**SKETCHES FROM**

**A SOCIOLOGIST’S CAREER**

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PREFACE

This is a volume I felt compelled to write and one that sets a personal narrative in a sociological context. It stands as an auto-ethnography of sorts, tracing in roughly chronological order the unfolding of my own story but setting it in its social and cultural context and analysing it from my perspective as a sociologist. The comfort of fit for a sociologist in academia has altered considerably since I began my university career in the 1970s, and these shifts, growing ever more seismic at the time of writing, are charted and their genesis traced to broader societal and cultural change. The result is a winding path to-and-fro between macro- and micro-phenomena. More than this, causal influences from the social through the psychological to the biological, and *vice versa*, are suggested. After all, we humans are an admix of many types of causation, and we act on our societies even as they act, often with what seems like irresistible force, on us. Unsurprisingly perhaps, I draw frequently but lightly on sociological theory, eschewing the normal adornments of scholarship like footnotes and references in favour of textual fluency and accessibility. For those so inclined, the brief introduction sets the scene theoretically.

I should add that my family, Annette Scambler and my quartet of daughters, Nikki, Sasha, Rebecca and Miranda, plus their partners and half a dozen grandchildren, are something of a cast of extras. This is not to underestimate their significance but rather to respect their rights to confidentiality. It is with love that this offering is dedicated to them. I should add that to protect confidentiality I have occasionally changed names and details of events, though never to alter their nature or impact.

INTRODUCTION

What follows is loosely set within a theoretical framework with which some not versed in sociology and allied social sciences will be unfamiliar. In this brief Introduction this framework is outlined, as are two methodological approaches of relevance. The framework is derived from Roy Bhaskar‘s critical realism, and the methods are autoethnography and analytic induction. Accessibility as a compliment to brevity is key.

Western philosophy and the concepts and theories of science and social science it has spawned, Bhaskar argues, suffer from a common defect. Any sense of what exists has been subsumed by questions about what we do or can know about what exists. The study of what exists, ‘ontology’ as the philosophers call it, has been buried under the weight of the study of what we know, or ‘epistemology’. It is helpful to distinguish between *experience* and *events* on the one hand, and those *real forces or mechanisms* that deliver them on the other. In the chapters that follow much will necessarily be written out of my personal experience of events, but intermittent reference will also be made, courtesy of my own and others’ sociological theories and investigations, to the ‘real forces or mechanisms’ that contributed causally to my life-story. It is of course easier to think in terms of Newton’s law of gravity as a real force or mechanism that impacts on all our lives than it is to come up with social equivalents; but I hope to show that we are all at least in part the outcome of real biological, psychological *and social* forces. We are partial products of our genes, our early socialisation, our personalities, and so on, but also of longstanding social structures or relations like class, gender and race. Important too is the fact that social structures can over time feed back into psychological and biological aspects of who we are. Certainly, a good part of who I now am, and my career too, are down to social forces.

Marx is routinely cited for a statement that elaborates on the relationship between the social structures and agency, agency referring here to the capacity we humans have for exercising free will: ‘men make their own history, but … not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.’ Bhaskar wanted to delve deeper into this insight. Societies, he contended, are open to change and people have the critical capacity and creativity, the potential, to shape structures; but they are of course also shaped by structures. So how do social structures shape us? The difficulty here is that events as we experience them are, to resort to a semi-technical term, ‘unsynchronised’ with the real forces or mechanisms that govern them. They cannot be simply ‘read off’ from our experience of events. This is because they only show themselves in *open systems*, that is, in circumstances where innumerable forces and mechanisms are simultaneously active. For example, gender relations might be skewed or compromised by those of race in one context but the other way round in another. This does not render the sociological investigation of the impact of assorted social structures or relations on who we are and what think and do hopeless, just challenging!

Bhaskar, like Marx, was concerned with changing society for the better. The point is to change the world, not merely to interpret it. Social structures and relations that enhance human freedom and dignity need to be reinforced, those that inhibit or constrain them contested and minimised. This is no easy task. After all, to be free is: (i) to know, (ii) to possess the opportunity, and (iii) to be disposed to act in, or towards, one’s real interests. The obstacles to the search for and pursuit of individual and collective freedom and dignity remain immense and a central theme through this text will be just how they have grown in salience between my first university appointment in 1972 and the emergence and consolidation of what I will follow convention and call financialised or *rentier capitalism* in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

There is one further aspect to critical realism to add at this point. It appeared in Bhaskar’s later work and hinges on the idea of *absence*. I think it’s important and often neglected. It takes us back to the idea of real forces or mechanisms and their causal inputs into the experience we have of events. Absence can be contrasted to presence; or, expressed slightly differently, non-being to being. We naturally tend to focus on presence and being. *But,* Bhaskar submits, this is a mistake. Once we recognise that – and I love Bhaskar’s way of expressing this – being is just a ripple on the surface of the ocean of non-being, we can appreciate and get to grips with the possibility of alternate ‘possible futures’. *What is need not be*. In the spirit of Marx and Bhaskar, this might be a suitable slogan for my text.

There are several critical realist themes woven into the chapters that it is worth highlighting at the outset. First comes the ongoing causal interplay of structure, culture and agency over my lifecourse in general, and my career in particular. My persona is part issue of such forces. The second concerns reflexivity and what Margaret Archer calls the ‘internal conversations we have as we live through and engage with that selection of events of which we are part.’ The third embraces what are sometimes called ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ causality (ie from the biological via the psychological to the social, and from the social via the psychological to the biological, respectively). Fourth is the unanticipated and often surprising intrusions into life and decision-making of contingency and chance. And finally, there are recurring references to the potentials for societal transformation and human flourishing, for doing and living better, both collectively and individually.

If critical realism provides a theoretical framework, then autoethnography and analytic induction can be offered as prime methods or approaches. Autoethnography can assume different forms, but in general it refers to a scholar or researcher writing about a phenomenon or topic of overriding personal relevance and interest and situating their experience within a broader social and cultural context. This can involve checking archival records and interviewing select others as well as intensive self-reflection. The act of writing can itself generate what have been called ‘self-cultural understandings’. It goes without saying, or should do, that autoethnography can degenerate into a narcissistic preoccupation with oneself, but it’s down to me to avoid this.

Analytic induction has been variously interpreted and deployed. I take it here to refer to a distinctive, qualitative rather than quantitative, way of exploring data that in this case comprise my life and career *with a view to developing genuinely sociological explanations that best* *capture its whys and wherefores*. Fortunately, in the present case there exist published studies that permit a degree of generalisation to the circumstances and lives of others inside and outside of universities.

In a nutshell, this is a text which is both a personal account of seventy plus years, featuring more than half a century in an ivory tower with walls of relentlessly increasing porousness, and a sociologist’s informed analysis - drawing on critical realist thinking, autoethnography and analytic induction - of why as well as how all this has its causal genesis in ‘changing times’. The sociologist Max Weber wrote of ideal types. He had in mind specifying the core or essential features of any social phenomenon to be investigated, whilst admitting that there is likely to be considerable empirical variation. In the sketches that follow we will witness the displacement of one ideal type of the university employee by another quite different one. I lived through this transition. The volume concludes with a sustained account of the challenging role of the sociologist in the ‘fractured society’ of twenty-first century Britain.

ONE: ORIGINS

We are none of us born into circumstances we have chosen. Instead, we enter a readymade society and culture that fashions us before we have had any opportunity to react, let alone to leave our mark. So it was that I arrived in Finchley in North London on 8th October 1948, the first, and as it happened the last, child of Ernest and Margaret Scambler. As a postwar baby, part of the babyboomer generation, my timing may have been propitious; but for my parents this was a period of turmoil and trauma. Their origins and the paths they only too often felt compelled to tread helped define my noviciate self and so need to be explored in some detail at the outset.

My father‘s origins are more obscure and enigmatic so it makes sense to focus first on these. He was christened Ernest William George on being born on 24 August 1911, but none of these old family names appealed to him and very early on he somehow managed to substitute ‘Ron’: I have a letter that his father wrote to him whilst he was away preparing for active service in the first world war and it is addressed to ‘little Ronnie’. So Ron is the name he always answered to and the one I shall use here. His parents were Ernest Clement William, born in 1885, and Edith Mary, born in 1884. They married in 1910, aged 25 and 26 respectively. Dig a little deeper and the biography of Ron’s father assumes a measure of ambiguity. I am indebted for this point to an historian at Edge Hill College whose signature I have never been able to decipher but who happened to be doing a Ph.D on the Scamblers. It transpires that Ron’s biological father was Alfred Wilkinson, a solicitor’s clerk from Hornsey, who promptly slipped beyond trace, either to the grave or to some faraway place. He was never talked about within the Scambler family, and my father had no insight into what happened to him. Anyway, before the dust had settled, Alfred’s wife Elizabeth, described as a widow and then aged 27, married again, this time to George Samuel Scambler, a bachelor aged 34. My father had a vague notion that George was a seaman, but it turns out his travels, although extensive, were more local as he was a bus conductor in Hackney. To complete this section of the jigsaw, Elizabeth’s sister Mary had earlier, in 1878, married George’s brother, Thomas, a draper. One obvious result of all this is that my family tree is drastically foreshortened, a matter of little importance to me, though perhaps marginally more concerning for my father whom I was able to update before he died; but it was doubtless a source of considerable shame for his Victorian-born parents who remained tight lipped to the end. Some stigmas fade even as others replace them, though, as we shall see, many Victorian norms of shame and blame have been resurrected of late.

Ron’s father’s job is recorded as shopkeeper on his marriage certificate, though he was later described as a commercial traveller. His mother’s deceased father is classed as a labourer. They lived in Highgate in London and had two sons: Ron and, nine years later, Ken. Ernest remained in employment throughout the hard times of the 1920s and ‘30s. Ron, who left school at 14 to help with the family income, recalled his mother saving leftover scraps from their meals to pass on to calling tradesmen. Ernest was quiet to the point of being taciturn, something of a family trait, but I remember him as a considerate and kindly man. Edith, by contrast, had a matriarchal predisposition to impose her opinions and herself. My mother felt under surveillance whenever in her company and mildly sarcastic or cutting rebukes for this and that were commonplace (‘nobody was good enough for her boys’). ‘Nana’ would later check behind my ears during our visits to make sure I’d washed properly; and while my mother squirmed Ron would look away, though we’d sometimes hear a ‘now that’s not fair Edie’ from Ernest. When they retired Ernest and Edith sold their house at 7 Raydean Road, Barnet (for £2,668), and moved in 1954 to a bungalow in East Preston on the Sussex coast (incidentally, when Ernest, following Edith, died in 1963 their bungalow was sold for £5,150).

In sum, my heritage on my father’s side reveals a degree of upward social mobility on his parents’ part, that is, a shift over a generation from manual working-class to non-manual or middle-class employment, culminating in stability, owner occupation and, as we shall see, a more solid measure of social and even cultural capital than might be expected.

My mother’s background was of a different order. Margaret’s paternal grandfather, Joshua William Nichols, an entrepreneur of some note, was a successful builder and eventual owner of a very large house, School House in East Acton. Margaret’s father, Arthur, was one of fifteen born to Joshua’s doubtless weary wife, though predictably not all survived infancy. Arthur was born in 1881. Amongst Margaret’s earliest recollections was of him being invalided out towards the end of WW1. He had been riding his horse bareback and was thrown, damaging his spine. Several months in hospital were followed by a period of convalescence with two middle-aged spinster sisters in the Surrey village of Gomshall. Margaret remembered being taken with her younger sister Jean on visits by Arthur’s wife Caroline. Caroline Elizabeth Carle, born in 1879, was two years older than Arthur. They had married in 1909, Arthur aged 30 and Caroline 28. The occupation of Caroline’s father, by this time deceased, is listed as licensed victualler. So on my mother’s side a builder’s son married a publican’s daughter. My mother was born in 1913, followed two years later by her sister Jean. When Arthur had recovered sufficiently from his injured back to return to work it was to Regents Street in London as a wool merchant; and here, as far as I can ascertain, he remained until retirement. Caroline, like my paternal grandmother, was constrained to remain a ‘home worker’; it was considered suspect, indeed socially deviant, if a wife took paid work outside the home, the presumption being that the male breadwinner’s earning potential was too low to support his family. When WW2 broke out in September of 1939 Arthur was nearing sixty and, like my paternal grandfather, he was pressed into service as an air-raid warden, patrolling the London streets in shifts to make sure the blackout was effective. On reaching retirement, Arthur and Caroline preceded Ron’s parents in purchasing a bungalow on the West Sussex coast, this time in the village of Rustington. It was doubtless not irrelevant that both sets had opted for to move closer to Ron and Margaret. So both my sets of grandparents ended up around ten miles from us and we visited regularly. Old photographs portray Arthur as invariably smart, even dapper, and in personality he was the antithesis of Ernest Scambler. He was apparently a strong Christian, though it didn’t show, and he was an extrovert and fun. Caroline had according to my mother been the family disciplinarian, though she had mellowed by the time I got to know her. Caroline was the only one of my grandparents to survive the 1960s, eventually dying at the age of 97 in 1976.

Ron and Margaret met a local tennis club in North London, which is suggestive of a degree of middle-class wellbeing They were to have what my mother afterwards called a long engagement prior to marrying in Barnet in 1940. Margaret had attended various schools as the Nichols moved homes. She ended up at Barnet Grammar School, eventually leaving at the age of 17. She had wanted to be a hairdresser, but this ‘trade’ was deemed unacceptable by Arthur and Caroline, so she attended Pitman’s College in Southampton Row instead. Like so many middle-class women, she trained and qualified in ‘shorthand, booking, typing and commercial correspondence’. Work was not easy to come by and sometimes intermittent, but she remained for the most part in secretarial employment.

Ron too found work initially hard to come by. The minimum school leaving age had gone up from 12 to 14 in 1918, and Ron left school at 14 without qualifications, so he was not well placed in what remained an inauspicious social climate. His first teenage job was delivering cricket bats on his bike. By the time of his marriage, however, he had settled into what seemed a secure enough job aa a shipping clerk (the job recorded on his marriage certificate). His employers were Brown, Jenkinson & Co., a firm of ship, freight and insurance brokers. He was initially tied to mundane paperwork, but over time more responsibilities were put experimentally his way, culminating in a six-month transfer to Hamburg. Here he specialised in German shipping and was assiduous in learning the language (he was still able to speak German with fluency decades later). By the time he’d arrived in Hamburg Hitler had been democratically elected to power by voters tired of economic crises and hyperinflation. Although insulated from many of the day-to-day effects of National Socialist policies, and an increasingly penetrative and antisemitic state surveillance regime, he became quickly aware of unease and latent threat. On one occasion he began a conversation about the changing political scene with a German business colleague and was immediately hushed and ushered away from the ears of potential informants. It was a symbolic moment.

War broke out in September of 1939, at least as far as the UK was concerned. Ron left Brown, Jenkinson & Co to volunteer for the armed services. His spectacles proved a hindrance (no contact lenses then). He opted for the Navy and after training as a sub-Lieutenant he was promoted to Lieutenant in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. He was to serve in contraband control in Trinidad, where his task was to check foreign shipping for the smuggling of guns and means and sustenance for German communities in Central and South America. Photographs from this period suggest a sub-tropical paradise, but Margaret was later to say that this experience changed Ron. This may be down to the fact that he contracted malaria, which sent him intermittently to bed with a fever in subsequent years, or maybe it was merely a consequence of what was in many respects an exciting time-out. He and his fellow officers had servants to attend to their needs and when off-duty explored, played makeshift games of soccer and cricket, dived and swam naked in vivid blue-green polls. The contrast with a grim post-war Britain of job and money shortages and rationing was to be acute.

Like many couples, Ron and Margaret missed each other during these disorientating long-term absences. Having married just after the announcement of war, their intention was to start a family in Falmouth where they had briefly rented accommodation. But the anticipated prompt conclusion to the war failed to materialise (it took six long years). It was Margaret’s lot to wait and hope, collecting bits and pieces of furniture that would one day make up a family home. Then, in 1943, a naval clerical officer came across Ron’s papers and made a note that this Lieutenant in contraband control possessed expert knowledge of German shipping and spoke the language fluently. The result was a reposting to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil where he was to present as a non-German speaking British civilian and to mingle *incognito* with the sizeable German population. He was in effect a spy, and his adventures took him to other South American cities. He later told me of one perilous flight low across the Andes, travelling with a suitcase containing his naval uniform. While this entailed a risk of revealing his ‘false’ identity as a civilian if he *was* exposed, his status as a naval officer might afford him some protection. In the event he remained undiscovered.

Yet another assignment followed when in 1943-44 he was recalled to London to work for the Intelligence Division of the Admiralty. Deep in an underground bunker he was one of two officers under the command of an Admiral charged to track the movements of German ships and shipping across the world’s oceans. His first-hand knowledge of German shipping from his days at Brown, Jenkinson & Co was a key resource. His work here and previously in the Caribbean was covered by the ‘official secrets’ legislation and it was only many years afterwards that he felt able to share these details.

I am recounting these episodes because I believe they have a bearing on my father’s mindset when the war ended, not least because they varied so markedly in their novelty, pace and excitement from what was to come. When the war eventually ended in 1945 Ron returned to the more prosaic world of Brown, Jenkinson & Co. This was the beginning of Attlee’s would-be socialist government, which between 1945 and 1951 laid the foundations for Britain’s welfare state. Churchill may have described Attlee as a modest little man with a lot to be modest about; but he eclipsed Churchill by a landslide in the aftermath of war. By 1945, however, German shipping had been decimated. The sole task remaining was to tie up loose ends, and it was for this purpose that Ron was once again sent to the firm’s Hamburg office. Margaret was once more abandoned in North London (she had returned to the parental home from Falmouth during the war). While before the outbreak of war Ron had worked his way up from junior clerk to the promise of a future partnership in the company, now he was unemployed, with credible work experience but still no formal qualifications or credentials; and there were tens of thousands of others looking for a wage. In the absence of opportunities in shipping or allied industries he turned to teaching. There was a teacher shortage and he applied for a place on an Emergency Scheme for the Training of Teachers initiated by the Ministry of Education. Much of 1947-48 was spent at Trent Park Training College in Barnet, from which he emerged with some credit. He took options in German and Physical Education (he had been a keen and talented sportsman before the war); it was the latter that he chose to specialise in and he went on to gain qualifications in a spell at Loughborough College, enabling him to teach not only gymnastics, tennis, swimming and life-saving, but also to referee amateur soccer and boxing. It seems that at least to this point his old energy had not left him.

Jobs were scarce even with the excellent references he had. He and Margaret initially looked to return to the Falmouth area, but without success. It was largely chance that saw a move away from North London to Worthing on the south coast. Maybe my imminent arrival was factored in. In any event Ron turned down the opportunity to teach German at Worthing High School for Boys, the local grammar school, and instead took a job, primarily as a teacher of Physical Education, at St Andrew’s School, a secondary modern. I was in my infancy when, in 1949-50, a cottage belonging to one of Margaret’s aunts, a small, terraced property In Seldon Lane, East Worthing, was accepted on rental, leaving Ron a short cycle ride to St Andrew’s. At the same time our names were entered on the local council housing list, and it proved a relatively short wait before we were able to move into 10 Colebrook Close, still in East Worthing. This is where my personal memories kick in with

I have sketched the backgrounds and mixed and changing circumstances of my parents’ origins and coming together because in important senses I was the product of them. If Ron’s and Margaret’s family histories differed, with the former materially and socially more stable and the latter having to overcome more obstacles, the years after the second world war demanded a new settlement for families as well as for society a whole. Our neophyte nuclear family unit had been detached from my parents’ earlier plans and aspirations. Gone were the prospects of promotion and a good salary with Brown, Jenkinson & Co; sabotaged too was a first-choice life in the picturesque village of Falmouth. Instead, we *found ourselves* on a safe if parsimonious war-trained teacher’s income, which my father supplemented in the summer holidays by working in a local nursery at the foot of the South Downs. Like both my grandmothers, it was taken as given that Margaret’s job was to do unpaid work in the home rather than paid work outside it. Money was often tight and I recall more than once hiding under the kitchen table with my mother when we were short and the rent man called. Ron and Margaret said very little, but I was to overhear occasional comments to the effect that they felt like fish out of water amongst the council houses of Colebrook Close. In truth, there was a real mix of working-class and middle-class tenants. I loved it, and here my story proper commences.

Our family was resolutely middle class in outlook; as Pierre Bourdieu would express it, my parents possessed a discernible *class habitus*. I was never permitted to wear jeans, the uniform of manual workers, and I cannot remember off-hand a single occasion when an adult neighbour entered our household in the decade or so that we were at Colebrook Close, although relations with them were never awkward or soured to my knowledge. But the friends I acquired were a heterogeneous and friendly bunch. My closest friend, whom I shall call Sean, was one of three children whose father was a freelance double bass player and whose mother a nurse who later became Matron of Worthing Hospital. It was to their new television set that I repaired for a pre-arranged set of programmes weekly. Otherwise, we were restricted to the radio. I still recall the episode of *The Archers* which climaxed with the death of Grace Archer in a fire (though I didn’t know then that the actress playing Grace was written out of the script because she was attempting to unionise her colleagues). It was the mid-50s before our own twelve-inch screen in the top left-hand corner of its cumbersomely large - for it was home to our radio too - mahogany casing was coaxed into life by Rob Ellmore, the woodwork master at St Andrew’s and an amateur electrician (not that the vertical hold was ever truly reliable). We were to have no telephone at Colebrook Close, and our rooms were heated, if that’s not putting it too strongly, by a coal fire in the sitting room, a couple of small portable electric fires and a moveable and smelly paraffin heater in the dining room or kitchen. Rather than rely on a succession of anecdotes to capture life more generally during these years, I can draw on David Kynaston’s comprehensive list of ‘missing items’ in his *Austerity Britain, 1945-51*:

‘No supermarkets, no motorways, no teabags, no sliced bread, no frozen food, no lager, no microwaves, no dishwashers, no Formica, no vinyl, no CDs, no computers, no mobiles, n duvets, no Pill, no trainers, no hoodies, no Starbucks. Four Indian restaurants. Shops on every corner, pubs on every corner, cinemas in every high street, red telephone boxes, Lyons Corner Houses, trams, trolley-buses, steam trains, Woodbines, Craven ‘A’, Senior Service, smoke smog, Vapex inhalant. No launderettes, no automatic washing machines, wash every Monday, clothes boiled in a tub, scrubbed on the draining board, rinsed in the sink, put through a mangle, hung out to dry. Central heating rare, coke boilers, water geysers, the coal fire, the hearth, the home, chilblains common. Abortion illegal, gay relationships illegal, suicide illegal, capital punishment legal. White faces everywhere. Back-to-backs, narrow cobbled streets, Victorian terraces, no high-rises. Arterial roads, suburban semis, the march of the pylon. Austen Sevens, Ford Eights, no seat belts, Triumph motorcycles with sidecars. A Bakelite wireless in the home. ‘Housewives Choice’ or ‘Workers’ Playtime’ or ‘ITMA’ on the air, televisions almost unknown, no programmes to watch, the family eating together. Milk of Magnesia, Vick Vapour Rub, Friar’s Balsam, Fynnon Salts, Eno’s, Germolene. Suits and hats, dress and hats, cloth caps and mufflers, no leisurewear, no ‘teenagers’. Heavy coins, heavy shoes, heavy suitcases, heavy tweed coats, heavy leather footballs, no unbearable lightness of being. Meat rationed, butter rationed, lard rationed, margarine rationed, sugar rationed, tea rationed, cheese rationed, jam rationed, eggs rationed, soap rationed, clothes rationed. Make do and mend.’

