

# Modernist radicalism, postmodernization and orderings



## The work of Stephen Crook

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### **Abstract**

The article is a survey of the opus of the late Stephen Crook. The work is analysed in three phases: meta-theoretical treatments of foundationalism and mundanity; substantive theoretical analyses of postmodernization, especially in the areas of culture, science and the environment; and principles along which everyday life is ordered under conditions of structural complexity, uncertainty and radical change. Crook's work is found to have the potential to offer superior analytic capacity relative to other arguments.

**Keywords:** foundationalism, frame, mundanity, order, postmodernization

Stephen Crook's work reflects its early influences. Indeed, while in middle career he moved away from his original position, then came full circle and returned to it at the end of his career.

As in the case of many theorists, Crook began his career as a philosopher, taking an honours degree in philosophy, but like at least one great theorist he discovered its poverty and moved on into sociology. He did a DPhil with Barry Sandywell at York and his first publication was co-authored with the new criminologist, Laurie Taylor (Crook and Taylor, 1980). That paper focused on the work of Goffman and it tried to find in Goffman's frame analysis a route between two apparently incommensurable methodological paradigms. Tracing that route was a theme that repeated itself throughout his opus. The first paradigm is the descriptive study of everyday life. At the time of writing, the 1970s, the main theoretical movement in descriptive study was ethnomethodology. The second methodological paradigm is the

unhappy cold war then taking place between grand theory and radical empiricism. Within this conflict Crook was particularly focused on grand theoretical meta-narratives and their political implications, including functionalism and Marxism. He was later to call these two paradigms *mundaneity* (atheoretical studies of everyday life) and *foundationalism* (general theorizing on the basis of a single central explanatory principle).

Finding a way between mundanity and foundationalism became the basis both for Crook's own methodological position and his substantive sociology of advanced societies. Within this, he retained a young-Marxian insistence that sociology should be a radical project. It should be a project aimed at remaking, at least reforming, but possibly restructuring society, if only in a piecemeal fashion. He retained that commitment throughout his life and career.

In tracing out these themes, I want to identify three related phases in his career. Crook would not himself identify these as phases – I am employing them as a heuristic that allows us better to understand the work.

The first phase might be described as the statement of methodology. This can originally be found in the DPhil written in the late 1970s and then completely rethought, rewritten and republished as a book called *Modernist Radicalism and its Aftermath*. The book was published in 1991, but it was fairly long in the gestation so it was really a product of his original work on the DPhil even though it was published much later. We can call this the 'York' phase.

The second phase of his work is the period in which he diagnosed advanced society and culture. The key work is *Postmodernization* on which he collaborated with Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (Crook et al., 1992). The book, though not its title, was originally conceived by Crook – Pakulski and Waters were invited into the project. This phase also includes the important empirical work on environmentalism in collaboration with Pakulski and Bruce Tranter. We can call this the 'Hobart' phase.

The third and most undeveloped of the phases is that which focuses on the future of society and of sociology. Here he introduces a new master term 'orderings'. We can call this the 'Townsville' phase.

We can now examine these phases in detail. We begin with the York phase, the phase in which Crook introduces the crucial term, post-foundationalism.

## The York phase

In *Modernist Radicalism* (1991) Crook poses two positions that correspond with the paradigms outlined above. The first position is foundationalism. In foundationalism the analyst works on the basis that he or she has direct and privileged access to a self-evident truth. The theorist assumes or theorizes that ordinary people in everyday life do not have access to that truth and

only the sociologist is privileged to have such access. Crook's primary example of foundationalism, somewhat surprisingly, is found not in the work of Marx but in that of Durkheim, particularly the work on social facts. Crook is particularly interested in the notion that society, in Durkheim, is *sui generis*, needing no further explanation.

The second position is anti-foundationalism and here the analyst assumes that all knowledge, including that of both the observed and the observer, is of equal worth. Crook associates anti-foundationalism with postmodernism (which, he and his colleagues always insist, is only tangentially related to postmodernization). Postmodernism is represented in sociology by ethnomethodology and similar practices.

Crook was deeply sceptical about foundationalism, regarding the separation of theory from its subject as its primary error, but he was even more concerned about the destructive capacity of anti-foundationalism. The rise of anti-foundationalism drives out foundationalism but with it, tragically, goes the project of modernist radicalism, the notion that one can remake society on the basis of theory. For Crook, anti-foundationalism offers no possibility of reform or remaking society, only the mundane cataloguing of the multiple and complex variations of social life.

