

Quests for Camelot: Re-thinking Sociology as Vocation using Jean Martin's Presidential Address to SAANZ Conference 1971

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Abstract

This paper returns to a pivotal figure (Martin) and moment (her 1971 Presidential Address to SAANZ) in the early years of the establishment of sociology in the Australian universities. Jean Martin (1923-1979) was both an institution builder of sociology as discipline in Australian universities and a bridge-builder in the social sciences between disciplines, the generations, and between the academy and the public in a time of civil unrest and ideological division, not least over Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war. At the very time of sociology's arrival it was being subject to rigorous immanent critique. Martin's Presidential Address is a masterful rhetorical performance in dealing directly with the most important aspects of this critique in and through a re-presentation of sociology as discipline, vocation, practice and mythical quest.

This paper is part of a wider project on the intellectual biography of Martin and the instituting of social sciences in Australian universities after World War Two.

Keywords: Jean Martin (1923-1979), history of Australian social sciences, vocation, sociological theory, sociological methods

Recent years has witnessed a rise in discourses of the 'public intellectual' by humanities and social science academics on its definition, history, and practices (Bauman, 1987; Jacoby, 1987; Habermas, 1991; Posner, 2001; Clawson, *et al.*, 2007). In Australasia, the joint meeting of TASA and SANZ in Auckland, December, 2007, hosted a colloquium on the concept and praxis of 'public sociologies'. With the instituting of social sciences in the university systems in the second half of the twentieth century and the rise of new technologies and media of public discourses, a new set of critical reflections on the vocation of the social scientist has arisen (Beilharz and Hogan, 2005). This paper returns to the life and work of Jean Martin, a

social scientist (trained in anthropology and sociology) who was both alive to these issues and an exemplary practitioner of the sociological vocation both public and academic settings at the foundation of the establishment of sociology in the Australian university system. In particular, it returns to a pivotal moment of her critical reflections on these themes: her May 1971 Presidential Address to the General Meeting of the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand that was subsequently published in its house journal, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* (1972).

Martin's title of her Presidential Address and wellspring for her critical reflections on the contemporary tasks of sociology in an Australian context is the quintessential British set of myths attached to the stories of Camelot that have accreted around a quasi-historical figure of King Arthur across 1,500 years. By the end of the 60s, Camelot occupied an ambiguous crossover site of counter-cultural and mainstream popular cultural symbols and images, with conflicting meanings and ends for different subcultures and age groups, from Britain to America and in Australia also. The times themselves were tumultuous, with the global student revolts of 1968 that rocked Paris, London, Chicago, Berkeley, Bangkok, Manila, Tokyo, reaching all the way down to Monash and La Trobe Universities in Melbourne. The pressing political issue was the Vietnam War and the Australian government's introduction of compulsory conscription but the new generation of young adults were questioning on a host of different fronts in society and embarking on new quests of alternative social orders. Universities were not immune to these changes and were sites of both political unrest and intellectual quests. Generationally and temperamentally, Martin was of her time but not part of the aspirations and activities of the baby-booming 68ers. A global depression and a world war marked her formative years. Martin was in her mid-forties,

and for the first time in her life found herself a well-remunerated Professor whose task it was to establish the sociology discipline against its critics in a new university.

In these overlapping contexts, Martin's choice of Camelot was a canny reading of the *zeitgeist*, and one she uses by taking the quest seriously. Her purpose was to bridge a perceived gulf between the 'epistemological aspect of sociology and the work of the sociologist as craftsman' and positioned in the 'context of sociology in Australia'. As we shall see, however, her turn to Camelot is not only a convenient, topical heuristic device but is presented as an inexorable because immanent part of the sociological task and responsibility in both its conceptual and methodological aspects.

Martin nominates three quests for Camelot: the mythic-symbolic, the historical-archaeological, and the ideological-sociological quests respectively. After a detailed outline of these three quests she declares that they each in turn are exemplary of the 'central and abiding issues of sociology':

The Arthurian legend points to the discipline's concern to identify and interpret man's symbolic world through his own eyes. The archaeological search for Arthur's seat represents our task of establishing the substantive reality to which man addresses himself, which he fashions in accord with his symbolic universe, or which results as the unintended by-product of this meaningfully directed behaviour. And finally, Project Camelot directs attention to the sociologist himself: the limits and obligations of his role as a political being and as creative agent in social change.' (6).

This declaration is a surprise as it is not explicitly confessed until this juncture that each of the three quests of Camelot are viewed by her as Weberian ideal-types of the sociological enterprise. This is made unambiguously clear however in Martin's third quest – that of the US government's still-born project of 1964-65 on the sociological study of social change in developing nations with the aim of 'developing a general social systems model which would make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change' that would 'relieve conditions which

are assessed as giving rise to a potential for internal war' (Horowitz cited in Martin, 5). In other words in clear ideological terms this was a case of the government trying to use social science to as a weapon against communism and an expression of US government 'determination ... to intervene in any country of the world where popular movements might threaten its interests' (Montes cited in Martin, 5). Perhaps serendipitously for Martin's pedagogical purposes, this failed endeavour was called 'Project Camelot'. The Quest myth is brought into the foreground of modern contemporary social sciences in all their conceptual, ethical, and methodological challenges and quandaries that arise when working with the modern corporation and state.