I might add four farthings to a penny, twelve pennies to a shilling and twenty shilling to a pound; the sound of the air-raid siren on the roof of what was to become my primary school being intermittently tested; the delivery of milk by horse and cart; the inchoate announcements of the rag-and-bone man; and I would stress that play, weather permitting, took place outdoors. Sean and I were joined as a matter of course by half-a-dozen others to play football or cricket at the apex of Colebrook Close, a quietly convenient cul-de-sac for sport with driveways for goals and a lamppost for a wicket. These early childhood years, which I relished, now seem a part of social history where British society was more settled or ordered and everything moved at a slower pace. Certainly, we ran freer then, left to roam in local parks and waste grounds (there was a disused nursery at the end of our street that would now be deemed hazardous), counselled only to get home before it was dark. It is as if my memories exist now only in sepia or black and white. It was a tranquil and relaxed childhood, not without its minor traumas of course, but virtually trouble-free. Ron and Margaret were good parents. It was punctuated throughout by routine Saturday visits to my grandparents, at East Preston for tea and Rustington for an evening snack. With Ernest and Edith Scambler we played French cricket in summer, shove-halfpenny when it rained and then listened to the radio. Then the real treat, a short drive to watch TV with a more relaxed, and unathletic, Arthur and Caroline Nichols: the end of *Grandstand* and the football results, *Gary Halliday*, *Six-Five Special, The Billy Cotton Band Show* and, less correctly by today’s more standards, *The Black and White Minstrels*, spring readily to mind.

My attendance at the local primary school in Lyndhurst Road from the age of five to eleven meant a ten-minute walk, initially with Margaret but soon on my own or with new friends. Too much detail would be superfluous for present purposes, so it will be expedient to pass by my one canning for touching an inkwell when explicitly told not to do so, and to mention in passing my less than distinguished introduction to sport as a right-footed left back and a number eight batsman, and to re-engage with the narrative on my entry to the sixth form. It was in fact only in retrospect that I realised that all those assigned to Mr Gilbert’s fifth form went on to fail the 11+ exam, while those of us ‘selected’ for Miss Buckley’s sixth form stood a reasonable chance of passing. And the 11+ clearly mattered, though I was only dimly aware of this. As my birthday fell on 8 October I was asked if I wanted to take the 11+ a year early or to wait a year. I’m sure I was consulted, but ‘we’ decided to maximise my chances of passing by waiting a year. In the event I did well enough in schoolwork and Ron, who knew only too well the significance of the 11+ and was determined that I wouldn’t end up at St Andrew’s, got me to work through a series of preparatory questions after school. He also made enquiries about the extent of the fees, which he could have ill-afforded, for pupils attending nearby Steyning Grammar School in case I failed. I passed, winning myself a shiny new Raleigh bicycle in the process. I remember Ron bringing the letter bearing the news up to my bedroom, a broad smile of pleasure and relief on his face.

The 11+ examination was a pivotal initiative for us babyboomers, as intrusive as it was divisive. Ron was right to be on edge. Bear in mind he left school at 14 for paid employment, in the process, incidentally, helping to fund his younger brother Ken’s schooling. As a war-trained teacher without a university degree he also felt second-rate: he experienced what I was later to call ‘felt stigma’, namely, a suspicion that he was likely to be overlooked for promotion, coupled with a diminished sense of self-worth. I suspect these feelings were augmented by the far rosier prospects of Ken, already ear-marked for a future manager’s post with Barclays Bank, and of Margaret’s brother-in-law, ’Bertie’ Oliver, a Dulwich-educated man who had inherited a well-established London firm - with a royal warrant - providing cases for jewels.

But back to the 11+. This was a product of the Butler Education Act of 1944 that introduced a tripartite system of secondary education involving grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. Those who passed the 11+ attended grammar schools, those who failed secondary moderns, and the third option of technical schools existed as a kind of technical or skill-oriented backstop. The exam itself comprised tests in verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning, maths and English. It was widely thought at the time that it afforded a reasonably accurate measure of innate intelligence and was therefore progressive, sorting out the naturally gifted wheat from the less well-endowed chaff. Critically: (1) it was geared to preparing children for their later contributions to the workforce (and two out of three men were doing manual work in the 1950s); and 2) reflected an elite governing view that it was both unnecessary and inadvisable to educate children beyond their ‘destined’ station in life. The result was a political decision that *four out of every five entrants should fail the 11+*. Statistically, very few children who failed the 11+ compelled a transfer into grammar schools by their subsequent academic performances (though as it happened my future colleague and fellow professor at UCL was one of these). For many the 11+ was a decisive and fatalistic event. Research since has clearly established that it was not in fact a simple indicator of innate intelligence but rather favoured children from professional and middle-class backgrounds: remember, Ron tutored me for several weeks before I sat the exam. In other words, it implicitly reflected existing social structural and cultural advantage. Basil Bernstein drew a pertinent distinction between working-class children who’d often been socialised into communicating in ‘restricted’ code, using attenuated forms of reasoning, and middle-class children who’d been socialised into communicating in ‘elaborated’ code, involving more complex forms of reasoning. Unsurprisingly it tended to be the latter who were better prepared for the 11+. While there is an ever-present danger of stereotyping here, there is no doubt that the dice were loaded in favour of professional and middle-class kids, like me. Ironically the 11+ was to prove unpopular with these same families if their offspring were assigned to the local secondary modern. It was not until 1965 that the 11+ was abandoned, though a handful still survive. Comprehensive schools were the new order of the day. Although this was widely viewed as a progressive move by Harold Wilson’s Labour Party, elected in 1964 after 13 years of Conservative rule, it did not, as any sociologist worth his or her salt could have predicted, vanquish class-related advantage and disadvantage. Most comprehensives introduced ‘streaming’ in one form or another, in the process delivering watered-down versions of the old 11+ divisions.

A quick mention might and should be made of a tiny segment of the education system of which I then had no knowledge, those mysteriously distant fee-paying ‘endowed’ *public schools* reserved for training offspring of the British elites to ascend in their turn to top jobs. It was only later, as an undergraduate in sociology, that I was to become familiar with this exclusive and prepotent social phenomenon. The term ‘public school’ had been deployed in England since the eighteenth century, though its usage was only made formal by the Public Schools Act of 1868, following the Clarendon Report of 1864. Nine schools featured at this time: Eton, Shrewsbury, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby, Westminster, Charterhouse and Merchant Taylor’s and St Paul’s Schools. This clutch of hugely influential and privileged outposts totally passed me and my kind by. I was to catch up with it later.

To return to my childhood world and that of the 11+ briefly. I saw its divisiveness at first hand. My friend Sean had passed and made it to Worthing High School for Boys a year ahead of me, but the two sisters at 9 Colebrook Close failed; and what in retrospect seems worse, one of two sisters at number 11 passed and the other failed. The stigma of failure was written into the colours of the compulsory school uniforms: green for the grammars, navy blue for the secondary moderns. As Erving Goffman puts it, those who stigma is conspicuous must manage the impressions of others. Personally okay and with my local friendships unaffected, the visible branding of the sprinkling of 11+ failures around me had a negligible impact. It was only in my later years, compounded when I discovered sociology, or it discovered me, that I became more reflective about it all.

What kind of boy was I at the age of 11, about to transfer to a ‘big school’? I can say with confidence that I was a shy and reticent boy, one who had been happily sheltered by loving parents from any minor local storms breaking around me. I was trundled along by events, largely unadventurous and rarely proactive. As for the causal input of each side of the nature/nurture dichotomy, it seems invidious to comment in any detail given that hindsight is as likely to be obfuscatory as enlightening. Doubtless I was in part the product of an upward causality of the biological to the social via the psychological, and, no less, of a downward causality in the opposite direction. My shyness seems more akin to my mother’s meek bearing and behaviour, though it is probably relevant too that she spent many years in amateur dramatics; and maybe my modified taciturnity (I was and remain less taciturn than Ron, who in turn was less so than his father Ernest), to which might be appended an occasionally perverse if sometimes functional streek of obstinacy. As is perhaps to be expected in an only child, my conversations with self, Archer’s internal conversations, were to-the-point and unremitting.

In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and his unpublished work on ethics, John-Paul Sartre introduced a series of concepts that might help frame and elucidate such youthful conversations with self. Most relevant are ‘hexus’, the ‘practico-inert’ and ‘spontaneity’. Hexus, a term borrowed from Aristotle, represents a person’s ongoing relationship to his or her environs via a set of acquired dispositions and habits. The practico-inert refers to those material structures and practical activities learnt or inherited from previous generations which, in combination, fuel hexus and in the process limit or nullify freedom of action. What Sartre earlier called ‘monstrous spontaneity’ is the capacity to break out, to do something that is not simply ‘what we do’. He calls this a power of negation, a term also used by critical realists: it comes out of inertia but evolves into a form of resistance to it.

Using Sartre’s terminology, it is I think possible to offer a rough characterisation of a child’s conversations with self. I do so via three derivative concepts. The first is that of an *enveloping hexus*. The young child is typically ‘trained’ to adopt acceptable and expected forms of behaviour, often by means of systems of rewards and punishments, that subsequently become habitualised. In my own case the rewards and punishments were subtle, but in Sean’s case less so: his otherwise quiet and amenable father ‘took his belt to him’ if he transgressed in ways deemed unacceptable and we could hear his shrieks from some distance. Second, there is a *spatio-temporal immediacy*: juvenile dialogues with self tend to revolve around the here and now, ruminating on anything from quarrels with friends to embarrassing gaffs to missed goals or dropped catches. Rarely do they mine the practico-inert with any depth of interest or intent. Finally, I suggest a concept of *ego-spontaneity*. It was Piaget who emphasised the tendency of infants and juveniles to put themselves - the ego - at the centre of their universe. While it would be wrong to suggest that children are incapable of thoughtful rebellion - Sean was always bolder in this respect than me - bids for freedom are frequently bounded by spatio-temporal immediacy and only exceptionally involve significant negation. There are of course occasional exceptions to this, though I was certainly not one of them.

TWO: SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

Worthing High School for Boys was founded in 1924, was enlarged three times before 1929 and again in 1934 and became a grammar school following the Education Act of 1944. It was a financial challenge for my parents to furnish me with the innumerable items of uniform and kit required and they shopped diligently around known suppliers. But suitably attired on the first day of term in the autumn of 1960 I cycled nervously to the school grounds on Broadwater Road, discovering a ramshackle mix of old and new buildings and an adjacent play area-cum-rugby pitch. I was seemingly randomly assigned to Jutes House, one of four possibilities, the others being Angles, Saxons and Vikings. My first-year form teacher was ‘Horace’ Anderson, a teacher of German and a mild and fair-minded man. I was disconcerted at first because I seemed to be the only new pupil addressed by my second rather than first name, but Mr Anderson took me aside to explain that this was because I was more mature than many others. He was in wrong: I was simply shy and correspondingly reserved. I have wondered since how many others I might have misled in this way. I was I think made form captain.

Grammar schools tended to be - often pale - imitations of the leading public schools. Hence the house system and its allied hierarchical and inflexible structures; the staff seemed to know their place in the pecking order and all taught in university gowns invariably besmirched in chalk (Ron’s felt stigma would have been even more pronounced here than it became at St Andrews). The headmaster was T.A. (‘Taffy’) Evans, the only truly charismatic presence I have ever have encountered. He had a booming voice that seemed to command more respect than obedience. I was not of course privy to the staff-room tittle-tattle, but he appeared to me always to stand effortlessly astride the social structure and order of the school. As for the teachers, I need only draw attention to a handful who influenced me most. Before discussing ‘O’ and ‘A’ level exams, I must say a word or two about my participation and interest in sport, which in later years was to lead to the publication of two singe-authored books.

Ron had sparked my interest in sport early on and at Lyndhurst Road primary school I had already had my appetite further whetted. Watching the 1958 FA Cup Final on TV, when Bolton Wanders defeated a post-Munich Manchester United 2:0, I had also acquired a Division One team to follow (and, oddly enough I still do routinely check their results). Ron was an Arsenal supported and had often performed in a gymnastic display team on their pitch prior to home matches, hence getting in free. But Worthing High School was a rugby-playing outfit (compulsory rugby in the winter and cricket and track-and-field in the summer). Above average height and weight, I was initially inserted into the second row of the scrum; but one Wednesday afternoon I found myself in space and made a run. From then onwards I was a left-winger. I was nothing like as talented as Ron had been, but I did have a turn of speed and I was pleased later to be selected for the Sussex Schools XV. Most of my abiding memories of sport derive from sprinting. A few prompt moments of almost visceral recall. A first memory is precious despite its inauspicious outcome. Our under-15 team was competing in a sevens tournament in Llanelli and we were drawn against Coleshill Secondary Modern captained by Phil Bennett. He broke free and I lined him up as he galloped down the touchline, my single advantage being flatline speed. He side-stepped me at the last minute and I vividly recall both throwing up my arms in disbelief and his toothy grin as he continued unimpeded on his way. I write this shortly after hearing of Phil’s premature death aged 73. What a terrific and popular player he was and anybody interested in rugby union laments his passing. A second example is the scoring of a try for the school against the old-boys team, the *Old Azurians*. It was an annual fixture that the 700+ boys were compelled to watch from the touchlines. I was the sole fifth-former selected and in the dying seconds our captain and fly half, Ian Wright, who went on to play for the senior England XV in 1970-71, made a break, the ball reached me on the wing, and I handed off our coach Peter Benson, who was still playing wing-forward for Rosslyn Park, and outsprinted the defence to score between the posts. Despite Wright’s conversion, we lost 14:11 though. One other event, this time in track and field, has stayed with me in all its appalling detail. Entered for the 220 yards at the Sussex Championships at the Withdean Stadium in Brighton, I misjudged a final I should comfortably have won. I surged just too late: the first three of us were given the same time (to a tenth of a second), but I was placed third. The first two went on to compete at the National Championships. Ludicrously, I still cringe at this missed opportunity.

Sport was an important part of my school engagement and had a considerable public-school-like kudos attached to it. I would add in passing that nobody should be *compelled t*o play a contact sport like rugby, the more so since the scary risks associated with it are now being documented. On another personal note, I lost a tooth in a collision and, after being tackled by our coach Peter Benson, suffered lasting ligament and cartilage damage that stopped me playing post-school (parents might sue these days, but it was an innocent enough tackle and he was a good man). Nor should schools put their sporting reputations above giving pupils options to sample and enjoy a variety of sports or other forms of health-bestowing exercise.

If my life-long addiction to sport was reinforced by my school escapades, one further interlude that occurred at this time should at least get a mention. I had what might be called a ‘religious time-out’. I’m sure it was not coincidental that my attendance at St George’s Church in East Worthing cemented several teenage friendships, afforded opportunities for playing badminton and table tennis on Saturday evenings after school rugby matches and, decisively, introduced me to girls. Interestingly three of the four girlfriends I acquired were attendees at the local secondary modern for girls, Davisons. In a short selection of poems recently published in my *Rhythmic Musings*, I included a poem which captures the complex of activities and emotions that characterised my flirtation with the divine:

God

I was religious once.

I stood by Splash Point on Worthing

beach and mimed hymns

before and after the local curate

said a few words.

It was an adolescent interlude

made all the more uplifting

by the companionship of girls

from our youth club.

After rugby on Saturdays

I used to cycle to the hall

beside the Victorian gothic

parish church in St George’s Rd

to play badminton, to talk

or to try and fathom which if any

of the girls might welcome

an opportunity to spend

time with me with a view

to auditioning for the role

of ‘girlfriend’.

It wasn’t a simple matter,

this appointing of a special

friend because I was shy;

nor did God help much

since he was all eyes and ears

and apparently omniscient,

but it was an apprenticeship

of sorts.

Thomas Hewitt was vicar,

Garth and Gareth’s dad,

the first now a gospel singer,

the other an ex-BBC journalist;

we saw little of them, oddly,

perhaps because they skipped

local state schooling.

I was confirmed into the C of E,

having attended Thomas’

preparatory classes.

It all seems so very strange now,

that Christian sojourn by the sea;

we travelled en masse to hear

Billy Graham, and I think a couple

accepted his invitation for instant

salvation; but I stayed seated.

I’m an atheist now, inclined

to be dismissive of talk of gods;

Kierkegaard advocated a ‘leap of faith’

but it strikes me that you’d jump

from the solid ground of philosophy

to pitch in the quick-sands of theology.

I was possibly a better person – whatever

that means – during my temporary

abandonment of reason, plus

I found four girlfriends at St George’s,

But these are psychosocial phenomena.

I’m glad I returned to philosophy.

For all the diversionary temptations of sport and faith, it was school study - ‘work’ – that mattered most in the long run. When asked I had no idea at the age of 14 what I wanted to ‘be’ when I left school and I plumped more or less randomly for solicitor, which meant I had to do Latin at O level (remember Peter Cook in *Pete and Dud*: ‘I wanted to be a judge, but I didn’t have the Latin’). I ended up sitting nine O levels, securing eight at reasonable grades in those pre-grade-inflationary times, but failing my single science, biology, because I messed up the practical component. I opted to study English, history and economics at A level. The English teaching was shared by ‘Max’ Fuller, who endeared himself to me and others by admitting how much easier it had been for his generation of ‘traditionals’ to get into Oxford or Cambridge than it would be for us (most of the staff had been Oxbridge educated), and by Mr West, whom I got to know better. Mr West shuffled around the classroom with a slightly stooping and apologetic gait and communicated in a nasal drawl. He introduced us not only to Shakespeare but to Marlowe, Milton, Spencer, Dickens and Hardy and I lapped it up. He must have recognised this because he made me a co-editor of the school magazine, *The Azurian*. The history syllabus was supervised by Mr Ludlow, an enthusiastic if lugubrious man whom I later discovered was deeply involved in local history projects around Worthing’s environs and stretching to sites on the South Downs. Relative newcomer Mr Austin taught economics and I remember him chiefly for the ease with which we were able to divert him off-piste to relay diversionary anecdotes.

It was taken for granted by many of us that we would go on to further study at university: such was the grammar school ethos at the time. In fact, a mere 51,189 people were to obtain university degrees in 1970, with 15,901 going on to achieve a higher degree. At the age of 18 I was still undecided on a career, but I pulled economic history out of the hat and caught a train up to Nottingham University for an interview, stopping on the way to buy my first pipe and a pouch of St Bruno. It didn’t go particularly well, but this was not to matter because when I sat the exams disappointments awaited. My grades in English and economics were mediocre, and we all failed history. Mr Ludlow was distraught - it was indeed not what he or we deserved - but official school protests were repelled. I was destined to re-sit. Three observations are pertinent. First, I was not entirely surprised, possibly because I had a premonition that all had not gone well. Second, when my parents told me they were happy to continue to support me while I re-took the exams, it shocked me: I had given absolutely no thought to what my under-performing might mean for them, materially. And third, returning to school, a failure, when my friends and peers had departed to higher education was a painful and traumatic experience. I had gone from the school long-list for Oxbridge to this. Against the personal pleas of the headmaster, I stopped playing rugby and focused totally on the re-sits, studying mostly under my own steam at home. When the results were in, he summoned me once more to his study to convey the results personally, and my success seemed to give him genuine pleasure. I attended fresh interviews at Hull and Surrey Universities, liked both, and opted for the location nearer to home. Home at this point had shifted from our council house in East Worthing to owner-occupation at 43 Gerald Road in posher West Worthing. Both Ron’s parents had died aged 78, Edith in 1962 and Ernest, lost on his own, a year later. It was the money left by the sale of their bungalow in East Preston, shared with Ron’s brother Ken, that enabled my parents to purchase their first house.

A brief word of context is in order before I develop the narrative. Teachers in schools matter and can turn individual lives around. As I have intimated, I had and have reason enough to be grateful for the good teachers at Worthing High School who greatly outnumbered the occasional dubious ones. But I have many times had to contest a false inference that people drew then and still draw, namely, that good schools and teachers underwrite, even guarantee, upward social mobility. The *sociological truth* has long been that excellent teaching, and the evolving education system *per se*, have a limited effect on mobility. As Bukodi and Goldthorpe found in their recent *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, it is an advantageous parental background that is most telling for upward social mobility; and, as was the case in the 1960s, it remains difficult for pupils lacking this kickstart mechanism to break into elite fields. At the time of writing, upwards social mobility in Britain has stalled, but until recently it was largely a function of the creation of additional professional and middle-class jobs. Issues like this will be revisited in later sketches.

In October 1968 I signed up for a course in Human Relations at Surrey University, which was comprised of modules in philosophy, psychology and sociology; at the end of the first year two were to be selected from this trio and it was my initial intent to abandon sociology. The university, which received its charter in 1966, was in its final year at Battersea (it had in its previous incarnation been Battersea College of Advanced Technology), and I was given a room at nearby Courland Grove Hall of Residence. There were no fees to pay for us babyboomers, though contributions to living expenses were means-tested and I had to switch from pints to half-pints by half-term. On the academic front I soon tired of psychology, which somehow failed to marry quite intensive lab-based study with looser or less disciplined excursions into social psychology. Philosophy was my first love. The lecturers were committed first and foremost to teaching and featured Andrew Haines, Pat Smart, John Heron and Irene Brennan. I relished it and all my coursework unexpectedly attracted ‘firsts’. What has stuck with me is Irene Brennan’s sessions on Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and de Beauvoir, not because I was convinced by their arguments but because what they wrote ‘mattered’ so much more than the austere, self-absorbed and smug stuff circulating at Oxford in particular; Cambridge had at least been home to the eccentric but remarkable Wittgenstein for whose writings I retain huge respect. Oh, and we read original texts, which might astonish contemporary undergraduates. Indeed, I recall sitting up half the night at Courland Grove perusing Kant’s *Critique* and progressing only to page four.

Sociology too was well taught, the more so when in 1969 we moved from Battersea to Guildford and Asher Tropp, fresh from publishing his study of *Schoolmasters*, arrived from the LSE as inaugural Professor of Sociology and Head of Department. Other lecturers included Keith McDonald, Brian Darling, Kate Evans, Colin Tipton and Mike Hornsby-Smith. Noteworthy were the deep political engagements of Brian Darling, who was a contributor to the influential *May Day Manifesto* of 1968, and Colin Tipton, who regularly distributed pamphlets for the Socialist Workers Party on the resolutely bourgeois streets of Guildford and, more salient for us at the time, provided a generous and much-appreciated interface with his students. Darling clearly alienated Tropp by his political absences, with the result that adverts for jobs elsewhere were sometimes anonymously deposited in his pigeon-hole. I learned a good deal about sociology during my three years as an undergraduate at Surrey. I also recall Tropp’s words of advice: ‘don’t bother doing a Masters degree, just get your hands dirty doing research.’ By a circuitous route I ended up taking his advice. As for the content of the Surrey courses, suffice to say that they were largely underpinned by what at that time remained something of a theoretical orthodoxy, namely, Parsonian ‘structural-functionalism’. Parsons’ *The Social System*, published in 1951, survived as a core text well into the 1960s, if one increasingly critiqued by symbolic and other varieties of interactionism.