To fill the void created by the rise of anti-foundationalism Crook proposes a theoretical stance that he calls post-foundational radicalism. The classical inspirations of post-foundational radicalism are principally to be found in the work of Simmel and also, of course, in Weber.

The characteristics of post-foundational radicalism are the following:

- It is relational rather than relativist. It makes use of second-order constructs which must, Crook insists, be connected with first-order constructs. That is, the social constructs of the sociologist (i.e. second-order constructs) must always directly be connected with the social constructs of what Crook came to call the actant, or subject (i.e. first-order constructs) (he originally used the word actor but in later work he uses the word actant).
- Post-foundational radicalism is characterized by ironic causality. This is akin to the Mertonian notion of unanticipated consequences. Crook accepts from Weber the idea that actants will pursue their own interests but in the course of this pursuit, ironic outcomes (reversals and unintended consequences) will arise and it is sociology's task to identify these ironic outcomes.
- Post-foundational radicalism is characterized by critical rhetorics. Crook takes from linguistic studies, including ethnomethodology, the notion that sociologists should critically unpack language – they should take apart what people say and show what they really mean.
- Post-foundational radicalism is reflexive, that is, it should engage in self-critique.

- Post-foundational radicalism assumes the contingency of values. Values must not be given as some privileged truth to which the theorist might have access but are linked to social arrangements beyond academic contexts.

By insisting on the contingency of values, post-foundational radicalism offers the particular advantage that its analysis can be extended beyond the social register and into two other registers that Crook regarded as particularly important. Using one of his favourite terms, it can be extended from the social register into the biological and the technical registers. It is this extension that allowed Crook to move beyond theory and into the empirical work on environmentalism. Environmentalism is a values arena poised nicely on the intersection between the biological and the technical registers.

## The Hobart phase

We can now examine the second phase of Crook's work, which centres on the thesis of *Postmodernization* (or 'PoMo' in his personal vernacular). It is in this phase that he begins to put post-foundational radicalism to work in the analysis of a substantive social formation. The theme of *Postmodernization* is uncertainty and disorder. If *Modernist Radicalism and its Aftermath* seeks to make sense of uncertainty and disorder in sociological theory, *Postmodernization* (Crook et al., 1992) seeks to make sense of disorder and uncertainty in society. Crook was responsible for two of the substantive chapters, the ones on culture and on science, as well as the concluding theoretical chapter.

Crook's work on culture took considerable inspiration from Adorno and the Frankfurt School. He later edited a collection of Adorno's work on astrology and other issues (Crook, 1994). For Crook, postmodernized cultures experience decomposition and progressive displacement by a *post-culture* in which the old cultural canons collapse into what might be called a supermarket of styles. In a post-culture, actants pick and choose which knowledge or tastes or values they want to enjoy or emulate or commit themselves to. Far from being auratic and thus differentiated from the social, culture collapses into everyday life and becomes a mundane aspect of the social.

The work on science parallels the work on culture referring principally to the disorganization of science. Like culture, science progressively ceases to be a differentiated and autonomous social sphere. Rather, it becomes embedded in a number of other contexts and practices, especially economic and political ones. This is partly caused by the uncertainties that afflict science itself. As these progressively become matters of public knowledge, people start to recognize that science does not have a complete set of answers to human problems. Indeed, ironically, science actually creates risk

as it engages in problem-solving activity. The particular risks in which Crook was interested were environmental risks and it is here that he identifies one of his favourite themes of contemporary social change, the 'return of nature'. The theme implies that human society and culture in advanced societies must now take account of nature whereas previously they had operated to organize and control nature.

These developments, and the others analysed in the book, remain unexplained as they stand. In a theoretical *tour de force*, Crook concludes the book with an innovative application of dialectical theory to contemporary developments. The two central theoretical themes of the book are that if modern society is both highly differentiated and systematically organized, that is complex and centralized, postmodernization involves de-differentiation and decentralization. Crook explains this shift by showing that if these characteristics are extended to extremes then ironic reversals occur, especially insofar as the characteristics interact. So, if a society becomes hyper-differentiated, it de-differentiates, becoming so impossibly complex that all actants are individuated. Equally if a society becomes massively organized, its components react by becoming ungovernable, either through dull compliance, wilfulness or outright rebellion. It implodes and thus decentralizes.