The audience and context of Martin's deliberations are Australasian. Yet she uses a British myth and British traditions of historiography and archaeology and American sociology and its central conundrums - conceptual, moral, and methodological - as her means of setting out the agenda for an antipodean sociology. For Martin, as for most of her audience, key traditions of modern sociology and anthropology for shaping the contemporary social imaginations and practices of Australian and New Zealand sociologists are Anglo-American with the German and French sources mediated through metropolitan centres of sociology in England and USA. For Martin, by far the most important source of intellectual traffic is North American and not only for reasons of her own early training and direct experience. The relative maturity, professional and institutional strength of North American sociology meant that it had been able to develop a longer lineage of theoretical and methodological innovation and consolidation than Australia and from which Australasian sociologists could learn. Whereas in the North American sociological setting, 'Project Camelot in 1965 provoked, ..., a laborious examination of the relationship of the sociologist with

governments, sponsors and funding agencies', Martin sets the agenda for sociologists in Australasia to inquire 'into the role of research in social change' (p. 3). This is the burden of her lecture – how to develop the craft of the sociologist in the Australian context? She purposively choose only one aspect of the three quests to explore this challenge: 'their import for the relation between the sociologist and his data' (p. 6). This is both to take up the North American sociology of knowledge critique of Mills through to Gouldner but also to deflect attentions of her peers and colleagues in the sociological association back to the central task and stuff of sociology – the study of society. It is a subtle message to her younger colleagues that there are many and better ways to be an agent of change than to simply deconstruct the epistemological foundations of sociology when it is not even yet properly established with any institutional power or credibility in the Australian and New Zealand university systems. A more effective political strategy than simply shouting revolution on the streets and trumpeting anti-empirical critiques of social science's truth claims, Martin seems to be implying, is to work from within the terms of sociology's own subject matter (that is, contemporary society not sociology itself) to reveal the quest for the discipline's own responsibilities and virtues that are proper to its station and purpose. Here Martin identifies two main aspects to this dialectical relation of the sociologist to his (sic) data. First, is the challenge of data collection itself – not least because of the 'obvious untidiness and stubbornness of social phenomena', the complexity of human behaviour, and the necessity of simplification in our methods not least in circumscribing time and space and 'delineating data that serve as indicators of the inaccessible' (pp. 6f.). The second aspect and field of tension is that already highlighted by Martin's use of Project Camelot – namely, the 'sociologist's dependence on information generated, collated and often also interpreted by

organizations whose purposes are quite different from his (sic) own'. (p. 7). Martin's clear and frank admission of the intractability of this tension in the sociologist's task and setting sets up as direct answer to Gouldner's charge that 'those who supply the greatest resources for the institutional development of sociology are precisely those who most distort its quest for knowledge' (Gouldner cited in Martin, 1972:8). Aside from pointing out that Gouldner's own solution in 'reflexive sociology' does not meet this problem of 'how a society or an organization within it is to be led to generate the kind of self-knowledge that will make it genuinely accountable to either supporters or critics' (p. 7), Martin – ever the bridge-builder – turns herself rather to the more important constructive task of how a sociologist can answer the question 'what can be done about it?' (p. 7). Martin seems to be arguing that ideology critique is a useful sociology of knowledge challenge only insofar it directs the sociologist back to a more sophisticated and critically engaged craftsmanship rather than to an assertion of its futility from the outset.

Martin delineates four main responsibilities of the sociologist. First, the sociologist has a responsibility to protect the individual's privacy and respecting his (sic) confidence. Second, she has to contribute to the 'fundamental processes of classification and analysis' that goes beyond our 'proper insistence of that facts' that exist for the mind always in an intellectual and social context (Mannheim, 1940 cited in Martin, 1972) and that the conceptual organization of experience into knowledge is a social exercise'. In other words, Martin argues that notwithstanding the violence and loss of traditional and local forms of cultures and knowledges, she defends the globalizing and universalizing propensities of the rational-scientific project - despite its radical and present-day critiques – as presenting humankind with 'gains that comparative examination of a range of social structures brings in terms of relating the

more unique modes of classification to the more nearly universal, and thus arriving at ‘what may be the essential conditions of whatever we are trying to understand’ (Mills, 1959 cited in Martin, 1972:10).... ‘it is to the open frame of reference, and the mode of classification that is ‘neutral’ to the extent that it embodies the possibility of alternative conclusions, that the sociologist has a responsibility’. (Martin, 1972:11).

