One across goes into sociology: A neglected feature of mass culture

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We are still waiting for a sociological study of crosswords. In diagnosing this as a significant deficit in the literature of sport and games, we might recall the libraries devoted to chess and bridge, let alone football or angling, in which aficionados can be informed on all aspects of their sport. Yet every day, not just at weekends, millions of people sit at home and follow their favourite sport, with no distinguishing team colours or banners. Crosswords are indeed a mass sport (according to the Gallup Poll of 1970 there were 30 million crossword solvers in the USA), but their fans never hit the headlines either for their achievements or for their antisocial behaviour. Nevertheless, a sociology of crosswords has ample legitimacy in comparison with other branches of sports sociology. Both the puzzles and their potential solvers – their social class, gender and the crossword's function in their work (or leisure) life – offer the researcher appropriate and fascinating material. It is striking that no sociologist yet appears to have taken cognisance of the field.

With what motivation would the sociologist embark on such work? Too often we have seen the consequences of the attraction which mass sports have exercised on intellectuals. A puny Bert Brecht revelling in the company of heavy-weight boxers, Arthur Miller and Joe Dimaggio, the eminent Logical Positivist A. J. Ayer and the football team Tottenham Hotspur come to mind, along with Gabriele D'Annunzio enjoying the spectacle as the 'dynamism' of the masses crushes all artefacts beloved by intellectuals. The sociologist must remain both uncontaminated by the swirling passions of this mass sport and overcome an anxiety specific to the intellectual snobbery of the field – the tendency for anyone discussing crosswords to exude a sense of expertise, as if interest in the object equates to success in the activity. No one assumes that a sports sociologist will wish to describe, let alone emulate, a cross of Messi's, for their theme is not to be found on a part of the field which even Messi can reach. A crossword sociologist who cannot solve 1 Down might, in contrast – at least during the early evolution of the discipline – be a suspect figure, and it would be important to separate the interest in crosswords from any skill in solving them. An encouraging thought for the sociologist is that *post hoc* any clue looks easy: when you have the answers, everyone is an expert.

The majority of crosswords – like the tiny body of accompanying literature [1][#N1] – appears in English, and we shall draw our examples from English-language crosswords. For reasons that will become clearer in the course of the next pages, the language used has had a huge effect on the nature of the puzzle; it has introduced differentiations, affinities and classifications which will prove stronger than any affinities with puzzles in another language, so much so that it may not be easy to recognise internal categories within the field, including elements such as their class orientation or cultural level. The puzzles contained in almost all English newspapers (magazines are increasingly in a field of their own) have such strong technical similarities that from any of them the solver may look down in surprise on German crosswords, for instance, or on some US products. [2][#N2] The differences are not merely those of spatial arrangement: the obvious fact that German puzzles lack black squares and include the text of their clues within the frame, whereas English-language

puzzles separate the two radically. More important is that the clues are structured according to a quite different principle.

It should be remembered that the English tabloids – where cultural and intellectual matters struggle for space – also contain crosswords. Yet these crosswords betray little trace of their origin, and four-letter words enjoy no privileges in their lexicon. Not everyone who turns to Page 3 goes on to the crossword. There seems to be a division of labour within the reading of the newspaper. These crosswords are hardly to be differentiated from the more simple products of the 'quality' press, and our future sociologist would be left to presume that they fulfil – in rather different social milieux – a similar function: merely passing time, with a very minimalist educational alibi. Perhaps they are simply a product-specific form of that column in *Reader's Digest* called 'It pays to improve your word power'.

A brief introduction to the history of crosswords

If the sociologist of crosswords will be confronted with a bewildering number of possible objects of study, then still more so any historian of the genre who wishes to move back from 21 December 1913 (when the first recognisable example of the crossword appeared in the USA) to its origins. Arnot opens her *History of the Crossword Puzzle* (1981) with the riddle of the sphinx and a string of surprisingly bloodthirsty examples from the Old Testament. In both cases we might be struck by the clear pattern of domestication to which crosswords have been subject during their history. The prizes have remained modest, but the penalties for failure have become less drastic.

If one relates crosswords to word and letter games, then Pindar and Tryphiodorus [3] [#N3] emerge as their patrons, the latter because – in contrast to Pindar who managed only one, subsequently lost, ode in this style – he composed whole poems with the omission of a particular letter. This art was laboriously imitated in the Middle Ages. Today it has resurfaced as the SMS of text-messaging, thus showing the sequence of discoveries: techniques evolve which wait centuries for their mass function to become clear. Such literal games played by poets put the student of literature in mind of those laborious critical analyses of poetry in which particular attributes are ascribed to individual letters, and every onomatopoeia ('the dark u-sounds') is claimed to pick up nuances of meaning – a procedure which is akin to crossword activities. Poetic and leisure plays on words have much in common, and their proximity in fact suggests that the playful deconstruction of a cultural language is almost as ancient as that language's original construction.

Clearly the clue has its origins in word-puzzles. While the sphinx herself avoided telling Oedipus the number of letters in the answer to her riddle (again we encounter the problem of universality: was the sphinx expecting the answer (3) – i.e. man – or, according to language, a higher number?), she had nonetheless grasped the quintessence of the cryptic. The acrostic is another form of word-puzzle closely related to the crossword, although once again the function – a rather laborious courting device of the Victorian period, enjoying support from the Queen herself – has changed through the years. The rebus – examples of which go back many millennia – incorporates significant elements of crossword thinking and was, like acrostics, particularly popular at the end of the nineteenth century. A device waiting for its time.

Anagrams have flourished at various historical times, not merely in classical antiquity but also notably in the seventeenth century. The Kaballists too were great practitioners of the anagram – indeed, it was believed that the birth of a Golem was produced by the ritual jumbling of the letters of his name – a technique implicit in Poe's *Tale of the Ragged Mountain* (Poe 1984 [1844]). Anagrams also were favourite pastimes of Albert and Victoria – in contrast to their German relatives, who would have found it hard to differentiate between a misprint and an anagram: *Majestätsbeleidigung* (Lèse-majesté) would have been the Kaiser's first thought if

someone had jumbled his name (but can one? WILHELM – not an immediate candidate for an anagram). Benjamin Franklin meanwhile – a man addicted to the tabular and cryptic representation of every aspect of his life, from his sins to his income – had turned the pastime of the idle rich into the basis of an excellent commercial practice. His paper printed puzzles (but not crosswords in the modern sense) in one number and the solvers had to buy the next number to get the answer.

