



# Bringing it 'Home'? Sociological Practice and the Practice of Sociology

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## Abstract

Since *Sociology* was established in 1967, the journal has assumed a significant role in shaping the discipline. In the interim years it is often said that the very *practice of sociology* has now 'spun out' beyond the dedicated departments that were once the centres of *sociological practice*. This raises questions as to the relationship between sociology and other disciplines, questions that are compelling and arguably distinct from a welcome recognition of sociology's undoubted intellectual hybridity. The extent to which this is a productive tension or one that requires a resolution is an ongoing conversation to which this special issue speaks. In this introductory article we take what we consider to be an innovative route that is guided by the theme of 'Bringing Sociology Home' whilst simultaneously recognising the enormous strengths brought by the multidisciplinary developments of the last 50 volumes. We set out the terrain before introducing a mixture of short and substantive papers from contributors, as well as interviews, with scholars who have

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made a contribution to the study of the discipline of sociology both inside and beyond the pages of the journal.

## Keywords

50th anniversary, disciplinary identity, sociology, *Sociology* journal, special issue 2016

## Introduction

In this special anniversary issue of *Sociology*, we mark 50 volumes of the journal by reflecting on the developing story of sociology as both a disciplinary and intellectual pursuit. In this respect, the collection stands alongside a corpus of anniversary publications marking the contribution of *Sociology* to key aspects of sociological enquiry, such as: social class (Ryan and Maxwell, 2016), gender and intersectionality (Roth and Dashper, 2016), identity and the self (Skinner et al., 2016), as well as earlier reflections on how *Sociology* has showcased the study of race (Meer and Nayak, 2013) and developments in empirical research (Ryan and McKie, 2012). What all these collections clearly display is how, since its establishment under the editorship of Michael Banton in 1967 (and so 2017 marks 50 years in addition to 50 volumes), the journal has made a significant contribution to shaping the wider discipline. At the same time, the anniversary publications also demonstrate that the *practice of sociology* has ‘spun out’ (Halford and Strangleman, 2009: 815) beyond the dedicated departments that were once the centres of *sociological practice*. In this respect it could perhaps be argued therefore that sociology’s ‘intellectual success has been as much about appealing to “dissidents” from other subjects, as about training a cadre of “paradigm-following” sociologists’ (Savage, 2010: 662).

To what extent this interdisciplinary practice of sociology is an asset or an expression of vulnerability for the discipline remains a moot point. For Hollands and Stanley (2009: para. 3.13), it reflects the dynamic quality of an intellectual tradition forged as much at its periphery as at its centre, and which in turn could ultimately facilitate ‘the re-configuration of a renewed and reinvigorated sociology’. There is nothing worse, complained the late John Urry (2005: para. 1.3), ‘than a discipline seeking to erect boundaries around something that cannot be bounded’. Others have begged to differ. At a time when sociologists have allegedly ‘been losing their confidence’, and doing so precisely while ‘other disciplines have shown a greater concern for “social” phenomena’ (Scott, 2005: para. 1.1), the question of the relationship between sociology and other disciplines remains compelling and arguably distinct from a welcome recognition of sociology’s undoubted intellectual hybridity. ‘In these circumstances’, maintains Scott, ‘it is all too easy for a discipline to lose its sense of identity’ (Scott, 2005: para. 2.5), such that ‘the time has arrived when the task of consolidating and maintaining the sociological imagination must be re-affirmed’ (Scott, 2005: para. 5.4).

What form such an affirmation might take is not clear. For Burowoy (2016) it must have a wide aperture to take in a global field of sociology, hitherto characterised by arbitrary power and the concentration of material and symbolic resources, and so include an account through which this can be contested and re-articulated. Bhabra (2016) seeks to anchor it in a ‘connected sociologies’ approach that reconfigures our understanding of

the 'colonial modern' and its profound relationship to knowledge production more broadly. Lamont (2016), the president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), encourages us to register 'the discipline's strength' – an endogenous set of both methodological and conceptual approaches that are 'multi-perspectival [in] nature' because they can simultaneously 'focus on the micro-, meso-, and macro-'. Back (2016) meanwhile is perhaps less persuaded on the need for a 're-affirmation of sociology' since, to his mind, 'people find themselves within the discipline of sociology without necessarily intending to, and as a consequence of this involvement have expanded the parameters of what sociology can imagine itself to be'.

