

## Feeding our sociological imaginations....

Helen Traill, PhD Student, reflects on the annual Sociology retreat at Cumberland Lodge.



Walking in Windsor Great Park (Photo: Paz Concha)

There comes a time at the end of January when the cold persists and London seems grey and dismal; when you can't help but think grey, dismal thoughts. It is a good time to escape London for a weekend, and that's part of what the annual Sociology department retreat to Cumberland Lodge offers. This year, our focus was on *Using Theory in Sociological Research*, as a complement to last year's focus on methods. We were lucky to have a number of distinguished guests, but the value of the weekend goes much further than the experience of meeting with highly esteemed colleagues. Cumberland Lodge itself is very committed to educational work, and to be allowed to use it annually is itself a great boon to the department. But it also provided the most delightful setting—with a grand piano and grander staircases, a lot of antique furniture and tapestries, all in the peaceful setting of Windsor Park.

Friday was a bumper treat with two evening sessions that went on late into the evening. Firstly, Craig Calhoun opened with an amusing and provocative take on the purpose of theory in sociology. This naturally included a tribute to Ulrich Beck, for whom we held a minute's silence on Saturday. Calhoun laid out three aspects of importance in the production of sociological theory. These were as the ability to surprise, to put form to that as yet unsaid; the ability to produce causal coherence, to tell a convincing and empirically viable story; and the ability to create an empirical toolkit. What was noticeable from many participants throughout the weekend was the way we returned to these ideas to draw a singular theme through the talks – allowing subjects as disparate as digital futures and the European central bank to feel thematically related.

We were also fortunate to have Antony Giddens join us, who on a panel with Nigel Dodd and Judy Wacjman, discussed the vagaries of the digital age – from our historically unique position (Giddens) through the ways it affects labour – particularly digital production (Wacjman) to digital currencies (Dodd) and the ways this might be a return to previous models of monetary systems, rather than the single currency system we have now. We thus all went to bed on the Friday with rather swirling heads – wondering if we did indeed lie poised “between Armageddon and immortality” (as Giddens claimed) and wondering what would come tomorrow, if tomorrow came at all.

Thankfully it did, and what Saturday highlighted – beside the variety of work across the department – was a lack of hierarchy. There was a distinct equality of meeting here – with Masters students questioning faculty, and staff and student alike wrangling with sociological theory. We heard from Mona Sloane on the urban design process and Paz Concha on the street food scene. Their work both draws on the urban assemblage as a construct, allowing them space to talk illuminatingly across their different fields. We also heard from Leon Wansleben on the sociology of Central Banks in our first morning session. Despite this diversity of topics, there was a distinct theme of capital in its different forms and it was one we continued in the later sessions.

Late morning, Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra and Mike Savage took us through their respective work on difficulties in financial regulation, and why regulators might be ill equipped, and Bourdieu and Picketty, with particular reflections on how we might be returning to Victorian levels of want.



Photo: Paz Concha

Having spent the morning in deep thought, we had a few afternoon hours to wander the grounds of Windsor Park and wonder at the

contradictions between the wealth of our surroundings and the recurrent ideas of inequality and difference. This certainly was put into stark relief later in the evening by Lisa McKenzie, but first we were lucky to host Nick Crossley from Manchester University talking to us about his work on relational sociology – particularly his work on punk and the networks which allowed it to flourish in London and later Manchester and other cities in the North. A theoretically engaged session, it was extrapolated in clear conversation with his empirical work, recalling Calhoun's interest in producing an empirically viable toolkit – as well as for many, a surprising new approach to sociological theory.

Tara Quinlan followed, whose work on counter-terror was provocative and thorough. Particularly helpfully for those of us just starting PhDs, she outlined her rigorous and punctual process of getting to where she is now. The space the weekend created for all of us for admitting things like trial and error, rather than complete pristine projects for presentation in more formal contexts, enhanced the experience. This is not least because, in this kind of coming together, there is much more room for creating space for dialogue between sociological imaginations.

Consider Lisa McKenzie's contribution – [a documentary made in 1969 and directed by Stephen Frears about the St Ann's district of Nottingham](#), a place where Lisa both lived and researched in her own ethnographic work. In providing us with this provocative visualisation of absolute poverty, we were forced to face more starkly the empirical reality that theorisation abstracts from. The most telling response to the original St Ann's film was from Nick Crossley's son: who's suggestion that the rich just give the poor more money, because they obviously need it more, received a round of applause from the audience.

Our substantive sessions ended on Saturday, but we did spend Sunday talking about sociology – simply from a different tack. How best to establish ourselves as interested parties? How best to use the influx of digital communication to our advantage? A morning discussing social media and sociology – with leadership from Sian Lewin and Tara Quinlan – let us all use our everyday experiences, previous careers and natural curiosity to ask how best we can communicate sociology to the world. We thus ended the weekend on a soft, more reflective note; where we could consider our own contributions to sociological knowledge and the best way of presenting these, and our selves, to the world of social media.

What can't easily be elucidated in a sketch of the weekend like this is the provocative way that sustained engagement with sociology creates engaged conversations and indeed has value beyond sharing ideas around the department and beyond. The intellectual kick from dinner-time chats recalls a more noble idea of what scholarly life looks like. But the context in which this happened couldn't be ignored – we were taken care of all weekend, meals provided, spaces cleaned, coffee and tea on demand. Perhaps this raises provocative questions, but none more so than the way the context of Windsor Park (and Cumberland Lodge has a great many portraits of the royal family) contrasted with discussions of inequality. This gave me, for one, pause for thought.

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