



## **Sociology's misfortune: disciplines, interdisciplinarity and the impact of audit culture<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is about tendencies to the subversion of sociology as a discipline. It connects external factors of the wider socio-political environment of higher education in the UK, especially those associated with the audit culture and new systems of governance, with the internal organization of the discipline. While the environment is similar for all social science subjects, the paper argues that there are specific consequences for sociology because of characteristics peculiar to the discipline. The paper discusses these consequences in terms of the changing relationship between sociology and the growing interdisciplinary area of applied social studies as a form of 'mode 2 knowledge'. It argues that while sociology 'exports' concepts, methodologies and personnel it lacks the internal disciplinary integrity of other 'exporter' disciplines, such as economics, political science and anthropology. The consequence is an increasingly blurred distinction between sociology as a discipline and the interdisciplinary area of applied social studies with a potential loss of disciplinary identity. The paper concludes with a discussion of how this loss of identity is associated with a reduced ability to reproduce a critical sensibility within sociology and absorption to the constraints of audit culture with its preferred form of mode 2 knowledge.

**Keywords:** Audit culture; disciplinary formation; governance of higher education; interdisciplinarity; mode 2 knowledge; social studies

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There is a general consensus that the rise of the knowledge economy has brought major changes in Western higher education systems (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Marginson and Considine 2000; Bok 2003). Increasingly, public policies to increase national global competitiveness through more effective science policy and the better translation of research into the product cycle have been promoted. These changes are also associated with a shift from an elite-based to a mass-based system as an ever higher proportion of young

people have been encouraged into higher education in order to develop a highly skilled workforce. At the same time, those higher education systems with a significant degree of public funding have been encouraged to diversify their income sources and to engage more effectively with private business, and with government and non-government agencies, as potential consumers of research. In addition, the ability of universities to draw upon public funds has been increasingly linked to regulatory audit and other techniques of 'new public management' designed to demonstrate transparency.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I shall consider the consequences of these changes for the discipline of sociology. Although the external environment of higher education is similar for all social science disciplines, I shall suggest that there are particular reasons why sociology is especially vulnerable.

There are external conditions of sociology's misfortune, but they do not explain its particularity. These are to do with internal characteristics of the discipline. I shall also suggest that these are generic characteristics and are not peculiar to sociology in the UK, although they make the discipline much more susceptible to national traditions of disciplinary development and, therefore, less 'international' than some other social science disciplines. My argument of the vulnerability of sociology to external tendencies in higher education systems is also consistent with its flourishing in some national contexts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the rise of Government spending on higher education in the UK in the last decade means that compared with the early 1980s there has been a general growth of undergraduate student numbers that has served to maintain a steady expansion of sociology (and most other social science disciplines) which means that the present argument may strike some as too gloomy.<sup>4</sup> However, even here there are signs of fragility, which are particularly significant in the context of a current financial crisis that will have major consequences for government spending, including on higher education. These signs include, a significant reduction over time in the number of sociology units of assessment within the Research Assessment Exercise, lower RAE scores when compared with other 'exporter' subjects, relative lack of concentration in higher ranked, Russell Group and 1994 Group Universities compared with other 'exporter' subjects, lower success rates in grant applications to the ESRC (though to some extent this is an artefact of ESRC classifications), as well as wider concerns about the subject's academic legitimacy that find support in public commentaries.<sup>5</sup>

### **Governance by audit**

The broad trends in higher education systems seem to be most strongly associated with neo-liberal forms of governance and, therefore, with the 'Anglo-American' model of regulation (see Whitley 2007). Essentially, neo-liberal forms of governance seek to manage public activities by finding proxies for

market mechanisms. The market is held to guarantee 'efficiency', while the distribution of public funds is argued to have no equivalent mechanism. Audit mechanisms, performance targets, outcomes and objectives, etc., all became key measures to provide a supposedly transparent governance of publicly funded institutions (see, Power 1999; Strathern 2000). At the same time, the ideology of markets, together with the private property relations that underpin market mechanisms, protect private companies and 'for profit' activities from being the direct object of public policy. Taken together, this has provided a situation in which the increased regulation of publicly-funded institutions has been accompanied by the decreased regulation of market-based activities (a fateful and paradoxical combination whose effects are so evident in the recent crisis in the financial sector).

This has given rise to increased centralization within universities and the adoption of hierarchical management structures. Universities are increasingly organized in terms of the elaboration of what Abbott (2001) has called 'self-similar structures'. Thus, universities typically have a central division of functions – education, quality assurance and research – which is mirrored at faculty, school and departmental levels. The old *collegial* system, based on professorial hierarchy, is replaced by a *managerial hierarchy* based upon functional representation. This is significant not least because the sociology of organizations suggests that the kind of activities with which universities are associated – innovation and the creation of new knowledge – would favour flatter, dispersed forms of organisation. However, managers in higher education are not responding to intrinsic qualities of its 'products', but to the nature of those products as they are 'co-produced' with public agencies and corporate sponsors (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001; Jasanoff 2004). Universities are not adapting to the requirements of *effective knowledge production* as judged by some 'intrinsic' standard, then, but to the policies and practices of the particular form of funding of higher education. In the name of becoming more efficient and flexible organizations, universities have become both *centralized* – evident in the replacement of Senate by Executive Boards – and *bureaucratic*, in order to direct the university's activities to meeting a few, simplified proxy targets.

