Sociology's Fate: Intersections of History and (My)Biography

Introduction

The first lesson of modern sociology is that the individual cannot understand his own experience or gauge his own fate without locating himself within the trends of his epoch and the life-chances of all the individuals of his social layer. (C. Wright Mills 1951 p. xx)

Mills voices the notion that it is impossible to understand our individual experiences, or the experiences of others, without locating ourselves within the developments of the epoch. This directive holds as true today, and for contemporary sociology, as it did when he wrote his trilogy about mid-century America in the post-war years. There is value in this Millsean approach regardless of whether one is studying the changing nature of employment, education, social class, researching the complexities around ethnicity and migration or considering trends in the history of the discipline of sociology as a whole. This special issue deals with the latter and is intended to celebrate 50 years since the publication of the journal *Sociology* while also reflecting on the developing story of sociology. To contribute to this endeavour, following Mills, then such a task requires two interlinked strands of discussion and analysis. First, to aid our understanding, and to reflect upon sociology as a disciplinary pursuit (or in Millsean terms 'to gauge sociology's fate') we must ask what are the trends of the sociological epoch? Second, we must ask what are the 'life-chances' of those engaged in the practice of sociology since the inception of the journal *Sociology* some fifty years ago? Indeed, sociology's fate and the ultimate success or failure of the discipline is closely and inextricably entangled with the configurations of those who study sociology, those who teach sociology and those who research from within a sociological framework. We must link history and biography to interrogate these overarching trends via individual experiences. As Mills clearly understood these 'personal troubles' cannot be considered in isolation but must be recognised as a part of the process of history making. Norbert Elias also enables the sociologist to view their 'individual' story not simply as something 'personal' or unique but instead as a 'process', as part of a web of continually changing relationships (Elias: 1978: 124). As such, the exploration of the 'individual story' can be used to illuminate broader processes of historical change and transformation. So how have sociologists progressed during this time? How have I managed/performed/survived as a professional sociologist since engaging with the discipline for the first time in the mid-1980s? I suspect that for some, my story may be somewhat typical of the many sociologists navigating their way through the rapidly changing disciplinary and higher education landscape since the mid-1980s. As such, and hopefully without sounding too grandiose, my own 'journey' as a sociologist says something (even a little) about the ongoing development of the discipline.

Trends of the 'Sociological Epoch'

What are the trends of the sociological epoch since the founding of *Sociology*? In many respects, the first question is well furnished with contributions and answers (see, for example, Rex 1983; Platt 2003; Halsey 2004; Bulmer 1985, 2005 and so forth). If we take 1965 as our census date, the discipline witnessed huge expansion in the mid-1960s following the Robbins Report on Higher Education (1963). Using sociology at Leicester as an example, sociology

expanded from two staff and one specialist student in the early 1950s to well over a hundred and thirty students and tens of staff in the mid-1960s (see Goodwin and Hughes 2011). Consolidation of the discipline followed in the 1970s, before a direct attack in the 1980s and 1990s from the political right and the Thatcherite conservatives (see Brooks, McCormack and Bhopal 2013). Indeed, one does not have to search too far in the pages of Hansard to find early-day motion 2468 from 1993 condemning sociology in what the then Secretary of State for Education, John Patten, referred to in an article as the 'radical whores of sociology'. More recently, trends appear entangled within some underlying tendencies ranging from the rise of the neo-liberal university, the potentially destructive power of the Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the concentration of teaching and research funding (see Holmwood 2010; Parker 2015).

However, there are two other trends of the epoch worthy of a little more attention here. First, the push towards interdisciplinary work. Interdisciplinarity has to be a good thing for the social sciences more generally and sociology specifically. All disciplines have a great deal to learn from the practitioners of other disciplines and such learning, and direct engagement is essential if we are to avoid the perils of 'disciplinary jingoism' (McGoey 2015 :121). However, the term 'interdisciplinary' can itself be used to create a hierarchy of knowledge when the approach adopted to interdisciplinarity is founded on using 'one discipline' to seemingly 'make up for' the perceived limitations of another. I worry that sociology may be the victim of this largely because it is one of the disciplines taught in Universities thought not to have a direct or obvious 'vocational' outcome (as compared to other areas such as criminology and management studies). Given the greater emphasis on employability in the consumer-oriented University the danger is that sociology in and of itself becomes perceived as insufficient. It has to be taught with something else to be seen to have 'value'. The second trend of the epoch is the acceleration in the 'flight' of the discipline (see, Elias 2009; 2009a). The breaking up of sociology into greater numbers of distinct specialisms and discreet areas of social enquiry. Elias predicted such a flight in (1987) driven by the increasing pressure of a narrowing of the sociologists field of view with them becoming focused on smaller areas of specialism and moving away from the larger projects of history to a more exclusive concern for contemporary problems. Mills also, as early as 1959 (see Mills 1959a), highlights the narrowing of sociological interests and the tendency to avoid commenting on anything that is not within the realms of individual 'specialty'. For Mills this caused concern and annoyance.

