

Beyond the Science of 'Society'

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Introduction

- 1.1 John Scott's recent 'Sociology and Its Others: Reflections on Disciplinary Specialisation and Fragmentation' (2005) raises some significant and fascinating issues for 'sociology' as it moves into the twenty first century. Scott organises his discussion around two overarching conceptualisations of sociology: as the Queen of the Sciences à la Comte and as a parasite or scavenger living off crumbs left over from other disciplines (Urry 1981). His wide ranging discussion 'deals with' political sociology, economic sociology and the cultural turn, as well as with various implications for the teaching curriculum. Scott concludes by arguing that sociology although not a 'Queen' is also not an ever-disappearing parasite. Rather 'the general idea of society as the specific form of intersubjective association' provides the basis of 'sociology as a vocation'. Such a vocation should be organised around 'the study of society'. It is this which can and should provide the forms of disciplinary closure, departmental organisation and curriculum development sufficient to defend the discipline from a potentially calamitous tendency to fragmentation especially likely through following the 'scavenger' role.
- 1.2 I wish to take up some of these themes especially because they draw upon and critique my 'parasite' argument of a quarter a century ago, an argument that I am still quite committed to (unlike anything else from that time!). There is incidentally much in his paper with which I agree, especially because although I am a fan of inter- or trans-disciplinary studies, these must be based upon strong and coherent disciplines. There is nothing worse than a lowest common denominator interdisciplinarity.
- 1.3 But there is also little worse than a discipline seeking to erect boundaries around something that cannot be bounded, trying to pull up the drawbridge when there is little 'essence' left within the castle. And this was my point in 1981, it was a sociological claim that sociology has prospered and grown especially through drawing upon and providing a space of contestation and debate between elements often extruded from other more reductionist disciplines. It was an argument that sociology was more a field or perhaps a network and less organised through hierarchy. And the experience over the past quarter of a century would seem to support this thesis, as in a way Scott acknowledges but laments.
- 1.4 There is I would suggest no simple 'centre' to sociology. This empirical claim is shown by developments over the last two to three decades. During this period sociology has drawn upon and reflected back a vast array of intellectual developments (Marxism, discourse analyses, post-modernism, post-structuralism, rational choice, cultural/linguistic turns, psychoanalysis, globalisation debates, turn to the body and performativity, complexity); multiple social movements have entered into and generated their own sociological specialisms (civil rights, students, women's, urban, black, post-colonial, environmental, disabled, anti-globalisation); and the interconnectedness of the social with various technologies are producing new domains of study and new methods of analysis (computing, mobile telephony, air travel, internet, new genetics, nanotech).
- 1.5 And of course this is exactly how the 'founding fathers' behaved, reflecting upon new trends and processes of their time, as with Marx with the working class, the factory system and the railway, or Simmel on the importance of the pocket watch. The one period in which sociology really did draw up the drawbridge was in the period of American professionalisation during the 1920s to 1960s when an American sociology ruled the roost, taking American society as the presumed model which all other societies would gradually come to mimic (Billig 1995). This pattern of work and disciplinary closure is surely one that few would now defend, and even at the time there were very important resisters (such as Mills, Goffman or Garfinkel).
- 1.6 Indeed this period of American hegemony was what many in Europe sought to resist when they entered sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. They have been broadly successful in this and this raises another problem in Scott's thesis, its lack of reference to sociology's changing global character. Every sociology

dept in the UK is significantly changed - and for the better - through the internationalising of the staff and graduate community. Thus there is no single 'society' that can be taken as *the* basis of Scott's centre for sociology; there are many different societies being analysed by colleagues from a huge diversity of places. Some such societies have a nation-state at their centre (US), some are parts of multilevel states as across the EU (UK), some have failing states (parts of former Soviet empire), and some which do not have state at all (overseas Chinese). It hardly needs stating here that there is absolutely nothing typical about the multi-national 'Britain/UK/England' which could be the basis of claims about anywhere else, either now as part of the EU or in the past at the centre of an Empire (is an empire a society?). So in this and many other ways 'society' is just too imprecise a term to do the work that Scott wants it to do; and anyway the internationalisation of sociology departments within the UK makes it inevitable that the processes of drawing in and counterposing intellectual, movement and technological developments from elsewhere will anyway continue apace.

- 1.7 And yet there is something in Scott's claim that it is increasingly hard to say just what makes a sociology department or indeed a sociologist. But this stems I would argue from 'success' not 'failure'. It is something that Giddens occasionally reflected upon, namely the diffusion of 'sociological' ways of thinking into very different domains of social life (not just into Number 10!). After all this was one claim in Daniel Bell's argument about post-industrial society, namely the replacement of economicist by sociological modes of thinking especially with the development of service commodities that are 'social' (1974). And this spreading of the sociological is happening across the media, new businesses, management, politics and some parts of the civil service. So sociology has gone underground and pops up like the islands of an archipelago in unexpected places through dealing with the complex, intractable and problematic nature of social life. So rather than this being a disappearing discipline it is increasingly de-differentiated, less a ghetto and more an expanding discipline, getting now into unexpected places and doing unexpected things once it has escaped *beyond* the drawbridge (as Scott's own work on various kinds of networks has done).
- 1.8 But finally let me wrestle with the main issue that rightly bothers Scott. If I am correct in saying that there is an incredible range of kinds of society, that much of what is interesting about sociology lies in processes that move beyond such societies, and that sociological thinking often takes place outside the academy (including much empirical research), then what is left? I have no doubt that what is distinct about the sociological imagination is the institutionalised capacity to analyse the complex, contingent and multi-layered processes we call the 'social'. But such sets of social relations are not to be purified as Latour cogently argues (1993). They always involve multiple levels with the apparently social being elaborately entwined with technologies, texts, objects and environments. And the social is also spatial and temporal, social relations can stretch across huge lengths of time and space involving inter alia what Knorr Cetina terms 'global microstructures' (2005). So in studying the social there is never a purified realm. The social presupposes and brings into existence many complex objects and environments including especially those that move people, objects and information through multiple time-spaces (Urry 2000). Indeed the changing nature of the so-called post human problematises the very notion of given 'subjects' that are then able to effect intersubjectivity.
- 1.9 or me then what is distinct is that the emergent forms of the social have to be analysed in part through insights, formulations and theories produced in diverse sites: by those developing and employing existing and emergent technologies, by various social and political movements, and by those partially extruded from reductionist disciplines where the social is just too troublesome. But unlike those other disciplines our comparative advantage lies in providing a field or site in which formulations of the social that get extruded from such 'reductionist' disciplines find a contingent home within a broad church so enabling sociology's 'hundred flowers' to bloom (to mix many metaphors). Sociology seeks understanding of the nature of our social life, how social connections face-to-face and at a distance are contingently enabled and performed. And it does this through scavenging from insights and approaches thrown up/ out elsewhere especially revealing the material worlds which social life both depends upon and iteratively reproduces (see Urry 2003). And in doing this analytical work it provides some insights that are not so much those of a disappearing discipline but central to comprehending the multiple transformations of life in the twenty first century. Maybe it is less disappearing and more an expanding empire!



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