With these developments a core 'cultural' underpinning of the collegial system is also displaced within the academy. In fact, part of the political shift to neo-liberal modes of governance involved the criticism of professional (in the university context, collegial) self-regulation as being potentially nothing more than the expression of a producer-interest. Where radical critics of professionalization looked toward the 'democratization' of the university (Gouldner 1973), what has transpired is its 'managerialization'. Democratization has been more easily translated into external public accountability than into the democratic re-organization of academic structures. In fact, these developments are not unrelated. Central to each was the idea of the problem of professions as

self-interested monopolizers of knowledge (for example, Collins 1990; Larson 1977), or as self-interested producer groups (Mathews 1991).

The introduction of 'regulatory audit' as the means of making funding decisions has the effect of creating league tables across a range of activities from research to teaching by which universities could be compared. The requirement to submit supporting documents and justificatory statements alongside data on performance means that universities are increasingly complicit in providing the detailed elaboration and justification of the criteria by which they are being evaluated. It is no accident that British sociologists have been at the forefront of scholars to derive a paradigm of 'governmentality' from the work of Foucault (Rose 1996). More than in any other higher education context, British academics have been 'enrolled' in the techniques of neo-liberal governmentality. The co-production of the audit system becomes its very legitimization.<sup>6</sup> However, even where 'threshold' standards are met, not everything can succeed once the targets are expressed in rank orders.

### **Sociology in the 'system' of social science**

The general trends outlined above are captured by Gibbons and Nowotny and their colleagues (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001) in their argument that, over the last decades, there has been a general shift in the nature of knowledge production. The university is no longer the privileged space for research. This follows from the increased marketability of knowledge with concomitant commercial investment in its production, and government concerns about maintaining effective investment in research and development. They refer to these developments as a shift from 'mode one knowledge production' to a new, 'mode two knowledge production'.<sup>7</sup> The former corresponds to a conventional view of research, based within universities and organized around disciplines. In the latter, knowledge production is increasingly transdisciplinary and is part of a 'larger process in which discovery, application and use are closely integrated' (Gibbons et al. 1994: 46; see also, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Caswill and Wensley 2007). In their view, mode two knowledge will not necessarily supplant mode one knowledge; rather, the two modes will co-exist and interact.<sup>8</sup>

This discussion is mirrored in UK social science policy debates by another distinction, that between 'exporter' and 'importer' subjects (ESRC 2006; AcSS 2003). Notwithstanding some imprecision in the distinction (arising from the development of mode 2 knowledge in all areas of social science), the dominant characteristic of an 'importer' subject – examples are business studies, social policy and education – is that they are interdisciplinary subjects with an applied, or practice-based, focus. In other words, they do not have their own distinctive status as disciplines, but 'import' frameworks, concepts and

methodologies from other subject areas. In a number of reports, ESRC and other bodies have indicated the research capacity weaknesses of importer subjects and have sought to address them (ESRC 2006; AcSS 2003). In social science policy terms it is recognized that importer and exporter subjects are interdependent, but the combined effect of the RAE in 'relativizing' excellence across the different areas of the subject sub-panels, along with university management strategies in pursuing 'excellence', has meant that this interdependence cannot be translated into strategy at the 'micro' level. Thus, the RAE constructs excellence in terms of the silos that are its subject sub-panels, universities pursue excellence wherever it is found with no regard to the shape of social science, and departments seek to 'appropriate' as much of the income that they have 'earned'. There is no mechanism for translating general concerns into effective actions, while the aggregate effect of each university pursuing its individual strategy is precisely what produces problematic outcomes for the shape of social science. Indeed, the very introduction of audit mechanisms as market proxies encourages competition among universities and reinforces their autonomy within the constraints imposed by the regulatory system.

This is the context in which the number of 'units of assessments' submitting to the Sociology Sub-Panel in the RAE shows the greatest proportionate decline of any social science subject area.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, through our professional bodies and in our departmental responses to the 'consultations' which are integral to the audit culture, we describe this situation as the very picture of health. The idea that sociology might have a wider significance for the social sciences – expressed in its status as an 'exporter' subject – at the same time as it has difficulties in representing that significance, is implied in Abbot's nice comment that he, 'write[s] about sociology partly because it is my own discipline. But is also the most general of the social sciences, or to put it less politely, the least defined' (Abbott 2001: 3). Emphasis on sociology's 'generality' suggests the idea of a significant range of topics of interest lying outside the scope of other disciplines, such as economics and politics, in what might be regarded as the generic area of 'social studies'. What would make those topics *sociological* remains difficult to define. At the same time, 'social studies' is also the domain of 'importer' subjects, each with its own RAE Sub-Panel. This creates the opportunity for the redefinition of areas of sociology in terms of specific other 'importer' subjects as part of the tactics of maximizing RAE success within an institution.<sup>10</sup>

