

On the everyday life of a significant sociologist

The life-work of Stephen Crook



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Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of Stephen Crook's scholarly and professional work as a prelude to the articles by Malcolm Waters and Jan Pakulski and Bruce Tranter. His scholarly work particularly focused on the theorization of social differentiation and social order in studies of everyday life. Through the critical appraisal of postmodernist approaches, he developed his own post-foundational radicalist approach that transcended the determinism of unitary meta-narratives, but also avoided relativistic and atheoretical descriptions of the plurality of 'the everyday'. Yet the everyday relevance of sociological practice was a defining feature of Steve's *weltanschauung*, epitomized in his professional service and role as a public intellectual.

Keywords: everyday life, post-foundational radicalism, Presidential Address, public intellectual, social differentiation, Utopian realism, *weltanschauung*

As the memoria¹ to Stephen Crook (1950–2002) attest, he touched many lives in his roles as colleague, teacher, mentor, researcher, social theorist and professional sociologist. The decision to dedicate my Presidential Address to Steve's life work was not only to honour him, but was based in a firm belief that he had made a major impact on our discipline. His approach to blending interests in social theory with empirical research, and applying sociological knowledge to 'make a difference' are exemplars of sociological practice.

Steve always urged sociologists to show the utility of sociological theory and research by engaging with issues of importance and relevance to people in their everyday lives. He was not of the 'doom and gloom' school of sociology, but rather was of the 'glass half-full' variety. For him, this did not mean breaking with sociology's radical project – of seeking out 'alternative

futures' (to use Giddens's phrase) – but instead concerned a focus on the utility of sociological analysis. Steve's contribution to studies of everyday life was acknowledged in a dedication to him of a special issue of the journal *Cultural Studies* on 'Rethinking Everyday Life' (see Gardiner and Seigworth, 2004). Using the theme of 'everyday life', I comment briefly on three facets of Steve's life-work: his scholarly life, professional life and life as a public intellectual.

Scholarly everyday life

Steve's first publication was a chapter in an edited collection on Goffman (Crook and Taylor, 1980). His major scholarly works included four books: *Modernist Radicalism and its Aftermath: Foundationalism and Anti-foundationalism in Radical Social Theory* (Crook, 1991), *Post-modernization: Change in Advanced Society* (Crook et al., 1992), an edited collection on Adorno (Crook, 1994), and a co-edited volume on environmental issues called *Ebbing of the Green Tide?* (Pakulski and Crook, 1998). Other substantive contributions can be found in an article called 'Minotaurs and Other Monsters: "Everyday Life" in Recent Social Theory' published in the journal *Sociology* (Crook, 1998b), two book chapters critically analysing postmodernism (Crook, 2000, 2001b), and a series of publications on environmental issues (see Crook, 1998a; Crook and Pakulski, 1995; Pakulski et al., 1998). As Pakulski and Tranter (2004) note, it was particularly in the study of environmentalism that Steve applied his theorization of the everyday practices of social differentiation.

Throughout his scholarly publications and conference presentations, Steve developed his own mid-range theory² between the extremes of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, which he called post-foundational radicalism. Waters (2004) provides a detailed explication of Steve's perspective, but in brief this approach retained the modernist project of social reform, but within a contingent, reflexive and relational context. Steve's interest in empirical studies of everyday life concerned exploring what actually mattered to people and deconstructing what they did and thought. Having eschewed foundational 'theory of everything' approaches, with their grand meta-narratives and unitary explanatory principles, he was unconvinced by highly relativistic anti-foundational (postmodernist) approaches; which focused on the atheoretical documentation of the minutiae of everyday life (cf. Crook, 1991, 2000, 2001a, 2001b) and exalted 'taken-for-grantedness' and 'purity of the social' as the end-points of social analysis (see Crook, 1998b).

