

Sociological dilemmas and the inequality agenda

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The interdisciplinary study of inequality has exploded across **the social sciences** over the past five years. Indeed inequality has become the defining issue of our times. Whether we are looking at the burgeoning fortunes of the super-rich and the rise of elite power, the inequities associated with migration flows, the growth of age divisions, the persistence of gender, the endemic worries about the decline of social mobility or the pervasiveness of racial divides, inequality is everywhere. Media representations on reality TV make this as clear as everyday social encounters or interaction on social media.

This shift might be interpreted as a marker of the success of sociologists in placing our agenda at the centre of the social sciences. We have long, and rightly, prided ourselves on our theoretical sensitivities in positioning inequality at the heart of our discipline. Class analysis, feminism, and anti-racism all have very strong associations with the sociological endeavour. The study of social mobility – probably the highest profile research social scientific research specialism – began in sociology and retains a powerful affinity with our discipline. From the 1960s, it was feminists working in sociology who played a fundamental role in championing the need for Women's Studies and feminist perspectives. Post-colonialism and critical analyses of race and ethnicity have been strongly associated with sociological research. And so on.

Yet in fact, the inequality agenda is actually associated with complex challenges to sociology. It has become enmeshed in a disciplinary identity crisis which – whilst far from being new – has recently reached unprecedented levels of anxiety and internal bickering, perhaps especially in the UK (though by no means confined to Britain). There are numerous contributing factors here. In the British context the closure of Sociology Departments, the declining number of sociologists returned to the 2013 REF (the UK research evaluation exercise), and indeed the extent to which the legitimacy of the REF results were accepted in the sociological community, all play a role.

It is the intellectual divisiveness around the inequality agenda that I want to focus on here, however. On the face of it, sociological studies of inequality – especially class – have been hugely successful in the past decade. The study of social class, which until the turn of the 21st century had become somewhat of a backwater, has been recharged with astonishing vitality. Alongside the ongoing power of orthodox approaches to occupational class, which have led to numerous comparative analyses and are the mainstay of much quantitative analysis of surveys, new currents of 'cultural class analysis' have commanded increasing interest. Here the work of Bourdieu has been especially significant in refreshing the sociological tool kit and foregrounding sophisticated renderings of the stakes around cultural inequalities. Feminist scholarship has pioneered vibrant research areas around issues of stigma, shame and marginalisation.

As a sociologist I am thrilled to have played a role in this – albeit one which has generated significant backlash. The Great British Class Survey which I directed with Fiona Devine has generated a raft of publications, and a popular book, and has also been the most popular work of digital social science ever, with 9 million people taking the BBC's 'class calculator'. More recently, the LSE's International Inequalities Institute has succeeded in winning the largest ever philanthropic donation ever received by the LSE – £65 million – to develop the Atlantic Fellows programme to educate leaders to address inequality. It is worth pausing to consider the significance of this donation, especially noting the concerns raised about the power of philanthropic giving in academic life (as brilliantly exposed by Linsey McGoey recently, especially with respect to the Gates Foundation). There are plenty of dilemmas too, most notably in becoming embedded into the philanthropic embrace, itself part and parcel of the rise of super wealthy fortunes which should surely worry those concerned with inequalities. This is taking sociology out of its comfort zone and onto a very different terrain.

And – more generally – it is taking sociology out of its comfort zone that is at least partly at the root of recent divisions in the discipline. This is most evident in the dispute over the Great British Class Survey which has been hugely criticised within sociology, including by defenders of occupational approaches to class, Marxists, Bourdieusians, and those who criticise the use of web surveys, quantification, data-mining and a-theoreticism (*Sociology* in June 2014 and *The Sociological Review* of May 2015 includes examples of these criticisms for those who wish to peruse them). Speaking as someone who has written extensively about social class over three decades, often to appreciative sociological audiences, I have never felt more assailed, though largely by my colleague sociologists. The reception of wider academic audiences and the public has usually been warm, intrigued, and receptive to see the question of class being posed afresh.

