it. That's what I found so terrifying. How can we protect our collective existence either against a war on Gaia that we have no way of winning, or against committing crimes of such mind-boggling magnitude against fellow humans?

Don't worry: I have no intention of adding another gloomy prognosis to those we read every day in the newspapers. I am not going to play the prophet of doom by telling you the precise moment when this very place in the Eastern part of the London Docklands will be under deep water. The reason why I start with Lovelock's call for a new Retreat of Dunkirk is that I think the ecological crisis entirely transforms the question that has been raised for this annual meeting. I quote: 'social connections: identities, technologies and relationships'.

Even if you don't share the gloomy prognosis of Jared Diamond, Lovelock, and so many other authors, you might agree that embarking on a 'world war' makes an enormous difference to what counts as 'social connections'.

How can we read in the newspapers that ‘we’ as humans might be responsible for 30 or 40 per cent of species’ extinction, without this effecting a change in our ‘identity’ and our ‘relationships’? How can we remain unmoved by the idea that we are now as dangerous to our life support system as the impact of a major meteorite? How can we have the same definition of ourselves, now that all the terms which earlier were metaphorical (terms like ‘upheavals’, ‘tectonic shift’, and ‘revolutions’) have become *literal*: yes indeed, collectively we are just as powerful as when we caused three or four other mass extinctions – and some scientists use the word Anthropocene to describe this new geological era. Do you feel proud of that? Some might, actually: so big, so mighty! But how can this feeling be reconciled with the opposite one: we are so little, so powerless, a mere scratch on the surface of the Earth? How could we be capable of war crimes of such proportion and yet so absolutely despondent? ‘I did nothing, I followed the orders.’ Is this discrepancy – between the immensely big and powerful, and the immensely weak and puny – not one of the reasons why we keep reading all of this literature on ecological crisis without really *believing* in it?

To begin to address the theme proposed by the organisers of this annual meeting, it seems to me that we have to redefine the collective ‘we’ that is the new focus of the social sciences (I will redefine the word ‘social’ in a minute).

The great German thinker, Peter Sloterdijk, proposed that history was never about ‘modernisation’ or about ‘revolution’, but was rather about another phenomenon, that he names ‘explicitation’ (2004). As we moved on, through our technologies, through our scientific inquiries, through the extension of our global empires, we rendered more and more *explicit* the fragility of the life support systems that make our ‘spheres of existence’ possible (‘Spheres’ is the theme of Sloterdijk’s three volume *magnum opus* unfortunately not yet translated into English).

Everything that earlier was merely ‘given’ becomes ‘explicit’. Air, water, land, all of those were present but in the background: now they are explicitated because we slowly come to realise that *they* might disappear – and if they do, *we* with them. In another war metaphor, Sloterdijk sees the symbol of the times. Taken this time not from the Beach of Dunkirk but from the terror of 1917 in the trenches of Ypres, when the greenish cloud of toxic gas migrated from the German side and British soldiers began to suffocate and die. Air, the air we always took for granted even through the horrors of the trenches, was suddenly *lacking*, and so air was thus *explicitated* in the most terrifying way. It could no longer be taken for granted, and instead entered the spheres of

existence as one of their 'air conditions' (another of Sloterdijk's obsessions). From the implicit, it became explicit.

'What has this to do', you could object, 'with the topic of the social sciences? No matter how you define what humans do, sociologists can still study their shifting "identities", their moving "technologies", their newly formed "relationships". "Social connections" will always be "social connections".'

Not necessarily, and this is where I want to enter more deeply – and maybe too polemically – into the topic: the whole idea of 'social connections' was linked to a moment in history, that of *modernisation* and of *emancipation*. What happens if we have shifted to another period, one of *explicitation* and of *attachments*?

Since 'we have never been modern', we have always been living through a completely different history than the one we kept telling ourselves about: until the ecological crisis began to strike hard and strong, we could go on as though 'we' humans were living through one modernisation after another, jumping from one emancipation to the next. After all, the future was one of greater and greater detachment from all sorts of contingencies and cumbersome ties until 'Free at last!'

What happens to our identities if it finally dawns on us that that very same history always had another meaning: the slow explicitation of all of the attachments necessary for the sustenance of our fragile spheres of existence? What happens if the very definition of the *future* has changed? If we now move from the position of taking into account a few beings to one of weaving careful attachments with an ever-greater and greater list of explicitated beings, where will we be? Attached at last! Dependent! Responsible!

Is it at all imaginable that the 'social sciences' could have the same agenda, the same methods, the same calling, in both cases?

If modernisation was for humans, explicitation is for – for whom? What will we call it, what would be a good name? 'Post-human' will not do, but why not use that word that science-fiction writers have used all along, yes, how about that of *Earthlings*? After all, if Lovelock is even one bit right, it's fitting to call those who have waged wars on Gaia, Earthlings.

What I am saying, to put it too bluntly, is that while we might have had social sciences for modernising and emancipating *humans*, we have not had the faintest idea of what sort of social science is needed for *Earthlings* buried in the task of explicitating their newly discovered attachments. If modernisation has been a parenthesis, we are being sent back to the design table to find out what happens next. I surmise that's why we have been assembled here today.

But how can we equip the social sciences for this radical new task? You will not be surprised if I claim that one of the problems lies with the notion of ‘social connections’, that is that which lies in the very title of our gathering. If it is true that a word gets its meaning by opposition to other words, then what is the opposite of ‘social’ in that expression? I am not completely sure that we will agree on the definition, but likely candidates must be something like ‘non-social’, ‘natural’, ‘material’, ‘economic’, or perhaps ‘biological’ or ‘psychological’. In most of the social sciences as they have been developed during the modernist parenthesis, the word ‘social’ was put in charge of gathering whatever was not already firmly fixed and cultivated by the other higher, older, harder disciplines. To speak of ‘social connections’ is thus inevitably followed by the sequel: ‘social’ *‘by opposition’* or *‘by contrast’* to other types of connections. ‘Not only’ legal but also ‘social’, ‘not only’ psychological’ but also ‘social’, and so on.

Naturally, this division among connections was not a problem when we were busy modernising our societies – or rather while we *believed* ourselves to be doing so – but it becomes a major hindrance once we try to shift our efforts toward the explicitation of the many attachments that we have to weave together simultaneously. A hindrance for one good reason: while ‘social’ was useful for focusing on *one* type of area *among* several others left in the hands of other specialised domains, the social is completely useless for tracing what should now be *common* to the other types of domains. In other words, ‘social’ might throw light on the ‘social’, but that’s all. Yet what we need now is a type of connection that sheds light on all of the other types of connections as well.

This is why, many years ago, I proposed that we shift the definition of sociology from the study of ‘social’ connections to the study of ‘associations’ – keeping the same Latin etymology but refusing to limit the enquiries to one domain only, as if, side by side, we had ‘social’, ‘psychological’, ‘legal’, ‘biological’, and ‘economic’ connections, each with its own science and protocols.

There are clearly two meanings (at least) of the word ‘social’: the first, social n°1, that is taken to be a domain among other non-social ones. The second, social n°2, establishes connections, associations, collections, whatever the name, between all sorts of heterogeneous domains, none of them being ‘social’ in the first meaning of the word. To sum up the contribution of ‘actor-network-theory’ (ANT): social is not the name of any one link in a chain, nor even that of the chain, but it is that of the *chaining* itself. A laboratory discovery, a piece of technology, a work of art, indeed a living being such as Michel Callon’s famous scallops,

are not social in the first meaning of the word, but they are social in the second one, whenever they deeply modify (or translate) what they are tied to.

If I now reconsider the theme of this meeting, you will agree that it takes two entirely different directions depending on how we understand 'social connections'. If it's social n°1, we should concentrate on the social domain and leave the others to specialists; if it's social n°2, our paramount duty is to understand how these domains might reconnect.

I need no other proof to show that this is not a new debate other than the fierce dispute that Durkheim had with his predecessor Gabriel Tarde, more than a century ago. As it is becoming now well known, Tarde was constantly complaining that Durkheim kept messing up causes and consequences. While the collective – my word – was made up of legal, religious, technical, scientific connections, Durkheim, Tarde complained, kept trying to 'explain' all of those connections by the fact that they were in essence social – that is, social n°1.

Religious ties were not due to religion, in spite of its venerable etymology, but to the diffracted presence of society above the praying souls. Legal ties were not due to law itself, but again to the underlying weight that society gave to the relationships. And the same was true, for Durkheim, according to Tarde, for every other activity – economic, spiritual, artistic, political, or psychological. The social realm was what gave solidity, durability, and consistency to domains like religion, law, economy, psychology that could not hold by themselves – nature being of course the only exception.

For Tarde, however, such reasoning was just a complete fallacy: society is nothing but the empty word we use for the superposition of all of the heterogeneous connections produced by *non-social* elements like law, biology, economy, politics, physics, and so on. Social (n°1) explains nothing, not even itself; on the contrary, it has to be explained. The duty of sociologists is not to limit themselves to the social connections or, even more absurdly, to explain away the other domains by pretending that, in essence, they are made of social ties, but to follow through which associations so many non-social ties are brought together to form a durable – and maybe liveable – whole.

Naturally, this dispute between Tarde and Durkheim was entirely buried (actually no one mentioned it before a few of us resurrected it a few years ago), buried, that is, until the development of science studies gave it a completely new import.

As it has been by now well exemplified, during the modernising period the 'social' n°1 was nothing more than the second half of a

division, the other half being, of course, the 'natural'. If sociologists had been so complacent about the meaning of 'social' in the expression 'social connections', it's because (as science students began to realise), they had quite consciously delegated to the harder sciences the task of dealing with the really hard causal connections: the ones that obtained between non-humans. Science and technology on the one hand, social connections on the other. But when science studies began to try to provide a 'social explanation' of science and technology, that is of causal relations, the whole divide went awry. This is what I call, using my Christian upbringing (and in the true spirit of Easter!), the *Felix culpa* of science studies: by failing to give a social explanation of science and technology, we got rid of social connections altogether.

Without the ecological crisis even this good riddance would have remained a curiosity inside of our tiny sub-discipline of Science and Technology Studies (STS). Suddenly, at a gigantic scale and speed, every single element of the former 'nature' or the former 'society' began to crumble. Such is the amazing transformation to which we have had the good fortune of bearing witness. Every one, it seems, has become a practitioner of science studies!

While thirty years ago it took sociologists and historians of science and technology enormous efforts to associate a given matter of fact to the human groups responsible for its coming into existence, it seems nowadays that there is hardly a matter of fact left without its associated constituency. Have you noticed it? Every disease now has its patient organisation, every river its advocacy group, every Swiss glacier, it seems, its protective cover, every bird, every tree, its own group of volunteers and militants – it is as if every bug had its blog! When last year astronomers turned lexicographers modified the list of planets in good standing, that too made the headlines – and some planetoids had their vociferous defenders! I have learned recently that even nettle, this real nuisance of my garden, benefits from a group caring for it and trying to redress what they see as sheer plant discrimination! Nettle?

To qualify such a sea change, this fast disappearance of 'nature' and 'society', I have proposed to say that all *matters of fact* have become *matters of concern* – or, more philosophically, *objects* have become *things* that is, issues, gatherings, assemblies of some sort. Whatever the name, one consequence is sure: this is the new turf of the newly redefined social sciences. The ecological crisis has forced us to abandon the nature and society collectors, reinforcing to a degree none of us thought imaginable, I swear, the feeble insights of early science studies.

Now this is the hard part: the demise of the 'society'/'nature' divide, what I had called the Modernist Constitution, is only, so to speak, a *negative* event: we are finally freed from a narrative that never accurately described what happened during the global expansion of humans anyway. The 'society'/'nature' divide says nothing at all about what really happened. We are still struggling to find a *positive* narrative, one fitting for the newly redefined Earthlings. To be sure, we now know that social (n°2) is the name of the whole chaining and not of any of its links, but that's not a great advance. The collective (my word for the former 'society' slash 'nature') still has to be assembled.

If the world is not made of either nature or society or any combination thereof, what is it made of?

Back to Tarde, or rather to ANT: take, for instance, the law (Tarde by the way was a judge most of his career). Forget about explaining the solidity of legal ties by appealing to some extraneous force, for instance society itself. Follow in details, for instance in a court of law, as I have done with the French *Conseil d'Etat*, or as Mike Lynch and his colleagues have done with DNA fingerprinting, the sort of objectivity it provides between scattered elements: common sense reasoning, results from instruments, precedents, legal documents, signatures, and so on (2008). If you do this, you might end up focusing on a type of *connector* that is not social (social n°1) to be sure, but that does connect in a thoroughly original way. Whenever we sign our name at the bottom of a document, we link words and deeds through a type of attachment that is typical of legal connection. Whenever a lawyer tries out possible gaps in the 'chain of custody' that guarantees, through many layers of paperwork, that a DNA sample pertains indeed to this or that suspect, we witness a sort of objectivity that deserves to be treated with extreme care, and not explained (i.e. explained away) by saying that, if it's strong and durable, it means that social forces have taken over. No, it's just the opposite: a large part of what we mean by being 'socially durable' is to be tied by that sort of fragile and yet wholly original legal ties: I am responsible for what I have done, precedents carry some weight, and the law binds. It does not bind socially, it binds legally.

The same is true, as is well known now through the efforts of the STS community, if, instead of to law, we were paying attention to techniques. Techniques don't form a cold domain of material relations wholly divorced from the rest of the collective. They do not form an infrastructure under our feet nor are they a mere background for the exercise of our freedom. If you take the example of the container so beautifully studied by Marc Levinson, it becomes very quickly clear that

a large part of what we mean by 'global' depends on the invention of that box (2006). To use the title of this book, the container is 'the box that made the world smaller and the world economy bigger'. But nowhere in the book do you have a technique on the one hand, and a society on the other. And for one good reason, the container is entirely a logistical invention with very few 'harder' parts – like the cranes or the holding gears. The spread of the container depends just as much on legal litigation, accounting procedures, ship design, labour relations among dock workers unions, harbour redevelopment, and so on. In other words, whenever a technology is considered, it becomes an assemblage of complex, heterogeneous threads. Yet, there is a type of connection that can truly be called technical: that is, when non-humans are brought in, aligned and black-boxed in such a way that they provide some sort of durable objectivity. This is why it's so moot to try to provide a social explanation (still social n°1) of the spread of a technique, since a large part of what is meant by being durably associated is made, in the first place, by the weaving of those very technical ties.

And I could have multiplied the examples, by taking, for instance, science or religion, or art, or politics. Each of those words designates specific modes of connection that cannot be explained by the other. If you had the patience to listen to the last two cases, law and technique, you will have noticed that I ended up each case with the same lesson: the durability of the associations is due to the ways laws and techniques connect. It's not because they are social that they last, but because the collective relies in part on the legal and technical ways to form a durable sphere. In a way, this is not surprising since (at least according to ANT) society, or rather the collective, is the consequence of all the different types of association – and not its cause.

All the same, it's a great weakness for a theory to claim that every mode of connection is specific, while at the same time not being able to say in *what way* each mode differs from the others. This is the problem I have always had with ANT, or indeed with good old Tarde: they offer extremely efficient ways to get rid of the social (social n°1), but of every single association they simply say that they associate. Even if it is nice to study at last the whole chain and not only one of its rings or links, it's disappointing not to be able to say anything about the composition of that chain. This is why I often compare ANT to a withdrawal cure: it's very good to clean your blood stream from centuries of addiction to social explanation, but it does not sustain you; it's a negative, not a substantive argument. You are cleaned from the bad dope of the social to be sure, but you are not yet healthily fed.

This is why, in the last few paragraphs, I want to try to push the argument further: the social sciences have a true object which is not the social *per se* (social n°1), but the shifting attachments offered by various non-social modes of connections.

If this sounds obscure, consider the collective as a sort of game of building *Lego*. Whereas Lego bricks have only one type of connection (the four peg standard), imagine that there are several types of connectors. The bricks have many shapes and they are all of many bright colours, but what attaches them can differ. Now, suppose we call one of those attachments the legal one, another the technical one, still another the religious one, yet another the scientific one, the political, and so on. Then, begin to build the collective out of those heterogeneous bricks using several of those various bonds, to use also a chemical metaphor. When bricks are connected through legal ties, they spread in a fashion that is highly specific and that possesses its own solidity, even though the bricks come from all over the place. It is the same when it's the mode of connection of religion or politics or science that is used to relate heterogeneous building blocks.

The point of this somewhat clumsy metaphor is not to draw various spheres of activity, as Luhmann has tried to do, each of them with its own homogeneity, one being the legal sphere, the other the scientific sphere, a third one the technical sphere, and so on. Institutions are much too heterogeneous to be assembled in a Luhmannian way, side by side. Yet, there is something deeply right in Luhmann's attempt to save the social from social explanation: it's totally impossible to assemble a collective made only of social (social n°1) ties. This does not mean that it's a system made of sub-systems – there are no systems and no sub-systems – but it does mean that modes of connection are indeed different and that it's utterly moot to account for the legal by using the technical, or the religious by the scientific, or the artistic by the economic, and so on. Each mode of connection has its own way of spreading, its own epidemiology, if you wish, its own contagion, its own objectivity, its own solidity.

What I am really saying is that, whereas there is no independent domain of science, technique, law, religion, and so on, it makes a huge, a lasting, an enormous difference whether a connection is made *legally*, *scientifically*, *religiously*, *artistically*, *politically* or *technically*. It's the *adverb* that designates a really major ontological nuance even though there is no such a thing as a substantive definition to be given: politics is not a domain; it's a type of relation. The whole attention should shift to the modes of connections, or 'modes of existence'. In that sense, the

early intuition of ANT was right: it's just that ANT is a black and white rendering of associations (social n°2), when what is needed is a fully *colourised* version.

The argument is not as far-fetched as it may seem, because it's exactly the one proposed (like those of Tarde at the beginning of the former century) by William James under the label of *radical empiricism* [1907] (1996). By reminding you of his argument, I will bring this chapter to a close and reconnect with the ecological crisis I started from.

What I want to say is that the problem with the social sciences is that they are not empirical enough, just at the time in history when they are most needed to redesign the whole spheres of existence from top to bottom. Or rather, they have inherited a very narrow definition of empiricism, what I call *first empiricism*. What's the difference with the second empiricism, the one that James called 'radical'? Precisely: relations, or connections; that is, precisely those modes of connections or modes of existence that are *not* dependent on the divide, on the bifurcation, between natural and social.

I am saying this with some trepidation, because I know that empiricism was invented in this country, in England and Scotland, a few centuries ago and that it's impossible to convince a Brit that it was a *historical* invention and not the true bedrock expression of what the world is 'really like': middle-sized dry goods on the one hand, on top of which you might wish to throw some symbols or social connections. In the eyes of the Brits, you have to be a French to deny that this not the real state of affairs. Yet, I will rub it in: first empiricism has been limiting experience to an amazingly poor repertoire of connections: the world provided sensory inputs and all of the relations had to come from the human mind. I quote James:

I will say nothing here of the persistent ambiguity of relations. They are undeniable parts of pure experience; yet, while common sense and what I call radical empiricism stand for their being objective, both rationalism and the usual empiricism claim that they are exclusively the 'work of the mind' -the finite mind or the absolute mind, as the case may be. (1996:148–9)

The social sciences to be sure have managed since the seventeenth century to socialise somewhat the 'work of the mind' so that it is now cultures, societies, norms, and no longer individual heads that are in charge of moulding sensory data into shapes. And yet, just as in the time of Locke or of Hume, social scientists never managed to realise again that *relations too are given into experience*. For reasons that are due

to the Modernist settlement, the social sciences, as a rule, accepted to limit experience to the incredibly narrow confines of objects without relations. What a pity. As James so nicely said:

Prepositions, copulas, and conjunctions, 'is', 'isn't', 'then', 'before', 'in', 'on', 'beside', 'between', 'next', 'like', 'unlike', 'as', 'but', flow out of the stream of pure experience, the stream of concretes or the sensational stream, as naturally as nouns and adjectives do, and they melt into it as fluidly when we apply them to a new portion of the stream. (ibid: 95)

What James is saying in effect is that it might be about time to be empirical at last, that is to *add nothing* to experience, to be sure, but not to *withdraw* anything from experience either, especially not connections! Conjunctions! Prepositions! The very stuff out of which experience is woven! Unfortunately, first empiricism, has done just that, depriving first, modernist philosophy, and then later the modernising social sciences, of any chance of being faithful to what is given in experience.

I will close with a strange paradox: never was the need for radical social sciences more pressing than it is today, yet this is just the time when the lines of columnists in the Western world, especially in France, are complaining about the abandonment of 'utopian ideals', the demise of 'revolutionary impulses', the fall back into complacency, the final victory of neo-liberalism; this is just the time when the task that lies ahead is not only 'revolutionary' but of truly 'earth-shaking proportion' – and remember, all of those expressions are now literal not metaphorical. We have managed to shake the Earth out of balance for good!

Think of it: what was the storming of the Winter Palace, compared to the total transformation of our landscape, cities, factories, transportation system for which we will have to gird ourselves after the Oil Peak? How ridiculously timid does Karl Marx's preoccupation with the mere '*appropriation* of means of production' seem, when compared against the total metamorphosis of the entire *means* of production necessary to soon adjust nine billion people on a liveable planet Earth? Every product, every biological species, every packaging, every consumer in excruciating detail is concerned in this, together with every river, every glacier, and every bug – even the earthworms have to be brought in according to a recent article in the *New Scientist*! We knew about Darwin's work on earthworms, but where could you find, before today, a Marxist view of earthworms? I know Marx's salutation: 'Well done, old mole', yes, but, as far as I know, he never said 'Be careful with earthworms!'

It's now painfully clear that communism was never more than capitalism's abundance pushed to the limit. How unimaginative was such an idea, compared to the modification of all the sinews and corridors of what abundance and wealth should be, from now on! Which communist could think that the day would come when they would have to devise a politics for the Gulf Stream? The Gulf Stream, for Goodness sake! Yet it might fail you (and then this place in London will be under water and probably frozen too!). Yet this is just the time when activists and politicians, pundits and intellectuals, continue to complain about the 'ends of utopias' and the disappearance of *les maîtres penseurs*.

No wonder, the travails of explicitation have nothing in common with the naïve dreams of emancipation. But they are radical nonetheless, they are our future nonetheless. Don't fool yourselves: explicitation is a much tougher task than the 'business as usual' of the modernising revolutionaries. There are more Third Ways than even New Labour and Tony Giddens could ever envisage.

Who are you really, Earthlings, to believe that you are the ones adding relations by the sheer symbolic order of your mind, by the projective power of your brain, by the sheer intensity of your social schemes, to a world entirely devoid of meaning, of relations, of connections? Where have you lived until now? Oh I know, you have lived in this strange modernist utterly archaic globe; and suddenly under crisis you realise that all along you have inhabited the Earth. It's as if you had changed space and time, past, present, and future. Can we re-equip our disciplines so that they meet the challenge? If Lovelock is right, to try to prove it we have a tiny window of opportunity, less than forty three years to go. So now let's get on with the social, I mean the *earthly* sciences.

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5

Complexity, 'Nature' and Social Domination: Towards a Sociology of Species Relations

Erika Cudworth

Whilst environmental sociology has been emergent over the past twenty years, our discipline has distinct difficulties grasping non-human life-worlds as properly the subject matter of sociological enquiries. Sociologists continue to write, for example, of the 'family' or household as if all household dwellers were human, frustrating those few of us who have undertaken empirical work on interactions between humans and the non-human animals who are so often to be found in the 'home'. I have been interested in a variety of non-human creatures whose lives are co-constituted with our own, particularly domesticated animals who live with us, labour for us and are eaten by us. Yet in disciplinary terms, the lives of non-human species and scapes are still overwhelmingly absent or enter the scene of the social as a backdrop, a prop, a fantasy, or a rhetorical device. Yet as Donna Haraway (2008) suggests, we constantly meet other species and have histories of entangled (and often ugly) relations with them. We need, in my view, a sociology that understands these relations with non-human 'natures' as social and allows for critical perspectives on the power relations of species difference. These social relations with species are also cross-cut, emergent with relations of social difference that have become sociologically recognised, around ethnicity, sexuality, gender, locality, and so on.

In thinking about how to develop a sociology in which non-human natures are seen as fully implicated in social practices, processes, and institutions, I have found concepts from the loose collection of work across the sciences, often homogenised as 'complexity theory', to be useful. Complexity theory is surfacing in a range of applications to the extent that Gregor McLennan (2006) has argued that the open and

amorphous quality of many complexity approaches means they have been applied by anyone to anything. Whilst I would concur that theoretically speaking, everything is still 'up for grabs' within the complexity paradigm, McLennan and other critics seriously underestimate the usefulness of complexity thinking in articulating distinct positions, not least in its sociological applications. What I discuss here is my own application – a multiple systems ontology that takes account of both our embodied and embedded condition with other species, and the patterns of iniquitous relations which constitute social relations within the framework of sociology.

Complexity theory offers sociology useful concepts for theorising social interconnections and relationships primarily because it opens up new ways of thinking about the concept of 'system'. However, most of the sociologists who have used concepts informed by complexity in their work seem to have had profound difficulties in theorising power. I consider how different perspectives within political ecologism have made sense of the power relations of species and argue for a multiple systems of social ecologism. This allows us to consider both a separate system of social relations which frame human relations with non-human natures and in addition enables us to see systems as socially intersectionalised, by which I mean, interrelated and characterised by a variety of complex social inequalities, such as gender or ethnicity. I go on to suggest how some complexity conceptions of systems thinking may be deployed in theorising both social formations and social natures. Finally, I argue that non-human nature is subject to a complex system of social domination that privileges the human.

Sociology beyond human exceptionalism?

It is becoming increasingly accepted that 'nature' is social, and that it is variably constructed across time, space, and place (Cronon, 1995; Soper, 1995; McNaghten and Urry, 1998). Nevertheless, the environmental sociologists William Catton and Riley Dunlap (1980, 1993) have been right to contend that most sociologists operationalise the 'exceptionalist' or (later) 'exemptionalist paradigm' in which humans are cast as exceptional creatures with specific attributes which make them exempt from the notion of environmental limits which implicate all other species. Sociology continues to tread the exceptionalist/exemptionalist path by adhering to social constructionism when considering nature, perhaps the result of a disciplinary legacy of countering naturalistic explanations of social phenomena (Benton, 1994: 3).

Strong constructionists argue that things in the world gain their character from human understanding and interpretation rather than by virtue of any objective properties, thus Haraway asserts that 'Nature cannot pre-exist its construction' (1992: 296). The co-constructionism popularised by Bruno Latour's (1987, 1993) actor network theory posits a hybrid ontology of not altogether 'natural' or 'social' objects, embedded in 'networks'. Herein, social and natural processes are conflated. In Catton and Dunlap's view, this is merely an extension of the human exceptionalist paradigm to include the biophysical world of nature (see Dunlap, 2002: 329–50). However, the different 'stuff' that constitutes social natures has its own properties, and it is only by allowing the potential autonomy of natural processes can we avoid seriously underestimating the emergent properties and causal powers of nature, and allow for non-hybrid causality. The ontological powers of the non-human life-world are incredibly significant (Martell, 1994: 176). We cannot simply conflate our social understanding of the non-human *with* the non-human, and critical realism enables us to accept the idea that the world is composed of 'real objects' with independent properties and causal powers, which sits alongside an understanding of the social construction of that world in different ways by human subjects (Dickens, 1992). Critical realism avoids epistemological and ontological elision, and Latour himself has latterly endorsed a 'realist social philosophy of science' in the face of 'things' that 'strike back' (Latour, 2000: 114–15).

Actor-network approaches have been significant, however, in encouraging sociology to account for nature (Murdock, 2001) and to think about patterns of relationships involving the non-human. But the networks are flat, being one dimensional they lack ontological depth and give no sense of their possible multi-levelled qualities including hierarchies, and thus the variety of kinds of relationships which might be found within them. The power relations and dominant social, economic, and political institutions of modernity have been constituted by constructions of social inequality, of class, race, and gender and through prevailing ideas about 'nature'. This has had implications for the treatment of certain categories of humans who are natured and thereby seen as closer to nature or less civilised (Anderson, 2001) and has certainly impacted on non-human species of animals, many of whom are seen, and made use of, as means for the satisfaction of human ends. Nature and 'species', like sex and gender or 'race' and ethnicity are concepts which might be used for capturing social relations of power.

For Dunlap and Catton, the move away from exceptionalism/exemptionalism entails a drastic reconceptualisation of the social as

embedded in, rather than interacting with, nature and an appreciation of the ontological powers of non-human natural systems. But Dunlap and Catton themselves offer a problematic route to ecologising sociology for their 'New Ecological Paradigm' (Dunlap, 2002: 333) is prey to a different traditionalism – a Malthusian notion of environmental 'carrying capacity'. Recent work in the biology of complex systems suggests that systems which include both humans and other nature are not the same as interacting social and natural systems. Rather, the latter give rise to particular forms of the social and natural which can be autonomous or relatively hybridised (Gunderson and Holling, 2002: 121–46) and raise questions for any presumptions of scarcity or 'natural limits'.

In sociology, we need to develop a conceptual apparatus that enables consideration of the relative power of different kinds of actants, for we are embedded in all kinds of different relations with natures: webs of reciprocity, networks of benign but unequal power, or relations domination and politically problematic practices of power. How could we think about patterns of relationships both between and across species, and how might we be able to tease out the different kinds of relationships present and the levels at and forms in which they operate? I consider that the notion of system is more useful than network in developing an embedded and embodied sociology. Even so, it needs rethinking. Concepts from complexity science can be modified and applied to this end, and a complexity inflected notion of system is extremely helpful in analysing human relations with non-human species.

Thinking differently about systems

Complexity theory is something of a misnomer for a range of theories and concepts. These have been deployed outside the sciences with sometimes problematic effect. For example, some misread the scientific understandings of complexity to support a chaotic notion of a fragmented and disordered sociality (Cilliers, 1998). However, the usual understanding of complexity by complexity scientists is as 'the occurrence of complex information in which order is emergent' (Hayles, 1991: 176), whilst also being in no way fixed, static, or absolute (Hayles, 1990: 292). There are those greatly concerned at the modification and application of natural science concepts and theories by social scientists, yet historically, both the social and natural sciences borrow from one another (López and Scott, 2000: 10), and the social sciences have increasingly been aware that the phenomena with which they are concerned cannot be seen as purely social formations (Urry, 2003: 17). Complexity

sciences are a rich source in attempting to transcend unhelpful but powerful dichotomies between the 'social' and 'natural' worlds and the disciplines of their study, but before proceeding to consider how complexity ideas might be applied in sociological theorising about 'nature', we consider some of the concepts associated with a range of new ways of understanding the notion of 'system'.

Complex systems in nature

In complexity science, natural systems are understood to exist in a web of connections with other systems and to be internally differentiated. 'Emergent properties' is a term used to describe specific qualities that emerge at a certain level of systemic complexity but which are not apparent at lower levels. This is a non-reductionist position in which phenomena cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts but gain their character from the patterns of their interaction. Thus in ecology for example, systems are understood as communities of organisms which link together in a network (Capra, 1996: 34–5). Complexity scientists often speak of systems as 'nested', with larger-scale systems enclosing myriad smaller-scale systemic processes (Holling, Gunderson, and Peterson, 2002: 68–9). One of the most common and simple elements of the complexity notion of system is the distinction between a system and its environment in which the system has boundaries, is delimited, and distinguishes itself from its 'environment', that is, everything which lies outside it. Although distinct, systems interact with one another in a way which has been referred to as 'coupling' (Maturana and Varela, 1980: 109). Coupled systems may themselves be self-reproducing, so they may come to depend on each other for the preservation of their identities.

Systems have 'autopoiesis' and are self-making, self-reproducing, self-defining or regulating. Neuroscientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela considered that in adapting and recreating the conditions of life, natural systems should be seen as engaging in a process of 'cognition' (1980: xvii). A system has internal processes which connect its elements that actively reproduce the system as a whole. A controversial and well-known exemplar is James Lovelock's earth systems science and the hypothesis that the earth is a 'superorganism' able to regulate its own temperature (2000: 15). A vast network of feedback loops bring about such regulation, and link together living and non-living systems. Regulation also takes place through 'symbiogenesis' – the merging of different species in complex arrangements of cooperation and

creativity (Margulis and Sagan, 1986: 119). In this model, the earth constitutes a single system within which multivariate networks of systems exist, implicating all species, in relations assuming multiple forms with different levels of organised complexity.

Systems are 'open' because they utilise a continual flux of matter and energy, whilst also exhibiting closure in maintaining a (relatively) stable form (Prigogine, 1989). One of the most influential theorists has been the chemist Ilya Prigogine who found in apparently chaotic situations far from equilibrium, that coherent, structured, ordered behaviours, or patterns emerged (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984: 146). Changes are processed by systems through feedback loops which synthesise new information and result in the dynamic qualities of systems. Feedback can result in stability, or, if there is positive feedback and a change is reinforced rather than dampened down, dramatic shifts can take place and a system can be said to have become 'path dependent'. However, the instability of these dynamic systems means that even a path-dependent system cannot be understood to be developing along a linear trajectory. Rather, systems can bifurcate and shift to new paths; they may dissipate or reorder themselves and perhaps move on to a higher level of complexity. Natural systems are characterised in this view by constant change, some of it abrupt, all of it unpredictable (Holling, Gunderson, and Ludwig, 2002: 14). Importantly, systems do not move in one direction, for physicist Murray Gell-Mann, they have differential 'potential complexity' and can move back and forth towards complexity or simplicity (Gell-Mann, 1995: 19, see also Gell-Mann, 1994).

Systems change through interaction and complexity scientists have used a notion of co-evolution to describe how systems complexly adapt to their environment. Rather than simply impacting on one another (as implied by a hierarchical model of system) systems have complex reactions to relations with other systems (due to the presence of their own internal systemic features). Biologist Stuart Kauffman (1993, 1995) uses the concept of 'fitness landscape' in understanding the complex co-evolution of species, arguing that the environment or landscape each system faces is altered as a result of changes in all the various other systems that collectively constitute the landscape.

These concepts allow for differentiated systems, with various layers and levels of emergent properties and powers, and do not assume that relationships between levels are fixed or hierarchical in character. In addition, there is the presumption that systems interrelate, overlap each other, may exist within each other, and have elements which are co-constitutive. There is no presumption of stasis, but rather, the notion

that systems are constantly making and remaking themselves, and may, given their inevitable interactions with other systems, change and shift radically in various ways.

Sociology and complex systems

Much of the theoretical legacy of the social sciences has, until recently, been concerned with large-scale conceptualisation and modelling, usually invoking some kind of conception of a system or structure. In the path of Marx for example, the capitalist system of relations has been seen as operating globally (Wallerstein, 1979) or nationally (Giddens, 1984; Jessop, 2002). The critique of systems theory in the social sciences has focused on an inability to account for the shifting nature of social life and its multiple differences, a rigid understanding of the relationship between parts and wholes, and a preoccupation with notions of balancing in the maintenance of equilibrium, or social order, as apparent in the functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1951, 1960). Yet systems in complexity thinking are at once ordered yet disordered, stable yet unstable (Prigogine, 1980). Instabilities lead to new forms of order and disorder and these are often (but not necessarily) of increasing complexity. Whilst Parsons saw change in terms of equilibrium, Marx saw gradual change punctuated by dramatic (revolutionary) transformation along a predictable trajectory of class conflict. In complexity thinking however, systems are not teleological – development depends on the systems' history and various external conditions and cannot be predicted (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984:140). So how then, have sociologists fared in their adventures with complexity informed concepts?

When Dunlap and Catton were beginning to argue for an environmental sociology in the 1970s, sociology was undertaking a purge of systems thinking in the attempt to rid itself from the grip of functionalist analysis. It is, in my view, most unfortunate for sociology in general and environmental sociology in particular, that the most thorough application of complexity concepts can be found in the Parsonian systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (1995). This has resulted in an embrace of complexity in a Luhmannist neo-functionalism and has made some on the left wary of invoking the spectre of Parsons, should they engage with complexity notions. Luhmann deploys complexity concepts straightforwardly (if hyper abstractedly), using 'autopoiesis' to suggest that each system reproduces itself on the basis of its internal operations and attributes, and differentiates itself from its milieu. His systems are differentiated into multi-levelled sub-systems, each with its own degree

of organised complexity. Thus, system elements are themselves systems and systems are embedded within other systems, which interconnect and influence each other, but are not determined by a single logic. Luhmann uses Parsons concept of 'interpenetration' to characterise the interdependencies that result from the co-evolution of systems, wherein different systems rely on each other's complexity to elaborate on their own internal complexity (1995: 213–4). For Luhmann, the reproduction of social systems cannot simply be seen as the 'replication of the same', but as a constantly 'new constitution of events' (1995: 189) as new elements are emergent and incorporated, although despite an avowed dynamism Luhmann's interpenetrated social systems seem ultimately fairly static.

Avoiding the term 'system' itself, Manuel Castells influential trilogy *The Information Age* (1996, 1997, 1998) uses complexity informed concepts to flesh out an understanding of the social as 'networked'. Castells has exchanged ideas with complexity physicist and green theorist Fritjof Capra (see Castells, 1997 in particular, and Capra, 2003) and largely as a result, his networks can be seen as complex systems characterised by both openness and closure, systems within systems, self-organisation and resistance. More explicitly, John Urry elaborates an approach to understanding 'the global' in complexity terms. Urry considers that the global is not a single system, but 'a series of dynamic complex systems' (2003: x). He applies elements of complexity theory to understand the non-linear, non-unified quality of globalisation where 'regions' (clusters of bounded societies based on the notion of a nation state) persist, despite being (re)shaped and affected by and implicated in 'networks' of international relationships often involving an array of new technologies, and 'fluids', flows of people, money, environmental hazards, commodities, and other objects (2003: 40–5, 53–74). These regions, networks, and fluids are themselves non-linear, complex, and self-organising systems, and collectively they constitute the 'global' which, itself a system and distinct from those systems nested within it, has its own emergent properties (2003: 76).

