



'Sociologists Talking'

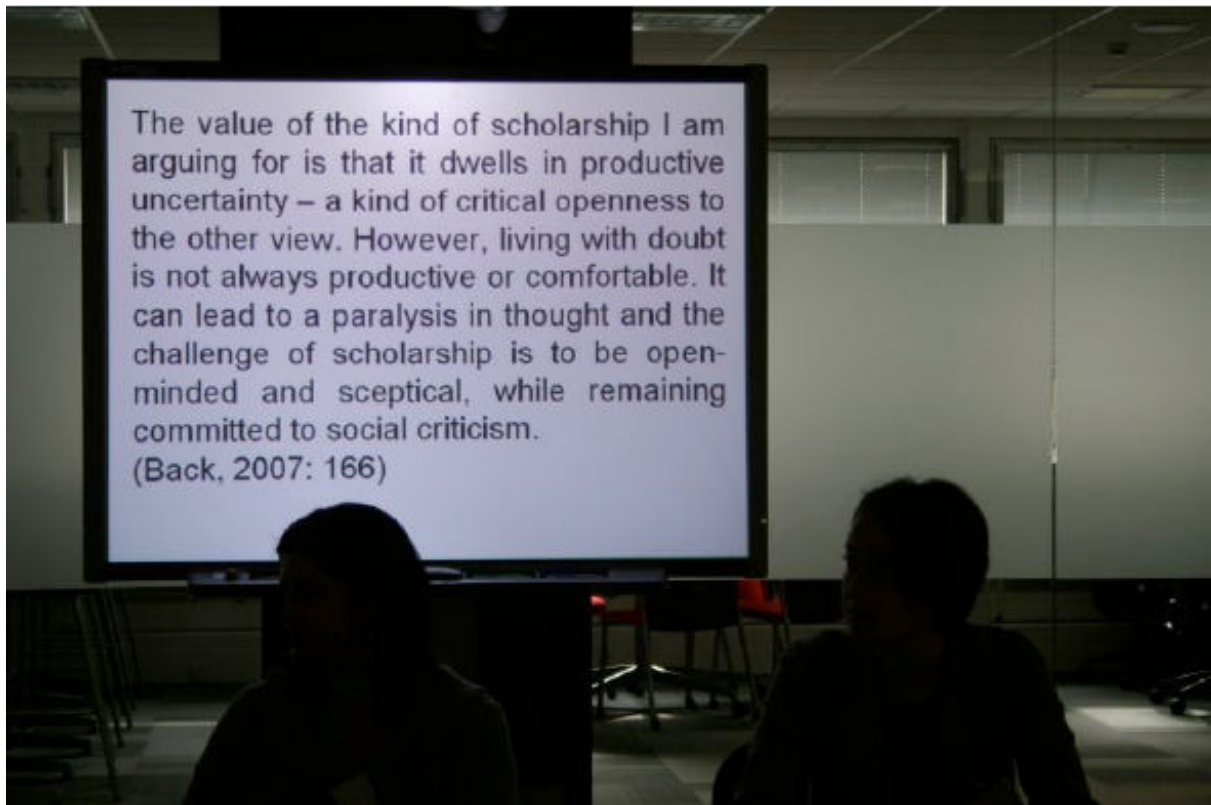
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Introduction

1.1 The alchemy of wi-fi hot spots and the global reach of email make it almost impossible to escape academic responsibilities for longer than the duration of a plane flight. This can bring rewards as well as the exasperation of seemingly endless queries about meetings, essays and deadlines. I checked my mail recently using a hotel server during a visit to the University of Texas at Austin, and found in the inbox a message from my friend Max Farrar. A sociologist working in Leeds, Max specialises in enigmatic email, often very funny and always thought provoking. This message contained no words aside from those entered in the title box. It was puzzling even by Max's high standards. Entitled 'Wise words' the message consisted of a photograph.



1.2 There's something unnerving and uncanny about seeing or hearing the words one labours to write being quoted. I am not sure quite why. Perhaps it is because citations are like the ghost of a previous thought or view. Sometimes they come back to haunt us, you can change your mind but not a citation - it is permanent. More and more, citation is to be the key measure of our intellectual value. Unlike the Research Assessment Exercises of the past, that emphasised quantity, and it needs to be said, quality; the new framework for research excellence seems likely to rely on the frequency of citation as indices of the intellectual 'impact' of our work. It seems clear though that the place of publication, and consequently citation, will be increasingly significant. New kinds of languages of audit are entering academic life, and journals with the highest 'citation index' (i.e. number of cites divided by the total number of articles publish

in the place of publication) like the *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review* are going to be the most prized places of publication.

