

## **In Praise of Sociology**

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### **Abstract**

This reflection on the relevance of sociology starts with the different forms of social knowledge, and some autobiographical reflection on my engagement with the discipline. A research-based social science is made urgent by the prevalence of distortion and pseudoscience in the public realm. However, the research-based knowledge formation is embedded in a global economy of knowledge that centres on a privileged group of institutions and produces major imbalances on a world scale. Sociological data-collection has important uses in policy and public discussion. But data need to be embedded in a larger project of understanding the world; this is what gives excitement to the work. Sociology has a potential future of marginality or triviality in the neoliberal economy and its university system. There are better trajectories into the future -- but they have to be fought for.

### **Keywords**

sociology, knowledge, politics, coloniality, intellectual work

### **Social knowledges**

*People who need people  
Are the luckiest people in the world*<sup>1</sup>

So sang Barbra Streisand in the Broadway musical show-stopper of 1964. I've long wondered why. All of us desperately need people, whether we are lucky or not.

Humans are a very social species. In contrast with most inhabitants of the planet, we take many years to grow from infancy to adulthood, and while we do, we are strikingly dependent on care work by other people. We gained our current dangerously dominant place on the planet not by chasing mammoths as fierce individuals, but by cooperative production of food and shelter, by shared

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<sup>1</sup> "People", lyrics by Bob Merrill, music Jule Styne, from the musical *Funny Girl*.

languages, and by the feats of social organization that produced kinship, cities, trade, machinery and science.

These feats depended not just on individual skills but on social memory: our collective capacity to encode knowledge and hand it from one individual to another, from one generation to another. This is true not only for the elaborate cultural structures that we call science, or religion, or Broadway musicals. It's true for our everyday life too. As ethnomethodology has ingeniously shown (Garfinkel 1967), our daily routines depend on shared social knowledge, usually tacit but surprisingly elaborate, that enable us to function as competent members of our society.

This does not mean that our behaviour is ant-like predictable. It does mean that our actions, while constantly improvised, are usually quite comprehensible to other competent members of our society. (Donald Trump may be an exception here.) Other members of society have, more or less, the same knowledge as we do, the knowledge of "how to go on" in our various relationships. There is a social know-how that is essential to the working of institutions of all kinds, from families to corporations, from churches to academic journals.

Such know-how circulates as widely as a language does; it is, indeed, often encoded in the forms of a language. The social significance of marriage, for instance, was encoded in the nineteenth-century colonies of Australia by the linguistic convention that labelled some women "Mrs" and other women "Miss". Becoming married, the woman adopted her husband's whole name as well as the new title, a custom that survived into the second half of the twentieth century. But this was also a class convention. In the early colonies most working-class women and men, even if forming couples, never married. "Mrs" thus carried a definite implication of respectability. "Miss" had the extra significance of a woman who by virtue of her class position was expected to make a respectable marriage some time in the future; a mere servant would be referred to as just "Sarah Riley" (cf. *Australian Etiquette*, 1885: 276). And that made "Mrs" and "Miss" available as an expression of special politeness for a man speaking to a working-class woman, regardless of the marital politics involved.

But the idea of a competent member of a society rather depends on what is meant by "a society", and that is certainly a concept with fuzzy boundaries. Even within an agreed – or policed – boundary, the know-how may not be shared by all. The English ruling class used to send their children to what were bizarrely called "Public Schools", precisely to give them social know-how denied to the masses. Indeed, looking at the current UK cabinet, it seems they still do. At a more democratic level, learning a trade such as carpentry or shoemaking demanded more than learning to use the tools without cutting off your fingers. It meant learning a whole occupational culture, and the patterns of cooperation and solidarity that allowed the trade to go on. (It's that pattern of knowledge that is attacked by scientific management and modular technical education.)

Forms of knowledge based in specific social groups, i.e. socially-situated knowledges, can usefully be distinguished from the more widely dispersed know-how that is a condition for a social order to continue at all. But specific social knowledges can *claim* a general validity. That is, indeed, a good way of

looking at hegemony, when the situated knowledge generated by or for a dominant class becomes the common sense of a whole society (Gramsci 1971).

