

Experience and Sociology

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In preparation for this conference I thought I'd read again C Wright Mills' The Sociological Imagination. Clearly there's a lot in that book about the pitfalls that sociologists face as they bounce about between the fetishisation of the concept on the one hand, and methodological inhibition and pretension on the other. There's much discussion, for example, of the 'unreality' of 'grand theory' which 'neither enlarge[s] our understanding nor make[s] our experience more sensible'; and of the inadequacies of 'scientific method', which Mills argues yields a precision that is neither necessarily empirical nor true. And even if the product of abstracted empiricism *were* true, it may yet be unimportant. For Mills, the really substantive issue that concerns sociology is not only the difficulty of shuttling between levels of abstractions - 'we must also', he writes, 'speak of problems'.

The sociological problem is the bridge between history and biography, and it's in the formulation of the problem that the sociological imagination realises its full potential. It's notable that for Mills, this imagination is as likely to be possessed by 'literary men and historians' as it is by 'professional' sociologists. Indeed The Sociological Imagination is in large part concerned with the problem of professionalisation; with how abstracted empiricism serves commerce and bureaucracy and grand theory serves nothing much at all. It's not surprising, therefore, that the appendix, 'On Intellectual Craftmanship', should read like an essay on the practice of creative writing. As for empirical work, Mills says that he tries to avoid it wherever he can.

Nevertheless, sociological problems, while they might require the imagination to formulate, are not themselves imaginative fictions. On the contrary, an important sociological problem, Mills argues, must be genuinely *relevant* both to the sociological conception of historical social structure and to the detailed information that sociologists collect. While Mills argues that 'no one is "outside society," the sociologist *is* distinguished from 'the ordinary man' insofar as he or she is uniquely positioned to make visible - that is, make relevant - the relations between the daily experience that is here and now, and structures and forces (capitalism, power, patriarchy) which are not visible in themselves. Making the connections between these domains is the political task of the sociologist / which Mills argues should be exercised in work, in educating, and in life.

The Sociological Imagination, then, is as much about the *experience* of sociology - about the experience of being a sociologist, and about what experience understood in sociological terms makes possible for others - as it is about the complexity of the relations between theory, method, and data. In this paper I want to explore the character of that experience a little more, and to consider two challenges to it, which bring the relevance (or not) of sociological relevance into sharp relief. It's no accident, in view of the specialization of function that's said to characterize western modernity, that these challenges concern two 'modalities of experience', as Martin Jay describes them, that offer partial alternatives to epistemic experience: they are aesthetic and religious experiences.

Jay shows how the fracturing of function and experience into discrete subcategories has 'palpable benefits'. I won't list the subcategories or the benefits here; suffice to note that they're persuasive. Despite the benefits however, and with Mills, I want to suggest that modern 'expertise' might be specifically problematic for sociology *in the light* of its ambitions to be relevant. And in a departure from Mills, that the channeling of *sociological* experience also has its problems. The emphasis in this paper therefore, will lie more on sociology as a practice and an experience than on the complex theories that are *deployed* in sociology which seek to address experience and/or the fatal split between subject and object, facts and values, and so on. But I'll be using one such theory myself at the end, in order to slightly refigure the sociological problem and indeed the sociological experience.

For the sake of brevity, I'll go directly - and speak rather schematically and reductively - of the 'discursive turn' in sociology. Foucault's been especially influential here. As one commentator (Deleuze) summarises it: '[in] the conversion of phenomenology to epistemology Everything is knowledge, and this is the first reason why there's no "savage experience": there's nothing beneath or prior to knowledge'. This shift, from explaining daily experiences, as Mills puts it, to explaining the knowledges that produce experiences, has been extended - differently, to be sure - to other people's experiences of themselves *as* knowledge producers. 'The sociology of scientific knowledge' would be the most obvious example here but, to be fair, sociology's *own* experience of knowledge production has also been the focus of considerable, self-reflexive, attention. There's an extensive literature in sociology which problematises both the kinds of knowledges that sociology seeks out and mobilises, as well as its methods and modes of knowing (and feminist theory has been important here). More recently still, there's been a focus on the *productivity* of knowledge- and other practices, and especially their *material* productivity (you could call this 'the ontological turn'). Crudely put, theory and methodology debates seem to have shifted from the sociological investigation into states of affairs, to the investigation of how states of affairs are understood (including in sociology), to the effects of sociological investigation in materially *constituting* states of affairs.