1.3 Other times, like this one, citations are a reminder of core commitments and robustly held beliefs. Looking at Max's photograph reminded me to that those words were no longer my own, they belonged to whoever finds a use for them. I didn't know it at the time but they also contribute to a larger conversation about what sociology might be useful for today, or what it might become in the future. Here citation is precisely the mechanism through which ideas are situated and dialogues established. As Ben Agger suggests the positive value of citation is in the way it: 'constitutes, argues, grounds, founds, rebuts'.^[1] In his next mail Max explained that he took the photograph at the 2008 BSA conference during a session as he put 'on teaching and learning in an extremely swanky bit of Warwick Uni Library.'^[2] This interactive exhibition called 'Teaching and Learning In and For a Complex World' aimed to open up a dialogue around teaching and sociological scholarship. The BSA session was a preview of the exhibit that was launched on 22nd April, 2008. Created by Cath Lambert and Elisabeth Simbuerger the exhibit emerged from Warwick's innovative Reinvention Centre^[3] for Undergraduate Research that encourages students to become authors, rather than simply consumers of their discipline.

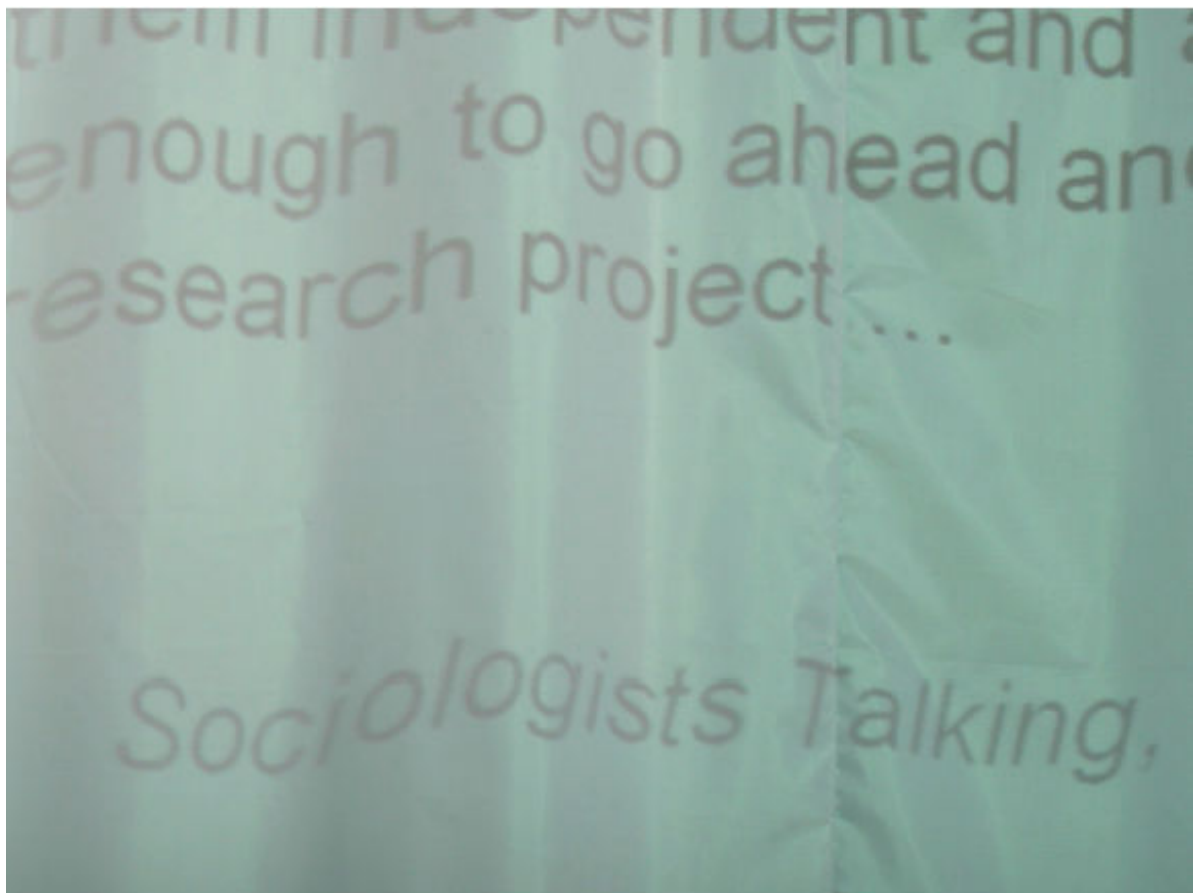
1.4 Citation can also trigger academic vanity. I would be being disingenuous not to admit that there was some of this at play in my desire to find out more. Attending the launch my immediate impression was that The Teaching Grid in Warwick's Central Library certainly lived up to Max's description but its smooth surfaces were adorned with sentiments out of step with the priorities of the 21st Century British university. Along the glass walls leading in to the exhibition a quotation from Joseph Beuys, in bold letters exclaimed: 'To be a teacher is my greatest work of art.' More epigrams were scattered around the exhibit and at the centre a projector showed a sequence of quotations from *The Art of Listening*^[4] including the one in Max's photograph.