[There is]....the scientific posture of social investigators...They won't or they can't get beneath the official stereotypes. They favour such terms as 'specialty' as used in 'not my specialty'. Thus treating themselves as minor departments of the big department store. (Mills 1959a).

Without a doubt the attacks on sociology in the 1980s and 1990s may lead some to question the legitimacy of the subject, could have driven students away from the discipline (fearful of their employability prospects in an ever competitive labour market) and caused some academics to redefine their disciplinary identities and research agendas. More recently, the REF may have accelerated such trends in the UK given the perceived need for clearer 'narratives' around research activities and research impact. It may be easier to achieve these if the area under consideration is relatively small, niche and very focused. Sociology also appears to have fewer and fewer practitioners who span multiple areas, who are writing about

whatever takes their interest and, for me, the discipline is poorer for it. The fragmentation of sociology has also been accelerated by the combined effects of the decline and closure of some sociology departments or the merger of sociology into larger organisational units where the distinctiveness of sociology becomes lost amidst competing discourses. This fragmentation also accelerates given the move of many sociologists to allied subject areas such as criminology, media studies, health studies and management to name but few. Some sociologists, with their greater specialism, have moved away to ply their trade elsewhere.

Sociological 'Life-Chances': The Individual Sociological Journey

The question as to how individual sociologists have fared during this time is perhaps a little less straightforward to answer. Sociologists interested in the history of our discipline do provide institutional accounts (see Halsey 2004; Halsey and Runciman 2005; Platt 2003). These have been complemented with by various auto/biographical accounts of how sociologists 'came to be' sociologists (see, for example, Homans 1986; Berger 2011; McKenzie 2015; Brewer 2005; Goodwin and Hughes 2011; Hughes and Goodwin 2013; Oakley 2014; Mennell 2015, 2016). The edited collection *Sociologists' Tales* by Tamley, Doige and Scott (2015) takes this genre of life writing still further by encouraging the contributing sociology practitioners to reflect upon, amongst other things, how they learned their trade. However, again my touchstone here is Mills who, to my mind, was ahead of many of his contemporaries, and those who followed, by actively reflecting on the life of a sociologist. Indeed, for Mills this constant reflection, review and recording were a key driver for his sociological imagination, and it underpinned much of his sociological practice. Beyond the appendices to *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) this is best revealed in his letters and autobiographical writings (see Mills and Mills 2000). For example, when reflecting critically on the wasted opportunities of those in the profession to act and think freely, he locates the intellectual amongst a privileged class where the

... college professor who is well located in a good school is a sort of salaried retainer. Although compared with other professions involving the same length of formal preparation, [their] income is often ridiculously low...[yet they are] free to do what very few men [sic] are free to do: [they] can work on what [they want] to work on, and yet be financially secure, even if a little threadbare. (Mills 1960: 297)

The 'threadbare' feeling expressed by Mills may remain. Like those highlighted above, I have often thought about my journey to, and subsequently through, the discipline and how it came to be that a working class 'school failure' from a mining community in North Derbyshire ended up becoming a sociologist. Although the writing of the previous sentence alludes to the origins of my 'becoming', looking back, I am clear that I have been a sociologist for as long as I can remember. I was engaged in 'sociological practices' well before I trained academically as a sociologist – taking notes and photographs of things I observed, creating small caches of material relating to the local community around my home and constantly asking why 'things' were the way they were. Like McKenzie (2015), reading Orwell at school in the early 1980s had a massive impact on me with the Penguin version of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, labelled clearly as 'Autobiography/Sociology', drawing me in. These early experiences ultimately provided the stimulus for my applying to study Sociology at Loughborough in the

Department of Social Sciences followed by a Ph.D. at Leicester. I joined the British Sociological Association in my second year as an undergraduate and subscribed to *Sociology* from 1990 onwards. It is here my subsequent sociological training comes to intertwine with the trends of the epoch.

