



Change, uncertainty and the future of sociology

Stephen Crook

I am grateful for the opportunity to address themes that are central to the future of our discipline and association. That future appears clouded to many of us, especially the majority located in universities. There, our concerns are amplified by funding problems, shifts in student enrolment patterns towards 'safe' vocational courses, permanent revolution in organizational structures and the rest (I have been at James Cook University for three years and in each year the composition and structure of our Faculty have been different).

Those matters richly deserve extended sociological attention, which I can't give them here. But I do want to link them to other questions about the future of sociology. The theme of 'sociology in crisis' is as old as the discipline itself, but there are important differences between the challenges presently facing the discipline and the post-Parsonsian 'crisis' of US sociology in the 1960s. In that period, each side of the quarrels over 'system vs conflict', 'structure vs action' or 'conservatism vs radicalism' could share the comfortable assumption that their arguments mattered. It was important to settle the political, theoretical and methodological parameters of sociology because sociology mattered. The type of sociology that prevailed would influence the shape of society itself. We no longer enjoy that consolation. We may have come to terms with a post-Parsonsian pluralism, but we seem to face the more insidious threat of a leaching away of our salience. That point has a double sense. In the more obvious, the audiences for sociology among policy elites, publics and students appear to be shrinking. In the perhaps less obvious sense, the specifically 'sociological' character of what we do loses definition, shading into the concerns of various area studies.

It is this question of salience that I want to address briefly today. In doing so, I want to avoid two extremes: a denial that anything significant

or problematic is happening and a fatalism that supposes nothing can be done to halt the decline of our discipline. In an address of this type I can't hope to be exhaustive, so I'll confine myself to three aspects of change that impacted upon the salience of sociology.

- Shifts in dominant sites of uncertainty.
- New modes of production of knowledge.
- A utilitarian culture that demands immediate 'relevance'.

I'll run through the difficulties created by each of these developments before turning to the ways in which sociology might usefully respond to them.

Uncertainty

Sociology and the other 19th-century projects we have posthumously enrolled as sociological were born in the attempt to make sense of an emergent industrial, urban, democratic and 'modern' order. Such success as sociology enjoyed in its early days derived from its ability to define, and to formulate as quintessentially 'social', some of the major sites of uncertainty in that order: urban poverty, crime, labour unrest and political conflict. That diagnosis would hold for the pragmatic founders of American and British sociology, for Marx's 'historical materialism' and, of course, for Durkheim. Durkheim's genius as a disciplinary entrepreneur lay in his capacity to take any source of fashionable anxiety and argue, to paraphrase, that 'It's the social, stupid.' A very few decades later, what some would see as the discipline's finest hour in terms of its salience came with the agricultural, industrial and social programmes of the Roosevelt 'New Deal' in the USA. The employment of sociologists in large numbers appeared to open a limitless vista of state patronage and influence for the discipline.

Our recent difficulties in establishing our salience, in forging privileged links to significant sites of uncertainty, derive from two apparently divergent trends. The first of these, paradoxically, is our own success. The fundamental theses that the founders of sociology fought to establish have become truisms, even clichés. Policy makers and publics do not need sociologists to tell them, for example, that poverty fosters crime, that schooling reproduces inequalities or that unemployment erodes community integration. Sociologists have lost any exclusive claim they may have advanced to intellectual property rights in 'the social'. At the same time, and here is the second trend, there is a growing weariness and disillusionment with those 'social' diagnoses and the policy prescriptions with which they have been associated. Over the decades in which the 'social' character of social problems has been understood, it can seem that understanding has not produced amelioration: crime, inequality and mal-integration stubbornly persist. Against that background, neo-liberal preferences for individual-level diagnoses and treatments for these pathologies have an increasing appeal. Their

appeal is only amplified by the promise of powerful biologically based explanatory accounts of, and interventions in, behaviour. The social, it seems, is surplus to requirements. As Laplace spoke of God to Napoleon, we have no need of that hypothesis.