1.5 The immediately striking installation comprised three simultaneous presentations: a film entitled *Students at Work* made by students about the realities, expectations and aspirations of student life; a journal dedicated to publishing undergraduate student work called *Reinvention*^[5]; and finally a sound installation called *Sociologists Talking* drawn from interviews conducted by Elisabeth Simbuerger with sociologists about their work and aspirations. Elisabeth's work is already receiving public attention and acclaim, and the installation forms part of a much larger 'sociology of sociologists.' One of her immediate findings is that anxieties about the future makes the field less open to inter-disciplinary experimentation and the discipline is becoming more disciplined.^[6]

1.6 This argument echoes Ben Agger's analysis of the way American sociology responded in the wake of its own crisis of authority in the late 1960s. Concerned with their public image sociologists in America became parochial scientists, obsessed with quantification and concerned with a kind of social physics in which they remained anonymous even in their own writing.^[7] At this time of crisis sociology became more observant of professional rites of passage and concerned with academic boundary maintenance. We are perhaps at a similar pivotal moment as we wait for the results of the 2008 Research Assessment exercise and anticipate a new research excellence framework that will use citations as quantitative measures of value. This is also combined with the likely change of government and a shift to the political right. It might be that we will look back with nostalgia on the period of the last ten years and the qualitative Research Assessment Exercise based – formally at least - on reading.



1.7 *The Sociologist Talking* exhibit offered an opportunity to eaves drop on the conversations that we are all having with our colleagues, friends and even ourselves about the state of the academy. Each set of headphones was connected to a digital voice recorder with twenty minutes of talk looped continuously. Actors reconstructed the voices in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and the interview transcripts were transformed into a script like play or dramatisation. All the 'informants'/ 'characters' are drawn from a single department in University from the Russell Group. Only Elisabeth is identifiable, she plays herself.



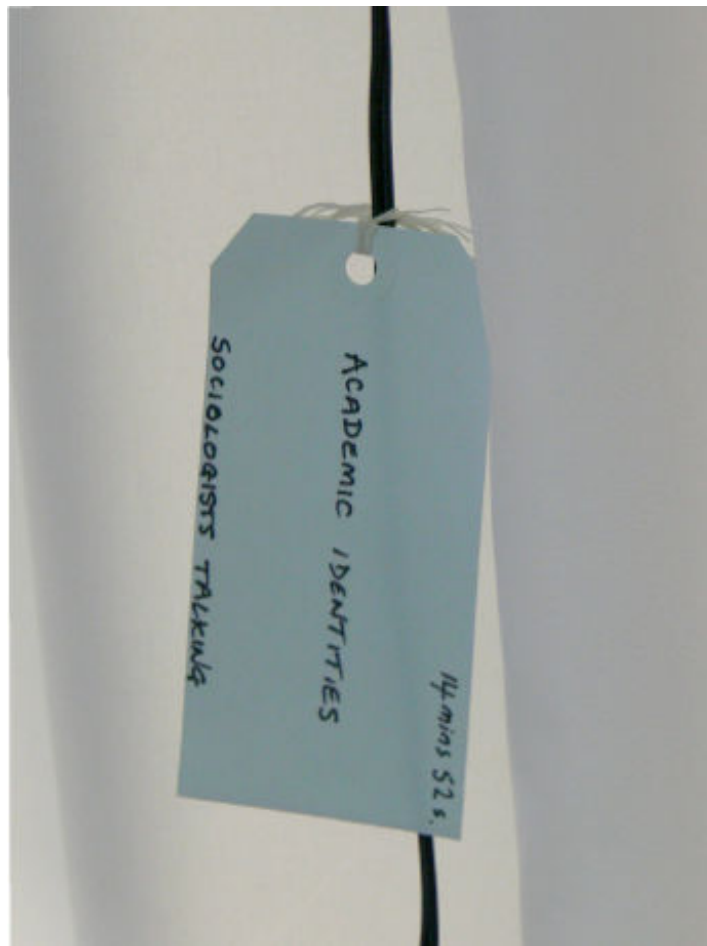
1.8 The recordings are far from flat recital of the data, they animate the secret drama of the encounter and the reconstructions foreground David Silverman's observation that 'no data is untouched by the researcher's human hands.'^[8] Not that these productions are mere artifice. Listening to them acts as a reminder that in order to return to an engagement with The Real one has to abandon a naive realism that automatically claims to correspond to a transparent truth. All interviews are social productions of one sort or another. In the exhibit interview quotations are projected onto white curtains so you see some of their words while you sit on the bench listening to them. Projected onto the fabric's uneven surface the transcribed quotes look like whispers.