The significance of complexity theory for understanding social relations is that it offers us different ways of thinking about connections and linkages, to examine interlinked and multi-levelled relations, and different scales of activity and processes and the specific characteristics of these. However, most of those who have applied complexity informed concepts to social worlds tend to lose any notion of power as related to interests and social domination. The explanation for this is partly political as can be seen in the use of complexity concepts to support

a postmodern political analytic (Cilliers, 1998). However, it is also epistemological in that some sociologists have drawn back from the implications of complexity for the study of both human and non-human worlds into a 'restricted complexity' position (Morin, 2007). In the work of Urry for example, complexity concepts are metaphors, description devices for social processes without a material basis which sit well with a strongly relativist approach (see Cilliers, 2007; Cudworth and Hobden, 2009). The inability of some applications to account for social domination has led some to reject complexity as having insurmountable problems when faced with the specificities of social systems shaped by contours of power and authority (Earnest and Rosenau, 2006).

We would not expect Luhmann to have much to say about conflict, inequity, and domination. Luhmann is also unashamedly anthropocentric – the social is exclusively human, and the irreconcilable difference of species renders interpenetration of social systems and ecosystems impossible (1995:34–7, 102). Whilst Urry has used complexity related concepts to understand social relations with nature and both he and Castells consider contemporary economic, political, and social forms, they discuss diffuse, mobile, dynamic networks of relations without tackling the persistence of social relations of power and domination. Urry's work can be taken as a case in point. Following David Harvey (2001), Urry argues capitalism can be analysed as a complex, adaptive, and non-linear system. This is capitalism, but not as we know it – there are no interests around which power might be constituted and exercised. This, Urry suggests, is precisely the point – a complexity approach sees power as 'something that flows or runs and may be increasingly detached from a specific territory or space' (2001: 112). Power is not exercised through interpersonal threat, manipulation, or persuasion, and the citizens of the twenty-first century are subjected to new forms of informational power (through the internet or closed circuit television) which is 'mobile, performed and unbounded', and therefore, oddly, 'like sand' (2001: 119). Power here is nebulous, diffuse, and most importantly, it is indifferent. It is noteworthy that Urry refers to Steven Lukes's (1973) well known critique of liberal pluralist analyses of political power with a structural model based on a distinction between intersubjective interests and 'real' interests in which the social system (capitalism) shapes our desires and our understanding of the world. Urry uses Lukes to critique the view that power resides with individual subjectivity, but fails to note the crucial point – Lukes understands power as *relational system of domination*. Herein lies the problem with Urry's use of the notion of a complex system – he does not distinguish between different types.

José López and John Scott make a disarmingly simple, but highly useful distinction between what they call ‘institutional structure’, ‘relational structure’, and ‘embodied structure’ (2000: 3–5) to capture different facets of the organisation of social life. These terms are useful to distinguish between *different kinds of system*, those based on sets of institutions and their related procedures and practices (e.g. a system of government), those based on patterns of social relations (around class, gender, ethnicity), and those involving the embodiment of social relations and the control of social bodies (such as populations of a particular species). Sylvia Walby (2007: 459) makes good use of two of these distinctions – institutional and relational systems – in discussing both intersected relational inequalities (of class, gender, ethnicity, locality, and so on) as complex systems, regionally varied and ‘non-saturated’ (i.e. not necessarily all encompassing) phenomena and gives them ontological depth through specific sites in which these relations cohere – institutional systems based on domains of polity, economy, civil society, and violence. However she does not consider how complexity concepts might be able to disturb the taken-for-granted assumption of the anthropocentric sociological mainstream. Following López and Scott, I consider institutional, relational, and embodied aspects of social organisation to be co-present, and that embodied systems may be a particularly important element in considering the relations between species.

I now turn to the way in which these elements help us to move towards a sociology that accounts for a multiplicity of power formations and is able to consider sociologically, relations that are not human exclusive or exemptionalist.

Ecologising sociology

Complexity applications in sociology as they stand require a specific ontology of social power. The ontological field which augurs best for those of us trying to understand the relationships of species as political, and to see the social as something which is not exclusively human, is political ecologism, of the kind inflected with insights from feminism, (post)-colonialism, and Marxism. This provides us with a range of understandings which problematise current human relations with ‘natures’. In addition to a conception of different systems of social power that are complex and intersected, it is important to capture the scales and levels of different kinds of bounded but intersected systems. Useful here is the notion of ‘panarchy’ which draws in ecosystems, political,

economic, and social systems, alongside a notion of local, specific human cultural systems.

Political ecology and the domination of non-human natures

To make the link between complexity approaches and environmental issues, I draw upon the different strands of political ecology. Connection with this literature, which has been apparent in other disciplines (e.g. critical approaches in international development, international relations, and human geography) has been notably absent from much environmental sociology. Although a criticism of typologies is that they might oversimplify and caricature the work of individual theorists, we can use this conventional sociological device to construct four approaches to understanding human relations to the natural environment. What they have in common is a radicalism that demands fundamental changes in social, economic, and political institutions and processes, and a fundamental recasting of human relations to non-human nature.

Deep ecology is a systemic approach to understanding the organisation and patterning of both social and natural life. From scientific ecology, it adopts the view that all processes are connected and human intervention in natural ecosystems cannot be without impact. Naess (1989) suggests that living beings of all kinds are 'knots' in a biospherical net or field of relations. Such webs of relationships are incredibly complex and need to be understood as vast systems (Eckersley, 1992: 49) that interlock us with a variety of species and scapes. In addition, deep ecology understands human society as structured in particular relations with the 'natural world'. That system of relationships has been termed 'anthropocentrism'. Western society is human-centred in its organisation and has a dominant world-view in which non-human natures are conceptualised in terms of means to human ends. Yet humanity, given all its differences of power, wealth, and consumption, is embedded with/in environments with different relationships and impacts. I want not only to retain this notion of social relations with 'the environment' and non-human species as systemic and exploitative but also to understand these relations as socially intersectionalised, that is, existent in a context overlapping relations with other systems of social relations, such as those based on class, gender, and ethnic hierarchy (McCall, 2005).

What are often called 'social' ecologies have accounted for the interplay between human domination of nature, and our domination

of each other. Systemic analyses of capitalism have been deployed to understand environment–society relations. Dickens (1996) suggests that the nexus of environmental exploitation is the social organisation of labour power in capitalist societies around the production of goods for the market. For various theorists, contemporary developments mean ‘nature’ becomes increasingly internal to the dynamics of capital accumulation as biotechnology is harnessed to overcome natural barriers to profit accumulation (Castree, 2001: 191). Harvey (1996) suggests that we have ‘constructed ecosystems’ in which nature is produced/reproduced, through relations of social domination. Endlessly repeated local actions (e.g. the exploitation of workers) reproduce the capitalist system and its emergent properties (e.g. class relations, resource depletion) giving rise to various system contradictions (from social movements to environmental collapse).

Also Marxist-influenced is ‘liberation ecologism’ or the ‘ecologism of the poor’ which has brought the conceptual apparatus of post-colonialism to bear on debates around social difference and human–environment relations. Environmental difficulties are embedded in the social relations of (post-)colonial capital, but those specific problems differ from both those experienced in the North and across the regional formations of the global South. For some, this means that we can only grasp the articulations of social nature according to geographic specifics (Peet and Watts, 1996: 14), whilst others consider various human communities in the context of diverse natural systems and also within the global system characterised by relations of post-coloniality (Guha, 1997: 22–7). Here, specific formations are understood as produced by a range of interrelating social and natural structures and processes, and these localised systems of environmental exploitation and human injustice have global effects.

Ecofeminists provide a version of social ecology in which the domination of nature is interrelated particularly with the relations of gender. The discourses of European modernisation from the seventeenth century involved the objectification of the natural world as a prerequisite for the commercial exploitation of natural resources and the social exclusion of women and gendered division of labour (Merchant, 1980). Vandana Shiva (1988) argues that the West has imposed its ecologically destructive and gender dichotomous model of modernity on the rest of the globe through colonial and post-colonial institutions and practices. However, these theorists have not used a multiple systems model of intersectionality, but often reduced and confined a range of dominations to a theory of patriarchy (Cudworth, 2005: 119–27). For

example, Val Plumwood sees gender, nature, race, colonialism, and class as interfacing in a 'network' or 'web' (1993: 2), but retains a conflationary approach where different dominations are characterised by 'a unified overall mode of operation, forming a *single system*' (1994: 79; my emphasis). Alternatively, for Maria Mies (1993: 223–6) the dominations of colonialism, gender, and nature appear as systemic effects of capitalism. Ecofeminist analysis would be enhanced by understanding systems of social domination (such as patriarchy, capitalism, and the domination of the natural world) as analytically distinct, but overlapping and interrelated, and not always co-present – a system does not necessarily 'saturate' a territory/space (Walby, 2007: 454).

All political ecologies see human communities, varied as they are, in a complex network of relations with non-human nature – relations characterised by reciprocity and interdependency, and also importantly, by exploitation and domination. I take from deep ecology that there is a social system of human domination, but consider that this takes historically and geographically specific forms. It is here that complexity theory can help us to consider intermeshing multiple systems as both analytically distinct, whilst being also, mutually constitutive. The domination of non-human nature is a system of exploitative relations, that overlaps and interlinks with other systems of power and domination based on gender, capital, ethnic hierarchy, and so on.

Intersections between natural and social systems

In addition to these relational systems, there are impacting and co-constituting systems that result from the interrelation between human social systems and those involving non-human natures. Lance Gunderson and Buzz Holling use the notion of 'panarchy' to describe such systemic configurations which are themselves living systems, with internally dynamic and historically non-static structures which develop mutually reinforcing relationships which are co-constitutive and adaptive (2002: 72–4). There are multiple connections established by feedback mechanisms between both different kinds of system and different levels of a system. It is not only panarchies involving human systems which demonstrate decision-making properties, rather a huge variety of non-human animals make collective decisions and engage in individual decision-making behaviour with a cumulate system effect (2002: 85–7). Living systems of humans, non-human animals and plants develop self-organised interactions with physical processes. These self-organised interactions do not result in stability. Rather, systems may

be vulnerable – ecosystems may collapse or be undermined by human endeavours, political systems may be vulnerable due to the collapse of natural systems on which populations depend for resources, or social shifts (such as economic exploitation, increased literacy rates, and so on). Importantly also, these configurations of systems in interaction are themselves complex systems with their own emergent properties (Holling, Carter, Brock and Gunderson 2002: 411).

This does not collapse the social into the natural (as does socio-biology) or the natural into the social (as per social constructionism). Rather, there are some qualitative and quantitative differences between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ systems, in particular, because the self-organising properties of intra-human systems outstrip those of natural systems (Westley et al., 2002: 104–5). Ecosystems and human social systems are all complex systems in their own right (Scheffer et al., 2002: 210). Whilst social and natural systems may be shaped and structured by similar processes, ‘signification allows human systems to divorce themselves to some degree from space and time, the critical organizing dimensions of ecosystems’, and the reproduction of social systems means that they are more mutable (Westley et al., 2002: 110). In addition, whilst natural systems have the capacity for ‘remembrance’ (g. biotic legacies), humans and intra-human systems have properties of consciousness and reflexivity. This, however, does not mean that change operates towards self-regulation in terms of the maintenance of equilibrium. Rather human systems may become more easily locked into paths of development that may have serious consequences for certain human and non-human species populations. And, of course, human systems reproduce and develop formations of relational social power, which, like capitalism, patriarchy, and so on, are usefully understood as complex adaptive systems. It is perhaps this which gives us an added challenge in using complexity in social relations.

There are systems of social power relations, institutional systems in the social world that implicate multiple species, ecosystems in which various kinds of human collectivities are embedded. To take sociology beyond exemptionalism however, I consider that it is necessary to theorise a specific relational system of power which privileges the human as exceptional and ‘beyond nature’.

Human social domination

I use the term ‘anthroparchy’ to capture the social ordering of human relations to the ‘environment’. It is a complex system of relations in

which the 'environment' is dominated through formations of social organisation which privilege the human (Cudworth, 2005: 63–71, 2007). The 'environment' itself can be defined as the non-human animate world and its contexts – including the whole range of multifarious animal and plant species. Whilst there are incredible differences between and amongst these phenomena, I group them merely by biological referent – their being both non-human and 'live' (manifesting properties of metabolism, growth, reproduction, and response to stimuli, see Capra 1996). In societies structured around relations of human domination, the complex and highly diversified non-human animate life-world is homogenised as 'nature', as 'Other' to the human. 'Nature' is a socially constituted category with the physical referent of species difference. Human relations to other species are constituted by and through social institutions, processes, and practices. These can be seen as sets of relations of power, which are consequential of normative practice and interrelated to form a social system of relations of natured domination.

The global spread of human dwelling means that there is little left that might approximate to an ideal of 'wilderness' and the natural environment has for centuries been rendered hybrid by the interventions of human technologies. The incredible disparities and differences constituted through various forms of human social relations mean that relations of domination may assume different forms and operate to a differing extent. Thus anthroparchy involves different degrees of formations and practices of relational power: oppression, exploitation, and marginalisation. I use these terms to capture distinct degrees and levels at which social domination operates, and also the different formations it assumes within which only some species and spaces may be implicated. For example, animals closer to humans in biology and sentience can experience oppression. Other species may not be implicated in anthroparchal relations, but exist in symbiosis. Different oppressive forms apply to different species due to their specific characteristics and normative behaviours, such as the presence of sociality and the ways in which this presents itself. Exploitation refers to the use of some being, space or entity as a resource for human ends, and one might speak of the exploitation of the properties of soils, woodland, or the labour power of domesticated animals in agriculture, for example. Marginalisation is most broadly applicable – and refers to anthropocentrism, a concept too weak for the capture of more direct aspects of human domination of certain species.

Whilst the environment, in its infinite variety may be enmeshed in anthroparchal relations, the agency of 'nature' differs across time,

space, and context and is implied by the ability of natural phenomena to exert their own properties and powers in specific situations, which operate within/across/alongside anthroparchal networks of relations. In turn, the structure of human social organisation, involving the exploitation of the environment, implicates human communities, practices, and institutions within ecological systems. However, natural systems, for example tidal flows and a host of weather patterns may have considerable impacts on the ability of people to dominate their environments, but intersectionality means that humans have different kinds of relations to natures across place, space, time, and social locality. Some groups of us are positioned in more potentially exploitative relations than others. In addition, individuals and collectivities choose not to exercise potential powers of domination and exclusion and also to contest them.

I suggest that five sub-systems, sets of institutions and processes network to form a social system of anthroparchy. First, production relations, that is the sets of relations between humanity and the environment as we interact with nature to produce the things we need (food, fuel, and so on), with dominant industrialised production and market distribution forms associated with European modernity exercising an unsustainable toll on natural systems and certain non-human species. The second arena is domestication. This operates materially, for example in intensification of technological manipulation of plants and non-human animals through breeding and 'husbandry', especially interventions in animal protein production; and symbolically, for example, in the imperative to civilise or tame a 'wild' nature, and the distinction between species that are safely domesticated and those dangerous beings and spaces that are not. The third arena is political. Institutions and practices of governance may re/produce, or contest and change relations of systemic domination. States and state-like formations can act as direct or indirect agents of anthroparchy – by subsidising intensive animal farming, or not taxing resource use, for example. States can also alter practices of domination, for example, by affording legislative protection for certain species. Fourth, we have systemic violence. For animal species with greater levels of sentience, violence can be seen to operate in similar ways to violences affecting humans, for example food animals, but we might also speak of violence in the destruction of natural scapes. Finally, anthroparchal social relations are characterised by cultures of exclusive humanism that construct notions of animality and humanity and other such dichotomies, which may, for example, encourage certain practices such as animal food consumption.

Conclusion – complex systems, 'species', and social intersectionality

Our social world has never been exclusively human. There is no categorical division between the human and non-human lifeworld – our social formations are of multiple species of incredible diversity, continually produced and reproduced by conglomerations of social–natural systems. It is not surprising that a discipline which carved out the 'social' as an entity fought hard to police its boundaries and repress the influence of explanations of social behaviour offered by the natural sciences. It is also unremarkable that the non-human was not a subject of enquiry or concern, given that species difference is a socially constituted category with political implications in modernity. We co-construct various kinds of socialnatures with various ends in mind and with various social and ecological effects. These are shaped by persistent forms of relational power. I have argued that the legacy of histories of human exceptionalism has led to a social system of power based on species – anthroparchy.

Sociology has broadened its repertoire in considering patterns of stratification and inequality, incorporating, for example, the complicating effects of gender for class, 'race', and other forms of difference. I have suggested that humans have socially formed relational power over other species. The social and ecological effects of species as system of relational power are co-constituted with other kinds of complex inequalities and assume specific spatialised and historical formations. Complex systems of social domination exist within a relational *matrix* – intermeshing and coalescing in a particular pattern, articulated in different ways, in different times, places, and spaces. The term matrix suggests a process of becoming and this is apposite for a complexity understanding of socialnatural systems – we are continually recast. Dynamic systems of domination reveal possibilities for (re)negotiations of power. The sociological task then, and it is of some urgency, will be to consider how we have made and remade socialnatures and consider what kinds of socialnatures we want for what kind of future.

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6

The Death of History in British Sociology: Presentism, Intellectual Entrepreneurship, and the Conundra of Historical Consciousness

David Inglis

We know only a single science, the science of history.

Marx

The one thing that does not change is that at any and every
time it appears that there have been 'great changes'.

Proust

Our ignorance of history makes us libel our own times.

Flaubert

The famous opening line of L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* – 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' [1953] (1977) – might well serve as an epigraph for sociology in Britain today. Mainstream British sociology in recent times has a very patchy record of building an awareness of long-term historical processes into its analytic foci and procedures. Presentism – the unintended, tacit, and unnoticed privileging of contemporary concerns and dispositions within particular modes of analysis – rather than systematic consciousness of the (contested) contours of historical dynamics is the hegemonic scholarly *modus operandi* today. Although the current ubiquity in both theoretical and empirical writings of a whole series of periodising theoretical constructs – such as risk society, globalisation, late modernity, liquid

modernity, network society, and so on – seem to indicate strong historical consciousness within the discipline, in fact such concepts both make possible and legitimate disengagement with historical processes. This is because they provide pre-packaged, sound-bite-friendly accounts of complex historical forces that save sociologists from engaging in some hard tasks, namely really getting to grips with historical details and complexities and with current developments in both historiography and historical sociology. In a quite acute sense, the historical imagination is dying or already dead in British sociology today. What I want to address in this chapter are both the reasons as to why this situation has come to pass and also how this state of affairs might be overcome through a resuscitation of sophisticated historical consciousness in sociological practice.

As a keen reader of the sociological classics, and a generally enthusiastic teacher of them, I have always been struck by the vast historical knowledges possessed by figures such as Max Weber and Karl Marx. Their historical awareness, even if limited by the intellectual horizons of their times, stretched far and wide, across vast tracts of human existence. But in stark contrast to the panoramic historical visions enjoyed by many of the classical authors, the past has become ever more a foreign country to mainstream sociological practice in present-day Britain. For the purposes of situating both themselves and their objects of analysis, British sociologists have become ever more reliant on the overly glib characterisations of present-day social conditions, and the historical processes that have allegedly created them, put forward by a cadre of elite specialists called 'social theorists'. Those persons coded as the major 'social theorists' of the day can be seen as a set of powerful and influential *intellectual entrepreneurs*, who are licensed by the sociological field as the interpreters of both 'contemporary society' as a whole, and of 'history', for that field. Within the social theoretical work of this group, buzz-words are offered which appeal to those more empirically oriented researchers who are in need of a quick-fix, provided in an easily digestible package, of historicisation and periodisation. Empirical work is thus located in time and given a theoretical gloss, the latter figuring as a potentially powerful legitimating mechanism in a field where one is expected to legitimate one's work through symbolic association with those figures defined as the major intellectuals of the day (Bourdieu, 1992).

This is not to say that the work of such legitimator figures is wholly without worth. Reading the writings of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells, and others who are coded as being

of their elevated scholarly stature may bring certain rewards: certainly I personally have found this to be the case on occasion. But the problem I wish to focus on here is that theorists of this sort – the most successful and consecrated intellectual entrepreneurs of the age – are weakest when making claims about the historical processes that they claim have led to the contemporary condition – liquid modernity, late-modern reflexivity, risk or cosmopolitan society, or whatever – because the historical account gets subordinated to the account of the alleged condition we are currently in. As the latter is what these entrepreneurs are endeavouring to sell in the contemporary intellectual marketplace, a central and unavoidable feature of this genre of writing is that historical complexity becomes caricatured, sacrificed to overly narrow narrative accounts that must end up at the point of the supposed contemporary condition that author is trying to promote as a master-template through which to understand the ‘contemporary condition’, and through which he (it is almost always a he) is endeavouring to cultivate symbolic mastery over the means by which sociologists think about both past and present social conditions.

By such means history – even just in the contexts of the West (often an un- or under-theorised term in this sort of writing), let alone in the rest of the world – gets forced into a Procrustean bed of a narrative which regards everything that happened ‘before’ as a run-up to what happens ‘now’. History becomes the ‘pre-history’ of risk society, cosmopolitan society, network society, liquid and late modernity, and so on. Even more problematically, historical complexity is sacrificed at the altar of schematic periodisation, generally involving rigid dichotomies. One cannot have late-, post-, liquid-, or second-modernity, and so on without having a (necessarily caricatured) ‘modernity’ to juxtapose them against. Nor can the latter exist without an (equally, or even more) caricatured ‘pre-modernity’ and ‘non-modernity’

Such dichotomising tendencies have of course been present in sociological thinking since its beginnings, as anyone familiar with the ideas of, for example, Tönnies and Durkheim will know. Schematisations and periodisations are not necessarily negative. Indeed they may be an endemic part of the human condition, in that they allow those currently alive to orient themselves vis-a-vis both the dead and, through imaginative apprehension of the future, also those not yet born. They are also arguably necessary and unavoidable tools of sociology *per se*, if the latter is to make any sense of both the social conditions it is dealing with and its own historical conditions of possibility. I doubt one could fully abolish the word ‘modernity’ and the many connotations it is

freighted with, not least because it is so heavily ingrained in contemporary social consciousness, a condition sociology is condemned to reflect to some degree (but not wholly, as I will argue below). But what can be done is for sociology to operate with more sophisticated and, crucially, self-reflexive understandings of such terms and what they might mean, existentially, ontologically, and epistemologically. As Calhoun (1996) has noted, a number of crucial epistemological problems arise when most sociologists are not systematically trained either in the methods or – more importantly, I believe – the conceptual apparatuses of large-scale, long-term, world-scale historiography, because their historical – and thus also *social* – consciousness remains impoverished at best and dangerously naive at worst. Relying on the *necessarily* overly simple historical accounts of an ‘elite’ group of social theorists (the legitimated and legitimating intellectual entrepreneurs mentioned above), a situation I think characterises British sociology in the present day, is simply not sufficient to allow a nuanced view of both past and present, of the entity (or entities) we like to call ‘modernity’ as well as what came ‘before’ it, and what lies in store in the future. Such conditions of sociological production tend to lead to work that makes us, in the words of Flaubert, ‘libel our own times’.

In what follows, I want to diagnose the reasons that lie behind these problems, to move towards suggestions as to how they might be mitigated, or even overcome. I will first turn to examine how the overly simple accounts of historical processes by the contemporary social, theoretical intellectual entrepreneurs is but an update of issues that have afflicted the discipline since the nineteenth century, and how that legacy continues to plague our own analytical efforts in the present day. I will then turn to consider the case of what is defined today as ‘historical sociology’. I will examine some of the ups and downs of this sub-field, my claim being that precisely because it has been constructed as a sub-field of the discipline, rather than as being seen as the crucial epistemic underpinning of the sociological field as a whole, that mainstream sociology can abrogate direct and systematic engagement with historical affairs. This task becomes defined as merely the province of a small group of specialists. In this way, over-reliance on the historical caricatures proffered by intellectual entrepreneurs becomes endemic, and the historical roots and thus the epistemological contingency of widely used concepts goes unnoticed, often to deleterious effect. Overall, a discipline that thinks it has adequately mastered history in fact turns out to be guilty of vulgar forms of presentism. How we might in future change this state of affairs will be the focus of my concluding remarks.

Thinking modernity

When sociologists are asked to explain what sociology is to a lay audience, one of the simplest descriptions one can reach for is that it is 'the study of modern society' (or societies). A slightly more technical gloss on that would be to say sociology is primarily the investigation of 'modernity'. While that term can be further glossed in various ways, we have all learnt in mandatory classical theory courses that the classical sociologists studied (relatively) newly emergent 'modernity', and that in fact it was 'modernity' that created sociology itself (Outhwaite, 2006). A truly ground-breaking study of classical theory would claim that these propositions are false – but such a work has not yet been written, so ingrained in the collective consciousness are these sorts of views. It is also often remarked that the central analytic procedure of (almost) all the classical sociologists, despite their diversity of opinions on almost everything else, was to identify what they thought was 'modernity' by juxtaposing it to what they thought was 'pre-modernity'. Nineteenth-century theory is awash with this kind of thinking – from the ideal-typical versions of Tönnies on *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Durkheim on mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, through the very many evolutionary models then created (e.g. Spencer on pre-modern inchoateness to modern structural rigidity and differentiation), to the more nuanced positions of Marx (from feudalism to capitalism) and Max Weber (from value rationality to instrumental rationality), and so on (Sztompka, 1993).

Dichotomies of the supposed 'modern' and 'pre-modern' abound in classical theory, attesting to a very strong sense, held across generations, reinforced by educational institutions, and shared by those otherwise intellectually and politically opposed to each other, that the times they lived in were somehow radically qualitatively different from those in which people of the past had lived. From the nineteenth-century pioneers sociology inherited this specific kind of time-consciousness, failing on the whole to remember that what was being built into the discipline, through the mechanism of socialisation of students into what was constructed as the 'classical canon', was a characteristically nineteenth-century mode of historical consciousness – a specific fusion of history and epistemology, as Somers (1996) calls it – which was subsequently misrecognised as an ahistorical set of dispositions that could be put to use in, and on, any time and place. Thus 'frozen traces' of nineteenth-century intellectuals' relations to what they imagined was the past (and indeed, the future) became reproduced in twentieth-century sociology

without this being much reflected upon at the time. Even in the later twentieth century, when the newly institutionalised sub-field of ‘historical sociology’ had deconstructed many of the value- and context-laden aspects of the classical inheritance – most notably through the critique of the politically tendentious ‘modernisation theory’ of the 1960s, a crude application of classical ideas as to ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ to Third World development matters – much of that critique remained within specialist circles, precisely because historical sociology was relatively insulated from, and unheeded by, sociological mainstreams in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Calhoun, 1996). Indeed, even today much of the historical–sociological critique of classical theory goes unheard in the mainstream, both because many of the historically bound assumptions of the classical authors have seeped into the intellectual bloodstream of sociologists at an early stage in their training and also because historical–sociological knowledges of this kind do not enjoy wide circulation outside specialist circles (Steinmetz, 2007).

This situation would be serious enough, but what really exacerbates it is the fact that the social theoretical intellectual entrepreneurs also very much have the more negative – because misrecognised – elements of classical thought in their bloodstreams too, even when they may explicitly label classical sociology as wholly defunct for present-day purposes (e.g. Beck, 2000). The dichotomising tendency goes on unabated, but this time what is divided up is the situation we allegedly live in now (and have done so only since the 1970s or so) and an earlier phase or phases of ‘modernity’. So in a triple move, the dichotomising meta-method of classical sociology is reproduced, the classical assumption that there is something called ‘modernity’, and that it is wholly unlike anything that came before it is again assumed, but now the modernity known by the classics is juxtaposed against the alleged contemporary condition (risk society, cosmopolitan society, liquid modernity, reflexive modernity, network society, etc.). Classical sociology’s apparent limitations are often invoked – we live in a modernity ‘very different’ from that which the classics knew – at the very instant that their dichotomising impulses and assumptions about modern uniqueness are tacitly deployed.

Giddens’s (1982, 1990) accounts both of what he sees as the radical ‘discontinuity’ between pre-modernity and modernity and of the special features of late modernity (hyper-reflexivity, hyper-individualism, etc.) provide one of the more-interesting versions of this species of thinking. One of the noteworthy aspects of his intellectual trajectory is how historical complexity and historiographical detail have become evermore traduced in his work over time. His mid-career reputation was

in part forged as a theoretically oriented historical sociologist. In a key mid-career work, he was to be found agreeing with those, such as Marx (cited above) and Philip Abrams (1982), who regard sociology and historiography as very close bedfellows: 'there simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history – properly conceived' (1979: 230). But the relatively careful historical explanations of the mid-period works of historical sociology (1981, 1985) were increasingly relinquished as a broader scholarly and non-scholarly audience was aimed at, with the upshot that the works that are most cited by mainstream sociologists today are those (e.g. 1990, 1991) which engage in the most abstract – some would add, vacuous – schematising and periodising, packaged in a short and relatively easy-to-read manner, not those which are heavier reads grounded in substantial historical detail. As Giddens has arguably sacrificed the historical nuance and empirical grounding of the earlier work – where he was a historical sociologist (restricted market production, in Bourdieu's terms) – for the academic crowd-pleasing and citation-seeking of the later work as a social theoretical entrepreneur (mass market production), sociology has lost something important in the process. The point here is less to criticise Giddens, or others like him, as an individual, and more to point towards the kinds of temptations and apparently glittering prizes that contemporary scholarly fields place in the way of the ambitious. The temptation to produce the splashy book and the memorable sound-bite is not a feature of the field of sociological production alone, as a glance at the field of historiography will confirm, a realm where the popular TV series and tie-in book has become ever more a possible means of career advancement for those 'fortunate' enough to be deemed telegenic by the ratings-minded cadres of television production (Bourdieu, 1998). While sociologists generally do not get to front TV series – perhaps they are insufficiently possessed of physical capital, or perhaps TV executives are of the view that their tendency towards verbiage is not sufficiently 'accessible' for viewers – they can nonetheless seek to reinvent themselves as intellectual entrepreneurs, a role which, for the few allowed to take on such a mantle successfully, can bring many rewards, not least the misrecognition by their peers of their historically simplifying productions as apparently profound insights into the nature of the contemporary world.

Returning to the case of Giddens, we could all today be citing *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981) and *The Nation-State and Violence* (1985), works which can still be taken seriously as attempts to think through important issues to do with historical

dynamics. Instead, the often glib assertions of *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) are the works that receive the most attention in contemporary British sociology. Reduced sophistication of production is very much tied to the level of standards in consumption, and in certain ways we only have ourselves collectively to blame for creating and reproducing conditions whereby those we think of as major intellectuals do their long-term reputations little good by producing work of evermore questionable intellectual worth, that may well be regarded very negatively in, say, thirty years' time, but which are certainly possessed of short-term commercial value.

British sociology: a love of great divides

In a recent piece, Mike Savage (2009) has identified long-term reasons why British sociology finds itself today in a situation whereby grand but glib periodising dichotomies between earlier and later modernity are like catnip to the sociological profession. Savage finds grand periodisations to be particularly prevalent in the works of British or British-based social theorists, or those (like Beck) who have close connections to UK sociology. American, French, and German theorists, by contrast, tend to emphasise historical continuities rather than breaks. These differing approaches reflect differing institutional settings in those countries and divergent intellectual traditions, to the point that shared reference points, such as the work of Marx, can be subjected to very different sorts of interpretations and uses. At the root of Britain's distinctive sociological culture is that sociology was established relatively later in Britain than the other countries above, and it had to fight a struggle for recognition and legitimacy in the academy in conditions different from those in which other nascent national sociologies had to contend. British sociology in the 1950s and 1960s distinguished itself from more-established disciplines as being the subject particularly oriented to the study of social change, seeking legitimation (eventually quite successfully) by 'claiming to know the "new", so allowing a settlement with other disciplines which knew the "traditional"' (Savage, 2009: 233). In this way, sociology put to use its classical legacy by claiming discursive hegemony – especially vis-a-vis the rival discipline of history, which could plausibly lay claim to understanding contemporary social conditions and the 'modern world' more generally – over something called 'modernity', the very entity the classical authors had been so concerned with.

Building on Savage's account, I would add that at this time, social change *within* modernity became understood as the key empirical focus of sociology, while the key theoretical focus remained the classics' depiction of the movement from pre-modernity to modernity. The innovation of the 1980s and 1990s by the emergent group of social theoretical intellectual entrepreneurs was to apply the periodising concerns of the latter to the empirical terrain of the former. This was a move already in part sanctioned by the authority given to such recent innovations in periodising sociology as the American Daniel's Bell's (1973) writings on post-industrial society. By the late 1980s, influenced by broader postmodern currents emanating from France and the United States (although, notably, such currents were generated more by philosophers and *litterateurs* than by professionalised sociologists), the periodising tendency in social theory was in full flow. Lash and Urry's (1987) influential work on the move from 'organised' to 'disorganised' capitalism is a good exemplar of a broader trend (although it has to be said that Lash and Urry's work of this period was much more historically sensitive than work by others on 'late modernity' and so on, that would appear later). In the 1990s and after, it is the periodising works of the kinds of authors we have considered above which very much came to frame empirical studies of various hues, or at the very least came to be invoked in ritualistic manners because of the conventional demand to connect data-driven work to 'theory'. As Savage implies, practically the whole sociological field in Britain now works in this way, even the most empiricist practice thoroughly often tied up in one way or another with the epochalist grandiloquence of the intellectual entrepreneurs. This is a two-way street, in the sense that while empirically oriented researchers create studies that they can deploy to qualify the epochalist claims of the theorists, the latter in turn 'assemble collages of facts from diverse empirical studies to buttress their claims' about allegedly great historical shifts of very recent provenance (Savage, 2009: 226).

So the field turns, and it can and does produce good research and interesting ideas – I do not want to deny that, especially as grand, simplifying claims, critiques, and dismissals are precisely what I am criticising here, and so I do not wish to indulge in these myself if at all possible. But the benefits that accrue from such work are constantly under threat of being undercut by the historical and historiographical simplifications and caricatures that are the unavoidable features of epochalist theorising. In his critique of current American sociology, Calhoun (1996) worried about the consequences of sociologists' knowledge of historical dynamics – just of their own national context,

let alone of world-history – being restricted to either what the classical sociologists said or what they learned in secondary school. In the absence of systematic historical consciousness-building, at undergraduate level certainly but especially in graduate school, sociologists' sense of history will be random at best, and misleading at worst, in that it will reflect naively the taken-for-granted assumptions of the time and place in which they live, and the scholarly milieu in which they happen to work (Somers, 1995, 1996). These dangers were some of the very things that Max Weber himself, probably the most historiographically acute of all the classic authors, warned about more than a century ago. But these warnings can go unheeded in an environment where the dichotomising tendencies of the classical writers are reproduced by contemporary theorists for an audience all too eager to have simple periodisations and characterisations of the present to frame their own specific researches around.

We have thus reached a condition of historical irony, the kind of which I suggest Weber would both have understood and deplored. We have retained the worst of the classics (their simplifying dichotomies), left the critique of the time- and space-bound nature of their conceptualisations seriously unattended (the critique remaining in large degree sequestered within the specialism of 'historical sociology'), and abandoned their greatest intellectual asset, namely their wide-ranging knowledge of both 'Western history' back to earliest times and the histories of other parts of the world. True, hardly anyone today could have the polymathic capacities of a Max Weber, not least because, given the increase in quantity and sophistication of knowledge of particular historical epochs generated since Weber's time, there is so much more material to master (a situation that German scholars of his period realised would in future occur – see Liebersohn, 1988). But just at the point that humanity has come to have at its disposal such vast information resources about the past, a situation that the classical authors would have been amazed and delighted to see, the historical imagination of most sociologists – bar a few notable exceptions, such as Michael Mann and W.G. Runciman – has shrunk dramatically in comparison to the wide-ranging visions of their ancestors.

In certain ways then, most sociologists today – because of their disciplinary training, because of the shaping by that training of the dispositions of the professional habitus, because of British sociology's structurally and historically induced obsessions with claims as to the supposed great uniqueness of contemporary social conditions, because of their over-reliance on and credulity about contemporary theoretical

epochalism, because of the highly presentist dispositions of the main governmental funding council, and so on – cannot but generally be less impressive thinkers than the classical authors who are subjected to constant ancestor-worship on the one side and cutting denigration on the other. The latter is in fact often voiced by the intellectual entrepreneurs themselves, whose role in the field requires them to claim that the phenomena they are depicting are so new that older sociological visions must perforce be blind to the blazing sources of novelty that are present-day social conditions – a situation that Flaubert, cited above, may well have recognised.

Historical sociology: saviour or vanquished?

The picture I have painted thus far has emphasised the problems we currently face. Historical amnesia and naivety do not provide the best lens through which to gaze at the world around us. If it is a lack of sophisticated historical consciousness in sociology that is the issue – and I am claiming that it is – then we might plausibly expect that a kind of sociology which had the analysis of historical dynamics as its *raison d'être* might furnish us with some solutions. This is indeed the case, but not, as we will see, as long as historical sociology remains internally organised the way it is and relates to the broader sociological field the way it currently does.