The more recent history of the crossword is as dominated by stereotypes of cultural superiority as in the worst days of great power rivalry and imperialism. The crossword historian seems partisan in suggesting the evolution from the original American crossword to the more complex and culturally demanding European paradigm. The history reduces for some to the refining of cheap imported goods. Europeans look down in a superior manner upon the achievement of Arthur Wynn in the *New York World* in December 1913 and on the veritable craze of the mid-1920s, which – thanks to the higher levels of efficiency in the distribution of the print media – reached much greater heights than had the puzzles of the nineteenth century. This phase was followed by the first appearance of a crossword in *The Times* of London in1930, which marked – or enabled – the acceptance of the genre by the English ruling classes. The final phase of Europeanisation saw the increasing encryption of the clues. A simple, mechanistic word-game became a stamping ground of intellectual manoeuvres and, more intriguingly, of culture.

From the middle-ground of the press landscape upwards, simple crosswords have stood next to their cryptic cousins. The solvers have a choice, either between the two puzzles or between two sets of clues for the same puzzle. Even the *Times* crossword, traditionally the market leader and celebrated for its cryptic qualities, now has a simpler companion. In the *Daily Telegraph* the coexistence of two crosswords was a feature almost from the start –perhaps suggesting different forms of the division of labour (and perhaps the proportion of professionally active women) within that paper's readership. A whole generation of middle-class women worked away for much of the last century at the smaller *Telegraph* crossword. These women might well have been surprised to find that the *Sun*'s crossword would have aroused feelings of recognition in them, rather than of alienation and distaste. They would feel at home there as solvers. It will take a most sensitive sociologist to trace out the class-related differences in the intellectual level of these simple crosswords. Bourdieu's fine distinctions (1984) will emerge more clearly in the upper regions, in which it is neither a slightly larger vocabulary nor a rudimentary knowledge of geography that determine one's place in the social hierarchy, but culture.

A national sport?

It is through their participation in culture, still more than as training exercises in the language, that crosswords assume national characteristics and, in the same measure that they deal in the nation's cultural capital, take on class character. It is in this context that not only the setting but the solving of crosswords can be understood in its competitive element.

It is not easy to place crosswords precisely on the continuum of games and sports. On one hand it would be necessary to compare crosswords with other activities in which there are no opponents, such as jogging, patience or – with all due respect to the fish – angling. The competitive aspect of British crosswords all but entirely lacks an economic dimension. We might explain this not simply on the basis of the few crosswords that are in fact 'prize crosswords', but a more convincing argument perhaps would make reference to the opportunities for cheating – an indicator of the economic importance of any activity. On the day of a crossword's appearance there is neither the opportunity to cheat, nor any reason to. Can one imagine horse-racing, poker, even cricket without deceit? It is inconceivable. If the activity of crossword solving is outside

both legitimate and illegitimate financial gain, while still being heavily subject to competition, then the activity has to be related to negotiations of cultural capital, something quite separate both from that interchange of money with political power and from formal academic achievements. The issue at stake here is an individual's relationship to the entirety of a society's culture, and the opponent – if such there be – can only be furnished by the sum total of others competing for social prestige through cultural capital.

At this point – anticipating the sociological work, for which we wait – I must beg my readers' indulgence. I cannot present these arguments with the proper density of learned footnotes, nor can I dot my text with references to systematic forms of social observation, or consult my clipboard notes. Instead the student of crosswords turns to trivial fictional accounts, in particular to the ranks of the crossword-solving detectives, in order to gain insight into these processes. Every reader of detective stories knows how significant the overlap is between detective and solver. The setter is that combination of fiction and the manipulation of reality which creates the problem, and the solving is a task shared by the reader and detective in some combination. Small wonder if these fictional detectives feel affinity to the crossword solver, and use their skill in one area to hint at their prowess in the other. We see this in the popular TV series concerning Inspector Morse – author Colin Dexter, now sadly deceased. [4][#N4] Morse underlines his (modest) position in the police hierarchy by means of his competence in cultural achievement, among them crosswords. His author was (careful to be) known as a crossword buff and, like his creation Morse, divided his time between two enjoyable forms of mystification. Towards his sergeant, Lewis, Morse presents himself differently: his mysteries are solved while the classy melodies of Mahler and Puccini swirl round Morse's red Jaguar car – to emphasise the contrast, Lewis's cheap production-line car is filled with the Disney tapes of his children. But working in Oxford, surrounded by the Fellows and Wardens of the University – luminaries of the establishment, who, surprisingly, are involved in many of the murders Morse has to solve – Morse has to draw on a different fund of cultural capital to be taken seriously, and this is available to him in the crossword. Knowledge and academic honours diminish in value, real intelligence lies outside their gift. A Professor of Classics may well be able to read incunabula and be on nodding terms with the most obscure of hieroglyphics, but if he does not know how to read a clue then he is merely a learned fool and Morse, who can, is vastly his superior.

Snobbery of this kind is absolutely endemic to crosswords, even on the lower slopes. Who has resisted the temptation of cultural superiority when, sitting in tourist class, one is obliged to watch First Class consume a luxurious breakfast but struggle with the simplest crossword? Surely there should be a crossword test before passengers are admitted to the forward rows? In an age long before such airborne dilemmas, Azdak, in Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* put it concisely: they can't count to four, he grumbles about the rich, but they eat eight courses. Not only at 30,000 feet, on the ground on campus, the same snobbery can be seen. It is hardly possible to enter an office in the administration, or to approach the counter in the Library without disturbing someone working at a simple crossword, who looks up – irritated and puzzled at the same time – with 5 Down on their mind. Yes, the Professor thinks, handing over the counter the all-but unreadable text on late Heidegger which is being returned, that's their level and offers to solve a few clues. This snobbery – painful though it is to admit to: it is too common to deny – dominates the world of crosswords. It happens mostly – as is familiar from other forms of boasting – through hints rather than explicit claims; people are careful not to have their potency measured in real terms, it is safer to suggest that it is there. This evasiveness should not conceal from the observer's eye the cut-throat competition of crossword solving, nor the deadly seriousness of its outcomes. Comparative research seems likely to reveal that no society can write in 1 Across with an entirely clear conscience.