### **Integration and hierarchy**

While 'importer subjects' are strongly associated with mode 2 subjects, the fact that even disciplines with strong mode 1 identities also develop mode 2

knowledges means that there are sufficient similarities across ‘importer’ and ‘exporter’ subjects for the distinction to be challenged. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why it is argued to be imprecise and overdrawn, even by someone associated with coining the distinction (Mills 2008). The issue of disciplinary identity in the context of mode 1 and mode 2 knowledges and exporter and importer subject areas is crucial to understanding the fate of sociology as a discipline, especially in the UK regulatory context. Disciplinary 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. Any challenge will receive ‘institutional’ support from the regulatory regime of audit because, as I have intimated earlier, it facilitates resistance to ideas of a potential hierarchy of subject areas; each subject can be excellent in its own way and the rewards of excellence should be distributed in an undivided manner.<sup>11</sup>

The fate of disciplines is also bound up with the policy emphasis on interdisciplinarity that occurs with the rise of mode 2 knowledge. One form of interdisciplinarity is the practical, problem-focused research characteristic of mode 2 knowledge, but, on the analysis presented here, it would be better to regard this as ‘transdisciplinary research’; that is, as interdisciplinarity without disciplines.<sup>12</sup> In effect, transdisciplinary social science is generic social studies and the consequence of its rise is different for the different ‘exporter’ disciplines, depending on the strength of their respective disciplinary identities. Strong disciplinary identity gives rise to a significant number of residual problems that cannot be dealt with in terms of core models, or assumptions, and can be deemed ‘empirical’ to be assigned as potential objects for a transdisciplinary ‘social studies’ separate from the ‘exporter’ discipline. Weak disciplinary identity involves a blurring of the boundary with applied ‘social studies’, while strong disciplinary identity allows enforcement of ‘disciplinary standards’ within the ‘importer’ area.

These issues can be addressed further in terms of a comparison between the two exporter subjects of sociology and economics and their different characteristics as disciplines. Collins (1994) and Whitley (2000) have argued that disciplines show different degrees of integration, with sociology more ‘loosely coupled’, involving more ‘weakly bounded’ groups and a lower coordination of research problems than other disciplines. Economics, in contrast, shows much higher degrees of integration than sociology and this engenders a greater claim both to disciplinary coherence and to ‘scientificity’ as understood in terms of the standard criteria associated with mode one knowledge claims. Whitley uses the idea of ‘task certainty’ and ‘task uncertainty’ to capture disciplinary differences. One of the mechanisms securing task certainty in the natural sciences is the ‘research apparatus’ associated with ‘big science’. We might regard research methodologies as a surrogate in the social sciences, with disciplines that maintain high task certainty retaining strong integration around

methods. Sociology, in contrast to economics (and psychology with its experiments, even anthropology, with ethnographic fieldwork, or history and its archives) has weak control over a claim to methodological distinctiveness.

In order to address these issues, I shall draw upon four North American studies which enable me to identify different aspects of the structure of sociology as a discipline. I shall suggest that the tendencies identified are not peculiar to US sociology and that national differences in academic organization and higher education environment reinforce or mitigate these tendencies. Lamont's (2009) study of peer-review processes at grant-bodies, although it did not include a sub-group of sociology reviewers, finds disciplines ranged between those with a high degree of coherence – economics and history – and those with a low degree of coherence – English and cultural studies – with political science in-between. Her analysis places sociology closest to English, a subject which she identifies as exhibiting a legitimation crisis, and, I shall argue, a similar situation obtains for sociology. However, legitimation crisis does not quite capture the situation, since the issue is not simply the inability to impose disciplinary standards (in the case of English over cultural studies, in the case of sociology over its importer subjects), but also *the absence of a will to do so*. I shall return to this when I address internal characteristics of sociology as a discipline in more detail.

The implication of these arguments about disciplinary integration is that coherence in the present is also associated with greater continuity over time in the reproduction of core areas of the disciplines. There are few studies on this topic although Abbott's (2001) analysis of the fractal character of disciplines finds a more dispersed splitting and recombination in sociology when compared with economics. Crane and Small's (1992) comparison of economics and sociology identified major changes in the research fields of sociology when compared between the early 1970s and 1987:

in the earlier period, sociology had a well-defined core consisting of quantitatively oriented fields, such as social mobility, methodology, demography, and the family. In 1987, the study of social classes and class mobility was no longer linked to methodology and formal theory. Instead, it was linked to Marxian economics, studies of political ideology, and the role of the state, and, more distantly, to European theorizing, in one direction, and the study of revolution, historical sociology, and economics in the other direction. Fields like demography and the study of the family were quite separate fields. (Crane and Small 1992: 226)