What is today called 'historical sociology' is in some ways quite intellectually diverse, but that diversity exists rather at odds with its relatively homogenising institutional structures. To understand this situation, we have to carry out what Steinmetz (2007) calls a 'historical sociology of historical sociology'. Steinmetz identifies a number of factors which promote or retard historical–sociological studies and their recognition and institutionalisation within the wider field of sociological production. These include the presence or absence in the general sociological field of ideas supportive of historical approaches to social issues, and the presence of Marxism, especially of a classical variety, as a corpus of thought upon which historically minded sociologists can draw or react against. Steinmetz points out that the presence and use of Marxism is double-edged in that it can promote historical approaches within sociology in some contexts, or it can hinder their development, if historical sociology is seen to be 'too Marxist' by a generally anti-Marxist sociological field. The appeal, or lack thereof, of Marxism also depends on extra-academic factors, notably the state of play in the political field in a given country. The turn towards historically oriented Marxian modes

of analysis by a rebellious younger cohort in US sociology at the time of the Vietnam War was one of the major preconditions for the appearance of historical sociology in that national field in the 1970s. Political dissatisfaction with the American state and economic apparatuses among many younger intellectuals translated into rejection of what were seen as the key intellectual legitimations of the *status quo* operative within sociology, namely structural-functionalist and modernisation theories (Calhoun, 1996). It was debate within, and against, a historically oriented Marxism that very much characterised the so-called golden age of American historical sociology in the 1970s and early 1980s, leading to such milestone texts as Skocpol (1979) and Tilly (1978).

Using the case studies of the American and German sociological fields throughout the twentieth century, Steinmetz (2007) shows how relatively open or closed the general sociological field can be to historically oriented sociology at particular periods. An absolutely closed sociological field was post-WWII Germany, where American-sponsored empiricism and positivism almost completely excluded history-led approaches for at least two decades after the war. As we have just seen, a more open field was the United States in the 1970s, and the same might be said for the United Kingdom in the same period. The turn towards Marxism was also strong in Britain at that time, making the field more fluid and open to innovations than it had been hitherto. In a review of the state of British contributions to historical sociology written in the late 1980s, John A. Hall (1989) could plausibly claim that this area had been in rude health for fifteen years or more, involving internationally cited contributions from outright Marxists, such as Perry Anderson (1974), to more Weber-inspired scholars, such as Runciman (1989) and Mann (1986), whose foils were over-deterministic Marxian accounts of long-term historical processes. The sense one gets from Hall's stock-taking piece from 1989 is that British-based historically oriented sociology is poised to make great contributions not just to what had by this time been institutionalised – especially in the United States – as the distinct sub-field of 'historical sociology' but also to the discipline as a whole, in Britain and further afield. But this has not in fact come to pass, for reasons to be explicated below.

Using Bourdieusian language, Steinmetz also argues that the effects on the wider sociological field of historically oriented sociology very much depend on what position(s) the latter occupies in that field vis-à-vis the kinds of capitals it can accrue and how much these are valorised. This involves issues to do with the advantages and perils of institutionalisation. Despite their collective flaws, most of the classical authors

'well understood the intimate relation[s] between "the historical" and "the social"; only after the rise to prominence of positivistic science [in the mid-20th century] did this affinity between social and historical inquiry suddenly appear to be problematic' (Mandalios, 2004: 389). The 'positivisation' of sociology was especially marked in the United States, and contemporary mainstream sociological practice very much bears that inheritance, as a glance at the heavily quantitative *American Sociological Review* and *The American Journal of Sociology* will reveal. When historically oriented sociology appears within such a field, if it is to survive it will have to be institutionalised through such means as graduate programmes, dedicated journals and book series, specialist conferences, slots at mainstream conferences, and suchlike. In this way, *historically oriented sociology* – which can hold out the promise of informing and transforming other wings of sociology, most notably through the revision of existing theoretical positions – gets transformed into *historical sociology*, a named and legitimated sub-field with its own codified corpus of reference points, texts, and modes of reproduction such as PhD training and tenure-track jobs. If institutionalisation is a necessary survival tactic for an upstart new intellectual constellation, as historically oriented sociology was in the United States in the 1970s, it brings with it the threat of sequestration. As the emergent constellation is turned into a legitimated sub-field, it risks losing both its intellectual and political edge, as it becomes just another wing of standardised knowledge-production.

This is the charge laid at the door by a number of critics of American historical sociology, the most well-known of which is Calhoun (1996, 1998). From the mid-1980s onwards, leading American historical-sociologists shelved the debates with Marxism and tried to look as 'respectable' as possible, by emphasising positivistic methods as much as did their broader peer-group in the US mainstream. At the same time, according to Steinmetz (2007), institutionalisation does bring with it the benefit of (relative) intellectual freedom for a few well-placed scholars in the richest, most prestigious institutions. Such places can 'afford' – economically and symbolically – scholars very rich in intellectual capital, the kind best placed to carry out historically oriented sociology, whether of specific contexts or of macro-level change. But the danger of such a situation is that, as Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005: 30) put it, the historically aware sociologist starts to resemble a pampered exotic pet with expensive and picky tastes, or 'a luxury good... the sociological equivalent of... a Prada bag'. Very good research may result, as Mann's career in elite institutions such as UCLA and Runciman's almost four

decade sojourn in Cambridge both attest. But a situation whereby such research is primarily carried out by a privileged few encourages the work thus created to be taken up only by a small, elite audience equipped with the necessary capital to decode its significance. It also means that historically oriented sociology, especially of the *longue durée* variety, is (and is generally seen as) a game to be played only by a sociological aristocracy and their small number of students, a game which can – indeed, must – be generally ignored by the rest of the field, a space populated by those who lack the capital to have any belief or investment in that kind of game in the first place.

While critics of American historical sociology's institutionalisation have an institution to criticise, the same does not apply for anyone wishing to engage in a similar exercise in the United Kingdom. The brave new world of historically aware sociology poised to make great contributions to the broader discipline, evoked by Hall (1989) in the late 1980s, did not lead to institutionalisation. While the American Sociological Association has a number of well-populated scholarly sections dedicated to matters historical, the equivalent organisation in the United Kingdom, the British Sociological Association, does not. In part this has been due to the 'brain drain' out of the United Kingdom of historical–sociological talent already pointed out by Hall in the late 1980s, with his own move to the apparently more promising terrain of Canada – where some elite universities were prepared to invest significantly in historical–sociological scholarship – being a case in point. Little historical–sociological work appears in the BSA's flagship journal *Sociology*, and in the most recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2008, there was little trace of departments presenting themselves to the world as specialising in historical sociology or something like it. To be sure, there are individual scholars here and there, and at least the recent fashion for 'globalisation' has compelled more than is probably usual in UK sociology an awareness of the historical processes that have produced a condition of advanced globalisation and globality – even if much of that awareness has been mediated through the periodising frameworks of the social theoretical entrepreneurs mentioned above.

But on the whole, presentism rules, with the present generally regarded through dichotomising, *isn't-today-unique?* lenses. Like the Light Brigade cavalryman facing the Russian guns, the present-day historically oriented sociologist has to the left of them government-promoted quantitative empiricism oriented towards state- and business-friendly 'relevance', and to the right of them, small-scale qualitative studies which are often quite innocent of how the concepts deployed within

them reflect more than interrogate the bourgeois self-understandings of the age. These are not favourable times for sociologists in Britain who have historically sensitive imaginations. Present conditions close in and threaten to smother sociological (and other) imaginings and re-imaginings of the past, when sociological thought should be both interrogating the present – vis-a-vis its characteristic social conditions *and* sociologists' habituated ways of thinking about them – and also opening up new ways of narrating who we are and how through historical dynamics we have come to be as we are. Thus as I noted above, in a quite acute sense the historical imagination is moribund in mainstream British sociology. What can be done to resuscitate it?

The coming crisis... what is to be done?

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold recommended that the great method of escaping out of present difficulties would be a focus on 'Culture' with a capital 'C'. In the early twenty-first century, it is not at all surprising that 'reflexivity' should be promoted as the way ahead. After all, present-day individuals are alleged by most of the cadre of intellectual entrepreneurs to be hyper-reflexive, and reflexivity is also forcefully presented in sociological texts that have become mainstream reference-points (notably Bourdieu and Wacquant (1996) – although the injunctions contained therein are probably more cited than actually put into practice). Nonetheless, I want to contend that unless judicious and systematic deployment of certain kinds of historico-epistemological reflexivity are exercised in British sociology, especially at the level of graduate student training, British sociology will be increasingly unable to hold up its head in, let alone lead, the global sociological field.

The way it is currently organised, the institutionalised sub-field we call 'historical sociology' is insufficient to create and promote the kinds of reflexivity I am advocating. Such a field is institutionally weak in Britain as we have seen, but even its well-populated US branch is currently unable to do the job. The strong fetishisation of positivist methods that critics discerned in the 1980s and 1990s has indeed been diminished in some ways, and 'cultural turn' work by scholars such as Mukerji (2007) is helping to broaden the kinds of methodological imaginaries available in the field, which is all to the good. But a glance through the specialist journals and book series that are part and parcel of the institutionalised realm of historical sociology shows that today intellectual practice in that field is more akin to what (some) historians do,

namely focusing on collecting data about very specific times and places (Kiser and Hechter, 1991), rather than engaging in the kinds of macro-historical, theory-infused, and, most importantly, *theory-generating* endeavours which Mann (1994: 37) has rightly said are 'essential... to our discipline' as a whole. For that kind of work, which I take to be crucial for the ongoing intellectual health of sociology in general, one has to turn to material that is, somewhat paradoxically, published in certain kinds of theory journals as well as in specialist locales.

I have in mind here the 'civilizational analysis' pioneered over the past fifty years by the Israel-based scholar S.N. Eisenstadt (e.g. 2003) and his colleagues (e.g. Arnason, 2003), which involves a hugely ambitious reconsideration of what we think 'modernity' is, by means of rethinking what 'civilisations' are and tracing out their dynamics since the so-called Axial Age 2500 years ago, when most of the world's great, expansive religio-cultural complexes were born. Such work generally avoids the presentist dispositions of the intellectual entrepreneurial avatars of contemporary 'social theory', not least because it roots its understandings of 'modernity' in systematically documented analyses of very long-term historical processes, and demonstrates how often very ancient cultural complexes continue, albeit in all sorts of complicated and mediated ways, to influence contemporary social orders of various hues. In particular, the complex cultural and social-structural legacies of ancient civilisations on modern social order (and disorder) are emphasised, in sophisticated and systematically documented ways that bear little correspondence to the simplifying and often highly speculative pre-modern/modern/late-modern schemas of the epochalist thinking depicted above.

The scope of this collective project and the scholarship required to carry it out are vast, but the contemporary civilisational analysts prove that great tasks can be accomplished if attacked with gusto over many decades (and not within the very limited temporal scope of whatever is the next government or privately funded project that happens to come along). This work will surely, like the civilisations it studies, last over time; material further from presentist ephemera one could not imagine. But on how many undergraduate or postgraduate courses in British universities does this work figure as part of the core curriculum? I know of only one (and it is not my own institution's!). But if the formidable historical sensibilities that animate and make possible this kind of work – simultaneously empirical *and* theoretical, the one element constantly informing the other – were instilled into graduate students (or better, undergraduates too) right from the start of their

careers, then a lot of the presentism in British sociology today could, if not wholly be avoided, be subjected to the kinds of critique it deserves. Of course, not everyone wants to know about the religious practices of the Ottoman empire or the taxation systems of ancient Mesopotamia, but at the very least, some familiarity with the kinds of *historical consciousness* attendant upon the civilisation-analytical brand of historical sociology (as opposed to just ESRC-drilled 'method') would put the new generation on guard against both the worst fallacies of the classical authors about what 'modernity' is supposed to be and how it developed and the bad habits of dichotomising periodisation picked up from them by the present-day theoretical entrepreneurs.

Institutionalised historical sociology has its ups and downs. The kind of reflexivity I am thinking of is better characterised as deriving from 'historicized sociology' (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2005: 67), a looser, non-institutionalised constellation that encompasses some work in the institutionalised sub-field and also work that exists outside of it or has an ambiguous relationship with it, as with the work of the civilisational analysts mentioned above. Before it became institutionalised as 'historical sociology', American 'historicized sociology' of the 1970s set out, through its critique of the falsely universalised verities of modernisation theory 'to change the basic [principles] that formed part of the core of sociological theories' (Calhoun, 1998: 849). It was felt that sociology had a pressing 'substantive need for history... [because of] the need for social theory to be intrinsically historical' (ibid.: 850). If my argument above is correct, contemporary British sociology is only pseudo-historical, because it buys into fetishised notions of 'modernity' taken uncritically from the classics and pays obeisance to the simplifying notions as to contemporary conditions advocated by the theoretical entrepreneurs. What it requires are serious reflection upon, and student training in, historicised sociology, which problematises taken-for-granted (i.e. taken from hegemonic theorists) assumptions, both about 'modernity' in general and the supposed present-day version(s) of it.

More radically still, what is needed are forms of historicised sociology which simultaneously reinterpret modernity (the usual game of the entrepreneurial theorists) *and* which address how the historical dynamics that created that state of affairs also generated concepts and modes of thinking that reflected and refracted those dynamics, creating ideas and assumptions which then were taken up by scholars – both in the nineteenth century *and* today – as if these wholly unproblematically described what was going on (Somers, 1996). To use Bruno Latour's (1993) phraseology, a defining characteristic of 'the moderns'

(a term encompassing both the classical sociologists and ourselves) is that they *think* that they are 'modern', and that situation brings a vast, but generally unexamined, conceptual baggage in its wake. 'Modern' self-understanding gets 'frozen' into the categories of sociology, dichotomising periodisations being a very central feature of such conceptual hypostatisation (Somers, 1996). Regarded in this light, the very notion of 'modernity' – the keystone of what sociology thinks it is about – proves to be chimerical, 'a moving index, pointing to everything – and nothing' (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2005: 13). What if we have never been 'modern', as Latour, the great sociological provocateur, suggests? Where would that leave sociologists' understanding of themselves, of *ourselves*?

The only way out of this repetition of endless misrecognition is to train the next generation of sociologists into modes of thinking that attack such problems of epistemic circularity head-on. The aim, if not actually fully to break the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle of moderns interpreting what they imagine is modernity, would be at least to look at these problems of circularity and repetition-compulsion from new vantage-points. The latter would aim to produce novel means of tackling such dilemmas and would be based on sophisticated (especially non-dichotomising) appreciations of the historical dynamics that created these problems in the first place. In this way, we could begin to appreciate and tackle some of the historically induced epistemological ironies that we are currently imprisoned within – the cultivation of ironic consciousness being, as Max Weber seems sometimes to say, the only really profound response to the conundra posed by history, historically formed modes of consciousness, and our inevitable condition of historical locatedness and the forms of myopia and blindness it brings in its wake.

But irony alone is not enough; courage is required too. One of the external factors Steinmetz (2007) identifies as a condition of possibility for the emergence of historicised sociology is the emergence of great social, political, and economic crises. Such crises have provoked sociologists in the past, such as in the United States in the 1970s, to reject as inadequate the comfortable analytic presentism of their times, and to turn to history, not to escape to ivory towers but rather really to excavate how and why such crises were occurring. While ages of relative, or seeming, affluence and stability (which the Blair years in the UK may retrospectively come to be seen as) may well encourage the 'retreat of sociologists into the present' that Norbert Elias (1987) famously attacked, an effectively handled *return* to the past can give

us a much better idea of what is going on both at the present time and in the future.

We face today a plethora of worldwide crises. The stark questions to be posed are these. How will sociology respond? Will sociologists continue to rely on presentist dispositions and the auguries of entrepreneurs who are misrecognised as prophets? Or will they come to concur with Marx that all good sociology is fundamentally historical, and only that kind of sociology can truly understand the crisis-ridden tendencies of the age? As George Orwell knew very well, those who control the past also control the future. If sociology wishes to contribute to the making of the future, it will first have to become radically historical, wholly attuned to both recent and distant pasts, to see ahead that much more clearly than it can today.

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7

Sociology and Post-colonialism: Another 'Missing' Revolution?

Gurminder K. Bhambra

Sociology is usually represented as having emerged alongside European modernity. The latter is frequently understood as sociology's special object with sociology itself a distinctively modern form of explanation. The period of sociology's disciplinary formation was also the heyday of European colonialism, yet the colonial relationship did not figure in the development of sociological understandings. While the recent emergence of post-colonialism appears to have initiated a reconsideration of understandings of modernity, with the development of theories of multiple modernities, I suggest, however, that this engagement is more an attempt at recuperating the transformative aspect of post-colonialism than engaging with its critiques. In setting out the challenge of post-colonialism to dominant sociological accounts, I will also address 'missing feminist/queer revolutions', suggesting that by engaging with post-colonialism there is the potential to transform sociological understandings by opening up a dialogue beyond the simple pluralism of identity claims.

The idea of the social

The 'modern' idea of the social, as a number of commentators have argued, was delineated in the emergence of sociology itself and in relation to the combined upheavals of the political and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century (Nisbet, 1966; Hawthorn, 1976; Giddens, 1987; Heilbron, 1995). The new social theory that emerged was seen to correspond to these new social relations and the problems they brought forth. Modernity was framed as 'the one great transformation in history' and sociology was seen as the attempt to understand how this transformation had begun and the means of intervening in

terms of how it would be completed (Badham, 1984). Sociology, thus, became ineluctably tied to the categories of modernity in its self-understanding.

These developments, however, were usually considered from a narrow, Eurocentric point of view where colonial and post-colonial encounters were written out of hegemonic accounts (Bhabha, 1994).¹ As Seidman remarks in his discussion of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, sociology's emergence coincided with the high point of Western imperialism, and yet, 'the dynamics of empire were not incorporated into the basic categories, models of explanation, and narratives of social development of the classical sociologists' (1996: 314). Outside the canonical 'twin revolutions', then, the potential contribution of other events (and the experiences of non-Western 'others') to the sociological paradigm has rarely been considered (see Calhoun, 1996; Chakrabarty 2000; Bhambra, 2007).

The neglect of colonial relations is, perhaps, particularly surprising in the case of British sociology, given Britain's past as an imperial power and the fact that the institutionalisation of British sociology in the post-war period – indicated by the 40-year anniversary of this journal – occurred in the context of a legacy of decolonisation and the dissolution of the British Empire. The limited engagement between sociology and post-colonialism is primarily concerned, on the side of sociology, with 'saving' the universality of sociology's core concepts in the light of a post-colonial (and other) politics of knowledge production (see Delanty, 2006; McLennan, 2006).² There is little engagement with what could be learnt, whether from the initial failure to address colonial relationships as integral to modernity, or from the subsequent neglect of decolonisation and post-colonialism.

Sociology is also frequently represented as a discipline peculiarly associated with issues of order and integration, and with social movements calling that social order into question (Habermas, 1984). Initially, these were associated with problems of class, but in recent decades new social movements, such as feminism and the lesbian/gay movement, have been particularly significant in sociological debates. However, scholars who have attempted to revise the discipline from the perspective of these new social movements have frequently come to believe that sociology is particularly (unusually, even, when compared to other disciplines) immune to influence.

This, in essence, is the argument made by those proposing revolutions in thought – for example, 'feminist' and 'queer' – which are 'missing' in sociology (Stacey and Thorne, 1985, 1996; Seidman, 1994; Stein

and Plummer, 1994; Alway, 1995; Stacey, 2000; Stanley, 2000; Thistle, 2000). If these arguments are correct, then we should now be beginning to see discussions of the 'missing postcolonial revolution', since this is the most recent claim to have purchase in the humanities and other social sciences. That this is not the case, I shall argue, can be seen to be a consequence of the particular structure of sociology, a structure that explains both the perceived 'missing revolutions' associated with gender and sexuality *and the seemingly paradoxical absence* of a 'missing revolution' of post-colonialism.

Significantly, the civil rights movement in the United States, which was broadly contemporaneous with feminist and queer movements, has not generated discussion in terms of a 'missing revolution' of race within sociology. The long-standing existence of separate Black higher educational institutions in the United States, where sociology was an early part of the curriculum and was inextricably linked with issues of race (and class), occurred alongside a separate consideration of race as a 'social problem' within predominantly white institutions (see Himes, 1949; Singh, 2004; Wilson, 2006). The lack of dialogue between them allowed both a consideration of race that developed into various forms of 'Race and Ethnic Studies', and the positing of race as a field within mainstream white sociology, but it did not lead to race being analysed in terms of being a constitutive aspect of the way in which sociology developed. Although one can find some contributions making the latter claim (see the edited volume by Ladner, 1973), it was not one that was taken up systematically within US sociology as a whole.

As such, the relationship of sociology to race in the US context can be seen to be one of an 'unfinished' revolution. This revolution is 'unfinished' to the extent that any consideration of race in the United States must necessarily address the institution of slavery, and then segregation, through which it was initially organised. 'Race' cannot be elided with 'ethnicity' precisely because of the way in which the colonial encounter responsible for slavery is intrinsic to the idea of race in the United States, but only contingently connected with that of ethnicity, which is associated with subsequent European migration there (see, for example, Jacobson, 1998).³ Race within UK sociology has had a different trajectory (see Murji, 2007 for a comparison; also Wakeling, 2007) and has more easily been assimilated to the category of ethnicity. This is because, in general, decolonising movements created independence in the states from which migrants to the United Kingdom have come prior to the significant episodes of migration forming Britain's ethnic minority communities.⁴ As a consequence, ethnicity is regarded as a social

phenomenon only recently present within the modern social, and not as a structuring condition of it.

While gender, sexuality, and race have come to be regarded as significant aspects of experience that deserve sociological consideration, then, they are nonetheless organised in terms of pre-existing orderings which render them an adjunct to general sociological understandings. In other words, while there may be recognition of the claims of gender or sexuality or race within standard sociological approaches, there is also an attempt to protect core categories of analysis from any reconstruction that such recognition would entail. Typically, this occurs by positing a distinction between the 'system' and the 'social', where the system refers to that which is general and the social to that which is particular (see Holmwood, 2000).

Although my concern in this chapter is with post-colonialism specifically, and not with the topic of 'race' with which it is often elided, I suggest that the way in which sociology has acknowledged the importance of race, while ignoring the post-colonial critique, is itself significant and analogous to the treatment of gender in the light of feminist critiques. In this chapter, I will show how the treatment of gender and sexuality (and, by implication, race) has been accommodated to the distinction of the 'system' and the 'social', while post-colonial critique is less amenable. Because the core sociological categories of the system and the social (or the socio-cultural) are integral to sociological conceptions of modernity, which post-colonial critiques directly call into question, these have the capacity to effect what is 'missing' in other 'revolutions'.⁵

Missing revolutions and modern societies

Stacey and Thorne's (1985) paper outlining a 'missing feminist revolution' in sociology was fundamental both in galvanising a specifically feminist critique of sociology and providing the structure for subsequent discussions regarding other absences, perhaps especially, sexuality (see Warner, 1993; Seidman, 1994, 1997; Stein and Plummer, 1994). The optimism that had existed among feminist academics in the 1970s – that the insights of a feminist perspective were in the process of revolutionising disciplines and fields of enquiry across the academic enterprise – had, a decade later, not materialised to the degree expected (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). It was this gap between expectation and outcome that provided the context for their address. While gender could be 'readily incorporated as a variable or as a source of

research topics', Stacey and Thorne suggested that little was done to advance theoretical reconstruction within sociology (1985: 310). The necessity of the latter move is that as sociologists only ever study a part of the world, theory is needed 'to help us situate the part in the whole' (1985: 311). Without theoretical reconstruction, they argued, issues of gender would remain 'ghettoised' and the conception of the 'whole' unaffected.

This argument was developed by a number of other scholars, among them, Joan Acker, who also argued that while there has been increasing research about women, both empirical and theoretical, this exists 'in relative isolation from a world of sociological theory that continues in a pre-feminist mode' (1992: 65; see also, Marshall 1994; Stanley, 2000). Similarly, Joan Alway (1995) addressed the failure of sociological theorists to learn from feminist theory and suggested that by ignoring this body of thought 'sociological theory impoverishes itself and the discipline as a whole' (1995: 210). Feminist theory, she argued, does not only offer explanations of women's situations but is also concerned with 'how the social world is structured and critiques of how that world has been studied and understood' (1995: 211). These understandings are part of a politics of knowledge production in which sociology is necessarily embroiled.

Building on the feminist critique, the challenge of queer theory has also been framed in terms of a 'missing sexual revolution'. Stein and Plummer (1994), for example, have argued that the absence of a 'sexual revolution' within sociology both consolidates the marginalisation of 'sexual minorities' and weakens sociological explanations. Further, it is argued that the basis for this challenge rests in the exclusion of the sexual sphere from the classical sociologists' accounts of modernity and processes of modernisation. Seidman, in particular, argues that, in their attempts 'to sketch the contours of modernity, the classical sociologists offered no accounts of the making of modern bodies and sexualities' (1994: 167).

Sexuality is not seen to be a separate sphere which could be covered by a 'sociology of homo/sexuality', rather, it is believed that sexuality is constitutive of the fabric of society and it is necessary to identify the ways in which it helps 'give shape to diverse institutions, practices and beliefs' (Epstein, 1994: 198). As it is not just personal life that is believed to be sexualised but also 'politics and economics, and just about everything else under the sun' (Stein and Plummer, 1994: 182), the relation of queer theory to sociology involves addressing the absence of 'sexuality' in sociology's treatment of modernity, a critical

relation which is directly complementary to the feminist argument concerning gender relations. However, within each position the argument that gender and sexuality are relevant to 'everything' has appeared to involve a series of empirical demonstrations of gendered and sexualised particularities.⁶

At the same time, the prior failure of sociologists adequately to address gender and sexuality has existed in stark contrast to the *presence* of women and homosexuals as subjects of the *modern*, social world. As feminists and gay/lesbian people began to make their presence felt within the academy, so issues of gender and sexuality began increasingly to be raised as necessary topics of investigation. While it could be argued that race has had a similar trajectory to that of gender and sexuality – at least in Britain and the United States where there have been long-standing minority communities (and indigenous groups in the case of the latter) – the historicisation of race in the context of post-colonialism provides an alternative explanatory framework to that proposed to account for gender and sexuality. This is as a consequence of its association with a social movement (decolonisation) that exists outside sociology as it is currently theorised and practised and, more importantly, a movement that is perceived to exist outside of, and distinct from, the processes associated with the 'modern social'.

Since the remit of sociology has generally been understood to be 'modern societies' – that is, societies engaged in processes of modernisation – then the 'post-colonial' is necessarily associated with 'pre-modern' societies, societies that have traditionally fallen to anthropology. For their part, feminism and the gay/lesbian movement arose within modern Western societies and, in their critique of sociology, did not fundamentally contest the self-understanding of those societies as modern, just the exclusion of women and gays and lesbians from the dominant narratives of modernisation (see Marshall, 1994; Seidman 1994). The particular identities articulated by these critiques, then, were more readily assimilated to the categories for understanding the modern social. The 'post-colonial', however, is not only missing from sociological understandings but is also not recognised as present *within* the 'modern social' except as constituting the context of modernisation for once colonised societies. Within sociology, then, the 'post-colonial' faces a double displacement – it can be seen as 'missing' from the structural framework and absent from the social framework (insofar as the social is categorised as the 'modern social').

The 'modern social' and the structure of sociology

To pose the question of the 'modern social' is to return to sociology's perceived origins. Regardless of the different interpretations put forward by sociologists in terms of the nature of modernity, the timing of its emergence, or its continued character today, all agree, as I have argued, on the importance of modernity to the establishment of sociology as a discipline. Further, there is general agreement that in its attempt to understand modernity what was to be understood was a new form of society defined by rupture and difference – a temporal *rupture* that distinguished a traditional, agrarian past from the modern, industrial present; and a cultural *difference* between Europe and the rest of the world. Moreover, in its own self-understanding as a discipline, setting out these parameters was defined as a key task of modern sociology. This is highlighted in the work of the primary theorists of classical sociology – Durkheim, Weber, and Marx – who all express, in differing ways, the challenges faced by modern European society, as well as across the range of contemporary sociological positions from Parsons to Giddens and Habermas (for further discussion see Bhambra, 2007).

As argued by Habermas (1984), the emergence of sociology also has to be understood in the context of economics and politics establishing themselves as specialised sciences and, as a consequence, leaving sociology with the residue of problems that were no longer of concern to them. This disciplinary construction separates the sphere of the rational (system) – that is, economics, with its object being the market; and politics, with its object being administration and strategic action (or bureaucracy) – from the sphere of the non-rational (social). Where economics and politics became disciplines restricted to questions of economic equilibrium and rational choice, framed within an understanding of system integration, Habermas argues that sociology's focus was framed by the problems of social integration which were seen to have been brought about 'by the rise of the modern system of national states and by the differentiation of a market-regulated economy' (1984: 4).⁷ In this perspective, sociology emerges as a particular form of reflection upon the sphere of the 'system': how it impinges on the social and, in turn, how it is impinged upon by the social.

Sociology, then, is integral to the understanding of the structural differentiation of modernity into distinct spheres and their interaction. In distinction from the objects of economics and politics, sociology's

specific object of investigation is the social, understood as the particular and 'non-rational' that deviates from the 'rational'. At the same time, however, sociology is also associated with an overarching framework which locates these other disciplines in relation to itself. This is done by putting forward a *general* definition of the 'social' (alongside its meaning as the particular) that encompasses the two dimensions of system integration and social integration (as Habermas puts it).

With these distinctions in mind, questions of difference and identity have traditionally been taken up in terms of the theorisation of the social in its more restricted sense. It is their absence from the sphere of the system and the general framework – which locates (or relates) the system and the social – that is highlighted as an area of concern by theorists arguing for the 'missing revolutions' of feminism and sexuality. For example, while gender has been recognised in recent decades as an important social variable, there has been little revision of sociology in terms of any particular identity claim being made. It is the extent to which gender, or any other social variable, is taken simply to *inflect* the structural form of the system (see, for example, Sayer, 2000), as opposed to being understood as constitutive of that system, that has led scholars to put forward arguments for a 'missing feminist/sexual revolution' in sociology.

Understanding the way in which sociology focuses on the social, as distinct from the system, and at the same time creates the general framework within which its relation to the 'system' is located, is of primary importance. This chapter argues that it is this understanding of sociology in terms of a system/social division and its consequent relation to the idea of general theory that poses fundamental limitations for sociological projects (see Holmwood, 1996, 2001). Thus, the failure of feminism and queer theory – the 'missing revolutions' of gender and sexuality – to effect a transformation of the disciplinary categories of sociology rests on their reproduction of the very aspects of sociology that constitute the problem in the first place. Once the space of the social had been opened up by feminists and queer theorists, it was easy to be absorbed within the 'diffuse complexity' of the social in terms of addressing just another potential (non-rational) identity within it; it is the same with race.⁸

Although feminists and queer theorists have frequently sought to question the fundamental parameters of the discipline, the particular identities of gender and sexuality have, in fact, been assimilable to the standard sociological understandings of the social. In this way, the initial address by feminist and queer studies, challenging the absence of

women and 'the sexual self' within sociology, could be absorbed by the discipline to the chagrin of those proclaiming a 'missing revolution'. That this initial acknowledgement of particular identities did not have subsequent effect, in terms of reconsidering the very categories of the discipline, can be understood in terms of the failure of these bodies of thought to develop their critique beyond a concern with the particular. In the end, neither feminist nor queer theory has challenged the constitution of sociology in terms of its founding categories of modernity, but instead, has made an accommodation within it: an accommodation, I shall argue, that has the effect of reducing the social to identity and the challenge of gender and sexuality (and race) to *issues* of identity. The promise of post-colonialism is precisely to bring about a revolution in thought so far missing from other challenges.

Multiple modernities as cultural difference

It is my contention that any 'revolution', or transformation, cannot come without a re-examination of the emergence of sociology as a discipline – both in terms of what it set up as its object of investigation and the general framework within which it located that object. It is precisely the examination of the latter, I suggest, that is missing in the arguments concerning the 'missing feminist/sexual revolutions' in sociology. It is also missing in the recent attempts by theorists of multiple modernities to engage with post-colonialism, and it is to their arguments that I now turn. While they acknowledge the basic substance of the post-colonial critique, namely a need to address the world beyond Europe and West, this engagement has no discernable impact upon pre-existing notions of modernity, its development, nor the sociological categories associated with it (see Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998; Wittrock, 1998; Gaonkar, 2001).

The literature on multiple modernities, in a similar fashion to that of earlier debates on modernisation theory, identifies modernity with 'the momentous transformations of Western societies during the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, and political change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' (Wittrock, 1998: 19). As such, modernity is understood simultaneously in terms of its *institutional constellations*, that is, its tendency 'towards universal structural, institutional, and cultural frameworks' (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998: 3), as well as a *cultural programme* 'beset by internal antinomies and contradictions, giving rise to continual critical discourse and political contestations' (Eisenstadt, 2000: 7). Understanding modernity in this

way permits scholars to situate European modernity – seen in terms of a unique combination of the original institutional and cultural forms – as the originary modernity and, at the same time, allows for different cultural encodings that result in *multiple* modernities. This explains the paradox whereby theorists of multiple modernities dissociate themselves from Eurocentrism at the same time as embracing its core assumptions, namely, ‘the Enlightenment assumptions of the centrality of a Eurocentred type of modernity’ (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998: 5).

The focus on different non-European civilisational trajectories is based on the assumption that, as Wittrock (1998) argues, these societies were not stagnant, traditional societies but were developing and transforming their own institutional and cultural contexts prior to the advent of Western modernity. However, it was not until the institutional patterns associated with Western modernity were *exported* to these other societies that multiple modernities were seen to emerge within them. Thus, it is believed to be the conjunction between the institutional patterns of the Western civilisational complex with the different cultural codes of other societies that creates various distinct modernities (for further discussions see Bhambra, 2007).

Theorists of multiple modernities, then, address modernity in terms of two aspects: its institutional framework and its cultural codes. This separation allows the former to be understood as that which is common to the different varieties of modernity – and thus allows all types of modernity to be understood as such – while the latter, being the location of crucial antinomies, provides the basis for variability and thus the divergence that results in *multiple* modernities. By continuing to maintain a general framework within which particularities are located – and identifying the particularities with culture (or the social) and the experience of Europe with the general framework itself – theorists of multiple modernities have, in effect, neutered any challenge that a consideration of the post-colonial could have posed. As Dirlik argues, by identifying ‘multiplicity’ with the cultural aspect, ‘the idea of “multiple modernities” seeks to contain challenges to modernity’ – and, I would argue, to sociology – ‘by conceding the possibility of culturally different ways of being modern’ (2003: 285), but not contesting *what it is to be modern*.

In a similar way to scholars such as Sayer (2000) in the context of gender, then, theorists of multiple modernities seek to contain challenges to the dominant theoretical framework of sociology by not allowing ‘difference’ to *make a difference* to the original categories of

modernity, that is, to the formal constituents of state and market held to be definitive of the modern, and thus of sociology's core concepts. As with feminist and queer critiques of modernity, the idea of multiple modernities fulfils the function of identifying social or cultural variations in modernity as a consequence of which its core features are seen to be modulated in some way.⁹ This allows space for difference but, at the same time, no difference is made to the categories of modernity that pre-existed the 'discovery' of these new modernities. The European experience is taken as foundational to these categories and other histories simply provide local colour. Theories of multiple modernities, then, can be seen as a reaction to the rise of post-colonialism and an attempt to contain it within those pre-existing categories as opposed to a positive engagement with it.

Conclusion

The demise of colonialism as an explicit political formation has given rise to understandings of post-coloniality and, perhaps ironically, an increased recognition of the role of colonialism in the formation of modernity. In this context, then, it is insufficient to regard post-colonialism as simply implying new ways of understanding modernity's future(s), but the contribution of post-colonialism to reconstructing modernity's past(s) needs to be acknowledged as well. To do the latter, however, requires a reconstruction of the forms of understanding – concepts, categories, and methods – within which past events were rendered insignificant. Pluralising understandings of the social, to include the experiences and histories of other cultures and societies (in a similar manner to that of gender and sexuality), does no more than lay those experiences and histories in parallel to European ones and within a framework determined by the dominant experiences. What is necessary is to identify and explain the existing partiality with a view to the *reconstruction* of those theories – a reconstruction that, while it could be more adequate, could never be final.

As suggested, then, the simple pluralisation of 'other' voices in fields previously dominated by particular voices can never be enough. The emergence of these new voices must call into question the structures of knowledge that had previously occluded such voices and, further, necessitates a reconsideration of previous theoretical categories. One way in which this can be done, I suggest, is by addressing difference in the context of what the historian, Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997), calls *connected histories*. These are histories that do not derive from a singular

standpoint, be that a universal standpoint, or the standpoint of any particular identity claimant. Instead, connected histories allow for the deconstruction of dominant narratives at the same time as being open to different perspectives and seeking to reconcile these perspectives systematically, both in the incorporation of new data and evidence and in terms of the reconstruction of theoretical categories.