After 50 years at the centre of the discipline, it is within this highly active and somewhat controversial set of debates that we locate this anniversary special issue of *Sociology*, with contributors discussing inter-disciplinary connections between sociology and criminology (Carrabine, 2016), environmental science (Hamilton et al., 2016), creative industry studies (McRobbie, 2016), social and cultural theory (Burowoy, 2016; Bhambra, 2016; Holmwood, 2016; Lamont, 2016), social policy (Banton, 2016), methodologies (Frade, 2016; Twine, 2016), cultural studies (Back, 2016; Burton, 2016; Goodwin, 2016), human geography (Tolia-Kelly, 2016) and the study of work and employment (Glucksmann, 2016) – all as sites of sociological practice. Our collection encourages the view that sociologists should not demur from questioning 'what knowledge is produced under these conditions and what type of sociologist is produced in such circumstances' (Halford and Strangleman, 2009: 818). However, it is equally important to register at the outset that this special issue is certainly not seeking to join a long established tradition 'of sociologists being fascinated by the weaknesses of their own discipline' (Savage, 2010: 659). Despite the contemporary resonance, this is a tendency we can trace back to Michels and the interwar years, with a characterisation of sociology as 'largely demoralized' amid 'an intense spiritual self-criticism' (Michels, 1932: 123–124 quoted in Hollands and Stanley, 2009: 1.1). This early disciplinary reflexivity can then be charted over the decades since: e.g. Mills, 1959; Gouldner, 1971; Abrams, 1981; Seidman, 1994; Savage and Burrows, 2007; Adkins and Lury, 2012. Hence Back (2016), in his interview here, states that 'crisis is almost as a kind of inherent, vocational reflex; crisis, crisis and another crisis. It gives us a sense of urgency but it is often an artificial one', while Frade (2016), in his contribution, argues that 'crisis as a mode of temporal experience constitutes sociology's very mode of historical existence'.

In truth, the most prevalent discussion of sociology's recent standing and fortunes, as it is expressed in the widely discussed 'public sociology' debates, sits adjacent to such concerns. Standard bearers for better engaging with society, or serving as organic intellectuals for progressive forces, do not begin from an assessment of imminent decline, and nor does this collection. Instead it begins with sociology 'on the inside, as a mode of intellectual inquiry' (Rosenfeld, 2010: 668), rather than as tradition beholden to external structural dynamics, a concern that is expertly covered elsewhere (e.g. Holmwood and McKay, 2015). As Frade (2016) puts it later in this issue, we can distinguish between the 'foundational crises' and the frequently discussed 'crises of (disciplinary) exhaustion'. Our overall aim here is to focus upon and illustrate the former, the capacity of sociology, through its interaction with other disciplines.

In this special issue, therefore, we take what we consider to be an innovative route that is guided by the theme of 'Bringing Sociology Home' whilst simultaneously recognising the enormous strengths brought by the multidisciplinary developments of the last 50 volumes. As we detail further below, we include a mixture of short and substantive papers from invited contributors, as well as interviews with scholars who have made a disciplinary contribution to the study of sociology both inside and beyond the pages of the journal.

## From Sociology to ...?

In his contribution to the collection, Carrabine (2016) understands that 'where once the ties had been strong', criminology now sees itself as a distinct activity to sociology, with its own gravitational centre. This is not necessarily a position that he endorses, but it is illustrative of the changing pattern of sociology's relationship to what many sociologists, and some criminologists, understand to be a sub-field.<sup>1</sup> In so far as it is indicative of a wider tendency, Holmwood (2010a: 646) argues that, 'it is not only individuals and frameworks, concepts and methodologies that migrate, but also entire sub-fields'. We might quickly observe this by noting the multiple undergraduate and postgraduate degree pathways available in combination with or 'through' sociology, in addition to criminology: in social policy, business and management studies, socio-legal studies, education, human geography, media studies and gender studies to name the most immediate.