It is hard to map these discriminations anywhere except onto the discriminations and hierarchies built into other features of the society. Certainly – despite the best efforts of Morse – they have to be seen as generalised phenomena, not limited to the 'field', an impression reinforced by a glance at the biographies of the setters.

These biographies hardly differ from those of other text-professionals (such as proof-readers or minor novelists and leisured clergymen). Outsiders from the academic community, eccentric autodidacts and frustrated school-teachers – it is a mixture familiar from other fields. Here, however, we should mention one particular biographical peculiarity of the setters in an earlier generation: their background in espionage.

In the Second World War the code-breakers assembled in Bletchley Park – a heterogeneous group, consisting of retired housewives, officers, future politicians – were recruited primarily on the basis of their interest in crosswords. A characteristic memoir from this period recalls the interview and its focus: 'my interest in the three Cs was tested: Classics, Chess and Crosswords' (quoted: Hinsley 1993: 282). In short, it seemed a thoroughly amateur affair, with – for instance – mathematical ability playing no role. While the fact that the Germans persisted in using the German language meant that a few professors of German had to be recruited, giving some veneer of professionalism to the enterprise, it was skill in crosswords which played the greater part. On the German side (here comes the inevitable national stereotype) there was a machine, the so-called Enigma, which had to be cracked by the crosswording amateurs. This small example shows Dexter's and Morse's historical legitimacy in associating his form of culture and intelligence with crosswords. Professionals, machines and other languages beware.

Game-Theory and Crosswords

At this point the sociological text which this brief article aims to provoke will have a long section on Game Theory, as well as in-depth studies of the overlaps of crosswords with other mass sports. Discussions of game theory will focus no doubt on those examinations of strategy involved in sporting practice, that element of Rational Choice which train the policy-making skills of multinational managers. Perhaps Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1944) will also feature there, or sociologists will put crosswords closer to that linguistic-aesthetic play which Schiller (1954 [1801]) saw to be part of the 'aesthetic education of mankind'. In our hoped-for sociology we shall wait for an explanation as to why Norbert Elias – having fled the Nazi regime (incidentally: REGIME and EMIGRE are anagrams of each other) – learned something of the rules of cricket but did not include the crossword in his studies. In hindsight it seems bizarre to focus on the arcane legislation surrounding the 'Leg before Wicket' rule at the expense of a sport whose evolution and embedding in mass culture are so eminently adapted to Elias's central theory of *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012 [1939]). [5][#N5]

For Elias games are exemplifications of rule-bound activities, in which the 'social interdependence' of social groups is reflected to such an extent that games become a model of what Elias calls 'figuration': individual behaviour in sport – though remaining the activity of interdependent human agents – becomes 'supra-individual', system-immanent, and thus model for more general social processes. Games represent 'a flowing figuration of human beings whose actions and experiences continuously interlock, a social process in miniature' (Elias and Dunning 2008: 35). Crosswords offer only partial illustrations of this theory, in that – while they show that formalisation which characterises all sport-evolution and are no less rule bound than other forms of sport [6][#N6] – their use of a national language means that they have preserved far greater cultural specificity than other sports. The spectacle of the USA doing well in what was for many years regarded as European football is sufficient to show the internationalisation to which most mass sports are subject and from which they derive aspects of their societal model-character. For this reason, Elias's game-theory has little to say on issues of cultural specificity: neither questions of why the Romans did not play ice-hockey, or why the Saxons liked skittles, nor by extension (and this is a greater loss) on those cultural issues as to the function of crosswords within the cultural capital-market of Western societies.

Together with Eric Dunning, Elias developed a theory of sport's social function which had to do with the 'quest for excitement'. Here the two sociologists focus on the function of sport in domesticating violence, in replacing physical aggression with its sublimated form: rule-bound excitement. Certainly, the rules of various sports have in common with those of crosswords that they aim to prolong that pleasurable excitement which anticipates an outcome (kicking a ball into an unguarded net is as uninteresting as writing known words into blank spaces), and of which the combination of two (sets of) players, law-enforcers and spectators seems an essential element. Such constellations lead sports to possess what Elias and Dunning (2008: 40–2) call a 'mimetic' character, something which in this particular case obviously reflects broader tendencies within 'the civilising process'. Crosswords clearly do not have the full range of attributes of these 'leisure-Gemeinschaften': important aspects of the combat and spectators are missing, and the place of excitement in them would potentially be a contentious matter (even though there are many for whom sports such as football also conspicuously lack excitement). But it remains important to establish to what extent crosswords belong in Elias's categories and to pursue in our chosen domain his enquiry as to 'the relationship between the structure of the leisure needs characteristic of our type of society and the structure of the events designed to satisfy these needs' (2008: 55). In this provisional essay, awaiting the wiser judgements to come, I would argue that, despite overlap with Elias's theory, crosswords' development relates to a no less basic drive in our society than that aggression which football sublimates and that crosswords are a 'fulfilment of a very basic, probably socially induced human need in its own right' (2008: 40). This need I see as a need for a game with language, which, by its pacific nature, does not need to be classified as 'a socially permitted regression' (ibid. 97), but 'in its own right' can be seen as simultaneously refined and primitive, in which human beings continue to imitate 'mimetically' the primeval organisation of the world through language. That pleasure is derived from it does not detach it from the deeper purposes of history: like all sports, crosswords generate – in the form of pleasure – reactions whose prime function had a deadly earnest no smaller than that of the bone-crunching struggles for existence played out in the jungle and the sports arena.