1.9 There is something else that is wonderfully suggestive about the care taken to protect the participant's identities. As Charles Lemert has commented: 'To a degree, all professions bluff. None wants the public to know their trade secrets.'^[9] Most are reluctant to speak openly about the ways in which the structure of academic governance and auditing are affecting our teaching and research albeit with some notable exceptions.^[10] In 2006 The British Sociological Association's *Network* magazine invited members to comment on the current Research Assessment Exercise. Having received very little response it chastised those readers who were 'rather reluctant to comment' and ran the provocative headline 'Who's Afraid of the RAE?' on the cover. Timidity and quietism inhibited any discussion perhaps through fear and not wanting to say too much in the run up to the assessment exercise. Lemert concludes that the professionalisation of sociology in America has created a stifling preciousness that limits thinking and imagination: 'for some of us, the pain is chronic [...] We must begin to tell the truth to *and about ourselves*' (emphasis in the original).^[11] The *Sociologist's Talking* exhibit offers an opportunity to begin such a reassessment.



1.10 Each set of headphones has a label attached. One that is immediately striking is entitled 'Academic Identities.' Each voice described what they felt was important about their job. Teaching, for many, was felt to be 'at the centre of academic life'. One sociologist summed this up:

'I invest a lot of time and energy in my teaching and I am just about weekly told by colleagues that I need to disinvest in it, because it's damaging my career, which it is, because I'm not publishing...'^[12]



1.11 Regardless of the priority given to research and publishing most said that teaching gave them a sense of academic purpose. Sociology here is understood for its ability to question that which is assumed and normalised. Teaching offers a kind of intellectual sociability, which in the words of one respondent: *'mitigates against the isolation of, for me, the isolation which is quite inherent to [the] academic work of research.'* The impetus so often is to encourage a search for research funds that necessitate being "bought out of teaching" in order to dedicate time to research and writing. Like most interview data this might be best interpreted as a moral tale, a reflection of the speaker's principles rather than a description of their daily choices and routines. Regardless, such sentiment reveals the first paradox: the sociological ethos may value teaching highly but academic success necessitates a quest to minimise the amount of time spent in the classroom.

1.12 Another set of voice recordings is entitled 'Teaching for Complexity'. This sequence of quotations speaks to the issue of what sociological thinking is needed for in our time. The task they suggest is to engender an 'enthusiasm for learning' but also to encourage students to lead, what one respondent called, 'an examinant life.' Sociology is not simply an invitation to engage life differently, but also an invitation to reside in sociological books and dwell within the abstract landscape of theoretical ideas.

'I mean, how do you learn to live in a text is like saying how do you learn to live in a new city? How do you learn to live there? Well, when you first live there your knowledge of it is very superficial, yeah. There are all sorts of things in it that you don't know and that you are therefore not receptive to or appreciative of.'