From experience, to knowledge, and now perhaps to methods, practices, performativity, or, to give it a more philosophical slant, 'becoming'. Becoming is the 'how', as Alfred North Whitehead put it, that constitutes the empirical 'what' - in practical terms, the 'what' that's both invented through sociological concept and method and is also the object of sociological investigation.¹ This improves on the sociological critique of science, I think, since there's a vast difference between subordinating science to the categories of sociology (i.e. saying that science is a social undertaking like any other) and conferring on scientists the respect that the singularity of their endeavour deserves, that is, the invention of scientific objects under the strictest conditions. Ignoring the rather tricky notion of 'invention', one might say that this is what experimental scientists have been doing all along: nature reveals its secrets only 'in bondage', said Bacon, 'not in freedom or in error, but "under constraint / and vexed"'. What this conception of science requires of *scientists*, is that they remember this, and try not to generalise beyond science, or even beyond a particular experiment. So too, one might say (and we *do* say) should sociologists.

But then again, despite the long and productive debate in the philosophy of social science on the relations between the social and natural sciences (a debate which often kicks off core sociological theory and methods courses) the sociological *problem*, at least as Mills describes it, is not a scientific problem, not least because it comes with *explicitly* political ambitions attached to it. Mills, I think, would argue that there's a great deal that sociology is obliged to be relevant *to*, other than its own inventions. This is the burden of responsibility that the empirical brings with it, *in sociology*.

Being relevant is rather like the sociological equivalent of doing no harm in the Hippocratic oath: it's an oath you take for others - Mills takes it for 'the ordinary man' - as much as for yourself. For whom one's research is *for*, however, is quite a tricky question, as the dualism in the history of British empirical sociology, between *social* research and *sociological* research, illustrates. Martin Bulmer suggests that the late institutionalisation of sociology in universities in Britain (the 1950s) accounts for the lack of continuity between social and sociological research, and also explains why, to quote, 'more empirical social research in Britain today is conducted in other disciplines and in non-academic research settings than by academic sociologists'. Being institutionalised however, is no guarantee that you can choose what you want to do, as many a grant application, submitted in the spirit of what might be called 'strategic empiricism', testifies. We might be seeing a lot *more* strategic empiricism given the recent reforms in higher education which leave sociology 'hanging in the balance' between those disciplines that, as some describe it, contribute directly to the valorisation of capital (like biotechnology, or the management of human resources) and those that appear not to (like the humanities).

It's hard to find the referents for relevance in such a complicated landscape. Which brings me to my two examples, which are concerned less with the environment in which sociology operates, and more with sociology's own operations.

So my first example concerns the diverse range of innovative methods and outputs that are being used and produced by sociologists today (strikingly different to those described, rather wearily, by Mills). I'm thinking of methods which utilise the visual and other senses for example, and outputs such as art works and exhibitions. In part, these initiatives can be situated in the context of changing sociological conceptions of the social world (that require different methods of sociological investigation), but they might also be understood in the context of, for example: funding body and commercial industry interest in interdisciplinary research; the rising numbers of practice-based PhDs in sociology; the integration of 'users' (or more recently, 'communities') into funded research; and, perhaps more broadly - and this might be an unexpected benefit to come out of the pressures on research funding - the move towards 'lateral connections across different forms of knowledge', as Foucault put it in his analysis of the specific intellectual.

These developments raise - or *should* raise, if they're to be taken seriously - challenging implications for the sociological project as it's usually understood. For example: in what ways do they enable sociological problems to be articulated? What kind of knowing, if they are about knowing at all, do they give rise to? If the output of an interdisciplinary research project has an aesthetic dimension, to what extent does conceiving of such an output *as* a knowledge product/knowledge transfer betray that dimension and render it irrelevant? Does sociology have to refigure - to put it rather reductively - its 'epistemological becoming'? To be blunt: are the set texts on core sociology courses going to change?