Whatever role Elias's game theory comes to play in the field, the sociology of crosswords will certainly require a fresh look at that game theory so beloved of economists and corporate managers. Crosswords seem to demand different criteria. They lack almost completely a traditionally defined competitiveness commensurate with the struggle for existence and profit. The habitués of this game theory – Little and Big Monkey, [7].[#N7] for instance, or the imprisoned fraudsters in the so-called Prisoners' Dilemma – seem unlikely participants in or profiteers from crosswords. It is true that the relationship between setter and solver has elements of that strategic interplay on which these situations depend, but the model is spoilt by the fact that ultimately both parties wish for the puzzle to be solved. Little and Big Monkey lose their interest for sociologists at the moment they start to collaborate, perhaps by opening a fruit-store. But cooperation of this kind is at the heart of the crossword. Another feature of game theory which sits ill with crosswords concerns the choice of strategy. In classic models which Gintis (2000) analyses one strategic choice affects the next: if Big Monkey climbs up the tree, then Little Monkey – being more agile, if less assertive, etc. – has to modify his own strategy. The game thus consists of logically interdependent rational choices. The sequence is variable (Big Monkey could decide to wait on the ground and force Little Monkey to climb) but inescapable. Crossword solvers by contrast – while they confront a whole range of strategic choices: to treat a clue as anagram, hidden word, allusion, and so on – are not chained to any sequence. When one strategy fails and another is adopted the basic situation does not change. [8].[#N8] The knowledge of the strategies which either player might adopt can be total, but the knowledge does not inhibit the free play of strategic thinking.

Considerations of this kind have a major impact on the discourse of the various sports. In the language of current sports-reporting the dominant idiom is based on the idea of the heroic struggles of antiquity. It is felt to be 'tragic' if a forward slips in the penalty area and an injury to the metatarsal matches in *gravitas* the

death of Hector. Moira [9] [#N9] and other personifications of fate look down from the stands on the Titanic encounter of Bayern München and FC Barcelona. Chess notoriously took refuge on the second mythological level, as those reports of the 1972 World Chess Championship between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky in the language of *High Noon* made clear. (Is it a coincidence that the decline of the Western has paralleled a loss of interest in these chess trials of strength?) It must be admitted that crosswords rather lack such dramatic discourses. Even at those crisis moments when the solver has recourse to another cup of tea, or a whiskey, when the pencil briefly returns to its holster, there is no journalist to record the scene, and no scale on which these struggles can be registered. It is a mass-sport without a public.

We repeat: it would be an error to think of crosswords training the solver for life's heroic individual struggles, or to conceptualise solving in terms of a bullfight, as an activity only completed when the puzzle lies defeated in the dust. We cannot forget that the setter wants his puzzle to be solved. There is a further dimension in which an understanding of crosswords should avoid overemphasising the individual. However much the crossword is normally solved by individual labour, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is a form of communication specific to particular classes and therefore profoundly involved in collective values. Crosswords test (to a very limited extent) intellectual ability: they test in strict privacy some of the most important attributes of class membership and, however invisibly this happens, its results are public. Crosswords are part of the cement of societies.

We can illustrate this only from non-scholarly sources – by looking at the function of the *Times* crossword within the closed worlds of the City of London and the Bar. Again, we reach for popular literature: John Mortimer's apparently highly unconventional barrister, Horace Rumpole. [10] [#N10] Nothing is sacred to Rumpole, he scorns all forms of conventionality, but he would be ashamed were he not to be able to do the *Times* crossword. He makes himself tipsy most evenings with cheap claret, rather than *premiers crus*; he wears suede shoes in court; he dirties his gown with gravy and ketchup, but his expertise in crosswords is unchallenged and speaks for him. This skill is his own personal, untouchable cultural capital, and failure there would worry him more deeply than further misfortunes in court. His system of values is in fact shared widely with his profession, even if many of them solve crosswords while drinking *premiers crus*, wearing shiny shoes and eating tidily; it is conventional, and in reality – rather than in the truthful fictions which we have narrated – the newspaper proprietors have based their market strategy on just such loyalties. It was anything but coincidence that Rupert Murdoch's 1981 takeover of *The Times* in no way interfered with the paper's crossword. Had the rules changed there, then the paper's readership – including all the Rumpoles – would have melted away.

Autres pays, autres moeurs. Not every profession is devoted in this way to *The Times*. Others are much more likely to practise the cryptic *Daily Telegraph* crossword – forty years ago, for instance, a male Anglican clergyman. The numbers of clergy may be falling, and the *Telegraph*'s support for Brexit has not helped with recent circulation figures, but even now the policy pursued by the paper [11] [#N11] will not concern our vicar, not necessarily for reasons of ideological estrangement: simply because for him ideology is remote from the functions of his newspaper. Countless disconnected news items and unlimited sport: these fill the pages, but the crossword corresponds with a deeply held conviction that the function of the base is merely to support the superstructure and has no intrinsic importance. But the crossword is not merely the shield against ideology, it is part of his habitus, a metronome for life's rhythms. For the *Telegraph* crossword fits exactly into the carefully timed rhythms of our vicar's life. He can time his services to the second, his sermons no less precisely: he has a christening finished by the time his roast potatoes are browning in the oven, and his crossword takes twenty minutes.

Readers unfamiliar with British customs in such matters should recall the simple facts of the layout of British newspapers. From an early date the crossword was to be found on the last page of paper, in a position where two rapid folds of the newspaper hid world events behind the sheltered world of the crossword. This had the function that the solver, on the way in a crowded train or tube to what some people might regard as the serious business of the day, could work at the puzzle without their elbows going in their neighbours' face. At weekends, when the restrictions of travel do not apply, the crossword is free to wander on to other pages, making it necessary to open up the whole newspaper. The crossword is thus one of the last surviving remnants of the archaic space-distribution of the British press – something which left its mark on the body language of the older generations of the upper middle class. At a time when the editors of *The Times* refused all but its own personal column access to the front page, and kept the obituaries on the page after the Leader, the siting of elements of the newspaper was a matter of great sensitivity. In the same way that the Personal Column represented the real news – a characteristic remark: 'I always read the agony column first and only afterwards the news (if there is any news)' (Fleming 1984 [1934]: 15) – crosswords' function was to represent the real culture of the newspaper's readership. This not only involved a sense of superiority, cleverness and education (i.e. cultural capital), but also a no less distinct process of abstraction from a more easily accessible culture. There is no doubt that the culture mediated on the crossword page represented something fundamentally different to what was dealt with on the Arts Page, which discussed fashions and intellectual–artistic innovations, rather than the bedrock of a class's culture and which no one read anyway. To play with culture shows the naturalness of a relationship to it – only in an alienated society or for the underprivileged does culture represent a goal of conscious striving and achievement which is too serious to include play. To know what one must know to be a member of the group is something which needs rehearsal and initiation, and for which there are no open doors. The crossword is the grid through which the non-participant can peer into the closed garden of a culture to which s/he may not belong.

