

# Barry Sandywell

## BEYOND METAPHYSICS AND NIHILISM

*In Memoriam*: Steve Crook, sociologist  
and teacher (1950–2002)

This special issue of *Cultural Studies* is dedicated to the memory of Professor Stephen Crook (1950–2002). He had been involved with this project in its earliest stages, but, sadly, was not in the end able to contribute. Steve, as he was always known to his friends and colleagues, died in 2002 after a lengthy and brave struggle with cancer. Steve is survived by his wife, Rosemary, and daughter, Felicity.

Steve was well respected in the sociological communities of the UK and Australia. He had longstanding interests in social theory, the sociology of culture and political sociology. His books include *Modernist Radicalism and Its Aftermath: Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Radical Social Theory* (1991), *Post-modernization: Change in Advanced Society* (co-authored with Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, 1992), *Adorno: The Stars Look Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (ed., 1994), *Environmentalism, Public Opinion and the Media in Australia* (edited with Jan Pakulski, 1998). In addition to his scholarly work, Steve served as the President of The Australian Sociological Association from 1999 to 2002 and the joint-editor of its journal from 1993–1997. In his role as President, he played a key role in the initial organization of the 15th World Sociological Congress held in 2002 in Brisbane. Sadly, however, illness prevented Steve from attending.

In the following brief space I would like to celebrate aspects of Steve's life and work from the point of view of my changing involvement with him over several decades as, chronologically speaking, his doctoral supervisor, his friend, and, occasionally, colleague in the common pursuit of a shared conception of sociological inquiry that is fully aware of the contingent facts of its historical origins, its public and ethical responsibilities and, above all, its enormous reflexive potential for our understanding and transformation of modern society. Immediately one should enter a caveat that Steve would have undoubtedly endorsed. Namely, that a life as full and complex as his cannot be compressed into a biographical 'unity' and that what follows should not be seen as a summary of the force fields and contingencies that marks such a singular existence. I do not wish to condense the substance and attributes of a life, but simply

to re-collect moments from a complex sociological itinerary. I believe that this more truly reflects the whole thrust of Steve's conception of the place of theorizing, sociological analysis and education in the wake of the grand narratives of modernity. In remembering Steve, I wish to commend his life as itself an instance of the kind of reflexivity made available in his work – leaving it to those who knew and respected him to provide other stories, other accounts and reflections that will help to reconfigure the person and his work. In the concluding words of his doctoral thesis: 'It would work against the thrust of the entire essay to urge a "unity" of these moments, or a "synthesis" of the projects associated with them. But it would be quite in keeping with that thrust to argue that it is only within those moments and projects that the precarious hope of a radicalism which is neither metaphysical nor nihilistic can be preserved' (1984, p. 382).

Steve came from a middle-class family and *miliu*; he was brought up and educated in the small manufacturing city of Leicester. He followed a not untypical early education that led to the study of philosophy as an undergraduate at the University of York in the early 1970s and to sociology as a postgraduate student. His disappointment with the aridity of the then dominant tradition of analytical philosophy led him away from philosophy as a career and he came to register as a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at the University of York in the late 1970s. Knowing my own interests in reflexive sociology and in exploring the genealogy of philosophy and social theory, I recall a youthful and somewhat diffident figure, enveloped in an old ex-Army and Navy trench coat appearing unannounced at my office door. An individual with a beaming face graced with an infectious smile introduced himself as a prospective research student. Was I willing to supervise material he had been thinking about for a year or more on the nature and origins of sociological thought? I was both surprised and a little suspicious of his ambitious project to isolate and uncover the origins and assumptions of radical social theory. To trace the presuppositions of the idea of a securely founded social science in the writings of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Althusser and Habermas? To deconstruct the genealogy of social thought in three years? I remained sceptical. However, I listened and Steve talked. Perhaps three hours passed and many cups of coffee later, my doubts about his intellectual credentials had receded and I was more or less persuaded that he could indeed fulfil the programme of research he had set out for himself, or at least, contribute significantly to the history of social thought. We arranged a further meeting and he promised to write out some of his ideas. In the light of these rough drafts, Steve became one of my research students. We both shared an interest in what was then referred to in a deprecatory manner as 'continental philosophy' and, more specifically, a profound respect for the German tradition of critique and critical social theory. Thus began a steady stream of discussions and programmatic texts; texts, it should be said, initially pervaded by the then-dominant influences of continental structuralism – in the form of the Althusserian revision

of Marxism – and debates current within British Marxism influenced by Althusser, along with contributions from Gramsci, Poulantzas, Balibar and others. I still recall the animation in Steve’s face when debating the relevant merits of the Hindess-and-Hirst line on some esoteric problem of structural determination that then exercised the left academic community. Steve had already seen that the pseudo-scientificity of Althusser’s epistemology, even when ‘purified’, by the hyper-structuralism of Hindess and Hirst, could not avoid metaphysical postulates and, as we would learn in later works, the threat of nihilism disguised as an imperative of sociological reasoning. Despite the variety and heterogeneity of his early drafts, however, his intellectual potential and analytical flair were no longer in doubt.