This was in contrast to economics where the research fields remained stable.<sup>13</sup>

As indicated earlier, greater integration of economics as a discipline means that its sub-fields are more likely to be reproduced across national contexts, while those of sociology are much more likely to be subject to national

variation. The institutional environment of UK sociology can be seen to be exacerbating this tendency, in a form of fragmentation not shared with other exporter subjects. In sociology, it is not only individuals and frameworks, concepts and methodologies that migrate, but also entire sub-fields which are then reproduced within the 'applied' subject area, for example business studies, criminology or applied health studies.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the subject sub-panel reports at each RAE record the movement of sub-areas of the discipline to other units of assessment with the 2008 sociology sub-panel report (2009), for example, indicating that the sociology of work and organizations and the sociology of medicine, health and illness are no longer represented in work submitted to it.

It might be useful to think of sociology as a discipline existing in a state of 'interdisciplinarity' as a characteristic of its internal order, and not simply in its relations to other disciplines. This might explain why sociology has a self-understanding of itself as peculiarly open to interdisciplinarity. However, a particular problem arises when sub-areas of the discipline migrate to constitute new subject fields, or become part of applied, subject areas. When this happens, there is potentially a shift in self-identification within the new subject field, which derives, in part, from the 'fuzzy' identity of sociology itself. Thus, 'sociologists' become 'criminologists', 'social policy' analysts and the like. Sociology may be interdisciplinary with itself, but, potentially, this means that it has problems in maintaining disciplinary claims in relation to sub-areas of the field and to importer fields.<sup>15</sup>

Writing in the US context, Abbott (2001) regards the emergence of mode 2 knowledge or importer subjects (though he doesn't use these terms) as relatively unproblematic because conventional disciplines have continued to hold their own, despite a proportionate growth of applied subject areas around them. Abbott puts forward a strong case for the superiority of conventional disciplines. It is here that original, transformative work takes place. That work is then translated into applied fields where reputations are forged by 'importer' academics. A different reputational order operates in the originating disciplines where it is associated with the initiation and development of transformative debates. The two orders do not match, however, and translation tends to be one way. In other words, the developments in the applied field are rarely translated back into the primary field. For Abbott, this means that the applied areas are not self-reproducing, but rely on continued importation, and, in consequence, on the health of the exporter disciplines. None the less, precisely because of its special characteristics, this stable reproduction of disciplines might be problematic in the case of sociology and its putative wider contribution to social science. Sociology's misfortune, then might also be thought of as a misfortune for the wider social sciences. There is some support for this view in Cappell and Guterbock's (1992) earlier research in the USA which identifies a bifurcation between,

specialities supported by research agencies of the welfare state and specialities that draw inspiration from intellectual, ideological and political opposition movements. This division reinforces the lack of integration between theoretical and applied sociology. (1992: 271)

Abbott is less concerned with this phenomenon because the strong departmental structure of US academic life sustains disciplinary sociology. However, the fact that this is an external factor weakens his general claim about the internal processes that serve disciplinary integrity. Thus, Abbott argues that,

interdisciplinarity has generally been problem driven . . . There is ample evidence that problem-oriented empirical work does not create enduring, self-reproducing communities like disciplines except in areas with stable and strongly institutionalized clienteles like criminology. Even there, the status differences seem to keep the disciplines in superior power. Criminology departments hire from sociology departments, but seldom vice versa. (2001: 134)

However, the UK Government's emphasis upon the introduction of 'impact' measures into the evaluation of research favours applied, problem-oriented subject areas and, thus, creates a 'central' and 'proxy' institutionalized clientele as a new structural condition affecting the reproduction of disciplines, with particular consequences for sociology.

All of this, I suggest, provides some reason to be cautious about any celebrations of 'transdisciplinarity', or the supposed openness of sociology to interdisciplinarity. John Urry, Chair of the Sociology Sub-Panel at RAE 1996 and RAE 2001, for example, writes that, 'although I am a fan of inter- or trans-disciplinary studies, these must be based upon strong and coherent disciplines. There is nothing worse than a lowest common denominator interdisciplinarity' (2005: para 1.2). All the evidence suggests, however, that sociology is not a strong, coherent discipline and that its strength and coherence has been declining. John Scott, Chair of the Sociology Sub-Panel at RAE 2008, for his part, proposes that 'social theory', especially that associated with historical sociology in the classical tradition, can form the core of the discipline (Scott 2005), but this is a recent addition to the subfields of sociology and could not really bear the weight asked of it. Indeed, the idea that sociology does have a coherent theoretical core, dissolves as soon as contrast is made with economics which quite patently does have such a theoretical core (for better or worse).

