



Interview

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# John Holmwood: Sociology of Structure, Sociology as Structure

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John was born in Hull, and lived in Manchester and Glasgow before settling in Chelmsford at around the age of 11 (his father worked in tailoring, his mother as a typist). He attended state schools and went to the University of Cambridge to study economics before changing to social and political sciences with the opportunity of specialising in sociology. He did a year at UCLA before returning to graduate studies at the University of Cambridge. His first academic job was at the newly established sociology department at the University of Tasmania, before going to the University of Edinburgh in 1980, where he stayed for the next 20 years. He then took up positions at the Universities of Sussex and Birmingham. The latter ended badly with the closure of the sociology department in 2010 by a vice chancellor committed to the marketisation of higher education (he was a member of the Browne Review). ‘The first chill winds of the new fees regime were in the air’, he writes. Together with Gurminder K Bhambra, Lucy Mayblin, Mark Carrigan and Michael Farrelly, he set up the *Campaign for the Public University*, and with Gurminder K Bhambra and Sue Scott, *Discover Society*, a free online monthly magazine of social research, commentary and policy analysis. His research interests are in the nature of sociological explanation and inequality and social justice, including the university as a site of knowledge production and social reproduction. His publications include *Explanation and Social Theory* (Holmwood and Stewart, 1991), *Founding Sociology? Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory* (Holmwood, 1996) and *A Manifesto for the Public University* (Holmwood, 2011).

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**(NM):** *You have been very active in challenging the government's reforms to higher education, how does this relate to your stance on public sociology and pragmatism, about which you have written recently?*

**(JH):** I think public sociology is reform-oriented sociology. I see pragmatism as saying that sociology should be oriented to social reform and that is what gives purpose to sociology as a science. Expressing this in terms of post-positivist philosophies of science and arguments about objectivity and the politics of knowledge, I think that we can see that transformative, or reconstructive, moments in sociology have often come from their association with social movements, or at least an engagement with them. Feminism is an example. If there was no commitment to a social movement and to gender justice, all you would have is gender studies, not feminist sociology. So is sociology, generally, to be thought of as being just like gender studies – a series of fields where there are no commitments, and, therefore, little drive towards the reconstruction of understandings – or, like feminism, aligned to a transformative project?

Putting this in more general terms, what the analogy of 'gender studies *versus* gender justice' means for me, is that sociology takes its force from its drive towards democratic knowledge, not simply objective knowledge, though, of course, there are issues of the adequacy of knowledge put to the service of democracy. We may differ in what we mean by democracy – that is not a problem so long as we make the argument that democracy is central to how we are defining sociology's purpose. I don't like a definition of public sociology that ties it closely to the specific value of emancipation. That seems to me one version of democracy rather than making it about democratic knowledge as such, knowledge that facilitates public debate.

**NM:** *Does public sociology make sense of, and clear the ground for, arguments for the public university?*

**JH:** Yes, I would say that it is no accident that sociology is closely connected to the rise of public universities, or at least the moment when the idea of a public university develops. One could ask: Are Oxford and Cambridge public universities? They remain status-based institutions, but they are not unaffected by the development of the public university. Take away public universities and the character of Oxford and Cambridge would change. That would be the same in the USA; yes, the Ivy League produces a particular way of conducting academic knowledge but it is constrained by the nature of the public university. The public university comes into being during the 20th century around processes of democratisation, thereby changing the meaning of the university previously associated with status-based institutions.

**NM:** *What role does the teaching of sociology in a public university have to add to this? Is it a space for conscious political activism in the delivery of the sociology teaching programme?*

**JH:** Conscious political activism and democratic knowledge are not straightforwardly the same thing. You can acknowledge the role of activism in the

expansion of democracy and in overcoming particular forms of domination, but it doesn't mean that the task of sociology is to be activist. The task of sociology is to be engaged with the issues of democracy. When you pose it that way, you do get the question that Howard Becker posed: Whose side are we on? It is not that sociology must be partisan, but that sociology cannot separate itself from the issue of partisanship as such, so it had better understand the process of the production and reproduction of knowledge, its relation to issues of democracy and hierarchy. But I remain strongly of the view that sociology will necessarily be damaged if public universities become instruments of human capital investment. We cannot be indifferent to whatever damages democracy and I think we are called to activism in that context, as sociologists and as citizens.