In hindsight, it is clear that Steve was one of a remarkable generation of postgraduate students that converged in the Department of Sociology at York in the 1970s. Many of these have produced important works in sociology and gone on to become important figures in the sociological world in their own right. Although the list is incomplete, I would like to single out Andrew Webster, Steve Yearley, Pete Cressey, John Hill, Shule Pojon and Pete McGavin in this context. Like many of his contemporaries, Steve’s basic orientation toward social thought and the unity of theory and critical research was forged in the aftermath of the ‘theory wars’ that then characterized academic sociology, especially by the heated debates between different forms of Neomarxism, semiotics and structuralism, phenomenology and interpretive philosophy. ‘Radicalism’ was both a central theme and a *desideratum* of responsible intellectual work. Theory was no ivory tower option but the very lifeblood of a politically engaged sociology. However, theory without a sense of its own limits and accountability was equally arid. Not surprisingly, Steve’s many-sided interests settled upon the question of the epistemological status of the ‘foundationalist’ discourses within the classical human sciences, in particular represented by the foundational claims made by Durkheim and Durkheimian sociology, Althusserian Marxism and the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory represented by the work of Jurgen Habermas. In hindsight, the idea behind his thesis can be understood as an early attempt to evaluate the debates on modernity and postmodernity that were looming on the horizon of the sociological fraternity. Steve had the insight and prescience to identify the coming epistemological storm. Steve successfully graduated in 1984. His thesis, ‘Beyond foundationalism: a critical analysis of three foundational projects in radical social theory’ was revised and published in 1991 with the more emphatic title, *Modernist Radicalism and Its Aftermath*. In retrospect, the intersection of these three radical projects in social thought – classical normative sociology, influenced ultimately by Durkheimian functionalism, structuralist Marxism and critical theory – can be said to have formed the creative matrix out of which all of the later themes in Steve’s work would emerge and find their intellectual rationale.

Steve remained a lifelong sceptic about the claims of what he called ‘foundationalism’ in social theory and of any attempt to initiate programmes of

research that failed to take into account the complex mediations of existing critical discourses and the complex entanglement of social research, ideology and ethical questions. The threat of scorched earth ‘radicalisms’ that ignored the resources of the past, the cynicism of ‘atheoreticism’ in social research, and the general nihilism of mainstream sociological research would remain guiding concerns throughout Steve’s productive career. This is where our ideas converged: an authentically reflexive sociology could still maintain its radical edge unencumbered by the illusory promises of both first philosophy or nihilism (it is relevant to note that the concluding chapter of Steve’s doctoral thesis has the title, ‘Conclusions: radicalism, metaphysics and nihilism’). Reflexive sociology uniquely questions the traditional images of certainty and foundational groundedness – ultimately derived from positivist and transcendentalist discourses – but with a commitment to transcend the limited solutions of both modernist revisionism and postmodernist fatalism. This, *in nuce*, is the task of what Steve called post-foundational theorizing.

After graduating from York, Steve taught sociology for six years at the College of St Mark and St John in Plymouth (now affiliated with the University of Exeter). During this period, he had met and married Rosemary – known to all their friends as Rosie. Steve left the UK to take up a position as lecturer in the University of Tasmania in Hobart where, within a short period, he was appointed Head of Department. It is here that Steve began an intense and fruitful dialogue with Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (who would later collaborate and publish an important work on the global processes and dynamics of structural postmodernization). After leaving Tasmania in 1997, Steve accepted a position in the Department of Sociology at the James Cook University in Australia. He was appointed to the foundation chair in Sociology in 1998 and shortly thereafter to the Headship of the then School of Psychology and Sociology. In 2000, Sociology merged with Anthropology and Archaeology and Steve became the most senior academic in the School. His colleagues have spoken of his effectiveness as a course organizer and administrator in the School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology. To honour his contributions to Australian Sociology, the Australian Sociological Association has instituted a bi-annual prize – the Stephen Crook Memorial Prize – for the best-authored monograph within the discipline of sociology published over the previous three years.