Reading the Clues

Thus forearmed with a little knowledge, we move now to the task of locating the various crosswords in some cultural scheme. As we suggested earlier, cultural differentiations are hard to detect on the lower slopes. Below a certain level, 'cluing' means nothing more than the offering of synonyms, perhaps presupposing no motivation in the solver beyond the desire to increase one's 'word-power'. The occasional fact-orientated clue comes along (pre-eminently geographical features) and the occasional anagram, provided that they do not exceed five or six letters in length, while the small *Telegraph* crossword periodically calls something up from classical antiquity, but then only short words, such as well-known gods (Venus, Zeus or Mars). The pieces of classical information dealt with in these crosswords are always fragmentary, like the news items themselves, scattered randomly through the other pages, they presume no cultural overview (that, if it exists at all, is for the Arts Page: that's why that page remains unread), merely the superstructural unity of being known.

Before we briefly identify the 'progressive' ideological elements in the advanced crossword, two further elements of the reduction of knowledge to single atomised items which can be freely manipulated should be discussed. The first is to stress the connection between forms of literary and artistic modernism and the reduction of the classical tradition to 'sawdust' by the crossword, thus presupposing (or actually creating) the isolation of the esoteric, the reduction of names to ciphers and to mere collections of letters. We see not merely on the textual level that a pillar of modernism, T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land,* reflects Eliot's observation of the reduction, devaluing and randomisation of culture: we see too in solver response the tentative shapes of the hermeneutics of this reduction. While our sociologist will no doubt – if she is sufficiently interdisciplinary in her training – find better examples, a Germanist may be forgiven for working with the known, in particular

the poetics of one of the pioneers of modernism in the lyric, Gottfried Benn. As *setter* of his poems, Benn insisted that only the individual word created sense, that only the poetic ensemble of assembled words – he too speaks of *Chiffren*, ciphers – carries meaning, that the poem alone is able, amid the fragments of destroyed civilisations and the rubble of meaningless history (the whole front-page stuff), to give shape to existence. Because of this poetics, Benn's readers stand like solvers between the space and the information which is arbitrarily alluded to. In scholarly editions the footnotes stand to the text like the clues to the frame of the crossword, legitimating words otherwise neither recognised nor understood, having been ground down to the dust in which poem and crossword deal. So, the solver reads 'the horses of Lysippus' in a poem (Benn 1921: 48) and is challenged to climb up to the level of 'claimable culture' (the sum total of the things one cannot get away without knowing). The footnote supplies the information – and the solver's reaction is: 'of course, St Mark's Square in Venice. Why didn't I see that at once?' – and as the letters click into the square, the hermeneutic process is complete, and no one has asked about the value of culture, the exploration of new meaning or the deepening of experience. Aestheticism's last refuge from reality: the crossword.

At a more obvious level we may observe further hermeneutic consequences of crosswords' reductionism. This is particularly evident in the dependence of crosswords on clear abbreviated stereotypes. At the very least this abbreviation expresses itself as a mental reluctance to go more deeply into a matter. Crosswords invariably use the shorthand of the boulevard press: Communist →RED (revolutionary →CHE may sound more progressive, but isn't really). For 'Bird in a Communist launch (8)' to produce REDSTART there is no room for political uncertainty. The setter may not be a follower of Senator McCarthy, but the clues would dissolve were their setter to be a friend of subtle differentiations. Such automatism makes every Scotsman IAN or MAC with even less thought than 'the French' turns out LE or LA. For some reason in *The Irish Times* the words 'German city' in a clue invariably produce ESSEN – a pleasant reminder of an agreeable city, but hardly more than a Pavlovian reaction. Such features structure the rules of crosswords and give them a tendency towards ideological conservatism or rigidity. (Of course, the left has its stereotypes too; however, they are understandable across a narrower spectrum of the readership of the press, and – technically – they are too long.)

Not all ideological distortions are involved with abbreviation. In Ireland, the prestigious crosswords are on the pages of *The Irish Times* and, for almost seven decades, in the hand of Crosaire. [12] [#N12] We wonder at what level Crosaire met the expectations of the solvers when he invariably treated national and racial as synonyms. Is it with the logic of a country whose nationalised electricity supply company offers 'power for our island race' (Fanning 2002) or instead merely with that indifference to differentiation which – for all its subtleties – more generally informs the crossword mind? Crosaire also invariably treated the word 'due' as a homonym for 'Jew' – something which sounds as old as the English language, without authenticating itself textually in *The Merchant of Venice* (in fact, Shakespeare resists making Shylock the Jew who demands his due). I suspect the practice comes rather from that isolationism of the crossword which, as we observed above, mirrors the complacent definition of class which social groups practise, and of which crosswords are a close reflection. It pays not to increase your word power. Incidentally, though it is expecting too much of readers to become interested in the Irish crossword – world leaders having failed for years to solve other dimensions of the Irish puzzle – it is interesting to notice how little ideological reference Crosaire put into his clueing, and how scrupulously those topics were avoided which once divided the country (no anagrams on IRA, for instance).

It is not merely trying to be fair to Crosaire which makes me insist that it is the very conventionality and rule-bound nature of crosswords which make them dependent on national stereotypes. Since they have themselves – as airlines say nowadays – 'for organisational reasons' to effect some selection on their own lexical items, [13] [#N13] their language tends in any case to standardisation, and a resulting somewhat mannered overemphasis

on particular lexical items. Indeed, such observations were formulated at a very early stage of the crossword's history (Arnot 1981: 57–8), in the form of a critique of the formulaic perceptions which crossword lexis was encouraging.