Ron and Margaret were not especially political, though each had by this time voted in turn for each of the main parties (then Conservative, Labour and Liberal). But I’d arrived at Surrey on a daily diet of the Daily Telegraph on weekdays (for Ron) and the Sunday Express at weekends (for Margaret). Ron liked the Telegraph, or ‘Torygraph’, for its crossword and, admittedly, me for its comprehensive sports coverage. Sociology shifted my perspective, and when Ron posted me a column from the Telegraph attacking sociology and sociologists I was ready and equipped to call it out as ideologically-motivated. However, despite my appreciation and enjoyment of sociology, philosophy remained my first love. Pat Smart encouraged me to think of applying for the Oxford B.Phil in philosophy, recruiting Daniel O’Connor at Exeter as an advocate. Once more I tripped up in my final exams, getting a decent upper-second but failing to do myself proper justice in one or more philosophy papers. I wasn’t, it appeared, a reliable performer in exams! I was however accepted to do an M.Phil/Ph.D at Birkbeck College, University of London, under the watchful guidance of David Hamlyn. I duly reported for study in the autumn of 1971 and attended an informative series of seminars in epistemology with Hamlyn and Roger Scruton: I gave one on Merleau-Ponty and perception which seemed to go well. Scruton, incidentally, was a good philosopher and teacher for all that his reactionary politics has put him beyond the pale for many. However, my personal, social and material circumstances had changed by this time. In the second year of my undergraduate studies at Surrey I had formed what was to be a lasting relationship with fellow student Annette. In our second year we had begun to cohabit and by the third we had rented half a quaint cottage on rural Albury Heath, where Annette’s daughter Nikki attended her first school. I could no longer afford to remain a non-earning semi-perpetual student.

Reluctant to burn my boats, I opted to postpone my philosophical studies and to search for paid work. In 1972 this was far less of a hassle than it would become in later years, despite the fact that Annette and I were among a mushrooming number of graduates in sociology (totally 1,768 in 1971, up from 724 in 1966 and a mere 200 in 1952). However, while I was reconciled to applying for jobs in sociology, the second string to my bow, I had no clear notion either of areas of expertise or even interest or of the state of the market. So it was pure chance that the dice landed as they did. I put in for a job as a research associate to a consultant neurologist at St Bartholomew’s Hospital Medical school who was interested in, and had funding from the British Epilepsy Association for, an investigation of the nature and extent of the stigma associated with epilepsy amongst adults living in the community. It was a job accompanied by the opportunity to take a M.Phil/Ph.D in sociology to be supervised by George Brown, then Reader in Sociology in Margot Jefferys’ influential Unit in Medical Sociology at Bedford College, University of London. I applied and was successful. A sign of the time half a century ago: one application, one academic job. It was a three-year appointment, starting on a salary a little over £1,600. With some regret I officially withdrew from Birkbeck College. What happened in my new job is a topic for the next chapter, but it should be recorded here that I was in the process of being ‘re-labelled’ *independently of my own wishes* *or feelings*. In the eyes of others, which I was to learn is what counted, I was no longer an apprentice philosopher, I was a real-time sociologist. More than this, I was a medical sociologist. It was an identity I was ‘ascribed’ rather than one I had aimed at or ‘achieved’, and it was one I never entirely shook off, at least until retirement in 2013.

At the conclusion of the last sketch I drew on the writings of Sartre to venture a few remarks on the nature of the internal conversations children might be said to have with themselves. By the time I belatedly left school in 1968, and certainly by the time I graduated in 1971, I was no longer a child, or even a youth - indeed, I was in the process of becoming a partner and a father - so how might these ‘new’ ongoing dialogues with self be captured? It is not that the Sartrean concepts of hexus, the practico-inert and spontaneity are entirely unhelpful here, but rather that Margaret Archer’s account of internal conversations comes increasingly into play and in some ways refines the Sartrean frame expediently for sociological purposes. Drawing appropriately enough on personal research with her students, she distinguishes three principal types of internal conversation, plus one add-on; and she sees these, veering away from Sartre’s existentialist/Marxist philosophy, as governing people’s responses to social conditioning. For her, the internal conversation is the missing link between society and the individual, between structure and agency. Her types are, first, ’communicative reflexives’, comprising people whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before leading to determinate courses of action. Second are ‘autonomous reflexives’, who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action. And third are the ‘meta-reflexives’, denoting those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society. Archer’s addendum, a fourth type of internal conversation, she calls ‘fractured reflexives’, and those falling into this residual category have internal conversations that intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action.

I was to use this typology in later publications on health and sport, but of immediate concern is how my own conversations with self might have moved on as childhood transitioned to adulthood. I may not be the most reliable or ultimate judge, but I suspect that my lot as an only child and my slow emergence from the chrysalis of infancy towards shyness and reserve constituted some sort of apprenticeship as a meta-reflexive. I was and am by nature a quiet, contemplative being capable of thinking myself into delaying action or inaction. But Archer’s types of internal conversation are what Weber called ideal types: they represent pure versions from which we all deviate on occasion. Notwithstanding any leaning towards meta-reflexivity, fed no doubt by both upward and downward causality (involving biological, psychological and social mechanisms), I have I am sure often slipped into communicative reflexivity, and even experienced moments of autonomous reflexivity.

THREE: BECOMING A MEDICAL SOCIOLOGIST

Accepting the post at St Barts established and confirmed my work and my social ‘status’ as a *medical sociologist*. Within the academic community I had just tentatively set foot in this rapidly became a ‘master status’: in other words, any other components of what American sociologist Robert Merton in his *Social Structure and Science* termed my ‘status set’ - partner, father and so on - counted for relatively little. And every status is accompanied by a ‘role’, that is, a clutch of actual as well as normative or moral expectations about how anyone occupying a given status should behave. My employer, Anthony Hopkins, was a maverick neurologist, as appointing a sociologist to conduct a study on a topic like social stigma eloquently testified. Like most ‘medics’ he was hierarchically-minded and we were destined to have a few run-ins; but the three years of our collaboration were, I think, fruitful and rewarding for us both. Unusually, Anthony - never Tony - proved willing to personally interview all the adults with epilepsy in our sample, either in his clinic at St Barts or in their homes. This meant that we were to have comprehensive clinical as well as social data on nearly one hundred people. It is a tragedy that Anthony was later to die unexpectedly and prematurely at the age of 59.

If Anthony was my day-to-day supervisor, George Brown was my academic supervisor. George’s reputation rested on his painstaking research on aspects of life events and mental illness, most notably schizophrenia and depression. His *Social Origins of Depression*, co-authored with Tirril Harris in 1978, was rightly to become a classic. I found him helpful and supportive, not least with the occasional hiccup in relations with Anthony. What I also discovered quite soon was that my study did not command a great deal of his attention. This became clear when he asked me one week why we weren’t going to include a control group in the study, and then, when I drafted a paper to incorporate one, he asked me why we needed a control group. Lesson learned: I didn’t mind if his focus was elsewhere, but I did decide at that point that I was going to make my own decisions.

Before I turn to the substance of this study, which was to prove significant for my subsequent career in sociology, it is worth remarking further on the nature of Ph.D supervision in the 1970s. Both George Brown and I were able to be relaxed about this process, institutionally as well as personally. Not only was he content to be largely hands-off at my instigation, but neither he nor Bedford College exerted any real pressure on completion dates. Thus it was that a Ph.D commenced in 1972 was only submitted and approved - with an optional request to correct 13 typos - in 1983. Given that I had typed my thesis on an old portable typewriter in my kitchen I certainly wasn’t going to bother about a handful of typos! But I’m jumping the chronological gun.

When I began to think about issues of stigma, or shame, facing adults with epilepsy living in the community I was armed with sociological theories acquired during my undergraduate studies. Principal among these were two forms of interactionism, ‘labelling theory’ and ‘dramaturgy’. The former originated with and was popularised by American sociologists like Lemert and Becker, in part reacting to Parsons’ system-oriented structural-functionalism, which was seen, a little unfairly, as altogether excluding the theorising of social change and the exercise of agency. Within the field of medical sociology, Elliot Freidson in his classic *Profession of Medicine* published in 1970 comprehensively addressed the issue of doctors as state-sanctioned professional experts who possessed the ‘cultural authority’ to label patients via the making and communication of diagnoses, in the process allocating them new identities - in Merton’s terms, another status and associated role - and the political, social and psychological ramifications of this whole process. It takes power, in this case in the guise of licensed rational authority, to label someone effectively, and it might be said to constrain those who are labelled.

Amongst the offsprings of the pioneers of labelling theory were the British ‘new deviance’ theorists, but it was to Freidson that I instinctively turned. The result was an embryonic framework tucked into my back pocket that accompanied me to my studies. It was probable, I reasoned, that people with epilepsy were as vulnerable to the application of the label ‘epileptic’ and its inevitable psychosocial sequelae as they were to the prospect or fact of recurring seizures. Diagnostic labelling applied professionally would surely lead to stigmatisation by others, and thenceforth to ‘secondary deviance’, that is, to those labelled in this way internalising others’ negative views of them and altering their self-perceptions and behaviour towards conformance with these negative views. It turned out I was wide of the mark. But I should say a word more about the study before outlining what I came to call the ‘hidden distress model of epilepsy’.

The community sample comprised 94 adults with active epilepsy accessed through five general practices in and around London. Each was interviewed both by me and by Anthony Hopkins, affording us an excellent data set. My own interviews all took place in people’s homes at their convenience, and I was to experience some interesting moments and challenging setbacks. Out at Thamesmead in East London, for example, I interviewed a former associate of the Kray twins whose seizures started when he was shot in the head by a member of a rival gang. His ‘canaries’ (seizures) had terminated his job as a driver on armed robberies. During the whole of the interview he was doing one-arm press-ups on the floor beside me. Several years later I was to read about his arrest in the *Evening Standard*. He had held up a bank with a shotgun, backed out of the door with his loot, stepped off the curb and been run over. He was quoted as saying ‘It’s a mug’s game’. The principal methodological challenge was the failure of my tape recorder during part or all of 13 of the first 20 interviews, meaning I had to return to complete the conversation; and there are methodological problems about returning (especially if people have reflected on what they said previously and regretted it). It was my failure to arrange and conduct two-to-three interviews a day that led to one dispute with Anthony, more used to dealing with subservient juniors; but George Brown provided welcome support.

One other methodological, or more accurately data-processing, issue is worth commenting on. I have never been convinced by the multiple software innovations designed to help analyse qualitative data, and part of the reason for this is the faith I developed during the epilepsy study in compiling what I called ‘topic cards’. An initial set of topic cards was constructed, corresponding approximately to the series of topics or ‘classes of information’ explored during the interviews. A set was then produced for each interviewee. It was a device I was to write up much later in a paper published in *Social Science and Medicine* in 1990. I recorded all remarks on a given topic, often scattered throughout two-hour interviews, including direct quotations; precisely where these could be found on the cassette recordings so I could revisit them if necessary; and, where relevant, cross-references to other topic cards. Ok, it took forever, the first interview absorbing 13 hours to transfer onto topics cards, but I gradually grew more efficient, averaging 8-10 hours. I ended up with nearly 5,000 topic cards. I felt then, and feel now, that no better way of familiarising oneself with a data set from in-depth semi-structured interviews commends itself.

Returning to the hidden distress model of epilepsy, I eventually concluded that epilepsy remains a stigmatising condition, but that most people with epilepsy are, to use Goffman’s terms, ‘discreditable’ rather than ‘discredited’; in other words, their stigma is inconspicuous between observed seizures, meaning that the predominant issue they face is ‘information management’ - when to disclose their epilepsy, to whom, and whether to it disclose at all -rather than ‘impression management’. This snippet of dialogue, included in what was to become my most cited paper (1,000 + citations at the time of writing) in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, published in 1986, epitomises the thrust of the hidden distress model:

GS: ‘how did you feel when he said it was epilepsy?’

Patient: ‘I cried for two days. I think it was the word that frightened me more than anything.’

GS: ‘Why was that?’

Patient ‘Oh, I just don’t know. It was the way I felt I suppose. It’s not a very nice word, is it? I can’t describe it really, I just can’t describe how I felt.’

GS: ‘It was something about this word epilepsy that sparked that reaction in you?’

Patient: ‘Mm. Because, to me, when you tell people they sort of shun you, that’s

the way I look at it. They, you know, don’t want to know; in fact my

mother doesn’t for one. If you go for a job and it’s on a form - and

you’ve got to put down ‘yes’ - more often than not you don’t get the

job, you know.’

GS: ‘Have you actually found this, or is this something that you understood

would happen?’

Patient: I understood would happen, because those I work with don’t know I

have them anyway.’

GS: ‘What made you think this sort of thing does happen to people with

epilepsy?’

Patient: ‘I don’t really know to be truthful. I just don’t really know.’

The model itself can be summarised in three propositions. First, on communication of the diagnosis people quickly come to perceive their new status or identity as ‘epileptics’ as socially undesirable. In general terms, this is because they define epilepsy as a stigma; more specifically, it derives from a ‘special view of the world’ in which a fear of meeting with active stigmatisation, what I called *enacted stigma*, predominates. Second, this special view of the world, the salience of which at any given time is contingent upon situational stimuli, is predispositional. It predisposes people, first and foremost, to conceal their condition and its medical label from others, to try, to deploy Goffman’s terminology once more, to ‘pass as normal’. The fear of enacted stigma, in other words, leads to a policy of non-disclosure, a policy which remains feasible for as long as they are discreditable and not discredited. Third, the policy of non-disclosure reduces the opportunities for, and hence rate of, enacted stigma, most notably in the context of personal relationships and the employment market. One general but crucial consequence of this is that *felt stigma*, denoting a fear of enacted stigma and a sense of shame applied to self, is more disruptive of the lives of adults with epilepsy living in the community than enacted stigma. This model gave a novel twist both to orthodox labelling theory in medical sociology and to clinicians’ thinking in general practice and neurology. The study was ultimately written up as a book in 1989, entitled, appropriately enough, *Epilepsy*.

Reflecting now on doing a Ph.D in the 1970s, albeit extending into the 1980s, there are several points to be made over and beyond the ‘relaxed’ academic environment and supervisory practices already alluded to. From the vantage point of nearly half a century on, and having myself examined between 40 and 50 Ph.Ds in the UK and elsewhere, it is difficult not to conclude that today’s theses are typically slighter. It is not unusual, for example, for them to rest on analyses of a dozen interviews, or to be touch more generous, case studies, or to deal exclusively in secondary data sets. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with either of these contemporary options and methodologies, it’s just that I have found I was used to, expected and wanted more. A related point is that doing a Ph.D is a far less relaxed process. As will become clear in later sketches, the institutional and supervisory agendas are now tied to log-books, box-ticking and a competitive ethos that pressurises students not only to stick to rigid timetables while thinking about jobs and their futures but to publish in high-impact journals prior to writing up their theses.

As far as my own Ph.D is concerned, I recall George Brown’s sound advice not to start off by clarifying and sorting basic philosophical and theoretical premises, which was my inclination, but to just get on with doing the research. What he never knew was that I had made another foolish decision at the outset, namely, to read nothing but thesis-related material for an unspecified but prolonged period, a tactic I obstinately stuck to for a whole year. On another tack, while I’m sure it never occurred to George to co-author material from *my* Ph.D, I had to negotiate a compromise with Anthony Hopkins, who was after all the initiator and fully engaged collaborator on the study. It was to be a compromise that saw a mix of single and joint authored articles and other publications. Eventually publishing the results in dribs and drabs established my presence within medical sociology as ‘the stigma man’, a tag that has never left me. I had, and indeed have, no objections to this and have subsequently built on my early endeavours by re-contexualising and elaborating on the hidden distress model, of which more in later sketches. Critical to this reputational boost was the distinction between enacted and felt stigma, which has featured regularly in textbooks ever since. Looking back, I think I was half aware of the possible, though certainly not probable, significance of what I was doing when I coined the terms. Maybe there’s a moral there.

A final point before moving on is that the easy-going and extended trajectory from Ph.D registration (1972) to submission (1983) enabled me to embark on other academic projects. Under the watchful eye of Margot Jefferys, for example, Donald Patrick, then at St Thomas’ Hospital medical School, and I co-edited one of the first textbooks in medical sociology aimed directly at the teaching of medical students: the first edition of *Sociology as Applied to Medicine* was published in 1982 (and it has gone on to achieve a seventh edition in 2018). But I also changed jobs and became a teacher. When the three-years of funding for the epilepsy study came to an end I was fortunate to be appointed as half-time lecturer in medical sociology at Charing Cross Hospital Medical School. How this came about now seems quite extraordinary. I have previously described Margot Jefferys and George Brown as London’s mafiosi in the world of medical sociology, and so it was to prove. The Dean of Charing Cross approached George to see if he knew of anyone who might join David Blane, who wished to remain half-time, as a second half-time lecturer with joint responsibility to teach a course in medical sociology to the medical students. George approached me, persuaded another Ph.D student who expressed interest not to apply, and I found myself seated in front of the Dean anticipating an exacting inquisition. That’s not how it turned out. He was clearly going through the motions and mostly devoted his questioning to the number of foxes to be found in Epsom, where I then lived. I left mildly confused but bordering on ecstatic. Ok, it was a part-time job, but I was now a *university lecturer*!

If my appointment at St Bart’s marked me as a medical sociologist, that at Charing Cross affirmed me as a lecturer-cum-teacher. I gave an early ‘experimental’ lecture to a group of medical students while David Blane looked on. Drawing in too much detail on my (ongoing) thesis, I was initially discouraged by the students’ blank looks; but David helped build my confidence, and we went on to combine well to offer students what I still think a good and challenging course. Some background is important here. The Report of the Royal Commission on Medical Education (the Todd Report) had been published in 1968 and reflected a significant input from Margot Jefferys. It argued for the inclusion not only of sociology but of psychology and statistics in the medical student curriculum, advice afterwards accepted by the General Medical Council (GMC). Hence David’s and, later, my presence at Charing Cross. Gradually, fitfully, and occasionally irritably, we sociologists began to occupy positions in medical schools in London and elsewhere. We were face with a plethora of challenges. David and I were initially given office space in labs and the like: I recall us later being housed in the one room of a block in Fulham Palace Road, the *only* room that was left un-refurbished and undecorated. Nor were the students predisposed to take sociology seriously. Even worse were so-called colleagues in the life sciences. An ancient Professor of Physiology with whom we were sharing a lift suddenly came out with: ‘I can never see you two without thinking of anarchy and bombs’. And this was a man who blew on the lift button to summon it out of a concern for hygiene. But we persisted and developed some ground-breaking student projects. Not that these were always trouble-free. One project involved students interviewing people in the local community about their experiences of primary care services. We were summoned to see the Dean, who had subsequently received complaints from one or more GPs that our students were interviewing their patients without their permission. We protested in vain that we didn’t need their ‘permission’ to organise interviews with *people*, not GPs’ patients. In what we thought was a diplomatic and expedient but indecent capitulation, the Dean supported the GPs, so that exercise was discontinued. After I left Charing Cross David initiated another impressive student project, in which his students drew up personal family trees to facilitate discussion of the social determinants of social position and its health sequelae. The teaching at this time was reasonably well funded, allowing David and I and our colleagues in London’s other medical schools to employ tutors to teach small groups by topic. The array of talent available was impressive and at different times the line-ups included Mel Bartley, Annette Scambler, Ann Bowling, Ruth Pinder, James Nazroo, Clive Seale, Richard Compton, Mary Boulton, Jocelyn Cornwall, Judy Green, Sarah Nettleton and many another contemporary and future luminary.

But half a post brought half an income and I had begun to search for another part-time post. I was already teaching a basic course and an advanced option in philosophy of education on the Postgraduate Certificate in Education at South Bank Polytechnic, courtesy of Joe McCarney, a world-weary Marxist who went on to write a book on ideology. This took up four evenings a week, but the financial return was meagre. I applied for a post as a venereal disease tracer at University College Hospital Medical School, but I was turned down because I was overly qualified and unlikely to stay in post for long. Eventually I landed a half-time post in the Department of General Practice at Guy’s Hospital Medical School to conduct a study of help-seeking behaviour. I’m not sure it was made entirely clear at the outset, but the focus was to be on women and menstruation. Overseen by Peter Higgins, the day-to-day running of the study was delegated to GP Donald Craig, working out of his practice at Thamesmead. I remained the sole researcher for around 18 months, devising six-week health diaries for the sample of women and collecting, processing and ruminating on pilot data. I left in 1978 when I was accepted for a full-time teaching post at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School, and when I did so I handed over the main study to Annette. The handover and its aftermath were informative and illuminating. I thought I had done well in persuading the women I interviewed to talk openly and freely, but - of course, as I was compelled to admit in retrospect - they had shown a natural gender-based reticence. What did a man in his mid-20s know or understand about what it is to have periods? Annette’s interviews in the main study highlighted the true significance of this. I wonder now whether a man would ever have been appointed to such a post as mine if the study had been initiated by female GPs. But thanks to Annette some interesting findings and publications emerged. Principal among the results was the gendered medicalisation of menstruation and the diversity of women’s approaches and judgements about their periods. Based on the health dairies, 35% of the women neither associated their periods with illness nor experienced any symptom episodes; 33% both made the link with illness and experienced a high level of symptom distress; 17% made the association with illness but apparently had no symptom distress; and 15% did not think of menstruation as illness-related but had a high level of symptom distress. We explored these results in several publications and later, in 1993, in another book, *Menstrual Disorders*, which was later unaccountably translated into Chinese.

My appointment to a full-time lectureship at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in 1978 eased our family’s financial situation. It also introduced me to another sociologist, Ray Fitzpatrick, as well as psychologists James Thompson and David Mulhall, the latter being replaced by Stan Newman. Sociology at the Middlesex was to be taught alongside psychology under the rubric of ‘Behavioural Science’, and we were to have what would now be called as a surfeit of curriculum time at our disposal: in the event, we reigned ourselves in and planned for and utilised 60 hours. That we had such time to play with was largely down to the amiable and accommodating John Hinton, Head of the Department of Psychiatry in which we were housed. Ray and I gave a series of lectures organised in conjunction with or alongside the psychologists, and we employed tutors to help us run two sets of seminars, one of which allowed students to choose specific topics of interest to them. Crucially in relation to institutional politics, students had to sit and pass an exam in behavioural science; and if they failed *either* its sociological *or* its psychological components, they were heading for an autumn resit. Ray was an excellent colleague and sociologist, and when he left in 1986 to triumph in what had been an extremely competitive field for a lectureship at Nuffield College, Oxford University, it was a real loss. In fact, his focus at Oxford was not to be on medical sociology, at which I thought he excelled, but on health services research. I thought this sensible career decision a loss for medical sociology and niggled away at him for a bit!

In an invited chapter for a book edited by Caragh Brosnan and Bryan Turner and entitled *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, I reflected on the changing circumstances of the teaching of sociology to medical students. I identified four phases, the first of which I called the *innovative phase*, dating from 1969 to 1983. This was the take-off period and covered my time at Charing Cross and my early years at the Middlesex. It was dominated by lecturers trained by Margot Jefferys and George Brown at Bedford College and was characterised by neophyte experimental courses conducted and executed ’against the odds’. It also featured the formation of a Special Advisory Committee in Sociology Applied to Medicine (SACSAM) of the University of London, then still a city-wide federal institution. Chaired initially by Margot, this body provided us with a rationale and excuse to meet regularly in Senate House and in the process created a sense of togetherness, collegiality and solidarity. It was an official body that also conferred on us a degree of clout, as we were to discover.