My second example concerns religion. I take my lead here from Saba Mahmood, who asks how it's possible for alliances to be forged between Muslim reformers in the Arab world and the U.S. State Department, given that these reformers aren't sympathetic to US foreign policy. And answers: a shared scriptural hermeneutics - in which the Qu'ranic text is understood as a privatised object of aesthetic, poetic and spiritual appreciation, 'its meaning open', to quote, 'to infinite play but also to historical determination'. Mahmood explores how the privileging, if not 'naturalising', of this approach to the text serves to civilise and discipline religious subjectivity and to characterise the so-called 'traditional literalist' as an absurd and comic - an *uneducated and unenlightened* - figure.

This textual hermeneutics requires, in short, what Mahmood calls a secular analytic standpoint, which is the standpoint we usually adopt, and expect our students to adopt, in the classroom. As recent experience at Goldsmiths testifies however, not all students - specifically, not all Muslim students - will submit to this. I'm not suggesting that sociology teachers share the same goals as the Whitehouse National Security Council's Muslim World Outreach

programme, which aims to 'transform Islam from within'. Or that the relation between religion, education and the empirical is not, often, or even usually, deeply problematic (one need only consider creationism in this context, and/or the claim that the empirical is a betrayal of religious faith). It might be worth pausing, though, to ask to what extent the relation of sociology *to* religion, which is in effect a study *of* religion, displaces difficult questions about the relation between sociological pedagogic practice *and* religion. To what extent does clarity of epistemological approach necessarily translate into political clarity?

These problems (for which I have no answers) are a reminder of what the training of professionals (and the training of experience) excludes, a point that Whitehead often underscored (of course, given his agendaⁱⁱ), in order to produce, to quote, 'both a *restraint* upon specialists and an *enlargement* of their imagination'. Restraint does seem on occasion to be appropriate: to at least acknowledge that there are other experiences to be had (other experiences of the text for example) that are perhaps not to be explained at all ***if that explanation serves only to explain them away.*** The problem with this is that while the sociological problem remains relevant, it is so only to things that are relevant to sociology.

In conclusion, I'm going to have a stab at reorganising the co-ordinates to which sociological relevance refers, by referring to a 'domain', if it can be called that, which is not (oddly enough!) defined by Cartesian coordinates at all: the Deleuzian virtual. I am not proposing that sociology take on a Deleuzian 'world-view' (!); I simply want to put the concept to work, as in an experiment (a test or trial, as experience was originally understood to mean): an experiment in experience. I'm asking: what kind of experience would sociology be, and what experiences would it permit, if the problem were refracted through the virtual?

So to recap: Mills' ontological commitments are to historical social structures on the one hand, and to some variation of the subject on the other. This much is already given; it's the *connection* that remains to be established. *Making the connection* successfully is transformative: it transforms the ordinary man's experience of his own experience. In the light of Mills' ontological a prioris however, one might speculate that this connection is actually important not because it *illustrates* the relevance of history to biography, but because the activity of connecting makes *sociology* relevant to its own problems. Relevance, in other words, is the evidence for what sociology *already* knows. Understood thus, the sociological problem is its own solution: it transforms ordinary experience into sociological experience. No wonder, then, to quote Mills again, that 'we (sociologists) *must* speak of problems'. !

I'd like to refigure this, and suggest that the *problem* must speak (I don't actually like the speech metaphor, but I'm using it because Mills does). The minimum prior ontological commitments here are to the virtual and the actual / which in fact have some characteristics in common with the elements that compose the sociological problem. Minimally defined as a dimension of the actual that's neither observable nor accessible *in itself*, the virtual offers a

'beyond'-actual-states-of-affairs for the social scientist to look to. I think that's important, because the explication of what isn't immediately, or indeed ever, accessible is how much of the 'magic' of sociology is generated (a magic that's arguably lost in the claim that sociology constitutes its own social worlds [without excess]). Unlike *social* structures however, virtual structures or patterns can't do 'explanatory work', because they're not determining in the way that social forces, or the material sedimentation of such forces over time, are often understood to be in sociology.ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of the virtual, in other words, doesn't allow me to replace sociology as **the articulator** of problems, with sociology as **the determining-agent** of problems.^{iv}

Virtual structures are not determining **not** because the virtual has *no* relation to the actual (it's not an unintelligible outside), but because processes of actualisation introduce many contingent divergences. Indeed, if the relations between virtual and the actual were understood to be the ontological counterpart of the epistemological relations between the problem and the solution, then one might say that a virtual problem has many different solutions. These solutions can never be true though, because there is no true solution to a virtual problem; there's only the development of the problem in particular ways.