Moreover, if the issue of sociology as an 'exporter' discipline is also associated with the export of its sub-fields, rather than individuals, then the problem of the absence of linkage of these sub-fields to their supposed 'core' would remain. In any case, the Subject Panel Report for RAE 2008 indicated a decline in the number of units of assessment submitting research in theory,

which is, for the Chair of the Panel, the subject's 'core' (Sociology Sub-Panel Report 2009).<sup>16</sup> If, in contrast, as Abbott argues, sociology in practice has been,

an archipelago of empirical work stretching from . . . various social problems . . . toward individual mobility studies and studies of middle-range institutions and social structures (2001: 145),

then, it follows that,

crime, deviance, family, work and occupations, demography, individual attainment, race and ethnicity, communities: these have been the bread and butter of sociology. (Abbott 2001: 145)

However, it also follows that this bread and butter is vulnerable to be taken off our plates to become a full meal in an importer subject, not to be supplemented by the richer diet of more general sociological arguments about institutions and social structures.

### **Sociology and its 'core'**

The way I have associated 'disciplinarity' with a 'core' would seem to place me on the other side of recent debates about the 'provincializing' of sociology and associated criticisms of hierarchical forms of knowledge (Burawoy 2005b). Indeed, I have been suggesting that there is a hierarchy of knowledges between exporter and importer subjects and between mode 1 and mode 2 knowledges. To what extent am I arguing for other kinds of hierarchy? Burawoy (2005a), for example, refers to the tendency for many commentators on the state of sociology to lament its decline and fragmentation when all that has happened is that sociology has been opened up to new voices. Liz Stanley (2005) makes a similar argument about British sociology which she characterizes as made up of 'hybridic sociologies'. Like Burawoy, she argues that the 'declinists' that lament this situation are really lamenting their loss of hegemony as the discipline is opened to new and more radical voices. Similarly, Abbott (2001: 121) also sees a normal chaos of disciplines and argues that the 'special ferment', that some perceive as being both peculiar to the present and to be problematic, is, in fact, typical and normal to disciplinary reproduction.

In contrast, I suggest that the fragmentation of sociology in the UK is also being driven by changes in the environment of higher education and that it has consequences for sociology that are different to the positive implications discerned, in their different ways, by Burawoy, Stanley, and Abbott. I can capture the force of what I want to propose by linking it to Burawoy's (2005a) account of the different dimensions of sociology – professional, applied, organic public sociology and critical sociology. He argues for a shift in hegemonic position from professional sociology to critical sociology. The emphasis upon a 'core'

appears to express the hegemony of professional criteria, while 'fragmentation' is frequently expressed as the consequence of the rise of critical sociologies (Stanley 2005). In contrast, I suggest that current forms of research governance in the UK are such that *any conventionally represented 'professional core' of sociology as well as its supposed 'critical alternatives' are both diminished*. The fragmentation of UK sociology is associated with the rise of mode 2 knowledge, reinforced by the governance of the higher education environment. It finds its expression in the form of applied social studies, increasingly separated from disciplinary sociology, whether the latter is construed in 'professional' or 'critical' terms.

Sociology, I want to argue, is a subject that has resisted formation as a discipline based around a fixed frame of reference or 'core'. This 'glosses' a transformation in the self-understanding of our discipline that has largely been produced by the 'new voices' that have entered sociological debates over the last decades and are continuous with the expansion of the discipline in the UK since the 1960s. The discipline is no longer understood as based upon timeless truths, but to be a product of historically located practices. In that sense, it is a discipline that has to be 'achieved', or continually re-invented, in new circumstances. In this context, the 'core' of the discipline lies not in concepts, categories or in methods (all of which are very significant products of practices of knowledge production), but in a *sensibility*. This raises a spectre, namely that of sociology in the 1960s, the period of its expansion in the UK (and attempted disciplinary formation). Precisely because of the rise of the neo-liberal audit culture and the criticisms of sociology that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, many sociologists wish to draw a veil over what was a difficult period for the discipline and fervently identify with the contention that sociology is now fully accepted. However, although I want to say that sociology cannot be characterized *only as a sensibility*, I want to suggest that a particular sensibility is a significant part of the *sociological imagination*.<sup>17</sup> I hope it will also be apparent that characterizing the core as a 'sensibility' does not entail a hierarchical ordering of activities argued to constitute the discipline. In this way, feminist critiques (or critiques from other standpoints) of standard sociological approaches are not antagonistic to the 'core'; indeed, they can be understood as the very *expression* of that 'core', once the latter is understood as a sensibility.

Implicit to the characterization of sociology as a sensibility is that it is peculiarly associated with critique. This involves critique of other disciplines, but also our own. Unlike other disciplines, our 'professional core' is expressed in a particular kind of 'dissensus'. This perhaps gives a different rendering of Abbott's argument that sociology is characterized by forms of fractal splitting different from those characteristic of a more linearly ordered discipline like economics. Sociology seems to produce a number of co-existing and mutually exclusive (semi) paradigms which continually split and re-form in different combinations. Those who are committed to the idea of the necessity of a

'theoretical core' frequently argue that such a situation represents a moment of *synthesis*, a moment that requires the development of a unified frame of reference representing structure and agency as presuppositional categories (as argued, for example, by Parsons, Alexander Habermas, Giddens, Archer, Scott, etc.). The fact that an accepted synthesis never comes and that each new attempt gives rise to further critique suggests that 'synthesis' is one of the moves that gives rise to new splits and forms and is not, therefore, a resolution.

