Editor's Introduction: Swimming against the tide

Volume 3, Issue 2, June 2014

Permalink: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0003.201 [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0003.201]

This issue will be a particularly stimulating one for the reader for it is a *tour de force* in terms of its intellectual vigor and incisive reflection. It is also a continuing testament to our publishing partners who support the kind of synthesizing, multidisciplinary and intellectual project at the heart of this journal. Why? Despite the contemporary squeeze impacting directly on the production of knowledge and the practice of the sciences, MPublishing maintains an explicit commitment to the 'big picture' and to supporting efforts to maintain a long-term network of writers and thinkers. Like us, MPublishing also rails against the type of specialisation that prevails in the academic world today. This tends to narrow intellectual horizons and is moving towards an increasing fragmentation into ever more distinct specialities that communicate less and less with each other. The narrowness of citations *across* disciplines is one reflection of this trend. So is the increasing proliferation of highly specialised academic journals.

The squeeze of increased financial and political pressures on academics and academic publishers comes in other varied guises and includes the 'impact' agenda and the increasing politicisation of academic research by governments. The pursuit of research income, academic rankings, and 'impact' is all the more evident today, it being a central means by which universities seek to demonstrate an improvement in their performance. Sadly, the type of practice in which the academic thinks, speaks and acts more and more in performance terms is all too familiar. In this fashion, social scientists are increasingly prone to the *taking* rather than the *making* of the very problems they seek to examine. And not surprisingly, this agenda sits uncomfortably with critical scholarship on power, the sociology of knowledge, whose world-view counts and why, and with alternative practices that question knowledge production (see, for example, Williams's discussion about the consequences of researching with 'impact' in the Global South (2013)).

In part a response to this, there have been calls for a 'public sociology' incorporating professional, policy and critical components (e.g. Burawoy, 2005). And arising from this has been an ongoing debate about the connections – real, ideological and perceived – between science and advocacy, and about the normative and political character of versions of public sociology, a fact that has led a number of sociologists to question this approach (see, for example, Turner 2005; Clawson, Zussman, Misra, Gerstel, Stokes, Anderton and Burawoy 2007). More generally within the academy there is also the intellectual problem of relativism in the social sciences (see, Loyal and Quilley in volume 2 of this journal). Taken together, it is safe to say that we live in an era characterised by more pronounced financial and political pressures on the social sciences to demonstrate relevance, as if seeking to understand the human condition in all of its complexity was somehow irrelevant!

Happily, however, readers of this issue can be assured of a more assiduous balance being struck in these muddying waters. Here you will find a stable platform for discussions by, and between, writers studying all aspects of the human condition. This issue also moves beyond the dualities of mainly short-term academic performance-based problems. Instead, we are treated to a series of wide-ranging discussions with far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the human world. None of this, we suggest, is easily reduced to the simple sum of its parts or to a linear and one-dimensional model of knowledge production or mobilisation. Instead the authors challenge us to consider: the dynamism of democratisation and processes running counter to this, including the drag effect of social habitus (Alikhani); the paradoxes involved in the empirical realization of an idealised state of affairs (Kilminster); the cultural roots of the 'silent warfare' that

is the double-bind process of relations between Iran and Israel (Yari and Akbari); the social regulation of teenage sexuality in the USA and the Netherlands since the late 1800s (Wouters) and the links to 'good society' and social integration; at the level of global power politics, the degree of socio-economic inequality and its implications for social cohesion within nation states, and particularly for the viability of the tenacious American Dream (Mennell); and, finally, an important and fuller contribution to discussions on processes of informalisation and how to test them (Collins).

Alikhani opens the issue with his examination of democratisation and de-democratisation processes and the functional, habitual and institutional dimensions therein. For him, no one dimension is 'the motor', 'the base' or 'the cause' of others. Rather they accompany each other, they are part of a relatively long-term societal transformation process and they are in a constant feedback-process with each other. Through the application of figurational ideas, Alikhani argues that empirical studies on the current state of 'democracy' in some Western societies, such as that of Colin Crouch, can be integrated into a more differentiated and dynamic model of democratisation. According to this model, social processes do not necessarily take place in one direction, as Crouch implied. Under specific circumstances, counter-processes can gain the upper hand. Indeed, social democratic processes can become reversible. The new manifestations of these counter-processes may differ in their *form* and appearance from those before, but importantly they share *structural* similarities. In this sense, Alikhani argues that speaking about three separate periods of democracy (pre-democratic, democratic and post-democratic) is potentially misleading. A dynamic and process-oriented concept of power can, he claims, overcome the polarising, static and stationary understanding of power and democratisation as well as deal with the problem of the collapse of newly created democratic institutions, itself the result of what he (and Elias before him) terms the 'drag effect' of social habitus'. Alikhani concludes that this model enables a more fruitful empirical investigation of the direction of democratisation and de-democratisation processes, thus moving current thinking on the subject beyond different ideological and polarised debates on 'egalitarian' and 'liberal' democracy. We look forward to further commentaries on this provocative idea in future issues.