There doesn't seem much here that will offer a referent for relevance, and yet I find this conception of the problem more robust than the sociological problem as Mills describes it, precisely because what's relevant or not is not decided in advance, but is rather held open until processes of actualisation are stabilised. Although the isomorphic relation between the virtual problem and the actual social researcher (and their approach) inevitably compromises the 'revelatory' capacity of discipline (which was so important to Mills), it does nevertheless confer on sociology an obligation^v to 'rearticulate' the problem in novel ways. This may be an uncomfortable experience though, since rearticulating a virtual problem, unlike articulating a sociological problem, isn't *in itself* necessarily the agent of transformation or the mark of novelty. There's a difference between sophisticated observation and an event.^{vi} It may be that sociology writes itself *out* of the problem because it can't secure its own relevance to it. The claim, for example, that 'our scientific grandfathers and fathers *beat down* religious doubts' (Mills' claim) may be relevant to sociology's experience of *itself*, but irrelevant to the experience of the student who remains silent, or who repeats like a mantra (but *only* until after their final exam), that all experiences are socially constructed.

I'm not proposing relevance as a lure for the student-as-consumer, although it *is* relevant to the changing horizon of the Anglo-American university. Bill Readings describes the decline of the 'university of culture and reason' and the rise of the 'university of excellence', in which *anything* can be taught and *anything* can be researched as long as its taught and researched *excellently*. Although one might intuitively want to protect one's discipline from this intolerable situation by insisting that it is in fact the privileged site of a (particular kind of) experience (an experience of 'reason', for example), this arguably puts it into competition with

all the other experiences that are available on the market (where sociology probably isn't going to fare very well!). Hence the significance not just of relevance, but of transformation. If the university is a place of learning, 'learning', in this revised version of the problem, cannot be about the sociologisation of experience, just as its not about the 'ordinary man' being 'encouraged' to talk back.^{vii} It's not, in other words, about tolerating other people's experiences. On the contrary, when *the problem* [not the sociologist, and not the ordinary man] makes things that can't be identified in advance relevant to each other, both the 'ordinary man' *and* the one who tries to articulate it are transformed. So if anything, I'd anticipate a fair bit of conflict.

ⁱ i.e. with the ontological turn, the privilege that once accrued to sociologists on the basis of the perceived rigour of their methods is now replaced with the constituting 'power' of sociological method.

ⁱⁱ '[I]n the modern world the celibacy of the medieval learned class has been replaced by a celibacy of the intellect who is divorced from the concrete contemplation of the complete facts. Of course, no one is merely a mathematician, or merely a lawyer. People have lives outside their professions or their businesses. But the point is the restraint of serious thought within a groove' (facts and values.doc/hhs/publications). whitehead's talking about this, of course, in relation to abstractions and the relation of abstractions to experience etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'The reality of the virtual is structure. We must avoid giving the elements and relations that form a structure an actuality which they do not have, and withdrawing them from a reality which they have' (reality and virtual reality.doc/caspar/publications)

^{iv} a bit of a critique of law and urry's 'enacting the social then', which has no excess at all, but not of urry on complexity, where its all more finely tuned

^v an ethical obligation - ethics being the final upshot of deleuzian empiricism (event.doc/tcs/publications)

^{vi} so yes, there's always novelty in every reactualisation of the virtual, but we're talking the epistemological counterpart here, problems and solutions: . 'What is [most] frequently found', Deleuze writes, ' - and worse - are nonsensical sentences, remarks without interest or importance, banalities mistaken for profundities, ordinary "points" confused with singular points, badly posed or distorted problems - all heavy with dangers, yet the fate of us all'.

^{vii} i.e. its definitely not about a two-way 'dialogue', that the object would be able ('encouraged') to speak back to sociology (as in reflexive sociology): firstly because, as others have shown, *this* kind of 'ethics', or 'ethical' research, often serves only to tie the subject more closely into power relations (strathern on consent); secondly, because the object of investigation may not be a speaking subject (human speech may not be *relevant*); thirdly, because the subject is an effect of the problem; and finally, and most importantly, because the very notion of speaking to and speaking back, whether human or not, implies some autonomy of and distance between entities.