In many respects, it is possible to see that Steve’s metacritique of sociological fundamentalism (what he earlier called ‘foundationalism’) anticipated the later postmodern turn against metaphysical identities and unities of every description. Steve had already grasped the idea that foundationalism within social theory was both logically and historically tied to the fate of modern philosophy. His encounter with the German tradition of critical thought here proved decisive in exploring the problem of how to integrate a critical concept of reasoning with a political engaged sociology. Indeed, the issue of how to ‘do’ creative theorizing, how to engage in reflection and responsible

social criticism, after the ‘end of philosophy’ was already an explicit theme in his early writings. It was Steve’s firmly held conviction that a form or a tradition of radical sociology – the tradition of post-foundational radicalism – could survive the necessary purge of metaphysical categories and concerns. Critical work could proceed without the self-certainties of philosophy – whether positivist, transcendental or dialectical. Indeed, once rid of both its pretensions to scientific certainty or interpretive self-righteousness, a radically reflexive sociology could proceed unencumbered toward a more open and reflexive analysis of important problems and issues – among these the growing hegemony of transnational capitalism, the entanglement of the mass media in that hegemony, acute social problems of self-identification and social control, chronic inequalities of globalization and the significance of the rise of post-modern culture – or what Steve along with his Australian colleagues Pakulski and Waters more accurately grouped together under the generic title of the ‘postmodernization of society’, in their important and influential text *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society* (1992). This collaborative work gave new directions to his post-foundational critical perspective, linking issues of global power and control with the study of transnational institutions, technologies and cultures and their impact upon the texture of everyday life. Indeed, the theme of everyday life and its difficult history and controversial conceptualization form the central theme of his paper ‘Minotaurs and other monsters: “everyday life” in recent social theory’ (1998). Here again we find a paradigm case of Steve’s erudition and critical acumen focused upon one of the central concepts of contemporary sociology. The essay remains a brilliant example of both Steve’s acerbic wit and sociological imagination and will undoubtedly serve to generate an agenda of issues and themes that will need to be explored in greater depth in the years to come.

In the last decade of his life, Steve’s work took new directions. These were, as I have intimated, influenced by a more urgent sense of understanding the transformation of the world system under the compound configurations of global capitalism, economic and cultural globalism and the cultural turn in all spheres of social thought. Social theory was not merely beset by foundational *aporiae*, but now contested by what has come to be called the postmodern condition (the term ‘postmodernism’ marking a complex and diverse set of critical responses and reflections on the limits of modernity and modernist ideology).

It is an important testimony to Steve’s creative insight and intuitions that the nexus of problems associated with ‘post-philosophical’ reflexivity – what becomes of radicalism in social theory after the deconstruction of its metaphysical frameworks – and the question of the impact of the globalization of all societal and cultural relationships remain major themes on the contemporary agenda of critical social thought (Sandywell 2004, in this volume; Robertson 1992, 2001, Waters 1995, Urry 2000).

Three problematics should be cited in this context. First, Steve’s increasing

concern with the analysis of popular culture and the mass media, particularly national and international television as a powerful global monopoly in which reality is shaped and manufactured (for example, Crook 1989). Second, theories of (post)modernization and the impact of social and technological change in advanced industrialized societies. Where the earlier 'crisis of western sociology' had questioned the ideological presuppositions of the dominant paradigms, now key postmodern thinkers were speaking of the recession of the object of social theory, the imminent 'end of the social' in Baudrillard's apocalyptic idiom. It is not merely that radical sociology has no secure foundations; but rather that it no longer has an identifiable topic, and that what passes for social theory is the recycled ruins of one or more discredited 'grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984). One of Steve's last essays, 'Social Theory and the Postmodern' (2001), is a careful analytic deconstruction of the claims and arguments of postmodern theory with respect to the globalization of power and society (in Ritzer & Smart 2001). It also contains the outlines of a more complex theory of social 'ordering' as we move into an increasingly heterogeneous and disorganized phase of global capitalism. Finally, the numerous problems associated with the understanding and analysis of contemporary forms of everyday life and cultural experience (which Steve was particularly concerned with under the headings of popular culture, global tourism, environmentalism and biotechnology). It is again one example of Steve's own contemporaneity that questions of language, culture and communication were placed at the centre of all three of these problematics. The referents of the term 'language', of course, could not be taken at face value and required careful respecification and redefinition. Here the unique experience of Australian social life and politics undoubtedly played a seminal role. The transformation of Australian society under the combined impact of global tourism, the new technologies, and the spread of more powerful state institutions provided Steve with an image of what was occurring in other advanced industrial societies. I would also argue that the singular innovations made in the field of radical social theory by Australian theorists – with their interweaving of thought from Nietzsche, Foucault and contemporary feminism – was also decisive in expanding Steve's sociological imagination in the 1990s.