Productions of knowledge

We know, on sociology of knowledge principles, that academic disciplines are contingent human practices rather than Platonic forms (remember R.S. Peters et al.). In consequence, we know that disciplines will emerge, mutate and sometimes dissolve. There is no reason to expect sociology to be an exception to this rule: our discipline has no unique right to an untroubled perpetuity. However, this process of emergence, mutation and dissolution is not a timeless ‘eternal return’. Disciplines, as we now understand them, are specifically modern in their social-organizational as well as their cognitive dimensions. They are contingent upon the funding arrangements, career patterns, curricula and the rest that define modern universities.

In a well-known argument, Gibbons and his colleagues have suggested that discipline-based ‘mode one’ knowledge production is yielding priority to a trans-disciplinary ‘mode two’. This shift not only breaches boundaries between disciplines, creating new fields, but erases the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ enquiry and erodes the privilege of universities as uniquely chartered sites of knowledge-production. The most frequently cited examples of ‘mode two’ knowledge production are fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and superconductivity. But there is abundant evidence that similar processes are re-shaping the landscape within which sociology is located: environmental studies, health studies, organizational studies, sports studies and tourism studies, for example. Here too, the modern pattern of disciplinarity is challenged in many of the ways that Gibbons and his colleagues suggest. If this argument is correct, the challenge facing sociology is not simply to re-assert disciplinary claims against competitor disciplines in a re-run of Durkheim’s battles, but to determine what its disciplinarity might mean in an increasingly trans-disciplinary world.

Utilitarian culture

It is here that the threats to our discipline are at their most visible and connect most plainly with the institutional travails I noted in my introductory remarks. The connections to the threats outlined above are also plain. In contemporary Australia a number of trends combine to produce a toxic anti-intellectualism in so-called ‘mainstream’ culture. In our local variant of neo-liberalism, the arts and education become private, rather than public goods. Any subsidy is denounced by the more virulent commentators as ‘middle-class welfare’ and ‘rent-seeking’.

In the post-Hansonite political climate fostered by the federal government, long-established traditions of egalitarianism are enrolled into derisive attacks on metropolitan 'elites'. In this climate, the only possible grounds on which to argue for increased – or restored – funding to higher education and research are purely economic: Australia's 'national competitiveness' will suffer if we do not do so. The times are not propitious for a discipline that has prided itself on its role as a critic of inequalities of wealth and power. These cultural factors combine with genuine and understandable anxieties about career prospects among potential students and their parents. The flight towards 'vocational' courses is complex and interesting. In some ways it represents a denial of contemporary labour market realities, an attempt to evade the truth that traditional life-long 'careers', with their single entry-ticket and their predictable and progressive unfolding, are relics of the past. For whatever reasons, the generalist degree packages within which sociology has typically been offered in Australian universities are out of favour with students and therefore, especially on current funding models, with university managements. Those same funding models partly explain why, in many institutions, the teaching that sociologists have offered in vocational programmes has moved 'in house' – to be offered either by sociologists separated from their disciplinary unit, or by non-sociologists.

What is to be done?

How, then, should we respond as sociologists to what I have sketched so far as a set of hostile developments? A first step is to recognize that, perhaps uniquely among the disciplines, we are equipped to understand the origins, nature and prospects of our own situation. In its very sketchy way, the account I have offered of the difficulties faced by sociology is itself sociological. Second, we will need to distinguish between those factors that are merely local or temporary and those that are connected to long-term trends. To fail to do this will encourage either a facile and passive optimism – 'The next change of government will see us right', or an unremitting and equally passive pessimism – 'We can do nothing, we'll all be roond.'¹ Third, of course, we must recognize the positive opportunities presented by the developments that I have portrayed in a wholly negative way. With those points made, I will re-trace my steps through the three clusters of issues I have addressed – although they overlap extensively – to explain why I think that sociology can face the future with confidence and optimism.

Uncertainty again

The obvious lesson to be drawn from shifts in the major sites of uncertainty is that we should ensure that our disciplinary agenda keeps pace with those shifts. On some fronts we are performing very effectively: sociologists have

been at the forefront of the analysis of globalization for a decade. We are well positioned to focus empirical attention on the uneven and disruptive local effects of globalizing processes in Australia. Similarly, we have produced compelling accounts of the nature and effects of neo-liberalism that have helped to shape public debate in Australia. Again, we are well placed to respond to the conservative re-discovery of 'social capital' which is likely to figure prominently in Australian politics over the next few years. In other respects, the challenge of maintaining salience requires of us more difficult choices and changes. The relations between natural, technical and social processes lie at the heart of fundamental issues from climate change to genetic engineering. Increasingly, these issues and others like them will move to the top of public and policy agendas. It is not simply cynicism and opportunism to argue that if sociology is to retain – or regain – its salience we must place these same issues at the top of our own agendas. Without a sociological dimension, public debate on scientific and technical questions will be radically impoverished. Policy outcomes will be more likely to fall victim to varieties of the paradox of consequences.