1.13 This analogy is developed further. Like an unfamiliar city theoretical ideas can be initially confusing and disorientating. Students need to get lost in order to find something of value and this takes time, effort and commitment. The relationship to theoretical reading is summed up beautifully as 'the difference between getting information out of a text and living in it.' Yet, the pressure placed on students to do paid work throughout their university education undermines such a level of engagement with ideas. Students are not going to find paid employment living in the city of books. Many of our educational ideals were defined in an era before student fees and loans, when many of the Sociological Professoriate – myself included – benefited from free University education. This difference is communicated powerfully in the film *Students at Work* produced as part of the exhibit. In a time when education is a commodity little wonder that students are goal oriented and instrumental. Therein lies another paradox: some of our most dearly held education values are in direct conflict with the economic and practical conditions within which teaching takes place. As a result, the pressure and temptation to simplify the curriculum and make courses less demanding and 'student friendly' militates against the commitment to spend time with difficult ideas.

1.14 The sentiments articulated in this exhibit sum up the fraught nature of the choices and accommodations that we are all faced with. One set out this choice in the following stark terms:

'I think most people at a university like this recognise that if you want to get a career, if you want to advance, if you want promotion, it doesn't matter how good or innovative a teacher

you are, it counts for nothing really. You're much better getting publications, a reputation at conferences, PhD students, than you are getting a reputation as a great teacher of undergraduates, that's my view.'

1.15 The quantitative measurement of academic value and performance are a part of the increased marketization of the sector. The auditing of research undercuts the place of teaching within an academic vocation, fostering instead a disciplined careerism that is both self-involved and by implication ridden with anxiety.

'That quantitative measure has meant in effect that most of us have been pushed into a position of either saying I don't care about a career, I'm really interested in teaching students or you have to say if I care about a career I've got to publish stuff. And to publish in our present conditions of work means neglecting other things, and unfortunately teaching is one of the easiest to neglect, because there aren't, aren't really any direct forms of accountability.'

1.16 The injunction to produce doesn't necessarily result in more communication. Perhaps, the ultimate indictment contained here is that the profusion of sociological literature resulting from making research the ultimate priority finds limited if any readership.

People write books and nobody reads them, thousands of journals that nobody reads. However, students are real people, and they come and they are expecting some degree of quality in what they get at university. And I have to say, many people who are employed as university teachers, in my view, don't give that quality. They regard teaching as something secondary to the great adventure of discovering new knowledge that no one is interested in.

Sociological writing in this characterisation is little more than a language game, prestige without value, knowledge that does little to nourish the imagination or even command attention.

1.17 Such a characterisation is resonant with Lindsay Waters' damning critique of academic publishing in America. ^[13] As an executive editor for Harvard University Press, Waters has monitored shifts in academic life from the inside the belly of the beast. The result he argues is the overproduction of 'unread' and 'unloved' books. He suggests academic books are not written now to be read or loved, rather they are written *to be counted*. The concern to communicate ideas is trumped by the requirement to get jobs, secure tenure and establishing reputations. Academic over production means that reputations are made in fleeting assessments, not judged through careful erudition but based on speed reading or second-hand judgements – 'I have a friend who read that book and they hated it!' Certain judgements made with minimal knowledge.

1.18 Let me sum up, at least three paradoxes can be heard in the voices of these sociologists. Firstly, while teaching is valued as a connection to what Michael Burrowy refers to as our first public (i.e. students), ^[14] academic success necessitates keeping that contact to a minimum. Secondly, our most dearly held education values like the value of 'living in books' and exploring the difficult ideas are proving harder to sustain in the face of the priorities that bear down on learning and teaching. Thirdly, that the injunction to write more professional sociology leads to less sociology actually being read. Are these open secrets? If they are then no wonder that the dominant atmosphere in universities is timidity and quietism. Perhaps we can't quite believe, or accept, what we have become. Yet, this might be just the beginning.

1.19 The introduction of the bibliometrics and quantitative measure of intellectual value, largely through citation, within the new Research Excellence Framework will add new dimensions to these challenges. What will matter it seems, above all else, is where one publishes. Books in the bibliometric system may count for less than articles and journals with the highest impact factors (i.e. those which have articles with the largest levels of citation) will be the most prized. Journal's are already more and more concerned about simplifying titles so as to enable them to be picked up by search engines like *google*. The emphasis placed on citations with put a new premium on catching names and dropping them. Perhaps, it will lead to reciprocally referencing and academic gaming with cartels entering into mutual appreciation pacts. In such a system citation – even multiple and sequential references – in an innovative multi-media installation will count for absolutely nothing!

