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Sociology as democratic knowledge

John Holmwood



John Holmwood is professor of sociology at the University of Nottingham. He did his undergraduate and postgraduate studies at the University of Cambridge, with an interlude as teaching assistant at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has held appointments at the universities of Tasmania, Edinburgh, Sussex and Birmingham.

He has been chair of the Council of UK Heads and Professors of Sociology (2007–12) and president of the BSA (2012–14). He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University and co-founder and joint managing editor of the free online magazine of social research, commentary and policy analysis, *Discover Society*.

What sociology is to me is best understood in terms of my biography and career in sociology. I have come to see sociology as an expression of democratic citizenship and as centrally concerned with facilitating public debate over pressing social issues. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given my involvement in forming the Campaign for the Public University, and my advocacy of public higher education, my commitment to sociology cannot be separated from my commitment to public education more broadly. This, too, has a biographical aspect – like others of my generation, I was a beneficiary of the 1944 Education Act and the 1963 Robbins Report and the expansion of public higher education supported by grants.

I went up to University in 1969 from a state grammar school (comprehensive schools were introduced for the cohort directly behind me) to 'read' the Economic Tripos at Cambridge University. Sociology was not available, but a Part 2 Social and Political Sciences Tripos with a strong emphasis on sociology had just been introduced and it was possible to change into it after the first year.

My family background was in tailoring (father and grandfather), very left-wing – communist leaning, in fact – but also socially conservative (my mother was the daughter of a prison warden and brought up in Wandsworth prison) and formed by the 'spirit of '45'. However, I must have been the only student at the time – the height of the student movement, sit-ins and demonstrations – to announce that I was changing from economics to sociology only for my father to say, 'but sociology is just bourgeois ideology'. 'Exactly,' I replied, 'that's why I want to do it!'

Steeped as I was in Marxism – virtually the only literature in our house was Left Book Club books and Marxist pamphlets – and having a daily diet of arguments about capitalism, I was attracted by the sociological alternative. The possibility of reforming capitalism, the promotion of progressive social reform and a different conception of freedom seemed to me to be central to sociology. Broadly, I was attracted to Durkheim, Mead and TH Marshall and found in my teachers precisely that sensibility. Reading the Marxist critiques of sociology that came to prominence as part of post-1968 reactions to sociological orthodoxies merely affirmed for me the significance and distinctiveness of the sociological imagination.

Oddly, my favourite author as an A-level student was EM Forster and what most resonated was his vision of resolving unsatisfactory dualisms and making connections as articulated through the character of Helen Wilcox in his novel, *Howards End* – 'Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and

both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.' That seemed to me to be at the heart of sociology, too, with its emphasis on the social self and complex interdependence.

On graduation, I went to study sociology at UCLA, at the height of the ethnomethodological movement. I took classes from Garfinkel and Schegloff, but the real influence was Melvin Pollner. One seminar stood out. He was recounting setting up fieldwork in a local mental hospital. He arrived in the lobby, where there was someone at reception. 'I am Dr Pollner,' he announced to the 'receptionist', 'here to see the Director.' 'That's interesting,' came the reply, 'because, I am also Dr Pollner and here to see the Director.' 'You don't understand,' said Melvin, 'I am Dr Melvin Pollner, from UCLA, and I have an appointment,' only to be met with the response, 'But I do understand because I am also from UCLA and I have an appointment.' There were several more iterations and Melvin described getting more and more exasperated and gesticulating with greater force, only to catch out of the corner of his eye, someone behind a plate glass door mimicking all his gestures. At this point, Melvin stopped. There was a pause. We asked for the conclusion of the story. 'The conclusion,' he said, 'is that *social reality is awesome*.'

The capacity for social life to be surprising, and for sociology to be surprising in turn, have, for me, been lasting pleasures of the discipline. This has been so, even when the surprises have come with a hard thwack. The eruption of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s was a shock. As a graduate student and after, I had been a member of the Cambridge social stratification seminar and the discovery that inequality was not only about class, but also was gendered, was both a shock to my intellectual system and an accusation against my sociological practice.

If, however, EM Forster had provided a lesson in the need to overcome class condescension and that, at the same time, it was a painful process, this provided a useful lesson in overcoming other condescensions of one's own privilege. Making connections and understanding that the sociological journey was one of self-discovery was one of the great lessons of feminism, usefully applied to other encounters that followed feminism's challenge to the academy and wider social relations. It reinforced my interest in Mead's (1899) account of reform and that social transformation also involved the disintegration and re-integration of the self.