So far so good, but here comes the hard part. Sociology's contribution to these debates cannot be confined to debunking assertions that climatic or genetic phenomena are 'socially constructed' (interestingly, in the former case such assertions are likely to come from the 'right', in the latter case from the 'left'). As Barry Barnes, Steve Fuller and others have recently argued, sociology must re-engage with the substantive knowledges produced in biology. The case could be extended to other natural sciences. The point here is not that biology is the new Queen of the Sciences, from whence all claims must be uncritically accepted. As Fuller points out, the stark and common optionalization of total rejection or total acceptance misses the point. But if we are to engage selectively with biology, it will require more sociologists to become more familiar with debates in that science, and more comfortable with the culture of the natural sciences generally, than has typically been the case. There are important research traditions in science and technology studies, notably actor network theory, that are enormously suggestive about the ways in which sociology should engage with nature, technology and the 'non-human' more generally. But these traditions are at the margins of our discipline – an arrangement with which they themselves have often been quite content. On the argument here, they must be brought to the centre in a fundamental reworking of our ideas of society and the social.

Productions of knowledge again

If a secular shift from discipline-based knowledge production, located primarily in universities, is giving way to trans-disciplinary productions whose sites are far more widely dispersed, why should sociology even try to buck

this trend? Why should we not accept the proliferation of area studies as a vindicating *Aufhebung* of our discipline in a post-disciplinary world? The question is not easily answered. I recall that my DPhil supervisor saw the task of sociology as its own abolition in a generalized reflexivity of practices. While President of the ISA, Immanuel Wallerstein argued in his (very lengthy) 'address' in 1998 that sociology should cede its priority to developing the broader 'culture of social science'. Andrew Sayer has recently advocated the embrace of 'post-disciplinary studies' as the alternative to the 'evolutionary cul de sac' of an absurd and self-contradictory 'disciplinary imperialism and parochialism'. These are generous, optimistic and outward-looking views that have much to commend them. Clearly, any attempt on the part of sociology to pull up the drawbridge and pour boiling pitch from the battlements on to non-sociologists would be a disaster. However, a modest (in all senses) defence of the 'disciplinarity' of sociology need not have this character. The starting point must be an understanding of 'discipline' that draws on the sociology of knowledge rather more than on the philosophy of science.

As noted earlier, sociology is not an eternally valid 'form of knowledge'. Neither does it hold exclusive property rights in a pre-constituted field of 'the social'. Rather, sociology is as we find it: an untidy and developing network composed of concepts, arguments, models, exemplary studies, associations, journals and practitioners – living and dead. The elements that make up this odd assemblage are not bound together by any 'logic', but neither are they randomly distributed and associated. Moving through time, the disciplinary network acquires the status of a tradition – or set of traditions – through citation and self-reference. On that basis, the question of our disciplinarity is the question of the extent to which we continue to link our activities in research and teaching to the elements of that network. In relation to trans- or post-disciplinary studies the question is not whether or not to engage with them, but whether we have something 'sociological' to bring to them. Stevi Jackson's recent argument that feminism has a lot to gain from a re-examination of the micro-sociological tradition exemplifies a type of committed and productive disciplinarity that engages with the trans-disciplinary without losing its sociological character. Jackson's point can be generalized: we must resist the intellectual cringe that can lead us to assume that any French philosopher is, by definition, more interesting than any American sociologist; or that one deconstructed text is more useful than any number of large-scale data sets. The point may seem banal and question-begging, but we enact our disciplinarity as sociologists when we take up, argue with and develop the resources of sociology's disciplinary networks in our professional practice. If we can do this in a manner that is both confident and open-minded, there need be no contradiction between our 'disciplinarity' in this sense and our engagement with trans-disciplinary studies.