How should we respond to this? This is what I meant by arguing earlier that sociology as a discipline exists in a state of internal interdisciplinarity. However, this does not quite get to the heart of it. I have been talking about sociology's 'core' as if it was simply an expression of a sensibility without any substance, that there is no way of seeing the world peculiar to sociology. This is because I have been presenting that sensibility in terms of its modes of self-critique. However, sociology is also externally thrown, thrown, that is, into the world. This brings me to an argument made by Bourdieu from whom I have taken the title of this paper. Bourdieu writes that,

Sociology's misfortune is that it . . . discovers necessity, social constraints, where we would like to see choice and free will. The habitus is that unchosen principle of so many choices . . . that drives our humanists to such despair . . . It would be easy to establish . . . that the choice of this philosophy of free choice isn't randomly distributed. (1990: 14)

This is nicely put. It suggests that the idea of sociology's core consisting in a sensibility can be extended to understand it also as a habitus, that is, as consisting in practices and dispositions. But, if there is a sociological habitus, it must have aspects to it that are contradictory or self-defeating. How, otherwise, are we to understand that the common criticism of Bourdieu's work is precisely the one he ascribes to humanism, namely that there is a problem of agency in it? A simple (but profoundly important) response – the one Bourdieu frequently made – is to argue that critics confuse the empirical demonstration that he has misrepresented the world with their wish that the world is other than it is when adequately described and explained. Bourdieu also asks us to take seriously the idea that many arguments about agency are unsociological. Then the question to ask is: what is it about the sociological habitus that can generate its antithesis? Put this way, the problem of achieving our discipline consists in something more than achieving it against all the external influences that operate to subvert it.<sup>18</sup> Sociology has to be achieved against an internal tendency to self-subversion.

Bourdieu writes further that,

it is through the illusion of freedom (an illusion which I have said a hundred times is the specific determination of intellectuals) that social determinations win the freedom to exercise their full power. (1990: 15)

Bourdieu's themes can be traced back to Durkheim in his *Rules of the Sociological Method*. The latter suggests that the dominant self understanding of the modern age is that social institutions are the product of will and, so long as we begin with the individual and agency, we will be within ideological understandings and not subjecting those understandings to sociological critique. The problem, then, is that sociology is typically undertaken in societies whose very self-understanding is problematic from the point of view of a sociological understanding.

In fact, this concern was also expressed, albeit in more muted form, in Parsons's (1959) argument that modern societies were beginning to enter an 'age of sociology'. Increasingly, he argued, everyday understandings were taking on a sociological expression, alongside their more usual 'psychological' expression. For Parsons, this was a risk as well as an opportunity. The risk was that sociology might not be able to maintain a clear disciplinary identity and, of course, he addressed that risk by advocating a 'professional core'. In its absence, sociology faces a potential problem where public understandings are either oriented to 'psychological' (or individualistic constructions of social issues), or regard sociological accounts as poorly expressed versions of common-sense. Indeed, Savage and Burrows (2007) have recently provided a further twist on this argument, suggesting that UK sociology after functionalism has frequently sought to provide detailed (qualitative) understandings of the 'world-views' of a diversity of groups, but that this is,

now routinely presented to us in the popular and new media in such a manner that their summary characterization by sociologists is no longer as necessary (or as interesting) as it once was. (2007: 894–5)

Of course, (as with Bourdieu and Durkheim, if from different perspectives) the engagement with sociology often comes from a desire to change the world. Understanding the world in order to change it is a fundamental part of the sociological sensibility. Thus, we can take the force of Bourdieu's comment to imply that agency might better be regarded as what sociology is directed at bringing into being, not what it studies.<sup>19</sup> However, this suggests a task for sociology that is beyond that of 'describing' different world views and potentially brings it into conflict both with everyday world views and with important political actors. In this context, bland claims for the usefulness of sociological analysis in informing public policy do no more than reinforce the saliency of applied social studies as a form of policy-embedded mode 2 knowledge. At the same time, a sociological reserve about professionalization reduces the capacity to defend the discipline, just in so far as that defence depends upon assertions of disciplinary hegemony. Finally, the assertion of disciplinary significance in terms of a critical engagement with social problems risks placing the subject at odds with a political culture that is organized in terms of the priority of market solutions, just at a time when that political

culture has greater significance in shaping funding decisions in higher education.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