In taking up the baton, Kilminster subsequently pushes us towards the subject matter of utopia, specifically the fictional and philosophical work of that name by Thomas More, published in 1516. Published here for the first time is the original English text of Kilminster's work on the debate about utopias from a sociological perspective, it being the product of his participation in 1982, with Norbert Elias, [1] [#N1] in the *Utopieforschuungsgruppe* at the Zentrum für interdisciplinäre Forschung at the University of Bielefeld. [2] [#N2] In the wake of widespread interest in utopian thought following the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this project was an ambitious interdisciplinary undertaking. It brought together specialists from history, sociology, philosophy, theology, German and English literature, and Romance and Slavonic studies. The polemics in the paper with the historians Frank and Fritzie Manuel and the philosopher Karl-Otto Apel (also participants in Bielefeld) reflect the disciplinary competition and co-operation of that occasion. Kilminster's contribution to this issue is organised into three parts: the first includes a comparison of historians' accounts of the context of More's *Utopia* with a sociological sketch of the same writer by Elias; the second surveys, briefly, trends in English and American social-scientific literature on utopias, focusing specifically on the contributions of Levitas and Bauman, and; the third concentrates on the structure of assumptions in Marx's theory about the realisation of utopia and concludes with a critique of Habermas, Bauman and Otto Apel. In so doing, Kilminster points out the inconsistencies and paradoxes involved in the empirical realisation of an idealised state of affairs which, by its nature, exists on a different, non-empirical, transcendental plane in and through real, historical, empirical societies. Not surprisingly, he also remains unconvinced of the cognitive value of highly abstract transcendental presuppositions. And in taking transcendental inquiry seriously, he argues that it is surely legitimate to ask about the significance and the

cognitive pay-off of the proposition that all empirical speech acts have in common the idea of mutual understanding.

Yair and Akbari tackle utopia but from a different perspective, that of the struggle for control over whose utopia matters most as seen in the 'silent warfare' that is the Iranian-Israeli conflict over the past two decades or so. Their paper seeks to add to standard geo-political interpretations by extending previous sociological heuristics for understanding the deep traumatic cultural roots of the escalating conflict between the two societies. In so doing, Yair and Akbari identify a double-bind process of colliding cultural traumas that have set Iran and Israel on what some commentators have described as a doomsday path. For the authors, both societies are driven by deeply-traumatised national identities – on the one hand the Iranians are attempting to escape from a victimhood complex that resulted from a series of colonial defeats while, on the other, Israelis' threat to engage in a pre-emptive strike also reflects their deep fear of annihilation. The reactions of one group toward the other only inflame this trauma, thereby creating a double-bind process of escalating crises. Yair and Akbari's paper is a welcome response to calls from International Relations (IR) studies to incorporate sociological insights, specifically showing that security interests are defined and shaped by actors who respond to cultural factors. Their paper also adds a hitherto absent emotional element in attempts to understand the Israeli-Iranian conflict. More generally it also provides a comparative case to think of other contexts where trauma and myths play an integral part in international conflicts.

From myths about conflict to the socio-genesis of national customs to do with dating, Wouters focuses on the social regulation of teenage sexuality in the USA and the Netherlands since 1880, basing his work mainly on sexology studies and manners books, they being the dominant codes of the established classes. The question of why the Americans have held on to the tradition of pre-marital abstinence of sexuality and why the Dutch have invented and established a new tradition of allowing premarital sex, even at home, equally intrigues and inspires Wouters. He proposes an explanation of the two trajectories from national differences in the functioning of good societies, particularly their regulation of social competition and social mobility. For him, both American and Dutch upper class people looked down at certain sexual practices with disdain and, notably, dating and *verkering* (going steady) spread predominantly from the middle classes. The rise in the USA of a highly competitive dating system and a complicated sexual morality goes some way towards a part-explanation of the persistence of old rules there. Further explanation for this is to be found, he claims, in America's lower level of social integration and more open competition between various centers of power and good societies. By way of contrast, the build up to the rise of a new rule among Dutch parents was an informalisation of the process of 'getting engaged', the diffusion of *verkering* and of parental policies to stay 'in the scene'. Young people from Dutch families who belonged to good society or directed themselves to their code continued to celebrate the good-society tradition of getting engaged and kept the spread of *verkering* in the dark. For Wouters this indicates that, in the 1920s, the middle classes and their offspring already had won a class struggle and cultural battle from the upper classes, while upper classes in the Netherlands succeeded in keeping the middle classes to their side until the 1960s. This then is related to different levels of social integration: the upper classes in the USA being much more divided amongst themselves, divided in many competing good societies (played out against each other and thus allowing middle class youths their cultural victory), and the Dutch living with increasing hypocrisy for status reasons (to keep up with the upper class Jones's), until upper and middle classes in the 1960s ended it joyfully and allowed pre-marital sex, even in their houses. Apart from the different pace of the emancipation of sexuality, another major comparative difference for Wouters involves the lust balance and the related emphasis on a longing for sexual gratification more strongly than the longing for enduring intimacy. Whether Wouters' examination of teenage sexuality and his practice of social science is at once, empirically-grounded and theoretically-sound, is a question that you, the reader, might consider in your own work. We welcome your thoughts on this in any future issue.