The usual response to such an argument, however, has been to assert the necessity of the categories being challenged (Sayer, 2000; Delanty, 2006; McLennan, 2006). While, for the most part, sociologists have given up a once-standard positivistic account of agreement on substance, there is still a wish for an 'objective', or 'analytical', agreement on concepts, concepts which are regarded as necessary for intelligibility in sociology. This is ironic, given that much of the rhetoric associated with claims to recognise and accommodate the voices of new social movements emphasises a conception of sociological undertakings as dialogue (see Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1988). However, it is usually a dialogue in which the possibility of speaking is given in a framework that is itself *outside* a dialogue (or, as I have suggested here, might properly be considered to be a consequence of a dialogue that was European social thought structured through its exclusions of 'others'). The problem with dominant sociological accounts, then, is that they want something outside dialogue which does not itself determine the substance of the dialogue. By locating gender, sexuality, and race within the domain of the 'social', these have become issues to be talked about, but they have not themselves been allowed to challenge the structures of dialogue that facilitate recognition and generate conceptual understandings of the world.

While feminism and queer studies have opened up interesting and productive avenues of thinking about gender and sexuality, to the extent that they have allowed these concepts to be regarded as constitutive of the social, merely inflecting processes of the system, they have remained, and reproduced, a way of thinking that undermines the force of the challenge posed. The post-colonial critique is not substantially different from that made by feminism and queer studies, but the nature of its location outside of the dominant understanding of the 'modern social' enables it to resist assimilation into the domain of the socio-cultural (despite the efforts of theorists of multiple modernities to so contain it) and open up discussion of general categories. The post-colonial revolution, then, points to what is missing in sociology: an engagement with difference that makes a difference to what was initially thought. While it may be seen as threatening by some,

what post-colonial thought truly threatens is to provide a revolution in thinking that would make sociology genuinely dialogic by making its fundamental categories part of that dialogue.

Notes

1. While Marx did refer to colonial relationships, his analysis of them made no difference to the dynamic of progressive change that he set out, reinforcing the more standard sociological view of a Eurocentric modernity accompanied by a theory of Oriental Despotism and stagnant Asian societies (see Thapar, 1992; Chakrabarty, 2000).
2. Seidman's (1996) review of Edward W. Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, for example, was published almost twenty years after its initial publication and appears to be the only review of this seminal book in a Western sociology journal.
3. While it is correct that the migration of many ethnic groups follows lines of previous colonial encounters, it is not necessarily so. For example, Polish peasants in the United States do not have a post-colonial relationship to their new domicile, whereas race enters sociological discourse around the experience of African Americans whose place in the United States has primarily been as a consequence of a colonial encounter. This enables ethnicity to be regarded as a 'cultural' phenomenon and 'race' as a pathological one, but neither form requires a consideration of sociology in terms of its structuring by race.
4. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies did emphasise that much migration followed patterns of imperial connection, but the relationships were complicated by mediated migrations such as that of Indians to East Africa and then to the United Kingdom.
5. This is not to say that there are no powerful critiques available of the sort that I am advocating. Sociologists such as Stuart Hall (1992, 1996) and Paul Gilroy (1993) have been exemplary in addressing aspects of the relationship between post-colonialism and sociology and are, therefore, largely exempt from the critique that I put forward which concerns the *reception* of post-colonial ideas more generally within the sociological mainstream. My argument is that mainstream sociology insulates itself from thoroughgoing reconstruction in light of the critical perspectives presented by feminism, queer theory, and post-colonialism by distinguishing the system and the social (or the structural and the cultural) and assigning the critical position to that of the particular. While Hall and Gilroy are resistant to this kind of assimilation of critical ideas, their sympathy to Marxist analysis and, in particular, a form of Marxist analysis that itself distinguishes the structural and cultural facilitates the rendering of post-colonial criticism as largely a cultural matter.
6. See Sayer (2000) for a critique of feminism in these terms and Green's (2002) critique of queer studies for its neglect of the social.
7. Giddens, for his part, argues that 'sociology involves a disciplinary concentration upon those institutions and modes of life brought into being by "modernity" – that massive set of social changes emanating first of all from Europe (and which today have become global in scope) creating modern social institutions' (1987: 25). This also echoes Parsons's earlier claim for Sociology

- to be seen as emerging as a distinct discipline in terms of its association 'with factors which emerge in "economics" ...but lie outside its central categories' (Parsons, 1937; for discussion, see Holmwood, 1996: 33).
8. This is not to suggest that feminists, queer theorists, and race scholars have not contributed substantially to Sociology, but rather to make the argument that these contributions, to the extent that they do not challenge the accepted structure of Sociology, are liable to assimilation within its dominant categories thereby diminishing the force of any critique. As such, the missing revolution that is being referred to is that relating to the structure of the discipline itself and not the engagement of scholars seeking to make a difference to it.
 9. In a similar way, Marshall's (1994) feminist critique of modernity sought to retrieve women's experiences from the margins of theory and locate them in the centre of such understandings, but her analysis does not go much beyond adding the category of gender to traditionally conceived categories of modernity with little discussion of the difference such a move would make to the original categories themselves.

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8

Towards a Multiplication of Specialised Assemblages of Territory, Authority, and Rights

Saskia Sassen

This is a time of epochal, even if partial, transformations. Some use the notion of globalisation to capture the change – a ‘national versus global contest’ view. Others focus on the ‘War on Terror’ and its aftermath, emphasising the ‘state of exception’ that gives governments legal authority to abuse its powers. There are several other interpretations and naming of the character of today’s major transformation. But this suffices to make the point that much of the commentary on the major changes of our time pivots on the notion that the national state is under attack, or at the minimum, that it is suffering the erosion of its territorial protections.¹

However, the major change is not fully captured in these types of understandings. A key, yet much overlooked, feature of the current period is the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialised, global assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights once firmly ensconced in national institutional frames.² These assemblages cut across the binary of national versus global. They inhabit national institutional and territorial settings, and they span the globe in what are largely trans-local geographies connecting multiple sub-national spaces.

These assemblages include at one end private, often very narrow, frameworks, such as the *lex constructionis* – a private ‘law’ developed by the major engineering companies in the world to establish a common mode of dealing with the strengthening of environmental standards in a growing number of developing countries, in most of which these firms are building.

At the other end of the range they include far more complex (and experimental) entities, such as the first ever global public court, the

International Criminal Court, which is not part of the established supranational system and has universal jurisdiction among signatory countries. Beyond the fact of the diversity of these assemblages, there is the increasingly weighty fact of their numbers – over 125 according to the best recent count. The proliferation of these systems does not represent the end of national states, but it does begin to disassemble bits and pieces of the national.

If you see through the eye of the national state, these assemblages look like inchoate geographies. But they are actually the bits of a new reality in the making.

Bits of a new reality

Using this lens to look at some current, often minor and barely visible, developments opens up some interesting vistas. For instance, Hizbollah in Lebanon can be seen as having shaped a very specific assemblage of territory, authority, and rights that cannot be easily reduced to any of the familiar containers – nation state, internal minority-controlled region, such as the Kurdish region in Iraq, or a separatist area, such as the Basque region in Spain. Similarly, the emerging roles of major gangs in cities such as Sao Paulo contribute to produce and/or strengthen types of territorial fractures that the project of building a nation state sought to eliminate or dilute. Besides their local criminal activities, they now often run segments of global drug and arms dealing networks and, importantly, they are also increasingly taking over ‘government’ functions: ‘policing’, providing social services and welfare assistance, jobs, and a new element of rights and authority in the areas they control.

We also see these novel mixes of territory, authority, and rights in far less visible or noticed settings. For instance, when Mexico’s (former) President Fox met with undocumented Mexican immigrants during his visit to the United States this past May, his actions amounted to the making of a new informal jurisdiction. His actions did not fit into existing legal forms that give sovereign states specific types of extraterritorial authority. Nonetheless, his actions were not seen as particularly objectionable; indeed, they were hardly noticed. Yet these were, after all, unauthorised immigrants subject to deportation if detected, in a country that is now spending almost two billion dollars a year to secure border control. But no INS or other police came to arrest the undocumented thus exposed, and the media barely reacted, even though it was taking place at a time when Congress was debating whether to criminalise illegal immigrants. Or When Chavez, seen as an ‘enemy’ of sorts

by the US government, is somehow enabled (through the state-owned oil enterprise) to bring oil to the poor in a few major cities in the United States. All of these are minor acts, but they were not somehow acceptable or customary even a short time ago. They can be seen as producing novel types of mostly informal jurisdictions.

Emphasising this multiplication of partial assemblages contrasts with much of the globalisation literature. It has tended to assume the binary of state versus national state, and to focus on the powerful global institutions that have played a critical role in implementing the global corporate economy and gotten states to implement the associated policies. My focus here opens up the analysis to a far broader range of components, including powerless actors, in what we describe as globalisation, and it repositions the powerful global regulators, such as the (reinvented) IMF or the WTO as bridging events for an epochal transformation, rather than as the transformation itself. The actual dynamics getting shaped are far deeper and more radical than such entities as the WTO or the IMF, no matter how powerful they are as foot soldiers. These institutions should rather be conceived of as powerful capabilities for the making of a new order – they are instruments, not the new order itself. Similarly, I argue (2006: ch. 4) that the Bretton Woods system was a powerful capability that facilitated some of the new global formations that emerge in the 1980s but was not itself the beginning of the new order as is often asserted.

I see in this proliferation of partial assemblages a tendency towards a disaggregating and, in some cases, global redeployment, of constitutive rules once solidly lodged in the nation-state project, one with strong unitary tendencies (2006: chs 4, 5, and 6). Since these novel assemblages are partial and often highly specialised, they tend to be centred in particular utilities and purposes (*ibid*: chs 5, 8 and 9). The normative character of this landscape is, in my reading, multivalent – it ranges from some very good utilities and purposes to some very bad ones, depending on one's normative stance. Their emergence and proliferation bring several significant consequences even though this is a partial, not an all-encompassing development. They are potentially profoundly unsettling of what are still the prevalent institutional arrangements (nation states and the supranational system) for governing questions of war and peace, for establishing what are and what are not legitimate claims, for enforcing the rule of law. A different matter is whether these established arrangements are effective at it, and whether justice is secured. The point here is that their decomposition would partly undo established ways of handling complex national and international matters.

The emergent landscape I am describing promotes a multiplication of diverse spatio-temporal framings and diverse normative (mini)orders where once the dominant logic was towards producing (grand)unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings (ibid: chs 8 and 9).

This proliferation of specialised orders extends even inside the state apparatus. I argue that we can no longer speak of ‘the’ state, and hence of ‘the’ national state versus ‘the’ global order. There is a novel type of segmentation inside the state apparatus, with a growing and increasingly privatised executive branch of government aligned with specific global actors, notwithstanding nationalist speeches, and a hollowing out of the legislature whose effectiveness is at risk of becoming confined to fewer and more domestic matters (ibid: ch 4). A weak and domesticated legislature weakens the political capacity of citizens to demand accountability from an increasingly powerful and private executive, since the legislature gives citizens stronger standing in these matters than the executive. Further, the privatising of the executive partly has brought with it an eroding of the privacy rights of citizens – a historic shift of the private–public division at the heart of the liberal state, even if always an imperfect division.³

A second critical divergence is between the increasing alignment of the executive with global logics and the confinement of the legislature to domestic matters.⁴ This results from three major trends. First is the growing importance of particular components of the administration, such as ministries of finance and central banks (respectively Treasury and Federal Reserve in the United States), for the implementing of a global corporate economy; these components actually gain power because of globalisation. Second, the global regulators (IMF, WTO, and others) only deal with the executive branch; they do not deal with the legislature. This can strengthen the adoption of global logics by the executive. A third becomes evident in such cases as the Bush-Cheney Administration’s support for the Dubai Ports’s attempted acquisition of several major port operations in the United States. In contrast to these trends, the legislature has long been a domestic part of the state, something which begins to weaken its effectiveness as globalisation expands over the past two decades. This then also weakens the political capacity of citizens in an increasingly globalized world.

Avoiding master categories

A major methodological, theoretical, and political implication of the type of analysis I am proposing is that it is insufficient to focus on the

nation state and the global system as two distinct entities. The transformations afoot criss-cross this binary and enter the national and even the state apparatus itself.

To historicise both the national and the global as constructed conditions, I have taken three trans-historical components present in almost all societies and examined how they became assembled into different historical formations. (This is fully developed in the larger project on which this chapter is based, see 2006.) These three components are territory, authority, and rights (TAR). Each can assume specific contents, shapes, and interdependencies across diverse historical formations. The choice of these three rests partly on their foundational character and partly on the contingency of my fields of knowledge. One could, and I hope someone will, choose additional components or replace one or another of these.

Territory, authority, and rights are complex institutionalisations arising from specific processes, struggles, and competing interests. They are not simply attributes. They are interdependent, even as they maintain their specificity. Each can, thus, be identified. Specificity is partly conditioned by levels of formalisation and institutionalisation. Across time and space, TAR have been assembled into distinct formations within which they have had variable levels of performance. Further, the types of instruments and capabilities through which each gets constituted vary, as do the sites where each is in turn embedded – private or public, law or custom, metropolitan or colonial, national or supranational, and so on.

Using these three foundational components as analytic pathways into the two distinct formations that concern me in the larger project – the national and the global – helps avoid the endogeneity trap that so affects the globalisation literature. Scholars have generally looked at these two complex formations in toto and compared them to establish their differences. This is not where I start. Rather than comparing what are posited as two wholes – the national and the global – I disaggregate each into these three foundational components (TAR). They are my starting point. I dislodge them from their particular historically constructed encasements – in this case, the national and the global – and examine their constitution and institutional location in these different historical formations, and their possible shifting across institutional domains. I develop some of this empirically in the next section, but a quick example would be the shift of what were once components of public authority into a growing array of forms of private authority. One thesis that arises out of this type of analysis is that particular national

capabilities are dislodged from their national institutional encasement and become constitutive of, rather than being destroyed or sidelined by globalisation.⁵

This type of approach produces an analytics that can be used by others to examine different countries today in the context of globalisation or different types of assemblages across time and space.⁶

In the modern state, TAR evolve into what we now can recognise as a centripetal scaling where one scale, the national, aggregates most of what there is to be had in terms of TAR. Though never absolutely, each of the three components is constituted overwhelmingly as a national domain and, further, exclusively so. Where in the past most territories were subject to multiple systems of rule, the national sovereign gains exclusive authority over a given territory and at the same time this territory is constructed as coterminous with that authority, in principle ensuring a similar dynamic in other nation states. This in turn gives the sovereign the possibility of functioning as the exclusive grantor of rights. Territory is perhaps the most critical capability for the formation of the nation state, while today we see ascend a variety of assemblages for which it is not; thus for the global regulators authority is more critical than territory.

Globalisation can be seen as destabilising this particular scalar assemblage. What scholars have noticed is the fact that the nation state has lost some of its exclusive territorial authority to new global institutions. What they have failed to examine in depth is the specific, often specialised rearrangements inside the highly formalised and institutionalised national state apparatus aimed at instituting the authority of global institutions. This shift is not simply a question of policy-making – it is about making a novel type of institutional space inside the state. In overlooking such rearrangements it is also easy to overlook the extent to which critical components of the global are structured inside the national producing what I refer to as a partial, and often highly specialised, denationalising of what historically was constructed as national.

Thus today particular elements of TAR are becoming reassembled into novel global configurations. Therewith, their mutual interactions and interdependencies are altered as are their institutional encasements. These shifts take place both within the nation state, for example, shifts from public to private, and through shifts to the inter and supra-national and global levels. What was bundled up and experienced as a unitary condition (the national assemblage of TAR) now increasingly reveals itself to be a set of distinct elements, with variable capacities for

becoming denationalised. For instance, we might say that particular components of authority and of rights are evincing a greater capacity to partial denationalisation than territory; geographic boundaries have changed far less (except in cases such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union) than authority (i.e. the greater power of global regulators over national economies) and rights (the further institutionalising of the international human rights regime). It points to possibly sharp divergence between the organising logics of the earlier international and current global phases; these are often seen as analogous to the current global phase, but I argue this understanding may be based on a confusion of analytical levels. In earlier periods, including Bretton Woods, that imperial logic was geared towards building national states, typically through imperial geographies; in today's phase, it is geared towards setting up global systems inside national states and national economies, and in that sense, at least partly denationalising what had historically been constructed as national. This denationalising can take multiple concrete forms: to mention two critical ones, global cities and specific policies and institutions within the state itself.

Specialised assemblages as new types of territoriality

Next I develop some of these issues empirically by focusing on emergent articulations of TAR that unsettle what has been the dominant articulation, that characterising the modern state. I will use the concept of territoriality, usually used to designate the particular articulation of TAR in the modern state. Here I denaturalise the term and use it to capture a far broader range of such articulations. But the national state is the standard against which I identify these following four types of territoriality assembled out of 'national' and 'global' elements, with each individual or aggregate instance evincing distinct spatio-temporal features. These four types of instances unsettle national state territoriality – the territory of the national is a critical dimension in play in all four. (There are other emergent assemblages I examine in the larger project, 2006.)

A first type of territoriality can be found in the development of new jurisdictional geographies. Among the more formalised instances are a variety of *national* legal actions which notwithstanding their transnational geographies can today be launched from national courts. The critical articulation is between the national (as in national court, national law) and a global geography, outside the terms of traditional international law or treaty law. A good example are the lawsuits launched

by the Washington-based Center for Constitutional Rights in a national court against nine multinational corporations, both American and foreign, for abuses of workers' rights in their offshore industrial operations, using as the national legal instrument the Alien Torts Claims Act. In other words, this is a global three-sided jurisdiction, with several locations in at least two of those sites – the locations of the headquarters (both the United States and other countries), the locations of the offshore factories (several countries), and the court in Washington. Even if these lawsuits do not quite achieve their full goal, they signal it is possible to use the national judiciary for suing United States and foreign firms for questionable practices in their operations outside their home countries. Thus, besides the much-noted new courts and instruments (e.g. the new International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights), what this example shows is that components of the national rule of law that once served to build the strength of the national state are today contributing to the formation of transnational jurisdictions. Another instance is the US practice of 'exporting' prisoners to third countries (rendition), *de facto* to facilitate their torture. This is yet another instance of a territoriality that is both national and non-national. Finally, diverse jurisdictional geographies can also be used to manipulate temporal dimensions. Reinserting a conflict in the national legal system may ensure a slower progression than in the private jurisdiction of international commercial arbitration (Sassen, 2006: ch. 5).

A second type of specialised assemblage that is contributing to a novel type of territoriality is the work of national states across the globe to construct a standardised global space for the operations of firms and markets. What this means is that components of legal frameworks for rights and guarantees, and more generally the rule of law, largely developed in the process of national state formation, can now strengthen non-national organising logics. As these components become part of new types of transnational systems they alter the valence of (rather than destroy, as is often argued) older national state capabilities. Where the rule of law once built the strength of the national state and national corporations, key components of that rule of law are now contributing to the partial, often highly specialised, denationalising of particular national state orders. For instance, corporate actors operating globally have pushed hard for the development of new types of formal instruments, notably intellectual property rights and standardised accounting principles. But they need not only the support but also the actual work of each individual state where they operate to develop and implement such instruments in the specific context of each country. In their

aggregate this and other emergent orderings contribute to produce an operational space that is partly embedded in particular components of national legal systems which have been subjected to specialised denationalisations (2006: chs 4 and 5); thereby these orderings become capabilities of an organising logic that is not quite part of the national state even as that logic installs itself in that state. Further, in so doing, they often go against the interests of national capital. This is a very different way of representing economic globalisation than the common notion of the withdrawal of the state at the hands of the global system. Indeed, to a large extent it is the executive branch of government that is getting aligned with global corporate capital and ensuring this work gets done.

A third type of specialised assemblage can be detected in the formation of a global network of financial centres. We can conceive of financial centres that are part of global financial markets as constituting a distinct kind of territoriality, simultaneously pulled in by the larger electronic networks and functioning as localised micro-infrastructures for those networks. These financial centres inhabit national territories, but they cannot be seen as simply national in the historical sense of the term, nor can they be reduced to the administrative unit encompassing the actual terrain (e.g. a city), one that is part of a nation state. In their aggregate they house significant components of the global, partly electronic market for capital. As localities they are denationalised in specific and partial ways. In this sense they can be seen as constituting the elements of a novel type of multi-sited territoriality, one that diverges sharply from the territoriality of the historic nation state.

A fourth type of assemblage can be found in the global networks of local activists and, more generally, in the concrete and often place-specific social infrastructure of global civil society. Global civil society is enabled by global digital networks and the associated imaginaries. But this does not preclude that localised actors, organisations, and causes are key building blocks of global civil society as it is shaping up today. The localised involvement of activists are critical no matter how universal and planetary the aims of the various struggles – in their aggregate these localised involvements are constitutive of global civil society. Global electronic networks actually push the possibility of this local–global dynamic further. Elsewhere I have examined (2006: ch. 7) the possibility for even resource-poor and *immobile* individuals or organisations to become part of a type of horizontal globality centred on diverse localities. When supplied with the key capabilities of the new technologies – decentralised access, interconnectivity, and simultaneity

of transactions – localised, immobilised individuals and organisations can be part of a global public space; one that is partly a subjective condition, but only partly because it is rooted in the concrete struggles of localities.

In principle we can posit that those who are immobile might be more likely to experience their globality through this (abstract) space than individuals and organisations that have the resources and the options to travel across the globe. Sometimes these globalities can assume complex forms, as is the case with first-nation people demanding direct representation in international fora, bypassing national state authority – a long-standing cause that has been significantly enabled by global electronic networking. Other times they are more elementary, as is the case with various Forest Watch activists in rain forests around the world. We can see here at work a particular type of interaction between placeless digital networks and deeply localised actors/users. One common pattern is the formation of triangular cross-border jurisdictions for political action which once would have been confined to the national. Local activists often use global campaigns and international organisations to secure rights and guarantees from their national states; they now have the option to incorporate a non-national or global site in their national struggles. These instances point to the emergence of a particular type of territoriality in the context of the imbrications of digital and non-digital conditions. This territoriality partly inhabits specific sub-national spaces and partly gets constituted as a variety of somewhat specialised or partial global publics.

While the third and fourth types of territoriality might seem similar, they are actually not. The sub-national spaces of these localised actors have not been denationalised as have the financial centres discussed earlier. The global publics that get constituted are barely institutionalised and mostly informal, unlike the global capital market, which is a highly institutionalised space both through national and international law, and through private governance systems. In their informality, however, these global publics can be seen as spaces for empowerment of the resource-poor or of not very powerful actors. In this sense the subjectivities that are emerging through these global publics constitute capabilities for new organising logics.

Although these four types of emergent assemblages that function as territorialities are diverse, they all share certain features. First, they are not exclusively national or global but are assemblages of elements of each. Second, in this assembling they bring together what are often different spatio-temporal orders, that is, different velocities and different

scopes. Third, this can produce an eventful engagement, including contestations and what we might think of as a 'frontier zone' effect – a space that makes possible kinds of engagements for which there are no clear rules. The resolution of these encounters can become the occasion for playing out conflicts that cannot easily be played out in other spaces. Fourth, novel types of actors, initially often informal political or economic actors, can emerge in the processes through which these assemblages are constituted. These novel actors tend to be able to access cross-border domains once exclusive to older established actors, notably national states. Finally, in the juxtaposition of the different temporal orders that come together in these novel territorialities, an existing capability can get redeployed to a domain with a different organising logic. These emergent assemblages begin to unbundle the traditional territoriality of the national, historically constructed overwhelmingly as a national unitary spatio-temporal domain.

Conclusion

Both self-evidently global and denationalising dynamics destabilise existing meanings and systems. This raises questions about the future of crucial frameworks through which modern societies, economies, and politics (under the rule of law) have operated: the social contract of liberal states, social democracy as we have come to understand it, modern citizenship, and the formal mechanisms that render certain claims legitimate and others illegitimate in liberal democracies. The future of these and other familiar frameworks is rendered dubious by the unbundling, even if very partial, of the basic organisational and normative architectures through which we have operated, especially over the past century. These architectures have held together complex interdependencies between rights and obligations, power and the law, wealth and poverty, allegiance and exit.

The multiplication of partial, specialised, and applied normative orders produces distinct normative challenges in the context of a still-prevalent world of nation states. Just to mention one instance, I would induce from these trends that normative orders such as religions reassume greater importance where they had until recently been confined to distinct specialised spheres by the secular normative orders of states. I would posit that this is not, as is commonly argued, a fallback on older cultures. On the contrary, it is a systemic outcome of cutting-edge developments – not pre-modern but a new type of modernity that is a kind of default sphere arising out of the partial unbundling of what had

been dominant and centripetal normative orders into multiple, particularised segmentations. The ascendance of religion is but one outcome, albeit a highly visible one that arouses deep passions. But there are others, and their numbers are growing even as they are rarely as visible as religion.

Notes

1. This is based on a larger project published as *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press, 2006). All references in this chapter are to this source; readers can also find full bibliographic elaboration of the issues raised here.
2. This is clearly an analysis that emerges from European history, with all the limitations that entails. Critical here is Gayatri Spivak's (see, for example, 1988) thinking about the diverse positions that can structure an 'author's' stance.
3. This is a complicated issue that I do not address here (but see 2006: ch. 6). One question is whether there is a necessary relationship between an increasingly privatised executive branch and the erosion of citizens' privacy rights.
4. An issue here is the relationship between this executive branch alignment with global logics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the proliferation of various nationalisms. (I address this in 2006: chs 6 and 9.) Helpful here is Calhoun's (1998) proposition that nationalism is a process articulated with modernity; this makes room for the coexistence of globalisation and nationalisation.
5. In the larger project (2006: chs 1, 8, and 9) there are lengthy discussions of questions of method and interpretation. I propose a distinction between capabilities (e.g. the rule of law) and the organising logics (the national, the global) within which they are located. Thus capabilities are multivalent: they can switch organising logics, with the latter shaping their valence.
6. I use the concept assemblage in its most descriptive sense. However, several scholars have developed theoretical constructs around this term. Most significant for the purposes of this book is the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 504–5) for whom 'assemblage' is a contingent ensemble of practices and things that can be differentiated (i.e. they are not collections of similar practices and things) and that can be aligned along the axes of territoriality and deterritorialisation. More specifically, they posit that particular mixes of technical and administrative practices 'extract and give intelligibility to new spaces by decoding and encoding milieux' (ibid.). There are many more elaborations around the concept assemblage, including not surprisingly, among architects and urbanists (vide the journal *Assemblages*). While I find many of these elaborations extremely important and illuminating, and while some of the assemblages I identify may evince some of these features, my usage is profoundly untheoretical compared to that of the above-cited authors. I simply want the dictionary term. I locate my theorisation elsewhere, not on this term.

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9

The Changing Life-Course in British Sociology

Gayle Letherby

Taking a life-course approach

Traditionally the life-cycle approach was considered to be the most appropriate way to understand individual lives. However, this implies a rigid set of transitions and an 'ideal' life within which birth, death, and other significant life events should occur only at the 'right time'. So, the life-course approach which 'encompasses social and demographic changes which affect all our lives, as well as the personal biographical events in each individual's lifecourse' (Cotterill, 1994: 112) would seem to be more appropriate for many people's lives:

This approach points towards the range of possibilities which may influence individual lives ... and emphasizes the interlinkage between different phases of the lifecourse ... using this approach we can see that an individual's journey from birth to death is not a simple uni-directional trip, but one which has 'false starts, changes, in direction and hidden obstacles'. (Hockey and James, 1993: 50)

The life course concept ... allows for the encoding of historical events and social interaction outside the person as well as the age-related biological and social states of the organisation. (Giele and Elder, 1998: 22–3)

In addition, Peter Alheit (1994: 309–10, emphasis in original) suggests that life-courses

follow institutionalized *expectation structures* ... When we look back on our biography or reflect on our future, we usually adopt a basic framework into which we insert our memories and expectations – childhood,

schooling, student days, working life, marriage and so forth. *Every* biography is inevitably structured by such sequential patterns to some extent.

In this chapter I reflect on aspects of my own sociological life-course, not least in the context of the past twenty years of British Sociology.

The (personal) significance of auto/biography

I have always been impressed by Charles Wright Mills's (1959: 204) recognition that the social scientist is part of society and not an objective, externally located observer: 'The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society, the question is where he [sic] stands within it...' I also agree with Mills that we should

learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship [sic] is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work. (Mills, 1959: 216)

These strictures plus his instruction to use the sociological imagination as a 'tool' that enables the individual to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two seemed to me to articulate both the task and approach of Sociology.

With reference to the research process it has now become commonplace for the researcher to locate her/himself within the research process and produce 'first person' accounts. This involves a recognition that, as researchers, we need to appreciate that our research activities tell us things about ourselves as well as about those we are researching (Steier, 1991). Further, there is recognition among social scientists that we need to consider how the researcher as author is positioned in relation to the research process, not least with reference to the choice and design of the research fieldwork and analysis, editorship, and presentation (Iles, 1992; Sparkes, 1998; Letherby, 2003).

There are resonances with these views in feminist work but feminists go further in terms of an explicit recognition of the researcher's self. Feminist researchers argue that we need to consider how the researcher as author is positioned in relation to the research process, and to ignore the personal involvement of the researcher within research is to downgrade the personal. Thus, feminists are concerned with who has the right to know, the nature and value of knowledge and feminist

knowledge within this, the relationship between the methods chosen, how they are used, and the 'knowledge' produced. Thus, the main concern is with the relationship between the process and the product of feminist research and how epistemology becomes translated into practice (Letherby, 2003, 2004).

I, like some others, would argue that research is always auto/biographical in that when reflecting on and writing our own autobiographies we reflect on our relationship with the biographies of others and when writing the biographies of others we inevitably refer to and reflect on our own autobiographies. Acknowledging this makes our work academically rigorous: '... self conscious auto/biographical writing acknowledges the social location of the writer thus making clear the author's role in constructing rather than discovering the story/the knowledge' (Letherby, 2000: 90).

Clearly, reflecting on my auto/biography is not a new experience for me. I am not suggesting that they would want to but anyone who reads my work could discover without much difficulty my age, the city of my birth, my parents' names, my reproductive and parental experience and status, aspects of my experience of working in Higher Education (HE), my favourite train journey, and so on. Indeed, this chapter could be seen as yet another excuse to indulge my passion for sociological auto/biography.

Reflecting on aspects of Sociology's life-course

Sociology, like sociologists, experiences and registers life-course changes as it is not only affected by new empirical findings and theoretical and methodological development but by external discourses both within and outside of HE. In recent years there has been some debate both on the health of the discipline and on the appropriate and possible political ambitions for Sociology (see, for example, the discussion on 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005 and Scott, 2005); on the future of Sociology in *Sociological Research Online* Volume 10 and 11; Holmwood, 2007; and some pieces in the special issue of *Sociology* on 'Sociology and its Public Face(s)' Volume 41, No 5 and Hollands and Stanley, 2008). Yet, as several people have noted debates about what Sociology *is* and specific concerns about a possible crisis of fragmentation are nothing new (e.g. Scott, 2005; Hollands and Stanley, 2008). Indeed such debate(s) have been characteristic of the discipline since the beginning and not least demonstrates a persistent critical vitality within the discipline.

Arguably, the more significant problem facing Sociology and other HE disciplines is the increased bureaucratisation and regulation within the academy (Epstein, 1995; Letherby and Shiels, 2001; Hollands and Stanley, 2008). Yet, concerns about 'crisis' and institutional changes are linked because the diversification of Sociology has material and economic consequences. For example, within some institutions the introduction of Criminology and/or Cultural Studies type courses in Social Sciences Faculties/Schools was/is part of the 'survival of Sociology' agenda; an attempt to protect Sociology jobs when recruitment to Sociology programmes decrease. However, the dangers are that the introduction of these courses, which are often very popular with potential students, can lead to a further decrease in student numbers on degrees in Sociology. The current popularity of Criminology and Cultural Studies is also reflected in publishers' agendas. In addition, we have recent real evidence of the impact of 'market force' concerns on Sociology departments in some universities and we know that many colleagues are teaching within and/or managing areas where Sociology is only one discipline amongst many competing for resources. Many of these issues are relevant to my own Sociological life-course as I have both been interested in and engaged with debates about working and learning in HE, and I have worked in institutions where there have been real material concerns.

Members of the British Sociological Association (BSA) have debated these issues at conferences, in NETWORK (the professional magazine of the association) and in BSA journals (e.g. see reference to *Sociological Research Online* and *Sociology* above and also Jennifer Platt's 2003 history of the association). For me this represents a stimulating space to critically reflect on my discipline and my place within it. Thus, auto/biographical reflection in this area enables a consideration of the self and other, the relationship between these, the influence of internal and external structures, and change within the academy.

Reflecting on my own sociological life-course

Being a late starter

I came to HE and Sociology later than the institutionalised expectation structure expects (I began my first degree in the late 1980s when I was 28) not least because of my class and gender and associated structures

of inequality. Jo Stanley (1995: 169) reflecting on her experience at a Women's Studies conference writes of

feeling marginalized and disempowered, as part of a dynamic in which some professional academic speakers refused – however unconsciously – to acknowledge that their knowledge and language were privileged, and that therefore introductions and translations might be required.

In my own career I have not felt the sense of exclusion Stanley felt. Yet, at times I still feel surprised that my work life has turned out the way it has. Also, I am aware that even though I do not feel the need to apologise to colleagues about my background and my route into academia, I do sometimes feel the need to play down my achievements outside of the institution. For example, in order not to feel like I'm 'showing off', I sometimes tell taxi-drivers that I teach and I do not talk much about my publications and promotions with my extended family of origin and at school reunions. Thus, although I feel comfortable being a professional woman at work, I perceive the expectations of my family and friends of early years to be more embedded in a traditional female working-class frame and/or perceive that my professional status will mark me as an outsider and someone who has 'got above herself'.

Sociological ambitions: beginnings

I began in Sociology as a non-standard, mature woman entrant. Having failed my Maths O Level the first time around I was told by the visiting careers advisor 'Well that's University out for you then'. Towards the end of my school education I was bored with study but when I started my A level Sociology at the local FE college some eight years later I couldn't get enough of studying or of Sociology and the effect it had on the way that I felt about the world and my place within it. This was the beginning of my personal 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959): a theoretically inquisitive approach relevant for all social scientists. In this first year of sociological study, I also became much more interested in the experience and consequences of personal politics and my development as a feminist sociologist began.

The rest, as they say, is history. From the very first day of my undergraduate degree I knew that I wanted to concentrate on women's experience of miscarriage (an event which I had experienced myself in the mid-1989) for my final undergraduate research project and this autobiographical trend continued into my doctoral career where I focused

on the status and experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' (which I write in single quotation marks to highlight the problems of definition). As a postgraduate student I also began to write with others (collaborative work is still really important to me) about methodological issues and about working and learning in HE. Alongside these academic developments as a new postgraduate I joined the BSA and as a student went to a BSA summer school, became co-convenor of the Human Reproduction Study Group, co-organised a BSA Family Studies group day conference, and joined the then Equality of the Sexes Committee. Through these networks and activities I met others who were also interested in the life-course of the discipline and in sociological reflections on the institutional experience of working and learning in HE.

Ambitions in Sociology: carrying on

Researching and writing about the academy

One of the first pieces I ever had published was written jointly with several postgraduate colleagues (Holliday et al., 1993). Here we reflected on our position in the academy to challenge the commonsense view that the postgraduate experience is inevitably isolating. Since then, with various colleagues, I have written and researched into the students of Women's Studies' experience of university life (e.g. Letherby and Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank and Letherby, 2001); gender, respect, and emotional labour in the academy (e.g. Barnes-Powell and Letherby, 1998; Letherby and Shiels, 2001; Marchbank and Letherby, 2001); non/parenthood in the academy (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006; Letherby et al., 2005); 'older' women's experience in the academy (Cotterill, Hirsch, and Letherby, 2007), and feminist ways of working (e.g. Cotterill and Letherby, 1998; Cotterill, Jackson, and Letherby, 2007). In all of this work we reflect on our own experience as I do in other individually written pieces (e.g. Letherby, 2000a, 2006).

Clearly some of the issues are relevant to my own sociological academic life-course and that of friends and colleagues. HE in the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century is affected by both 'New Right' and 'New Left' policy and ideology. The impact of the focus on individualism, consumerism, and quality pushed by consecutive Conservatives from the late 1970s through to the late 1990s has been recognised for some time. For example,

The Higher Education sector is increasingly being forced into, and, in some cases has willingly adopted the entrepreneurial spirit of the

market. One consequence of the move toward entrepreneurialism which most of us are experiencing is a shift towards the stronger 'managerial' culture in Higher Education. (Epstein, 1995: 59–60)

Many changes in Higher Education in the last decade or so have been related less to knowledge production and pedagogy than to ideological and market concerns. [The] 'entrepreneurial' trend, has affected both working and learning conditions and, in a knock-on effect, the nature of student/tutor relationships. (Letherby and Shiels, 2001: 123)

Thus, it is widely acknowledged that HE is perceived as a product and universities represent a 'service industry'. Universities and the departments within them have business plans; both research and teaching is quality assured (e.g. Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Quality Assessment/Internal Teaching Reviews) and this external moderation and review has encouraged the development of a particular management focus within institutions to ensure improved performance on the criteria valued by the producers of league tables which appear in the media (Marchbank and Letherby, 2001). The result of the development of this 'charter' mentality is significant. Although staff may still want to encourage students to develop as people, to think differently about the world, and to be excited by knowledge acquisition, increasingly students are less motivated by a passion for their disciplines and more concerned with transferable skills and service provision (Stanley, 2005; Letherby, 2006).