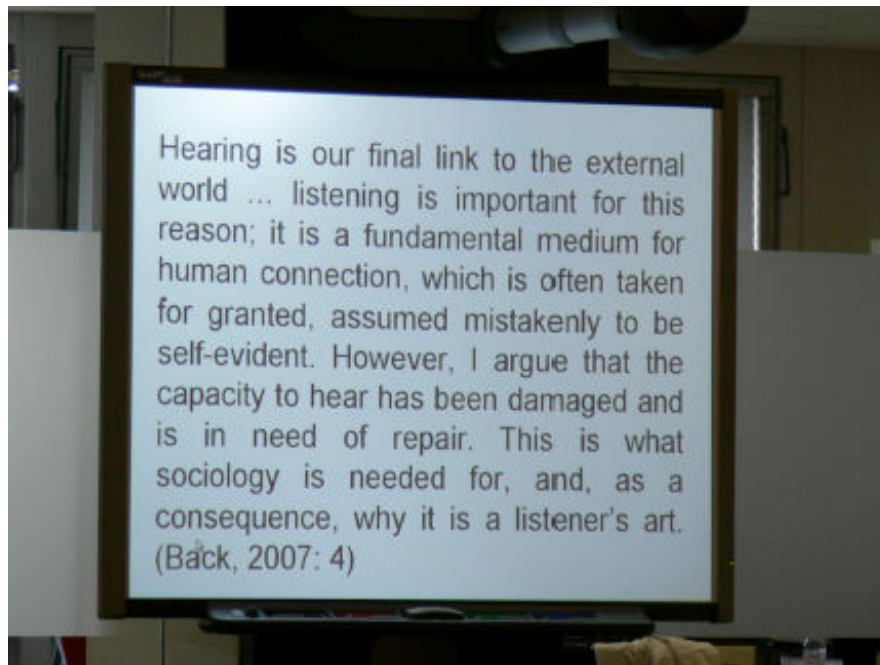
1.20 Added to this is a wider sense that academic sociology has been out manoeuvred by freelance fact-makers in policy think tanks and corporate research. Mike Savage and Roger Burrows have argued that empirical sociology is overshadowed by the capacity of industry and commerce to know patterns of behaviour and taste in more sophisticated ways than sociologists. They cite the example of the capacity of Amazon.com to almost automatically anticipate what we like and want to buy next. ^[15] There is much of merit in this diagnosis but it might be that sociologists are suffering from 'data envy.' Savage and Burrows are right to suggest that sociology is better placed to focus on it's ability to describe that which is not paid attention: 'through a radical mixture of methods coupled with renewed critical reflection.' ^[16] The accounts of the social life produced in the data machines of 'knowing capitalism' are not concerned with thick descriptions or sustained critical attention. ^[17] I remember being in a 'data analysis session' with a group of commercial qualitative researchers and suddenly the discussion – which I felt was just getting going - was called to a sudden halt. The corporate ethnographer announced: 'I've got enough for a powerpoint presentation!' It struck me as very telling. The threshold of 'enough knowledge' in these worlds is passed when they can predict your next Amazon purchase, or have enough ideas to furnish a powerpoint presentation. Following Savage and Burrows I think we have to be more strident about the value of sociological attentiveness, a compound of dialogue and critique that is the hallmark of sociological imagination.

1.21 I am not suggesting that we should delude ourselves with the fantasy that our obscure academic preoccupations deliver social change. Recently, I spent the morning at a local south London further education college. The college provides a place of refuge and hope for what used to be called 'non-traditional students'. It is not an easy educational environment to work in and opportunity and alternative futures are forged here often amidst social damage and self-destruction. I do this every year. The students, who are on a youth access to higher education programme, prepare a set of questions before hand. The questions range from big ones about world politics to the sociological minutiae of a specific theory on the syllabus. Each student takes responsibility for asking one question. I get handed the list of questions just before we start. We talk sometimes for two hours without a break. The sessions are always extraordinary: I learn something from them and I hope that they in turn learn something. The first question this year was: 'can sociology change society?' No, society isn't changed by sociology but perhaps we are. I tried to offer them some examples where social research has influenced society positively but also examples where sociology has acted as racism's accomplice. We are changed by 'living in books' and by entering into such conversations and thinking together but also by opening out to the social world and having our understandings challenged as a result. This is not the arrogant certainty that has the last word, or the capacity to translate or transpose the world through sociological revelation or that privileges sociological thought as the key to unlock common sense. It is close to what philosopher Romand Coles calls a dialogical ethics, or the give and take of a receptive generosity that both hears and speaks. [18]