**NM:** *I am struck by the extent to which in the first part of your answer you are elaborating an account of democratic practice which is not dissimilar to the kind in the civic debates that we found in the 1930s.*

**JH:** Yes, there is a problem in reform-oriented politics, which can be criticised for its timidity in the light of what subsequently became possible. I would not wish to defend timidity but it's very difficult to engage in reform without, in some sense, being seen to be timid later so long as the reforms you pushed for give rise to something which goes further. But the real risk we are in at the moment is not timidity in what we might demand, but the risk of regression. One response to my arguments in defence of the public university is that people have said they are a form of nostalgia. There is nothing nostalgic about my position really. I don't think that universities were ideal in the past, but I do think there is a serious possibility that they can become much worse than they currently are and that the major pressure on them is to extinguish democratic knowledge. That means that universities that I regard currently as not as good as they could be, will become worse – and that is the dilemma we are in and we need to fight around.

**NM:** *Let me go back to your beginnings. One place might be to refer to the quote that has been attributed to Parsons, who asked: 'Who now reads Spencer?' One question we might ask is: 'Who reads Parsons?'; would an answer to that be 'John Holmwood'?*

**JH:** [Hollow laugh] My interest in Parsons was that he represented a position in sociology that I thought was problematic, and that the way in which people responded to him reproduced that problem. The standard criticism was that there is no 'action' in Parsons's action frame of reference, as Giddens (1993) argued in *New Rules of Sociological Method*. This is said to be why 'systems' predominate in Parsons, but then there is an oddity that when Giddens says there is no action in Parsons and seeks to bring action back in, he does so in exactly the same way as Parsons himself proposed – via the same action frame of reference. That then led me to think that the categories of system and action are intimately connected, that they are problematic and mutually constituted. So the problematic concept of system derives from a particular concept of action, and that concept of action generates a self-contradicting conceptual system.

My view was that sociology was trapped in a cycle of which Giddens was part, Habermas too, trying to establish sociology within a frame of reference that sought an integrated and mutually consistent account of system and action but ended up with the contradictory formulation, which they criticised in others, only to start all over again. I thought it was easier to go back to Parsons to understand this as everybody knew what they thought was wrong about Parsons – you could use him as an exemplary case. Not that it provided an example for how sociology should go forward, but of a problem that we needed to resolve. Of course, people thought, if you read Parsons sympathetically you were committed to a Parsonsian view, whereas the opposite was the case and I regarded others to be closet Parsonsians – whether they were critical theorists, critical realists or structuration theorists, and so on, and notwithstanding their protestations to the contrary.

**NM:** *Is your rejection of Parsonsian thought also a rejection of systems thinking in contemporary social theory?*

**JH:** What I have been opposed to is all forms of axiomatic theorising within social science and that would include rational choice theory and functionalism – methodological individualism and methodological wholism, alike – that is, all forms of presuppositional or foundational thinking that attempt to put categories beyond revision within substantive explanatory practices. I was much more interested in critiquing forms of general theorising to say that what sociology should be is a practical explanatory undertaking, involved in the reconstruction of ways of thinking and being in the social world. I was much more sympathetic towards pragmatism and the idea of empirically located enquires as the expression of collective intelligence.

**NM:** *I can certainly see the sympathy towards pragmatist thinking in some of your contemporary work. I suppose I was trying though to tease out through Parsons the biographical journey of your intellectual work; did you train as a philosopher?*

**JH:** No, I would like to say I am sociology all the way down. I started off doing economics and changed as soon as I could to do sociology. I did the second part of my undergraduate degree in sociology and have done sociology ever since. My initial interest in sociology involved the disciplinary relationship between sociology and economics and how sociology emerged out of economics. Another of my reasons for being interested in Parsons was that he was one of the few sociologists concerned with the relationship between economics and sociology. Those who were critical of his approach tried to renew general sociological theory, but none of them went back to look at what it meant for relations between disciplines and how sociology stood in its relation to economics. My view was that Parsons's mistake was to take sociology's initial *critical* relation to economics and to try to turn it into a *complementary* relation.