The second phase was the *consolidation phase*, dating from 1983 to 1995. The selection of 1983 here marks the decision by Margaret Thatcher’s education minister, Keith Joseph, to rebrand the Social Science Research Council as the Economic and Social Research Council. It was a move that symbolised governmental hostility to disciplines like sociology. In the medical schools, innovation and staffing stalled in sociology (as indeed elsewhere). Posts were typically frozen if a lecturer moved on. Sociology remained, however, a necessary component of the education of doctors as defined by the GMS post-Todd. Intriguingly, it was this GMC ‘requirement’ that underpinned SACSAM’s major skirmish in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was a skirmish that escalated to vice-chancellor level before fizzling out in obduracy and indecision. By the time I became chair of SACSAM in 1989 my predecessor Sheila Hillier had prepared the ground. Using our representation on the committee overseeing medical education within the University of London, we had won support for exerting pressure on the medical school at Cambridge University to incorporate a medical sociology course taught and examined by sociologists into its undergraduate curriculum, a step it had been reluctant to take. In the absence of a positive response, medical students from Cambridge were stopped from transferring to any of London’s medical schools to do their clinical training, at that time a popular move for students. Cambridge would not budge and in the end it was decided that this stalemate, disrupting the training of growing numbers of Cambridge students, could not continue. We on SACSAM were reportedly dismissed as ‘a bunch of Ayatollahs’ after the new ruler of Iran. From anarchists to theocrats! Although technically seen-off, we took much encouragement from the support of our medical allies in London.

I called the third and fourth phases the *rationalisation phase* (1995-2006) and the *corporate phase* (2006-) respectively; but the exploration of these will feature later as aspects of the comprehensive ‘neoliberalisation’ of our universities as financialised or rentier capitalism gathered pace. (In the event, in a talk in Paris in 2017, I was to re-set the corporate phase as lasting from 2006 to 2010, and I added a fifth or *neoliberal phase* from 2010 to the present.) It would be remiss to sign off this sketch without mentioning two teaching initiatives that in their different ways were to provide me with some of the most rewarding and enjoyable teaching experiences of my career. Both began in the mid-1970s. One was medical school-based and emerged out the synergy created by the innovative phase outlined above. David Armstrong at Guy’ Hospital Medical School was a driving force. Medical students could then opt to take a year out between their pre-clinical and clinical studies to undertake a year of specialisation in a relevant area or discipline; their reward would be am intercalated B.Sc to add to their eventual MB,BS. David and allies won approval for an intercalated B.Sc in Sociology as Applied to Medicine. I was persuaded early on to teach Max Weber on a theory unit (and I was able to recruit David Blane to teach Marx). Over time I extended my teaching, establishing my own unit on ‘Conceptual Foundations of Modern Sociological Thought’. I had initially called it ‘Philosophy of Science and Social Science’, but David Wiggins, representing London University’s philosophers, objected to my planned syllabus, which included the likes of Wittgenstein whom he thought way beyond the intellectual reach of medical undergraduates. How wrong he was, and how appalled at his judgement Wittgenstein would surely have been. In the event I kept my syllabus, simply renamed my unit and all was well.

The medical students we recruited were exceptional. Many had to jump through hoops, most often vociferous opposition from parents who were themselves practicing doctors to sociology and all it was thought to be and to involve. Some recruits, I always thought sensibly, had decided to take a year out from their medical training because they had future career doubts, and why not enjoy this year of rethinking? In the event, almost all those of this persuasion were ready for clinical studies after this year away. It is worth dwelling awhile on what teaching these students was like, not least because it now seems like, and in many respects is, a bygone era. Usually totalling a dozen or so, the students were bright and highly motivated. Apart from the deviant who missed numerous seminars because he was busking along the south coast, attendance was excellent. The readings I personally allocated, usually by lending out my own volumes, were challenging but invariably completed with comprehensive noting. I remember one student reporting back on the whole of Bhaskar’s *Realist Theory of Science*, a dense and difficult textwhich he’d digested whole no ill-effects. Seminars were enjoyable, one memorable one lasting six hours, the first three in the seminar room in the Middlesex’s Department of Psychiatry in the Wolfson Building in Riding House Street and the second three in a local pub. This was teaching at its most pleasurable and I’m still in touch - usually via social media - with some who took our B.Sc, many of whom now hold senior positions in medicine or are approaching retirement.

The second teaching commitment involved visiting students from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Margot Jefferys was approached - she was then and remained the main link between medical sociologists in the UK and those in the USA - by Dick Levinson from Emory with a view to hosting a six-week summer programme in London on comparative health care. Aware that I have a young family, Margot recruited me in the mid-1970s for a fee that came in very useful, in fact funding our holidays for many years. The programme itself comprised lectures from local experts on the NHS, visits to healthcare facilities and 12-day placements in settings married to individual students’ interests (in as far as that was possible). Many of the students were ‘pre-meds’: that is, they were undertaking a first degree with a view to applying to medical school in the US on its completion, and for them placements in clinical environments were a useful addition to their CVs. The programme was to evolve quite rapidly. Not only was I able to recruit well-known academics, including experts like Brian Abel-Smith, Michael Marmot and Ann Cartwright, but the placements afforded the students remarkable opportunities to ‘get close to clinical action’, for example, by attending ward rounds and even surgery. I was to remain coordinator of the programme for 35 years, in the process making good and lasting friendships, most notably with Dick Levinson, Mike McQuaide, Terry Boswell, Karen Hegtvedt and their families. This led to several visits to Atlanta on the part of the Scamblers, including visiting professorships for Annette and I for a semester in 1998, courtesy of then chair of the sociology department, Terry Boswell. I had the dubious pleasure of teaching classes normally taught by two very good and popular teachers, Dick at Emory and Mike at the Emory campus at Oxford College. It was an experience Annette and I appreciated and very much enjoyed and I shall return to it as a learning experience later. Tragically, Terry Boswell, an established scholar, Marxist and world system theorist, was later to suffer from motor neurone disease and to die prematurely aged only 40.

It is difficult to see how such teaching is possible now. In fact, the intercalated B.Sc was to die a natural death after 20 years or so; and the Emory summer programme, which still runs, was to transmute into something significantly more diluted during the rationalisation and corporate phases of sociology teaching in medical schools alluded to above. In sociological terms this process was part and parcel of a much broader tranche of social changes culminating in the displacement of *welfare state capitalism* by *rentier capitalism*. It is important for much of what follows in this account of the unfolding of my personal career in sociology to understand what this displacement consisted of. As a babyboomer born in 1948 I was a beneficiary of a British society re-shaped by the trauma of war and loss. The Beveridge Report that in 1942 established the principles and laid the foundations for a comprehensive welfare regime, and Attlee’s subsequent election victory in 1945, announced the birth of a welfare state, allowing for the introduction of the National Health Service in the year of my birth. These initiatives, triggered by a mix of collective suffering, post-war ‘restlessness’ and political commitment, marked the beginning of an historically unusual phase of capitalism. As Adam Smith wrote, capitalism has a natural tendency to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, *unless steps are taken to mitigate this tendency*. In the years immediately following the second world war to, say, the mid-1970s, such steps were falteringly taken by means of state interventionism. The result was a significant slowing of capitalism’s tendency to growing wealth and income inequality. A degree of consensus held between Conservative (in office 1951-64, 1970-74), Labour (in office 1964-70, 1974-79) and Liberal Parties that adequate welfare and health systems and decent housing were prerequisites for a civilised society. But by the 1960s the political scene was growing more unsettled, and it is reasonable to take the oil crisis of the mid-1970s as marking the halting beginnings of a transition to rentier capitalism. Margaret Thatcher was elected to office in 1979 and lent her considerable political weight to this shift.

As Brett Christophers has shown in detail in his excellent *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy and Who Pays For It?* published in 2020, the British economy has had a strong rentier element historically, though it is only since Thatcher’s time that this element has come to the fore; and it has done so more rapidly and decisively in Britain than in any other country. Rentier capitalism denotes a system oriented to and privileging ‘unearned income’ deriving purely from the ownership of assets, often in monopoly markets. What rentier capitalism has done, in effect, is release rentiers’ ability to make excess profits. In a classic tome which hit the headlines in 2014, entitled *Capital in the Twentieth-First Century*, the French economist Thomas Piketty sets the scene for us. He estimated that the return on assets (*r*) globally before tax has always been greater than the rate of economic growth (*g*), and for most of the history of capitalism, *r* after tax has also been greater than *g*, leading Piketty to claim that, *ceteris paribus*, wealth inequality increases under capitalism. Unusually during my early babyboomer years in welfare state capitalism after the second world war *g* exceeded net (post-rax) *r*, in the process curbing inequality (largely through a combination of exceptional growth and progressive taxation policies). Both Christophers and Piketty insist that right-of-centre governments in the Thatcher mould have cosseted rentiers, even encouraging people to become rentiers by means of tax subsidies. The two of them have suggestions for remedying this, but that can wait for later sketches. For now it will suffice to lay the groundwork for grasping the welfare state/rentier switch, and this requires more to be said about related causes and effects of wealth and income inequality in rentier capitalism.

In a useful table from their *Paying for the Welfare State in the 21st Century*, which saw the light of day in 2017, Dave Byrne and Ruane set out the differing employment and taxation systems characterising welfare state (or industrial) capitalism and rentier (or post-industrial) capitalism. What the items in the right-hand column unambiguously reveal is a cross-the-board deterioration in the circumstances of those most poorly positioned either to cope or to contest policy changes that further disadvantaged them. I am reproducing this table here in recognition of its articulacy.

**The Principal Differences in Employment Relations and Taxation Systems in Industrial and Post-industrial Capitalism**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Industrial employment relations and tax system** | **Post-industrial employment relations and taxation system** |
| Keynesian/Beveridge mode of regulation | Post-industrial/consolidation state mode of regulation |
| Industrial workforce approaching half of total workforce | Primarily service sector workforce; industrial workforce less than 15% of total |
| Full employment with frictional unemployment | Disguised unemployment (eg extension of higher education; early retirement); underemployment |
| Job security and substantial worker rights | Flexible labour – spread of precarious employment, limited worker rights |
| Employer-borne risk and responsibilities to workforce | Transfer of risk to workers – use of zero hours contracts and forms of self-employment |
| Large public sector and devalorised labour | Declining public sector as proportion of all employment and recommodification of labour |
| Relatively high trade union membership | Low trade union membership |
| Relatively high wages | Lagging wages and spread of low wages; heavy reliance on wage subsidy |
| Strong protections for workers in public sector | Workers in public sector exposed to market competition |
| Status and protection for professionals | Extension of Fordism into professional work and proletarianisation |
| High top rates of income tax | Relatively low top rates of income tax |
| Relatively strong link between national insurance contributions and benefits received | Weak link between national insurance contributions and benefits received |
| Higher corporation tax rates | Lower corporation tax rates |
| Avoidance and evasion practices which do not catastrophically compromise the tax system | Avoidance and evasion practices which catastrophically compromise the tax system |
| Strong and independent tax collection authorities | Weakened tax collection authorities strongly influenced by corporate lobbying |

The rationale for addressing the transition from welfare state to rentier capitalism at this juncture is that I not only have lived through it, experiencing first-hand the admittedly gradual stop-start moves from innovation to consolidation to rationalisation to corporate to neoliberal phases of the teaching of sociology to medical students, but because it was in Thatcher’s 1980s that I began to turn more attention to social and sociological theory. As we shall see this led eventually to a retheorising of the welfare state-to-rentier ‘trauma’; to the emergence of what I have come to call the ’fractured society’; and to an analysis of the roots of this traumatic cluster of events in causal mechanisms residing in the social structural, cultural and agential strata. But I must not jump the gun.

FOUR: MY THEORETICAL TURN

As my original attraction to philosophy and my decision to teach an intercalated B.Sc unit on the conceptual foundations of modern sociological thought might suggest, I have always been drawn to abstruse matters. It was in the 1980s during my tenure at the Middlesex that I first expressed this in print. I was busy enough - or at least what passed for ‘enough’ then - teaching and publishing other bits and pieces, including publishing a book with my colleagues at the Middlesex entitled *The Experience of Illness* in 1984 and co-editing a second issue of *Sociology as Applied to Medicine* with Donald Patrick in 1986. In 1987, however, I turned an intellectual corner by publishing an edited collection under the heading of *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology*. This had an explicit purpose, namely, to send a message to sociologists based in sociology departments and inclined to dismiss those of us holding posts in medical schools as second-rate applied or service teachers. The authors were my peers and colleagues: as well as myself, they were David Blane, David Armstrong, Ray Fitzpatrick, Sheila Hillier, Uta Gerhardt, Karl Figlio, Steve Taylor, Clive Ashworth and Simon Williams. I was pleased with the results (and interestingly the book was reissued in its original form by the publisher in 2022). The thinking that went into my chapter on Jurgen Habermas not only represented my first post-flirtatious engagement with theory but also marked a departure of sorts. Looking back, I think it was this project that prefigured the start of a new and more personally stimulating personal intellectual trajectory, and possibly also a new willingness to take time out from settled meta-reflexive conversations with self to indulge in intermittent if still cautious bouts of autonomous reflexivity.

It was ironic in a way that I wrote on Habermas at this time. I had read Bhaskar in the mid- to late 1970s and been enthralled by his dense but, to me at least, clear explication of critical realism in relation to the natural sciences. I was not to return to his writings until later. Having in the interim read a good deal of Habermas’ many papers, chapters and books, including the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, translated into English in 1984 and 1987 respectively, I saw the potential of his thinking and theorising to inform and render more deeply sociological our understanding of institutions like the doctor-patient relationship. In my chapter for *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology* I drew on several aspects of his work, most of which I have continued to espouse and would still defend. In a conversation with Terry Boswell in our garden in Epsom he had dismissed Habermas’ concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’ as philosophical, utopian and unhelpful. I had agreed that it was philosophical and that it had utopian overtones but disputed his view that it was unhelpful. What the ideal speech situation does is formally recognise that when we engage in a conversation or exchange of views we presuppose that all participants are equally able to participate, intervene and be heard, and that a rational consensus is an achievable endpoint. This, Habermas contended, is a universal. Otherwise, why would anybody anywhere bother conversing? Think here of a seminar conducted with a group of students for example. Habermas acknowledged of course that in actual conversations and exchanges - in actual seminars - the ideal speech situation rarely applies in its formal or pure form. What the concept does do, however is give us a yardstick against which we might appraise or analyse actual encounters. Habermas considers various ways in which such encounters can and do deviate from the ideal speech situation.

Elaborating, he draws on Austin’s distinction between three types of ‘speech act’ in the latter’s *How To Do Things With Words*, published in 1962. Austin wrote of ‘locutionary’, ‘illocutionary’ and ‘perlocutionary’ speech acts. By using locutionary speech acts a speaker says something by expressing a state of affairs. By using illocutionary speech acts a speaker performs an action in saying something, generally by means of a performative verb in the first person present (eg ‘I promise you that ‘p’’). And by using a perlocutionary speech act a speaker produces an effect on a hearer. Habermas characterises these three types of speech act in the following ‘catchphrases’: ‘to say *something*, to act *in* saying something, to bring about something *through* acting in saying something.’

He frames all this in terms of a distinction between ‘communicative action’ and ‘strategic action’. Communicative action is linguistically mediated interaction in which all speakers pursue illocutionary aims in order to reach ‘an agreement that will provide the basis for a consensual coordination of individually pursued plans of action.’ Strategic action on the other hand occurs when at least one speaker aims to produce perlocutionary effects on his or her hearer(s). Perlocutionary effects ensue ‘whenever a speaker acts with an orientation to success and thereby instrumentalises speech acts for purposes that are contingently related to the meaning of what is said.’ Communicative action, in sum, is oriented to understanding, and strategic action is oriented to success.

My apologies for launching into more detail here, but the rationale for doing so is that these aspects of Habermas’ theorising have remained salient for me, inform my later work, and are perhaps best got out of the way now. We are in fact getting closer to analysing doctor-patient encounters. For Habermas, simple imperatives, like requests or demands, are illocutionary acts with which the speaker ‘openly’ purses his or her aim of influencing the hearer(s), and with which a power claim is associated (as in ‘doctor’s orders’). In such instances the speaker pursues illocutionary aims unreservedly, but nonetheless acts with an orientation to success rather than understanding. Habermas calls this *open strategic action*. When speakers employ speech acts for perlocutionary ends, this is referred to as *concealed strategic action*. In the case of either open or concealed strategic action the potential for attaining an agreeable rational consensus remains unexploited. This potential is only realised in communicative action, when illocutionary speech acts express ‘criticisable validity claims’. Habermas regards what he terms ‘communicative pathologies’ as the result of confusion between actions oriented to understanding and actions oriented to success. Instances of concealed strategic action may involve either ‘conscious deception’ or ‘unconscious deception’. In the case of conscious deception at least one of the participants acts with an orientation to success but allows the other(s) to assume that all the conditions of communicative action are being satisfied. Unconscious deception - which Habermas calls ‘systematically distorted communication’ - occurs when at least one participant is deceiving himself or herself about the fact that he or she is acting with an attitude oriented to success and is only ‘keeping up appearances’ of communicative action.

I hope it will be clear why I found this framework helpful in considering doctor-patient encounters. In my chapter I drew on Ann Oakley’s studies of women’s consultations with obstetricians in her *The Captured Womb* published in 1984to reflect on doctors’ regular use of both open strategic action and conscious deception to reconcile or steer women to accept their expert guidance, which at that time was to agree to a hospital birth and likely clinical interventions during childbirth. More interestingly perhaps, I also explored the salience of systematically distorted communication, suggesting that women *and obstetricians* often seemed genuinely but mistakenly to believe that a hospital birth was invariably safer than a home birth. In a later book I edited in 2001 called *Habermas, Critical Theory and Health*, Nicky Britten and I applied this thinking to more routine doctor-patient exchanges in primary care.

So much for micro-interactions. Another attraction of Habermas’ theories was the way in which they opened up opportunities to explore linkages between micro- and macro-phenomena. The key distinction here is between the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system’. The former refers to everyday social worlds we inhabit, combines the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the mass media, and is characterised by communicative action; and the latter embraces the economy and the state and is characterised by strategic action. The private sphere of the lifeworld delivers *commitment*, while the public sphere delivers *influence*; the economy operates via *money* and the state through *power*. There exist trade-offs between these: thus, the economy relies on the state to establish and police legal institutions like property and contract, on the public sphere of the lifeworld to influence consumption patterns and on the private sphere to provide a committed labour force, while it sends money into each other subsystem. Habermas argues that in modern times the system has increasingly become ‘decoupled’ from and come to ‘colonise’ the lifeworld. More and more of our everyday lives are dominated by systemic imperatives. This seems incontrovertibly to be the case, and Habermas’ macro-analysis gives sociological context not only to the seemingly distant phenomenon of routine medical consultations but opens the door to a more generalised theorising of linkages between social structures or relations, culture and what might otherwise be misleading seen as discrete and individualised decision-making.

I have taken some pains to introduce aspects of Habermasian theory because it has remained with me as an important fuel and aid to my own studies and will crop up in subsequent sketches. While I am critical of some of his thinking, like what I see as his premature abandonment of explicitly Marxian thinking, I continue to make selective use of his communicative/strategic and lifeworld/system dichotomies. But I should now address how ‘coming out’ as an apprentice sociological theorist impacted on my career. Once more the distinction between welfare state and rentier capitalism is pertinent. During my early days as a university lecturer in the mid-to-late 1970s I was regarded as an oddball in a medical school and largely left alone, which suited this well-trained only child perfectly. Occasionally I was quizzed. I remember my Head of Department at Charing Cross, psychiatrist Steve Hirsch, once saying to me: ‘I don’t know what you do, I’d like you to keep a diary so I have some idea.’ Without giving much thought to it, I replied: ‘I don’t know what you do either, so I’ll keep one if you do.’ In retrospect this seems a foolish and risky response, but in the event Steve grinned and I was to hear no more about it. In fact, I spent a fair amount of time out and about then (and since), exploring second-hand bookshops in Charing Cross Road and off Tottenham Court Road and writing in cafes. I felt then and feel now that this was time well spent. And I was reasonably ‘productive’ according to the criteria being loosely applied then. I taught well enough, and I was ticking over with publications; if I was deficient in bringing in research revenue, nobody seemed unduly distressed by that. This status quo eased into my years at the Middlesex, where old-school John Hinton put no pressure on me. This is such a marked contrast with academic life now that I feel compelled - almost a duty - to record *and commend it*. The change, when it came, was to be a feature of the post-1995 rationalised and corporate phases of medical education mentioned earlier.

While at the Middlesex it was suggested that it might profit me to ‘present’ as a theorist. Given that I was still an oddity in a medical school, I might possibly occupy my own exclusive silo to my advantage, both in terms of confusing senior medics and defending my CV should opportunities for promotion arise. So the 1990s bore witness to my consolidation as a sociological theorist through a series of further publications. Not all of these were applications or elaborations of Habermas’ work. One was however, and this seems an opportune time to discuss it. In my first publication in a mainstream sociological journal, *Sociology*, in 1996, I argued that Habermas was right to maintain that we should remain committed to a *reconstructed* version of European Enlightenment thinking. This was not of course to deny that the ‘unreconstructed’ version was classed, gendered and racialised, quite the contrary; but it was to insist that we should keep our nerves in the face of a ‘cultural turn’ that threatened the very possibility of rational decision-making emergent from communicative action.

My argument in this paper drew on several of Habermas’ concepts already introduced in this sketch, but it was presented in terms of five theses. The first paved the way for the remainder, asserting that sociology’s system ties have in modern times come to outweigh its ties to the lifeworld. It has, in other words, become more answerable to the pervasive influence of money and power, the steering media of the economy and the state respectively. Sociology has become subject to what Habermas called ‘system rationalisation’. The second thesis invited a more comprehensive analysis of sociology’s subjection to system rationalisation. Citing Ritzer’s then novel diagnosis in his *The McDonaldisation of Society,* published in 1994, I noted a trend towards a McDonalisation of academic life, with British sociologists experiencing intense institutional pressure to meet short-term system needs by attaining funding from increasingly commissioned research programmes. I gave as examples of the *taming* of medical sociology the unseemly rush to win career-enhancing funding and the adjustment of research on health inequalities by neglecting the role of class-related material factors and focusing on individual lifestyles and behaviours. Some even consented to write of ‘health variations’ rather than health inequalities.

The third thesis reflected my agreement with Habermas on the critical importance of retaining faith in a reconstruction of European Enlightenment philosophy. Sociology’s principal commitment, I insisted then (as I would now), is to what Habermas called the ‘rationalisation of the lifeworld’. It is simply unacceptable, indeed an affront to the discipline, to genuflect in the face of system rationalisation. Medical sociologists, for example, *must* follow the evidence and not be deflected into prioritising, to stick with the previous example, research into lifestyles and individual behaviours rather than material factors as social determinants of health inequalities. Nor should they, I maintained, allow themselves to become, or even to communicate primarily with, what Eyerman and Jamison in 1991 called system-based or ‘established intellectuals, for such intellectuals are either agents of manipulation in the lifeworld or unwitting agents of systematically distorted communication: their work serves strategic action, system rationalisation and lifeworld colonisation rather than communicative action and lifeworld rationalisation.