It also, however, brought me an understanding that this process might all too easily become a routinised and ordinary part of our sociological life – that we can be unreflectingly reflexive – and that social change is frequently a source of anxiety, precisely because of its challenge to

the sense of self and identity. I recall telling my mother that the 'left' stood for feminism and gay rights, as much as for hostility to capitalism. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she said, 'you are making it up!'

Of course, one of the purposes of family is to remind you, that, even as a professor, you might just be 'making it up'. The sociological imagination is about making imaginative connections and imagining different possibilities, but we also have to be attuned to the possibility that our imaginings are the consequence of our particular locations and experiences in the relatively privileged space of the university and may not resonate much beyond those locations.

Social change can produce different experiences and possibilities and displace even those who think themselves privy to the future. It would be hard to represent a career in sociology that traversed the 1970s to the present without addressing the external environment of wider social changes and ideological reconfiguration. For much of my career, and past the time when I should have known better, it seemed straightforward to me that social reform, amelioration and the public purposes of the university were all aligned with the development of the discipline. After all, the Robbins reforms of the 1960s brought about an expansion of universities and the great growth of sociology as a discipline – new departments, new appointments – but this brave new world began to fracture from the 1980s onwards.

By 1978, it was difficult to get an academic job – bizarrely, to anyone reflecting on current circumstances, I had been offered a lectureship directly after my undergraduate degree – and I moved to the University of Tasmania as part of the setting up of a new Department of Sociology. I returned to a post at the University of Edinburgh in 1980. This was one of the last permanent posts for over a decade. The 1980s were hard for sociology. The Thatcherite attack upon the welfare state also included sociology as a discipline that seemed peculiarly aligned with it, notwithstanding that many sociologists were also critical, albeit from a different political position.

Like many, I regarded Thatcherism as temporary and reversible in the normal cycle of party politics. Even the adoption of neoliberalism by New Labour did not initially dissuade me from a view of the cyclical nature of the political process. Now I am much less sanguine. Finally, I understand the anger of my parents – their anger at inequality and poverty, their anger at the corruption of political elites. Along with a sociological conviviality, I now express a sociological anger. Social reality is not only awesome, it is also distressing for many and sociology ought not avert its gaze and lose its sense of purpose in the improvement of the circumstances of publics and the deepening of democracy.

With a government committed to the reduction of public functions to the market, I fear we live in a profoundly anti-democratic age in which the anti-social sciences are promoted at the cost of the sciences of social structure. Evidence-based policy has become reduced to policy-based evidence, where what is wanted is a social science that accepts inequality as given and describes possible interventions to change individual behaviour. Sociology, for its part, necessarily imagines a different society.

As might be guessed from this short biography, I am an unapologetic advocate of sociology and defender of the discipline. I don't have much time for equivocal self-description in terms of some separate field of study or interdisciplinary identity. Like a stick of rock, sociology is written in me all the way through!

What is now under threat is the critical engagement and ways of understanding that the discipline represents and these need to be defended. I have been a member of the BSA since graduating and I have been actively involved in it. Part of this is simply the enjoyment of the company of fellow sociologists – as Durkheim said, 'to have the pleasure of communing, to make one out of the many, which is to say, finally, to lead the same moral life together' (1964, p 15). But as universities become unremittingly managerial and collegiality is undermined, its last bastion is the professional association. It is not necessary to join the BSA, but for any who complain about managerialism, it is incumbent on them to join some body that represents the meaning of academic life beyond a particular university's corporate branding.

I do think these are difficult times to start out in sociology. Perhaps surprisingly, I do not think the pressure will be that of getting a job, but rather the difficulties are all about the purposes that are enjoined upon academics under a neoliberal knowledge regime. But all situations, however negative, create niches and opportunities that give respite from the dominant trends. As ever for sociology, career cannot be all – and it is best to let one happen rather than to pursue one, to the neglect of the personal meaning derived from being an academic and sociologist. First and foremost, identify your own purposes and find the niche in which they can flourish.

What would I have done differently? Not very much. I would probably not believe everything I read in books. I read in Habermas that it was not possible to understand the nature of the problems confronting sociological theory without proper consideration of Parsons's work. I made the mistake of writing about Parsons, and subsequently found it difficult to persuade others that my interest was in the pathologies of sociological theory, not as an advocate of his approach.

More seriously, I wish I had fought the neoliberal onslaught on universities earlier, but this would probably have been to no greater effect. It is doubtful if academics are ever ready to look up from their studies and notice the impact of what is near at hand and most threatening to their ability to engage in those studies. I could be reconciled to that as our loss, but just for once the defence of sociology and of the public university has a greater cause than our own discipline and jobs and a greater consequence, namely the possibility of contributing to the imagination of a different society and the defence of fellow citizens against a partisan politics of austerity.

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