We have already noted the ideological effects that such formulaic language may produce by its own logic: we must now ask whether or not specific national languages make a distinctive contribution. It is one thing to think formulaically of the four points of a compass (that NSEW which so often features in clueing): it is another to realise that, since various languages contain greater or much lesser possibilities of forming anagrams – Arabic, for instance, is prevented from formulating even palindromes, to say nothing of anagrams, since letters in Arabic are inscribed differently according to their place in the word – those such as English which do have that capacity open up forms of linguistic chauvinism hardly conceivable in other languages. While many of these may seem harmless – *It lay in the Mediterranean (5)* → ITALY – others less so (Spain →PAINS) – in fact, it is the very possibility of linguistic play which might be the *casus belli*, especially from a language as imperialistic as English. This is illustrated by a clue in the *Globe and Mail* which is Balfour's favourite (2003: 157). The clue reads: *Often makes me angry (7)*. The solution – alas for a Germanist it is: GERMANY – illustrates the way in which linguistic automation advantages prejudice, rather than diminishing it. And it is probably unfair to shoot the pianist in such a situation: is it the setter's fault that this anagram simply exists, waiting to be realised? A German setter would fruitlessly attempt to turn ENGLAND into any anagram at all, let alone a negative one. The English language has this possibility, and others only to a limited extent. *Tant pis*. Or is it really Germany's fault for being called that – though an English language setter might (with difficulty) do something with DEUTSCHLAND – whatever Gerard Manley Hopkins meant by the title of his great poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, he was not thinking about anagrams. Anti-Americanism does not necessarily make AMERICA anagrammable, whereas the French language is flexible enough to make AIDS SIDA. The European Community finds its way to the British crossword heart much more as EU than in its more explicit political manifestations.

Further reflections on the chauvinism of the English language

Earlier in this essay I suggested that the English class system was the prime mover in the distinctions and differentiations on which crosswords are built. By now I seem to have deserted my former position and to be arguing that it is the English language which has that role. The argument has also become non-ideological, in that it is neither history nor an historically evolved culture that legitimates the claim, but rather the minutiae of spelling and word-composition. Is it possible that the crossword will offer Sapir and Whorf their final victory? [14] [#N14]

The real difficulty is that which I indicated in my reluctance to accept the simplistic theory that crossword solvers are likely to win against machines such as Enigma. That namely the cult of the flexibility of the English language legitimates more than crosswords: it legitimates dilettantism, xenophobias, and the British popular press. To see that it is more than paranoia which dictates these ideas, one needs only to look at the culture of British newspaper headlines. Whatever about the xenophobic tendencies of the culture, we must admit that it starts with the English language, with that language's sublime (or is it base?) indifference to distinctions between nouns and verbs and its (as the guidebooks would say) Dickensian spelling. All this means that the headlines can dance over all news, with a freedom which the English language rather than the *pax britannica* confers. And once this has been located in the English language rather than in the specificities of ideology or class, the *Sun* suddenly emerges as a fully-fledged member of the Anglophone nest. When that newspaper

reacted negatively to the 'interference' of the EU Commission in some British concern, it had recourse to the vulgarism 'Up yours, Delors' [15][#N15] – a phrase, but of course not a gesture, which is unthinkable in a German headline. *Guardian* readers may well have puckered their brow at such vulgarity, but the truth was that their own newspaper was on the same wavelength as the *Sun* – not in political attitude, but in linguistic practice. No reader of the *Guardian* could mistake the affinity, which exists in the preference of both newspapers for 'witty' word-plays, including rhyme, and a 'linguistic' dealing with reality. It is impossible to open the newspaper without proving this contention. One Easter weekend, when – as a matter of routine, if not liturgical tradition – the British railway system was on strike, the *Guardian* reported on empty railway stations in the metropolis under the headline 'Paddington Bare'. [16][#N16] In their use of such techniques the *Guardian* and the *Sun* are infinitely closer to one another than to the linguistic practice of German newspapers. *Bild* reads in comparison like a language course in the use of complete sentences, while the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* appears to have remained in the age of the illuminated manuscript.

And here, even in this cheap joke, placed within the not exactly Anglophile comments of this section, the deep-structures of my argument uncomfortably emerge again. For the joke implies a belief that there is some innate superiority in the English language, and that this superiority – masquerading as playfulness – is expressed in headlines and crosswords. The next step would be to claim that the Germans 'lack a sense of humour' – an assertion based contentiously on the absence of similar crosswords, or more neutrally (and more worryingly) on those very features of the language itself to which my topic has inadvertently drawn attention. Such pride in the English language is confined neither to the English, nor to their word-pilfering neighbours in Ireland: we need only to listen, all too frequently since the invasion of Iraq, to the streamlined language of the American military (we eagerly await the first use of WMD in a crossword: probably the only place such weapons of mass destruction will be found), or some years ago to the modest pride with which the native Australian invited his collocutors *Let's Speak Strine* (Lauder 1965) – to say nothing of the verbal dexterities of rap, all of them hardly thinkable in any other language – to realise that these feelings are linguistically, rather than culturally based.

It is time to return to the cultural reference points of crosswords. Gervase Fen, the detective in Edmund Crispin's novels, despises all crosswords. [17][#N17] As Professor of English in the University of Oxford he has no need of surrogate cultural capital, and he can use his university office to impress the local constabulary and Crispin's readers. But even he cannot resist the temptation, the moment his eye alights upon a crossword – which, true to the fashion of the period 1945–1980, contains a variety of literary allusions and quotations which must be completed – to show what he can do. He fills in – effortlessly, of course – all gaps in the quotations, and contemptuously ignores the other clues. The scene, while it may lack that last element of sociological persuasiveness for which we are condemned to wait, is most revealing for the mechanisms of crosswords. If it had been a case merely of solving a clue of the kind *'Shall I compare thee to a summer's ___' (3)*, Fen and his author would have saved their energies. The crossword has to test real culture to have any value. Indeed, that is its point: it must test things which those who attended a red-brick university would not know. An expensive private education has to show benefits in this field, and these crystallise in esoteric literary knowledge.

This apparatus – for the majority of the twentieth century at least – was called Barlett's *Familiar Quotations* (Bartlett 1939). Its 1600 pages render the title little more than a joke, for no one – not even Fen – can actually be familiar with more than a fraction of the material. Its only function can lie in representing a cultural canon which crosswords practise and internalise. The preface totally identifies itself with this cultural mission. The collection is 'not just a scrapbook of belles-lettres, but also a sort of anthropology; a social history; a diary of the race' (Bartlett 1939: vii). (We have got used to the idea that whenever people speak of race they actually mean *class*.)