I am not suggesting that twenty-first-century Sociology students are not interested in the social world but they have been affected by recent history and by debates over whether we live in a 'post-modern, post-feminist risk-society' or indeed whether there is such a thing as society at all. Current students are also affected by and indeed part of the recent technological revolution and often expect teaching and learning materials to be presented and available in ways that were unthinkable just a few years ago. Thus, although it is important for us all – as teachers and learners – to develop a 'technological imagination' and for lecturers to find every way of encouraging students to take charge of their learning (e.g. see Broad et al., 2004) to get the most that we can from the resources that we have, it is important also not to lose our interest and enthusiasm for our 'sociological imaginations'.

The gendered academy

Commenting specifically on the position of women in HE in 1996 Meg Maguire argued that women were 'concentrated in subordinate

positions with an occupation which is organised and managed by dominant male workers from the same occupational class and education background' (28–9). Despite the encouraging first sentence a recent article highlights continuing inequalities:

The number of female professors in UK universities reached record levels last year, according to figures published today.

The first analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's staff record for 2006–07 shows that 17.5% of professors in higher education institutions (HEI) were female, up from 16.7% the previous academic year. This equates to 2,885 women, compared with 13,600 men.

The proportion of female academic staff in all grades has increased over the same period, from 41.9% in 2005–06 to 42.3% in 2006–07. But far more female academics worked part-time last year – 41.8% – than their male peers – 26.8%. (www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/feb/28/educationsgendergap.gender)

The reasons for male/female differences may include the fact that women do not adopt the traditional **male** linear HE career path (see Weiner, 1996; Blaxter et al., 1998; Davies, 2006) as they often enter late and are more likely to have a 'broken' career due to family responsibilities (Weiner, 1996). There is a need to balance this with the fact that some of the changes in HE in recent years have led to opportunities for women (e.g. see Morley (2003) who notes career opportunities for women in managing teaching quality procedures). Yet, this widening of career opportunities is accompanied by an increased number of insecure positions, and a reduction in career satisfaction and progression possibilities (Morley, 2003). Gendered expectations are also relevant to women's experience within the academy, not least as evidence suggests that women academics are much more likely to be challenged by students (and colleagues) especially when concerned with feminist issues (e.g. Lee, 2005; Webber, 2005). Yet, at the same time women academics suffer from expectations that they like women in general are seen as responsible for others' emotional needs where men are not (e.g. James, 1992; Perriton, 1999). In career terms I have been fortunate progressing from a temporary, fractional appointment at Staffordshire to a permanent appointment as lecturer in Sociology at Coventry (1994–2005). Whilst at Coventry I was Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Head of Subject Group, and Acting Head of Subject Group. In addition, in 2001, alongside other roles I became Deputy Director of the Centre for Social Justice, and in 2003, I became Reader

in the Sociology of Gender. In October 2005, I moved to Plymouth as Professor of Sociology and took on the role of School Research Coordinator in 2007. However, although I have achieved a position that many women in the academy do not, throughout my career I have been subject to expectations (e.g. emotional demands from students and colleagues) and treatment (e.g. verbal abuse from students and colleagues) that I have rarely seen men in similar positions experience (see Letherby and Shiels, 2001 and Ramsay and Letherby, 2006 for examples).

I am not arguing that the work that women in the academy do does not have an impact. Taking the influence of feminism on Sociology as an example Stanley (2005: 4.1) insists on the 'transformative impact of a combination of feminism, gender and women's studies, in a worldwide context and also in the United Kingdom, on the domain ideas and working practices of Sociology and most other disciplines ...' Further, Sue Wise and Liz Stanley (2003) suggest that recognition of this impact coupled with the growth of other perspectives and approaches within Sociology means that it is no longer relevant to speak of feminist thought as other to the mainstream. Despite this some still contend that despite the influences of feminism sociological theory remains heavily dominated by male thinkers and writers (Delamont, 2003; Marshall and Witz, 2004; Abbott et al., 2005) and some feminist academics, including feminist sociologists continue to argue for the need to challenge the mainstream/malestream.

The work of women (and pro-feminist men) has also had influence within the BSA. Following the 1974 conference whose theme was 'Sexual Divisions and Society' the continued work on sexual equality has led to not least:

- *Sociology* [one of the official journals of the BSA] being normally edited jointly by a man and a woman, and women becoming the majority among authors of its articles;
- Two annual conferences since 1974 having a gender theme, and those which do not have almost invariably have a gender stream;
- Female plenary speakers becoming much commoner at conferences, and the proportion of women non-plenary speakers rising (with variations by conference topic) until at half of the conferences from 1991 to 2000 they were in the majority;
- Several study groups being founded which deal with gender and women's issues;

- Women becoming the majority of executive members, and the sexes have been very evenly represented among the officers [Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer]. (Platt, 2003: 102)

Alongside my work within my own institutions and other external work I remain involved in BSA work including a stint as Chair of Equality of the Sexes and five years as Vice Chair/Chair/Vice Chair of the Council/Executive Committee. With Ross Coomber (Plymouth) I have recently taken over as co-editor of *Sociological Research Online* (www.socresonline.org.uk), one of the four BSA journals. I have also become involved in the development of the sociological life-course of others not least through speaking at various postgraduate events and organising the 2005 Postgraduate Summer School. For me then the BSA has always been an organisation to which I feel I have responsibilities whilst at the same time providing me with academic and social support and connection to my discipline.

The 'old' and the 'new'

For those women **and** men working in post-1992 institutions (as I always have) there are other concerns. With reference to the teaching/research balance the (often) higher teaching loads and the extra time devoted to student support in the 'new' universities impacts on time for personal scholarly development and research and writing. Furthermore, even though some post-1992 universities 'do well' in terms of securing external funding the highest 'new' university achievers manage to secure a much smaller percentage of the amounts that the highest pre-1992 institutions do (although, post-1992 institutions have seen the biggest increase in research funding following the 2008 RAE with a 120% rise nationally). Thus, some institutions have fewer resources to support staff and the development of a research culture can lead to extra pressures on already pressurised, overworked academics. In addition, twenty-first-century students are often unaware of just what an academic does and their socialisation into academic life may need to include reference to the 'academic job' as well as detail on what it means to be a student.

With reference to my own story though I have to say that my experience as a woman working and learning in the 'new' university sector has been a (usually) positive experience (even though I sometimes feel that just as my personal background affects my 'ability' to boast about my academic achievements¹ I think 'new' university academics in general tend to hide their lights under their respective bushels, not

least because there is still some real prejudice about work produced in this part of the sector). I have always had opportunities for personal intellectual/academic development and I owe my academic status not only to my own hard work but also to the support of others (women and men) both within the institutions I have worked at and also externally, not least through BSA networks.

Other research and writing

In a paper written in 1999 Liz Stanley described herself as a 'child of her time' suggesting that intellectual/academic socialisation effects our interests and approaches. I too am a 'child of my time' which my interests – including those in auto/biography – highlight. One of my earliest (co-authored) pieces on issues of auto/biography was presented at the first conference of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). Much of my work – the themes and focus of which are also affected by my own intellectual/academic socialisation – is grounded in the autobiographical. In addition to working and learning in higher education my other interests include the following.

Methods, methodology and epistemology: My interest in the doing of research began as an undergraduate and links to my own journey as a feminist sociologist. Thus, in addition to auto/biographical methodologies I have worked on (amongst other issues) the political and emotional aspects of the research process; accountable knowledge/the relationship between knowing and doing (or the product and the process); and the political possibilities of the work that we do (e.g. Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Letherby and Zdodrowski, 1995; Letherby, 2000, 2003, 2004; Letherby and Bywaters, 2007).

Reproductive and non/parental identity: My earliest work in this area was the previously mentioned final year undergraduate project which focused on women's experience of miscarriage (Letherby, 1993). This was followed by my doctoral research concerned to explore individuals' (predominantly women's) experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' (e.g. Letherby, 1999, 2002, 2003a; Exley and Letherby, 2001). At the time of the fieldwork stage of this project I fitted the medical definition of 'infertile' and was 'involuntarily childless'. Since then I have become a 'step-parent' which influenced a recent piece with a friend and colleague focusing on experiences of social motherhood (Kirkman and Letherby, 2008). Thus, some of my work in this area (I have also undertaken research in the area of foster caring, teenage pregnancy and young parenthood and support needs, and diabetes in

pregnancy) relates to my own autobiography and I continually reflect on the significance of my own experience to my work.

Travel mobilities: My interest in this area again began with the auto/biographical. With Gillian Reynolds (Coventry University; an undergraduate peer and one of the group of women with whom I wrote one of my first publications (Holliday et al., 1993)) I undertook a project concerned to explore the social and political aspects of rail travel within which we drew on our own experiences as well as those of a 100 plus respondents (Letherby and Reynolds, 2003; Letherby and Reynolds, 2005). Our second joint project involved editing a collection of writings (many of them auto/biographical) focusing on gender, emotion, and travel (Letherby and Reynolds, 2009). Recently I have begun to work with Jon Shaw – a human geographer from Plymouth – and our plan is to undertake a project focusing on travel, transport, and respect across the generations, which will include the keeping of auto/biographical diaries (kept by respondents and researchers).

Sociological ambitions revisited: personal opportunities and concerns

Ambivalence and ambition

At seminars and conferences focusing on academia and/or careers over the past few years (including the session within which an earlier version of this chapter was given) I have heard other academics, including sociologists, talk about the 'accidental' aspects of their career. It began to seem to me that ambition was something of a dirty word, maybe especially for women. In support of this there is writing about the concept of career and the fact that this often does not tally with women's experience (Weiner, 1996; Blaxter et al., 1998) and writing that suggests that to succeed women have to adopt or feel they have to adopt the masculine models of both career and management style (Bagilhole, 1994; Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000).

Despite, or perhaps because of, my late entry, my education and career thus far in institutions where there is often more emphasis on teaching and learning than on research and my own involvement in course development and management issues somewhere along the line it came to me that I had ambition. Although, like Breda Gray (1994) I remain ambivalent about my position in the academy there is nothing else I would rather do and I want to do my job the best that I can. Of course, events and experiences in my personal life-course impact on and are

reflected in my academic life-course. For example, if I had been able to have the biological children that I desired I may not have ever returned to education let alone be able to undertake the work that I do now. My experiences have also given me a political motivation for what I do and how I do it: including my relationships with colleagues, students, and respondents as well as my approach to teaching and research.

Discourses of ‘hard work’ and ‘too much work’ compete though with discourses of ‘ambition’ and there are times when I feel that some people (both outside and inside of the academy) are critical of my career choices – what a colleague a few years ago referred to my ‘work/work’ balance. From others, often those whose work also sometimes impinges on other aspects of their life, I experience understanding and support. Recently Pam Cotterill and I began a new research project – *Talking Dirty? Gender, ambivalence, and ambition in higher education* – with a pilot email questionnaire which we sent to 50 people (receiving 29 replies and 3 replies via snowballing from colleagues from 13 institutions (in the UK and Canada) and 19 disciplines). Through our data collection we aimed to explore the following questions:

- Do academics in the twenty-first-century academy remain ambivalent about their position or do they embrace ambition?
- Is it possible to be ambivalent and ambitious at the same time?
- How does highlighting ambivalence and/or projecting ambition (negatively or positively) affect one’s experience and status within HE?

So far our analysis suggests that our respondents are not only ambivalent about their positions in HE but also (tentatively) embrace ambition and indeed it is possible to be ambivalent and ambitious at the same time. However, it is not clear from the data collected what relationship there is between the display of ambivalence and/or ambition and academic experience and status. We plan to do more work (including qualitative interviews) in this area.

Auto/biography and critique

Like any academic aspects of my academic work have (quite rightly) been subject to debate and criticism by others. To end this chapter I reflect briefly on criticism of an area of work particularly relevant to this chapter – my auto/biographical approach. Work which draws on and celebrates the experiential can and has been described as ‘un-academic’: ‘There is the fear...that mixing the personal with the academic will discredit the work in some quarters, and that in disavowing the stance

of the objective scientist I will let down my informants' (Rose, 1983 cited by Scott, 1998: 4.6).

So, work which in any way recognises the significance of the auto/biographical is less highly valued and more open to possible attack. I have experienced attack:

- one of the first articles I wrote with Pam Cotterill (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993) within which we explored the relationship between our personal experiences and our academic interests was reviewed by Gary Day in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* who attacked our approach for being 'sickly self-indulgent' and 'grossly self-advertisement'.
- the chapter I wrote with Tina Barnes-Powell (Barnes-Powell and Letherby, 1998) focused on our own experience of gendered expectations in HE and was published in a book entitled *Speaking Our Place: Women's Perspectives on Higher Education*. Like other chapters in the book our experiences were contextually and theoretically grounded and we reflected on the significance of our experiences for others working in HE. The book received some very positive reviews but one reviewer of the book felt that 'the pieces that stood out were those that went beyond the personal'. Even worse was a reader's comment on amazon.com website:

Self-dramatising Rubbish

Why oh why do we have to have this kind of self-absorbed navel gazing and pretending to be academic research. One can only assume that the contributors are so anxious to see their own words in print that they will write anything... Dreary stuff...

- the book focusing on the social life of trains which I wrote with Gillian Reynolds (Letherby and Reynolds, 2005) was reviewed by Ian Carter for *The Journal of Transport History*: 'Letherby and Reynolds bring today's conventional feminist sociological methodology to their task by foregrounding the personal, privileging qualitative methods... over quantitative, declining to swamp respondents meanings with authorial authority. This is *refreshingly different* from much previous work in railways studies... Relentless insistence on the personal can become intrusive, of course; having watched each author expatiate in their first chapter on how she can love Britain's railways, should we really have to *suffer* lots more long quotes from 'Gayle' and 'Gillian' (as solo arias and duets) later on?' (my emphasis).

One possible interpretation of all of these criticisms is that rather than producing respectable academic outputs, I (and others who write and research similarly) am producing 'sensational journalism' in order 'to sort myself out' (Katz-Rothman, 1986: 53). But why does auto/biographical work bring such strong responses? Do the reviewers feel challenged in some ways? Temple (1997: 5.3) suggests that 'the notion of collegial accountability to a research community is problematic'. She cites the work of Eric Mykhalovskiy (1996) whose auto/biographical writing has been described as 'self-indulgent' by an academic orthodoxy which stands by its view that there is one correct way to write about research and only one audience – a (traditional) academic audience – that know how to read 'correctly' (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Temple, 1997). Auto/biographical work then is a challenge to the orthodox and perhaps attack seems the best form of defence? To date sociological auto/biography has provided me with the opportunity to critically engage with issues that are central to my own life-course and to the life-courses of others that I share personal and professional experiences with. This is both a privilege and a responsibility that I take very seriously and something that I continue to defend as vital to the sociological project.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this chapter was presented in a roundtable discussion of 'The changing life-course in British Sociology' at the 2005 BSA Conference. I was asked to contribute to this by Jennifer Platt and my thanks to her for stimulating this piece. Thanks also to the editors of the volume for helpful critical comment on an earlier draft.

Note

1. I accept that some readers might find this hard to believe given the number of self-citations in this chapter!

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10

Aspirations and Opportunities: A Career in Sociology

Michael Banton

In 1945, at the end of WWII, there was only one person in Britain, Morris Ginsberg, who held an appointment as Professor of Sociology. By 2001, according to a survey conducted by A.H. Halsey (2004: 225–32), there were 199 serving and 37 retired professors of sociology. Halsey threw his net widely, counting as sociologists persons who held posts in Social Policy, and others on the fringes of the subject, but nonetheless the figures testify to a truly remarkable expansion.

For the BSA annual conference of 2005, Jennifer Platt convened a panel of speakers to review the growth of British sociology over these sixty formative years. She was interested to consider the extent to which their careers had been the development of personal inclinations as opposed to external constraints, like the employment market and the changes in the political environment (post-war austerity and economic growth, television, Labour and Conservative governments, the founding of the Social Sciences Research Council, the Research Assessment Exercises, etc.). For this reason Professor Platt wished to look beyond the campus and take note of the participants' contributions outside the university world. I was invited to open the discussion as a representative of the first post-war generation of British sociologists. If five speakers were to fit into a two-hour session, oral addresses had to be brief, so I filled out the record with a series of endnotes.

A career

One model of the human life cycle is that set out in the Christian sacraments: baptism and communion, plus the five lesser sacraments. I was *baptised* a sociologist by Edward Shils at LSE in 1947, and *confirmed* by a notional laying on of hands at a graduation ceremony three years

later. According to Halsey's *History of Sociology in Britain*, thirteen of my generation became apostles. We were sustained in our membership among the faithful at meetings of the University Teachers section of the BSA and at other conferences (Platt, 2003). They were our *communion*. We were *ordained* as teachers of doctrine by various universities; in my case, by Edinburgh and Bristol. Sociology, like the church, is troubled by scandalous doctrine; teachers can make students do *penance* for errors and give them absolution, but, again like the church, they have only limited powers to correct the heresies of their peers. The analogies are weaker with respect to *matrimony*, though my wife has sometimes protested that I am married to her and not to sociology. Whether I will enter into the sociological hereafter depends not upon *extreme unction* but upon the possible conferment of a place in accounts of the growth of sociological knowledge.

Religious faith, and its criticism, was more important to sociologists of my generation than it has been to our successors. At the age of fourteen I was struck by the aphorism 'God made man in his own image and man has been returning the compliment ever since.' It marked the beginning of my interest in epistemology. How can we have confidence in the conceptual structure within which human knowledge is organised? I contrast this with an assumption that underlies Halsey's *History*. He believes that our generation were activists, enthusiastic for the reform of British society. I came to sociology believing that there were other societies more interesting than that of modern Britain. The problems of the welfare state seemed to me relatively parochial concerns.¹

I came because, though originally intending to specialise in economics, mine was the good fortune to have Edward Shils as a personal tutor. He got me to read *The Protestant Ethic*, then *Crime and Custom* and *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, *Le Suicide*, and *Street Corner Society*, followed by the works of the Chicago school and more Weber in translation. I was to understand Britain the better by drawing on a comparative perspective. When, before the end of the second term, I told Shils that I would opt for sociology as a special subject in the BSc (Econ.), he astonished me by saying 'Well, go register in the Anthropology Department then; you will learn more sociology there than you will in the department I am in.' Having made enquiries, I came back to tell him that, as far as I could see, a qualification in social anthropology pointed only to a career in the Colonial Service, but I could, within special subject sociology, follow a course in the Anthropology Department leading to one exam paper called Ethnology. I asked 'Would that do, Sir?' He replied 'I suppose so.'² Shils also recommended me to listen to Karl Popper because

his was 'probably the most interesting teaching in the School at present', and I never received better advice. Popper, even more than my other teachers, conveyed the inspiring conception of an academic career as devoted to the advancement of learning. So, though I graduated only in the lower division of the Second Class, I persisted in my hopes of an academic career and at the end of the following October secured a research assistantship in the Department of Social Anthropology in the University of Edinburgh that was funded by the Noel Buxton Trust. I displaced Erving Goffman from the lowest rung of the departmental ladder. Until 1955, by which time I had a wife and two children to think of, I had no job security. Though salaries were then very poor, it was a great relief when, within the University's Social Sciences Research Centre, a new lectureship in social anthropology was established and I was appointed to it.

My first three books, *The Coloured Quarter* (1955), *West African City* (1957), and *White and Coloured* (1959), were all derived from research inspired by my head of department, Kenneth Little, though they were very much in line with my own interests. The latter two were aided by grants that he secured from the Nuffield Foundation. The research that led to my next book, *The Policeman in the Community*, sprang from my own ideas, greatly helped by a year as a visiting professor in political science at MIT.³ When the expansion of the mid-1960s began, I was well placed.

In the late 1960s, as Halsey (2004: 118) testifies, sociology and sociologists became identified with disruption and dissent. From 1965, my main concern was with the establishment of a new Sociology department in the University of Bristol. When, a little later, a professor of dental surgery remarked to me that 'your subject has grown a lot', I responded 'No, it has been expanded, and that is not the same thing'. Sociology was sinned against as well as sinning. Universities advertised courses before they had suitable staff to teach them. It was also an era of acute struggle between warring conceptions of what the subject should be, a time when there were many accusations of heresy, and one in which it became easier to understand that Socrates should have been forced to drink hemlock for corrupting the young.⁴

In January 1970, I was appointed Director of the Social Sciences Research Council Research Unit on Ethnic Relations at Bristol on a part-time (two-fifths) basis, and continued in this post until July 1978 (longer than any of my full-time successors). The Unit was multidisciplinary, established to demonstrate that in this field there were problems of theoretical as well as practical interest to all the social sciences. Such

interest did grow, more because of trends outside the universities than because of our efforts.⁵ My time with the Unit intensified my interest in this field and helped me formulate my own theory, one that I would now call an application of the theory of collective action. I also found that I did not enjoy being responsible for other people's research. Nor would I have wanted to become a Vice-Chancellor.

Looking back, I see my interest in human rights, and in racial discrimination in particular, as the development of an orientation formed before leaving school and shaped by the doctrines I studied at LSE. The School gave me a conception of sociology as a social science, sharing with the other social sciences common theories, so that any boundaries between the various disciplines are matters of convenience. Yet the claim that an interest in human rights runs right through my career is a retrospective view. I was an unsuccessful candidate for the chair of sociology at Reading in 1964. That university is close to the police staff college at Bramshill, so had I gone to Reading I might well have developed my interest in police studies and my academic life would have taken a different direction.⁶ Though there was continuity in my efforts, their development was helped by my being in the right places at the right times. That must partly explain why I was invited to engage in several forms of public service,⁷ including appointment to two Royal Commissions: one at home and one colonial.⁸ Prior to my involvement with the United Nations from 1986, like other British sociologists, I had no conception of human rights.⁹ My service on the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination gave me an opportunity to learn about them and to contribute a sociological perspective to some questions of international law.¹⁰ It opened a path to my main career distinction, for I have so far been the only UK national elected to chair a UN human rights treaty body. I cannot estimate the importance of the opportunities that have come my way relative to my personal intellectual development; the two have interacted. For this reason I am doubtful if anything can be learned about the future of British sociological careers from my life-course.

Retirement is a step down but not a terminus. It has enabled me to return to epistemological questions and to argue that the study of ethnic relations has to develop technical concepts to replace ordinary language concepts like those of race and ethnicity. The biochemist, whose discovery of vitamins earned a Nobel Prize, Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, reportedly said that in his laboratory he would sooner have a first-class man with a second-class idea than a second-class man with a first-class idea. I have been a second-class man with the first-class ideas of another

person, Karl Popper. When others come to review my career they may focus on the way I gained prominence by writing about 'race relations' and then turned right round to look for ways to supersede that concept.¹¹ Very few of us will enter into the sociological hereafter. My chances of doing so may depend upon others' evaluation of the extent to which I influenced later generations' conceptions of the field of ethnic and racial studies. That is a project on which I am still working.

Notes

1. From 1941 (the year in which I became fifteen), it was clear that, provided Britain did not lose the war, I would be joining the armed forces when I left King Edward's School, Birmingham. There I studied Classics up to what is currently 'O' level. The task of writing an essay comparing education in Athens and Sparta extended the ideas of cultural variation I had obtained from my reading and from the Scout movement. If, as small boys, we were to play Cowboys and Indians, I preferred to be an Indian. Indians had distinctive cultures and lived in harmony with their environment. From school I entered a naval officer selection scheme that took me for two terms to the University of Glasgow. To reduce the class bias in their officer ranks all three services had instituted schemes that began with a wide range of entrants but were highly selective. Relatively few entrants were eventually commissioned. I was one, though by this time the war was over and my active service was as a navigating officer in a warship sweeping minefields in the North Sea and off the Irish coast. With a view to employment in commerce, I had started a correspondence course leading to a qualification of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries when there came a signal from the Admiralty indicating that there would be scholarships for people like me to go to university. This was a welcome surprise. I assumed that I would have to seek employment in industry or commerce and that a qualification in economics would help. Having written to two Oxford colleges only to hear that they were struggling to find places for their own former students, I applied to the London School of Economics on the assumption that an institution with such a name ought to be a good place to study economics.
2. I believe Shils's comment on his department had some justification in that Ginsberg's conception of sociology had grown out of nineteenth-century philosophies of history; it placed non-European societies in a framework of social evolution and closed off any interest in other questions arising from study of them. Ethnology was one of the three sociology papers in my nine-paper finals examination. The others were three papers in economics, one in Comparative Social Institutions, one in Scientific Method, and one essay paper. The BSc (Econ.) was for me a qualification in social science rather than in one or more particular social sciences.
3. The possibility of extending my police research to the United States came about because of an invitation to teach in the Political Science section at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I had participated in a conference in Chicago about economic development and cultural change in 1959 that had

drawn attention to my West African research. Funds were available because an MIT alumnus named Sloan had invented a missile propellant and had money to give away. His wife, Ruth Sloan, had worked on the Africa desk of the US Information Service. The two benefactors came to Cambridge having told Harvard and MIT that they were prepared to endow chairs in African Studies and Chemical Engineering. The universities assumed that Harvard would get the former and MIT the latter, but they were wrong. So MIT found itself with an African chair at a time when there were hardly any Africanists in the United States. They decided to fill the post on a temporary basis and invited me. I used the opportunity to teach two courses in African studies. In my spare time I continued my study of the police. My year in the United States was a very valuable stimulus but it also taught me that Edinburgh had good points I had not appreciated sufficiently.

4. Universities competed with one another for the services of graduates qualified to teach sociology. I remember that one man to whom we offered a research post had simultaneous offers from Kent of an assistant lectureship and from Hull of a lectureship. Graduates able to teach the quantitative aspects of sociology were almost impossible to find. In 1968, Bristol students were very conscious of their privilege in having a new and large building for the Students' Union. They wished to make Union membership available to those registered as students at other institutions of higher education in the city, which required changes to the Union's constitution. While the necessary amendments were being drafted, still within the area for which the Union was itself responsible, some students decided that the delay was the fault of the Vice-Chancellor and occupied the main administrative building. The spirit of 1968 was maintained for some years by students in sociology who argued for plebiscitary democracy, examination by continuous assessment, and for a conception of sociology as a guide to political action that drew upon a Marxist philosophy of history.
5. Our record of publication was disappointing, but many of our staff moved on to academic posts and at least six of them have contributed significantly to the advancement of ethnic and racial studies (Roger Ballard, Avtar Brah, Robert Miles, Anne-Marie Phizacklea, Sandra Wallman, and Peter Weinreich).
6. Had I taken employment outside Britain (always a possibility), my career might have been even more different.
7. I served for thirty years as a magistrate on the Bristol bench. With the increased pressures in universities it would now be extremely difficult for anyone with professorial responsibilities to accept appointment as a JP.
8. The Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure sponsored several studies of a socio-scientific character and based some of its recommendations on their findings. As a member of the Royal Commission on Civil Disorders in Bermuda, I was the principal architect of a report that could be considered an exercise in applied sociology. In working on racial discrimination I have tried to synthesise the relevant fields of law and sociology.
9. Among sociologists in the generation preceding mine, my teacher Morris Ginsberg was the most alert to the recognition of human rights. In *On Justice in Society* (1965) he stressed 'the enormous importance of the growth of legality, the emergence of the notion that persons are under the rule of law and not of men', yet he failed to see the significance of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights or to mention the process by which it was being given legal effect.

10. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has to advise on whether states have fulfilled the treaty obligations they accepted by ratifying the Convention of that name. Prior to 1995 the obligation to prevent racial segregation had been interpreted as an obligation binding the actions of governments. I was able to get it changed to require action against all forms of segregation, however caused.
11. Much current writing about ethnic and racial relations utilises ordinary language concepts and could be assigned to the study of social policy as distinct from sociology. The study of social policy is tied to the institutions of states and to those that originate in treaties between states. The growth of sociological knowledge depends upon the discovery or creation of concepts of a more general character that make possible transnational and transcultural explanations of social phenomena. If I could have my time over again, I would wish to go back to 1970 with my current ideas about the study of ethnic preferences and ethnic alignment and have the directorship of a research unit free to develop them.

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11

Cracking the Ivory Tower: Proposing ‘an Interpretive Public Sociology’

Max Farrar

We shall set to work and meet ‘the demands of the day’, in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibres of his very life.

Max Weber (1918/1991)

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

Karl Marx (1845/1968)

When I arrived at Leeds University (UK) in October 1968 to study sociology, the whole campus seemed to have been painted with slogans from the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation. Seeing this, and entering its magnificent Brotherton Library, made me think I was entering a slice of heaven. In 1969, when Alan Dawe (1979) finished his lecture with Max Weber’s words quoted above, I began to feel it was worthwhile doing sociology. I read the quote (above) from Karl Marx in 1970, and I began to think that radical, politically engaged sociology might be my vocation. But, by 1974, after two years of a PhD thesis, I was convinced that universities were ivory towers, and that the Marxist intellectuals were part of the problem, not the solution (Louis Althusser (1969) was becoming hegemonic among the university Marxists). In the late 1980s, I needed a proper job and started teaching ‘community education’ part-time at Leeds Polytechnic. In the early 1990s, I turned again towards sociology. Reading Zygmunt Bauman and Stuart Hall, I began to think there might be some point in the discipline after all. This chapter reflects

on aspects of the journey I made. Through an examination of Bauman's work on intellectuals (1987) and Burawoy's argument for 'public sociology' (2005), it offers support for those who work to open the space within universities for a sociology which is passionate about changing the world in favour of its oppressed and exploited peoples. For reasons that are only beginning to become clear to me, since my early teens I have felt enraged by exploitation and oppression, particularly racism, which is why Weber's metaphor of the demon clutching the threads of my life appealed so strongly. I still search for an 'enraged'/'engaged' sociology which can help translate my turbulent emotions into practical action for change, to meet the demands of the day.

What is to be done?

Do sociology students today read V.I. Lenin's *What is to be Done?* In expecting the answer 'No', or 'Very few', I am setting up a contrast with sociology students of my generation. For some of us, but not many, it was required reading in the early 1970s as we struggled simultaneously to figure out what was to be done in the wider political world *and* within the academy. While Lenin's solution – to join the revolutionary vanguard party – contradicted my left-libertarian ideology, his conviction that the world was to be changed by practical, political action influenced me strongly and was part of my reason for abandoning academic sociology in 1974. This highly politicised context in which my generation studied sociology no longer exists. Thus the conjuncture¹ of that time needs outlining if my meanderings inside and outside of the academy are to make any sense. There was a particularly unstable 'balance of forces' among the key political agents at the time. 'Youth' was one of the key elements. We had been called into play not simply by the 1960s expansion of Higher Education (several new universities and polytechnics were established) but the emergence of masses of young workers with relatively large amounts of disposable income and the time to enjoy it. But there were major contradictions among us. Some of us adopted radical lifestyles (representing ourselves as Hippies), some chose radical political practice (often looking like Hippies), some entered 'youth culture' as Mods, Rockers, Skins, or Rude Boys (Hall and Jefferson (1975/1991) remains the most useful analysis of youth culture in this period). Most relevant to this chapter are the university students, among whom there were many contradictory elements. Despite media portraits of universities as full of revolting students, in my sociology first year of about 45 students at Leeds in 1968,² perhaps five of us were

explicitly interested in politics, and I was the only self-declared revolutionary. When, in 1969, I went to canvass the engineering students as the 'agent' for a South Asian revolutionary student who was a candidate for a sabbatical post in the Union we were subjected to a barrage of paper missiles and continuous shouting throughout the whole of the hustling. Nevertheless, there was a milieu which nourished radical intellectual and political work for many more of us than we see in student unions today. I was amazed walking into the Leeds University Students' Union building in 1968. Not simply its bar, its meeting rooms, its large hall for Union meetings, film shows, and theatre performances but the fact that it was 'ours' – managed and controlled by the Union, without interference from the staff. This doesn't surprise anyone today, when the 'independence' of youth is taken for granted. Every Monday morning ten or more tables would be set out in the Union's entrance at which student representatives from political factions, including Communist, Labour, Liberal, Conservative, and the emerging far left (only the Anarchists, International Socialists, and the Socialist Labour League, at that point) set out their stalls. Each would produce its own thoughts for that week (personally typed and printed on foolscap paper on a duplicator), along with the publications of its favoured party. They cost one penny each and I collected them all. But even then it was evident that this wasn't a 'mass activity'. While the engineers could mobilise themselves once a year into active hostility to the politicians, most students were indifferent to our frantic activity. Union meetings attracted less than 50 people, although two to three hundred students might attend if there was a really controversial issue. (Note that these meetings took place every week – unthinkable nowadays.) There were 6576 students enrolled at Leeds in 1965, and 8475 in 1969 (Dixon, 2009). The sit-in in May 1968 (the president of the Union was Jack Straw, currently a senior minister in the New Labour Government) attracted much publicity, and about 1000 signed the list of people who associated themselves with the cause. About 600–800 actually took part, according to John Quail (1978), a charismatic mature student who was among the most militant of us in those days (Quail, 2009). At perhaps 10 per cent of the student population, this will seem a high rate of involvement by twenty-first-century standards, but one student in ten of the student population is really rather small. Only about 30 people turned up to the pub where the founding meeting of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF) was being held, so far as I recall. I remember John Quail telling me he had painted the university red almost single handed, and there was no agreement on what the RSSF would do, so it failed to form. He

estimates that there were only about 50 actual members of the various far left groups.³ Why were we not at all spirited?

There was another conjunctural element that was stopping us from drawing pessimistic conclusions from these dismal numbers. Across the Western world and in the Southern hemisphere the movements against the dominant capitalist order were highly visible and seemingly successful. It was this which actually shifted the balance of forces in favour of the radicals; and however small were the actual numbers of students involved in the United Kingdom it was this momentum which gave us our political self-confidence. A crucial part of this international movement was stimulated by the successful effort to end white domination. A brief outline of this is relevant because this shaped my own political and intellectual activity for the next 40 years. The successful ousting of the British in India in 1948 was followed by the British scramble to leave Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. (My childhood spectre of Kenya's 'Mau Mau' army haunted me until I transformed it into an inspiring liberation movement during my late teens.) Along with the steady emergence of independent Caribbean states from 1962 onwards, these anti-colonial movements all spoke to the power of the people to throw off their oppressors. Paradoxically, the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 in South Africa had the macabre, positive effect of highlighting the repugnant concept of apartheid, and Nelson Mandela's imprisonment in 1962 after a show trial turned him, and the African National Congress (ANC), into a beacon for anti-racists everywhere. While the notion of an 'anti-racist' probably did not emerge until the mid-1970s, an anti-racist movement was forming itself in the United Kingdom from the mid-1960s, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the ANC in South Africa. The Institute of Race Relations (founded in 1958), the Anti-Apartheid movement (it took that name in 1960, after Sharpeville, but had been in existence for eight months previously), and the Campaign against Racial Discrimination (founded in January 1965) were among the institutions which provided both the intellectual foundations and the practical campaigns around which anti-racists began to form themselves into a movement. Reading James Baldwin's novels and essays in the mid-1960s cemented my commitment to this international movement. (*Giovanni's Room* (Baldwin, 1956) also started me thinking about what would later be called sexual politics.)

Other radicals coalesced around the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (founded in 1957), and the sexual allure of newspaper photos of women marching on Aldermaston in ski pants and duffle coats, with a Penguin book in their pocket, has to be another reason

why I was drawn to the left in my teens. The sit-down protests of committee of 100 (set up in 1960 with Bertrand Russell as its most famous supporter) put direct action at the front of the news. Perhaps the biggest recruiter for the radical cause towards the end of the 1960s was the American government's war on communism in Vietnam. A mass movement emerged in the United States from 1965 onwards because large numbers of young, middle-class whites were being drafted into the army (the number drafted was doubled to 35,000 per month in July 1965, and it became a crime to burn your draft card). Their demonstrations inspired huge sympathy marches across France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in 1968. In 1968, the French students led such huge riots, university occupations, and demonstrations that, when workers occupied their factories in parallel protests, it seemed that the government might fall. The intense pleasure I felt marching through London against the US government in October 1968 behind a banner urging us to 'Storm the Reality Studio – Retake the Universe' is easy to recall. Anarchist student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit had been called 'foreign scum' when expelled from France in May 1968. Joining in the mass chant 'We are all foreign scum' as we marched down Aldwych in support of the Vietcong seemed the perfect way to unite our anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics. It was obvious, then, that 'we' were going to win. It is sobering, today, to see that the BBC estimated there were only 25,000 of us.

There is no space here to attempt a full conjunctural analysis. It is important also to note that, *contra* Althusser's notion that there is a 'science' of politics, my account of the 'conjuncture' is one which reflects my own situation – these are the elements which had the most impact on me, as a young person striving to be radical. The 'objective conditions' are always filtered through our own subjectivities, however earnestly academics claim to side-step their subjective dispositions. But Marxism properly directs us always to examine the condition of international capital. In the late 1960s, capitalism's internal contradictions seemed to unbalance the power of the class that aims to manage capital. One element of this destabilisation is summarised in Prime Minister Macmillan's oft-quoted statement in 1957: 'Most of our people have never had it so good.' By the end of the 1950s and for most of the 1960s capitalism in northern Europe and the United States was delivering higher real wages and the unprecedented phenomenon of 'full employment'. This had contradictory effects in the early 1970s. Those of us influenced by the effort to unify Marxist and Freudian thought (following Reich, Marcuse, and Fromm) saw that the rampant consumerism

resulting from increasing real wages was encouraging fantasy and mystification, but it was also generating the sense of optimism and energy that might (somehow) be turned in an anti-capitalist direction. This seemingly profitable and expanding economy also contributed to the confidence of the unions in calling its members out on strike for higher wages and better conditions – and the youthful, largely middle-class far left, fantasising about Paris in 1968, joined every trade union demonstration it could get into. When the Conservative government led by Edward Heath fell in 1974 after concerted trade union pressure over the previous year, we felt sure that the balance of forces had shifted decisively in our favour.