Thesis four inferred that sociology’s commitment to lifeworld rationalisation requires its promotion in the public sphere of the lifeworld, which, it will be remembered, harbours and delivers influence. Societies like Britain, Habermas argues are ‘formally democracies’: they embody a legitimation process that elicits generalised motives - ‘a diffuse mass loyalty’ - whilst avoiding participation. Social policy priorities are in fact framed by private investment decisions in the subsystem of the economy, and politics is democratic in form only: hence it doesn’t really matter which political party is in power. Formal democracy can be contrasted with ‘substantive democracy’, which opens the way for genuine participation of citizens in the process of will-formation. Substantive democracy, it might be contended, institutionalises in the public sphere the fundamentals of communicative action, though Habermas insists on eschewing any ‘utopian’ equation of substantive democracy with any specific form of societal organisation. So lifeworld rationalisation entails the incremental rationalisation of the lifeworld via the reconstitution of the public sphere out of its present ‘re-feudalised’ or corrupted home of image creation and opinion management. Finally, in the fifth thesis, I suggested that if sociology is to be effective, to ‘make a difference’, it must build alliances with both system-based and lifeworld-based intellectuals and activists. I stressed the importance of lifeworld-based ‘movement intellectuals’, thinking less at the time of ‘old’ class-based movements than of Europe’s ‘new’ social movements provoked into action by lifeworld colonisation. Reason, I rather grandiosely concluded, ‘conceived formally or procedurally as universal, commits sociology to what Habermas has referred to as the reconstructed, and as yet incomplete, project of modernity; that this commitment requires that sociology be directed first and foremost to the decolonisation of and further rationalisation of the lifeworld; and that this, in turn, necessitates sociologists, *fated to be actors in high modernity,* acting *consciously*, through alliances of interest with other system-based and lifeworld-based activists, perhaps most notably from the new social movements, to promote and engage with a reconstituted public sphere of the lifeworld.’ I certainly still agree now the thrust of this.

To conclude this preliminary theoretical excursion, it is relevant to record that my ‘theoretical turn’ via this engagement with Habermas was an issue as well as a confirmation of my natural – biological, psychological – only child’s aptitude for solitude. Only Habermas and I, plus a handful of others through their published commentaries, were protagonists. I was and am generally content in my own company, and this holds also for the business of thinking and writing. This meant that the inevitable isolation which was for some a burden carried by sociologists in medical schools was never a hardship for me. It was not that I didn’t enjoy the company of David Blane and Ray Fitzpatrick, quite the opposite, but rather that my own company was always a viable and amicable option. This has pros and cons for us academics. On the one hand, I was until the 1990s free to dwell on what mattered to me and to edge forward in my thinking; and theorising, but on the other hand, I did not then and have never really benefitted from the sustained critical inputs of close colleagues. Indeed, I have often been unaccountably but obstinately reluctant even to be drawn into that type of conversation. My dialogues have overwhelmingly been internal conversations or dialogues with distal others, often deceased, via their writings. I recognise that this has probably been a failing on my part, but I have insufficient energy and no intention or wish to remedy it well into retirement.

In retrospect I can see three other sequelae of my reading and application of Habermas’ theories. First, despite the fact that I started from the micro-phenomenon of doctor-patient interaction, it represented the beginning of a long-term interest in how macro-structures filter down to inform not only institutions like doctor-patient encounters but also the more mundane day-to-day dealings we have with others. Social structures, I have come to argue with growing vehemence, exercise a strong causal influence on such dealings, though without ever determining them. I still find the Habermas’ critical theoretical frame has much to commend it in addressing this matter. Second, from this point on I took it as a given that although it is important to represent other theorists’ perspectives and arguments faithfully, it is quite another thing to feel bound to leave them alone: in other words, I have little compunction in ‘using’ others’ works, even if this means departing from authors’ stances or intent. What matters here is clarity about what one is doing. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it heralded the commencement of a sociological project to complement and shape that of enabling further lifeworld rationalisation, namely, the building of good weight-bearing bridges between two only too often discrete discourses, that of philosophy and theory on the one hand, and that of empirical research on the other. It was only with hindsight that I could properly discern these ramifications of my early engagement with Habermas.

FIVE: FROM THE MIDDLESEX TO UCL

In 1972 our family had moved into a spacious unfurnished flat in Epsom, 45 Sandown Lodge. Unbeknown to me before the event, Anthony Hopkins had exaggerated my income to satisfy our new landlords, Freshwater. Freshwater symbolised greed and we were to be subject to repeated attempts over the next twenty years to raise our rents, often by 100% or more. Fortunately, Labour’s Rent Act of 1965 had afforded new protections to tenants, and we were able to appeal to a Rent Officer, who invariably sided with us, restricting any increases to much more modest increments. When Thatcher succeeded Labour’s Callaghan in 1979 things began to change. As tenants departed from Sandown Lodge the flats were sold off. The result was a refashioned community of affluent, middle-class ‘third-agers’. Moreover, their contracts differed from and were in contradiction to ours: no children should play in the grounds, insisted theirs, while ours proscribed pets. Petty disputes involving our four daughters followed in the wake of the new gulf in status between ‘owners’ and ‘tenants’.

It was only in 1991 that we were able to purchase our first property, just round the corner from Sandown Lodge. I was 43 years old by this time. Our home from 1991 to 2004 was to be 58 South Street, Epsom. It was a two-bedroom terraced house, so our sextet had some spatial compromises to make, but it was characterful. When our daughter Rebecca undertook a school project, she invited the local history society to inspect it. ‘1690’ said the plaque on the front of the trio of terraced properties, but this date was to be revised by the local history society. It transpired that our house, number 58, was the oldest of the three, dating back to Queen Elizabeth I. There were signs accessible to the connoisseur: late mediaeval joints and horse-hair stuffing behind the plastered walls. So our new home – likely a farm-worker’s abode – was constructed around 1590-1600. It was the front abutting the A24 into Epsom that was the oldest part. Behind this was a Victorian addition and, twisting around a small courtyard, there was a second and much more recent reception room. We were just able to maintain the mortgage and pay our bills, but it was tight: I taught through much of this period four evenings a week to enhance our combined incomes, traveling to teach philosophy of education on the PGCE at South Bank Polytechnic by Borough Road tube station, and topping this up with an extra-mural sociology course at Surbiton. Many of us babyboomers didn’t always find life as easy as some might now imagine.

Returning to the arena of work, for a decade at the Middlesex teaching sociology to its annual intakes of 80 medical students and my occasional publications got me by without much need to fight off potential predators. When Ray Fitzpatrick left for Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1986, I taught on my own for a while, becoming a senior lecturer in 1987. Ever since I had come to the Middlesex in 1978, the ethos had been a relaxed one, but this changed when John Hinton retired as Head of Psychiatry and was replaced by Rachel Rosser, whom I had briefly known as a consultant at Charing Cross. Highly strung and ambitious for herself and the department, she sought rapidly and successfully to appoint additional psychiatrists and generally tightened up on decision-making. To be fair, I recall one departmental meeting where she said she would not harry us for enhanced performances: it was down to us to self-motivate, but we should know that promotion would depend on an ongoing scrutiny of our performances under her leadership. I thought this was fair enough. For a while I was charged with organising and advertising the departmental seminar programme. This went well enough until the programme for one term was not distributed. It was a secretarial error, but Rachel held me personally responsible and stormed into my office to tell me I had no future in the department unless I improved my performance. I was not going to blame the secretary, so it became another ‘Steve Hirsch moment’. Resentful but surprisingly unflustered, I replied: ‘you can’t intimidate me, Rachel. Sod off!’ She slammed the door, ignored me for two weeks, then grinned at me as we passed in the corridor. I’d taken a risk once more, but I’d made my point. Another sign of the times: worried about the possibility of Rachel noticing that we paid our loyal group of sociology tutors out of ‘her’ departmental funds, I spoke in confidence to the finance officer who agreed to hide this sum from her, an inconceivable happening today.

Rachel Rosser’s tenure was towards its end marred by health issues. She found it increasingly difficult to function in a job that demanded of her a high level of energy and commitment. Word filtered through that she was struggling, not least with her clinical load. This presented a problem: the usual mediator-cum-arbiter in situations where a clinician is unable to execute his or her duties because of poor health is precisely the Head of the Department of Psychiatry, *but Rachel herself occupied this post*. In the event the situation dragged on for far too long. I was receiving regular informal second-hand reports of her distress and its negative impact on her duties, but no action was being taken. In the end I rang the senior consultant in psychiatry, Oscar Hill, and told him the situation was untenable and not fair on Rachel. It would be crazy, I said, if it had to be me, a sociologist, who rang the Dean! I know only that action was indeed taken shortly after this conversation, and she went on to take early retirement. Tragically, Rachel was to die prematurely aged only 56.

But by this time several institutional changes were afoot. The Middlesex and Royal Free Medical Schools had merged. This was a significant change, not least for those doctors who had obtained their medical credentials from one or other of them. After all, the Middlesex dated back to 1746, and the Royal Free to 1828. Complex negotiations took place around syllabi, and I was destined to talk it all through with sociologist Charlotte Humphrey and epidemiologist Jonathan Elford at the Royal Free, who had developed their own excellent course. More and more challenging complications were to arise, however, when what was seen as a neighbour with a voracious appetite, the multi-faculty University College London, bid to take over our combined medical schools. The result, in 1987, though it was not fully formalised until 2008, was interpreted by many at the Middlesex as something of a ‘takeover’. This sequence of disruptive events represented a rationalisation of medical education and training in London: 13 independent medical schools had become four increasingly devolved and autonomous multi-faculty universities, namely, UCL, Imperial College, King’s College and Queen Mary College, leaving only St George’s Hospital Medical School in Tootjng in South London as an independent outlier (St George’s has since formed a link with Surrey University). The attitude among some academics on the Middlesex site had been very much opposed to being subsumed by UCL. I recall Peter Campbell, Professor of Biochemistry, calling a meeting to argue that this ‘takeover’ should be resisted, only for Peter Semple, Professor of Medicine, to appear at the back of the hall, like the ghost of Banquo, to insist that a campaign of resistance was destined to fail, and to do so rapidly and with deleterious consequences: it was a done deal as well as the only route out of institutional isolation and vulnerability.

As far as the ‘combined/unified’ Middlesex/Royal Free/UCL contingents of psychiatrists were concerned, we were perhaps fortunate in that the Middlesex had by far the largest compliment of staff. Rachel’s eventual successor as Head of the Department, in 1993, was to be Stan Newman, a psychologist and David Mulhall’s replacement from many years before. Stan had risen rapidly through the ranks and his was a logical appointment, though not one readily accepted by the Royal Free contingent of psychiatrists led by Mike King. A psychologist heading up a department of psychiatry! I now found myself a member of the Department of Psychiatry *and Behavioural Science* (psychologists, I have found, have never quite grasped the identification in non-psychologists’ minds of behavioural science with psychology, and *not* with sociology or anthropology, *or perhaps they have*). This period of the early 1990s were marked by three developments. As far as the teaching went, we found ourselves on the cusp of what I earlier called the ’rationalisation phase’ of 1995-2006. This was characterised by retrenchment and consolidation. Gone were the relaxed, extensive and liberal courses in medical sociology we had grown accustomed to at both the Middlesex and the Royal Free. Our course at UCL had acquired a new set of properties. It was part of a ‘Society and the Individual’ programme, incorporating sociology, psychology and epidemiology that eventually settled into a first- rather than a second-year slot. There was neither the money nor the rooms available to hire tutors for small group teaching for an intake of 360 students. The substitute was stand-up lectures to the whole year, plus episodes of private study and ‘self-paced learning’ (otherwise known as time off). The sole means of assessment was a norm of two short-answer questions, subsumed in a general end-of-year examination, with model answers constraining more creative or independent-minded candidates. The ideal form of assessment, lurking barely hidden at the back of many a crass mind in London’s medical schools, was one that could be machine-marked.

A second, very welcome, episode during these years was the appointment to a lectureship of Paul Higgs. Ray Fitzpatrick’s post had been frozen on his departure for Oxford, and it was Stan Newman’s initiative to agree to advertise for a replacement. I was of course delighted. Paul, who had been lecturer at St. George’s, was appointed in 1994, against strong rival candidates like short-listed James Nazroo (a doctor and sociologist whom I had taught on the intercalated B.Sc several years before and whose Ph.D I was subsequently to see through to completion), and Gill Bendelow, both of whom have since forged impressive careers. Paul’s background was unusual. He had failed his 11+ examination but accomplished the rare feat of a transfer to the local grammar school in its aftermath. Attending North London Polytechnic as an undergraduate he went on to secure his Ph.D at Kent University. Paul’s wide-ranging intellectual interests diverged from those of my previous colleagues, David Blane and Ray Fitzpatrick, and were more closely allied to mine, While I did not then, and have not since, abandoned my predilection for solitary study, I found myself visiting cafes with Paul and enjoying thoroughly discussions of theory and politics. Okay, I often struggled to get in a word in edgeways but life is full of compromises. Paul’s range of knowledge and the reach of his intellectual convictions are as impressive as his memory for textual detail. Paul’s established expertise lay, and lies, in the field of ageing, though he was as interested in social and sociological theory as I was. Much of his published work has been with psychologist Chris Gilleard, and they were to go on to write a series a volumes developing themes introduced in their very successful *Cultures of Ageing*, published in 2000. Their working relationship can appear chaotic to anyone not amongst those in-the-know, those Goffman would call the ‘wise’, yet it somehow works and they have been an exceptionally productive pairing.

Paul and I were to collaborate on several academic ventures, the first of which was to co-edit a book entitled *Modernity, Medicine and Health*, published in 1998. Bringing together a formidable group of contributors - including Bryan Turner and Zygmunt Bauman - this enterprise allowed me to pursue select themes from Habermas, like the underlying neoconservatism of relativistic postmodern thinking and theories, the potential salience of the public sphere of the lifeworld for engagement and change, and to publish an inaugural piece, with Paul, on a critique of routine socio-epidemiological health inequalities research. Incidentally, this was to be the first time I used the term ‘high modernity’ instead of the increasingly popular ‘late modernity’, which I found too presumptuous. I will restrict myself to commenting on the chapter on health inequalities here, because it represented a departure from my previous studies and was one that was to endure until and beyond my retirement. The gist of our message was, first, that medical sociologists had missed a trick by failing to devise their own research agendas, sometimes because they seemed overly indebted to the undoubtedly superior fund-raising potential of socio-epidemiologists, who were almost universally committed to forms of simple-to-sophisticated multivariate analysis inimical to the delivery of sociological explanations rooted in causal mechanisms addressing social structures and relations, culture and agency. I have since had numerous exchanges with UCL’s best known epidemiologist of health inequalities, Michael Marmot, about this. Always a charming discussant, I have gradually come to accept that he remains firmly committed to what he sees as the primary task of epidemiologists like himself, that is, to stick to the discipline’s brand of quantitative research, to eschew qualitative study as a largely unhelpful superfluity, and to leave theorising to people like sociologists.

Second, and relatedly, Paul and I argued that medical sociology’s contributions to research and debates on health inequalities were detached from theorisations of class in the mainstream of the discipline. The result had been a protracted under-theorisation of class in studies of health inequalities. We distinguished between ‘class analysis’, which derived largely from the theories of Max Weber and focused on occupation-based class schema, and ‘class theory’, which often favourably referenced Marx but also encompassed insistent postmodern announcements of the ‘death of class’ that privileged concepts of identity instead. Our emphasis presaged my own continuing thoughts and writings for some decades: this was the importance of identifying the *ruling class*, the significance of which for any credible sociology of health inequalities was that its members’ decisions effectively determined the health-damaging material and psychosocial circumstances of the poorer segment of the population. Latent, but yet to feature, was my subsequent spelling out of a *greedy bastards hypothesis*. Interestingly, on revisiting our chapter I can see that this was the first time we had mentioned Bhaskar’s critical realism in print: our interest in his work had begun. Shortly after *Modernity, Medicine and Health* saw the light of day Paul and I published a follow-up paper in *Sociology* (in 1999) that drew more explicitly on Bhaskar to maintain that ‘given the marked social patterning of many causes of ill health, which have – together with congruent social patterning in rates of morbidity and mortality and in many domains other than health – been documented in terms of nominal, weakly and strongly relational class schema, there must exist real class relations resting on the ownership/control of the means of production.’ We added that the poor health of people experiencing material and social disadvantage might be seen as the largely unintended consequence of the behaviours of members of the ‘capitalist executive’ supported by the power elite of the state.

In addition to our perambulations around social and sociological theory, Paul and I took two significant institutional initiatives around this time, both of which might conveniently be registered now. The first was to set up a new M.Sc in ‘Sociology, Health and Health Care’. I wrote to Mike Bury at the time to reassure him that we did not intend to compete with the pioneering and longstanding M.Sc established by Margot Jefferys and George Brown at Bedford College/Royal Holloway and now overseen by him and taught with colleagues Jon Gabe and Mary Ann Elston; we were intending rather to appeal to a narrower band of students via a strong focus on sociological theory. We negotiated the piles of paperwork in which UCL took such pride. We offered modules in classical and contemporary social theory; social determinants of disease, illness and illness behaviour; comparative health policy and health systems; and philosophy and methods. It was available either one year full-time or two years part-time and we looked to recruit 8-12 students. We had a few guest lecturers, but Paul and I bore the brunt of the teaching since we were reluctant to sacrifice continuity by drafting in a heterogeneous assembly of colleagues to run seminars. James Nazroo, by now based in Michael Marmot’s department, joined us to teach quantitative and qualitative methods. For a while we held our own in terms of recruitment, two of my daughters, Sasha (a Bristol sociology graduate) and Miranda (a Warwick sociology graduate), took the course, the latter having the dubious pleasure of being taught by her father, her mother and her older sister! Naturally, this required careful precautions around assessments.

We were to encounter one interesting hiccup. We organised our own local unseen examinations to make for informality and to take pressure off the students. One of our students, an excellent one, decided half way through one of the papers that his mind had gone blank and that he could not continue. I was invigilating and escorted him outside the room to try to persuade him to hang in there; as there was a window in the door I was able to observe the other students whilst talking to him. It was to no avail and he ultimately left: my attempt to calm and reassure him had failed. Later, however, he lodged a formal complaint that the examination had been improperly conducted: on the grounds that the invigilator had left the room in the middle of the examination, leaving the candidates to their own devices. I was disappointed and unimpressed and told him so, while at the same time affirming his right to make a complaint. The upshot was an independent inspection of our procedures and, though we were not criticised, the assimilation thereafter of our M.Sc examinations into UCL’s more formal system. Such are the vagaries of academic life.

One other incident is worth recording since it represented - indeed caricatured - the changing context of academic life. The threat of internal and external audit hung over us. Neville Woolf, a somewhat aloof pathologist and no friend of sociology in his Middlesex days, was put in charge of a UCL programme of audit preparations. He was clear and thorough and visited the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences to set out his bureaucratic stall. It was not enough to replace a blown light bulb in the department toilets, he averred; there must be a paper trail, an email record of any student complaint of the hazards of darkness and how this was remedied. His prescription failed to strike a chord. Unsatisfied with the two bulging ring binders of documentation I had compiled with regard to our M.Sc, we were also instructed to prepare aims and objectives for each of our seminars in each of its modules. I’d done this for each module, but I categorically refused to comply with this additional requirement and there was no comeuppance. A more telling and more symbolic event occurred when external auditors visited UCL, one of whom entered the room, flung his papers onto an appropriately polished long table, and exclaimed that a lot of questions needed answering. The shoot-from-the-hip combustible UCL Provost at the time, Derek Roberts, apparently told him that that if that was his attitude, he could pick up his papers and leave the campus: UCL was open to interrogation but not to gross and foolish attempts at intimidation. Autocrats have their moments.

The M.Sc was an enjoyable and worthwhile experience, if a tiring one for Paul and I - we often taught a full six hours on M.Sc days - but it was not to last; and the final year, 2003, is a study in its own right. Eight students accepted and confirmed their places in writing. Of these, six were from outside the European Union. None of them turned up, or indeed let us know they did not intend to do so. Feeling morally committed to the other two candidates we offered to go ahead if they were still up for it. Yes, they said. One of the two, however, later changed her mind and withdrew, leaving us with a single student. Fortunately, this was Suzanne Moffatt; already in possession of a Ph.D, she travelled down from the far north, teabag at the ready (her refrain in cafes, ‘just a cup of hot water please’), and proved an exceptional student. Suzanne now holds a senior academic post at Newcastle University. But why did things unfold in this way? I think it was because we offered an unapologetically academic, indeed theoretical, experience which did not lead to obvious employment qualifications at a time when employers as well as aspirants were focusing on the pragmatic attainment of credentials. As I shall argue in later sketches, the capitalist imperative to work gained significantmomentum, and was more effectively facilitated and policed by the state, in this neo-Thatcherite, neoliberal rentier phase. Universities were seeing their philosophies and purposes refashioned.

The second initiative Paul and I took in combination came to fruition in the same year the M.Sc withered and died, 2003. This was the founding of a new peer-review journal, *Social Theory and Health*. This was both a natural articulation of our shared interest in social and sociological theory and the recognition that the leading extant international journals in the sociology of health, illness and health care attracted relatively few theory-oriented papers. Journals like *Social Science and Medicine*, *Sociology of Health and Illness* and *Health* in the UK had won their spurs as repositories of medical sociological scholarship, and US journals like *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* lapped up its more quantitative exemplars, but few outlets existed for those focused mostly on theory, *or for those explicitly oriented to the building of bridges between what too often seemed independent discourses, social theory on the one* *hand and empirical research on the other* (a pet theme of mine by this time of course). We recruited my old US friend Dick Levinson as a third editor to give our plans an international element. We were open to submissions too from outside sociology. In Palgrave McMillan we found a sympathetic publisher, and in our inaugural issue in May of 2003 our editorial included the following statements:

‘It is the lively interplay of theory and research that lends point and credence to any attempt to grasp the nature of both social and natural phenomena. Theory unchallenged - or worse, unchallengeable - by rigorous empirical investigation is likely to degenerate into mere speculation. Research undertaken for its own sake, detached from the refinement or revision of theory, can be little more than suggestive. Biological, behavioural and social curiosity and enquiry into the health domain is unexceptional here. Theory, logically, should inform research, which in turn should inform theory. Systematic or scientific attempts to describe, understand and explain should, again logically, fall somewhere between the American sociologist C. Wright Mills’s ‘grand theory’ on the one hand and his ‘abstracted empiricism’ on the other. Or that, at least, is the perspective that underpins *Social Theory and Health*.

*Social Theory and Health* has been conceived as a vehicle for at least three related tasks: to support, stimulate and foster the dialectic between theory and research in the field of health and health care; to encourage and disseminate innovative contributions leading to the advancement of social theory in this same substantive area; and to throw new light on global, national and social structures and processes through the lens of health.’

I fear that I was a somewhat alarming presence to Palgrave McMillan’s dedicated personnel since I professed little interest in marketing. I did, however, take my editorial responsibilities seriously. In fact, for an initial period of seven years or so I took personal responsibility for steering and gauging its content. I wonder whether my approach and methods would stand scrutiny today. I understood the role of editor to be to edit, and we needed to hit the ground running as well as to maintain a good quality of authors and inputs! What this meant in practice was that I personally invited well-known sociologists and allied academics to submit their work; I occasionally overruled our referees, though only to accept - innovative, even controversial - papers they had wanted to reject and not to reject papers they recommended to us; and I quite often acted as a second referee myself to hasten a reviewing process that was becoming too lengthy. The journal grew steadily during this time, approximately 2003-2010. After 2010, however, we recruited Ruth Graham from Newcastle University, and Paul and Ruth have overseen accelerated interest from the international community and the establishment of *Social Theory and Health* as a major player in the health field. More recently the editorial group has expanded further and its impact factor ‘improved’ significantly. I reflect on the underlying issue of metric assessment of persons and products in academia in some detail in later sketches.