I don't say this as a means of making light of the gravity of sociological criticisms, far from it. There are serious methodological and theoretical issues at stake which we don't claim to have addressed fully, and the skewed GBCS web data, large though it is, has plenty of flaws. Nonetheless *Social class in the 21st century*, the recent book from the GBCS team, tries to present our overall arguments in a way which we hope offers replies to criticisms, and emphasises the need to focus on the current conjuncture, rather than in meta-sociological terms. My olive branch here is to suggest that the interest in the issue of social class generated by the GBCS can actually benefit all parties to these debates, who can display their wares to a more enthusiastic audience in the intellectual market place.

Having said this, however, more troubling issues persist. How far are we, as sociologists prepared to go outside our comfort zones, and think about working with non-mainstream methods, such as large web surveys? Indeed, how comfortable are with the clear move to data which is evident across the social sciences, and which has become vociferous around the issue of 'big data'? John Goldthorpe's recent critique of the lack of quantitative sophistication in sociology is highly relevant here, but is accompanied by a strong sociological anxiety about 'big data', which runs the risk of putting sociologists on the defensive.

How are we to orientate ourselves intellectually in the face of changing agendas and demands for new interdisciplinary alliances? From the 1980s to well into the 2000s, the cultural turn dominated the sociological agenda, and created the most creative and dynamic spaces in the discipline. This was very much the paradigm in which my work was based, and in which the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) at the University of Manchester and the Open University was geared to. As the work of CRESC went on, I remember conversations with my colleagues about the lack of energy around the 'cultural'. Instead, it was the 'social' and 'economic' domains which seemed more dynamic. The point is that pressing questions change. And with them the intellectual resources that will help us to address them most effectively. The inequality turn in the social sciences partly marks a revival of economic sociology (which is apparent in several British universities, including Edinburgh, Essex, Goldsmiths, Manchester, and Warwick), and a concern to facilitate more engagement between sociology and economics. This can be disturbing to those sociologists who are invested in a critique of economics. Speaking personally, I now see engagement with the 'economic' (including the work of some economists

whose own agendas are re-shaping towards a closer engagement with sociology, most notable in the work of Piketty) as lying at the cutting edge of the crucial sociological concerns.

Ultimately, for me, the issue is whether as sociologists we want to get involved in making 'worlds to come' in order to shape interdisciplinary agendas and to demonstrate the vitality of our discipline. This does require us to compromise, in that we would need to engage with the messy world of data, of corporate players, of diverse audiences, and we lose complete control over our work. However, such compromises can be part of alliances and engagements which allow us to mobilise with wider communities and take the discipline forward. Sociologists should be more ambitious than being critical commentators, sitting on the sidelines and lamenting current trends. This involves taking up and rebuilding the urgency of our discipline. As I have argued in *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, in the classic period of the formation of sociology in the UK from 1950 to 1970 sociologists were opening up new arenas and pioneering new methods. Yet, as Roger Burrows and I argued nearly ten years ago, as phenomenal new sources of social data have emerged the pace has been made by other players, many of them outside the academic realm. One of the most encouraging features of recent years has been the renewal of sociological interests in methods – for instance in the expansion of quantitative methods in sociology, in the call to 'live methods' from Les Back and Nirmal Puwar, in the increasing appeal of rigorous ethnographic research, in the promise of digital sociology from Susan Halford, Evelyn Ruppert and others, and in the turn to 'the social life of methods' (e.g. from John Law and others at CRESC). In all these arenas, sociologists can develop new repertoires and showcase them through the way they might handle issues concerned with inequalities which are now so high profile across the social sciences and in the public realm. As sociologists I believe we have to recover our self-confidence and determination to shape the world. My hope is that a critical engagement with the inequalities agenda will help to allow us to do this.

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