What is clear is that each is nonetheless anchored in a sociological ontology, namely a concern with the nature and implication of the 'social'. Each moreover displays close family resemblances with sociology at the theoretical level (e.g. in conceiving the role of agency, structure, culture, identity and power) as well as in methodological approaches and techniques. On the one hand this is a reflection of the intellectual vitality of these subject specialisms, but on the other it reflects something deeper, explained in Holmwood's (2010a) description of sociology as an 'exporter' subject. Here, core (sociological) epistemological and methodological practice is typically and easily 'imported' by other subjects, who 'do not have their own distinctive status as disciplines, but "import" frameworks, concepts and methodologies' (Holmwood, 2010a: 643).

The challenge that this mobility raises for sociology is that sociological questions, perspectives and subject matter cannot remain the preserve of the discipline of sociology or, compounded by the concern that they 'are rarely translated back into the primary field' (Holmwood, 2010a: 646). To what extent this is an opportunity for sociology or, as Holmwood (2010a) describes, 'sociology's misfortune' remains under explored. One of our tasks here is to redress this oversight with contributions from scholars who have traversed disciplinary boundaries in the pursuit of sociological inquiry. As Goodwin (2016) demonstrates in his contribution to this volume, recent explorations of the supposed 'flight' of the sociology of work, organisations and employment to business or management schools encapsulate some of the challenges presented to the wider discipline by the creation of new silos of knowledge, the dilution of sociological concerns and perspectives, and the potential loss of criticality and independence.

Several observations are pertinent here. The first concerns the extent to which sociological practice outside the formal (disciplinary/university) practice of sociology is not an entirely unidirectional activity. In other words, it is not the case that sociology is without influence from those it 'exports' to. Critical Race Theory (CRT), for example, was forged

in legal studies (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000: xiv), and so too, for that matter, was intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988). While both are now part of the sociological repertoire (Meer and Nayak, 2013), they are only so ‘through scavenging from insights and approaches thrown up/out elsewhere’ (Urry, 2005: para. 3.1). The same could be said of a variety of postcolonial approaches that were anchored in the humanities, with orientalism as the most obvious example (Said, 1978). Without here assessing the status of CRT, intersectionality or postcolonial critique within sociology (Alexander and Nayak, 2016; Bhambra, 2007), it is clear that sociology can be centripetal as well as centrifugal, and that interdisciplinary debates can bring important and energising influences to the discipline.

A further observation concerns the extent to which institutional impulses motivate sociological practice by another name. Or, as Holmwood (2010b: 672) puts it, ‘we make sociology, but not in circumstances of our choosing’. Criminology is probably the best illustration; as a growing discipline that frequently now exceeds sociology in terms of student recruitment, it is able to pursue sociological concerns through its own learned societies, conferences and allied journals. What this perhaps shows, and it is something captured in Carrabine’s (2016) discussion of the National Deviancy Conference (NDC), is that sociology’s interdisciplinarity potentially means ‘that it has problems in maintaining disciplinary claims in relation to sub-areas of the field and to importer fields’ (Holmwood, 2010: 646). The issue of sociology’s identity therefore is undoubtedly important, particularly in terms of the discipline’s position within educational institutions. Our aim, through the contributions to this special issue, is to demonstrate the ongoing indispensability of sociological theories, methods and concepts to the aforementioned sub-areas, importer fields and related disciplines. As Rosenfeld (2010: 669) puts it,

economics, political science, and psychology all address the problems of order, control, conformity, and rule-breaking, but only sociology conceives of them *sui generis* and without, as a matter of disciplinary perspective, privileging the economic, political, or psychological aspects of social context and action over the others.

It is worth re-stating that the traffic of course is not unidirectional. As the proceeding discussion shows, the porous relationship between sociology and other disciplines in turn shapes sociology’s own disciplinary identity too.