A specific and currently very important example of this is the academic curriculum that is hegemonic in large-scale school and university systems, and is crucial for their testing and selection practices. The fact that this curriculum is grounded in the historic culture, language and learning practices of the privileged classes in European and settler-colonial society, is fundamental to the powerful *social* selectivity of formal education (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett 1982). The fact that this curriculum is institutionally central to a universal education system allows it to masquerade as universally valid knowledge. It thus helps to legitimate social selection and exclusion on a massive scale. In Australia, for instance, elite schools form a socially selective group which by a variety of strategies maintain high levels of success in selections based on this curriculum, and have the political power to fend off, or seriously weaken, all attempts to change the curriculum in a democratic direction (Windle 2015).

Seeing the problem as one of hegemony and exclusion is a perception based on a third form of knowledge, which involves a consciousness of society as an object of knowledge. With social know-how and socially situated knowledges, one is swimming in the social surf. With reflective knowledge of society, one is standing back on the shore, taking a certain distance from the water and considering how the surf is breaking. This allows for analysis and critique. Yet it is no less social than the other forms of knowledge. Reflection and critique happen in a conversation, more exactly in many conversations, that usually involve many people, and can in principle involve the whole society.

I am describing social science here; but not only social science. Reflection on society can take other forms. Think of the novel, from Dickens' *Bleak House* with its critique of the British legal system, to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* narrating the colonial impact in west Africa, to Munro's wonderful evocations of Ontario rural communities. Think of humour, such as Leacock's satire of the ruling class, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. Or think of plays like Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* or television serials like *Mad Men* and *The Wire*.

Social science however is the pre-eminent form of reflective knowledge of society in one important respect. It involves systematic forms of research and conceptualization that allow knowledge to grow. Social science makes claims of truth that can be tested. Mistaken claims can be superseded, and new truths come into view. It would be hard to claim that *Mad Men* is better than *An Enemy of the People*, but we know damn well our sociology is better than Herbert Spencer's and Émile Durkheim's.

Not much sociology was taught in Australia when I was a student in the 1960s. I did a degree in History and Psychology. Sociology departments were being set up in other universities, but not at the good old University of Melbourne! Nor at the University of Sydney, where I did a higher degree in Government. I got a fine intellectual training; but the world was in flames. I was a molecule in a stream of student activism contesting the US war on Vietnam, the oppressiveness of Australian society, and the narrowness of university curriculum. We wanted

more relevant knowledge, a wider vision of society, and more critical perspectives. I turned to sociology to find them.

Many students still want those things in the 2010s, and those who do often turn to sociology. That is hardly surprising. The element of distancing involved in much sociological knowledge involves critique, and the critical stance can be generalized. That's not a necessary feature of sociological knowledge, as we quickly found in the orthodox social science of the 1960s; but it is a permanent possibility.

Which is why sociology is an uncomfortable trade. It speaks of matters that established powers would prefer to leave in decent silence: poverty, violence and exploitation. It speaks in tones that can offend, about power, privilege and the possibilities of change. Its formulation of problems rests on notions of the collective that are out of step with the ruling ideology of individualism. Sociology constantly concerns questions of the public interest, and rasps against the sensibilities of the privileged social groups to which most professional sociologists themselves belong.

### **The tabloid world**

A way of speaking about the social world that makes testable claims of truth is important because there are other ways of representing the social world – ways that are, indeed, based on systematic distortion. And these other ways flood the airwaves, the cables and the satellites.

We can take the history of infamous distortions of knowledge far back beyond current media. Episodes like British atrocity propaganda in the Great War, McCarthyism in the USA, the show trials in Moscow, and the ministrations of Dr Goebbels, stud twentieth-century history. There is even a branch of sociology, the theory of ideology, that treats the problem of distortion in a certain form.