What is a sociologist to do?

That was the context in which I decided to turn my back on academic life. For the previous two years, while I had a grant to pursue a PhD, I had written nothing academic. Instead, I had written hundreds, maybe thousands of words for the movements. Between 1972 and 1975, I wrote leaflets, a pamphlet (denouncing the council's regeneration programme for the multi-ethnic inner city area of Leeds called Chapeltown, where I lived), and minutes of meetings of the Chapeltown Community Association. Mainly, I wrote countless stories for *Chapeltown News*, the 'community newspaper', usually produced (with a typewriter, Lettraset, Cowgum, and set-square) around the kitchen table of our communal home. From 1975 to the early 1980s, I devoted most of my writing skills, limited as they were, to *Big Flame*, a tiny revolutionary socialist organisation with libertarian/CLR Jamesian/autonomist tendencies. In the mid-1980s I thought, and read, and sometimes wrote for the independent magazine *Emergency*, joining an editorial group which included Mark Ainley, Pete Ayrton, Paul Gilroy, Malcolm Imrie, Sarah Martin, Enrico Palandri, and Vron Ware, some of whom had been in *Big Flame*. Throughout, I read novels, leftist tracts, and political theory – much of which, particularly the novels, I now realise was sociological in the best sense of the word. All of this reading was linked to my search for effective political strategy, and none of it was 'academic' in the ivory tower sense of the word.

Thinking back on what for a young person is a long time (1968–1988) is a chastening experience. 'Reading' my own efforts through the writing of Michael Burawoy (2005) and Zygmunt Bauman (1987) throws me back to the dilemmas which haunted my earliest days at Leeds University and which remain unresolved. How could I be sure that the path I was travelling down had firm foundations? As an undergraduate,

the problem seemed to be the one called 'relativism'. Instead of sociology (which I thought I had enrolled for) we were taught social history and social anthropology in our first year (we had to combine sociology with two other subjects – in my case, politics and economics). What was valuable for me in studying 'primitive' cultures was recognising that these were orderly social entities whose values and processes were as worthy of admiration as those of 'civilised' societies. It was easy to dismiss the implicit colonial assumptions in anthropology in this period. What was harder to deal with, as my reading developed in the second year, was the recognition that Marxism might not be immune to this type of thinking: its assumption that the move from 'barbarism', through feudalism, to capitalism and ultimately to communism was unquestionably 'progressive'. Thus, as I began to admire 'primitive cultures' (with their obvious parallels to the new Hippy agrarian communes in the United States I was hearing about), the world view summarised in Marx and Engels's epithet 'the idiocy of rural life' began to look like a leftist version of the same old imperialist story.⁴

Bauman

Using Bauman's terms (which I didn't encounter until 1989), people like me who were searching for a new politics were beginning to critique the 'legislative' claims of the Marxist left. In Bauman's withering analysis, modernity's intellectuals saw Reason and Interest as battering rams for the crushing of passion; as stepping stones for the regulation initially of the (increasingly prolific and rampant) poor, and then of society as a whole. Marx's epithet quoted at the start of this chapter turns out to be neither true nor radical. All the philosophers of this period were united in 'their passionate urge to remake: to remake everything – individuals, their needs and desires, their thoughts, their actions and interactions, the laws that set a frame for such interactions, those who set the laws, society itself' (Bauman, 1987: 101). Just like Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Mao, as it turned out. As the ultimate arbiters of Reason and appointed guides to government, intellectuals in the modern period are well described by Bauman as 'legislators'. In the postmodern period, however, the philosophical and sociological assumptions of the earlier period are exposed. 'Modernity's self-confidence' was based on utter conviction that its theoretical foundations are absolutely true:

[Modernity's] conviction of its own superiority over alternative forms of life, seen as historically or logically 'primitive'; and its belief that

its pragmatic advantage over pre-modern societies and cultures, far from being a historic coincidence, can be shown to have objective, absolute foundations and universal validity. (Bauman, 1987: 119)

Set out like this, these convictions should send a shudder down the spine of anyone who had engaged with the radical movements of the past 50 years. Racism turns out to be not the result of inhumane individual action or an illiberal state policy but is embedded in an episteme – a structure of knowledge – which even the left intellectuals had, until recently, failed to challenge. Thus any assumption of the ‘absolute foundations and universal validity’ of our politics is called into question. According to Bauman, the role of the intellectual in the postmodern world is that of ‘interpreter’. Not only has intellectual certainty collapsed – ‘relativity of knowledge... is a lasting feature of the world’ – but no authority figures need us any more: ‘[t]here is no would-be enlightened despot seeking the counsel of philosophers’ (1987: 148). The role of the intellectual-as-interpreter thus

consists of translating statements, made within one communally based tradition, so that they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition... [the interpreter aims at] facilitating communication between autonomous (sovereign) participants... preventing the distortion of meaning. (Bauman, 1987: 5)

This is a position with which good teachers are thoroughly comfortable: clearly summarising different positions, helping students think through their implications, facilitating communication between people with different intellectual and cultural traditions (particularly important in ethnically diverse classrooms in cosmopolitan universities), and refraining from imposing a particular interpretation. It is a conclusion which will disturb only those few intellectuals who still yearn for the ear of government. Thus, most ivory-tower sociologists can adopt Bauman’s analysis quite easily (though of course, to ensure that they earn their salaries, they must ‘critique’ him from as many angles as possible).⁵ But his conclusion is awkward for those of us who want to engage in radical politics, since our politics is normally based on conviction that both our means and ends are demonstrably correct.

Bauman does not tackle this problem directly in the 1987 book. Casual readers might conclude that his scathing remarks on the post-Enlightenment intellectual project of controlling the poor and his dissection of the imperialist assumptions in the modern episteme

imply contempt even for the intellectual legislators of the left. But, intellectually and personally, Bauman is much-more complex than this. As a young man he was a proud member of the Polish Workers' Party, and though his Marxism had 'slipped' by the time he got a post at the University of Warsaw (Beilharz, 2000: 2) he still considers himself 'very much a Marxist when it comes to the discussion of the formation and mechanism of capitalist society' (Farrar and Wright, 1990: 57). At Warsaw University he was among those developing a 'humanistic Marxism' and 'he still calls himself a socialist, indeed he maintains that 'never has the world needed socialism more than now' (Bunting, 2003). A glance at the titles of some of his books over the past decade indicates his political commitments: *Globalization: The Human Consequences*; *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*; *In Search of Politics*; *Wasted Lives – Modernity and its Outcasts*; *Liquid Fear*. Analytically, however, he does not accept Marxism as a valid 'theory of human society' (Farrar and Wright, 1990: 57) and his epistemology has something in common with Foucault, another renegade from Marxism who remained left-wing politically. However, Bauman's indictment of the human consequences of capitalist modernity and its liquefaction in the current period is utterly remorseless and will be endorsed by open-minded Marxists. Nor is it correct to position Bauman as a pessimist (as the sub-editors did in the interview with Madelaine Bunting). As he said to Ms Bunting: 'Why do I write books? Why do I think? Why should I be passionate? Because things could be different. [My role] is to alert people to the dangers, to do something.' He then referred to Emmanuel Lévinas's dictum: 'Don't ever console yourself that you have done everything that you could, because it is not true' (Bunting, 2003).

Nevertheless, he argues that we live in a time of 'permanent and incurable uncertainty' (Bauman, 1987: 120) and that intellectuals are reduced to the role of interpreters (who may be so detached that they do not even join with Alvin Gouldner in 'shopping for an historical agent' (1987: 177)). So where is the foundation for his critical practice? It lies in his analysis of social values. This begins in *Legislators and Interpreters* with the argument that modernity's 'hierarchy of cultural values has crumbled, and the most conspicuous features of Western culture today is absence of grounds on which authoritative judgements of value can be made' (1987: 156). Later, he goes further in arguing that there is no longer any authoritative basis for ethics, stating that 'morality is *not universalizable*' (Bauman, 1993: 12). Reversing all those theories that have attempted to deduce ethics, morals, and values from social facts, Bauman argues that 'there is no self before the moral self,

morality being the ultimate, non-determined presence; indeed, an act of creation *ex nihilo*' (1993: 13). Adopting Emmanuel Lévinas's notion that the first ethic is 'Being *for* the Other', paradoxically, Bauman offers a foundation for values in our new, non-foundational world. He argues that ethics, and moral behaviour, are generated inside the self. Ethics therefore require no social foundations. Ethical behaviour does not rest on a reciprocal relationship with another person: 'I am for the Other whether the Other is for me or not' (Bauman, 1993: 50).

In his next book, Bauman (1995) provides a more sociological analysis on the same lines, again using Lévinas's ethic of 'Being *for* the Other'. Here, the Self/Other relationship is cast, as it is in social life, as emotionally charged, from which good or evil actions are equally likely to ensue. The emotional nature of this encounter is important because it makes indifference impossible, it provokes openness and dialogue, and it 'extricates the Other from the world of convention' requiring new rules to be created specific to that encounter (1995: 62). The value implications of this analysis are spelled out: 'Being tied to the Other by emotion means... that I am responsible for her/him, and most of all for what my action/inaction may do to her/him' (ibid: 63). But the content of the action remains to be decided – each of us has to make our own decision (with no 'legislators' telling us what is right): 'I am also responsible for reforging the existential responsibility into a practical one, for filling it with the content it lacks', and Bauman is clear that this is 'at bottom a *power relationship*' which means (echoing Sartre) that 'responsibility is synonymical with *freedom*' (ibid: 64, italics as original). The problem of making our own choices is inescapable, Bauman argues:

Once it has been agreed that there are alternative values, the acceptability of one set of values does not necessarily preclude the acceptability of another – it is now a question of people being aware of these choices and ultimately bearing responsibility for the choices that are made. (Farrar and Wright, 1990: 55)

In this way he restores the possibility for political action in postmodern society (or, as he will put it later, in 'liquid modernity'). Political action, following Bauman's sociology, will be based on value choices we make which have no ultimately assured philosophical foundations, though we may base our choices on our reading of intellectuals' (and others') arguments. We follow certain views (which we now recognise to be interpretations) not because the arguments are 'true', but because

of the values their work exhibit (perhaps because of their commitment to an ethic of 'Being *for* the Other'). Their values chime with our own self-construction; their words touch the fibres of our being. These freely chosen values, forever provisional and endlessly negotiated, guide the choices we go on to make about which are the most important issues of the day and the methods we adopt, as we live through, and struggle to change, an epoch of anxiety in which 'all that solid melts to air'. (Bauman admires Marshall Berman's book (1983) which takes Marx's epithet as its title.)

Burawoy

Michael Burawoy (2005) offers a simpler answer to the question 'what is a sociologist to do?' He argues that we should engage in 'public sociology'. In an accomplished overview of sociology's history (mainly in the United States), he sets out four types of sociology: policy, professional, critical, and public. He is a self-declared Marxist, whose 'main focus', he says, has been to shift sociology 'in a critical direction' by recovering 'visions from below which might inform alternatives in the future' (Byles, 2001). (It might be evidence of a leftward shift in American sociology that he became President of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2004 and that the ASA passed a motion critical of the US government's decision to invade Iraq.) Public sociology, he argues, is in an alliance with critical sociology and is respectful of policy and professional sociology. The strain of holding these types together is summarised in his assertion that all four sociologies are in 'antagonistic interdependence' (Burawoy, 2005: 4). Most academic sociologists who call themselves radical subscribe to critical sociology, summarised by Burawoy as one which 'examine[s] the foundations – both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive – of the research programs of professional sociology' (2005: 10). In his laudable effort to include all within his fold, Burawoy does not describe critical sociology as ivory-tower sociology, but I would. His purpose is to push sociology, and sociologists, towards public sociology, and thus there is an implied criticism of the critical school, since public sociology is defined by its commitment to

embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fiber. Herein lies the promise and challenge of public sociology. (Burawoy, 2005: 5)

Unlike policy sociology, which is 'in service of a goal defined by a client', public sociology 'strikes up a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other' (Burawoy, 2005: 9). Thus, 'the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways' (2005: 5). Burawoy's commitment to the radical agenda is quite explicit. In his introduction he suggests that 'sociology [has a] particular investment in the defense of civil society, itself beleaguered by the encroachment of markets and states' (ibid: 5). Towards the end of his address he argues that

Through this period [i.e. since the early 1970s] civil society has been colonized and co-opted by markets and states. Still, opposition to these twin forces comes, if its [sic] comes at all, from civil society, understood in its local, national and transnational expressions. In this sense sociology's affiliation with civil society, that is public sociology, represents the interests of humanity – interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny. (Burawoy, 2005: 24)

Here, as elsewhere in his discussion, there is an elision between 'sociology' and 'public sociology' (as in 'sociology's affiliation with civil society, that is public sociology'). In my reading of most sociological texts, and in my experience in and out of the academy, sociology does not effectively defend civil society. 'Critical sociology' effectively exposes the depredations of capitalism, both in theory and in practice, but it never allies itself to political practice. Thus I support an argument for an explicitly radical 'public sociology' which does 'represent the interests of humanity' against 'state despotism and market tyranny', since it requires an active, dialogic engagement with 'multiple publics'. Such engagement must result in sociologists getting their hands dirty.

Were we to do this, we should keep Bauman very much in mind. There might otherwise be an urge for us to try and return to the legislative role asserted by our forebears. Bauman's argument that sociologists have been cast by the epistemological shifts of post/late/liquid modernity into the role of interpreters should perhaps become a normative, as well as an analytical statement. A properly dialogic public sociology would only be politically effective if sociologists adopt the interpretive stance as their value position, at least while they do their work as sociologists. The classic 'role' problem immediately arises however, since 'being a sociologist' is just one among many roles which we play. (I am

not suggesting 'being a sociologist' is the identity position of public sociologists, though it might be one of our identifications.) In engaging with the public on the demands of the day we are bound to find our roles as 'political activists' being called into play. In liquid modernity we are increasingly aware of our split lives and uncertain positions, and this confusion should be embraced by public sociologists. We might simultaneously offer interpretations and translations and make tentative recommendations for a course of action, but we desist from any 'legislative' stance.

It is useful to compare this suggestion with Antonio Gramsci's notion of the 'organic intellectual', which might seem to be the role for public sociologists to adopt. Gramsci wrote that 'the mode of being of the new [organic] intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence...but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator' (Burke, 1999/2005 citing Gramsci 1971: 10). To see the implications of this emphasis on constructing, organising, and persuading, it is instructive to look at the work of Saul Alinsky, currently restored to prominence by Barack Obama. Alinsky was committed to the creation of people's organisations and it has been argued that he was influenced by Gramsci. Alinsky wrote (in 1946)

The building of a People's Organization can be done only by the people themselves. The only way that people can express themselves is through their leaders. By *their* leaders we mean those persons whom the local people define and look up to as leaders. (Alinsky, 1946/1989: 65)

Alinsky's local leaders could be understood as 'organic intellectuals'. In the 1946 book, Alinsky writes that these 'natural leaders' need to be supported and developed by 'the organiser' but later he was much more didactic. After the resurgence of his ideas and methods during the American 'War on Poverty' in the 1960s (Moynihan, 1970), he wrote

The building of many mass power organizations to merge into a national popular power force cannot come without many organizers. Since organizations are created, in large part, by the organizer, we must find out what creates the organizer. This has been the major problem of my years of organizational experience: the finding of potential organizers and their *training*. (Alinsky, 1971/1989: 63, added emphasis)

The organiser is trained, and then s/he trains the 'natural leaders'. For Alinsky, there is no self-doubt about what constitutes the truth, nor about his role as legislator for the people. Uncertainty, doubt and the perilous process of seeking a foundation for value choices are not to be found in Alinsky – and nor do they appear in Burawoy's magisterial sweep through sociology. Yet Alinsky's influence has stretched right through to the present day. Barack Obama, President of the United States, was partially formed in an Alinsky-inspired organisation. His detailed account of his work in Chicago's South Side with the Developing Communities Project is instructive (Obama, 1995/2007: 133–295). While there is a sub-text of distaste for Marty, the Alinsky-tutored man who recruited him, and a recognition of how distant Marty was, intellectually and personally, from the low-income black people he was trying to organise, Obama never offers any critique of the model which Alinsky advocated. Nor of its underlying assumption: that there is a cadre possessed of the correct ideas which will train local people in how to make change. While Obama's account of his work in Chicago's South Side is replete with his own learning process, through endless dialogue with all types of people, Alinsky's is not. Marty told Obama to 'interview' people before 'organising' them, but it is clear that the idea is simply to get to know what the key issues in the neighbourhood are and who has the capacity to lead. In contrast, Obama actually got to know the people, eventually establishing close relationships with many of them, which is why he was so successful. But it is clear from his career that Obama was just as committed as Alinsky to leadership, in his case leadership from the top, based on a network of supporters at the bottom. (Interestingly, in his autobiography, Obama (1995/2007) reveals all kinds of doubts and self-questioning, including those inspired by his encounter with an older black man who knew and worked with one of the most politically creative of all black Americans, Richard Wright. Doubt was presumably cast out when he took high office.)

In contrast to the legislative intellectuals inside or outside the ivory tower, the 'interpretive public sociologist' respectfully departs from Gramsci and Alinsky. S/he becomes embedded in communities and workplaces and should become organic to those social institutions. S/he provides her or his sociological skills of exposition and translation when the dialogue that is taking place requires them. S/he is not there to train anyone. S/he translates her or his interpretive intellectual role into a horizontal political role if and when s/he joins the group in public action in pursuit of its agreed-upon goals. (By 'horizontal' I refer to the dispute in the new social movements between the 'verticals' and

the 'horizontal', where the verticals stand for authoritative leadership (intellectuals playing the role of legislators) and the horizontal sit for action based on consensual decision-making by the whole group.) The interpretative public sociologist probably has some difficulty in separating her roles as 'sociologist' and 'citizen' and always makes it clear that her expertise is provisional and subject to discussion, so that when engaging in action as a citizen there is no question of her claiming any particular leadership status.

Conclusion: an example, and a caution

If we choose values which align us with the radicals who are enraged by capitalism's remorseless drive for profit at the expense of the well-being of the majority of the world's population; if we choose to study both capitalism's ravage and its alternatives; and if we choose to engage in practical, political action to promote these alternatives, how do we earn a living? I chose a series of jobs from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s which hurt my bank balance but which extended my knowledge and refined my values. I taught 'complementary studies' to craft apprentices in a Further Education College (Tom Sharpe's 'Wilt' novels give a worryingly accurate flavour of this work); I was a legal adviser and campaigner in a Law Centre; I worked as a freelance writer and photographer alongside a part-time job at the Runnymede Trust (the 'race' think-tank in London); and I did some part-time teaching of adults in community centres and at Leeds Polytechnic. Throughout this period I was supporting the independent local social movements in the multicultural inner city as best as I could. Part-time and flexible work made most sense since I wanted to be at home with my children as much as possible. As the scope for radical political action declined in the late 1980s and 1990s and, perhaps more significantly, I got older and poorer, and as our children were becoming teenagers, I took a full-time job at the polytechnic just as it was becoming a university. My career is not unusual for people working in the vocational, post-1992 universities in the United Kingdom. Many of us have had what are now called 'portfolio careers' (unlike the old universities, where many made choices to become academics straight after graduating: these are the real ivory towers). My career choices, like everyone else's, were framed by my values and my material and emotional needs. I chose to work in the public sector (despite its increasingly businesslike ethos), in the third sector (despite its failure to live up to the virtues it proclaimed for itself), and as a self-employed freelancer (offering photos and writing,

not very successfully, to progressive publishers) because these seemed to be fields where radical values could be asserted without losing your job. My decisions still make sense to me, but they leave the Bauman–Lévinas dictum ringing in my ears: I never think I have done enough (for my family, for the people), because I haven't.

Since this chapter is mainly about sociology, I conclude by describing an effort I have made to be an 'interpretive public sociologist', applying a health warning as I do so. It arises from the death of David Oluwale, a Nigerian who arrived in Hull (UK) as a stowaway in 1948 and was drowned in the River Aire in Leeds in 1969. Two policemen, Inspector Ellerker and Sergeant Kitching, were convicted in Leeds Crown Court in 1971 for assaulting Oluwale and were briefly imprisoned. Oluwale had spent several years in a mental hospital and for his last two years or so he was living rough in Leeds's city centre. The court heard that two officers had been seen pursuing a tramp along the river's edge, but the judge dismissed the charge of manslaughter against the two policemen in the dock, saying there was insufficient evidence that they were responsible for his death. I learned about the case in 1972, when 'Remember Oluwale' appeared in huge white letters on a wall on Chapeltown Road, the multi-ethnic area in which I lived. I read Ron Phillips's (1972) article about David in the magazine *Race Today*. This story refuelled the rage that had driven me for the past few years. At Jacob Kramer Further Education College, where I worked from 1974, the astonishingly progressive principal (the painter Frank Lisle) asked the complementary studies staff do something with the full-time art and design students for one week per term which was completely outside their normal curriculum. We could do, quite literally, anything. One of my week's projects was about David Oluwale. (Another was to go and live and work in a commune for a week.) We listened to a tape of Jeremy Sandford's radio play *Smiling David* and we read the published script (Sandford, 1974), as well as the *Yorkshire Evening Post's* daily reports of the trial of Ellerker and Kitching. One of the policemen's habits was to grab David Oluwale off the streets in the middle of the night and drive him to woodlands miles outside of Leeds. One cold, wet, dark winter evening the students and I got on the bus to these woodlands and walked all the way back to Leeds. I persuaded them that this was 'experiential learning'. When Caryl Phillips (2007) and Kester Aspden (2007) interviewed me in 2004 about my memories and feelings about David Oluwale, I found myself feeling as angry and upset about the malevolent racism in white society as I had in my teens. I arranged for Caryl Phillips, a world-famous author who was brought up in Leeds, to read from his manuscript at a Black History

month event at Leeds Metropolitan University in 2005. At this event, which drew hundreds of people, many of whom lived in Chapeltown, Professor Phillips suggested that there should be a memorial for David in the city. When his and Aspden's books were published I formed a Committee to pursue the idea of a Memorial. The committee included representatives from the West Indian Centre, the Christian Churches, St George's Crypt (the main shelter for the homeless in Leeds), the Leeds New Muslims group, the Nigerian Community Organisation for Leeds, the poet Rommi Smith, and at least one well-known figure from other third-sector organisations, and one from the national media. Slowly and surely, we have achieved the support we need to launch a public appeal for funds.

This work has been, for me, an enactment of 'interpretative public sociology'. The sociological work has taken the form of a lifetime's immersion in the social, political, and cultural life of Chapeltown, where I have learned about the impact of racism in general, and this case in particular, on black people's lives. I referred to the case in my book on the struggles of black, Asian, and white people to put their dream of community into practice in Chapeltown since the 1970s (Farrar, 2002). That book might be read as a story of oppression, resistance, and hope – an interpretation of local political struggles which might help us reflect on what we have learned and what still has to be done. This knowledge (partial though it is; the book is an 'insider' account written by someone who remains an 'outsider') helped my effort, inspired by Caryl Phillips's speech at the University, to frame the narrative for the Memorial Committee's appeal. It is a simple statement which aims to bridge the city's overtly racist past with its deliberately undefined present and radically inflected aspirations for the future:

So our memorial appeal is made in this spirit: to help us understand our past, celebrate our progress, and acknowledge how much further we have to go before we have a city where equal rights and justice prevail for everyone, whatever their colour or social status. (Oluwale Memorial, 2007)

Just as the remit for the Memorial Committee was sociologically and historically informed, its political processes were based on sociological reflections on long experience of politics in Leeds. In the distant past we radicals would have made demands and held demonstrations. We might end up doing just that. But the strategy adopted in the current regime of dialogic politics was to create the conditions in which

those whose objections we could anticipate would find it too difficult to refuse support. The invitations to join the Committee resulted from this strategy. The coalition represented by the Committee described above has had the desired effect: it secured the moral high ground for the Memorial. To broaden its base, a series of public events – usually involving poetry – in various different venues with different constituencies (the Catholic Cathedral’s Hall, the West Indian Centre, Leeds Met University) involved quite significant numbers of people and established a mailing list of supporters. A website for the Memorial Committee was established. Someone else (we do not know who) set up a Friends of David Oluwale Facebook site, and other websites which campaign on these issues gave us publicity. We also benefited from actual changes in the configuration of ‘race’ in twenty-first-century Britain. Despite the persistence of racism, sufficient progress has been made for leaders in public organisations, now in their 40s, to have been educated in institutions which set their public face against discrimination of all types. Thus, after private meetings, leading figures in the West Yorkshire Police Force – no doubt influenced by the findings of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (for a critical view, see Mayberry (2008)) – supported the argument for a Memorial, and the editor of the Yorkshire Evening Post publicised our work (Aspden, 2008; Farrar, 2009). West Yorkshire Playhouse commissioned a play based on Aspden’s book. A highly successful dramatisation by Oladipo Agboluaje for Eclipse Theatre performed to large audiences at the Playhouse in Leeds in February 2009, and then toured to Liverpool, Nottingham, and London (Walker, 2009). In making their decision to commission an adaptation of Aspden’s book, the West Yorkshire Playhouse was aware of our work and it helped them feel confident that there was an audience for a play about David’s life (Chisholm, 2009). The Playhouse advertised the Memorial Committee in its programme and donated half the proceedings of one performance to the Memorial Fund. A young woman in Nottingham contacted us to offer to work with Nottingham Playhouse on engaging support in that town. Events Management students at Leeds Met (now ‘Carnegie’) University organised a fund-raising dinner and entertainment for the Committee, as part of the ‘community-based learning’ initiative I helped to promote at the university. This combination of carefully thought-through initiatives by the Committee and a ‘snowball effect’ in which radical and liberal people and organisations altruistically involve themselves and extend the Committee’s work is an example of the type of politics which emphasises the horizontal

structures and dialogic processes usually associated with the radical social movements.

These are the structures and processes which fit well with interpretive public sociology, but warning bells will sound with fellow radical academics who face increasing institutional pressures. Those with long memories will recall that Robin Blackburn and Pete Ayrton were sacked by the University of London for supporting their students' protests in the late 1960s. Animal liberation and Islamist activity in the twenty-first century have resulted in the accusation by other academics that universities must reverse their alleged role in generating for extremism (Glees and Pope, 2005). When two of the 7/7 bombers in London were revealed to once have been Leeds Met/Carnegie students, my university came under enormous pressure (Farrar, 2006). The witch-hunt against radical academics launched in the United States by David Horowitz's book gives all university radicals pause for thought (Horowitz, 2006). Anthropology Professor Chris Knight was suspended by the University of East London for remarks about a protest in London against the G20 governmental meeting in March 2009 which were interpreted as inflammatory (Hamilton, 2009). Academics have the same fears about their careers, and paying their bills, as most other people. Even if they reject the ivory-tower stance of most of their contemporaries, they are understandably cautious about their public political positions. (Ben Carrington and I campaigned publicly in 1997 against our university's decision to award an honorary degree to Raymond Illingworth, a Yorkshire and England cricketer with a record of making racist remarks (Carrington, 2010). I was warned by a senior manager that to continue speaking out would damage my career. I continued, with the consequences he predicted. (Ben Carrington, then a PhD student, went on to make important contributions to what he calls a critical public sociology of sport, developing the work within British cultural studies which effectively placed issues of identity and culture at the centre of radical praxis (e.g. Carrington, 2007)) Bearing the career threat in mind I checked with my Vice-Chancellor, Professor Simon Lee, before launching the Oluwale Memorial. An academic veteran of Northern Ireland's politics during the so-called Troubles, Lee is renowned for his commitment to university–community engagement. Leeds Met has an impressive record in this field, to which I am proud to have contributed in my role (then) as head of Community Partnerships and Volunteering (CPV) (Farrar with Taylor, 2009). His ready agreement that I should coordinate the Memorial Committee, utilising the CPV website, meant that my role as an interpretive public sociologist could progress without insti-

tutional friction. Senior managers of other universities might well have feared that a case with such a controversial history in the university's home city would impugn the university's reputation. Lee, unusually, was unafraid of such a consequence (which only emerged, briefly, on a British National Party website). Public sociology is what it says it is – doing sociology in dialogue with many publics – and one of those publics is the sociologist's managers. So we have to engage with that public with same commitment to interpretive politics as we do with the other publics, unless we decide to jeopardise our careers. The danger to your career prospects are obvious, and caution is necessary, but if you choose radical values and obey 'the demon who holds the fibres of [your] very life' you will do the best you can, even though you know it is never enough.

Notes

1. Althusser's term 'conjuncture' was glossed by Ben Brewster as follows: 'The central concept of the Marxist science of politics (cf. Lenin's 'current moment'); it denotes the exact balance of forces, state of overdetermination (q.v.) of the contradictions at any given moment to which political tactics must be applied.' The term riddled 1970s and 1980s academic Marxist analysis and even crept into some of the internal texts of the organisation which I joined in 1975 (Big Flame). The fairly clear definition given here shows that it could be a useful concept, until you check the definition of another key term for the Althusserians: 'overdetermination'. This is glossed in this way:

Freud used this term to describe (among other things) the representation of the dream-thoughts in images privileged by their condensation of a number of thoughts in a single image (condensation/*Verdichtung*), or by the transference of psychic energy from a particularly potent thought to apparently trivial images (displacement/*Verschiebung-Verstellung*). Althusser uses the same term to describe the effects of the contradictions in each practice (q.v.) constituting the social formation (q.v.) on the social formation as a whole, and hence back on each practice and each contradiction, defining the pattern of dominance and subordination, antagonism and non-antagonism of the contradictions in the structure in dominance (q.v.) at any given historical moment. More precisely, the overdetermination of a contradiction is the reflection in it of its conditions of existence within the complex whole, that is, of the other contradictions in the complex whole, in other words its uneven development (q.v.) (Althusser, 1969: 249, 251–2)

I particularly enjoyed the 'more precisely' there. When I told my Althusserian fellow PhD student that language like this was incomprehensible and of no use in political practice he called me Fahrenheit 451 (punning my surname, I presume), suggesting I was anti-books/anti-intel-

lectual. Another wit among my PhD compatriots said that the Marxists had changed the world; the problem now is to understand it. Both loved the ivory tower.

2. Forty-two people graduated with a BA in Sociology in 1971 (O'Brien, 2009). At least one of those who started sociology in 1968, the musician Bill Buford, dropped out when he got a call saying the band he'd just left was about to become very big indeed. He never looked back (with *Yes*, *King Crimson*, even a stint with *Genesis*, and his own jazz band *Earthworks*). But it sounds as though his sociological eye developed despite leaving the ivory tower. As one blogger comments on his autobiography: 'Bill writes flawlessly as he plays! He looks on America with love/hate and it appears he wants us to know the socio/political/socialogial [sic] causality of Progressive music in each chapter.' <http://www.rollingstone.com/rockdaily/index.php/2009/03/17/frickes-picks-bill-brufords-drummers-view/> Accessed on 31 April 2009.
3. John Quail has this to say about the RSSF (personal email dated 13 March 2009):

I was at the RSSF founding conference at the LSE in 1968 which was a complete sectarian dogs breakfast with the Trots [followers of Leon Trotsky, such as the Socialist Labour League and the International Socialists] in full bandwagon mode... I may or may not have done the slogans [on the walls of Leeds University]. I do recall a meeting with Tony Cliff [one of the founders of the International Socialists, later the Socialist Workers Party] in Leeds which was an RSSF event (more sectarianism) though when I stood up and asked why the anarchists appeared not to be invited to the feast there was applause from some and a kind of dull "oh shit" from the Trots who had established some simple rules for squabbling over who would control any popular manifestation. Anarchists added an unnecessary complication. I think the RSSF probably didn't happen because the benefits of a common front would only have been realised by a hard working, genuinely low-sect[arian] and popular leadership cadre faced with a fairly homogenous common enemy. None of those things existed. The wacky thing about the period was its decentredness. You could do more, more quickly, locally. As time wore on of course the fragmentation – the Fragments which we did not move Beyond – was a source of weakness. But that is another story.' (*Beyond the Fragments* is the title of a book which became something of a manifesto for the independent, non-party far left [see Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, 1979]. The conference with that title, which took place in Leeds in 1981, which Big Flame supported and I helped to organise, failed in its aim to bring the fragments together in a common movement)

4. Marx and Engels wrote:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (Marx and Engels, 1848/1968: 39)

I now read that Hal Draper argued in 1978 that this is a mistranslation, and that the German word 'Idiotismus' should be translated as 'isolation' (Monthly Review, 2003). This may be so, but Draper's attempted refutation of our critique of orthodox Marxists' contempt for all pre-modern societies never reached any of the devotees of Marx that I knew. That might be because the text quoted here clearly indicates that Marx and Engels considered non-capitalist societies 'barbarian'. There is not much conceptual distance between a barbarian and an idiot.

5. The extraordinary attack launched on Bauman in parts of the European press in early 2007 when it was revealed that as a young man he worked as an agent for Poland's Stalinist military secret service found little echo in Britain. Bauman was finally duped into replying: 'For three years I co-operated with intelligence...gradually, like so many others in my position, I came to the conclusion that there was a yawning gap between the official world and the practice...so I became a revisionist, rejecting the official version of Marxism.' For fifteen years he was 'the object of persecution from the secret services...I was spied upon, I was reported on, I had my flat bugged, my telephone was bugged, as so on. I was thrown away from the internal army [military intelligence] and in the end...I was expelled from the university [in 1968]' (Edemariam, 2007). His wife Janina was also dismissed as head of unit at Polish Film. Their children were harassed (Beilharz, 2000 p. 2). Bauman became Professor of Sociology at Leeds in 1971, during my third year as an undergraduate. If I had listened to him more carefully while pretending to do my PhD I might have seen a future in sociology. Over the intervening years we have become friends and he has been very supportive of my work, both outside and inside the academy. While talking about the attack on Bauman at the British Sociological Association conference in April 2007, I choked. I suddenly became aware of my huge emotional investment in this man's lifetime effort to contribute to the building of socialism, in political and intellectual practice (despite having observed its manifest failure in the Soviet bloc). I might call it projective identification if I possessed a fraction of his scholarship.

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12

Sand in the Machine: Encouraging Academic Activism with Sociology HE Students Today

Joyce E. Canaan

By being more inventive, more subversive and more determined to function – by acting, as Eich (1973) put it, as ‘the sand, not the oil, in the works of the world’ – we can kindle the passion that fuels action. By asking questions that smoke out agendas and scrutinise conflicting interests..., we can help students to build understandings of how social control is maintained and changed.

von Kotze, 2005: 18–19

Academic activism is driven, intellectually, through calls from radical academics for more ‘direct action’ against... neo-liberal education policies..., a more public social science against the effect of privatisation..., a more relevant academic research agenda that informs public policy.

Neary, 2005: 5

How far can academic activism be taken in mainstream HE today? Can we take it so far as to act as ‘sand in the machine’, to paraphrase Eich, encouraging students to work with us to critically explore and potentially progressively transform the beast whose belly we work within (to switch metaphors)? Or is this aim an illusion harboured by those of us who still locate ourselves on the left? As my chapter title suggests, I believe that it *is* possible to act as sand in the machine, and that we can do so in part by working dialogically with students and colleagues to resist the alienation that the neo-liberal restructuring of HE is producing. This belief stems in part from my left activism over

the past 20 years that has led me to view the ever-greater imposition of the neo-liberal logic on the public sector in general and education in particular with both dismay and a determination to continue to resist this imposition as it widens and deepens. Like Freire (1996) and others (see, for example, Bourdieu, 2003; Giroux, 1999, 2009), I recognise that education is never a neutral process and therefore that HE, like other formal and informal educational spaces, is a political site like others. Indeed my research and teaching are motivated by the recognition that we and our students work under progressively worsening conditions. As I and others have discussed elsewhere, lecturers now teach, research, and complete the paperwork that audit and new managerialism require, under worsening conditions. Students now enter our classes more poorly resourced than previously as government funds for education have decreased whilst a testing regime has made students into performers whose efforts seemingly improve year on year (according to League Tables) whilst encouraging their greater instrumentalism (Ainley, nd; Amsler and Canaan, 2008; Canaan, 2008, 2009; Canaan and Shumar, 2008; Thorpe 2008). These students now face greater work intensification themselves as rising fees require a greater percentage of them to work part- if not full-time, which considerably impacts on their academic performance (Callender, 2008).

One response to these worsening conditions for our students and us could be to continue to comply as we have done to date. This has led, however, to the progressive worsening of our conditions. Another response, which I adopt, is to work with students and colleagues to improve our conditions. Like Bourdieu (2003), I seek a 'scholarship with commitment' that includes researching student learning and lecturer teaching (as well as research and administrative) conditions. My aim, like that of other members of the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group I set up and now co-coordinate, is

to resist the conditions we increasingly face of eroding autonomy and spaces of freedom, increased repression and oppression and dehumanisation and, in response, ...to work with others in a more democratic and autonomous way. (Amsler and Canaan, 2008)

That is, the ever-worsening conditions under which we teach and our students learn, belied by improved League Tables results, are part of the wider economic, political, social, and ecological crises we now face. My politics, then, has developed in response to these crises caused by neo-liberal restructuring globally. As a sociologist, I occupy the

privileged position of working with students studying a subject that, like other social sciences, offers the opportunity to critically explore the social world. But critical understanding is possible indeed, essential, for non-social science students and lecturers, as all subjects are taught in, from, and about the world from particular, situated social locations (Haraway, 1988).