**NM:** *But the formative period of your introduction to sociology was at a time when sociology was heavily steeped in a critique of political economy ...*

**JH:** My parents were communists and I had a huge amount of Marx at home. When I changed from economics to sociology my father said: 'Oh well, sociology is just bourgeois ideology.' And I said: 'Yes, that is why I am interested in it!' I wasn't unsympathetic to Marxian arguments but I found them unpersuasive. They were aimed at the right sorts of issues and problems, but I was interested in sociology as a possible alternative to Marxian political economy, and was somewhat frustrated to find sociology turning away from that engagement with economics or that it simply repeated Marxian formulations.

My PhD supervisor was David Lockwood and he was often seen as a Weberian. If he was, it was more by default because he was much more sympathetic to the insights of Marx and Durkheim. So I was interested in following through those ideas and seeing if one could connect Durkheim to the critical American pragmatist tradition.

**NM:** *At the same time, I guess you were encountering the philosophical traditions of social science enquiry. This was a time of Roy Bhaskar, Ted Benton and colleagues.*

**JH:** Yes, but I saw critical realism as neither particularly critical, nor realist! It was arguing that Marxism had the form of a science and therefore entailed a critique of positivism, based upon the possibility of the truth of Marxism. Just because something has the form of a science doesn't mean it actually provides an adequate explanation. I always thought that Marx's account of capitalism was plausible and properly formulated, but unfortunately not correct. I always saw critical realism as a way of rehabilitating a form of Marxism without addressing the substance of what was problematic in the explanation. All the core explanatory structures were retained as 'real', but unrealised because of countervailing tendencies. Paradoxically, by failing to address those core explanatory structures, their additions moved it closer to the form of general theory in sociology.

**NM:** *Do you see critical realism now as being rehabilitated as 'post-positive' critique?*

**JH:** Yes, rehabilitated, but no less problematic. It is, in effect, saying that there are a set of analytical categories that stand outside the process of constructing and reconstructing explanations. So it proposes categories like action, structure, system, system integration, social integration, etc. All are conceptual distinctions which are themselves not empirical in character, yet they are held to organise the nature of the explanations we propose.

I suppose part of my concern has been to ask: Why do we come to think there is a form given to inquiry independently of the substance of any particular inquiry? Dealing with that issue in its purest form meant addressing the structure-action problem. My view, expressed in work together with Sandy Stewart (Holmwood and Stewart, 1991), was to suggest that if you had an adequate explanation there would be no way you could distinguish between structure and action. So, where do we get our examples that

illustrate the ‘reality’ of ‘structure’ and ‘action’ as producing separate effects? Our view was that the distinction derived from the inadequacies of particular explanations. If our analysis was correct, the implication would be profound. It would mean that general theory in sociology reproduced the form of explanatory failure and generalised it. So, far from ‘structure and action’ being the analytical categories that organised all successful explanation, the opposite would be the case; all successful explanation dissolves that contradictory dualism. But it has to dissolve the dualisms substantively. It’s only because explanatory problems have the form of practical anomalies that they have to be dealt with substantively (that is, directly in the terms in which they arise), which means there are no methodological guarantees for social science.

**NM:** *Can I move you on to talking about sociology as a discipline and ask whether you think there is a disciplinary centre of Sociology?*

**JH:** I don’t think there is one. The centre of any intellectual endeavour ought to be problem-solving; there is no reason to imagine that all problems are inter-linked and interconnected, there is no reason to say that problems that arise in sociology will make themselves necessary in other areas and so on. However, I think sociology is a peculiar discipline and this goes back to the discussions of general theories. A central observation of Parsons was that explanations produce anomalies – he called them residuals – and he identified a process whereby disciplines sought to purify their concepts of residual categories. After a while those residual categories accumulated and had the form of negative categories alongside the positive categories of the scheme in which they arose. What you had to do, according to Parsons, was to transform the negative categories into positive categories.

On this perspective, sociology deals with the problems that economics and politics leave behind on the way to becoming specialised sciences, an argument also found in Habermas. Of course, I didn’t think their solution was the correct one, but the setting of the problem is interesting. If sociology, in the first instance, is about residual categories, it is going to tend to be an ad hoc discipline. That is, there is boundary work going on in the other disciplines, where they are chucking problems over the fence which we are picking up in sociology, and we do so in ways that keep them disconnected from each other. That is why I think sociology tends to be a particularistic discipline and in order to overcome that particularism it would need to attack the disciplinary centres of other disciplines.