But the intensity of distortion seems to have grown recently. In the 1960s, the idea proposed by Robert Welch (founder of the John Birch Society) in a black-covered book called *The Politician*, that Dwight Eisenhower was a communist agent, therefore illegitimate as President, defined its proponents as crazed extremists. In the 2000s and 2010s, the idea that Barack Obama was not American-born, therefore illegitimate as President, was almost mainstream. Mass politics on the right has become increasingly a systematic exercise in attention-getting and stirring up fear of social threats by exaggerated, and often simply false, claims about their evil schemes. The threats involved comprise a varying selection from migrants, Muslims, Blacks, refugees, Asians, Mexicans, homosexuals, feminists, pedophiles, union bosses, scientists, greens, the United Nations, or the European Union.

The social impact of tabloid formulas of thought has increased as newspapers have been overtaken by electronic media. That is ironic, since John Logie Baird, one of the inventors of television in the 1920s and 30s, had promoted it as a great aid to education. By the 1950s television in capitalist countries was firmly

in the hands of corporations, and its main purpose was advertising in the context of undemanding entertainment. In authoritarian states its main purpose was glorification of the regime, sometimes in the context of undemanding entertainment.

Cable television, the Internet and social media have not weakened corporate control, though they have changed its form, and made outright lying, abuse and manipulation more pervasive. Feminist and environmental work on the Web, for instance, will reliably be met by hostile trolling. Twitter feeds are increasingly invaded by “promoted” tweets – that is, paid advertisements by corporations. We are increasingly aware of the covert manipulation of the online world by authoritarian states, notably China and Russia. The idea of a public culture, more or less shared, dependent on measured debate and articulated by serious journalism with a claim to objectivity, is almost obsolete. It is certainly obsolete in the global media empire of Australia’s gift to the world, Rupert Murdoch. His original company running a state-level newspaper in Adelaide, South Australia, was called News Ltd; it has grown to an 800-company complex including the remnants of *The Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as Fox News.

The notion of science still retains a certain force, despite the scandals about faked results in biomedical drug research and the sustained attacks on climate science that have been sponsored by fossil fuel industries. Contemporary mass media offer a highly distorted view of what science is. With the decline of real journalism, the media rely on a flow of releases from universities and corporations about “breakthroughs” - which sometimes don’t occur at all, and rarely produce substantial effects.

The surviving prestige of science even applies to social science. Government economic policies, in practice determined by a calculus of political interests, are often presented as justified by economic modelling. Of course the details of the models are kept under wraps. The media releases do not mention that modelling actually produces a range of outcomes depending on differing assumptions, equations, data-sets and estimates.

Thus a kind of pseudo-economics has become normal currency in politics; and there is even a pseudo-sociology used the same way. A striking example is the Australian national government’s White Paper (i.e. policy guideline paper) *Australia in the Asian Century* (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). This document set out a broad agenda for economy, agriculture, education and national security. It was built around the idea that there is a rapidly rising middle class in Asia which will provide a vast, ever-expanding market for Australian goods and services, thus guaranteeing our prosperity into the future - if we are agile, entrepreneurial and corporate enough to grasp the opportunity.

Now I have heard of a rising middle class once or twice before. It was a staple of my History courses in the early 1960s: the rising middle class accounted for the English civil war, the Enlightenment, European industrialization, representative democracy, Mr Gladstone, and so forth. Somehow the middle class’s balloon-like ascent did not seem to produce universal prosperity on those previous occasions. Looked at closely, the White Paper’s idea of “middle” is simply an income category, its idea of “class” is vacuous, and the document ignores actual

social-scientific research on the structure of Asian societies. The function of the sociological language here is simply to provide a gloss of sophistication to some fairly crude corporate notions about marketing.

Tabloid media and tabloid policy-making depend on the absence, or at any rate the weakness, of an educated public. By that I don't mean a public with certificates or degrees, but a public that respects substantive knowledge and is engaged with institutions where enquiry and debate happen. Among working-class publics, such institutions include not only state schools but also self-help adult education, a labour press, and above all, labour unions, which have always served a function of economic and political education on a mass scale. It's the decline of these institutions (complete disappearance in the case of labour press and most serious adult education), first in anti-communist campaigns and then under neoliberalism, that has left rich and apparently sophisticated countries vulnerable to the racist tabloid politics of Brexit, Trump and "border protection" campaigns.