## ‘See it whole’

The special issue includes a collection of peer-reviewed articles from invited contributors who have made a leading contribution to the present shape of the discipline, as well as to potential ‘successor’ subjects over the last 50 years. In addition to the full papers we include shorter substantive contributions in the form of reflexive essays, as well as three interviews with scholars who have made a significant contribution to the focus of the SI, but who are located in quite different places in their assessment of the key issues. The collection concludes with two book reviews that neatly complement our focus and bring us back to where the discussion commenced.

Eamonn Carrabine launches the articles with a discussion of perhaps the most hotly debated import/export relationship, that between sociology and criminology. He charts

how, as criminology has developed over the past 25 years, its relationship to the sociological imagination has fractured, to the detriment of the field. In particular, he maintains that the formerly overriding influence of social theory has diminished and this needs to be renewed for the benefit of both disciplines. Crucially, Carrabine argues that this is not just a criminological ‘problem’ but also partly arises from the fragmentation of sociology and, particularly, the increasing specialisation and marginalisation of social theory within the discipline. The renewal of social theory as a “cosmopolitan” vision’ (Carrabine, 2016) should be a unifying force, reinvigorating the ties between sociology and criminology and enriching both disciplines.

The marginalisation of social theory, and a call for its renewal is also a theme within Carlos Frade’s (2016) fresh and bold critique of the debate on ‘big data’, the latter initiated by Savage and Burrows (2007) within the pages of this journal. Frade argues that in the era of big data and the digital capitalism, sociology can and should, through a renewal of social theory and its capacity to ‘see it whole’ when compared to other disciplines, aim for more than servicing a ‘knowing capitalism’. According to Frade there are alternative responses to the coming crisis of empirical sociology, not least the renewal of social theory within the public domain in order to reveal the political economy underlying big data.

The imperative to ‘see it whole’, placing social phenomena within the appropriate social context, the essence of both the sociological imagination and the cosmopolitan character of sociological theory and method, are themes which run throughout our substantive papers. Miriam Glucksmann’s (2016) fascinating discussion of ‘consumption work’ draws upon a long theoretical tradition within the sociology of work and employment wherein ‘work’ is defined in its broadest possible sense and studied in relationship to other areas of social life, e.g. consumption. Her analysis and argument would simply not be possible without the plural character of the sociological discipline. Consistent with this theme, Tolia-Kelly (2016) tells us, ‘I do not separate the writings of Stuart Hall and Nigel Thrift as *sociological* or *geographical* respectively’. In her contribution she sets herself the task of thinking through race and culture in the space of the museum, and how this rests on a ‘spatially and temporally situated account of the ways in which racialised cultures are encountered and refigured in the everyday’. The dialogue here is between cultural geographers working on affect and sociologists working on race as a category of difference.

In something of a step change, Hamilton et al. (2016) take the practice of sociology to environmental science in their examination of the ecological crisis and responses to it, looking particularly at the role of ideology. Sociologists, they maintain, have been ‘cognizant of economic and political forces and have studied this opposition [between the social and earth sciences], but less commonly as part of interdisciplinary teams’. Their contribution is conceived to introduce sociological dimensions to what are traditionally physical science frameworks. In the final contribution to this section, McRobbie’s (2016) analysis of the creative industries brings with it an important discussion on the role of sociological method. In the era of big data, argues McRobbie, creative industry research has tended to ‘sidestep questions of method’. To this end, the practice of sociology has an important role ‘in rectifying this deficit’. Yet this discussion is also tied to the alternating relationship between sociology and other approaches. McRobbie details how this might lead to a kind of ‘aestheticisation of sociology’, or a new kind of programme for

cultural research in a dynamic creative economy, as much as bolstering the capacity of creative industry research to grasp the social.

## Back to the Future?

In the opening reflexive essay, Burawoy (2016) demands an 'alternative' sociology, able to forge a distinctive course out of the 'wreckage'. What might this alternative futuristic discipline look like? Long dominated by white male intellectuals from the Global North, contributions from scholars from across the globe are transforming the discipline. However, as Burawoy goes on to argue, a global sociology produces yet another conundrum: it can either work within the constraints of the prevailing hegemonic order or it can work against it, seeking an alternative hegemony. The way forward, Burawoy maintains, is to 'go local' and develop a public sociology, one that works both with and against the dominant sociologies of the North.