Parsons attempted to do it by saying that sociology could be complementary to the other disciplines, but actually if you took post-positivist approaches within the philosophy of science seriously, the only way of dealing with residuals and turning them into positive categories would be by reconstructing the field in which they had initially emerged.

Sociology, then, should take on the role of being a critique of economics (or, as I now would put it more broadly in the context of democratic knowledge, it

should take on the role of being a critique of liberal reason where economics is central to liberal reason). I don't think that sociology has wanted to take that on and so it has no centre. It would only have a centre if it engaged critically with other disciplines. It has defined itself in particularistic ways, and that is why we have the paradox. We have lots of different topics that we look at, but there is no common way of looking at those topics.

**NM:** *So, there are two kinds of questions that flow from that. One, are you presenting sociology as the answer to the problem of other disciplines? And why isn't sociology being willing to take on the broader role that you envisage for it?*

**JH:** To the first question, I would say my answer would be a version of a post-disciplinary argument. If sociology took on other disciplines, it would at the same time be taking on itself. I see the separation between economics and sociology as a symptom of the intellectual problem and it is not a question of replacing economics with sociology, but replacing the dualism of economics and sociology with something else. So I would say, if we wish sociology to be a critique of economics, it can only complete that critique by being a critique of its own constitution as a discipline.

One could say, perhaps, that is why that critique isn't taken on because our own identity as a discipline is at issue. But the other reason is linked to sociology's association with 'particularism'. The strongest justification of the 'reality' of that particularism is a commitment to the 'reality' of 'agency'. Actors can always do otherwise, so the differentiation of the social world is easily presented as arising both because of the capacity of actors to act otherwise and because they have done so. That is a form of voluntarism that enters into sociology and to me is against the spirit of sociology. I would say Durkheim, Marx, Mead – and how they build towards an idea of the social self – is a critique of that kind of voluntarism and it is that idea of the social self that is displaced in dominant ideas of agency within the discipline.

Voluntarism is also central to the self-understanding of capitalist modernity. We have the problem that sociology purports to be the critique of the ideological form of capitalist modernity but reproduces that very form within itself, and that weakens the possibility of the critique of economics. If economics is based in rational choice, then what sociology seeks to do is not explain the social constitution of rational choice but add to rational choice with a broader and complementary definition of action.

In my view, the idea of action is what gets us into this difficulty. Sociology should be deconstructing the idea of action as providing the basic categories of understanding. It should be locating actions socially, rather than providing an action-based understanding of the social.

**NM:** *Do you think there is a tension which overhangs sociology – I suppose between rational choice theory and what some may call the cultural turn?*

**JH:** Well, I think I have been suggesting they are the same thing, or arise from a common problem. As soon as you argue for a rigorous understanding of

rational action, you have to recognise that not all behaviour is rational. This means you have a category of irrational behaviour and there are two responses to that. One response could be that the problem lies within the idea of rationality, and that is where I would choose to go and see rationality as a socially limited concept. Instead, the typical response is to say we don't want to call people's behaviours irrational, so let's give a more sensitive name to reproduced 'irrational behaviour', let's call it value rational or non-rational action.

As soon as you call it value rational or non-rational behaviour it is culturally defined behaviour. The cultural turn is there, but now you have identified culture in distinction from the rational, and at the same time, preserved the rational as possible, but unrealised, in that it is unchosen.

**NM:** *Can I take you back to something that you have mentioned, the extent to which sociological enquiry should be problem driven, and ask you where it is problem driven or methodological practice. They could come together but they also diverge most of the time, could I engage your views on that?*

**JH:** I think methodologically driven is the same as conceptually driven, the idea that there is some kind of guarantee of what we are doing. I would say it is important to have a particular view of what a problem is and where it is located. If we say that social enquiry is an attempt to understand located practices of social actors, one of the tendencies in sociology is to operate with an asymmetry between sociological rationality and the rationality of actors: to say that our rationality is methodologically guaranteed in some way. I would say that we should be alert to the fact that sometimes we are addressing problems in the behaviours of other actors and sometimes the problems are in our construction of explanations, which are themselves deficient.