I initially joined the Department of Sociology at Leicester to undertake a Ph.D. but did so just at the point when the department split into three separate groupings – *The Centre for Labour Market Studies (CLMS)*, *The Centre for Research into Sport and Society (CRSS)* and the remainder of the Sociology Department. This split meant that a significant amount of applied sociological research and teaching took place outside of the Sociology Department itself in what were known in the institution as 'entrepreneurial centres'. CLMS at the University of Leicester has a direct lineage back to research projects such as *Married Women in a Leicester Factory* (1959-1961) and the *Adjustment of Young Workers Project* (1961-1965) undertaken by academics within the Leicester Sociology Department. David Ashton founded CLMS to explore issues of training, education and employment with membership of the Centre being transformed from a single-disciplinary base (sociology) to an interdisciplinary one (economics, education, psychology with some aspects of management studies). Rather than teaching a single subject to predominantly undergraduates, CLMS was an interdisciplinary, innovative teaching and research unit focused mostly on the education and training needs of fee paying mid-career professionals. The last point is crucial. These students, often from business background, were not interested in knowledge for its own sake, and they demanded from us, as teachers, full explanations and justifications as to the relevance, utility and potentially transformative impact of what we were teaching. In some senses this meant we were pitching our sociological ideas against alternative voices from psychology, education and management studies. In such circumstances, it is perhaps only inevitable that one begins also to question your knowledge and practice, to see the allure of other ideas and approaches. However, my experience of working in an interdisciplinary environment was that my disciplinary identity became more distinctively sociological. I emerged with a clearer sense of who I was as a professional sociologist and had a stronger view of what the discipline had to offer.

Between 2010 and 2011 CLMS, the department I had worked in for nearly twenty years by that point, was merged into a much larger, pre-existing 'critical' School of Management (ULSM). For Critical Management Studies (CMS) scholars like Parker (2015) such 'critical management' schools, are meant to represent something of a departure from the usual/typical business school. Echoing points made earlier about the flight of the discipline; Parker (2015) suggests that the 'unfashionable' area of the sociology of work and employment having moved away from departments of sociology now provides much of the motivation for the 'critical' orientation within schools like Leicester (Parker 2015: 163). He writes:

No wonder then that there are many migrants who don't feel quite at home...This sense of estrangement was doubled for those who moved from sociology simply because these were domains which had been hugely influenced by the counter cultural currents of Marxism, feminism, critical theory and poststructuralism.... For those engaged in studying work, employment and organization this makes for a very comfortable situation because in most institutions there are more jobs in this single area of the business school than in the whole of the sociology department. (Parker 2015: 174)

Outwardly, the perceived 'business' and 'vocational' emphasis of the degrees offered by CLMS, plus a legacy of research in the area of work and employment, suggested that such a merger made complete academic and pedagogical sense. However, this push to merge did not fully take account of the different cultures, values and approaches of the two merging Departments. The consequence of this was that for some (and I hasten to add not all), the merger did indeed represent an uncomfortable transition. So I was, for three years a 'sociology migrant', part of a wider 'sociological diaspora', who through no choice of their own had found themselves housed in UK business school. Indeed, I was a member of the sociological diaspora in *the very same* business school as Parker. Yet for those three years I never felt quite at home although ironically, according to Parker's analysis, it is in those critical management schools, where critical theory, post structuralism and so forth are now applied with relish, that the 'exiled' sociologist should feel most at home. Yet the critical management studies oeuvre, this particular brand of critical sociology (or perhaps more appropriately cultural philosophy) had little relationship to my sociology, my sociological position and standpoint. For me, the danger of critical management studies are the perils associated with 'partisan track' scholarship. A potential 'cul de sac' of starting with the outcome of the analysis and speaking only to an implied audience of like-minded researchers. Does this not limit the potential that the sociological (or even critical imagination) has to offer? So while Parker is correct to argue that 'sociologists have no particular monopoly on imagination, and it is not the queen of the sciences' (Parker 2015: 174) he is perhaps too quick to dismiss sociology due to the relative size and 'wealth' of sociology departments as compared to Business Schools. I agree that sociology does not have a monopoly on imagination nor are some of the Departments of Sociology large or wealthy in relation to their staff or student body¹. However, sociology is 'rich' in heritage and traditions. It has a deep knowledge base upon which the discipline can draw and to which other areas of study can only aspire. Indeed, it is journals such as *Sociology* that best reflect and express this legacy and the stock of sociological knowledge. In many respects, it was this legacy that drew me back to sociology once the chance arose. In 2014 I had the opportunity of re-joining the Leicester Sociology Department, a Department whose intellectual forbears such as Elias, Neustadt interest me so much and a Department which was once home to those how had a direct impact on my sociological career. A real heterodox department where no area of research is 'off limits' nor political standpoint assumed or required. I came home to sociology, and it was sociology itself that brought me here.