Steve (Crook, 2001a) argued, in line with authors such as Beck and Giddens, that the three dominant social processes of our times were individualization, informationalization and globalization (cf. Beck et al., 1994). These social processes combine to erode established structural determinants

(such as class and patriarchy) and produce a sprawling fragmentation-pluralization of social life, in which life chances and identity become increasingly socially differentiated. In attempting to bridge the divide between abstract grand theory with its radical project and descriptive empiricist studies of everyday life, his continuing quest was to refine generalizable concepts for understanding an increasingly pluralistic and fragmented world. For Steve, social phenomena are interlinked in the form of networks of causal chains and structural relations that are ‘multiple, partial, contingently articulated with each other and heterogeneous’ (Crook, 2001a). His preferred approach to social analysis, then, would focus on interdependent networks of ‘local and partial structuring factors’, and has clear parallels with Elias’s (1978) figurational approach, with its avoidance of structure–agency or macro/micro-sociological dichotomies. As an example, Crook (2001a) considered the labour market position of unskilled migrant women. A foundational approach would focus attention on ethnicity, gender and class as determining relative access to social resources. Alternatively, a post-foundational approach would consider the local and partial context of pluralized structuring processes, such as local access to child care, transport, and English language and vocational training, as well as the recruitment practices among local employers and community attitudes towards migrant women (Crook, 2001a). Within this post-foundational radicalist approach, social reform was still part of sociology’s project. Part of this project for Steve meant that sociologists had to engage with publics beyond the walls of their own academic institution, by participating in broader professional activities and in public debate – a discussion to which we now turn in the next two sections of the article.

Professional everyday life

Another side to Steve’s own radical project is evidenced in his passionate commitment to fostering the professional development of colleagues and the discipline of sociology as a whole. His ‘everyday professional life’ reflects a significant contribution to TASA and professional service in general. He was co-editor of TASA’s *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* (1993–7), overseeing a change in journal format and the move to a commercial publisher (Addison Wesley Longman). In 1996, his Sociology Department hosted the annual TASA conference (with Tim Scrase as convenor). In 1998, he moved from Hobart to Townsville to take up the Foundation Chair of Sociology at James Cook University. In 1999 he became TASA President and was halfway through his second two-year term when he resigned in February 2002 due to illness. Prior to that he had attended his last TASA Conference held at the University of Sydney in December 2001. There he delivered an insightful conference paper on ‘What Became of the Social Structure?’ (Crook, 2001a), chaired a forum

on professionalization issues (whose report can be found in the members' section of the TASA website), participated in a forum on publishing advice for early career academics, and chaired the TASA AGM and Executive meetings with his usual aplomb.

Steve had a high profile at TASA conferences, regularly presenting his own papers as well as participating in numerous forums, whether on social theory or professional development. This was characteristic of Steve's generosity to the profession in general, and reflected his strong belief in the obligation of established academics to mentor colleagues and foster the professional development of early career academics. Anyone who met Steve, either in organizational meetings or during conference presentations, would acknowledge that his charming and eloquent manner, underpinned by a stoic determination, could be highly persuasive. As his then Vice-President, I both admired and enjoyed seeing him use his intellectual and diplomatic skills to great effect on many TASA occasions. His deft intellectual touch can also be seen in his authoring of the TASA media statement on the attacks on New York and Washington DC, which urged a thoughtful consideration of the sociological issues that underpinned terrorism rather than a military response and political opportunism towards refugees – a statement that has stood the test of time (TASA, 2001).

Steve's diplomatic skills and determination were particularly called upon in his pivotal role in preparations for TASA's hosting of the International Sociological Association (ISA) XV World Congress of Sociology held in Brisbane, 7–13 July 2002. The success of this event, which attracted over 2800 delegates, was ultimately due to an eleventh-hour intervention by Steve. It is worth recalling the events in some detail as it is indicative of the extent of Steve's commitment to professional service, especially to TASA. As I recall, the story goes something like this. The TASA Executive had been in lengthy discussions with the ISA over finalizing the details of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Talks were deadlocked on the ISA's requirement that all registration monies would be handled directly by their office in Spain. In effect this meant that after receiving registration fees, the ISA would then reimburse TASA for expenses incurred in hosting the Congress – placing TASA in a financially risky position and leading the Executive to seriously consider pulling out of the event. With less than 12 months before the Congress was to open, and given the Executive had spent much of the previous four years planning the event, Steve took it upon himself to attend the last ISA meeting prior to the Congress and attempt to convince the ISA to change their mind. At short notice and whilst still in a teaching semester, Steve boarded a plane for Courmayeur in the Italian Alps, where the ISA was holding its meeting. After spending two days in prolonged negotiations with ISA officers, Steve returned with a workable agreement (the ISA acquiescing to TASA's request for control of the funds). Sadly, due to his illness, Steve was unable to attend the actual Congress,