I have already remarked, that ‘social studies’ appears to be a domain marked out by those residual problems of economics and politics that are defined as lying outside their, narrower disciplinary specification. Writing back in 1981, John Urry described sociology as a ‘parasite discipline’ to indicate that its problems and even sociological discourse, itself, were generated within other disciplines. Innovation in sociology was argued to be ‘theoretically driven’, and, as such, frequently driven by theoretical arguments from non-sociological discourses (Urry 1980: 34). While the latter included discourses of feminism and other social movements, it should be clear that sociology’s porosity is also to the ‘importer’ subjects of social studies, which have grown commensurately with mode two knowledge. When he first put forward the argument Urry asked two related questions:

What are the means by which we can defend a space for sociology? What are the social preconditions for sustaining this particular discursive structure? In general, I am pessimistic about the prospects. (1981: 37)

Writing some twenty years later, this pessimism has been transmuted into optimism, if not triumphalism (itself, a rhetorical product of audit culture, I suggest). The apparent declining salience of sociological discourse needs to be seen instead as its success:

it provides some insights that are not so much those of a disappearing discipline but central to comprehending the multiple transformations of life in the twenty first century. Maybe it is less disappearing and more an expanding empire! (Urry 2005: para 1.9)

If my analysis is correct, we are witnessing the disappearance of sociology in the UK as a consequence of a ‘national’ agenda for social science. In that sense, it could be argued that UK social science is becoming more ‘state-centred’, just as it is oriented to criteria of excellence deemed to be ‘international’.<sup>21</sup> The two are different aspects of the same development. However, in the context in which this is occurring, the more likely consequence is not the flourishing of a diversity of voices, but a placing of all voices into the same register, that of ‘the University of Excellence’ (Readings 1996). The difference between social studies and sociology is that the first is an adaptation to the University of Excellence, while the second exists only as a promise beyond it.

The regulatory systems typical of many systems of higher education are accentuated in the UK and they have negative consequences for many

different subjects. However, as I have argued in this paper, I believe that its interaction with the internal characteristics of sociology as a discipline is particularly unfortunate and has profound consequences for our discipline. The 'University of Excellence' is not a university in which sociology can easily flourish. In an important paper criticizing the idea of mode 2 knowledges, Pestre (2003) accepts the description of the current situation of knowledge production, but argues that the ready acceptance of that description has tended to 'naturalize' the processes by which it has come about. He suggests that what needs to be struggled over is the current system of power in knowledge production. He cites Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of the new spirit of capitalism in which 'co-production' incorporates what was previously counter-cultural criticism. If the above account is correct, sociology in the UK risks absorption to what is its negation. It is not easy to see how the weight of audit culture can be countered, but a first step must be recognition of the nature of that risk.

(Date accepted: August 2010)

## Notes

1. This paper was first presented at the BSA Theory Study Group Conference, 'Have we ever been 'post'? The critiques of sociological knowledge', September 17–18, 2009, University of Warwick. I should like to thank the participants for their useful comments. In addition, thanks to Gregor McLennan and Gurminder K. Bhambra for their helpful comments and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and rigorous engagement which improved the paper considerably. I should also like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for a fellowship that supports the project of which this paper is a part.

2. On new public management, see Dunleavy and Hood (1993) Barzelay (2000), Lane (2000); for critical discussion, see Hood and Peters (2003).

3. With regard to the development of the professions in different national contexts, Abbott (1988) argues that general tendencies do not give rise to convergent structures and may, indeed, give rise to significant, stable differences. In this way, sociology may have discernibly common features across different national contexts, while being char-

acterized by different trajectories and national characteristics.

4. This general expansion masks the fact that sociology in the UK does not recruit as well (in terms of application numbers and qualifications) as other social science subjects; criteria that have consequences for some of the 'rank order' measures of subject and University performance.

5. A number of these issues are addressed in the recent ESRC International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology (ESRC 2010), which, in general, was very favourable to the international standing of UK sociology, but also identified signs of potential weakness similar to those addressed in this paper. This report did not, however, compare sociology to other social sciences.

6. According to theorists of governmentality, one of its consequences is to lead to a continued reproduction of its effects: '[it] inaugurates a continual dissatisfaction with government, a perpetual questioning of whether the desired effects are being produced, of the mistakes of thought or policy that hamper the efficacy of

government, a recurrent diagnosis of failure coupled with a recurrent demand to govern better' (Rose 1996: 47). This could be a summary of cycles of reform of the RAE system, each new version designed better to achieve its aims, and each produced with the active engagement of those whose activities it will regulate.

7. The distinction has been argued to be overdrawn and more applicable to the natural sciences than the social sciences, which, it is suggested, have always been more closely allied with policy contexts. Indeed, a number of studies suggest that disciplinary organization in terms of mode 1 characteristics was most evident in the first period of the expansion of higher education in the 1950s and after, to be overtaken, subsequently by mode 2 developments. Turner and Turner (1990) suggest that, even in the USA, the disciplinary development of sociology was not strongly institutionalized until the 1950s, while in the UK few universities had departments of sociology until after the expansion associated with the Robbins reforms of the 1960s.

8. The connections between the RAE and the rise of mode 2 knowledge are set out by the Director of Research at the ESRC (Alsop 1999). The shift in modes of knowledge production is also reflected in the increased emphasis on 'users' and 'impact' in Government and Research Council discussions of research.