These transformations in theory and empirical research would have resonated with insights established in Steve's postgraduate days. I recall a line from his doctoral thesis where he observes, thought-provokingly, that any form of post-foundational radicalism 'must take from Foucault (and from Nietzsche) the lesson that the history of the proliferation of discourse is not a coming to self-consciousness. It has no "goal" but it is deployed in the pursuit of goals' (1984, p. 376). Steve understood that the breakdown of foundationalist accounts of theory and practice, the rejection of representationalist conceptions of language, and the demotion of value questions to questions of personal choice and idiosyncratic subjectivity had momentous consequences not just for social theory, but for the wider social and political world. Once these points are fully

understood, we see that they are certainly 'obvious', but also that they run against the grain of entire traditions of social thought and praxis (1984, p. 376). In some respects, the fate of radical social thought is an icon or allegory of the fate of radical social reform and political engagement in the twentieth century.

As sociologists, we now live in the aftermath of the decline of empiricism, the ruins of Derridean deconstruction and the new problematics of poststructural anti-theory – whether of Foucauldian genealogy, Baudrillardian postmodernism or radically immanent discourse (de Certeau, Virilio, Serres, Deleuze, Latour and others). If there is no going back to the illusory certainties of the past and no creative mileage in reinventing the grand narratives of agency and structure in revamped terminologies, where should theory be heading? Where is the path beyond the impasse of both modernism and postmodernism? Steve saw lines of possible advance prefigured in the writings of Simmel, Benjamin and Adorno. All three had struggled with the grand narratives of their day and all had a fundamentally ethical conception of the reciprocal relations between theory (writing) and the ordinary textures of social praxis. He also saw the importance of concrete empirical research problems – whether in understanding environmental risk, the social consequences of the new technologies or the ethical issues raised by, for example, xenotransplantation – in disabusing high-altitude theorizing of its pretensions to knowledge. What modernist radicalism and postmodernist anti-radicalism both elide is the pre-given constellations of the ordinary that sustains all projects of thinking and writing. The 'end of philosophy' might well be the name for a process that leads inquiry back to a radical reappraisal of the sustaining powers of the ordinary. Had Steve lived he would have no doubt seen the theme of a renewed interest in ordinary life and everyday cultural formations as the storm-centre for a more empirically sensitive theory of postmodernization processes. The return to the ordinary is also perhaps another fruitful way in which questions of value and judgement can again enter critical discourse and find their point of articulation (Crook 1991, ch. 7, Sandywell 2004). If the 'unity' between theory and practice is no longer intelligible, if we are now more pragmatically inclined toward a fallible, post-empiricist conception of scientific research, if ethical issues cannot be cleanly separated from substantive and empirical questions, then the future of robust ventures in radical critique is *more*, not *less* important. We cannot dispense with 'theory' as though this was a realizable strategy (indeed all such attempts are themselves exercises in 'first philosophy'). Against this know-nothing stance, theorizing has to be redefined and respecified as a mundane accomplishment grounded in particular historical relations and generated by specific communities and their ongoing and unfinished work of 'ordering'. The ordering work of the ordinary must be redefined to include the diverse activities of theorizing as a range of embodied, practical regimes. As an accomplished practice, each of the discourses of radical social theory is necessarily a mundane cultural form, established and consolidated by diverse forms of practical sociological reasoning. In *this* respect,

theory is no different from any other form of sense-making activity or ‘world work’. In this respect, many of the radical sociological insights of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis had already pointed the way to something like a radical perspective of empirically informed studies of social organization.

But unlike mundane world-making, theory has a systemic and programmatic side. Theorizing is also explicitly oriented to others, to the implicit or explicit intersubjectivity of its own projected audience and community. It follows that we must, as responsible social theorists, be able to engage with and work through the discourses of theory, we must rediscover a more existential understanding of the value of theorizing and the endemic risks of cynicism and nihilism to which the life of theory is subject. There is no privileged ground or site for theorizing. We begin, inevitably in *media res*. However, we do not begin with nothing. As social thinkers and researchers, we begin with a singular responsibility for the subjects of research, the audience of our work and the hoped-for impact upon a transformed society. Rather, on the other side of metaphysics and nihilism we need to return to the richness and complexity of the ordinary.