SIX: VISITING PROFESSOR, EMORY UNIVERSITY

During old friend Terry Boswell’s time as chair of the Department of Sociology at Emory University in Atlanta, he came up with the notion that Annette and I might be invited to be Visiting Professors of Sociology for a semester, putting on hold their replacements for two permanent posts. Knowing Terry as we did, we suspected that this was a very personal initiative that might - or might not - have gained the wider approval of members of the department. But it was an opportunity not to be missed and we readily acquiesced. The semester was to be the first one in 1998. Paul Higgs willingly shouldered the extra burden of our M.Sc teaching while I was away, and in acknowledgement of his generosity we paid for him to come out to Atlanta for a brief sojourn. This was possible because I retained my position and remuneration at UCL while at the same time attracting an income from Emory (which was of course taxed appropriately). It was to be a learning experience in multiple ways. While Terry had made the trip possible, Dick Levinson had gone out of his way to find us somewhere to live adjacent to Emory’s splendid campus. Two lessons were absorbed from the outset. The first involved a complex procedure to settle our status as ‘resident aliens’ entitled to undertake temporary paid work in the US. I vividly recall reading a sign in the local office proscribing the shooting of people on the premises. Of more moment was an early meeting to clarify the extent of our medical coverage on Emory’s nominally excellent insurance. Another visiting academic asked: ‘What if I was to attend a conference in New York and was involved in a road accident, would I be covered?’ There was a hesitation before the spokesperson replied: ‘Well, you would be advised to ring the insurers in that eventuality.’ Best be cautious, Annette and I looked at each other and reminded outselves: there is no NHS here.

Doris Lessing and others have remarked that the British should see the USA through the eyes of an anthropologist and not fall for the presumption that because Americans speak the same language their society more or less mirrors ours. Stand back, open your eyes wide, take it all in and learn became our motto. I was delegated two courses on the main Emory campus and one on Emory’s outlying ‘junior’ campus at Oxford (where students whom it was thought would benefit from a phased and sheltered introduction to university life were admitted). My undergraduate course on the sociology of health and health care on the main campus was normally taught by Dick Levinson; and I was also invited to teach a Masters course on social and sociological theory. The undergraduate course at Oxford was also on the sociology of health and health care and I was to stand in for Mike McQuaide. Dick and Mike were both dauntingly good and well-evaluated teachers. Annette meanwhile was to teach a course on sociology and modern Britain on the main campus.

Unlike UK students at this time, most American students had long paid heavy fees to study and were accustomed to being ‘clients’ in pursuit of credentials. Moreover, Emory was a high-status, if not Ivy League, private university, and one attracting considerable financial support from locally based Coca Cola (whose historic factory we were to visit). I was told that when a bottle of Pepsi Cola was found in the fridge of one member of the Emory faculty, he was instantly sent home to reflect on his wrongdoing and to undertake a period of penance. I often pondered on Terry Boswell’s accommodation of all this as a Marxist sociologist. Another aspect of the teaching was the seriousness with which students’ evaluations of faculty were taken (and you didn’t want to have a teaching slot at 9am on Monday mornings). We were also each allocated a Teaching Assistant. Mine was the excellent Leslie Martin, who was to sit my graduate theory class, is now herself a university teacher, and with whom I’m still in contact. The prescribed tasks of TAs were to help with class preparations and to assist with marking assignments. I never quite got my head round this and suspect I asked too little of Leslie, but I have no regrets.

This was an opportunity to sample a different society, which is another way of reflecting on one’s own. I became very fond of the students I taught, undergraduates and postgraduates alike. One or two incidents stand out, however. The first involved an undergraduate who submitted several drafts of an assessed essay to me before eventually achieving a creditable ‘B+’. ‘Why didn’t I get an ‘A’’, she expostulated, ‘I followed all your advice.’ Rightly or wrongly, one couldn’t say: ‘Well, there is the matter of ability and aptitude.’ Another by chance also female, rang me up on the eve of our departure for the UK: ‘You’ve given me a ‘B+’ and if I don’t get an ‘A’ I will lose my funding for next year!’ ‘Sorry’, I was able to reply, ‘there’s nothing I can do. I’ve submitted the marks.’ What these two incidents did was send a message: in the absence of resolution and a degree of obstinate determination, grades awarded are sometimes only the opening salvo in a protracted process of bargaining. ‘I’ve paid good money for this course, and I expect/am entitled to an ‘A’’. American academics struggle to meet their students less than half-way. In later sketches we shall meet British academics beginning to be confronted with these same negotiations.

‘Political correctness’ was another feature of the Emory scenario, and another that was later to characterise British teaching in higher education. Annette was informed by one of her intake that she was ‘not comfortable’ discussing the ins and outs of racism in either British or American society. Annette’s response was along the lines of ‘tough, make an adjustment’, which I approved of then and do so now. We were to learn of one Emory faculty who had in an unguarded moment, and admittedly with extreme foolishness, let slip a phrase her parents had deployed, namely, ‘nigger in the woodpile’. She apologised and withdrew it immediately. Her retraction and apology proved insufficient. A black student lodged a formal complaint, and the upshot was that she was dismissed from her post. I found it difficult to understand how such a racially loaded phrase could have been uttered inside or outside of the classroom but wondered if the sacking was proportionate to this one-off offence for which a fulsome apology had been proffered. This, as with so much in the US, seemed to anticipate cultural mechanisms that were to come to characterise the UK in the twenty-first century, not least in the guise of debates around trans rights. On the other side of this issue of political correctness were two mildly disconcerting experiences. The first came when one female student wrote on her form evaluating my course: ‘nice buns’. Aged 49, I wasn’t sure whether to be chuffed, bemused or just plain surprised; settling on the latter, it struck me that no British student I had ever taught would have dreamt of submitting a written comment like that (and not merely because they held to different/better aesthetic criteria). The second episode was in similar vein but more alarming. The last one to leave the classroom, a female student who had previously invited me to eat with her at her parents’ restaurant in downtown Atlanta - an invitation I had politely and diplomatically declined - waited until her classmates had departed at the end of the seminar and, while maintaining eye contact, proceeded to lower her jeans to adjust her underwear; I clutched my papers and left at speed. Again, an episode almost inconceivable in the UK.

Mention should also be made to the phenomenon of the American café. Already committed to ‘café society’ and its bounty, of which more later, I found the innovative US versions a real eye-opener. They were plentiful in and around urban centres, as well as liberally scattered alongside interstate highways, but most appealingly they were often open late into evenings. Moreover, around university campuses like Emory, they were replete with people much like me, reading and writing by their bottomless coffees. In bookshops, cafés were relaxed loci, allowing student to take unpurchased books to consult while consuming food and drink. On numerous occasions, Annette and I drove our hired Buick - a choice of auto that amused Dick since it’s apparently associated with middle-aged conservatism - to the likes of *Barnes & Noble* to while away a couple of hours.

It was this same car that was to transport us across the USA and back, a round trip that ate up 5,500 miles and an eyebrow when we eventually returned the ‘unlimited mileage’ hire prior to departing for the UK. It was a journey that further educated us about the USA and warrants a few paragraphs here. The plan was to utilise the mid-term break to visit the Grand Canyon. We left after our classes at 2pm on Friday 4 March and set off on the I20 to Birmingham, though it rained in torrents and we saw little of Alabama. Four hundred or so miles out of Atlanta and we arrived at Memphis and rested in a cheap *Day’s Inn* motel ($35-40 per night in 1998). Known for its music, Memphis also hosts Elvis’ *Gracelands*, and we duly paid homage (excepting the awful ‘jungle room’, replete with remarkably hairy furniture, it was all quite elegant). Aiming for Oklahoma City, we set off again in a continuous downpour, finally stopping for the night 550 miles later in another *Day’s Inn* on the other side of Oklahoma City and well on the way to Amarillo.

We awoke to find ourselves in deep snow and a freezing wind; Amarillo was apparently cut off. Deciding to drive on regardless we saw only the occasional truck before, skirting Amarillo, we were held up by a truck blown onto its side by high winds. Texas proved as flat as expected and it was almost a relief to enter New Mexico. At Tucumcari I somehow managed to leave the car keys in a locked car while the engine was running; and it was now Sunday (8 March). Thanks to a phone call by a local hotel proprietor, we were rescued by a friendly blacksmith and extricated for $40. A second bout of foolishness overcame us when hours later we turned off for Santa Fe and our ‘gas’ needle went from empty to a red warning light. I pulled over by a restaurant to ask where the nearest gas station might be and, fortuitously, was informed it was 100 metres down the road behind a hedgerow and thus hidden from the road. Settled in Sante Fe for the night, we slept well before exploring this unique Spanish enclave, its environs inhabited by the Pueblo Indians from 600 AD until, for reasons unfathomed, they abandoned the area around 1400. The Spanish arrived in 1609-10 and developed it, bequeathing much of its surviving charm. Later in the day - Monday 9 March - we drove on into Arizona and on to our destination of Flagstaff, 80 miles south of the Grand Canyon, where we booked into a *Best Western* for two nights to explore. It was already in the backs of our minds to carry on driving west but no decision had been reached. The Grand Canyon, a huge, tiered set of rock faces unevenly carved by the Colorado River over a period of ten million years, didn’t disappoint. A first glimpse of the South Rim took our breath away, as indeed did the day’s excursions to a series of different vantage points; we gazed on until fatigue eventually overtook us. I’d driven 250 miles on my day off.

It was now Wednesday 11 March and we’d opted to drive on, traversing Arizona in burning sunshine and surrounded by giant cacti, some of them 15-20 feet high. Arizona eventually gave way to California and the cacti to brightly coloured exotic flowers and palm trees. For reasons that escape me now, we decided to drive through rather than to skirt Los Angeles. We hastened through Beverley Hills and Hollywood and joined the Santa Monica Highway, aiming at Santa Monica Pier, where we stopped at a *Starbucks* for coffee. The Pacific was lost in the early evening haze. Unsure how long it would take us to return to Atlanta, we opted to drive on another 100 miles to San Diego, risking running out of gas again when we hit a snarl-up exiting LA. Refuelling, we passed several miles of building sites, massive floodlit cranes transmuting an archetypically urban environment into a fairyland. We saw nothing, however, of the famous Long Beach as we sped through the darkness, reaching San Diego at 12.30am,

690 miles from Flagstaff. When we awoke, on Thursday 12 March, we found the Pacific as grey and uninviting at the Atlantic. But our stereotype of Californians was reinforced when a couple in their early 20s cycled past, male and female alike with flowing blond hair, and I overheard him saying to his companion: ‘Gee, your hair looks great blowing in the wind honey’; and she replied, gleefully but earnestly (and through perfect teeth): ‘Why thank you!’ We explored the cosmopolitan city briefly and I ate the best sandwich I’d ever tasted, but it was time to move on. California, in my imagination much like a desert in the Middle East, all sand dunes, gave way to Arizona and we were heading for Tucson.

If Tucson was not endearing, the prospect of stopping by Tombstone was irresistible. We entered this historic town close by the cemetery, the ‘Boothill Graveyard’, each incumbent with a story to relate: only two had died natural deaths, the remainder having been shot, killed by local apache indians, taken their own lives or, in one case, ‘hanged in error’. We lunched in the Grand Hotel in the main street, a venue frequented by the Earp brothers, visited the Old Bird Cage Theatre, the most notorious bordello in the country between 1881 and 1889 (the ‘bird cages’ being used by prostitutes servicing their punters and overlooking the gambling tables below). Recently reopened, this venue is much as it was when ‘Doc’ Holliday placed his bets and Wyatt Earp met his third wife in one of the cages). We avoided a staged re-run of the gunfight at Ok corral, although we scanned the site. Interestingly I was to read later that Wyatt Earp refereed a world boxing bout between Fitsimmons and Sharkey when in his late 40s, though he had to be disarmed of his Colt’s Navy revolver prior to the bout and, after disqualifying Fitsimmons for a low blow was accused to fixing the fight. Earp died in 1929.

Back on the road we were encumbered by an electric storm. The sky, alarmingly black ahead, was split by sheets of lightening that seemed to touch the ground. Tired after a mere 380 miles we came to a halt at El Paso. Anette’s research informed us that we could easily walk across the border into Mexico’s Juarez, and we decided on the spot to do so the next morning, even if it meant being a day late back to Emory. So on the morning of Saturday 14 March we crossed the Santa Fe bridge into Juarez, which we only later discovered is one of the world’s most dangerous cities. It was more than poor: its roads and pavements were pitted with jagged craters and its buildings in desperate ill-repair. Men hung around its central square. We haggled over an Aztec broach for Annette, sipped beers in the shade of a café and retreated across the border to our El Paso base, where we spent an evening listening to an appalling Mexican band playing at a wedding in an adjacent room but managed to book a hotel in San Antonio for the following night. Next morning, we left around 10am for San Antonio and drove in what seemed like a straight line across Texas on the I10, arriving early evening at our hotel, another *Holiday Inn*, named ‘Crocket Hotel. We strolled to the Riverfront, found a restaurant, and celebrated the day’s 570 miles with a good meal.

The next day we rang Dick Levinson and asked him to alert Emory about our delayed return. We walked over to the nearby Alamo, where the Texan ‘martyrs’ (and others, including a dozen Englishmen), died at the hands of Santa Anna’a Mexican army in 1836. Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie were thought to be among those who fell, though I have since read that Crockett may well have escaped and been put ignominiously to death on his recapture). Only the church and part of the barracks have survived, but the reconstructive work has been well done and a few artifacts, like Crockett’s rifle, are on show. We sat down to a Mexican brunch. Returning to the Riverfront in the evening we found a jazz club (we often do) and the set was excellent, a sextet led by local club-owner Jim McCallum.

Time was of the essence when we regained consciousness on Tuesday 17 March. Six hundred miles and we were in New Orleans, a favourite city of ours that we’d visited several times before. In American chronology it’s an old city, but it’s younger than the seventeenth century house in Epsom we owned at this time. We drove into the French Quarter more in hope than expectation of finding accommodation, eventually retreating to a motel just out of the centre. But we couldn’t resist returning for an evening meal - at *Pierre Anthonie* - just off Bourbon Street, and in doing so we discovered just why accommodation in the French Quarter was in short supply and expensive: it was St Patrick’s Day and New Orleans was partying! Cars, floats and well-lubricated music and singing surrounded us; and, a local tradition this, necklaces of green and yellow beads were hurled down from balconies to women passing by beneath: to our delight Annette retrieved three. Bourbon Street was its usual mad, packed and exhilaratingly sleazy self. We sauntered down by the less frantic Jackson Square to *Cafe du Monde*, where we complimented our cafes with *beignets*. It was a late night.

It was the morning of Wednesday 18 March when we set off back to Atlanta, a fortnight after our departure on our semi-planned trip, improvised beyond the Grand Canyon to the West Coast. This abbreviated travelogue is included here because it rewarded us with insights into the American way of life unavailable from books or the classroom. So how to summarise the ways in which our trip extended the experiential knowledge of America and Americans gleaned from the classroom? My answers cluster between the utopian and dystopian. Referring to Habermas lifeworld/system dichotomy once more, I found Americans friendly and helpful in my large if non-probability sample of lifeworld encounters. This applied to multiple personal interactions, including those in what Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place* called ‘third places’ (ie those routine informal meeting places like bookshops, restaurants, cafes and bars), but seemed to extend also to dealings with goods and service providers. The dystopian elements might reasonably be cast as products of system rationalisation and colonisation. At the interactional level, normal good relations were often conducted against a background of latent threat. Most dealings with US bureaucracies for example, ranging from border controls to registering and being accepted as resident aliens to everyday matter-of-fact policing, seemed contaminated by needlessly officious bureaucrats or officers. On a more mundane level, the natural friendliness of the average citizen driving along an Interstate must surely be called into question by the fact that he or she is likely carrying a gun in the car’s glove pocket. We were told not to get into disputes with drivers when we set off for the Grand Canyon ‘because 60% of American drivers have guns in their cars.’ Such is the current power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the US (the NRA was formed in 1871 to advance rifle marksmanship, but since mutated into a prominent ‘gun rights’ lobbying organisation).

If the NRA is an eccentric example of system intrusion into the American lifeworld, more telling illustrations are to be found at the macro-level. The US remains a deeply divided and unequal society, the more so since the advent of financialised or rentier capitalism, symbolised by Reagan in the USA as it was by Thatcher in the UK, under cover of a near-ubiquitous ‘There-Is-No-Alternative’ (TINA) neoliberal ideology. This was readily apparent by 1998 but has since been dramatically amplified by Trumpism and the continuing threat of a resurgent right-wing populism; Johnson was in some respects the UK’s Trump. Already by 1998 there was a sense that events in America would inevitably find an echo in the UK. This has been amply born out, as we shall see later. Without anticipating the contents of sketches to come, it is sufficient for now to mention the growing potential for capital to buy power to make policy in its own interests; the personal infiltration of national governance by leading capitalists; and the rapid increases in wealth and income inequality and the generalised contraction in welfare provision. Within higher education, students in the UK have come to pay fees to study and to accumulate significant debt, in the process becoming more client-like and questioning and with a growing recourse to court action against their universities; universities themselves have become more bureaucratic and competitive, forced into targets and metric competition, and with the elite Russell Group institutions putting clear water between themselves and their ‘rivals’; and faculty have lost security and autonomy. This is of course just to scratch the surface and it should be emphasised that there are important differences as well as similarities between the USA and the UK. Moreover, underlying the social institutions found in each, in 1998 and in the present, are distinctive social structures, cultural recipes and agents with potential to both reproduce and transform the status quo.

SEVEN: A FOCUS ON HEALTH INEQUALITIES

From the 1990s and through the ‘noughties and beyond the main focus of my writing switched from long-term illness and stigma to health inequalities. There was a short interlude, however, during which I conducted or oversaw a few short projects on the sex industry, and these can be briefly summarised before the bulk of this sketch explores my explorations of the enduring and disturbing patterning of health inequalities. A former Intercalated B.Sc student, Adrian Renton, asked me back in the 1980s if I would be interested in collaborating in some AIDS-related research with female sex workers. In the event two subsequent intercalated B.Sc students, Rita Peswani and Rebecca Graham-Smith, went on to conduct small-scale studies for their projects and dissertations, work we were able to publish in the early 1990s. This fruitful link with Adrian also introduced me to epidemiologist Helen Ward and anthropologist Sophie Day, two London-based experts in health-related research with sex workers. All this led to an edited volume by Annette and I called *Rethinking Prostitution*,which saw the light of day in 1997 just before our departure to teach in Atlanta. This included contributions from several leading researchers in the field, including Helen and Sophie on their studies based at the Praed Street Clinic at St Mary’s Hospital in London. The central message of the text as a whole was that de-criminalising sex work would be the optimum policy. It was a book that attracted public attention and I was invited to contribute to several TV and radio discussions, though because it coincided with my US sojourn, I was unavailable for most of them. One occasion I was able to make on my return was an invitation to be interviewed on ‘Women’s Hour’. I was told I would be joined by a representative of the English Collective of Prostitutes. Sitting in the waiting room, I was soon joined by an amiable woman, and we chatted. But my assumption that she must be from the ECP proved false. By pure luck I had said nothing terrible or unretractable in my conversation with Joan Armatrading before she was called into the studio.

*Rethinking Prostitution* was succeeded by several journal publications, including one in *Sociology* in 2005. This was the result of a study with a snowball sample of a dozen ‘white but not quite’ female escorts who had travelled to London from Eastern Europe to work for London-based agencies (although the owners were typically Albanian). I was to call these women ‘opportunist migrants’ because they gave the lie to common stereotypes of ‘victims of traffickers’ by explaining that they had taken calculated decisions to improve their situations and future options by working as escorts for specific time periods to earn large sums of money simply out of reach in their cities of origin (I later checked and all 12 left their agencies to return home when they had told me they would). I confess that I had a lot of respect for these women. Referring once more to Margaret Archer’s types of reflexivity, I went on to characterise them as ‘transitory autonomous reflexives’, that is, as people who judged themselves dissatisfied with the lot accorded them by what Archer would call their ‘involuntary natal placement’ in their home societies, weighed up their options and resolved to take decisive action to improve their prospects. It is an analysis I returned to in a later book, entitled *A Sociology of Shame and Blame: Insiders Versus Outsiders*, which was to see the light of day much later, in 2020. I should also note passing that in a general paper on global sex work in *Social Science and Medicine* in 2008 Frederique Paoli and I returned to Habermas’ lifeworld/system dichotomy to reframe debates about sex worker interactions with economies, states and clients.

As has been alluded to, a handful of my early publications on health inequalities with Paul Higgs had planted the notion that it is vital to study the causal contributions of the wealthy and powerful to the persistent and increasingly cavernous gaps in morbidity and mortality between affluent and securely placed citizens and those struggling materially, culturally and psychosocially. There already existed multiple empirical studies demonstrating beyond dispute a strong positive association between senior managerial, professional and middle-class placements on occupational class classifications like the *Registrar General’s Classification of Occupations* (RG) and, since 2001, the *National Statistics Socio-economic Classification* (NS-SEC) and improved health status and enhanced life expectancy. As well as pointing out the undue neglect of the causal sway of the wealthy and powerful, Paul and I had insisted that neither the RG nor NS-SEC provided credible measurement of social class as a social structure or relation, notwithstanding the latter’s genesis in the neo-Weberian theories of John Goldthorpe and colleagues at Oxford University. Our contention, later to be underpinned by Roy Bhaskar’s critical realist philosophy (see the next sketch for more details), was that for these correlations between RG/NS-SEC and morbidity/mortality rates to hold with such unerring consistency, they *must be* the product of deeper structural relations of social class. Moreover, the concept of social class we invoked was explicitly neo-Marxist. This was a stance elaborated in my *Health and Social Change*, the first of my two contributions to Tim May’s ‘Issues in Society’ series for the Open University Press: this one was published in 2002.

Starting from a discussion of the transition from welfare state to rentier capitalism, and the resultant ubiquitous and multifaceted ‘de-standardisation of work’, I reiterated a point Paul Higgs and I had emphasised, namely, that within medical sociology ‘hard’ class *theory* had all but disappeared and been displaced by ‘soft’ class *analysis.* I also repeated our rejection of postmodern proclamations of the ‘death of class’. I then took my cue from a particular neo-Marxist approach to social class advanced by Wallace Clement and John Myles in their *Relations of Ruling*, published back in 1995. Central to their position was the conviction that classes are formed at the point of production and reproduced throughout social life. Central to class formation are the criteria of real economic ownership of the means of production and the appropriation of surplus value and/or value through the control and surveillance of the labour of others. The exercise of control and surveillance should be distinguished here from the accomplishment of coordination and unity, which is properly part of creating surplus value/labour. A concept I picked up and ‘borrowed’ from this approach was that of the ‘capitalist executive’, referring to real economic ownership. This group was contrasted by Clement and Myles with the ’new middle class’, which is responsible for coordination and unity; the ‘old middle class’, which owns its own means of realising its labour and works outside the dominant relations of production; and the ‘working class’, which has no command over the means of production, the labour power of others or its own means of realising its labour. The relationship that matters most, their argument runs, is that between the capitalist executive and the working class.

I must admit that I adapted - or, maybe better, developed or elaborated on - this broad notion of the capitalist executive. I did so by focusing on a much smaller, dynamic and strongly globalised *hard core of significant players amongst its membership*: these comprised cutting-edge bankers and financiers, major shareholders and the CEOs of leading transnational companies. I went on to proffer a sociological theory of health inequalities that I have since refined but neither abandoned nor compromised. My thesis was that this class fraction, the *global* hard core of the capitalist executive, was more able in rentier than in welfare state capitalism to put sufficient and telling pressure on *nation-based* governmental political or ‘power elites’ to make policy to their advantage. They were, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s word, ‘nomads’, with no particular base in, or loyalty to, any nation state, irrespective of any personal insistence to the contrary (follow the money). In the process of time this reduced to the simple formula that *capital buys power to make policy*. I did my best in the book to unpack, explicate and render as plausible as I could the two pivotal constituents of my analysis, namely: (i) the hard core of the capitalist executive, and (ii) the power elite of the state apparatus.