9. There were 61 submissions for sociology in RAE 1996. This fell to 48 submissions in RAE 2001 and to 39 in RAE 2008. There was a similar fall in the number of submissions to the economics sub-panel – from 51 submissions in RAE 1996, to 41 in RAE 2001 and 35 in RAE 2008 – but as I will argue later, economics retains its dominant and effective position in relation to subjects, such as business studies, which import its 'expertise' (in part because of favourable student recruitment, and in part because of its internal coherence as a discipline). Submissions from other 'exporter' subjects are much more stable. For example, there were 19 submissions to the anthropology sub-panel in RAE

1996, 20 in RAE 2001 and 19 in RAE 2008, while for politics and international studies there were 66 submissions to RAE 1996, 69 in RAE 2001 and 59 in RAE 2008.

10. Equally, optimizing student recruitment also allows the creation of new degree subjects that were previously part of the domain of sociology – for example, applied social studies, health studies, criminology.

11. In the UK, this has given rise to Government action to protect some subjects – the so-called STEM subjects of science, technology and medicine – against the distributive consequences of an 'unconstrained' RAE.

12. For a discussion of transdisciplinarity that sees it largely in positive terms, see Wallerstein et al. (1996). Burawoy (2005a) refers to their argument as 'positivistic', a judgment that is in contradiction to their own self-avowed stance, but which captures the roots of the position in the development of mode 2 knowledge and the ties of the latter to the commodification of knowledge. Savage and Burrows (2007), for their part, note the commodification of generic social scientific research methodologies and the much greater resources that corporations and market research companies have in their access to social data, such that the knowledge claims of 'public' empirical sociology are dwarfed by the knowledge claims of what we might call 'private' sociologies.

13. There is some indication of this in the difference between economics and sociology in the methodology adopted by the ESRC international benchmarking exercise for economics when compared with sociology. Reports on different areas of economics were commissioned, with the clear implication that these represented the stable core of the discipline (See, ESRC 2008). It was not possible to identify a similar core for sociology (See, ESRC 2010).

14. It is also the case that unlike other exporter subjects, sociology has within it more academics trained in other subjects, especially history and anthropology, than is the case for anthropology, economics or politics (See ESRC 2010).

15. The contrast here would be between economics and business studies, where the claims of the former are largely accepted by the latter. Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons (2003) suggest that their identification of mode 2 knowledges has been used 'politically', writing that, 'those with most to gain from such a thesis espoused it most warmly – politicians and civil servants struggling to create better mechanisms to link science with innovation; researchers in professional disciplines such as management, struggling to wriggle out from under the condescension of more established, and more "academic", disciplines' (2003: 179)

16. Others might wish to associate the 'core' with distinctive methodologies and analytical categories, an argument vulnerable to the observations of Savage and Burrows about the consequences of 'knowing capitalism' (or mode 2 knowledges) for, 'the changing significance of *empirical research* and the claims to jurisdiction that sociologists can make around their methodological repertoires' (2007: 886).

17. Reference to a 'sociological imagination evokes C. Wright Mills' (1959) book of that name, a book that was written while Mills was on leave in the UK and which had much greater impact in the UK than in his native USA, not least because it was a 'text' that expressed the discipline for many brought into it by the expansion of university departments of sociology in the 1960s.

18. Gouldner put it well, 'The university's central problem is its failure as a *community* in which rational discourse about *social* worlds is possible. This was partly because rational discourse as such ceased to be its dominant value and was superseded by a quest for knowledge *products* and informa-

tion *products* that could be sold for funding, prestige and power – rewards bestowed by the state and the larger society that is bent upon subverting rational discourse about itself' (1973: 79). As I have suggested, the constraints are institutional, but they can now be seen to include the general intellectual culture in the age of audit. The idea that nobody else understands sociology may seem to be an embarrassing form of paranoia, but this is partly because we have been socialized by audit culture not to express sociology's existential condition.

19. This can be illustrated by reference to feminism. Feminist sociologists seek to demonstrate structures of constraint in order to bring agency into being, rather than to represent those structures as reproduced in agency. At the same time, the force of feminist sociological theory is deeply embedded in specific empirical claims, with the consequence that nearly all attempts to represent sociology in terms of a 'theoretical core' of presuppositional categories also characterize that core as unaffected by feminism's transformation of sociology's research agendas. See, Holmwood (2001).

20. This is what Burawoy (2005a) describes as a 'scissors' movement between sociology and public opinion, where the latter has moved to the right and sociology to the left. For discussion, see Holmwood (2007).

21. Beck suggests that sociology has previously been a 'state-centred' discipline, but it now needs to free itself from those boundaries (see also, Taylor 2000, Beck 2005). However, the transdisciplinarity that is advocated in critiques of state-centred social science has as one of its material conditions a 'national agenda' for the social sciences, not the transcendence of that agenda.

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