### **The research-based knowledge formation**

Most of the readers of this article will be academic staff or students in universities. The universities we know in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the main sites of a specific knowledge formation. There exist other knowledge formations in the world – indigenous knowledges, religious knowledge systems, and many bodies of traditional, technical and practical knowledge. But since the rise of the research university in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first in Germany and then in the United States, research-based knowledge has held the central place in the university curriculum. Conversely, universities have become the key institutions (though never the only ones) that support and develop research-based knowledge.

As all sociologists know, the awkward name "sociology" was invented by the French philosopher Auguste Comte. Before he fell in love and appointed himself Pope of a new religion of humanity (temple, holy family, saints and all), Comte produced the most influential account ever written of the whole knowledge formation, the account he called *la philosophie positive*. His contribution included an innovative classification of the fundamental sciences that – with modifications – still underpins the university curriculum. His new concept of sociology sat at the top of the hierarchy of sciences; not because it was the most important, but because it dealt with the most complex phenomena, presupposed all the others, and was historically the latest to develop. His idea of sociology or "social physics" embraced most of what we would now call social science.

European and North American sociologists of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, putting Comte's brilliant idea into practice, compiled great heaps of data from which they tried to extract the laws governing human social life. As they saw it, they were following the example of physicists with astronomical data, chemists with the findings of experiment, and especially biologists like Darwin with observations of animal and plant life.

The sociologists drew their data from all over the world, and from all human history known to them. This era was the high tide of European imperialism, and from the colonized world came masses of data about exotic customs, laws, kinship, sexuality, political structures, economies, religions, magic, and more. The astonishing assemblages the sociologists made can still be seen in texts like Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, Sumner's *Folkways*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and most strikingly of all, Durkheim's *L'Année sociologique* (the only major work of Durkheim's that is never cited in current sociology!).

Though the harvest of scientific "laws" was remarkably thin (the supposed laws were mostly confused ideas about social progress, which finally died under the guns of Verdun and the Somme), this effort firmly placed sociology in the category of research-based knowledge. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the discipline had shrunk from the grand synthesis imagined by Comte and Spencer, to being just one among a half-dozen social sciences in the US academic curriculum. Alongside economics, political science, anthropology, history and psychology, sociology was the one that specialized in studying the civil society of the global metropole. Yet in this transition, the concern with data and method survived. Indeed the interwar years were very fertile in this respect, developing sociological research methods that ranged from attitude scaling to life-history interviewing to industrial ethnography to urban surveillance.

It was the package of research methods, as much as Parsonian ideas about the social system, that characterized the academic and governmental sociology exported from the USA to the rest of the world in the Cold War years. This period produced the main institutional pattern of global sociology that we have today. It also produced the curious myth of the Three Founding Fathers, relegating Comte and Spencer to a misty pre-history and providing retrospective justification for re-defining sociology as the science of modern or industrial society.

Like other sciences, sociology as an institution is embedded in a global economy of knowledge. A key feature of that economy is a hierarchy, in which the elite institutions of the global metropole – the global North, the former imperial centres of western Europe and north America – occupy the central position. The hierarchy also involves a division of labour, in which data flows in to the centre from the peripheries, while the centre assembles and processes data, develops concepts and methods, and exports the result as theoretical and applied science.

For sociology specifically, the main institutional centre is the elite research universities of the United States: perhaps twenty-five universities including the Ivy League (Harvard, Columbia etc.), a few other influential private universities such as Chicago, Stanford and Northwestern, and the most prestigious public research universities including California, Illinois, SUNY and Wisconsin. The influence of particular departments waxes and wanes but this complex as a whole has remained stable for the last two generations. It houses most of the very influential individual sociologists, produces the graduates who staff the next tier of sociology departments at home and abroad, and predominates in research grants, editorships of the top journals, presidents of the American Sociological Association, and other markers of influence. The curricula of these elite

departments and the textbooks based on them provide models for the teaching of sociology all over the world.

Of course there are other significant centres: the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and others. Select writers from Europe may personally have more fame than any individual sociologist in the USA – Habermas, Foucault and Bourdieu spring to mind - though their worldwide recognition largely follows from being taken up, or promoted, in the USA.