The high point of this interdependence comes in a scene from a modern German detective story – one which borrows many features of the classic English genre – in which a crossword is constructed in which the clues are capable of both a West and an East German solution. The crossword is therefore re-integrated *as clue and signal of a whole national culture* into the solution of the crime and used to reflect on the methodology of the solver. Within such metacognitive awareness, Ulrich Ritzel's intellectual detective contrasts his intuitive skills with those of an ex-Stasi officer, who sees crosswords merely as an exercise in handwriting. [18] [#N18]

Bartlett's mission statement means that *Familiar Quotations* assumes a role quite different from the apparently similar volumes situated in other cultures. Its German pendant, for instance, Büchmann's *Geflügelte Worte* (first edition 1864), remains not merely far shorter but is tied to a quite different function. In the preface to a recent edition, the editor stresses how Büchmann himself regarded the quotations as the 'quintessence of spirit, wisdom and ethics' and that Büchmann had undertaken his labour of love out of a feeling of 'responsibility for the purity of our language': something Bartlett's anthropological sense excluded on principle.

The editors of Bartlett are well aware of the processes in which – as in a football league – authors move up into and down out of the canon. Hermann Melville, for instance, was left on the substitutes' bench for generations of Bartlett, only to make his first appearance in 1939, at the cost of Axel Oxenstiern. [19] [#N19] Other canonical anthologies are familiar with the promotion and subsequent relegation of literary figures, and perhaps because of these complexities, subsequent dictionaries of quotations have been much more modest in their goals. *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (1960), for instance, despite being edited from one of the pinnacles of the academic establishment, reduced its readers' expectations significantly. This can be seen not simply in the fact that the quotations from antiquity no longer appear in the original language, or in the fact that it is no longer required for a cocktail party to discourse at length on the plot of obscure Meredith novels. [20] [#N20] The *Dictionary* does not go so far as to 'unmask' the ideological functions of its predecessors and the 'games' they legitimated, [21] [#N21] but merely recognises the solving of crossword puzzles as one of its prime purposes. By the time of its publication, however, this shift has been shadowed by the crosswords themselves moving away from the gapped quotation as a form of clueing. Culture has therefore clearly moved, from the alibi function of a philistine ruling class, to a token membership badge of a wider elite. What is known of national culture is no longer the instinctive knowledge which identifies the group, but the acquired knowledge of the rules of the game. Crosswords are therefore highly democratic institutions, which – while they appear not consciously to undermine the values of the society in which they are published, leaving such revolutionary activities to REDs and CHE – open the access ways to that élite. In the cultural arena their clues should be referred to as across and up.

Cryptic and yet subversive

It would seem from what we have so far established that crosswords consist of a mixture of the subversive and the affirmative: the anagram working as a continuous questioning of politically correct values, quotations acting as a forced march through the canon: improve your word-power is mixed with write your prejudices into a square. Not only the envious passengers in economy class regard the crossword as a written examination; the whole of society expects those who cannot legitimate themselves in crosswords to do so in other ways. To the TV-show's question *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* there is a multitude of answers: to *23 Down* there is but one.

We return briefly to the allegedly 'progressive', cryptic clues. So far, we have identified crosswords with a tendency to abbreviated and stereotypical thinking. At the same time, we should not forget that the opposite

view is also possible, for in their cryptic manifestations crosswords are involved in subversive and non-conformist practices. Such a double-think cannot endear the crossword to its opponents. Not only does this essay claim the crossword – in which any sensible person would recognise an advanced form of autopoiesetic self-gratification – is worth studying as a cultural artefact of mass society, like the railway novel or the short story from popular magazines: suddenly it appears to be claiming the crossword as subversive. The solvers, closeted in their room, their weak eyes focused far away from the news pages – those unseen millions who stay quietly at home – a caste which (to vary the eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach*) does not even wish to interpret the world differently, merely to change the spelling – these people are suddenly being presented as activists. This surely goes too far.

We return then to the comparison between the crossword and the aestheticism of the *fin de siècle*. For this parallel alone exposes the deep ambiguities in the position of the apolitical radical. Perhaps we may start from Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*. [22] [#N22] Its eponymous hero recognised the radical nature of his own aesthetic position, when he spoke of the capacity of language in the hands of the aesthete to render individual experience, human passion and sincerely held conviction 'cold, to put them on ice' and thereby to 'write them off' (*erledigen*). Manipulation of language was the last refuge of those who could not otherwise articulate their protest at the state of the world. Language games, whether or not within recognised aesthetic genres, 'write off' reality, transpose the all-too-real into the currency of the trivial, in protest folding away the news behind the crossword, defeating the world in a gesture which marks their own defeat. For Tonio, the solvers are not to be criticised as cowards: rather we should admire the logic with which they transform and relativise the dark sides of their existence. They have no fear even of existence itself: if an inexorable fate places BEING in their hand, they know that they can transform this monstrous impostor into a BINGE. Where the Germans have to reach for *Lebensphilosophie*, the solvers can always find an anagram. [23] [#N23]

These skills in 'writing off' the worst assaults of fate by means of linguistic manipulation apply not merely to the order of things which includes Being, Life and Existence: *a fortiori* they apply to the dispatching of the political dwarfs of the political moment. Nowhere better is this illustrated than in the Guardian clue '*Poetic scene has surprisingly chaste Lord Archer vegetating*' (3,3,8,12) (Balfour 2003: 207f). The clue in fact contains every feature of the story we have outlined above. The 'poetic scene' refers to Rupert Brooke's abode from which the prominent Conservative politician Lord Archer was spending time absent in prison; 'chaste' touched upon his denied relationship with the prostitute, and – as the technical term 'surprisingly' made clear – the whole thing was an anagram on THE OLD VICARAGE GRANTCHESTER, Lord Archer's residence. On this example it is undeniable that clueing represents a kind of political stance, even if it does not usually go so far as to express particular viewpoints. This reticence is not the product of a passing political indifference, or lacking radicalism: instead it belongs with the absolute nihilism of Tonio Kroger. When solvers read all their clues and carry out their implications, their reward may well be more than a dictionary and biro and the world may well be surprised at the changes which they will work and at the power-plays present even in this opponent-less sport. By then, however, these changes will be monitored by sociologists.