Utilitarian culture again

Sociology was born in the spruiking of its general usefulness, but has now developed – in some quarters at least – a much more cautious attitude to utility and application. Any hint that an application of sociology may be complicit with corporate or state power immediately condemns it. By contrast, an application conducted in the name of ‘resistance’ is absolved of the need to meet any other criteria, it can seem. The lingering afterlife of the myth of purely resistant knowledges, uncontaminated by power has severely hampered our capacity to think about the utility of our discipline. Perversely, it has discouraged paying attention to the ‘professional ethics’ of sociological practice.

We need to recognize more clearly that there is nothing inherently dishonourable about research that aims to enhance the effectiveness of government programmes, or to restructure a corporate management, or to identify the market for a consumer product. Even more generally, there are no reasons why neo-liberals or conservatives cannot be effective professional sociologists. Once we abandon the idea that our professional practice in some way necessitates, or privileges, a particular political stance we can focus our attention on the ethical and legal conditions that should regulate our practice.

This is perhaps an oblique way to approach my main point: if we are to argue that the utilitarianism of our contemporary political and policy culture is damagingly restrictive, we weaken rather than strengthen our case if we set our professional face against utility *per se*. We strengthen the case if we show that we can be ‘useful’ in quite narrow ways while at the same time encouraging sharp-edged and critical debates about social priorities and alternatives. For a century, the capacity to hold these two aspects of sociology in balance has been one of the major strengths of our disciplinary networks.

I want to raise two other matters under this heading. First, I recall a bleak winter afternoon in 1995 when I was visiting my old university – York, in the North of England. Sociology staff I had known as a student 20 years before were reflecting on what they saw as the decline in York sociology over those years and the lack of engagement on the part of many sociology students. As someone remarked, in a phrase that has stuck in my mind, ‘We need to tell them better stories.’ Perhaps, sometimes, we do need to tell them – our students – better stories. A diet of unrelieved gloom focused on the evils of class, patriarchy and racism, or the threats posed by environmental crisis and the global economy has a strong appeal to me but not, I think, to most 18-year-old North Queenslanders. Perhaps we need to tell them stories about the skills they can acquire to help them make what they want of their lives, or about the ways their communities can be strengthened, or the types of transnational institutions that might promote

ecological sustainability. For all the flaws of US sociology in the Parsonian ascendancy, its fundamental optimism and can-do orientation to social problems are attractive. I'm not suggesting a John Howard style return to a future of Norman Rockwell paintings and the Peace Corps. We should not become the collective Dr Pangloss of the social sciences. But neither should we claim from economics the title of 'the gloomy science'. Social criticism must remain a central element in our disciplinary repertoire, but balanced by a 'utopian realism', to borrow Giddens' phrase.

On the second, and final, matter I want to raise, we must recognize that universities have no monopoly on the practice of sociology. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Australians trained in sociology work in transnational corporations, market research companies, government departments, community groups or as independent consultants. Their positions are rarely labelled 'sociologist', but none the less that is what they are. These practitioners of sociology are in the front line of debates about 'utility': it is the fundamental condition of their professional activity. The challenges facing sociology that I have outlined here are not matters that face academic sociology alone. If we are to try to formulate any kind of collective response, we surely cannot do so effectively if academic sociology and its practice outside the academy remain as divorced from each other as they are in Australia. The difficult task of forging links between these very different sociologies must be a priority for sociology, and especially for TASA, over the next few years.

Conclusion

I don't want to offer a very extended conclusion, you will be pleased to hear. Very roughly, I have argued that sociology faces serious challenges linked to: shifts in dominant sites of uncertainty, new modes of production of knowledge and a utilitarian culture that demands immediate 'relevance'. We have the capacity, if we choose, to seize the opportunities embedded in those challenges, to reshape our discipline in a way that adapts to contemporary realities and priorities while retaining its identifiably sociological character. It is not only in our own interests to do so: now, more than ever, the pace and complexity of change processes require a strong sociological voice in public and policy debates about Australia's future.

Note

1 That is, 'we'll all be ruined'; from John O'Brien's poem 'Said Hanrahan'.