Bhambra has long made a significant contribution to this activity by setting her sights beyond sociology's current vistas, and her reflexive contribution (Bhambra, 2016) tells us much about where sociology has come from as a discipline, and where it is now, 'substantively, conceptually / methodologically, and epistemologically'. She spells out how the changing landscape of higher education and 'the academy being opened up to diverse demographics, specifically to scholars from social locations not typical of those previously entering higher education', led to challenges within the discipline by feminists and queer theorists and to a move away from a historically Eurocentric branch of knowledge. However, she argues that post-colonial studies have shown how the historical omission of race as a sociological concern has represented a different challenge, 'hard to overcome through simple inclusion'. She explores this complexity through a discussion which argues for a future encompassing what she elaborates as 'connected sociologies'.

Twine (2016), as a 'North American feminist ethnographer and critical race theorist', uses her reflexive essay to look in on British sociology. Choosing visual sociology as her medium, she brings together biography, theory and methodology in providing a detailed account of her own qualitative research practice, drawing on fieldwork with British multiracial families and her development of the notions of racial and visual literacy. She registers the importance of British sociology both to the progress of the discipline and to her own development as a sociologist, whilst at the same time deploring the lack of attention given to visual sociology in the US. This, she explains, is due in part to what she describes as a 'methodological wall' dividing US sociologists 'along the lines of qualitative versus quantitative methods'. Interestingly, and by contrast, she argues that innovation in British sociological research, focused here on the use of visual sociology, has contributed significantly to wider understandings of race and social justice in a way that US sociology has not.

The next cluster of reflexive essays offers an un-choreographed debate on acknowledging and holding in tension both the 'above' and the 'below', the public and the private of social life, as something that has both underpinned the strength of the sociological discipline and, as both Goodwin (2016) and Burton's (2016) personal reflections show, many of our own careers within it. Goodwin, now located firmly back within the 'home'

of a sociology department, after a spell in an interdisciplinary school of management, suggests we should go forward as ‘champions’ of the discipline, proud of the distinctive sociological lens we bring to our investigations of social issues. Second, Goodwin argues, we should continue to look back to the legacy of our sociological forebears and use their insights to inform the future.

And what of new generations of sociologists? Sarah Burton’s contribution is optimistic. A sociologist more ‘by accident than design’, she reminds us that not only has sociology ‘spun out’ to other disciplines but that other disciplines consistently ‘*spin in*’ to sociology. A migrant from English Literature, what carries particular resonance for Burton is the ‘sociological imagination’: this is ‘what sets sociology apart’. This ‘handle’ on the world, as Mills himself described it in personal letters (Wakefield, 2001: 8), is for Burton the distinctive ‘way of looking’: the sociological lens which Goodwin also refers to, which draws in scholars from across the disciplinary field to sociology, in recognition that this is their ‘home’. While this home is highly mobile, an ever changing meeting point for global scholars of all theoretical persuasions, we should always remember that sociology imports as much as it exports and that it is this dynamic interdisciplinary freedom which promises much for the future.

These reflexive essays make a valuable contrast to our final contribution in this section, which takes us back to the beginnings of this journal. It is a privilege to include here a reflexive piece by *Sociology*’s founding editor, Michael Banton, 50 years after he led the publication of the first issue. His piece fulfils its remit in reflecting on five decades of sociology and social policy or, as he terms it, the distinction between pure and applied social science. Banton argues that while there are logical bureaucratic reasons for treating sociology and social policy as distinct subjects, in terms of teaching and administration, there are also solid intellectual justifications for this division, based principally on ‘a particular philosophy of science’. Put simply, Banton argues that while the work of sociologists and those working in the social policy arena are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there is a clear divide based on sociology as ‘seeking new knowledge in the form of better explanations’, and social policy as ‘seeking practical knowledge useful to the improvement of existing practice’. Given recent developments in the discipline, specifically the trend towards departments of sociology which would previously have submitted to the Sociology unit of assessment in the Research Excellence Framework (2014) choosing instead to be returned to the social policy unit of assessment, this distinction is important and timely (see Holmwood and McKay, 2015).