The analysis below examines my efforts to introduce popular education/academic activism and academic literacies insights into my teaching and student learning of Sociology from autumn 2001 to 2005, when my efforts were most successful up to that point. This piece is retrospective; it captures a moment perhaps familiar to readers in that it explores my pedagogical response to a growing awareness, from the mid-1990s, that students were entering HE differently resourced, and consequently differently engaged, than students of prior generations. As I will suggest, my relative success in supporting these students came from my growing utilisation of insights from the aforementioned literatures coupled with support from a colleague.¹ Both factors allowed me to rework lecture space to enable greater reflection and dialogue about the *process* as well as the *content* of learning and teaching and to use the virtual learning environment of Moodle to enhance students' reflexivity and dialogue. Yet my efforts, which retrospectively seem small but felt considerable at the time, did not seem to lead students to storm the barricades, never mind wanting to chivvy away at changing key social institutions or social policies. On reflection I realise that I was naive, even hubristic, in assuming that one lecturer's classes during one semester could radically change students' approaches to, understanding of, and engagement with the world they had been developing up to the point of entering my class.

As I will argue, the project I am now engaged in is long term and, increasingly, collaborative; it cannot be done by one person singularly and seemingly heroically battling against the odds to help encourage the creation of the next generation of activists. Heroism is exhausting; working with others can also be exhausting but it is more realistic, affirming, and energising, notwithstanding the increased workloads many of us now face. We may never know the results of our efforts, as I suggest below, as the change we seek to encourage in students is gradual.

Further, my efforts are more modest now than when I started. They are informed in part by a wider reading of the literature on popular education and critical pedagogy (see Amsler et al. (nd) for articles that discuss both). This reading has helped me recognise that, on the one

hand, lecturers must continue to support and sustain students' critical engagement with their discipline – in my case, Sociology – so that students may continue, after graduation, to apply insights gained from critical thinking and action to their working and personal lives at least. This is especially important in the current moment of crisis when careful and complex solutions are needed. On the other hand, the reading I have done and activism I have been engaged in reminds me that my efforts and those of others require that we listen to students before we talk or act and, indeed, that there must be a 'constant two-way exchange of experiences and ideas' between teacher and students (Che Guevara in Holst, 2009: 157). That is, we can best guide by listening to students' current understandings and working with them to help them, if they wish, critically engage with, and perhaps question their prior understandings. Further, our efforts may be most effective if we work with colleagues to develop a supportive network that critically engages students and challenges the worsening conditions under which we teach and students learn.

My efforts are also more modest because I have less time and energy with which to develop them. This isn't just a matter of me aging (although that is a factor!). Rather, like many other academics, I am allocated more work year on year as the hours granted to accomplish this work dwindles – leading to further work intensification. This is in addition to the evermore voracious and soul-destroying processes of audit and managerialism to which I, like so many others, am now subjected (see, for example, Petersen, 2009; Canaan, 2008, 2009; Davies and Petersen, 2005).

This chapter has five sections. Informed by insights from Gramsci and Freire, I first discuss efforts by academics predominantly working in adult and continuing education to encourage students to critique and progressively transform aspects of their social world. I also suggest limits such efforts pose for those of us working in state-funded HE. It uses the concept of 'academic activism' or 'scholar activism' (Neary, 2005; Chatterton, 2008) that apply popular education insights to critically examine and transform state-funded HE, conceptualised as a site of political struggle in its own right. Next, I consider how the literature on academic literacies encourages a more socially just reworking of the lecturer–student relationship to benefit all students and not just the widening participation students it initially aimed to target. This section suggests that this reworking rests on similar principles to those of popular education. This is followed by my reflection on teaching practices prior to autumn 2005, showing how I was beginning to use insights

from popular education/academic activism and academic literacies to build a richer dialogue with students. The next section explores my practice during autumn 2005, examining how I utilised these insights to create a fuller dialogue with students that enabled at least some of them to engage more fully in learning. I conclude by suggesting that progressive lecturers today can and must act as sand in the machine which we can do as academic activists critiquing and working to re-humanise HE, focusing on processes of learning and teaching especially in the current context of neo-liberal marketisation (and commodification) that is worsening the conditions of learning and teaching (Canaan and Shumar, 2008b; Thorpe 2008).

Can popular education insights be realised in HE today?

Elsewhere I have summarised three key insights from Gramsci and Freire that provide the basis for my engagement with popular education (Canaan, 2006a). The first insight is that popular education presumes that teaching and learning require a problem-posing pedagogy in which students are treated as potentially active and responsible thinkers who can articulate problems they face through a dialogue with one another and with their teachers/lecturers. Freire suggested a reworking of the conventional teacher–student relationship in which the teacher deposited their knowledge in students who passively received it (the banking model) so that students and teachers together were ‘co-investigators in dialogue’ (Freire, 1996: 62) in which

the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Ibid: 60–1)

This reworked relationship potentially enabled students to develop their agency as the teacher listened to students and worked with them to help them move from ‘common sense’ as Gramsci put it, to ‘good sense’ with which they could together work to understand and change the world.

Second, the teacher–student dialogue focused, according to Freire, on the situations in which students lived and acted rather than on a pedagogic content abstracted from students’ lives, as occurred in the conventional classroom. Teachers sought to help students see limits

they placed on their thoughts and actions and to move beyond these limits. Interestingly, this emphasis on learning starting from students' experiences in popular education was also stressed by Holt who noted that learning needs to be hooked to students' world; learning that 'has no hooks on it...can't be attached to anything, it is of no use to the learner' (1964: 104).

Third, this teacher–student dialogue aimed to encourage students to overcome limits on their thoughts and actions by intervening 'in the world as transformers of that world' (Freire, 1996: 53) so that it was organised in a more humane way. By doing so, students' developed critical consciousness further:

conscientizacao [conscientisation] does not stop at the level of mere subjective perceptions of a situation, but through action prepares men [sic] for the struggles against the obstacles to their humanization. (Ibid: 100)

Whilst I have placed this tenet of action to change the world as the outcome of popular education, popular educators, usually located outside the academy, often suggest that popular education starts with the assumption that students and teachers came together to effect progressive change² (see, for example, Crowther et al., 2005; von Kotze, 2005; Kane, 2007a,b). My placement of this tenet as the outcome of a process is strategic, as I noted in a communication with Liam Kane, a Scottish popular educator working in a university Adult Education department:

the students I teach are not in my classes because they are involved in political action; ... they want to do a degree that will help them get a job – even though they often choose sociology because they wanted to understand the world more fully and indeed they often find that doing a sociology degree has made them think more critically than previously. (Canaan personal communication, 15 March 2006)

Kane's response suggests that we shared more than I initially thought:

I think the context we [both] work in clearly affords more opportunities to focus on thinking as opposed to action but I think two things are relevant: (a) as part of our work on thinking, we can constantly problematise how this should relate to action. Constantly asking students what they should do about what they think and

also help them come up with possible courses of action... (b) as Che Guevara pointed out, as educators the example we give through our own practice/activism is also important... In our discussion with students if they see that we link our own intellectual work to real-life activity, working for change, it certainly helps draw the connections between thought and action. (Kane personal communication, 22 March 2006)

In a draft of a later paper, Kane noted that popular educators 'should not assume there are restrictions until they come up against them: sometimes they could end up pushing on open doors' (2007b). This suggests that those committed to popular education principles must utilise their agency in state education, especially in HE where at present fewer restrictions operate than at primary, secondary, or further education (Kane, 2007b; Ainley and Canaan, 2006). With tutors, students can raise questions about what students do or could do in response to circumstances they face and can show how they are using theory to inform their activist work.

Yet, I still find popular education somewhat dissatisfying because popular educators are primarily located outside the state sector which gives them more freedom (albeit fewer financial resources (Kane, 2007b) than state-based educators whose political agendas are consequently more muted. I find the concept of 'academic activism' helpful because of its focus on the university, recognising that our working conditions and relations within this institution, like those of others, are structured by the logic of neo-liberalism. The consequences for those of us in HE are less funding, a narrowing of the curriculum and changes in how we engage with and understand our relationships with managers, colleagues, and students (Chatterton, 2008; Neary, 2005). Academic or scholar activists recognise the political nature of HE work; as Amy Gutmann recently noted (in Giroux, 2009), 'education is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency, the ability to struggle with ongoing relations of power, and is a precondition for creating informed and critical citizens'. Academic or scholar activists use insights from popular education, critical pedagogy and recent critiques of the workplace to expose these consequences and to challenge them (see, for example, Canaan, 2006, 2008, 2009; Shumar, 2006; Petersen, 2009). The aim is to work with like-minded others to rally support for the pedagogical and political power of the bottom-up alternative we are creating against the top-down neo-liberal marketising of HE we are undergoing (Bourdieu, 2003; Santos, 2006). By doing so, as

John Holloway notes, we fight against our inevitable complicity with the system:

If we abandon in our [academic] work the exploration of the possibility of radical change in a world in which exploitation and misery become daily more intense ... do we not then become accomplices in the exploitation of person by person, accomplices in the destruction of humanity ... We are all accomplices of course ... But there is a big question about how ... we fight against our own complicity (2005a).

Holloway's comments support the academic activists' efforts to create more progressive forms of knowledge and of social relationships in the academy. I discuss my own efforts in academic activism in the following sections.

Academic literacies

Academic literacies offers a model of HE student writing that in part builds on insights from new literacy studies. New literacy studies posits that becoming literate does not entail acquiring value-neutral skills to improve one's life. Rather, literacy

is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles ... Literacy ... is always contested ...; its meanings and practices ... are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (Street, 2003)

Thus literacy is not value-neutral; one always acquires a particular value-laden version, usually that of the dominant. New literacy studies posit that there are multiple literacies and problematises the relationship between 'dominant and marginalized or resistant' literacies (Street, 2003). New literacy studies questions whether gaining a version of literacy automatically improve one's 'cognitive skills' and 'economic prospects' (ibid.), as this ignores wider social, economic, and political factors that led to illiteracy in the first place.

The academic literacies model of student writing that builds on these insights questions whether universities should consider the diverse students in the newly massified HE system today as lacking skills held by their more traditional predecessors. It further questions that this apparent 'lack' can be overcome by teaching them generic 'study skills'

(see, for example, Lea, 2004; Street, 2004) as this model homogenises, pathologises, and marks as 'other' these students and fails to consider the social and cultural challenges these students face in a HE system still largely structured on the presumption of elite students (Haggis, 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 599). Academic literacies suggests instead that we consider how HE appears to these students and suggests that from this vantage point there are considerable 'gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing' not just for new students but for all students (Street, 2004: 15). For *all* students, not just new ones, come to HE with distinct literacy practices based on their prior engagements with formal and informal learning (Ibid.; Lea, 2004). Thus lecturers must reflect on what the tasks that they set students entail so that they can help students accomplish these tasks better. This reflection should be done with students, exploring and developing further the 'different meanings and understandings' that all course participants bring to learning and teaching (Lea, 2004: 744). Academic literacies is thus compatible with the popular education insistence that learning starts with students' understandings and requires a dialogic engagement between lecturer and students because

The construction of knowledge is a dialogic process, as students mediate the texts through their own personal readings and understandings of the materials they encounter through their study of a course. (Ibid.: 747)

Academic literacies thus refuses the banking model of education and recognises that new students may have experienced this model of learning previously, with little success, and may concomitantly now experience considerable tentativeness when approaching learning:

Previous experience of lack of success with transmission approaches [to learning] and knowledge-testing assessment regimes... may have left students underconfident and fearful, wary of the very challenges that higher education exists to stimulate. (Haggis, 2006: 7)

I would add that the transmission model that guided these students' learning has been less than successful for them – as, indeed, for most other students – *because it assumes passive student acquisition of, rather than active engagement with, ideas*. Thus, academic literacies' insistence that students learn best when learning is linked to their lives and is collectively constituted shares with the second popular education tenet

that learning proceeds best when hooked to students' lives through dialogue aiming to encourage students to surpass limits they previously placed on their understandings. As Haggis notes,

In dialogic forms of exploration ... student positions and perspectives are seen as being as important an aspect of the educational process as the propositional content of the discipline itself. To develop collective, rather than individual, forms of understanding, exploratory work of this kind arguably needs to take place before assessment, as part of teaching, rather than in the individualised forms of post-submission feedback on written assignments. (2006: 10)

Academic literacies encourages lecturers to help students understand their current approaches to learning to 'open up possibilities for new types of understanding' in future (Ibid.). Importantly with regard to academic activism, I would add, this emphasis on collective action critiques and works against the neo-liberal emphasis on students' individual performance.

Further, academic literacies notes that each discipline has distinct literacy assumptions and conventions. Therefore, there is little benefit in providing entering students with generic study skills as Street notes,

What constitutes a discipline and its ways of thinking and knowing are actually embedded in that discipline's writing process, its norms and conventions... Lecturers are each socialized into their own discipline's norms and conventions but do not recognize the learning process and do not make this explicit for their own students. (2004: 16)

Academic literacies is a plural rather than singular term to acknowledge the distinct and multiple discipline-specific ways of thinking. Further, academic literacies has begun to recognise that it should focus not singularly on 'the essay' but also on

other texts which are involved in course design: course materials, guidance notes for students, web-based resources, feedback sheets or even policy documents concerned with quality assessment procedures. (Lea, 2004: 743)

Academic literacies has expanded its focus, including, additionally, the suggestion that lecturers should 'feed forward' information to students about essay-writing skills as they prepare for essays rather than

providing feedback after essays are completed (Higgins et al., 2001). Such an expanded focus requires lecturers to reflect on and concomitantly help students negotiate multiple textual tasks. Doing so, Street (2004) notes, critiques and works against the current re-conceptualisation of knowledge as a measurable and potentially profitable product within and outside HE. It also confronts head-on the transformation of the lecturer–student relationship as students are increasingly viewed as ‘customers’ acquiring purportedly work-based transferable skills and lecturers are viewed as service providers supporting customers’ efforts to acquire these skills (ibid: 13). Academic literacies is thus a hopeful, critical and, importantly, subversive model of learning and teaching that resists the kind of complicity of which Holloway spoke above. It therefore is compatible with academic activism as it reworks the growing commodification of knowledge and marketising of the student–lecturer relationship. Academic literacies is thus compatible with the third tenet of popular education, which aims to improve society – with a focus on the university as a site of and for transformation. My main caveat about academic literacies is that although it seeks to effect change in HE, it places responsibility for effecting this change on lecturers, which fails to recognise lecturers’ increasing work intensification and under-resourcing that prevents them from realising this responsibility as fully as they might want.

I now consider how I used popular education/academic activism and academic literacies insights in my own teaching from 2001 to 2005.

How my teaching practice impacted student learning: 2001 to 2004

I first began re-conceptualising my teaching and student learning in the aftermath of 9/11 as I believed that this context offered sociologists the ‘chance to understand the present and to examine closely the social structures and processes that we might otherwise take for granted’ (Canaan, 2002; see also Lyon, 2001). I sought to use my teaching of the module *Contemporary Social Theory* to encourage students to question and work to change the world in this traumatic context. I focused on this module as a growing proportion of the increasingly diverse students I taught came to theory modules ‘with a heavy heart and a somewhat dulled and intimidated mind’ (Canaan, 2002a: 2.1). Post-9/11, I decided that students might engage more readily with theory if I actively showed them in each lecture how the theorists we were studying would make (or were making) sense of the world. In so linking

theory to the world, I sought, as I have realised since, to provide essential 'hooks' connecting learning to the world (Holt, 1964: 104). I have used this strategy of hooking sociological insights to the world since then, as have others (Rosie et al., 2001; McManus, 2006). My efforts seemingly paid off as the module evaluated well. In addition to students finding lectures well-presented (84%), well-structured (86%), and well-organised (78%), 80 per cent thought that the module organisation improved their engagement with social theory, as the following comments indicate:

- Organising the module in this manner made it a less-daunting prospect as you could relate the theories to real-life events.
- Don't just see social theory on paper and learn its key features. Able to participate a great deal in seminars, relating theory to own experience.
- Not just seen as a module that was compulsory. Instead, gave some interesting insights into the world today so, yes, did appreciate theory more.

I also reworked seminar space, organising it as a large group discussion that focused on questions students brought from readings, the lecture, and the world rather than on questions I brought to seminars. This reworking is informed by my developing appreciation, through reading the popular education and critical pedagogies and critical academic literacies literatures, that student engagement with learning is best accomplished when it starts from and seeks to engage and expand students' current understandings.

My efforts in this regard were somewhat successful, as the second quote above indicates. Further, nearly 50 per cent of students reported that the changed seminar structure positively impacted on their learning, as the following comments suggest:

- I enjoyed being an active member and sharing my ideas for discussion.
- It allowed us to feel that it was better to ask questions than not. I never really felt happy talking in class until this module!!

However, some students reported that they felt uncomfortable talking in large groups in seminars.

I now realise that whilst I sought to use students' understandings to inform my lectures and to organise seminars, and I had started to experiment with students setting at least some of the agenda by encouraging them to ask questions, I still maintained the banking or transmission model of learning of which Freire speaks in lectures and offered students little more than passive engagement with my ideas rather than active engagement starting with their ideas, especially in lectures. A lifetime of working first as a student (from primary through to post-graduate education) and then as a lecturer with the banking model of learning was hard to break. The fact that this slight shift in my pedagogy made such a difference suggests that students are finely attuned to lecturer commitment and respond positively when the latter grows.

The following year, 2002, I began encouraging students to occupy the subject position of active and potentially activist theorist. I suggested in the initial lecture that they were social theorists and that I sought to help them become more aware of how they theorised so that they could do so more effectively and could work to improve the world in the future:

I take it as my responsibility to demonstrate to you how you might use social theory not just to understand the world, but to work to make it a better, more secure and sane place in the future. (Canaan, 2006c: 2)

Whilst I was encouraging student engagement with theory for the sake of understanding and changing the world, *I* was telling *them* how to use social theory rather than starting with their current usages. Further, and mindful of my comments to Kane, my students, unlike his, did not take my module to change the world. Indeed, they did not even choose this module, as social theory is required. As I noted recently:

Perhaps I was only giving them a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine of theory go down in a less painful way than it might otherwise have done ... I was foisting my agenda on them, which is hardly Freirean problem-posing pedagogy. Nonetheless, I felt in this initial class, and indeed in those that followed, that year and in years since, that students are hungry to understand the world. (Canaan, 2006b: 9)

Whilst my efforts to encourage students' active and activist engagement with social theory could have gone further, they did seem at least partly to help students gain greater clarity about the world.

I also somewhat tentatively began disrupting the assumption that the lecture was a space of knowledge transmission from lecturer to student. For example, in one lecture I asked students what their theories of human nature were prior to presenting that of the theorist we were studying. However, this action only slightly disrupted my more general usage of the transmission model of learning. I also recently wondered

if students might feel intimidated by me asking them to articulate something as abstract as 'a theory of human nature and society'. I was offering them the pre-designated subject position of social theorist rather than working with them from the subject positions they already occupied. (Canaan, 2006b: 8)

Again I was imposing my agenda – although how I could do other than suggest that students develop their theorising capacity further in a social theory module remains beyond me.

Furthermore, I began to explore students' strategies for learning, which since then I have realised is a key tenet of academic literacies. For example, rather than focusing solely on teaching about Nietzsche in the first full lecture, I also discussed my strategies for reading his work so that students might reflect on their own strategies of reading. In some seminars we explored how students engaged with lecture content, thereby including a discussion of learning process into a discussion of learning content (Canaan, 2006a). Yet these efforts were minimal. I started the discussion of reading strategies with *my own* (followed in seminars by discussions with students of theirs) and of theorists' ideas with *my own*.

Interestingly, the module evaluated better in 2002 than the prior year. Eighty-seven per cent (as opposed to 80% in 2001) claimed that organising the module around issues in the contemporary world helped their appreciation of social theory. In addition, I was now including a discussion of the learning process alongside that of module content – that is, discussing with students the fears and issues that they had about the readings and about how they wrote – aiming thereby to more fully support students' efforts to engage more fully with the process of doing theory than previously. I suspect that this somewhat greater success was due in part to me becoming more effective in linking theory with the world as I became more familiar with this linkage as I was making it myself. However, this improvement was limited and may indeed be indicative of the ways that students today, perhaps especially those in new universities with lower entry requirements than Russell Group or

post-94 universities have been damaged by an education system that stratified them from their earliest years. Their education, that is, may have inflicted symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) on them which would make them reluctant to move outside the 'comfort zone' they adopted for learning (see, for example, Allen and Ainley, 2008). Thus, these students initially may be likely to be rightfully reticent to 'try new things'. But if we listen to their reticence, and seek to work with the part of them that is hungry for a fuller understanding of the world, we may engage more of them.

But more importantly, sharing with students my growing commitment to enhancing their learning, and, offering them a greater sense of agency by suggesting that they were social theorists, must have indicated the lessening hold of the discourse of derision about students I had as I taught more diverse students. I noted in my first diary entry of 2002³ that 'the students I am teaching do not seem to be at the level that I would like and I fear that I am losing respect for them' (2002b: 1). Rather than consider how these students were finding HE, I initially damned them as inferior to their better prepared predecessors. I was thus clearly guilty of pathologising new HE students. The literature points to this as a common response by academics faced with these new students (and not receiving any training from the university to shift their views of these students). Yet my concomitant commitment to supporting student learning indicated that I also placed a more respectful discourse about students alongside the discourse of disappointment. Undoubtedly students responded more positively as I treated them more respectfully. I began to treat them more respectfully as I considered that the reason they did not have the educational resources of students of prior generations had to do largely with the restructuring and under-resourcing of the education system in the interim. But I only gained this insight because I had the luxury of research funding that granted me time to research, reflect upon, and change my teaching strategies and how I treated students, which most lecturers do not have today.⁴

Nonetheless, I still felt that I had not encouraged students to work to change the world. This frustration emerged despite the fact that (a) at least in seminars on one topic, students explored how they might use social theory to effect change and (b) many students reported how they began using social theory to critique the world (see Canaan, 2006a). I experienced a similar frustration the following year, despite students seeming to use theory to understand and critique the world. I noted that at least some students in Focus Group discussions of the module at

its end used metaphors that indicated my efforts to link theory to the world had some impact on them. Students spoke

about the module as being like a process of waking up, of having a light bulb go on, of opening one's eyes, of sitting up and thinking... [These] are all powerful metaphors students introduced that suggest that the way I linked theory to the world helped at least some students see themselves and the world more clearly. These metaphors suggest that students used connections I made in lectures to widen their understandings, to see more of the world than previously. (Canaan, 2006b: 9)

On the one hand, I could have done more. Freire reminds us, for example, that when students express the kind of fatalism that the Thatcherite mantra 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) (to the neo-liberal globalisation), teachers can explore with students how this fatalism is socially manufactured. In this situation lecturers should bring to students' attention 'examples of the vulnerability' [of the government]... so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them' (Freire, 1996: 46). This suggestion is similar to that of Kane above that lecturers should encourage students to consider how to implement progressive change and should support students' efforts where they can. Lecturers should also discuss how their own activism builds on intellectual insights and offers a means of transformation that students might consider.

On the other hand, I believe that it is somewhat arrogant to assume that lecturers teaching students who come to classes with a lifetime of thinking one way, can, in one or even two semesters, so profoundly be affected as to enable an immediate damascene conversion. Kane, as well as the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, make the important point that our efforts might not be immediately apparent whilst students are in our classes. Kane's recent study of factors that Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) members believed led to them becoming socialist activists found that several factors rather than one were usually contributory. Further, research participants reported that formal education impacted considerably on their future activism, with secondary education slightly more important than FE/HE, but with FE/HE perceived as influencing more than one-third of Kane's respondents (2007b and personal communication).

Baldwin concomitantly suggested that the process of becoming radicalised is gradual and that one is not likely to be aware of its end point when it starts. Indeed this radical end point might 'perhaps

have terrified them had it been described and represented to them in advance' (2003: 221). If, as Baldwin reminds us, a life is 'an existential project... towards a goal which is both determinate and indeterminate, which, to the person concerned, is... recognized only on being attained' (2003: 222), then academic activists must be mindful of the potential future effects of their present efforts. Perhaps the main thing that academic activists can do in classes, then, in their efforts to act as sand in the machine and to encourage such action by students, is to support students as they gain critical awareness and, as Kane said above, to encourage them to lessen inequality and injustice and to demonstrate the efficacy of our efforts in this regard.

I now turn to my teaching strategies and students' responses in autumn 2005, my most successful effort to date.

How my teaching practice impacted on students: autumn 2005

The classroom

I have developed these ideas further, especially since autumn 2005 when I first taught a new double (i.e. year-long) core (i.e. required) module on Social Identities introduced in autumn 2005 for third-year Sociology students.⁵ As I was preparing this module, I sought to more fully use the popular education/academic activist as well as the academic literacies insight that teaching should start by encouraging students to reflect on relevant aspects of their identities and their social locations more generally. I realised that students could be perhaps more readily encouraged to engage reflexively with the sociological literature with such a module than with some others. This is not to suggest that such reflexive engagement is not possible with other modules; it is. However, the topic makes the process of encouraging such reflexive engagement somewhat easier than other topics. As the first sentence of the module guide stated,

This double module aims to encourage students to develop an appreciation of the ways that their identities and those of others are socially and historically shaped and how we all use these processes to shape our identities still further. (Canaan, 2005a: 1)

I encouraged students to be reflexive about their identities and to use this reflexivity to expand their understandings of themselves and others – and thereby to recognise limits to their prior understandings were and develop their critical awareness further. I thereby recognised and

wanted to encourage students to recognise that reflexivity could open up 'new ways of addressing old long-standing questions of how and what we can legitimately take ourselves to know and what the limitations of our knowledge are' (Davies, 2004: 364).⁶ I was guided partly by Zapatista insights, quoted from John Holloway in my reflexive teaching diary:

The Zapatista saying '*caminamos preguntando*' acquires a particular resonance because we are conscious that we do not know the way forward... The politics of rebellion is a politics of searching – not for the correct line but for some sort of way forward... There is no party to tell us which way to go, we must find it for ourselves. (Holloway in Canaan, 2005b: 3)

I then noted that

But '*caminamos preguntando*' is... a politics that is... a verb of questioning... It is about having students see the world not as one that is taken for granted but as one in which we are asked to take things for granted and therefore not to question. It is a pedagogical politics that says one must act with a heightened sensitivity to all that is around us, to everything that comes to us from government, media, the institutions we belong to... [T]hat is what I find so powerful and compelling about it at least as a starting point,⁷ because it is about doing, it is about generating practices, here and now... Zapatismo is... for enabling, for doing, for walking, questioning, and engaging from the present as political action. (Canaan, 2005b: 4)

Focusing on the process of learning alongside the module content is an insight shared by academic literacies and popular education. I was unsure where this focus would take me, but I felt energised by this emphasis on process in itself and as a means of encouraging students to move from critique to active transformation. I therefore started the first lecture by asking students to write down on post-its how they thought a person who knew them well would describe them to someone who did not know them. I preceded this task by telling students that post-its allowed them to speak anonymously so that their voice could be

included in a dialogue even if you feel uncomfortable speaking aloud in class. Your peers and I will have the chance to 'hear' all the voices in class without knowing who is speaking them. (Canaan, 2005b)

By introducing a notion of dialogue informed by Zapatismo, popular education and academic literacies and by using this dialogue in lecture space, I was suggesting that the module would not be guided by my (authoritative) voice alone. I put students' post-it responses on the front wall, placing together those responses that spoke of individual characteristics only and those that spoke of social characteristics, including sexual orientation, class, and race – provided solely by members of each group. However, minority ethnic backgrounds were mentioned with greatest frequency, which is unsurprising given that more than half the students were from minority ethnic backgrounds. I pointed out how minority groups emphasised minority aspects of their identities but majority groups did not and we discussed why this might be.

Students' essays submitted at the end of the semester indicated that this strategy of anonymously sharing and juxtaposing their ideas with those of peers initiated in the first lecture impacted on their learning, bringing them to question prior ideas about themselves. White students particularly mentioned that this exercise helped them appreciate how racialisation worked in society and of their own racialising practices. The following extract is indicative:

I wrote down 'female, brown hair, average height'. When looking at the responses of other people it was pointed out that very few descriptions stated 'white' but many of the minority ethnic groups had stated their race. We discussed that this is due to the white people not thinking about themselves in terms of race... Living in a majority 'white' country and coming from an area with not very many ethnic minority groups, I had never had to classify myself as 'white'. (Canaan, 2002)

I continued to use post-its, especially when introducing a new unit and their introduction continued to impact on students. For example, in the first session on class, I asked students to reflect on what they thought their class identity was. Comments from the following two students indicate a growing reflexivity with regard to class and, importantly, how some of them were using the sociological literature to guide their efforts:

When asked the question in the lecture to discuss what thoughts go through your head whilst thinking about class, I found this extremely strange... because... [I was] trying to think of... which class I fit into. The lecture forced me to stop and think, [sic] how do we judge which

social category we fall into? Is it where we are born? Where we live? The jobs that our parents have? ... Attending the lectures and doing the reading [sic] I have finally been able to answer some of the questions raised.

By Joyce posing a question in lecture, what class are you?, this immediately confirmed Sayer's (2002) observations, that class is a complicated moral issue which is embarrassing to talk about. (Canaan, 2002)

Rather than solely telling students what *I* thought and wanted *them* to think, these students' comments indicate their growing sociological reflection on identity, which widened their appreciation of their identity and those of others (Mohanty, 2003). Their growing awareness of their sociological identity, as mentioned in the introduction, was a key finding of this research, informed by my reading of the popular education, critical pedagogy, and academic literacies literatures with their emphases on dialogue and reflection, is that student engagement with learning deepens through using module literature to understand themselves and the world.

Assessment and Moodle

This emphasis on dialogue and reflection were also central to the assessment strategy I initiated – although here I was less successful. I asked students to put non-assessed patchwork texts on the virtual learning environment of Moodle, which they and I were using for the first time. Like McKenzie (2003), I was attracted to patchwork texts because they encouraged students to engage with module ideas from their own social locations. I was attracted to Moodle because its philosophical assumptions complemented mine (informed by popular education and academic literacies which Moodle is not) of conceptualising learning as a process in which *'each participant can be a teacher as well as a learner'* and in which learning builds on *'learners' [prior] point of view'* (Moodle Docs, 2006; emphasis added). Students join a module group in which only they, I, and the faculty moderator can participate. Anyone who puts a comment on Moodle automatically communicates with all module participants, which potentially offers this space as one of dialogue in which all can participate and can learn from one another.

Guided by the example of my colleague Dr Matt Badcock, I asked students to put patchwork texts on Moodle and to use these texts as the basis for their final assessments at the end of semesters one and two. All students thus could read one another's patchwork texts and thereby reflect on how peers were engaging with issues, unlike essays individual

students submit and only the lecturer reads. In addition, I provided feedback on patchwork texts to support students as they prepared for essay writing, in effect feeding forward insights students could use when writing essays (Higgins et al., 2001).

However, students reported in taped focus groups held at the end of term that they felt uncomfortable putting identifiable patchwork tasks on Moodle⁸:

Student 3: [P]utting your work onto the internet for everyone to look at...it's kind of a bit more democratic and everyone's sort of learnt from each other...but a lot of people just didn't like it...they were really resentful that they had to put their work on a site which other people could look at as it was like an invasion of their privacy ...

Student 2: I wasn't keen on it.

Student 5: No, if they'd said you can choose to put it on or not, I wouldn't have done [so]... [t]he first couple of pieces of work that we did, like, we had to give our personal views on things and I just felt really uncomfortable with someone else knowing what I think about things.

Student 2: And it was also really hard knowing how to write it cos we've always done, like at school and in first and second year, just written a lot of standard essays, so it's really hard to know how to write it ...

Student 4: I'm dyslexic, and to ask someone who's dyslexic to display their work for other people...I don't think is respect. (Canaan, 2002)

Whilst I did tell dyslexic students *when they asked me* that they did not have to put patchwork texts on Moodle, I did not appropriately anticipate their needs as I should have done. But prior comments in the above extract also indicate a real limit of Moodle – it does not allow the kind of anonymous dialogue that post-its enables and which students clearly felt had enhanced their learning. In addition, I failed to recognise how profoundly different the task of writing reflexively was to that of writing a conventional essay, the latter of which is, as student 5 said, more impersonal than the former. As students had not had much, if any, experience of this previously, many expressed the view that initially this seemed to be a very scary thing to do.⁹ Furthermore, as student 2 noted above and student 4 noted elsewhere in the focus group, being required to write in this way in their final year made them feel like guinea pigs – a word I naively used at the

beginning of the semester – for an experiment I was running whose outcome I said was not guaranteed – even though I had few doubts about its success. Finally, whilst I sought to introduce Moodle to encourage greater democracy – a point student 3 made – other focus group participants stated that they felt coerced into using this strategy and felt vulnerable using it. Such feelings are clearly antithetical to those of popular education/academic activism and academic literacies literatures and are indicative of the need to introduce these strategies earlier in HE.

I also sought to encourage students to use Moodle to converse with one another and with me in ways they did not in the conventional classroom. Here again I was less successful than I hoped as few students commented on one another's work. One reason seemed to be that students felt silenced by their exposed identities. For example, in focus groups recorded by a research student, when one student stated that s/he did not like reflecting on their identity and thought that I should be presenting material to them (*a la* the banking model of education), two sets of students rallied to what they thought was my defence. As one of the latter put it,

I think Joyce is doing a great job and I actually enjoy being taught by her (this year). I love the fact that she is open to criticism regarding the modules and that we are free to voice our honest opinions. (Canaan, 2002)

In addition to the left-handed compliment of appreciating my teaching in their final year modules (as I also taught Contemporary Social Theory to these same students and had taught them Classical Social Theory the prior year), this student commented on my emphasis on students' reflexivity. However, the other two students did not realise how to limit their Moodle comments to me and this other student and were unhappy to share them with all others. Consequently, dialogue largely stopped after this point. It is clear, again, that anonymity would enhance students' capacity to express their views.

But another reason why students did not use Moodle space more dialogically emerged from the focus group discussions mentioned above where students expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to comment on peers' work.

I mean I've read patchworks and thought, 'Oh it's really good', but to type in 'Oh, that was a really good patchwork, I really like this bit,' ... I'm [not] a lecturer and I don't really know.

I don't have confidence in my own ability to comment on what is a good patchwork and what is not a good patchwork. (Canaan, 2002)

Clearly further work needs to be done to help students appreciate what a good patchwork assessment entails, which would also improve students' confidence in their ability to judge peer's work – and their own. For, if students feel unable to judge the worth of others' work, does this not suggest that they are unsure of the worth of their own work? Appreciating students' possible academic vulnerability, an appreciation I continue to develop, is essential if we are to help them feel more confident to make such of their own and others' work.

Why, given these negative factors, did I believe that my efforts were more successful in 2005 than in prior years, notwithstanding student caveats? First, I was more fully utilising popular education, critical pedagogy, and academic literacies insights to rework lecture space – although I could and now do go further still. Second, I believe that Moodle can potentially enable a fuller dialogue amongst students and between students – and I have been able to accomplish this through setting up Moodle groups in which students work with peers and share ideas only with those in their own group. With such a dialogue in virtual space, coupled with the kind of dialogue that strategies offered by post-its in the material space of a lecture, I believe that students can learn more from and with one another and me. Furthermore, if students are more fully supported in writing reflexively, as I have done in years since 2005, they can use their own knowledge base as the basis of their learning, rather than receiving knowledge transmitted by their lecturer. With the above strategies in action, students might develop the kind of transformatory insight of which popular education and academic literacies speak. It is clear to me that the reflexive activities in which students in my classes now engage is enabling them to critique the world, a critique that has a potential which neither they nor I can know at present. I end with the words of another student who pointed out in her/his first semester essay in 2006–2007 that they had begun to question not just ideas on this module, but in the world more generally. These words fill me with hope, as they suggest that at least some students were recognising that they have often been asked to take things for granted unquestioningly and that they are more likely to question the world in future. Refer to Freire to wrap it up? These words help me believe it might be possible to act as sand in the machine in future, engaging much more dialogically with

students as the popular education, critical pedagogy, and academic literacies literatures suggest:

I think the module has made me more aware as a whole of who I am, how I think and has given me the chance to look at why I think as I do, why I accept certain things ... [T]he module has [also] given me the opportunity to think to ask why and not just accept the answers I am given.

Conclusion

I don't want to end this chapter on a singularly celebratory note. At least three factors threaten efforts like those described above. One is that the freedom we currently have to organise learning and teaching in HE is being cut back. How long will it be, for example, before a national curriculum for HE in Britain is introduced which stifles lecturers' capacity to encourage students' critical thinking (Ainley and Canaan, 2006)? A second threat is that if we are explicit about our principled positions with regard to learning and teaching (as I have been in this chapter), the powers that be in our universities might view us as biased and might then try to limit our efforts. As suggested in the first section above, we could respond by stating that, of course, education is an inherently political process and we are merely making our politics explicit. We could also tell them that our efforts are in support of social justice, about which educational managers speak volumes (as they contradictorily make the educational system less just), which might placate them for awhile. But in a state-funded education system, if we go against the state too explicitly, then we threaten it and may find ourselves silenced by one means or another. Finally, a third threat is that as lecturers are increasingly work-intensified and under-resourced, it becomes more difficult to find the time and energy to rework teaching practices and support students' learning as already suggested. The solution to this is for us to collectively draw a line in the sand with regard to such work intensification.