Sociologists in the rest of the world live in the shadow of this central institutional complex. We constantly have to negotiate what the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1997) has dubbed “extroversion”, the stance required of intellectual workers in the global periphery: that is, being oriented to intellectual authority that comes from outside. We need to learn the concepts and methods that are taught in Harvard and California, we travel to study or update our knowledge in the global North, we are supposed to publish in their journals, go to their conferences, and join their networks. The result is an unstable mixture of dependence on the metropole’s sociology, which is required for being professionally up to date, and independence, which is required for being relevant to our own societies and speaking to local audiences. This too is an uncomfortable trade.

### **Useful sociology**

The research-based knowledge formation that we call sociology overlaps in many ways with everyday social know-how and socially located knowledges. The continuity between science and everyday knowing was a theme beautifully brought out in the epistemology of John Dewey - another philosopher sociologists need to read more of - to whom “science marks the perfecting of knowing in highly specialized conditions of technique” (Dewey 1916: 223). Those techniques, which in more contemporary language could be called the operations of knowledge construction in sociology, include the systematic assembling and presenting of information that is the glory of quantitative sociology.

Like any other set of operations, these can be put to work on trivial questions, and unfortunately they often are. The fact that a piece of sociological research looks rigorous, or actually is rigorous, need not mean that it illuminates anything that matters. There is also a category of research – attitude scaling is the case I know best, having done some of it myself – where the entities being counted are substantially artifacts of the research operations themselves. The research looks very precise, with measures of dispersion and statements of probability levels, and we get handsome tables of numbers to print in the journals. But the connection that the entities measured have with events in the actual social world is uncertain at best and often quite mysterious.

But there is other research using quantitative methods where the topic is far from trivial and the connection with events in the world is clear indeed. Studies

of income and wealth distribution, social access to higher education, the prevalence of violence and victimization, industrial and domestic divisions of labour, sexual practices, patterns of migration, correlations between race and home ownership, patterns in voting intentions, and social correlates of health, are among them.

These are all questions studied in sociology, questions that really do matter, some of them literally questions of life and death. They are things that an informed citizenry, an informed civil society and an informed policy-making process need to know about. Without such knowledge, myth and prejudice flourish, professions are blinded, advocacy becomes rhetoric, and public policy follows damaging courses.

Consider more closely the final example in my list, the sociology of health. In 2005 the World Health Organization, an arm of the United Nations, set up a commission on the social determinants of health. It assembled a distinguished team who duly produced a hefty report, *Closing the Gap in a Generation* (CSDH 2008). The report compiled data on the relationships that health and disease have with poverty, education, housing, rural economies, gender, employment and other matters. Its approach is now influencing health policy around the world. The report's "executive summary" starts thus:

Our children have dramatically different life chances depending on where they were born. In Japan or Sweden they can expect to live more than 80 years; in Brazil, 72 years; India, 63 years; and in one of several African countries, fewer than 50 years. And within countries, the differences in life chances are dramatic and are seen worldwide. The poorest of the poor have high levels of illness and premature mortality. But poor health is not confined to those worst off. In countries at all levels of income, health and illness follow a social gradient: the lower the socioeconomic position, the worse the health.

It does not have to be this way and it is not right that it should be like this. Where systematic differences in health are judged to be avoidable by reasonable action they are, quite simply, unfair. It is this that we label health inequity. Putting right these inequities – the huge and remediable differences in health between and within countries – is a matter of social justice. Reducing health inequities is, for the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (hereafter, the Commission), an ethical imperative. Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.

That's a concise and powerful statement of the relevance of sociology – specifically, descriptive quantitative sociology. Life and death are indeed at stake, for very large numbers of people.

Relevant, certainly; but also limited. Health sociologists have identified significant limitations in the simplified social models that the WHO Commission used (Schofield, 2015). Its framework is static: the social processes that generate the "determinants" are not in focus. The whole vast saga of imperialism, colonial conquest and exploitation, neoliberal politics, global trade

and finance, that lies behind the “worldwide” inequalities mentioned in the Commission’s first paragraph (e.g. in disability: Meekosha 2011), is pushed far into the background. The fact that health inequalities of a rather dramatic kind, i.e. death by dismemberment, are being directly produced by the actions of some of the United Nations’ prominent member governments – such as the US bombing of Iraq, or the Russian bombing of Aleppo which was happening while I wrote this – is unspeakable.

