

Sociology as a Pandora's Box

by **Helen Trill**, *Doctoral Researcher in the LSE Department of Sociology*

Capturing quite what is so enriching in sociology is difficult. It's the idea soup: the zing, the thrill of fitting things together; the frustration at past theorists when it doesn't; the possibilities of new research paths; the opportunity to pursue your curiosity about the social world. But I knew this as a master's student and then purposely left sociology, albeit for a mere 2 years. The reason I came back? Because sociology ruined me. That rich experience and exposure to a serious craft infiltrated my imagination and left an indelible stain.

I worked a handful of not particularly engrossing jobs in between, but the clincher was digital communications. I was working in a charity that I believed in, doing a job I didn't. I had a stronger curiosity in why it was that my job had come into existence given the current technological and social environment, in the culture of a third sector organisation, in the self-important discourse of "digital age" communications, than I did in metrics, websites and social media management. Do you see the problem? I was committing sociology^[1] but instead of this being a joy it was a hindrance to me actually getting my job done.

But I'd left sociology for a reason: a question of representational politics, in one sense of the story. I was faced with my inability to answer the rebuke against my age (how can you represent the social world when you've spent so little time in it?), my lack of 'world experience' (you've never worked a real job, what do you know about labour?) or the isolation of the ivory tower from the 'real world'. I hit a sociological-existential crisis that I couldn't find a way around. So I left, like Dick Whittington off to seek my fortune in the world, except with rather more to my name than would fit in a handkerchief on a stick (damn you capitalist materialism).



Returning to academia a few years later doesn't mark the resolution of this crisis, but its development into maturity. It marks instead the way that awakening my sociological imagination was akin to opening Pandora's box. All I really learned was that that 'life experience' was a chimera that people will wave at you in your twenties whatever your occupation. I did realise though that if I had a problem with my potential to misrepresent the social world, the answer probably lay in sociology itself. If someone were to suggest (in jest, naturally) that sociology was prone to a kind of belly button contemplation that we'd usually call reflexivity, then it's likely the answer might have turned up among the fluff. In an abuse of the dialectical metaphor, sociology might hold both the problem and its antithesis.

The potential for misrepresentation, to talk over the heads of people who are living the realities we so assiduously study, continues to trouble me. But what I needed in order to represent the social world in my work was dependable, ethical, reflexive, methodologically sound *research*, not some nonsensical experience of the world. The researcher cannot become a single mother, a financier, a street seller in the global south but she can find ways of researching these subjectivities without doing symbolic violence to their realities. This for me is one of the real questions raised by the Alice Goffman furore^[2]. The challenge, the gauntlet, is to produce research that doesn't produce a discomfort over its representational politics.

^[1] I greatly like this idea borrowed from the Sociological Imaginations blog

^[2] And I think that Michaela Benson is quietly and unsensationally on the mark with the **ethics of the case**.

August 11th, 2015 | [Studying Sociology](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