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The Sociologist as Voyeur

After my first interview, I called John to say I couldn't do it – I couldn't be a sociologist. I felt ashamed, guilty, sleazy and above all, impotent. About 20 minutes into the interview with Rita, the tears had started flowing, first hers then mine, as she told me of her flight to Rome, the first night in thirty years that she had not shared a bed with her husband, the calls with her son demanding to know why she had left him when he needed her. I apologised for intruding and said we should stop, but she insisted on continuing, telling me that it was good to be able to put into words all that she had had to hide from her family during the weekly telephone calls. There was an unspoken agreement that when she and the other domestic workers met up on their Sunday afternoons in a park, they would not bring each other down by talking of their loneliness, how much they missed husbands, their children and their lives back home. She told me she didn't need or want anything more from me, except that I listen to what she could not say to anyone she knew.

John Solomos, my constant mentor, offered reassurance, stressing the importance of listening to those about whom we write no matter how difficult the experience. Years later in the Moroccan desert, I was confronted by an angry man wanting to know why he should talk to me – what good would it bring him, stuck as he was in limbo, trying to return to a country that had deported him. I told him truthfully - 'None. If you speak to me, you will give me a gift I cannot repay'. He demanded I hand over my bag, and having examined the contents took a card and told me to leave. Some hours later, I received an email. He had made his way to the nearest town, and in an internet café had googled me. He had done his research and on the basis of my writings so far, decided that he would meet me after all, because he trusted me with his story. We met in a dusty café, surrounded by other men in a similar situation who took turns to tell me how they had left home, the journeys they had made and their plans, before turning the questions back on me – insisting that I explain why 'Europe' had deported them, didn't want them, refused to allow them to work, to look after their families, 'to live like Europeans'. And again, the question why did I want to talk to them, what was I going to do with the information?

For over 20 years, I have regularly been asked, and asked of myself, 'what is sociology' for? Teaching introductory sociology courses, I have lost count of the number of times I have read that sociology is the study of social facts, social relations, that it is about understanding social phenomena. I accept and am committed to the search for understanding, to the resolution of social problems and to the formulation of public policies that will do more good than harm, and also accept that these are necessary and sufficient reasons for becoming a sociologist.

And yet...in the field, they can feel very abstract. In the field, witnessing the personal challenges, difficulties and experiences of fellow human beings, it is easy to feel like a thief or a voyeur. This is especially so when using qualitative methods, encouraging people to share what are often the intimate details of their lives before thanking them and returning to a desk to write a paper or a book that improves the chances of promotion, but has little chance of making any difference to those without whom said paper would be impossible. And so the question – what is sociology for? – seems a very pertinent one. So too is the question of how to be a sociologist in a way that respects those I work with.

I don't dare to speak for sociology as a discipline – only for myself. And I do sociology because I want to understand – and change – the way things are. Finding myself in Germany in 1992-3 I followed the asylum debate and the attacks on migrant hostels with bewilderment. Returning to Britain to find the same rhetoric but only a

tenth of the asylum seekers, I found myself asking ‘why?’ – why were wealthy, liberal states so hostile to people fleeing war and persecution?

An approach that consistently asks ‘why?’ must challenge the way things are, especially when calling into question norms, roles and practices that seem ‘natural’ or ‘given’ to those involved in them; an approach that uncovers relations of power that are invisible must call into question the operation of power whether at the micro or macro level. For me therefore, the practice of sociology is always and inevitably critical and political. Perhaps this is not true of all sociologists, but I am influenced by two scholars with a profound commitment to social justice, John Solomos and Stan Cohen, whose loss I continue to mourn.

Stan combined an intellectual rigour with serious moral commitment. Having been told on starting my PhD that I would have to choose between academia and activism, Stan showed me that this was not true, that the desire to alleviate or reduce human suffering was a legitimate motivation for becoming a sociologist. Although my PhD was in Political Science, I had the great good fortune to switch supervisor to John Solomos, who was then in Sociology at Southampton. I had been led by my research to the conclusion that it was not possible to have non-racist migration controls. Disturbed by this turn in my research, John provided calm reassurance that this was a tenable position – that radicalism was not incommensurate with academia. Why study social problems unless it is to contribute to their resolution? This does not necessarily mean going on demonstrations or campaigning against government policy, and some of my best friends draw strict boundaries between academic and politic work, but it is possible to combine the two.

Increasingly, I am working with vulnerable populations who have little education and who are sometimes illiterate, but who trust me even when they have no way of understanding what sociology is or what I will do with what they tell me. This creates a moral pressure to develop a way of being a sociologist that allows me to rebalance what often feels like (is?) an exploitative relationship. There are plenty of guidelines, right back to Weber, emphasizing the importance of putting aside personal bias and stepping into the shoes of those being studied, to Bourdieu demanding that the sociologist objectivize herself and acknowledge the extent to which the world we describe is a production of our ‘theoretical gaze’ (1992, 69). But what does all of this mean practically? For me, it means a) using the knowledge and skills that I have to analyse and work with the data I am given, b) following where the data and the analyses lead, c) finding ways to open my analysis to my participants’ critique and d) allowing those I am studying to make demands on me.

Allowing people to get close to me means allowing them to make demands on me and on my time. It means ceding control of the conversation and waiting until the person I am speaking to is ready to tell me what is important to them. I find much of my fieldwork now consists of conversations in which I respond to at least as many questions as I ask – about myself, my migration history, my family and my work, but also about visa regimes and migration destinations, about life in Europe and about whether I can help with letters of invitation, work, accommodation and contacts. And providing accurate information about issues that interest my interlocutors offers a way of recompensing people for the time and stories they share with me. It is not always a comfortable way of working, but the discomfort of this openness and proximity is infinitely preferable to the superficial comfort of adopting the pose and distance of the ‘expert’.

But the acquisition of data (and of funding) creates an obligation. The stories of migrants are vital to an understanding of migration but, contrary to what some seem

to believe, do not speak for themselves. It is not enough to claim that one is allowing the voiceless to speak by presenting chunks of raw data harvested in the field. While people are the experts of their own lives, being a migrant does not mean that one understands migration as a social phenomenon. Understandably, most people are too mired in the quotidian challenges of working, caring for families, living to be able to locate our experiences – migratory or otherwise – within a broader social context. As sociologists, we have the luxury of time to read, to study, to reflect on social phenomenon and probe common sense understandings. It is important not just to engage with people, but also with what they and other scholars tell us, to test our understanding against the understanding of other working in the field. As C Wright Mills (2000) suggest, we need to use our information to produce lucid summaries of what is going on in the world, to connect history and biography, to use our sociological imagination.

Finally, increasingly I try to test out my analyses and conclusions on those I am studying, asking if what I have said makes sense to them, whether I have represented their views or perspectives accurately, and where necessary I defend or amend my conclusions. Again, I don't offer my solution as a model, only an example of how one sociologist has, however, tentatively, tried to resolve the challenges of doing sociology for herself.

Perhaps I would have found better solutions if I had actually studied sociology, but I learned my sociology through teaching it, and for a long time felt uneasy describing myself as a sociologist. My diffidence about describing myself as a sociologist had a lot to do with a lack of training in sociological methodology. While it is important not to become hung up on methodology, I do wish I could at least understand quantitative methods. I have a continuing scepticism towards statisticians whose data seems to hide as much, if not more, than it reveals... and yet numbers wield incredibly seductive power. I wish I could rely more on solid knowledge than informed intuition when evaluating such 'hard' data and so if I was starting out, I would do an MSc in Quantitative Methodology.