Descriptive sociology, then, produces useful information, information that a democratic and informed society needs to have. But something more is needed to produce sociological *understanding* for action to change the conditions documented. Here we are in the territory of theory, critique, and other forms of research more oriented to social process.

To get to grips with the HIV epidemic, for instance, documenting what groups were affected was necessary, but far from sufficient. It was essential also to know the practices through which the virus was spread; the situations, relationships, emotions and reasoning that gave rise to those practices; and the social resources that could be mobilized to change them. This has been the distinctive contribution of sociology to the global struggle against AIDS (Kippax et al. 1993), and has informed effective grassroots action in many countries.

Yet this knowledge project is hard to sustain. Social-scientific perspectives in AIDS research are confronted by the greater prestige of biomedical knowledge, supported by the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry. Currently, social action for AIDS prevention - sustainable, cheap and democratic – is being sidelined in international strategies by “treatment as prevention” – damaging, expensive and top-down. In that approach anti-retroviral drugs are distributed on a large scale to people who are not infected (Kippax 2015). Guess who will make a lot of money from that?

In other fields of knowledge with enormous consequences for the world we can see the potential of a sociological perspective, though it has not yet been widely accepted. There is, currently, much discussion of the idea that we are in the “Anthropocene” epoch, in which human action is changing the earth on a scale only huge geological forces have done before. The idea has been given credibility especially by climate change research.

It would be more accurate, I think, to speak of a “Sociocene” epoch. The “human” being referred to is a rapacious economy, irresponsible governments, cultural conditions allowing the destruction of nature, and the dominance of billionaires and profit-oriented corporations, rather than humans in general. Regrettably, in climate change studies, social science has only a marginal place. This can be seen in the famous reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and in the elaborate computer-based models in which research-based knowledge about climate is currently organized.

## **The intellectual project**

Collecting data, by any of the methods – statistical, historical, observational, interview-based, textual – that sociological researchers use, becomes most effective when it is part of a larger intellectual project.

The shape of the project is not standard among sociologists, any more than it is among mathematicians or geneticists. Any research-based discipline is at best a sheaf of knowledge-construction projects, some interconnecting and some separate. They are held together by institutional framing (departments, associations, journals) and some shared history and culture, but pushed apart by specializations, outside links, practical demands and generational change. There are, nevertheless, some characteristic shapes that the labours of sociological researchers take.

One is the project of documenting and accounting for a social reality that has been overlooked, underestimated, or misunderstood before. This was the shape taken by sociological research on gender after the feminist mobilization of the 1960s and 70s had shaken academic life in the global metropole. Feminist sociologists, most of them young and many of them coming out of movement activism, began counting and describing the evidences of gender inequality, sexist attitudes and culture. Among these was the previously taken-for-granted imbalance of labour – women’s heavier burden of housework and child care - which remained when the “two-career family”, often simply the two-job family, became more common.

This particular issue was addressed in an admirable piece of public sociology by Arlie Russell Hochschild (working, at the time, in one of the elite US universities mentioned above). Her book *The Second Shift* (1989) started from media images of the “supermom” and existing quantitative research on time use in American families, but it was substantially based on close-focus interviews with fifty couples, plus some ethnographic observation. The result is a fascinating account of the ways particular couples handled the demands of combining family life and jobs in a still-unequal gender order, with special attention to the emotional commitments and frustrations involved.

This is all described in clear and thoughtful prose, and could stand simply as a classic of descriptive qualitative sociology. But it is given its edge because it is located in a larger intellectual project; in fact, two. One is the project of understanding the gender order, in which a major problem is why gender inequalities are so sticky, so resistant to change. The other, in which Hochschild herself was a pioneer, is the project of understanding the social dimensions of emotion, now a sub-field of sociology in its own right. *The Second Shift* illustrates the creative interweaving of knowledge projects that is one of the sources of vitality in the discipline.