though he was aware of its success. Both associations owe him a great debt for his dedication that ensured the viability of the Congress – an event unlikely to be held again in Australia in our lifetime – and which returned a 20 per cent share of the profit to TASA (around \$28,000).

To honour Steve's memory and contribution to Australian sociology, TASA established the Stephen Crook Memorial Prize, a bi-annual award for the best book in Australian sociology. The inaugural prize was presented by his wife Rosie Crumpton-Crook in the presence of their daughter Felicity, at the conclusion to the Presidential Address at the TASA 2003 Conference, to Michael Pusey, for *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).³

Concluding remarks: the everyday life of a public intellectual

Steve was a firm advocate of sociological engagement in public debate beyond the academy. He often spoke out in the media on social issues, such as on Tasmanian environmental issues and homosexual law reform, and more recently on Australia's treatment of refugees. For Steve, being a public intellectual was part of the everyday life of being a sociologist.

In his masterful Presidential Address delivered at the TASA 2000 Conference held at Flinders University, published posthumously, he stressed the need for sociologists to fight 'toxic anti-intellectualism' and continually promote the utility of the discipline (Crook, 2003: 8). In that address, Steve argues that the discipline is under challenge on two fronts, both of which seek to undermine its utility. First, he notes the irony that sociology has been the victim of its own success – 'the social' is now part of the popular consciousness and sociological insights are a regular feature of public debate. Such 'success' has undermined its novelty and has led to the appropriation of social analyses by many groups. Second, the discipline of sociology finds itself under challenge by the very social processes it critiques (such as globalization, neo-liberalism and managerialism). Yet his message is one of hope and of the continuing relevance of sociological practice. He suggests this can best be achieved by adopting a utopian realism (to borrow from Giddens, 1990), and by engaging with everyday issues of importance to people in a constant struggle to address the gap between reality and possibility. In other words, it is no longer enough to merely debunk, problematize or expose social constructions, by positioning sociology as a facile resistant 'other' – absolving its practitioners from confronting the utility of sociological knowledge. Perhaps it is best to end with Steve's own words in this regard:

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.... 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.... 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 ... 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. (Crook, 2003: 13–14)

Throughout his life Steve seamlessly blended the sociological study of everyday life with social theory, underpinned by an egalitarian *weltanschauung* that was integral to his own radical project – the mark of a scholarly, professional and very *public* sociologist. *Vale* Stephen Crook.

Notes

The three papers in this symposium were originally presented as part of the Presidential Address at the TASA 2003 Conference, University of New England, Armidale, 4–6 December. This introductory paper has been substantially expanded and revised. I am honoured by, and wish to warmly thank, both Malcolm and Jan for their kind acceptance of my invitation to participate in the symposium and to have their papers reproduced here.

- 1 Details of the Stephen Crook Memorial Prize and memoria to Steve can be found on the TASA website: <www.tasa.org.au>.
- 2 This is an adaptation of Merton's term: 'middle-range theory'. While Steve would probably not have used this description himself in order to avoid confusion with Merton's other ideas, it aptly conveys Steve's post-foundational perspective.
- 3 In addition to TASA members' financial contributions, on behalf of TASA I thank Rosie Crumpton-Crook and Steve's family for their substantial donations to the prize fund, which will ensure its viability for the foreseeable future.

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Biographical note

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