Here too I spelled out my *greedy bastards hypothesis*, or GBH. I had best explain the nomenclature at the outset. It was deliberately chosen to be provocative and to elicit a reaction, a plan that was in the event mostly frustrated. I had grown intensely tired and depressed at reading countless socio-epidemiological studies replicating linkages between material inequality and health but remaining fixated on multivariate analysis involving individuals/aggregates of individuals and entirely ignoring or making only passing and forlorn reference to social structures like class. This was okay for epidemiologists oriented to prediction rather than explanation in my reasoning, but it was a travesty for sociologists of health inequalities. I recall reading a chapter by the leading UCL-based British epidemiologist of health inequalities, Michael Marmot, making the point that sociologists presumably have their own questions to ask. You would think so! Anyway, the GBH asserted that the primary cause of health inequalities in the UK is strategic decision-making on the part of the hard core of the capitalist executive and subsequently imposed on the power elite of the state, resulting in the de-standardisation of work and all that implies for members of the working class in particular: I was thinking here of revocations of the legal protections long afforded trade union, lower pay, job insecurity, zero hours contracts, reduced benefits and so on, all of which were known to have deleterious effects of the health and longevity of those affected. This seemed to me at the time, as it does now, incontrovertible.

I also wrote of what I then called ‘capital flows’ but now term *asset flows*. The idea was that these were the ‘media of enactment’ of the GBH, or the way in which it exercised its force. Strong flows are protective for health and longevity, while weak flows present a threat to either or both. I discerned from the extant literature six distinct and salient capital/asset flows: biological, psychological, social, cultural, spatial and, pre-eminent among them, material (I have since added a status or symbolic flow). The biological flow is often described as ‘body capital’ and embraces genetic factors as well as others like low birthweight; the psychological flow refers to factors like coping and resilience; the social flow incorporates factors like social integration, networks and support; the cultural flow alludes to forms of socialisation that accrue from being ‘well connected’; the spatial flow refers to the character and wellbeing of communities and neighbourhoods; and the material flow denotes level of income and related aspects of standard of living. The material flow, I argued, is the most significant for health. I defended the idea of flows against socio-epidemiological and sociological researchers who openly worried about the challenge of operationalising ‘flows’ by insisting that these forms of capital or asset are rarely either held or not held but vary over time. Furthermore, there can be and often is compensation between flows: for example, a weakened material flow due to an unpredictable redundancy might be compensated for strong a social flow.

I suppose it should not have surprised me that the appearance of the GBH in several publications failed to gain much traction and was largely ignored by putative leaders in the field of the sociology of health inequalities. I grew accustomed to colleagues explaining in conference bars that while they referred to my ideas when teaching - ‘my students love the GBH’ - and were themselves sympathetic, they could not jeopardise their chances of future grant funding by giving it succour, or even addressing it, in print. I understood despite finding their remarks deeply depressing. I had thought that the articulation of the GBH would at least provoke an attack or two, giving me the opportunity to respond and for my response to leak into the wider community of researchers. I had first ventured on an analysis of the importance of a macro-sociology of financialised or rentier capitalism in general, and of the behaviours of the wealthy and powerful in particular, for population health and health inequalities in the late 1990s, and by the early noughties this had crystalised into neophyte expressions of the GBH. With hindsight I would stress two points. The first point is made with a mix of exasperation and irritation. It seems to me that it has taken the best part of two decades for mainstream sociology to refocus its attention on the major causal import of the strategic decision-making of the rich and powerful, and that it is taking even longer for this to impact on medical sociology. I am not of course implying that colleagues have been influenced by me or are ‘catching me up’; but I am suggesting that mainstream sociology has been tardy and medical sociologists interested in health inequalities culpably so. As for the former, a series of excellent investigations are belatedly underway under the guidance of Mike Savage at the LSE.

My second point is that this generalised tardiness is indeed tied to the enhanced pressures that academics find themselves working under, the more so since the advent of what I previously called the post-2006 corporate phase - and later amended to confine the corporate phase to 2006-2010 and to add a neoliberal phase from 2010 on - of university life. Subsisting on short-term contracts, bringing in grant revenues and publishing in high-impact journals, commonly now while still working on one’s Ph.D, are urgent matters affecting financial and family security, let alone the forging of careers. It can be an occupational or career hazard not only to take one’s eye off the ball but even more so to stand out as a suspect or controversial figure likely to upset not only potential funders but a variety of local apple carts. This was all to get significantly worse in the lead up to, and after, my retirement from UCL in 2013, but this is a narrative to be developed later in this chronicle.

So the sociology of health inequalities had deflected my theoretical attention away from long-term illness and stigma, for all that I was to return to the latter in due course. Above all, I wanted researchers to focus on the social structures, above all relations of social class, that delivered the greedy bastards, or, as I once put it, upon which they ‘surfed to their advantage’ while others drowned. But by the start of the twenty-first century my mining of the works of Habermas was being complimented by Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism, and it is to this that the next chapter turns.

EIGHT: ROY BHASKAR’S CRITICAL REALISM

I remarked in passing that I had read and relished Bhaskar’s *Realist Theory of Science* soon after it was published in the mid-1970s, and indeed that it was prescribed reading on my ‘conceptual foundations of modern sociological thought’ unit on the Intercalated B.Sc for medical students from London University well before the end of that decade. Gradually the under-labouring philosophy of critical realism joined Habermas’ critical theory as a major influence on my own thinking and writing. I have hinted at this without giving an account of critical realism or just why it informed by theorising, and it is time to make this good.

An expedient starting point is Bhaskar’s statement on the ‘epistemic fallacy’, which asserts that throughout history philosophers have typically reduced questions about *what* *exists* to questions aabout what we do, or can, *know of what exists*. In philosophical parlance, they have reduced ontology (the study of what exists) to epistemology (the study of knowledge). This has a variety of serious ramifications that have plagued attempts to make sense of the natural and social worlds we inhabit. Bhaskar went on to distinguish three basic strata of reality: the *empirical*, the *actual* and the *real*. The empirical is the world as apprehended by experience; the actual is the world of events; and the real comprises those structures or ‘generative mechanisms’ that *must* exist for us to experience events in the ways that we do. This is perhaps easiest to grasp in connection with the natural than the social sciences. Consider gravity: what scientists have learned, often as unwitting or unknowing critical realists Bhaskar would say, is that gravity *must* exist for us to experience events as we do. But how does this apply to social as opposed to natural scientific enquiry?

The natural and social sciences share a common goal, Bhaskar argues, notwithstanding differences in methodologies; both pursue causal explanations for phenomena of interest. Both search for those real objects or mechanisms that *must* exist for us to experience events as we do. Like other social scientists, however, sociologists cannot investigate phenomena of interest to them under laboratory conditions. Rather, they are compelled to conduct their enquiries in a dynamic, ever-changing or ‘open society’. Moreover, the mechanisms they seek are ’intransitive’, that is, they exist *whether or not they are detected*. It is simply not possible to map the effects of such mechanisms as these at the level of events and our perceptions of them. This is of the essence of the open society. These mechanisms, Bhaskar writes, act ‘transfactually’: once set in motion, they continue to exert an influence even if other countervailing mechanisms annul or prevent this influence from manifesting itself. In some contexts, for example, the influence of class is overridden by that of gender or race or age.

Ontology for Bhaskar is not only stratified but *transformational*. Agents do not create or produce structures out of nothing, but instead *recreate*, *reproduce* and/or *transform* a set of pre-existing structures. The total ensemble of structures comprises, indeed *is*, society. One of Bhaskar’s most quoted paragraphs reads:

‘people do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism).’

A remark made at the very outset of these sketches is worth dwelling on briefly here. It is that although the social cannot be reduced to - ‘explained away’ in terms of - the psychological or biological, there undoubtedly exists both ‘upward causality’ (from the biological and psychological to the social) and, importantly for this discourse, *‘downward causality*’ (from the social to the psychological and biological). This is why it was important to begin these sketches of my career as a sociologist with some background information about where I came from and how I became set on this as opposed to that trajectory. These are matters to which I will return in some detail towards the end of my account.

The GBH, I was beginning to articulate more clearly, was a function of the structural and cultural shifts that accompanied the transition from welfare state to rentier capitalism. The political or state power that ‘big capital’ could purchase to fashion policy in the interests of its further accumulation had grown, most notably since the Thatcherite 1980s, and, if stalling only marginally during the Blair/Brown New Labour years, gathered renewed momentum with the Cameron government post-2010. By the time I was writing in the early noughties it was readily apparent that it was a major failing of sociologies and sociologists of healthy inequalities merely to allude in passing to the salience of social structure and culture, *having omitted them altogether from their analyses of data*. Of special relevance is that many of them, betraying social-epidemiological inclinations, were constrained by their commitments to the quantitative analysis of secondary data sets to pose only research questions that the data available to them could hope to answer. They were, and are, also constrained by the lack of a philosophically and theoretically credible concepts of structure, and often even culture. This matters, and I shall argue, when returning later to the notions of corporate and neoliberal phases of university life and research, that these have now become part and parcel of an extended family of constraints on academic practice that are effectively taming the discipline of sociology.

At the time of writing, it has become commonplace for sociologists interested in health inequalities to include a reference to the salience of social structures in the concluding paragraphs of their articles. It has long been my conviction that this should more appropriately feature in their introductory paragraphs and be a dominant theme. The individual GB’s of my GBH are eminently replaceable. What counts are the often hidden but transfactual causal or generative mechanisms like class that enable them to take the fateful strategic decisions they take and constrain others to live or die with the consequences. Bhaskar’s philosophy offered new ways of conceptualising such processes, and I have spent two or more decades since the excursions noted here developing my own theories.

Health was not the only field in which my explorations took place in the noughties. Picking up on my love of sport which dated back to my early recollections of life and schooling in Worthing, I also published a second volume in Tim May’s ‘Issues in Society’ series entitled *Sport and Society: History, Power and Culture*, published in 2005. It was a tongue-in-cheek book since I was seen by colleagues - even if I’ve never seen myself - as a medical sociologist. In other words, I was concerned that I had wandered, was trespassing in fact, on an alien field. What would *real* sociologists of sport make of it all? In the event all went well enough and I was told my incursion was positively received. It may just be that being free of any baggage in the field worked to my advantage. What I tried to do was draw on a combination of Habermas’ critical theory and Bhaskar’s critical realism to posit a distinctive way of ‘doing sports sociology’. Resorting yet again to the proverbial device of ‘in a nutshell’, I espoused and illustrated an approach rather than a novel sociological theory of sport. After discussing the history of the ancient and modern Olympic Games in considerable detail, I devoted some attention to the principal sociological theories of sport, to linkages between exercise, sport and health and to sport and violence (suggesting a contemporary ‘de-civilisation of sport’), before commending a ’reflexive critical sociology’. I summarised as my conception of a reflexive critical sociology of sport in the following terms:

‘a reflexive critical sociology … should, first, become truly global, not just in its interests and reach but by encouraging the genesis of a transnational community of sociologists; and global does *not* here mean the propagation and spread of Anglo-Saxon perspectives. Second, it should focus increasingly on … the world capitalist system. Sociologists of sport have made solid progress in this respect (see, for example, the extensive work on the migration of elite athletes and on social aspects of world games and championships across many sports). Third, its practitioners should, in C. W. Mills’ telling phrase, ‘do it big’; that is, they should forego more specialist excursions to link their research to wider social change … Fourth, its descriptive and explanatory power should be transmitted to a reconstituted civil society/public sphere. Sociological endeavour and output should – logically and morally – inform public deliberation. And finally, it should not purport to be value- neutral, since it is logically and morally contiguous with communicative action, premised not only on the public use of reason, that is, the pursuit of an inclusive, informed and ‘argued-out’ consensus between a freely and equally participating – and increasingly transnational – citizenry, but, it follows, on the pursuit of – increasingly transnational – legal and social institutions capable of securing and underwriting justice and solidarity.’

I ended this paragraph with a statement that picked up on the theme of my 1996 paper in the journal *Sociology*, namely, that ‘a reflexive critical sociology necessarily has its roots in a reconstructed ‘project of modernity’.

There is a question here that needs to be addressed. If my thinking was influenced by both Habermas’ critical theory and Bhaskar’s critical realism, do these two perspectives make good marital partners? Or are there clear grounds for divorce, or at least for a period of separation? Obviously, I think not. The point I want to emphasise might seem like a sleight of hand. What matters, it seems to me, is that abstruse issues of ontology, epistemology or ethics *need not* yield obstacles to combining critical theory and critical realism; and, of special moment*, do not in fact have any significant negative ramifications for doing sociology.*

What I have taken from Habermas is restricted by my needs plus what I have found acceptable. I have never accepted the speed with which he departed from his earlier commitment to a neo-Marxist theory of social order and change. But I have had less difficulty in accepting his insistence on the general Marxist neglect of communicative action, and his explication of a universal ideal speech situation. As will be more than apparent, I have also made extensive use of his lifeworld/system dichotomy, together with his account of their de-coupling in modernity and the accelerating colonisation of the former by the later. What I take from Bhaskar’s basic critical realism is a means of extending my own analyses of social phenomena - most obviously of health inequalities - via a search for those causal or generative mechanisms that *must* exist in the stratum of the *real* if we are to arrive at credible, testable sociological explanations for them. Bhaskar offers ontological depth to enquiries conducted within a Habermasian framework.

I was not at this juncture of my career venturing into the more complex world of Bhaskar’s dialectics, let alone his later meta-philosophy. I had gained much, I thought, from his *Realist Theory of Science* and his application of his thinking to the social sciences in *The Possibility of Naturalism*. I have never met Jurgen Habermas, although he had generously commented positively on my chapter in *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology* when I sent him a copy. However, I did have the pleasure of getting to know Roy Bhaskar, then based at the Institute of Education (which was later to merge with UCL) before his premature death in 2014 aged only 70. This meant I was able to discuss common philosophical and theoretical interests, and I was also able to invite him to give a well-attended annual lecture, courtesy of our journal, *Social Theory and Health*. In the course of the next few years I was to tackle *On Dialectics* and to find much of value there, perhaps most especially the notion of ‘absence’. Being, he memorably wrote, is but a ripple on the ocean of non-being. I was to find this a profoundly important statement, arrived at from Hegel via Marx. I will comment on it briefly here as it seeps now and again into the chapters that lie ahead.

Bhaskar’s point was that to date most philosophers as well as sociologists and others have concentrated almost exclusively on what exists, on ‘presence’. This has meant that they have systematically neglected *what might have been* as well as *what might yet be*. The importance of spelling this out and attending to it instantly struck me. I was to come to interpret what the lack that absence signifies as crucial for a meaningful sociology. It has become routine for we sociologists to confine ourselves to what we see in front of us, not only the events we experience as opposed to the real structural, cultural and agential mechanisms that deliver them, but on the present presence, as a given, a set-piece somehow suggestive of inevitability.

One way of elaborating on this is to introduce Bhaskar’s concepts of ‘power 1’ and ‘power 2’ relations. Power 1 relations refer straightforwardly enough to the transformative capacity intrinsic to the concept of agency. Power 2 relations, on the other hand, encompass a more sociological notion of power: they are those relations that enable agents to defend their sectoral advantages by prevailing against either the covert wishes and/or the real interests of others. The significance of power 2 relations for Bhaskar is not that they grant agents the capacity to exercise control over the social and natural environments, that is, the capacity to intervene causally in the world; this is an unqualified good. It is rather that they organise or structure an *uneven* capacity of agents to exercise transformative power over their condition of existence. While power 2 relations can be enabling or empowering for some, they can be repressive for others.

Returning to the idea of absence, Bhaskar analyses dialectic as a process of ‘absenting absence’. Ok, his language might seem arcane and obscure, but I have generally found it profitable to hang in there with it: his arguments are generally very clear. Bhaskar’s dialectic of freedom is powered by the interface of absence and desire, since absence is a condition for desire (desire presupposes lack). We humans, the thesis runs, have an ‘inner urge’ to struggle against the lack that flows universally from a logic of elemental need and want; and this surfaces whenever power 2 relations hold sway. This is because power 2 relations negate needs, ranging from those of basic survival to those defined by culture, of most humans, leading to a desire for freedom from ‘absenting ills’. The unfolding dialectic of absenting absence on freedom - as agents struggle against successive forms of power 2 relations - taken together with expanding definitions of needs and wants constructed in part through this struggle, nurtures and fuels a logic of more inclusive and encompassing definitions of and aspirations towards freedom.

To reiterate what I think is an important point, I have had no difficulty drawing on both Habermas and Bhaskar in constructing sociological theories. It seems to me, to pick an obvious example, that Habermas’ critical theory provides an expedient framework for considering just how system rationalisation leading to lifeworld colonisation (the constraint of power 1 relations by ‘assemblages’ of power 2 relations) can be explored to advantage via a search for real and causally telling or generative mechanisms that in combination deliver this macro-social change.

NINE: PROMOTIONS AND TRAUMA AT UCL

My theoretical deliberations didn’t play out in an institutional vacuum. In 1997 I was appointed a Reader at UCL, and in 2001 a Professor. True to form for one of Margaret Archer’s meta-reflexives, I had rarely shown myself to be proactive in my own interests. My idea of ‘getting on’ was, and remains, largely confined to developing ideas and advancing theories. I was even inclined to act as judge and jury in relation to my own papers and publications, not being unduly swayed by others’ reactions (I’m not proud of this). I also had a very Anglo-Saxon suspicion of ambition and conspicuously ambitious people. I remember once saying to Stan Newman, ‘you’re ambitious, aren’t you?’ His very reasonable response was ‘what’s wrong with that?’ I had to admit that my question was loaded and, if anything, betrayed my own parsimony. It was in fact only when I saw others of my peers being promoted around me that I judged I had better put myself forward.

Becoming a professor certainly satisfied one ambition. I had never wanted to retire as a senior lecturer. I’m not sure why I felt this way because I was aware that many excellent academics in the past, and indeed more recently, had ended their careers without becoming Professors. Titles, as all academics should be willing to confess, do not always reflect talent or even accomplishment. I suspect my perspective was coloured by what might be called an inflationary spiral of promotions in higher and further education since the 1960s. When I attended Surrey University in 1968, Asher Tropp was the only Professor of Sociology. As was customary then, it was a title largely confined to Heads of Departments. Exceptions were relatively rare: Margot Jefferys at Bedford College supported George Brown’s promotion from Reader to a Personal Chair for example. Since then we have seen both a proliferation of universities and allied institutions and a greater tendency for titular rewards within them. In short, I was introduced to the university sector at a time Chairs were scarce and was awarded one myself when they were plentiful. I am not implying that there is anything wrong with this, merely that I had travelled through and experienced a significant institutionalised shift. Professors are now everywhere. I recall being invited to act as a referee for a candidate for a Chair at a new and little-known university. I was compelled to recognised both that she met the institution’s criteria for such a promotion and that she would not meet UCL’s criteria for a Lectureship. I had better qualify these comments further.

As I say, I was more discombobulated than disturbed. I have lived through a transition from a degree of uniformity or standardisation in what a degree amounted to and what a title meant to one in which what mattered most - after the fashion of the American system - was where you obtained either or both. My reference points had changed. The more important point perhaps is that top-rate sociologists can be found throughout this novel, elongated hierarchical system, in sociology as in other disciplines. More than this, there are good sociologists outside the universities and kindred bases. Moreover, there are now also a significant number of good sociologists who cannot get a foothold in settings that offer liveable salaries and security: many of these are being lost to the discipline. But I am jumping ahead again.

Typically, the award of a Chair brings with it an opportunity to give an inaugural lecture. I received and accepted such an offer and delivered the lecture in 2002. The title I devised was ‘The Jigsaw Model: Towards a Composite Picture of Health in Society’. What I called the ‘jigsaw model’, briefly, had three aspects. First was a ‘best guess’ at an *overall picture* of the dynamic, complex and highly differentiated social world we inhabit. The second was a series of models, articulated in terms of *logics*, *relations* and *figurations*, each constituting a discrete piece of the jigsaw. And the third was a process of *dialectical reasoning* by means of which the sense of the overall picture informs the application of models, and the application of models informs the sense of the overall picture. An additional comment on the salience of logics, relations and figurations is in order. Consider the following example: the *logic* of the economy can be seen as the regime of capital accumulation. This logic establishes the parameters for *real* (in Bhaskar’s sense) *relations* of class. Such relations, when exercised, become generative mechanisms and manifest themselves in tendencies, albeit in open systems. The logic of capital accumulation and relations of class can be examined within a number of different *figurations*. My sociology of health inequalities within the figuration of the British nation-state can still be framed in terms of the jigsaw model, though I have in fact ceased to do so. The central theme running through my lecture was the increasing health inequalities in the context of figuration of the British nation state. I drew on two sets of logics and relations. The first, as mentioned, was the logic of the regime of capital accumulation and relations of class; and the second was the logic of state regulation and its associated relations of command. My argument can be anticipated from my earlier account: it was that in financialised or rentier capitalism relations of class have expanded their influence over those of command, with the result that they exert increasing control over the formation and implementation of social and health policy, with deleterious consequences for poorer member of society. I went so far as to sum this process up by referring to the GBH.

The lecture was introduced by Mike Spyer, formerly Dean at the Royal Free and subsequently Dean within the UCL Medical School, after which Stan Newman said a few complementary words. I’ve no idea what Mike Spyer, a physiologist, made of my lecture, nor would I wish to speculate! I enjoyed it, although it’s always problematic trying to assess how these things go. Annette and my daughters - Nikki, Sasha, Rebecca and Miranda - were there, as were a group of Epsom friends with whom I had played badminton every Monday evening for nearly three decades (not all of whom shared or share my political convictions). A number of my peers and colleagues were also present, for which I was enormously appreciative. More alarmingly, sitting next to James Nazroo, was George Brown. Maybe fortunately, I had no chance to discuss the lecture with George, but I cannot think he found it within his comfort zone. I did, however, have a quick exchange with Mike Wadsworth, then also based at UCL. Mike said he had enjoyed the talk and asked me if he could attend the next one. I must have looked confused, so he added: ‘well obviously you’ll be sacked by UCL after this one.’ Inaugural lectures are strange experiences, a kind of trial by fire. We adjourned to the nearby Senior Common Room and bar.

It was in 2006 that I was to experience a trauma of a very different genus. It came out of the blue. I was chatting to our Centre secretary, Liz Wake, outside Stan Newman’s office; and she let it drop that the Head of the Department of Medicine in which our Centre nestled wanted to see me. I was curious as to why and not a little alarmed. Why was Patrick Vallance about to summon me into his presence? As I was querying the purpose, Stan appeared and overheard our conversation. ‘We had better have a word’, he said. Seated in his office, there occurred an explanation that left me both bewildered and unsettled. Stan explained that three member of our Centre - James Thompson, Roland Littlewood and me - had been identified as surplus to requirements. Discussions had taken place around possible transfers to other departments within UCL, including Michael Marmot’s Department of Epidemiology, but with no success. Stan commiserated, said he knew that I particularly liked teaching, and mentioned that he had contacts with Thames Valley University and could if I wished contact them on my behalf. The fact that Thames Valley was at the time ranked bottom of all British universities only added to my confusion.