The teasing-out of connections between processes is equally important in the study of social inequalities in education. The statistical patterns are familiar: children from privileged families tend to do well in tests and exams, and have higher rates of school completion and university entrance, while children from backgrounds of poverty and ethnic marginality tend to do worse in tests, are more likely to be in trouble with school, more often drop out of school and are much less likely to enter higher education. Despite fifty years of anti-poverty

programmes, these inequalities remain, in rich countries as well as poor countries.

Conventional wisdom sees the causes of these unequal outcomes in the children themselves - their brains or their diligence - or in bad family attitudes to education. Sociological research certainly addresses family processes, but is sceptical about the "bad attitudes", and sees families as having different resources for their interactions with the schools. Sociologists have given close attention to schooling as an institution. We have mapped the character of the hegemonic curriculum, the sorting and selection mechanisms in school systems, and the wider relationships of education to class dynamics that include the financing of schools and the role of schools as organizers of social classes. The statistics of unequal outcomes cannot be understood, and the educational exclusions – huge and remediable differences, to use the language of the WHO about health - cannot be remedied, without bringing these institutional processes into focus.

Sociological research addressing practical problems, such as the dilemmas of two-job families and the inequalities in schooling, needs more than tools of description. It also needs tools for analysis, ideas about processes, and ways of linking different processes; it needs concepts, hypotheses and models of causation. It needs, in short, to engage in ambitious intellectual projects.

It is the construction of these larger projects that gives sociology its intellectual excitement. I have criticized the completely un-historical myth of the Three Founding Fathers. But if you insist on choosing imaginary fathers among dead white European bourgeois men, then Dr Marx, Professor Durkheim and Captain Weber (yes, he was in the Prussian army) are not a bad trio to pick. All had large intellectual ambitions, enthusiasm for bringing disparate material together, creative imagination, and Marx even had a sense of humour.

I have found sociology a source of intellectual excitement all my working life. Over the years I have witnessed the ups and downs of three very broad conceptual projects. One I thoroughly disagree with: the neo-positivist attempt to make sociology an inhuman social physics. One I partially disagree with: the post-structuralist attempt to interpret social reality through analysis of discourse and subjectivity. One I hold more hope for, and have tried to advance: the attempt to understand the dynamics of social structures in relation to the creativity of social practices.

Other sociologists would map the conceptual territory differently, but that does not really matter. The goal of our work is not to create an orthodoxy. It is to push out the limits of our understanding of the distinctively human form of life, the social – whose current trajectory, without better understanding and action based on it, promises to destroy all forms of life on the planet.

## **Trajectories**

We do sociology today under the shadow of nuclear war and environmental catastrophe. Since the 1980s when the IPCC was founded and the “nuclear winter” discussion (independently) began, there has been increasing awareness that the effects of current technologies and their social uses really are worldwide. It is not an accident that discussion of economic “globalization” began about the same time, and the concept became popular in sociology in the following decade (Connell 2007).

Awareness of the global structuring of social-scientific knowledge has grown in fits and starts; it has by no means been a smooth progress. The problem has certainly been addressed in the past (e.g. S. H. Alatas 1977), but attention fluctuated. Post-colonial perspectives developed vigorously in the humanities, with the work of Said, Spivak and Bhabha, before related projects built up and gained recognition in the social sciences. The elite knowledge institutions of the global North have a familiar routine for dealing with troubling innovations: they declare them a new specialty. Thus “post-colonial studies” can be granted a new journal, a new course, even a new degree programme, inviting its practitioners to get on with their business in this fenced-off territory and not trouble the mainstream any more.

Recognizing the coloniality of knowledge in the mainstream itself is potentially not just troubling, it is explosive – in the same way as recognizing the class structuring of mainstream philosophy was in the days of Lukács (1923), and recognizing the patriarchal structuring of mainstream social science has been in the past generation (D. Smith 1987). All reveal radical insufficiency in the research-based knowledge formation and major injustice in the economy of knowledge. All raise sharp questions about the directions the intellectual project will take in the future.