Notes

1. Apart from a very few short accounts of the history of crosswords, the literature consists of collections of puzzles and guides to their solving (Augarde 2003, Arnot 1981, Greff 2003, Millington 1974). I wish to acknowledge my debt to Olaf Briese for his pioneering paper 'Der zweidimensionale Mensch. Zum Status von crosswords', read at the Dublin conference on *Netzwerke* in the autumn of 2002 and subsequently published in Jürgen Barkhoff et al., eds, 2004 215–38. ↑ [#N1-ptr1]

2. In recent years *Die Zeit* has established a challenging cryptic crossword. [#N2-ptr1]

3. Pindar (c. 522 – c. 443 BC) was a renowned Ancient Greek lyric poet from Thebes, while Tryphiodorus was a Greek poet and grammarian living in Egypt in the third or fourth century AD. Details in Augarde (1984). [#N3-ptr1]

4. Colin Dexter (1930–2017) published his series of detective novels between 1975 and 1999. They gave rise to the 33-episode television drama series *Inspector Morse* (broadcast 1987–2000), the later episodes of which featured Dexter's characters but in stories written by others. After Morse's fictional death and the real death of the actor John Thaw who played him, there was a spin-off series featuring Morse's sergeant, *Lewis*, now himself promoted to Inspector. And finally, from 2012 onwards there has been a 'prequel' series, *Endeavour*, depicting a young Morse at the start of his police career in the 1960s. [#N4-ptr1]

5. I wish to thank my colleague and friend Stephen Mennell for introducing me to Elias's game theory. Many happy hours were spent discussing it with him and Eric Dunning. While everyone knows *On the Process of Civilization* (2012a [1939]), I wish this essay could do full credit to the ideas in chapter 3 of Elias's *What is Sociology?* (2012b [1970]: 66–98), entitled 'Games Models'. [#N5-ptr1]

6. Setters have formalised, if not legally binding, rules and conventions, which relate above all to the syntax of the clues and which are enforced by the newspapers' crossword sub-editors. [#N6-ptr1]

7. Herbert Gintis's (2000) standard account of Game Theory treats these two monkeys as basic models of the genre. Their problem is how – given their disproportionate skills and opportunities – to get a meal off one rich fruit hanging at the top of a tree. [#N7-ptr1]

8. Another fruitful field for comparison is the computer-generated game. The player has to determine whether the game is played according to a Monkey strategy (the computer recognises the player's strategy and takes appropriate counter-action) or operates within a static logic. Both relationships to the computer/setter are personal, at stake are the quality of the excitement of victory and the level of paranoia towards the machine. [#N8-ptr1]

9. Moira was an embodiment, from ancient Greek mythology, of the fates. The discussion of metatarsal bones was begun in connection with David Beckham in 2002. [#N9-ptr1]

10. John Mortimer (1923–2009) created the character of Horace Rumpole for a BBC television play in 1975, leading both to a television and a book series. [#N10-ptr1]

11. From 1986 to 2004, the *Daily Telegraph* was under the control of the eventually disgraced Canadian businessman Conrad Black (1944–), who also owned the *Jerusalem Post*. [#N11-ptr1]

12. Crosaire was the pseudonym or Derek Crozier, who set *The Irish Times* cryptic crossword from 1943 until his death in 2010. (Since then, his successor has used the witty pseudonym Crosheir.) [#N12-ptr1]

13. Words like SYZYGY may score well in Scrabble, but they are a setter's nightmare, particularly when the rules require a minimum number of confirming overlaps with other words in the puzzle. That crossword solvers and setters also play Scrabble is an illustration of the closeness of the genre to aestheticism. What do lyric poets read? Other poetry. [#N13-ptr1]

14. Sapir and Whorf argued, from about 1925 onwards, for the predetermination of experience through the structures of language (see Whorf: 1956): 'We dissect nature along the lines of our language' was their prime claim, and it was within the parameters of Sapir and Whorf's theory that the Eskimos found themselves surrounded by linguists counting the number of words which they had for snow (I think twenty, though global warming may have struck here too). Sapir and Whorf's 'strong hypothesis' has been subjected to principled criticism in recent years, and it is hardly encouraging that my crossword theories are pushing me towards their unfashionable position. [#N14-ptr1]

15. Jacques Delors was President of the European Commission 1985–95. The headline appeared in the *Sun* on 1 November 1990. Brexit campaigners have been less inventive in their language. [#N15-ptr1]

16. *Paddington Bear* is the well-loved hero of a series of children's books by Michael Bond (1926–2017); he made his first appearance in 1958 at Paddington railway terminus in London. [#N16-ptr1]

17. Edmund Crispin was the pseudonym of Bruce Montgomery (1921–78); Gervase Fen appeared in nine books and some short stories. [#N17-ptr1]

18. Ulrich Ritzel: *Berndorf and his Dog*. e-book: Kindle. Original: *Der Hund des Propheten*. Munich: btb, 2005. [#N18-ptr1]

19. Of course, the 1946 edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (compiled and edited by Sir Paul Harvey) refuses all information on the subject of Oxenstiern. We assume, *post hoc*, however, that, because Sir Paul – for whom Sheridan's Irish nationality is a matter of state secrecy – refuses him an entry, Oxenstiern must have belonged to a minority group and for that reason (with war threatening in 1939) was merely thrown overboard. Wikipedia is more democratic with information on this cultured Swedish gentleman. [#N19-ptr1]

20. George Meredith (1826–1909), English novelist – once famous enough to be repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. [#N20-ptr1]

21. An important strand of sport-sociology suggests the function of sports in hiding the true nature of particular regimes behind the façade of partisan enthusiasm (as in the Berlin Olympics of 1936). On this topic see Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]: 209ff. [#N21-ptr1]

22. This was one of Mann's most enduringly popular texts. First published in 1903 it reflects on the problems of the alienation of the intellectual from 'normal' society. The intellectual's integration into society is central to many of our themes here – indeed the figure of the cultural and intellectual detective is clearly designed to offer a social role to figures who would otherwise be alienated from society (prime example: Agatha Christie's Poirot). [#N22-ptr1]

23. This example happens to be one of the few cases where German solvers could take refuge in anagram. LEBEN leaves them, however, not with BINGE but with NEBEL (mist). Are they once again betrayed by the innate characteristics of their language? None of this should be taken to imply that the Germans or their language lack 'humour'. How could any culture which disposes of 'le sublime Heine' (as Nietzsche called him) ever be accused of that lack? Because of the obduracy of his native language, however, Heine had to work through rhyme rather than anagram: who else would have rhymed 'Hegel' on 'Kegel' (Skittle), in limerick-style. The English ignore, or do not need their philosophers: to make fun of them is left to the Germans. [#N23-ptr1]

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