## The Townsville phase

The central theme of the Townsville phase (where Crook took the Foundation Professorship of Sociology at James Cook University) is *orderings*. 'Orderings' was the provisional title for a book that was intended to be a sequel to *Postmodernization*. The book was never written because Pakulski and Waters moved on into other theoretical areas and Crook became very busy in trying to reform his Department of Psychology and Sociology and as President of TASA, which was at that time preparing to host the International Sociological Association conference in Brisbane in 2002. It was during this period that his fatal illness struck. Had it not done so we can be confident that Stephen Crook would have become one of the most influential theorists of the times.

We therefore have only two fragments of what he might have said on the orderings theme. They appear in a paper on risk in a collection organized by Hindmarsh et al. (Crook, 1998a) and in an article in the journal, *Sociology* (Crook, 1998b). These two papers lay out the problematic as follows. Postmodernization creates uncertainty and disorder. Yet somehow people manage to arrange relatively stable and predictable lives within and throughout this uncertainty and disorder. The question for Crook is how this is accomplished. Under modern, as opposed to postmodernized, conditions we might have thought that they would create order by the deployment of historically or ideologically stable stories or narratives. These will confirm where people come from, where they're going, the path that gets

them there and why they are moving in a given direction. Thus they know about the society they live in, they know where they fit in it and know their place in it. However, under postmodernized conditions, actants do not experience a fixed order in their lives but are constantly being arranged and re-arranged. Single or primary meta-narratives can no longer serve to explain them. The narratives that actants use to explain and give meaning to their lives are as multiple and complex as their lives are. These ‘orderings’ are selected from a menu that covers the following arenas:

- *Modern orderings*. These are the familiar meta-narratives that people of the generations born before about 1970 were familiar with. These are the meta-narratives of the state, the market, the nation and the community. To order their lives people tell stories, sometimes contested stories, about these things, to each other, to themselves and so on.
- *Hyper-reflexive orderings*. This is an emerging arena consisting mainly of associational narratives. These are statements of common experience and common commitment made with other human beings or other actants, a term now used very intensively, some of whom might be in other parts of the world. Interaction with non-present actants is mediated through networks and importantly mediated globally through communication technologies. In hyper-reflexive orderings people reflect on their identity and their commitments and pick and choose between them, without being too glib, in a manner that has the flavour of surfing the Internet. People can now seriously ask themselves the question, ‘What shall I be today?’.
- *Neo-traditional orderings*. Neo-traditional orderings are established at the level of intense group solidarities on the basis of such social characteristics as ethnicity, race, religion, ideology and kinship. Those are familiar orderings to any sociologist but Crook insists that there is something different about them under current conditions. They are *neo-traditional*, that is, they too can frequently be mediated through mass communications media and this distinction is very important.

Arguing against Giddens and Beck and some others, Crook suggests that the peculiar feature of advanced or postmodernizing societies is that all three types of ordering operate at once and in the same space (here he means social as well as physical space). As they always did, each of them internally generates contests and conflicts but now, in advanced societies, commitments and projects jump around between the three arenas of orderings. It is precisely this continuous displacement of meaning from arena to arena that creates a sense of disorder and uncertainty. Everyday life in advanced societies becomes a constant negotiation and renegotiation of commitments and projects.

In conclusion, there are two important comments to be made about the work. First, it had the potential to be a far superior analysis to the account

of neo-traditionalization that Giddens, Beck, Lash and others have put forward. The latter are simple neo-traditionalists, arguing for the return of status solidarities. The reality of postmodernized societies is far more complex, and Crook's capacity to model shifting complexities might have moved us much closer to a genuine understanding of the social processes in play. We might have hoped for an application of the dialectical analysis of change found in the last chapter of *Postmodernization*, to the arenas of orderings. This might, for the first time, have given us an idea about the internal processual dynamics of societies after modernity, rather than simply the dynamics of the transition out of modernity.

Second, the work represents something of a return to Goffman's frame analysis. Crook defines orderings as general frames or matrices in which models of order are projected and contested. Perhaps then, Crook's work indeed had the potential to bridge the divide between the societal-level analysis found in foundationalist theory and the detailed analysis of the mundane interactions of everyday life.

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