A simple example would be the distinction between objective versus subjective class position that arises within class analysis. Subjective class position is the view attributed to actors where those views are different from those expected by the sociologist, who describes the position from which the actor's different view is accepted as being 'subjective'. That is, the sociologist claims objectivity for her or his account, while actors have implicitly a different view, and we reconcile that difference by calling one objective and one subjective (rational and value-rational). Yet in any situation where we use the distinction objective-subjective, there is always the possibility that what actors are actually doing is a guide to the misunderstandings of sociologists and should press us towards a reconstruction of our understanding, as distinct from accepting the difference and naming it in a way that validates our 'side' by calling it 'objective'.

**NM:** *To what extent is that a reflection of reification or to what extent is that the activity of working with categories, what you might call 'under erasure', when you are in the business of doing large-scale data collection?*

**JH:** The typical response goes back to things I have been saying of how social science, sociology in particular, makes sense of that kind of gap voluntaristically. Instead of doing the reconstruction of thinking to find the consistency, the response is that we shouldn't really expect consistency. That's where problems arise because if you have an approach to explanation that finds inconsistency allowable – as being the way the world necessarily presents itself to us – you can never identify when the inconsistency is not the way the world is, but the way our misformed theories represent the world to us.

There must be some point at which we can be pressed to accept that inconsistencies are *our* problems and reconstruct *our* categories. I find it difficult to think what this could be other than by extending the requirement of consistency to include the relation between our own theories and what we attribute to actors as underlying the reproduced practices we are seeking to explain when our own 'rational' expectations are otherwise.

**NM:** *Is there a space for interdisciplinarity in terms of answering what we might think of as sociological problems with working with people in literature or working with people in some of the more interpretive traditions of the humanities?*

**JH:** I think that all intellectual activities have similar processes associated with problem-solving and the deepening of understanding and interpretation. The problem is how we understand the process of learning. I think there are two ways in which we represent learning. Learning has to be a process of allowing yourself to become different as a consequence of the engagement with some other, be that person or text. Our models of learning tend to be based upon consensus: I learn by becoming the same as that text or become the same as that person. You can learn from someone without becoming the same as someone, you just become different from what you had previously been. I think there is a reification of difference which we must be careful not to reproduce. My view is that the mistake is to think that the outcome of engagement is similarity. Equally, I cannot be satisfied with sociology as simply a deconstructive undertaking and I would wish a way of thinking of deconstruction that would allow reconstruction.

**NM:** *I find that many people – perhaps, especially, the gatekeepers of sociology, including our funders – say they are fighting a bit of a rearguard action defending sociology and that promoting interdisciplinarity helps. Do you have any sympathy for that?*

**JH:** Well, it depends upon the kind of interdisciplinarity that is being promoted and the context in which it is occurring. With market-based choices there is not a lot for sociology to do, but if the aim is facilitating public debate then sociology has a lot to do. My worry is that we are at the moment of a shift from interdisciplinary *social* sciences to interdisciplinary *behavioural* sciences. *Behavioural* sciences are amenable to serving markets while *social* sciences serve democracy – that is the way I think of it.

Of course, I am describing the situation in ideal terms, seeing sociology as a discipline that carries a particular kind of sensibility, but there are many individual sociologists that don't share that sensibility. But in terms of the internal organisation of the social sciences within the British academy, I think a breach is opening between those who see the self as socially formed and the nature of the social and its structures as crucial in determining outcomes and life chances, and those who think the self is a product of inheritance and environment in early years. The latter arguments are increasingly dominant in public discourse and funding is increasingly being shifted towards behavioural sciences.

But sociology will not become extinct – sociology is dead, long live sociology! However, if the discipline won't disappear, its character will nonetheless be transformed. If democracy is reduced that will be a reduction in the scope of sociology and sociology needs to fight for democratic knowledge because it is fighting for its meaning as a discipline. It is quite possible that democracy will become reduced and the discipline will become reduced, but people will still have jobs. The issue is not the instrumental reproduction of institutions; it is about the meaning of those institutions in wider social and political life that we are struggling for at the moment. I would say there is a wake-up call to recognise that, *if sociology is about the expansion of democratic publics then the market is about reducing publics to market-based choices*. I return to what I said earlier, we are called to action as citizens and as sociologists.

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