Bringing (Past) Sociology Home: A Sociological 'Back to the Future'?

Marty, the future isn't written. It can be changed. You know that. Anyone can make their future whatever they want it to be. I can't let this one little photograph determine my entire destiny. I have to live my life according to what I believe is right... Doc Brown, *Back to the Future III* (1990)

A little like Marty McFly in the *Back to the Future* trilogy I ultimately ended up back where I began and for me coming home to sociology is a return 'back to the future'. What the fictional Doc Brown suggests is correct, the future of Sociology is still to be written, it is not fixed in time nor is it as pessimistic as some might suggest. Answering the questions around 'sociology's fate' also suggests a need to look to the future and to act upon the lessons we

have learned since *Sociology* was first published. For me these lessons are numerous, but I will briefly propose two. First, we have much to gain by engaging in interdisciplinary work and by directly engaging with colleagues from across the social sciences, arts and medicine and biological sciences. However, this should not be at the expense of our sociological identity and the traditions we inherit from our standpoint or the sociological lens that we use. We must also avoid the danger of apologising for being sociologists engaged in sociology when confronted with the new, the current and the 'trendy' or just avoid becoming distracted by those areas of the academy with the 'loudest voices' or the 'deepest pockets' (as attractive as that may be). We should champion the discipline and be proud of it.

The second lesson, and one of the benefits of undertaking such reflective pieces in celebratory issues such as this, is that we are reminded of the need to 'look back' to get a clearer sense of the future. *Sociology* has carried many papers that retain a contemporary relevance to which we should all return. For example, the journal has presented an extensive array of highly significant papers (see, for example, Brown and Brannen 1970; Crompton 1987) which still have something to offer current concerns within the sociology of work and employment. The same is true for the study of ethnicity and migration and we should revisit earlier discussions within these pages, such as Collinson (1967), Fowler *et al* (1977) Brewer (1982) or Anthias, to ascertain what we can (re)learn. *Sociology* has also carried classic studies that shaped the discipline, both in relation to teaching and research. For example, Goldthorpe *et al* (1967) and the thesis of embourgeoisement was not only significant for the way we conceptualised class but also introduced a new concept that would become a mainstay for most sociology textbooks. I am sure the others may choose different papers that they would wish to return to, reflecting their own substantive and epistemological proclivities, the point being that the back volumes of *Sociology* serve as a valuable repository of sociological knowledge. Yet given this stock of sociological knowledge, alongside our heritage and the traditions, we have, perhaps been too quick to forget this legacy and forget these past contributions. Is this something perhaps inherent within a discipline where we deal with social change and transformation and our research? Yet we must re-examine what we have and what is already thought to be known as there is so much still to learn from legacy research, and there are so many studies which deserve to be revisited or reconsidered. For my part, that means returning to the work of previous generations of sociologists to celebrate their achievements and to use what we learn to reposition our disciplinary future so that we may continue to bring past, present and future generations of sociologists home.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Regarding size sociology departments tend to teach sociology whereas business schools tend to have a much broader remit beyond the 'critical' covering areas such as marketing, finance and economics, law and so forth. Moreover, there is also the danger that these specialised pursuits in such mammoth schools, divorced from wider sociological debates, become the 'minor department' of the big department store to which Mills refers.

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