1.22 By contrast I think the academic priorities, defined through the systems of auditing and measuring value and excellence, have led to an injunction to be selfish, self-serving and ultimately mean, be it with our time, or in relation to others. This is not limited to Britain or the United States. *Forskerforum*, the Norwegian magazine for University teachers, published an article recently entitled 'Professor Before 40.' The article offered a series of profiles as examples of fast track academic success. One of the young professors offered twelve tips. Amongst the first priorities was 'think publishing' followed by the suggestion to limit lecturing and have fixed tutorial times to restrict contact with students. Controversially, he also suggested that 'children take time,' so ambitious academicians should wait until they have secured a chair before they have them. The lesson ended with the grim conclusion: 'If you want to make it, you have to be a bit of an egoist.' [19] This model of success is tacit within the modern university system and perhaps the only thing that is surprising here is in the young professor's brazenness.

1.23 To be successful in these terms academics have to be entrepreneurs that network with others and raise research funds in order to inaugurate their own institutions. Learning the art of catching names and dropping them is key in establishing quantitatively defined forms of repute that are accrued through citation. This involves publishing the right kinds of articles – often agenda setting papers signalling a new 'turn' or 'shift' – in the high prestige journals with the largest impact. Success defined in these terms will engender a feeling of resignations amongst some, perhaps leading to the impulse to giving up and getting out. In truth there is nothing necessarily new in this model but the move towards metrics and quantification will make it bite in ways that we are only just beginning to imagine.

1.24 It is perhaps time to tell the truth about this open secret. Also, it may be time to re-think how to situate our ourselves and our commitments in relation to, not only what one is against, but also what vision of sociology one might want to argue for. It is not a matter, to my mind, of answering disciplined instrumentalism with hyperpolitical posturing that dwells in the delusion that we transform the world simply by making pronouncements about it. It might be that the value of what we do is found in the commitment to thinking, education and understanding. In fact I think this is what the sociologists in this exhibit are talking about. Guided by ambition and a confidence that may have something to say about our current condition, this involves shaping the discipline, developing collaborations, and yes, raising income and resources to fund projects we believe in. A commitment to dialogue is central here to – not least with our students – if we are to seek and find new audiences and publics for sociological ideas. We have no choice but to play the game and establish standing that can be quantitatively recognised. However, this is a dead game without retaining a commitment to communicate to a wider range of publics comprised not only of professional sociologists but also our students – inside and outside universities - and people searching for alternative ways to think the issues of the day. This wonderful exhibit - all too briefly available – offered an opportunity to listen to sociologists talking and allowed us to begin to tell the truth *to* and *about* ourselves.



Notes

¹ Ben Agger *Public Sociology: From Sociological Facts to Literary Acts* (Lanham, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000), p. 39

² The Teaching Grid - <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/teachinggrid/>

³The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research is a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based between the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick and the School for the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University, both in the UK . Further information on the Reinvention Centre is available at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention/>

⁴Les Back *The Art of Listening* (Oxford: Berg, 2007)

⁵Reinvention: a Journal for Undergraduate Research and the url is <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinventionjournal>

⁶See 'Sociologists failing to practise what they preach, say report', *Times Higher Education*, 3rd April, 2008 p. 4-5.

⁷Agger Op.cit.

⁸David Silverman *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Qualitative Method* (London: Sage, 2007) p. 55

⁹Charles Lemert 'The Necessary Truth-Telling of a Public Sociology' in Ben Agger *Public Sociology* p. xiii

¹⁰See Mary Evans *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities* (London: Continuum, 2004)

¹¹Lemert Ibid. p. xv

¹²Thanks to Cath Lambert for providing and allowing me to quote the installation's text/script.

¹³Lindsay Waters *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship* (Chicago: Prickly paradigm Press, 2004).

¹⁴Michael Burawoy 'For Public Sociology,' *American Sociological Review*, 20(2005) p.9.

¹⁵Mike Savage and Roger Burrows 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical sociology', *Sociology*, 41, 5,(2007) p. 891.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 896

¹⁷Nigel Thrift *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2004)

¹⁸ Romand Coles *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁹Ida Kvittingen 'Professor før 40', *Forskerforum*, 4 (2008) p. 14 Thanks to Stephen Dobson for translation.