Mennell also takes up the challenge of examining functional democratisation processes with a specific focus on the American case. While a decrease in socio-economic inequality in Western societies during the last century was connected with the strengthening of networks of interdependence at the *national* level, he argues that a number of processes seem to have thrown the trend into reverse in the USA. It may be that the powerful have up to now found functional alternatives to growing equality, that is, alternative ways of maintaining the necessary degree of patriotic solidarity among the 'middle classes'. For Mennell the most striking fact about the distribution of economic resources in the USA is that the real income of the 'middle class' has actually been falling. This grouping includes the great majority of the non-super-rich, everyone who is in steady employment (itself a changing phenomenon), down to and including manual workers and service workers who would certainly fall into the category 'working class' in even the most faintly Marxist definition of the term. And although much anger has been expressed, there remains little sign of serious reform of the aspects of capitalism that have proved so damaging in the global economy, and especially in the USA. In a convincing explanation of this, Mennell draws attention to the military-industrial complex in the USA after 1945 and the emerging power ratios of global society, including the globalisation of Big Finance. For him, the new paradox of pacification may be that the powerful no longer see the need to 'see to peace' within the ranks of their own fellow citizens.

Finally, we are delighted to publish the full text of Collins' thoughts on the four theories of informalisation and how to test them. Originally published in 2011 in a truncated version, here Collins includes those sections omitted in the *Festschrift* tribute out of necessity. Just as Wouters (2007) used etiquette books as a key source for his work published as *Informalisation: Manners and Emotions since 1890,* Collins drew on photos of social interaction at different periods during the twentieth century. In the paper, he summarises the full results of analysing a long series of hundreds of photos from many sources (e.g. photo histories, regional and national photo archives). Historical and visual sociology combined. These data provide evidence for and against various theories of informalisation by documenting the leading sectors of various kinds of changes including arbitrary style cycles, democratisation, status reversal and what he terms antinomian situational dominance – making oneself the centre of attention by shocking others with an 'edgy' style. Thus, the debate between Wouters, Mennell and Collins (see, for example, Collins 2009; Wouters and Mennell 2013) is at least partly a matter of different kinds of evidence. Collins' arguments do go further, however, and question the direction of civilising processes and the basis of related arguments about the continued disciplining of people. As Collins himself noted in personal correspondence with the editor, 'there are, of course, strong differences in theory and conceptual approach'. In our view, these are to be welcomed and certainly not avoided. For debates about intellectual templates, heritage and the social conditions that have shaped conceptual schemes or paradigms are just as important as we move further into the twenty-first century. As Collins extends here an invitation to sociologists to join the empirical project of examining the observable self-presentation of people in small public groups, so do we warmly invite the reader to keep a watching brief on how this debate develops over the course of coming issues.

Dr. Katie Liston

References

Burawoy, M. (2005) 'For public sociology', *American Sociological Review*. 70 (1): 4–28.

Clawson, D., Zussman, R., Misra, J., Gerstel, N., Stokes, R., Anderton, D. and Burawoy, M. (2007) *Public Sociology*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Collins, R. (2009) 'A dead end for a trend theory'.*Archives européennes de sociologie*. 50 (3): 431–441.

Collins, R. (2011) 'Four theories of informalisation and how to test them', in Brinkgreve, C., van den Haak, M., van Heeirkhuizen, B., Heilbron, J. and Kuipers, G. (eds.) *Cultuur En Ongelijkheid*. Diemen: AMB, 160–172.

Turner, J. (2005) 'Is public sociology such a good idea?', *The American Sociologist*. 36 (3-4): 27-45.

Williams, G. (2013) 'Researching with impact in the Global South? Impact-evaluation practices and the reproduction of "development knowledge"', *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*. 8 (3): 223–236.

Wouters, C. (2007) *Informalisation: Manners and Emotions since 1890*. London: Sage.

Wouters, C. and Mennell, S. (2013) 'Discussing Civilisation and Informalisation: Criteriology', *Política y Sociedad*. 50 (2): 553–579.

Notes

1. Elias's contribution was 'Thomas More's critique of the state: with some thoughts on a definition of the concept of utopia', translated by Edmund Jephcott, and is to be found in *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias,* Volume 14, (University College Dublin Press). [#N1-ptr1]
2. This paper was published in German as 'Zur Utopiediskussion aus soziologischer Sicht', in Wilhelm Voßkamp (ed.) *Utopieforschung: Interdisziplinäre Studien zur neuzeitlichen Utopia*, Band 1, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, in 1982. [#N2-ptr1]

Hosted by Michigan Publishing, a division of the University of Michigan Library.
For more information please contact mpub-help@umich.edu.
Online ISSN: 2166-6644