The above analysis suggests, however, that if and when we do find this time and do put in this effort, the results can be incredibly affirming for students, ourselves, and the future of us all more generally. This requires numerous strategies of which I have only mentioned some.¹⁰ It requires re-conceptualising learning and teaching, from the banking

model, as Freire aptly called it, which many of us learnt as students and previously reproduced as lecturers, to a more dialogic and critical problem-posing model such as those proposed by Gramsci, Freire, and the academic literacies literature discussed in the first two sections above.

This re-conceptualisation takes considerable time, thought, and effort. It requires reorganising lecture space more dialogically, and, I suggest, taking this dialogue from material to virtual space. It requires rethinking assessment so that students can be supported more effectively through mechanisms of feeding forward as well as feeding back and providing assessments hooked to, and potentially expanding upon, their understandings of the world. Whilst such processes are somewhat more readily enabled in modules such as Social Identities that lend itself to such hooking, such rethinking of learning, teaching, and assessment is possible on all modules, as I have suggested above. Given that, as I have argued, all disciplines are engaged with the world in which we live, all disciplines require learning, teaching, and assessment strategies; it is possible to critically rethink these strategies to encourage more critical student engagement generally. As my work with students discussed above suggests, our efforts can result in students questioning the taken-for-granted world which they and we are asked to accept without question, and this questioning has a potentially radical future.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to C-SAP (2002–2003) and BCU (2002–2005) for providing funds with which I began to research my teaching and student learning.

Notes

1. Thanks to Matthew Badcock for our discussions.
2. In so emphasising particular features of popular education, I am aware that popular education has meant different things, depending on the context in which it is used and evoked (see Crowther et al., 2005).
3. I kept a reflexive teaching diary in autumns 2002–2003, 2003–2004 and 2005–2006.
4. Funding allowed me to have a research assistant conduct focus groups about the module as well as interviews with individual students that explored the place of students' learning on this module in the context of their educational life histories more generally.
5. As I was putting the module together, I realised that the title I had given it previously, 'Gender, Class and Race in a Comparative Perspective', did not capture what I came to recognise as the importance of students using their

identities as the basis for their learning. The module will therefore be called 'Social Identities' in autumn 2006.

6. I have not taken reflexivity as far as Davies et al. have done. I did not and do not point to the supposedly slippery nature of reflexivity which constitutes a sold self as existing outside discourse in part because I believe that such a self exists at least some of the time.
7. I question, however, how far zapatismo can go as one inevitably comes up against the power of the state, as I fear I will do by taking the position I take, hopefully later rather than sooner.
8. I have only read and not listened to transcripts of these conversations to protect student anonymity.
9. Moodle does, however, allow one to create groups whose members can communicate with one another and not with others. I now use Moodle groups so that students can communicate with others in a group in which they have agreed to work.
10. I am mindful, for example, of Neary's (2005) recommendation that work-based placements offer another site where students could come to understand how the world is, and could alternatively be, organised, a point that Shumar has also made (1997; Canaan and Shumar, 2008). I am also persuaded by the power of encouraging students to actively research their lives, which is a key element of the Re-Invention Centre (Neary, 2005).

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13

The Sociological Imagination As Popular Culture

David Beer and Roger Burrows

One of us recently contributed to a polemical article claiming to be able to identify a coming crisis in empirical sociology (Savage and Burrows, 2007). The article argued that the jurisdiction of the subject rested on its ability to innovate methodologically in such a manner that it could retain some form of privileged access to knowledge about social processes. It questioned whether this jurisdiction could still pertain in an era of 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift, 2005) in which many of the core methodological practices of the subject had been usurped by powerful commercial actors. The article has stimulated an interesting and lively debate (Back, 2008; Crompton, 2008; Hardey and Burrows, 2008; Hollands and Stanley, 2009; Osborne et al., 2008; Savage and Burrows, 2009; Stanley, 2008; Uprichard et al., 2008; Webber, 2009), which will likely be further fuelled by the publication of Savage (2010) which offers a monograph-length dissection of the historical and institutional processes that have presaged this state of affairs. Our ambitions here are far more modest.

We want to develop an aspect of the original argument contained within the 'coming crisis' (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 893) that has so far received little formal comment but which, we intuit, has far-reaching consequences for the practice of academic sociology. This is the point that it is not only the *methods* of sociology that have seeped out of the academy to become a ubiquitous part of the infrastructure of 'knowing capitalism' but it is also the observation that the cultivation of a distinctively sociological *sensibility* has become a far more generic aspect of our culture than perhaps we have hitherto realised. As C. Wright Mills (1959: 19, note 2) observed over fifty years ago, when he spoke of the 'sociological imagination' he was not referring to 'merely the academic discipline of "sociology"'; indeed, he was highly disparaging

of much of what passed for academic sociology at the time – the ‘grand theory’ of Parsons and his acolytes, and the ‘abstracted empiricism’ of Lazarsfeld and his followers (Mills, 1959: chs 2 and 3). Rather Mills located such a sensibility as residing within different regions of cultural production: ‘In England... sociology as an academic discipline is still somewhat marginal, yet in much English journalism, fiction, and above all history, the sociological imagination is very well developed indeed’ (Mills, 1959: 19, note 2); whilst in France he notes that ‘both the confusion and the audacity of French reflection since World War Two rests upon its feeling for the sociological features of man’s fate in our time, yet these trends are carried by men of letters rather than by professional sociologists’. Clearly, the regions of cultural production have become far more diverse and complex in the past 50 years and, we argue here, it is no longer just in text-based cultural practices – journalism, fiction, and history – that we can now locate such a sensibility. However, academic sociology has not offered much critical reflection on the nature or functioning of the sociological imagination outside of the academy. However, the need to do so is now quite urgent, as has been signalled very recently by Tom Osborne, Nik Rose, and Mike Savage, in what might well become a watershed statement on the future direction of Sociology. They argue – correctly we believe – that

Whilst some professional sociologists may claim a monopoly on the right to speak truthfully in the name of society, they are not the only people who investigate, analyse, theorise and give voice to worldly phenomena from a ‘social’ point of view. In fact, today more people speak this social language of society than we might imagine... Not just statisticians, economists of certain persuasions, educationalists, communications analysts, cultural theorists and others working in the academy who tend to use broadly ‘sociological’ methods but also journalists, TV documentary-makers, humanitarian activists, policy makers and others who have imbibed a social point of view. In many cases it may be that these agents of the social world actually produce better sociology than the sociologists themselves. (Osborne et al., 2008: 531–2)

We read this piece in early 2008 at the same time as we, most of our colleagues, and many of our students were engrossed in the HBO TV series *The Wire*. *The Wire* premiered in the United States on 2 June 2002 and ended on 9 March 2008, with 60 episodes airing over the course of its five seasons.¹ All 60 episodes were finally shown on BBC2 in the first

half of 2009. Set in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, it has a huge cast of over 300 characters. The 'star' of the show is, however, the city – a simulated post-industrial every town – within which the interactions between the drugs economy, race, the criminal justice system, the polity, globalisation processes, the changing class structure, the education system, and the (new and old) media are examined in minute detail. It has been widely critically acclaimed not just as a complex piece of 'entertainment' but also as a profoundly 'sociological' piece of TV. A couple of our colleagues – a political sociologist and a criminologist – found the show to be so sociologically compelling that they questioned the value of some of their own undergraduate teachings in a context where 'a TV show can do that!' Now, such statements might have little value if they were just taking place amongst social scientists in common rooms in provincial British universities.² However, when someone as eminent as Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson can calmly and very publicly proclaim the following, then perhaps we need to register the profundity of the situation. At a seminar held in Harvard on the 4 April 2008,³ he opened proceedings with the following statement, which is worth quoting at length:

The Wire's exploration of sociological themes is truly exceptional. Indeed I do not hesitate to say that it has done more to enhance our understandings of the challenges of urban life and urban inequality than any other media event or scholarly publication, including studies by social scientists... *The Wire* develops morally complex characters on each side of the law, and with its scrupulous exploration of the inner workings of various institutions, including drug-dealing gangs, the police, politicians, unions, public schools, and the print media, viewers become aware that individuals' decisions and behaviour are often shaped by—and indeed limited by – social, political, and economic forces beyond their control.⁴

This is a near-perfect statement of what we take to be the *sociological imagination*, the ability to convey in vivid terms: the Marxist dictum that people make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing; the lived relationship between public issues and private troubles; and the interminable struggle between human agency and social structures.

Having watched *The Wire* and the Harvard seminar about its political and sociological significance, the proclamations of Osborne et al. (2008) not only rang true for us but, if anything, perhaps understated

the issue. *The Wire* is certainly an exemplary instance outwith the academy where the sociological imagination is thriving, but it is by no means the only one. Indeed, the more we have thought about it the more we have come to the view that the sociological imagination is now a prominent – perhaps even a defining characteristic – of much contemporary popular culture.

This chapter aims to illustrate how popular culture is being constructed, disseminated, and consumed in ways that indicate an increasing sociological tendency in the people involved. The consequence of this position is that the concept of a sociological imagination cannot provide us with a definitive concept that might allow us to demarcate a distinctive jurisdiction in response to any crisis in our discipline. The sociological imagination is not something that belongs uniquely to academic sociologists or that can be said to be a distinctive property that ‘distinguishes’ academic Sociology from other cultural areas or disciplines (Denzin, 1990: 1). Some might argue that we hold the right to regard our imaginations as being the *most* sociological, or say that as a profession we are the most able at employing our sociological imaginations in directed, sophisticated, and insightful ways, although this is clearly no longer the view of William Julius Wilson and, we suspect, many others within the academy. This though is not really the point. Rather, in a context in which the sociological imagination is becoming a defining characteristic of contemporary popular culture, ‘we’ (as sociologists of various sorts) are surely forced to consider where ‘we’ fit; where our work might add something distinctive, insightful, or important. These, it seems to us, are large and difficult questions for those of us concerned with sociology’s subjects and objects.

The following discussion draws upon a range of media sources and popular cultural artefacts to illustrate in more concrete detail the extent of the sociological imagination *as* popular culture. The rest of the chapter is organised into four sections each of which discusses a form of popular culture that is illustrative of a range of sociological tendencies at work – from what we view as an increasing interest in the ‘consumption’ of otherwise mundane aspects of everyday social life, through to the more fully fledged and nuanced sociological imagination manifest in *The Wire inter alia*. These four forms have been selected as they represent highly popular and widely consumed forms of popular culture where these tendencies are, we argue, particularly prominent: *participatory web cultures*; *celebrity culture*; *social experiment TV*; and *authentic drama*. The chapter concludes with a range of examples from other spheres of popular culture before making some concluding comments.

Participatory web cultures

As we have recently documented, there has been a radical transformation in the structure and organisation of web cultures over the past three years or so which have had important sociological implications (Beer and Burrows, 2007). This has been marked by increased user participation, increased user-generated content, and a shift from the *desktop* to the *webtop*. It is now highly likely that even the most technically illiterate sociologists will have come across discussions of, what has come to be known as, Web 2.0 and the supposed rise of new participatory web cultures in relation to any number of social and cultural matters. Web 2.0 is no longer just a minority interest; applications such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Wikipedia*, to take just three of the most well-known examples, have very quickly become part of the popular cultural mainstream, especially amongst the young. To be sure, all three of these applications possess sociological content; *Facebook* has myriad groups dedicated to sociological topics; *YouTube* contains recordings of lectures and interviews with leading sociologists; and *Wikipedia* has user-generated entries on a vast number of sociological topics: 'Bruno Latour', 'Risk Society', and 'SPSS' are just three selected at random. However, we are interested here in how developments in Web 2.0 might invoke a shift towards a more sociological sensibility over and above that which may be invoked by reading or watching such sociological content.

We find this perhaps most clearly in social networking sites (SNS) such as *Facebook*, which allow people to create profiles about themselves and then make 'friends' and communicate with other members of a network. These SNS have become a central part of many people's social existences, connecting with people they already know, people they will be at university with, people with shared musical tastes, and so on. They are used to debate all sorts of topics, to form groups around selected themes, to keep up with other people, to find out about people's preferences, religious views, political views, and the profiles often contain large numbers of photos of everyday activities (including 'nights out' and the like). These have been described by Zygmunt Bauman (2007) as being part of a broader 'confessional society', in which people feel obliged to communicate intimate details about themselves to stay involved in the social 'game' (Beer, 2008). This he describes as the process of 'consuming life' (Bauman, 2007). It has been suggested that the activities and practices occurring in contemporary web cultures, and this process of 'confession' and the 'consumption of life', are indicative

of a 'sociological tendency' in those involved, the development of a form of 'vernacular sociology' even (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Hardey and Burrows, 2008). Users of these sites show an interest in finding out about other members of the network, researching people, researching friendship connections and linkages, negotiating group dynamics, and so on. Applications such as those that allow friendship social networks to be visualised (in formats not dissimilar to those used by social network analysts in the social sciences), the user applications that enable surveys to be conducted by any user, the development of 'memes' that utilise network connections to spread messages across SNSs as a form of DIY viral marketing, are all perhaps illustrative of a fledgling sociological tendency at work. What we see within these participatory web cultures is an interest in and celebration of the mundane and the routine, an interest in observing social connections, social events (through photographs and videos) and the pattern and shape of social networks.

Similar forms of production/consumption of the mundane and everyday are going on elsewhere on the web. Blogging is now a well-known pastime through which individuals and groups are able to construct narratives about themselves as well as communicate various opinions, ideas, views, and the like. *Youtube* is populated with clips of everyday life practices, video blogs, personal documentaries, moments of events captured on mobile phones, and the like, as well as providing unofficial clips of what would generally be understood to be copyrighted materials such as music videos, TV shows, and films. The photo folksonomy *Flickr* holds millions of photos of private moments like holidays, trips, events, personal celebrations, personal moments, amongst many others with people putting up photos they have taken for others to consume (or protecting them for a small group of users to consume). What we have seen in these spaces is the living of private lives (or selected parts of them) in the public domain, and people consuming these private lives as a contemporary form of entertainment.

In addition, we are also seeing users involved not just in creating content but also in organising and sorting this content by contributing metadata. Often referred to as 'tagging', this metadata acts to sort and categorise information so that it can be found by other users; these tags act as a guide around the information, or in some instances inform algorithms that allow information to 'find out' users who might be interested (the example of music on Last.fm is a good example here). This metadata is not just being used to organise content; users are also involved in generating visualisations of data sources that are available on the web. A good example here is that of software mashups, which in

many instances bring together Google maps with other freely available data sources. These then generate real-time maps of things like crime statistics, the locations of people contributing to the micro-blog Twitter or the wiki Wikipedia, the locations of particular sounds, amongst innumerable others – for a more detailed discussion of the potential sociological tendency at work in mashups see Hardey and Burrows (2008).

So, on the one hand we have people showing an interest in researching and finding out about other people's lives, participating in loose types of informal ethnographic investigation, looking into practices, life views, and lifestyles. On the other hand we find them categorising the things they find, creating classifications for the things they come across and constructing vernacular typologies of this everyday web content. We can see this second practice as being not dissimilar to the practice of sociologists, although it is notable that this vernacular sociology works from the enviable position of being on the 'inside' of what is going on and so the problem of the 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens, 1993) does not, in general, pertain.

Web 2.0 applications provide perhaps our weakest example of the sociological imagination *as* popular culture – that is to say it is perhaps the place where the sociological imagination is operating in a manner furthest away from the expectations placed upon academic forms of sociology. However, their popularity and widespread use is perhaps illustrative of a hitherto latent interest on the part of the public to visualise, map, and 'play' with the often mundane realities of social life – not a full-blown sociological sensibility perhaps, but certainly an indication of a strong interest to better understand one's place, both literally and metaphorically, in the world.

Celebrity culture

The prominence of 'celebrity' and 'celebrity gossip' is perhaps a defining feature of the distinctiveness of contemporary popular culture. Celebrity magazines such as *Heat*, *Closer*, *OK*, and *Hello* continue to have considerable circulations, celebrity tell-all biographies and autobiographies are amongst the top-selling books each year and there is a plethora of celebrity gossip websites, with the celebrity gossip blog of Perez Hilton being a very prominent recent example. On television there are also now a large and growing set of shows which follow particular celebrities around to observe 'every' aspect of their lives. Recent examples have included home-life documentaries on Hulk Hogan, Ozzy Osbourne, Rev Run, Katie Price aka Jordan, and Kerry Katona, amongst

many others. These documentaries show, or are purported to show, the homes, relationships, arguments, jobs, luxuries, leisure activities, media anxieties, and the like of these celebrities. There is an apparent interest expressed by the mass-consumption of such items in consuming the ordinary and mundane parts of the lives of these celebrities. The celebrities are again living 'private lives' in the 'public domain' through such TV shows, through selling stories to magazine and newspapers, through autobiographies and blogs. Celebrity gossip is, of course, no longer just limited to the consumption of 'official sources'. A quick search on Google will reveal a huge number of blogs and forums dedicated to commentaries on this gossip provided by anyone who wishes to analyse its content, pass ethical and/or moral judgments, perpetuate new gossip, or even generate new gossip and images captured on digital cameras and/or mobile phones. This is not then just about consuming intimate insights into the everyday, but in a substantial number of cases it is about providing a commentary on these intimate insights which are disseminated through the web.

To explore this a little further it is worth picking up on the recent example of the celebrity Jade Goody. At the time of writing, Jade Goody – who became famous through an appearance on the reality show *Big Brother* and has since made a reportedly substantial living from appearances on other reality shows and through magazine stories, books, perfumes, and other products – has just died of cancer. Through the escalated press attention and a series of stories apparently sold to specific media outlets we have been able to consume intimate details of the days leading up to her death. The ubiquity of the images and stories capturing the processes of Goody's illness are virtually impossible to avoid for anyone who has even a small level of contact with popular culture. As a result it has become almost impossible to avoid consuming these 'insights'. This example is important in that it shows exactly the type of intimate and private detail that is now forming a defining part of contemporary popular culture, whatever the driver of this may be.

In addition to the above, as well as observing celebrities in their 'natural settings', examples can also be found where they are taken out of their 'comfort zones' and put in places and situations that are unfamiliar, so that the viewer can see what happens and how they cope. *Celebrity Big Brother* is one example, as is the highly popular *I'm a Celebrity Get Me out of Here* in which celebrities are put in a camp in the Australian bush. Also very popular are shows in which celebrities are taught to ballroom dance and have to perform a routine each week on *Strictly Come Dancing*

in the United Kingdom or *Dancing with the Stars* in the United States. There are a number of other examples of this type of celebrity programme. Similarly we find these types of show that feature 'ordinary people' put in unfamiliar circumstances such as having a dinner party on *Come Dine with Me*, living with a different family and household in *Wife Swap* (and *Celebrity Wife Swap*), working in the community on *Secret Millionaire*, or having to pretend they have an unfamiliar skill on *Faking It*. These all offer the viewer apparent insights into the human condition, however useful we might think these are sociologically.

Social experiment TV

This brings us to the emergence of what might be thought of as *social experiment TV*. The first series of *Big Brother* in 2001 was presented, in a strategy likely to have been intended to appease any possible public responses of anger and disgust, as an authentic social experiment. The show still has psychologists offering expert viewpoints but these are largely marginalised as presenters, celebrities, and audience members provide detailed and elaborate psychosocial commentaries on each show (on the companion TV shows *Big Brother's Little Brother* and *Big Brother's Big Mouth* as well as on the web). Indeed, the marginalisation of the authentic academic voice in this example is illustrative of how this type of analytic commentary need no longer be provided by academics but is now a part of everyday discourse. It also shows how the early tropes of outrage and disgust have been usurped by the moral acceptance of the consumption of intimate and private aspects of everyday routine life.

On the back of the success of shows like *Big Brother*, and others that form the reality TV canon, there have now emerged even more self-conscious attempts to provide viewers with psychosocial insights into people and social groups. These shows describe themselves as 'social experiments', and sometimes even as 'unique social experiments', designed specifically around particular research questions, objectives, or hypothesise. If we take first the highly popular and international programme *Beauty and the Geek*, this show is described in the opening credits as an experiment designed to bring together 'beautiful' women with 'geeky' men to see what happens and to find out if they can learn from one another – can the geeks become more beautiful and can the women become more intelligent (which is equated with being geeky). Two discrete categories of people are created, with the people selected depicted as being either beautiful or geeky. The programme then puts

together the beauties and the geeks into pairs who then compete against the other pairings to obtain immunity from eviction from the house (the eviction is a common feature on these TV shows). The final eviction head to head each week sees the geeks answer beauty type questions, about celebrity culture, and the like, and the beauty is asked geeky questions, about computers, philosophy, science, and so on.

Beauty and the Geek is not ploughing a lone furrow in providing supposedly glamorous and exciting answers to social, and sociological, questions. There are other shows that explicitly (and sometimes implicitly) present their content as social experimentation. *Vanity Lair* provided a social experiment designed to understand the relations between beauty and popularity. In a similar vein to *Beauty and the Geek*, *Average Joe* provided the opportunity for ordinary men to interact with and date a beautiful woman to see if differences in attractiveness could be overcome and new intimate loving bonds be created. *Age of Love* tested whether a man in his early thirties, the retired tennis professional Mark Philippoussis, would choose maturity or youth when selecting a partner from a group of women in their twenties and a group in their forties. *Joe Millionaire* tested whether financial affluence was an attraction in creating relationships, by pretending that a construction worker was a millionaire; once a relationship was established it was then revealed that he was not in fact affluent. Finally, *Playing it Straight* tested the ability of contestants to anticipate, through cultural signifiers, the sexuality of other contestants, thus testing the ability to conceal or not-conceal sexuality through play with these signifiers.

Clearly these shows do not represent the types of psychosocial experimentation that Stanley Milgram or Harold Garfinkel might have dreamed of, nor, in our shared view, is it likely to represent a satisfactory attempt to address possible research objectives. In many cases these shows are clearly constructed for dramatic purposes, and in some cases carry warnings that parts of the show have been 'artificially created' for dramatic affect. This list of shows also suggests in places a quite startling moral framework operating in the formulation and production of their content (see Skeggs (2005) for more on this). The reader is no doubt clear that these are not practices that social researchers worth their salt would allow themselves to be involved with; we would no doubt manage to find good ethical and methodological grounds for not producing the sort of 'research' found in these TV shows. What is significant is that these shows are presented to the viewer and constructed throughout as being social experiments that provide insight into social phenomena and into people's lives and how they relate to one another.

This is done in a quick-moving, visually stimulating, melodramatic, and engaging way. This type of show, perhaps above any of the other examples described in this chapter, is likely to shape public perceptions of what social research is, its methods, and the types of questions it might ask. Amongst a plethora of possible consequences we can imagine two effects here: first this audience might be satisfied in terms of their sociological tendencies and may not pursue social research; alternatively, where they come across social research they are likely to be disappointed that it does not create the same level of entertainment value that these shows provide. Whatever the outcomes, we need to imagine sociology operating in a context where these shows are widely consumed, almost certainly by many of our own students! The result is that we cannot expect social research to be unaffected, it is likely to be interpreted, understood, or avoided based upon the expectations and understandings shows like these might propagate.

Authentic drama

Television drama has historically provided a sociological take on life in a number of instances. What we can point to in the contemporary landscape are two developments in drama that indicate a heightened and more prominent presence of the sociological imagination. In the first instance we have seen the development of highly detailed and apparently authentic depictions of everyday life, particularly in the city. As already discussed, the cult HBO-produced 'anti-cop' TV show *The Wire* manages to construct a brilliant depiction of a complex urban ecology in operation. *The Wire* is not alone however, other dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *Generation Kill* display something of the same tendency. The point of these shows is that they are presented as authentic uncompromised depictions of people's lives, often drawing upon those who were 'actually there', and in some cases even including these people in the shows themselves. Penfold-Mounce et al. (forthcoming) has argued that this constructs an 'authenticated' depiction of city life that is intended to 'stimulate' the sociological imagination of the viewer.

Shows like *The Wire* are then offering viewers sophisticated sociological readings of contemporary urban life. This not only challenges academic Sociology but also presents an opportunity by providing us with a model of new ways of doing things and also a useful resource that we can use as an intermediary for communicating with our students and the wider public. In fact, the reason *The Wire* is such a good example here is not only the clearly sociological content of the show

but it is also because of the reaction it has caused amongst sociologists and other exponents of the sociological imagination including those working in 'quality' journalism. This reaction and word-of-mouth dissemination amongst a sociological community illustrates how this show, and some of the others noted, are providing opportunities for the application of the sociological imagination.

The second category of drama we might note is much less concerned with this type of approach and instead encourages a different sociological response: that of active research and reportage. Recent developments at the intersection between television and participatory web cultures have led to the production of shows that do not end with the programme but where the viewers then participate in researching and playing with the content of the shows themselves. In this second instance the show becomes the beginning, the focal point around which the viewer is mobilised as a social researcher. A key example here would be the TV show *Lost*. In a recent paper, Nick Prior (2008) identified how sections of the plot have been woven into the show, in the forms of mysteries or trails, through which viewers are able to research the show and participate in perpetuating and developing the story lines. Echoing the suggestions made about *The Wire*, Prior has suggested that *Lost* is a kind of 'sociological experiment' focusing upon a small, emergent society of survivors from an air crash on an island, their social relations, and their interlinking biographies. Prior also points to the threat felt by the characters from the unknown 'others', resonating, he claims, with post-colonial discourse. In addition to these sociological features *Lost*, as we have suggested, also has other sociological qualities integrated into its mediascaped form. The indeterminate stories open up opportunities for participatory viewers to pursue the storylines across a range of media. Objects found in the show then form nodes around which those interested can perform research and report their findings through user-generated content. The examples Prior identified include a reoccurring set of numbers in the show, an unpublished novel that is found by a character on the show which is subsequently actually published, and a featured 'candy bar' which has also now been produced. These are clearly self-conscious attempts by marketers to cash in upon the participatory leanings of the audience to generate publicity and interest in particular tie-in products (we can imagine that something similar is happening in music marketing and perhaps in other spheres). This illustrates that these activities are already ongoing, with people researching around popular cultural forms, sharing information, blogging, circulating news, researching and reporting on their findings. It would appear

that the makers of *Lost* have identified that this is a common practice amongst its audience's demographic and have designed aspects of the show to suit these tendencies. This is not dissimilar to what is happening in celebrity gossip, with interested parties circulating and creating their own gossip, adding material captured on mobile phones of particular moments they have attended, and the like.

Some further examples

Clearly it would be impossible to argue that popular culture has only just discovered its sociological imagination. This is clearly not the case. Film, music, and literature, to take three key instances amongst many, have always provided sociological insights comparable with, and some might argue better than, those offered by academic sociologists. As we saw at the outset of this chapter, it is clear that from the outset the concept of the sociological imagination was intended to capture something much broader than the academic pursuit of Sociology. The argument of this chapter is that the sociological imagination has now become a highly prominent part of what contemporary popular culture is. The sociological imagination is not just in the places outside of our discipline where we would traditionally have expected to find it: BBC Radio 4; *The Guardian*; political documentary film; art-house cinema; and the like. It is still in these places of course, but it is also now 'out there' across much of the most prominent forms of entertainment. We may retort that this is in highly ephemeral, disposable, unsophisticated, and even pathological form, but it is still there as a prominent part of the production and consumption (if this distinction is still maintainable) of popular culture. This is a significant break from the position of Mills, who sees the sociological imagination as a marker of credibility and distinction, a badge of honour, a 'craft' (Fraser, 2009), a way of avoiding the polarised pitfalls of 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism'. The accuracy and depths of the insights these popular explorations into the sociological offer is not really the issue, there will always of course be scales of quality. What really matters is its presence and form. It is likely that in many cases these will not generate great insight into the 'fruitful distinction...between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and the 'public issues of social structure' (Mills, 1959: 8), but the point is that they are having a good go (or are at least giving the impression of having a good go) but with unpredictable consequences.

What is at stake is that the sociological imagination is now highly ubiquitous as a driving force for the participation in and consumption

of popular culture, it is present in popular culture in a form that is appropriate to the audience, it is ready and easy to consume and to be involved in. This presence could well transform how Sociology is understood and viewed as a discipline. How can sociology deal with this presence? How can sociology be distinctive or offer something worthwhile when these highly accessible variegated versions of sociology are so prominent in people's lives? How can a 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005) be realistically developed where much more exciting versions are already out there, giving people the answers and entertainment they want in formats they are comfortable with? In short, popular culture is now talking in much more complete ways to people's varying sociological tendencies, leaving little room for sociology itself to operate or communicate with people. We have to ask why, given the apparent interest in sociological insight, the discipline finds it so hard to have a 'public face' (Holmwood and Scott, 2007). It is perhaps for the very reason that there is such a plethora of sociological narrative out there which inevitably detracts from, dilutes, or simply diverts attention away from our efforts.

We should take this opportunity to point to some notable absences from the above descriptions. In fact, illustrating the scope of the phenomena described, there is a substantial list of things that this chapter could not discuss in detail. A list of these would include movements in mundane realism in situation and stand-up comedy, this would include the stand up of Ricky Gervais, Stuart Lee, Chris Rock, and perhaps Frank Skinner, and the TV shows *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *The Royle Family*. The now frequent focus of magazine, radio, newspaper, and television news items upon understanding underlying social patterning, stratifications and actions could also have been discussed. This type of focus seems to have a particularly strong presence on television rolling news, where items on lifestyle choices are prominent as are focus pieces concerned with debating social issues such as housing, schools, the NHS, and consumption. Documentary television is a further obvious area of sociological content that has been neglected here in an attempt to focus on the less clear-cut but more prominent areas of concern. The television chat show would have provided similar grounds for discussion; the celebrity chat show circuit could have been one area of interest, but so could the broadcasting of the mundane on chat shows where ordinary people are subject to in-depth interviews about personal problems on shows like *Jeremy Kyle*, *Trisha*, *Montel Williams*, and *Jerry Springer*. These shows include members of the public discussing topics that include relationships, family, abortion, infidelity, and other

such private matters. These shows have now also incorporated forms of social ordering through polygraph and DNA testing to provide clear-cut answers to the questions and remove any perception of ambiguity.

Finally, the most significant absence is gaming. In terms of revenue generation, games have now overtaken music in the United Kingdom. It is possible, if we look at some of the leading games over the past couple of years, to find an embedded sociological content, or content that would be of interest to the sociologically inclined gamer. There are now a series of social interaction type games, where multiple-users meet in virtual places to interact and respond to particular stimuli. For instance, games on the Nintendo DS mobile handheld console allow users to look after horses or dogs, or to share in decorating the interior of an imagined home. These are about participating in particular practices in particular places. It is in fact now common for games to be based upon multiple players organising themselves in communities of use around particular objectives: *World of Warcraft* is a good example of this. The extremely popular *Grand Theft Auto* (Atkinson and Willis, 2007) series of games enable the players to participate in intricate and locational experiences of the city that provide insights into crime, violence, social disorder, urban economies – many of the themes found in *The Wire* in fact. There are then other games that provide detailed insights into the functioning and management of things like warfare in the *Command and Conquer* games series, and of course the mundane as well as exciting aspects of running a football club in games such as *Football Manager*.

The most obviously sociological game series is however the *Sims* and *SimCity*. We might be familiar with the interest of sociologists in ‘the exploration and understanding of social and economic issues through simulation’ (Gilbert and Troitzsch, 2005: ix). These games allow users to actually play at this by controlling certain contextual factors which the game then simulates. The *Sims* operates at the small-scale level of the household and the family, with the player controlling things like sleeping, bathing, and eating, and *SimCity* operates on a larger scale with the player controlling locations of buildings, services, roads, maintenance, and so on. In both instances we are able to watch the simulation of complex forms of emergence (Urry, 2003; Byrne, 2005) as the parameters set by the player play-out in the simulated game-world. The player is attempting here to understand and then predict patterns of complex causality and localised forms of emergence resulting from the alteration of social variables. These popular games then see the player taking on a not dissimilar role to the sociologist, town planner,

architect, or policy-maker in being able to simulate and therefore predict on the back of these simulations the outcomes of interrelated social phenomena. In other words, looking at how the biographies of people and places might be changed in relation to small-scale alterations with difficult-to-predict consequences, and also how series of events and alterations may interact with one another. The impact of social factors on personal biographies is a strong feature of these games.

To pick out one final further example that illustrates the point, during the writing of this chapter one of the authors watched a one-hour documentary on Channel 4 titled *Love, Life, and Death in a Day* which focused on births, marriages and funerals occurring in the UK city of Bristol over a 24-hour period on 21 June 2008. This case study presented a range of statistics about these types of events that were occurring on that day, and on average, and then showed more qualitative examples of particular wedding events, babies being delivered, and families attending funerals. Giving us an insight into secularisation in Bristol we learnt, to give one example, that there was only one church wedding in the whole of Bristol on that day, and that there were as many as thirty-seven other places in Bristol where people could get married. The programme also followed a pagan wedding and a lesbian civil ceremony. Clearly this programme provided the viewer with a satisfactory and highly insightful public sociology of some quality (even if the cases were clearly sampled in a way to achieve maximum impact). Other sociological shows on TV at the time of writing include the actor Ross Kemp conducting participant observations on gangs around the world and soldiers in Afghanistan, and another actress Natalie Cassidy, also from the soap-opera *EastEnders*, following thirteen individual people to see inside their daily lives on *Natalie Cassidy's Real Britain*. The popular celebrity genealogy series *Who Do You Think You Are?* is in its third series and is highly successful in providing accessible narratives on linkages between personal biographies and social contexts, including slavery, diasporas, world wars, social change, religious conflict, civil wars, and the like. Again this forces us to reiterate Osborne et al.'s question: 'do we need sociology and sociologists today?' (Osborne et al., 2008: 531).

Conclusion

We can imagine that the risks of the situation and context we have outlined are not just limited to how we communicate with the public but also how the public might view us, particularly the students and prospective students we try to communicate with on a day-to-day

basis. It is inevitable that their experiences of the types of popular culture described above will inform and structure their expectations of what sociology is, how it operates, and what it is for. Whether we like it or not our discipline will be judged in relation to these forms and contexts. So something that might seem as inconsequential as the TV show *Beauty and the Geek* might already be affecting the attitudes of people who encounter Sociology, either when selecting a degree to study or when encountering our attempts to go public. It might even be that our existing students draw as much from these popular cultural sources when thinking about how to do Sociology as they do from us and our 'official' sociological resources. This might seem far fetched but it seems highly likely to us that activities on the social networking site *Facebook* or the 'research methods' on a TV show like *Beauty and the Geek* or *Vanity Lair* are as likely, if not more likely, to inform the type of work our students do as Durkheim's (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Similarly we can imagine ethnographies written like celebrity biographies or celebrity gossip magazines, projects constructed like blogs, the list goes on.

Having said all this we should not be seduced by an entirely dystopian reading of the situation; crisis can lead to beneficial change. There are some instances where we might be pleased that our students, the public, or our colleagues associate us with 'cool' TV shows like *The Wire*. And we might aspire to achieve what the creators of that show have achieved in terms of the communication of sociological ideas. New ways of doing sociology might come from these alternative sociological forms; we might also find new ways of connecting with intended audiences by appropriating selected elements from these forms. We should perhaps also be pleased that the forms of popular culture discussed here reveal such a strong and widespread interest in things sociological, even if this interest is not entirely contained within the discipline itself. It suggests an opportunity for us to make some new connections if we are able to find a way of tapping into the broader interest in 'thinking sociologically'. The problem is that as with those who feel the need for sociology in the commercial sector (Burrows and Gane, 2006) consumers of popular culture are getting their 'fix' elsewhere.

The reader might well feel that we have stretched the argument a little too far in places in this chapter. We have; it has been deliberate, it is part of a broader attempt to force open the debate about the future of a discipline we love. What is absolutely unquestionable is that the 'coming crisis' cannot be averted through the use of the sociological imagination as a territorial concept able to provide us with distinctive

jurisdictional boundaries to our discipline. In fact the reverse is the case. The concept of a sociological imagination can in fact be used to illustrate how far the interests of sociology have spread beyond the confines of the discipline. Mills identified the presence of the sociological imagination outside of the discipline; he understandably did not see this as a problem or a threat in the context in which he was writing. More recently Mike Savage, in what appears to be a part of a more general project aimed at rethinking the discipline of Sociology, has contended that '[w]e need to face up to the serious current challenges to social scientific expertise [so] that we can find a means of grappling with the contemporary condition' (Savage, 2009: 170). The changing face of popular culture (and of sociology) now means that the issues outlined above form a significant and underrated part of these 'serious current challenges' that needs our consideration as we continue to debate our future academic practices. We might not feel that sociology is really genuinely being challenged by sociological forms of popular culture or by the sociological tendencies found in its production and consumption. We may feel that sociology is more sophisticated and credible and, as such, has no reason to be overly concerned, but it is not really a question of 'quality' but of how popular culture transforms expectations and understandings of sociology and the conditions within which we operate.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mike Savage for commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter. Some of the issues he raised will take another paper to tackle, but we have attempted to respond to some of his queries in a limited way here.

Notes

1. See <http://www.hbo.com/thewire/> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wire_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wire_(TV_series)).
2. At the time of writing we were helping to organise a conference on 'The Wire as Social Science Fiction' held 26–27 November 2009 in Leeds Town Hall, and our initial call for papers generated a flurry of emails from academic colleagues from across the UK telling similar tales.
3. A video of the event can be found at: <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Multimedia-Center/All-Videos/The-HBO-Series-The-Wire-A-Compelling-Portrayal-of-an-American-City>.

4. A slightly different version of this quote and a more detailed justification for it can be found in Chadda et al. (2008: 83).

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