If rhetoric – like language and the density of past social relations and institutions – is a boundary and limit of our thinking, we can imagine new rhetorics. We can even imagine rhetorics whose goal is the critique and analysis of rhetorical formations (including the complacencies of ‘everyday language’ and ‘ordinary practices’). Again, to cite Steve’s doctoral work, the ‘moment of reflexion’ has ‘no access to discursive resources which grant a “privileged” self-knowledge . . . reflexion must be constituted out of the ordinary stuff of discourse. The elements of rhetoric and simulation are inescapable’ (1984, p. 381). Once again, the urgency of rethinking the mundane as the horizon of thought remains one of Steve’s most pressing legacies:

‘Radicalism’ is not defined in a new unity of theory and practice. From a mundane perspective, radicalism lies in the production of new insights into processes that are pragmatically defined as problematic. In orthogonal enquiry, radicalism lies in problematizing the boundaries of the mundane idiom itself. ‘Theory’, considered as speculative and programmatic synthesis, yields its privilege in both strategies to specific programmes of substantive enquiry, whether into mundane problems and processes or into the production of mundanity itself.

(1991, p. 22)

This sensitivity toward the rhetoricality and reflexivity of all theory was Steve’s life-long commitment and the source of his analytical rigour. He found the life of critique in many thinkers and traditions – most seminally in the work of Adorno and Derrida, but also in Foucault, Habermas, Heidegger and Gadamer. However, critique – or theorizing – is not a possession that can be ‘owned’ or commandeered by individuals, no matter how gifted or skilled in the

arts of reading and appropriation. Rather, it remains the task and the passion of those who are still committed to the future of genuinely reflexive social inquiry. Above all else, theory must be accountable and open itself to the ethical horizon of its relation to the Other (indeed, Steve's working definition of nihilism is a failure in the accountability of social theory; 1991, p. 18). The interlocking themes of the mundanity of theoretical strategies and the ethics of reflexivity may, perhaps, be the thread that links all of Steve's later work. But neither mundanity nor reflexivity on their own can provide a 'solution' to unreflexive inquiry. Steve imagined this path beyond foundationalism by citing the literature of analytical sociology (Blum 1974, McHug *et al.* 1974, Sandywell *et al.* 1975). Reflection here takes the form of an explicit requirement that the constitutive practices of reading and writing sociology should be made thematic topics within the projects of social inquiry. Even more radically, both ordinarieness and reflexivity have to be historically specified and critically explicated (Sandywell 1996). In this vein, he speaks of a continuum of reflection:

Projects of enquiry vary according to the type of reflexivity, or self-reference, they engender. Some may have only a minimal reflexivity centred on 'relation to method', while others may explicitly aim for a high degree of reflexivity about all their auspices. It would not be appropriate to insist on a uniform type and intensity of reflexivity for post-foundational radicalism. A minimal demand might be that any project be able to account for the particular balance of reflexivity and non-reflexivity it entails. Such accounts can lay projects open to an always corrigible judgement about the costs and benefits of a particular balance.

(1991, p. 21)

Analytical sociology and the 'textual' turn in literary theory are viewed as parallel forms of mundane reflexivity upon their respective 'objects' and 'practices':

At a different level, the Heideggerian turn in reflexive sociology offers the most highly developed exploration of the possibilities of reflexivity as a form of intellectual community. The reflexive dimension of textuality itself might be developed in experiments with the textual forms of social theory. The point on which these diverse projects converge is simply the rejection of foundationalist formulae for reflexivity which must appear, from the standpoint of a post-foundationalism, as formulae for its postponement and evasion.

(1991, p. 206)

Theorizing, as Steve knew, is the joy and burden of thinkers, a precarious and fragile achievement negotiating the temptations of both nihilistic complacency

and metaphysical certainty. Steve managed to avoid both of these temptations and in his person embodied an exemplary resolution of the difficulties facing the radical intellectual in modern society. Above all Steve was committed to dialogue and thoughtful reason. In the words spoken by one of his friends, Andrew Webster, at his memorial service, Steve 'was a good man, honest, companionable and highly intelligent. He was also good fun. He will be sorely missed by his colleagues and friends here in the UK and elsewhere'. It is in this spirit of our common commitment to critical reason that the preceding essays are dedicated to the memory of Steve Crook.

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