It is not hard to see unattractive futures for sociology in the neoliberal world. Neoliberal regimes have no need for social science as a full-scale intellectual enterprise, not even for economics. Neoliberal politicians and managers already know the answer to all important questions: unleash market forces. So a policy of privatising everything in sight, and following the mantras of a simplified free-market economics, will generally meet their intellectual needs. Investing in serious knowledge production about society seems pointless in a neoliberal universe, so an easy answer is for neoliberal university managers to close down the unnecessary departments.

In the neoliberal environment, nevertheless, a reduced sociology may still be useful, for two purposes. One is to collect or interpret the big data (mostly owned by corporations already) needed for administrative issues such as where to locate the new tollway, how to sustain consumer sentiment, and what throughput can be expected from schools to universities and prisons. The other is for sociology to become the science of the losers, those who don’t succeed in market competition - producing knowledge about the poor, the halt and the lame that can assist the police and the helping professions in managing them. In this field qualitative methods might survive, as sociologists venture on ethnographic expeditions and bring back tales of life among the deviants and the marginals.

Stretching a little, it is even possible to see a neoliberal future for sociology as entertainment. There will be a considerable need for entertainment in the grey murk of a market-dominated world, and some of those ethnographic tales might be best-sellers. (Think of *The Wire*, or *Transparent*.) There is already a genre of lightweight research, where people write showy papers on quirky topics, from fashions in babies' names to the political thought of Lady Gaga. There will be, perhaps, a niche for ludic social research,<sup>2</sup> producing a decorative science that nobody need take more seriously than we take Karl Lagerfeld.

But there are other futures with more substance in them. If the argument earlier in this paper is correct, though sociology is not much needed by neoliberal managers and politicians, it is vital for a democratic society. Its knowledge is needed for informed public debate, and for intelligent collective decision-making. If we are to deal effectively with this pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world<sup>3</sup> as it really is, and not try to wish it away or shrink it to a bare diagram, then we need the most powerful, the richest, social science we can get. And since this pig of a world keeps producing its farrow – new facts, new relationships, new situations - as history unfolds on its erratic path, we need a social science that is capable of open-ended development and growth.

There is a future for sociology and the social sciences more generally, if schools, universities and other institutions take seriously the need for public education - in this extended sense of creating conditions for democracy – and take seriously the role of research in supporting public education.

Seen on a world scale, that issue makes the decolonization of the social sciences imperative. What has been said already about the integration of social processes across world regions is enough to show a democratic project in one region needs support from the others. It is still early days for this project in most of the social sciences, though debated for decades in Anthropology (Asad 1973).

Decolonization will require re-thinking curricula, methodology, theory, and the way the workforce of social science is constituted. We already have some fine resources for this work (e.g. L. Smith 2012, Bhambra 2014, S. F. Alatas 2014, Cooper and Morrell 2014) but a demanding job still lies ahead.

I want to finish, not on the protestant-ethic reminder that there is hard work to come, but with the happier reflection that there will also be intellectual excitement. Sociology at its best gives us glimpses of the structure of social reality. The social is, as I have insisted through this article, historically dynamic; it is constituted by creative practices which bring new realities into existence. That is happening all around us now, and will go on happening into the future, unless nuclear winter or global warming choke us off.

Consider, for instance, the mutation of global power relations. The old colonial empires were dismantled, mostly, from the 1940s to the 1960s. They were

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<sup>2</sup> A concept I owe to Adriano Senkevics, whose apt observation about a certain academic conference is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>3</sup> I'd love to claim this splendid phrase but as many readers will know it's actually from Yeats, "Blood and the Moon".

replaced by the cold-war superpowers and the self-funding multinational corporations mostly based in the USA and western Europe. That world too has mutated in the age of neoliberalism. Global production has been re-located and long-distance trade multiplied; finance capital has expanded, sustained by huge transnational flows; masculinized corporate management increasingly operates through computerized systems that have moved offshore; the Chinese and Indian states approach superpower status; new configurations of power, influence and dependence are emerging.

How do we understand all that? What strategies make sense now for social groups trying to change global inequalities and power relations? The familiar Eurocentric theories of states and ruling classes don't give us much grip on the world we live in now. Yet other powerful ideas are emerging and there is enormous scope for creative social thought. That is the kind of sociology we need, and it can be made. But it will also have to be fought for.

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