The third responsibility of the contemporary sociologist, for Martin, is to ensure that the standardized data classified is always and everywhere accessible, and therefore open to professional and public scrutiny. Finally, Martin reinstates the importance of the sociology of knowledge as a crucial responsibility of the sociologist herself – namely, ‘the examination of the generation of information as itself a social enterprise’, not of the epistemological foundations of social science but of how, what and why a society generates its own knowledge base. ‘What one wants is a sociology of social data’ (p. 12) :

By what processes does it come about that the data collected in some sphere of activity in some societies and groups are so much more precise, reliable and comprehensive than in others? How do the adopted classifications emerge? How are processes of classification, data-collection and presentation influenced by the institutional milieu within which these processes operate? How and when does data-collection become an end in itself, a self-perpetuating process geared to long-forgotten purposes and interests? (13).

It is noted in passing that this proposal is suggestive at least in part of Michel Foucault’s historical sociology of knowledge/power nexus of modernity in his archaeology of knowledge project of the first half of his career which was appearing in French at the time of her lecture. Nevertheless, her argument must have sounded strange to her audience – insufficiently radical to those who sought change in unmediated material terms on the one side, and, on the other, perplexing to those

raised on the certitudes of social demography or the social systems approaches of quantitative research methods mediated by the theories of Durkheim, Parsons, and Merton.

Such are the four responsibilities of sociologists that Martin puts to her audience. Had she stopped there, the lecture would have been sufficient to the task of reasserting the creativity of sociology as a science of society that is not naïve or disingenuous about its own epistemological foundations and sociology of knowledge. Martin has provided a subtle and sufficient reply to the hermeneuts of suspicion who see only power and ideology at the base of the social sciences. Martin proceeds further, however, to suggest that the sociologist can develop a creative response to the intractability of her material by taking up one of three positions to ensure that the sociologist herself is an ‘active agent in creating informative situations’(14): namely, as experimenter, participant-observer; and innovator. As an experimenter, the sociologist can build in a self-evaluative component to the social experiments that are being developed either by the sociologist himself in small group dynamics or in the larger corporate endeavours of corporations, community associations, or government departments. As a participant-observer, Martin claims that too often ethnographic research has not progressed much beyond the first generation of anthropological and sociological field work that emphasizes full immersion by the researcher in the host culture but at one and the same time to avoid emotional attachment that will adversely affect the results of the research (Robert E. Park cited here by Martin: 14). In anticipation of Allan Touraine’s actor-subject interventionist mode of sociology, Martin advocates the kind of work done by W. F. Whyte in his *Street Corner Society* (1955 cited in Martin, 1972) in which ‘the research worker’s understanding comes from his observations of the responses made to situations which he has himself set up -...Responses to his

presence – the roles he is cast in and the way he is incorporated into the action – are sources of insight inherent in every situation.’ (14).

The third creative response that a sociologist can make to the intractability of her social data according to Martin is that of the innovator *par excellence*. This is the natural extension of the participant observer but where the sociologist actively and self-consciously seeks out and then becomes involved in developing innovatory forms of social living’ (p. 14). In making this suggestion, did Martin have the last decade of Max Weber in mind – when he involved himself with various alternative organizations and communal and institutional settings as participant-observer? Just when it seems that Martin has put her own utopian glasses on she slips in an archetypal Weberian word of warning: ‘innovation is, of course, in the air, but it is not easy to say what in the long run will prove the more radical departures from familiar patterns. Mixed college dormitories may turn out to have more far-reaching implications than hippie communes’. (p. 15). Always Martin reaffirms the sociologist as in the first place a scientific vocation and not an unmediated political vocation. This is not to deny that all science has political dimensions and implications but these do not obliterate the primary form and content of the calling and craft itself.

Jean Martin was a bridge-builder, constructive thinker and institution builder. The ‘Quests for Camelot’ artfully eludes the crude dichotomies of revolution versus reform, theory and practice, interpretation and empiricism, moralism and science, by taking seriously the stuff of the sociologist’s first interest and responsibility - the study of society in its contemporary expression. Martin takes up the poetics of quest as her own and reworks the images of the sociologist as scientific data collector, critical analyst and interpreter as engaged in this romance of quest also. Her temper is critical, her bias is democratic, and her quest is the application of enlightened

rationality, scientific rigour applied to the best hopes and needs of each generation. For Martin, sociology as the craft of studying contemporary society is necessarily and intrinsically bound up in the creation of the good society, across time and cultures: ‘Sociology’s immersion in the present....means that ‘[the sociologist] is a contributor to man’(sic) self-knowledge and self-image.. and his work are themselves an element that more likely than not will influence the emergence processes that are the subject of his (sic) inquiry’ (p. 16). This is the central quest that Martin set herself from the outset and the tasks that followed she embraced in her roles as researcher, teacher, networker, institution-builder, across the academy, the government, and the community sectors. This is her legacy to actually-existing and practising sociologists today.

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