Banton’s piece leaves us with the prevailing question: do disciplines matter? The internal configurations of disciplines are of course profoundly contingent and messy affairs, but the question of their provenance is less important to some commentators than is their contemporary identity and explanatory force. For Holmwood (2010a: 644), ‘[d]isciplinary identity is crucial precisely because the distinction between “exporter” and “importer” subjects implies a hierarchical relation among subject areas, and this will potentially be contested’. Put another way: ‘Sociology has to be achieved against an internal tendency to self-subversion’ (Holmwood, 2010a: 650). This is to some extent a Bourdieusian (1990) concern in so far as it implies a ‘classification struggle’ over theory and, certainly, methodology, and it is an issue registered by all our contributors. ‘There is a risk’, maintains Lamont (2016), that ‘sociology will be left with the study of networks, as they are often conceptualized as operating at the meso level, which is where

sociologists are best positioned to claim superior knowledge'. As has already been indicated, Lamont's view is a more optimistic one, that leverages sociology's distinctive span across not only topic and scales of analysis but also methodologies.

We conclude this special anniversary issue of *Sociology* with two book reviews chosen to complement our focus: WG Runciman's (2015) *Very Different, But Much the Same: The Evolution of English Society Since 1714*, and *The Shame of Poverty*, by Robert Walker (2014). There is a long record of dispute between the disciplines of history and sociology over how to explain social change. In his latest book Runciman applies his theory of culture and social selectionism to examine a period of history usually taken to exhibit fundamental changes in the political, ideological and economic features of social relations. The theory has roots in key ideas in the thought of Darwin. Parallels in the theoretical approach might be drawn with Room's (2011) recent book *Complexity, Institutions and Public Policy: Agile Decision-Making in a Turbulent World*.

Most contributors to this emerging way of thinking about social and sociological theory explicitly avoid a reductionist interpretation of 'the social' and of individual agency. It reflects demanding exercises in sympathetic bridge-building between biological and social scientific disciplines, including, of course, sociology itself. It may be that the approach will imply that sociologists will need to reformulate some features of what was described earlier as the 'sociological ontology'. So Runciman and others may be developing theory which should be seen already as impinging on the varied discussions reported in this special issue. Whether or not that is the case, it does seem that it must be accepted, at some stage, that 'the findings of biology and social science will need to be compatible' if either is 'to rate as satisfactory' (Laland and Brown, 2002: 316; see too Offer, 2010: 306–327).

Walker's *The Shame of Poverty* explores in a novel way aspects of a landscape made popular by Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). Goffman in the main did not distinguish cases in which 'shame' was a feature – whether for 'normals' or the stigmatised – from cases in which simply a perception of 'difference' was involved. This blurring of a real distinction perhaps raises questions about the nature of Goffman's appreciation of the subtleties and nuances that need to accompany the understanding of agency. Walker, however, makes 'shame' itself the centre of his research. As Birrell's review explains, 'shame' is becoming a key topic in areas such as social policy studies. Walker's study demonstrates how sociological work on the concept of stigma is powering important new thinking on what we may have to get used to calling 'shame studies'.

It is in this respect that we return to the beginning. Namely, the tension between those on the one hand who are 'committed to the idea of the necessity of a "theoretical core"' (Holmwood, 2010a: 649) and are concerned by the 'co-existing and mutually exclusive (semi) paradigms which continually split and re-form in different combinations' (Holmwood, 2010a: 649), and those on the other hand who find 'the move to try and define the discipline ... a waste of time' (Back, 2016). The extent to which this is a productive tension or one that requires a resolution is an ongoing conversation to which this special issue speaks.

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## Note

1. Rosenfeld (2010: 669) puts this in the following terms: 'Criminology does not have a distinctive corpus of orienting perspectives, theories, or methods. ... What does criminology draw from sociology that it cannot acquire elsewhere? Nothing less than many of its most basic concepts and problematics: order, power, social control, social structure, social institutions, class, community, compliance, conformity, and deviance.'

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