I left Stan’s office stunned and disorientated. A short while after I found myself seated in front of Patrick Vallance, future Chief Scientific Officer, with Stan in attendance. The former went through my CV, which was clearly beyond his ken, and asked if there was a senior colleague to which he could submit a few chosen publications for their feedback. I suggested Nicky Britten, whom I respected and felt was broadly sympathetic with my work (apparently the result, when Nicky’s comments eventually arrived, was positive). Patrick also helpfully suggested that I attract a ‘small grant’ as Principal Investigator, say for £1m, and think about getting a paper in the journal *Nature*. He was clearly clueless as to how sociology differed from his own field of laboratory medicine. I nodded obligingly and as requested made comprehensive notes on what we had apparently ‘agreed’ and was expected of me in consequence.

There were several sequelae to this meeting. The first was that the threat of imminent redundancy seemed to have receded, even if temporarily: there had been no mention of it, but rather a generalised warning about my future measurably productivity. I felt obliged to respond to the demands made on me in some meaningful way *as a matter of self-protection*. The second was the onset of a stressful period of continuing uncertainly: what did Patrick Vallance’s pointed pep talk with its implicit warning add up to? Was it an appraisal that was setting me up to fall short? Third, I immediately adjusted my output of publications, switching from a longstanding predilection for writing books to concentrating on articles in peer review journals (I had passed off my book on sport to Patrick by insisting that I did it in my spare time: some people relaxed by playing golf, I explained, but I relaxed by writing on sport). In the event I upped my rate of publishing markedly after this meeting, finding it easier and quicker by far to write short articles than long books. Fourth, I began to make enquires with a view to transferring to another part of UCL. I did this on my own initiative and without sharing my intentions or the results with either Stan or Patrick. What I found was that the options for moving into another UCL faculty or department were indeed available. One Dean asked me about my teaching and, on discovering that I did ten lectures to 360 medical students, let slip that this alone was worth £100,000 in paper money, so in this respect at least I was a desirable asset. The possibility of establishing a Unit in Medical Sociology was mooted, but Paul Higgs decided that his position was more secure staying put, so that option died a death. In the end I moved into Graham Hart’s Department of Infection and Population Health in Mortimer Market, the other side of Tottenham Court Road, but I’ll come to that. A fourth consequence of this unsettling episode was a souring of my relationship with Stan Newman. It seemed to me that he had exaggerated the threat to my position at UCL, and this interpretation seemed to be confirmed by my conversations with other Deans and Heads of Department throughout UCL as well as within UCL Medical School: I was obviously not a *persona non grata*. Had it suited Stan to appease/please Patrick Vallance by making savings? Some years on my anger has subsided and I now like to think that the unexpected and awkward initial conversation with Stan had caught him unawares and led him to improvise and unwittingly to convey a misleading impression.

I had a long exploratory conversation with Graham Hart prior to moving into an office in Mortimer Market. I had known him as an excellent medical sociologist for some years, and I had also been on his selection committees twice, first time when he was appointed to a lectureship at the Middlesex, and then again when he was appointed as Professor to run the Department of Infection and Population Health. I stressed to Graham that I needed and wanted to retain my independence and not to find myself under pressure to tick too many institutional boxes. My assumption was that if I transferred to his department, he would stand to gain a post - to reoccupy as he wished - on my retirement (in seven years or so). I found our conversation reassuring. After all, I was reasonably productive in my own non-metric fashion, and I had had some impact on our subdiscipline over the years.

It proved a good move. Graham was to remain welcoming and supportive and my productivity did at least not falter. Moreover, my newfound proclivity to publish more articles, without neglecting books and chapters, stood me in reasonable stead. I published seven papers in peer review journals in 2006 and went on to place a further 20 before retiring in 2013. These figures are of course unimpressive when compared with those accomplished by contemporary sociologists, but for me they represented something of a surge. To lend perspective to this, I also published four edited books between 2006 and 2013, plus 24 chapters. My new office provided the kind of private space that I had always seen as essential given my preference for solitary working and my meta-reflexive inclinations. Graham Hart’s office was just down the corridor and I was fortunate to be close to a number of enthusiastic and friendly researchers of varying degrees of seniority. I found it interesting that I was to mix and get on more easily with this group than I ever had with most colleagues in psychiatry.

So 2006 was a turning point. My record was no longer subject to the ruminations of a clueless laboratory-based academic and the threat to my employment had been lifted, I presumed permanently rather than temporarily. At the same time my perambulations around UCL in search of job security had taught me a good deal about UCL politics and the Machiavellian machinations of some Heads of Department and Deans. I had added to my stock of experiential knowledge to compliment that acquired through professional sociology. Before too long this was to prove useful.

10: DRIFTING LEFTWARDS

To most people reading thus far it will be apparent that my lasting attractions to the works of Habermas and Bhaskar suggests a sympathy with ‘left-of-centre’ thinking. After all, Habermas was once a Marxist, and Bhaskar remained one. Sketch 1 traced my ancestry and established that my parents, Ron and Margaret, were not politically motivated or electorally oriented. In terms of British parliamentary and local politics, each had at one election or another voted Conservative, Labour and Liberal. My own teenage mind and interests lay elsewhere: I have memories in my mid-teens of feeling sorry for Douglas Hume being regularly torn apart by Harold Wilson in the run up to the 1964 general election (handsomely won by Wilson). In short, I was disengaged. My few discussions with Ron, who was politically well informed if in no way evangelical, had not solicited any kind of stance or commitment. It was this ambivalent frame of mind that I transported to Surrey University in, of all years, 1968. I cannot say that my three years of undergraduate study altogether removed my ambivalence. Even the torrid happenings at LSE featuring Robin Blackburn and others, and more significantly in continental Europe, largely passed me by. But what did come to pass in that three-year sojourn paved the way for what were to prove incremental changes in my political outlook.

It is often claimed by right-of-centre enthusiasts that sociology attracts those inclined to radical socialist imaginings. This is not my experience or view. On the contrary, I suspect sociology, naturally and properly, tends to prompt a ‘rethink’ in its apprentices. This does not have to occur through introductions to Marxist theory. Often sufficient are either the macro-theories of other canonical thinkers like Weber or Durkheim, or the accumulated body of empirical research on the changing nature of British society; macro-theory invites the asking of questions that are new to many students, while familiarisation with multiple and varied research studies insist on an acceptance of the reality of system rationalisation and lifeworld colonisation (Habermas) or the constraints exercised on many, even most, citizens by imposing power 2 relations (Bhaskar). Of course, I encountered fellow students and students I have since taught myself who do not fit in with this characterisation: one Intercalated B.Sc student, president of his medical school’s Conservative Society, opted to take our course with the express intent of getting to know his enemy better.

In my case I benefitted from informal dialogues with my undergraduate peers at Surrey as well as from lectures, seminars and, above all, my reading, prescribed or otherwise. One mature student with views far more committed and organised than my own was Pete Kirby, a Marxist and a member of the Community Party. Finding myself in the same tutorial group as Pete, I was constantly challenged to clarify and develop my thinking. I had the benefit too of continuing discussions with Annette, whom I had got to know as a member of the same grouping and with whom I had begun to share my future. Thinking back more than half a century later, I am inclined to think that by the time I left Surrey University in 1971 I was at least primed to sidle leftwards. After my brief flirtation with philosophy, undertaking a Ph.D at Bedford College obliged me to revisit social and sociological theory, albeit often through the restricted lens of the health field. Sharing lecturing duties with Marxist activist and union rep David Blane at Charing Cross from 1972 to 1975, and, especially, teaching on the Intercalated B.Sc, further refined my sense of social order versus change. In all likelihood the years of transition from welfare state to financialised or rentier capitalism, culminating in the demise of the Wilson/Callaghan Labour governments in the second half of the 1970s and the election of Thatcher in 1979 added impetus to my changing views.

By the time I was systematically reading the original works of Bhaskar and Habermas I was identifying as strongly anti-Tory and already suspicious of the will or capability of the Labour Party to effect social structural change (for all that for want of an alternative I voted for them whenever an occasion presented itself). I stuck with Labour, although with diminishing enthusiasm, through the years of Kinnock’s abandonment of any pretensions to champion socialist policies, even sharing something of the enthusiasm greeting the landslide victory of Tony Blair in 1997. This at least marked the end of the Thatcher/Major years from 1979 to 1997. My relief-cum-hope, always carefully packaged, faded rapidly. The ‘third way’ of New Labour, articulated by leading sociologist Tony Giddens, betrayed just how far Labour’s slipping and sliding after the brutal treatment of Michael Foot in the 1983 general election had proceeded. The New Labour years of 1997-2010 showed a real intent to appease Murdoch and his acolytes and readers and to parade Labour’s compatibility with the more rapacious and unforgiving phase of capitalism that Thatcher had championed and helped fuel.

It is worth stressing that if one lived through the change from welfare state to rentier capitalism this disjunction was accompanied by a marked shift rightwards on the pollical spectrum. This was as apparent in the US as in the UK. The regimes of Clinton and Blair were significantly to the right of those of Kennedy/Johnson and of Wilson respectively. And then, under Blair, came 2003!

There is no need here to delve too deeply into the false prospectus deployed to justify the illegal excursion into Iraq. None of the alleged ‘weapons of mass destruction’ were found, or indeed existed (but the Iraqi oil fields certainly did). I well recall the mass demonstration in London on 15 February 2003, coordinated with protests in over 600 cities globally. Estimates have put participation worldwide between eight and eleven million. Rome saw around three million, Madrid one a half million. The numbers in London were inevitably disputed: the police suggested 750 thousand, the BBC around one million, and the organisers three million. The Scamblers were well represented, with Sasha, Rebecca and Miranda joining Annette and I, and with Nikki unable to attend but with us in spirit. It was, I recall, a chilly day as we arrived at Waterloo Station and made for the Embankment. Hundreds of coaches from more than 250 cities and towns across the country discharged their heterogeneous cargoes of protesters. Euan Ferguson from the *Observer* recorded representations, among others, from the ‘Eton George Orwell Society’, ‘Archeologists Against War’, ‘Walthamstow Catholic Church’, ‘Swaffam Women’s Choir’ and ‘Notts Country Supporters Say Make Love Not War (and a home win against Bristol would be nice)’. All Met leave had been cancelled. By the time we reached Hyde Park we were too late to hear the likes of Tony Benn, George Galloway, Charles Kennedy, Bianca Jagger and Harold Pinter, so we did what Scamblers do and found a cafe.

Reflecting on this phenomenological experience of principled comradeship, I would make three observations. First, it failed. Blair’s right-hand man, Campbell, later suggested in his ‘Diaries’ that Blair wavered. Maybe, but I suspect not. Second, as Tariq Ali and others maintained, its subtext or tacit purpose - to mobilise and engage people - likely paid dividends. Old Emory University friend Terry Boswell once purported to show empirically that such protests and rebellions tend to be cumulative and are sometimes catalysts for future change. And third, we Scamblers took encouragement from our participation. In one poll for the *Guardian*, 6% of people claimed that someone from their household went on the march or had intended to, which translates into 1.25 million households and fits in with the estimates of circa two million attenders (assuming that more than one person could come from each household). I felt then as I feel now that the Iraq ‘adventure’ epitomised Blair’s premiership and his behaviour since. Together with George W Bush, he should in my opinion be charged with war crimes. The ‘collateral damage’ consequent on the invasion of Iraq is immeasurable.

I don’t think the events of 15 February 2003 hastened my identification with socialism, but it may well have consolidated it. I was by then already espousing the GBH and had indicated its compatibility with a neo-Marxist theory of society. Was I by then, and am I now, a Marxist? Well, a socialist and neo-Marxist in any event (if the reader will for the moment excuse the ambivalence and contestability of these terms). I would firmly maintain that the writings of Marx, despite their dating back more than century and a half, remain the essential starting point for building a convincing contemporary sociological theory of modern society and social change. I was also edging towards espousing the view that sociology is properly a normative social science, of which more later. Regrettable though Habermas’ departure form Marxist thinking might be, he appended something worthwhile in examining and retheorising the evolution and ongoing tension between communicative and strategic action. Bhasker, for his part, sought actively to advance critical realism as a vital under-labouring philosophy for a Marxism fit for the twenty-first century.

But I was at the same time very aware that any commitment to a neo-Marxist sociology must be answerable to internal and external critique and to empirical research. Moreover, non-Marxist thinkers undeniably have much to offer. In the next sketch I consider the works of Margaret (‘Maggie’) Archer, whose work on internal conversations and reflexivity I have already alluded to; she remains a thinker much influenced by Roy Bhaskar but her theoretical allegiances differ in important respects from mine. As my writings on social phenomena like health inequalities proceeded, I was to make good use of Maggie’s writings. My more general point here, however, travels beyond the advocacy of an open mind fit for the study of an open society. Nor am I merely drawing attention once again to the extensive overlaps in theoretical treatises, extending to numerous reinventions of the wheel. Sociological theories are only exceptionally proved or disproved. On occasion they might receive a degree of corroboration or even be ‘falsified’, to borrow Karl Popper’s concept. Typically, however, there is a discernible fissure, even a gulf, between a theory in sociology and the data available to confront it. The literature on health inequalities is a case I point. As I have argued previously, most of the data cited in this field is quantitative and social-epidemiological in nature. To put it crudely, it trades in statistical correlations and offers a best guess at causation. Further, this guesswork stops at the experience of events, rendered more or less accessible for analysis via their reduction to variables. It is not that this research is without return, far from it. Moreover, there is a growing body of qualitative and ethnographic research to factor in. But what I have argued is that the bulk of this research, quantitative and qualitative, testifies to the existence of real social structures. Indeed, these structures *must* exist given the consistent and enduring results of otherwise limited empirical investigations. By the early noughties I was going further and claiming that it *must* be real relations of class that are pivotal, and I was explicitly commending a neo-Marxist understanding of class relations, one fit for use in the twentieth-first century UK and elsewhere. I had confessed my commitment to a ‘Marxian’ analysis and a concomitant politics.

11: THE NORWEGIAN CONNECTION

In 2005 I was invited to give a plenary lecture at the annual autumn meeting of the Medical Sociology Group of the British Sociological Association. This represented, and represents, a kind of coming of age for medical sociologists in the UK. The title I chose was ‘Social Structure and Health: A Narrative of Neglect?, and the intention was to invite more attention to the structural substrates of phenomena of interest to medical sociologists. The lecture was probably overly ambitious: I focused on the potential contributions of critical realism to examine structurally-oriented causal-explanatory accounts of health inequalities and stigma attribution: an abbreviated summary of can be found in *Medical Sociology News* (Vol 31, No 3, Winter, 2005). I remember two moments, the first when I quoted Galbraith, who once said that when lecturing he would periodically say ‘and in conclusion’, not because he was finishing but because ‘it gave people hope’; and the second when daughter Sasha’s newborn son, Elliot, was so bored that within two minutes he had to be taken out bawling.

The following day I was approached by a Norwegian attendee, with a touch of the Viking in his appearance, who asked me if I might be willing to give a talk to a neophyte Norwegian Medical Sociology Workshop in Trondheim in April of 2006. This was my introduction to Aksel Tjora. I replied in the affirmative and my visit to Trondheim in 2007 was to prove the first of many to this annual festival. From 2008 onwards, well into my retirement post-2013, Annette was to accompany me as a participant. Aksel proved a relaxed host as well as being an excellent sociologist with flair in abundance. He is also a ‘fixer’, someone who makes things happen: there is more of the autonomous reflexive about him than there is about me! We have since collaborated on a number of projects and a number of publications including two books. Trondheim is a delightful town, and I have grown very fond of the close group of Norwegian colleagues I have met over the years. I have learned much about their local health services research in general and about eHealth and telemedicine in particular. In a subsequent meeting in Tromso I was shown a control room from which physicians were able to dictate celebrated, precise and life-saving surgery to preserve the life of a young man who had been attacked by a polar bear. It may well be the contemporary neoliberal desire to cut costs that prompts much investment in innovative information and communication technologies (ICTs), but in a country that stretches into lonely, isolated spaces of the Arctic Circle they can facilitate vital modes of healthcare delivery.

Aksel, as a fellow enthusiast, introduced me to Trondheim’s cafes. It was in one of these that we conceived the idea of an edited collection on *Café Society*, which eventually saw the light of day in 2013. Some years later, in 2020, I was to become his co-author in producing an English version of his Norwegian book *Communal Forms: A Sociological Exploration of the Concept of Community*. In the early years of our friendship I was to discover the Norwegian habit of buying alcohol to drink at home prior to going out to bars and clubs late evening. It was a habit born of the steep price of alcohol. During my first visit I boldly offered to buy a round of drinks for local sociologists and was instantly warned off such extravagant gestures. Aksel and I used to drink and chat until around 3am in the early years, which was the common closing time. We were invariably joined by Ph.D students and postdocs. At the close of the noughties, however, the authorities were ‘tightening up’ and in any case I, and even Aksel, had since aged a bit.

It would be tedious here to wade through my various Norwegian talks, which took up themes readers will already be familiar with, but four episodes warrant mentioning. The first notes an Aksel initiative that impressed me enormously. It was the establishment in the very centre of Trondheim, and at some distance from the NTNU out-of-town campus, of a ‘Sociology Clinic’ (one of Aksel’s postgrads at my invitation wrote a blog about it for the journal *Social Theory and Health*). The Clinic was designed to provide a space for municipal and commercial exploratory and planning meetings - several community studies have been based there - as well as a fantastic postgrad teaching resource. At the time of writing the Clinic is still going strong and remains a model for academic excursions into the community and for public engagement. Aksel got it off the ground as a strictly personal initiative. Revealingly, he did so without going through the normal departmental and institutional channels. How would UCL respond to such a project? Defensively, proprietarily, and ultimately negatively I suspect.

A second significant event arose out of meeting Dag Album in Trondheim. Dag had a longstanding research interest in the ‘prestige’ attached to different medical diagnoses. He subsequently acquired funding for Annette and I to visit him at Oslo University, where I was able to discuss this further and to meet with his Ph.D students as a kind of informal adviser. Back at UCL I was encouraged to undertake a small study of ‘disease prestige’ with an intake of my medical students. What the results indicated, I inferred, was that disease prestige is, if not a function of, very much associated with the differential status and rewards of the medical specialities involved; but this is an inference that I think Dag remains sceptical of. I analysed and sent my results to Dag, and we later met up in London, but I didn’t attempt to publish anything myself. It remains on a back-burner I guess. Dag, a much-respected medical sociologist in Norway, moves slowly and surely. But our trip to the wonderful city of Oslo, to Ibsen’s house, to its cafes, and to a superb modern ballet at its impressive Opera House, stick in the memory.

A third episode recalls another meeting of medical sociologists, not this time at Trondheim but aboard a ferry departing from Tromso. I had agreed to give a talk that was outside my comfort zone: on ‘eHealth and Social Theory’, and this took place ‘at sea’ and in the company of a stellar cast of colleagues better informed on the topic than me. As well as the Trondheim contingent and representations from Oslo and Tromso, with us were Sue Ziebland, Cathy Pope, Susan Halford and Alex Broom. I redefined my relative ignorance as detachment and ploughed on. I noted that eHealth covers a wide range of ICTs, including electronic health records, telemedicine, health informatics, health knowledge management (Medscape), virtual healthcare teams, mHealth (mobiles), medical research using ‘grids’, and healthcare information systems. I discussed different approaches to sociology and went on to posit certain ‘issue clusters’ with which social theory might usefully resonate. I split these between micro-, meso- and macro-orientation. As far as micro-theory is concerned, I stressed the salience of demarcating virtual from face-to-face interaction. Many ICTs come under the umbrella of eHealth and are characterised by the ‘mediation’ of information storage and transmission by technologies. The virtual abbreviates, codes and sometimes re-inscribes the actual. Indeed, the virtual can trump, supercede and, as Baudrillard might express it, be ‘more real’ than the actual. eHealth can involve dealings with ‘familiar strangers’ who are present *but absent*. The hinterland of Tromso is very different, I insisted, from South London. Commenting on meso-theory, I suggested that eHealth technologies are an important vehicle for Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’. They may epitomise a new ‘power/knowledge disciplinary’, but they also offer effective modes of transmission of an ‘ideology of personal responsibility’ (maybe leading to a pervasive policing of the responsible self). Finally, I appended a remark or two on the relevance of macro-theory. Faith in ICTs, I intimated, can be interpreted as a core tenet of neoliberal ideology. Rhetorics of ‘choice’ facilitate this ideology, offering up for sale in our consumer society a false but lucrative prospectus to would-be patients. If only I had known then of the sequelae of the Conservative Party’s calculated underfunding of the NHS post-2010 to promote for-profit providers, namely, the explicit introduction of ICTs into routine medical practice! More important than my talk, however, was the trip up the Norwegian coast and into the Arctic Circle. The views were stunning and an exceptional cruise culminated in coffees together in the awe-inspiring Lofoten archipelago.

A final comment jumps ahead to 2017 and a conference in Paris, one of my favourite cities, not least for its famous cafes. I include it here because it was another gathering organised by Aksel. It was here that I introduced the idea of a neoliberal phase of university education from 2010 on. This, I argued, is epitomised by a privatisation agenda, that is, the displacement of public funding by fund-raising in an open and increasingly commercial marketplace. I emphasised five themes: we have witnessed a system colonisation, and a shift in the character of higher education from bureaucratisation to commodification; this system colonisation has with gathering momentum taken on the character of McDonaldisation, with standardised formats being applied to teaching, examining and assessments of academic performance; a new and insidious cultural relativity has permeated higher education, making it difficult to provide compelling critiques of what Ritzer in *The McDonaldisation of Society* calls ‘the irrationality of the rational’; education has ceded crucial ground to the inculcation of job-oriented ‘skill-sets’; and, a far-reaching and worrying shift this, sociology has become progressively tamer.

I then drew on Bourdieu’s theory to take this thesis a step further. I had better briefly lay some groundwork. Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ refers to the mental structures, or schemes, by which people deal with the social world. Habitus is the internalisation of the structures that comprise the social world. Thus, it reflects objective divisions around class, gender, race and age (for example). It varies in other words with an individual’s position in the social world. Those who occupy similar positions will tend to have a similar habitus, giving rise to a ‘collective habitus’. Habitus emerges over time and acts like a durable ‘structuring structure’. It comes from practice, and it shapes practice. It predisposes people to think and act in patterned ways, but without determining their action. A companion concept is that of ‘field’. This is most satisfactorily explicated ‘relationally’ rather than structurally. The field is a family or network of relations among the objective positions within it. The occupants of positions can be either agents or institutions. The social world has multiple semi-autonomous fields, of which higher education is but one example. All of them have their own specific logics and all generate among actors a belief about the things that are at stake in a field. A field is an arena of struggle, or competition, with people or collectivities occupying positions and oriented to defending/improving them. The field, in short, is a kind of competitive marketplace in which agents or institutions or both employ various types of ‘capital’ - economic, cultural, social and symbolic – to defend or further their interests. However, the field of power (politics) is of the utmost significance: the hierarchy of power relationships within the political field serves to structure all the other fields.

The obvious questions posed by Bourdieu are: first, what is the relationship between any given field and the political field; second, what is the objective structure of the relations among positions in the field; and third, what is the nature of the habitus of the agents/collectivities who occupy the various types of position within the field? The positions in the field are determined by the extent and strength of ‘flow’ of each type of capital (economic = wealth, income; cultural = taste, connections; social = social relations; and symbolic = status). Occupants of positions employ (structured but not structurally determined) strategies to defend or enhance them. Bourdieu also, finally, used the notion of ‘symbolic violence’. The state, he contends, is the site of struggle to secure a monopoly of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is a form of what he calls ‘soft power’. The education system, for example, is a major conduit for exercising power over people.

In my talk I drew on a mix of these ideas to venture a *habitus of compliance* characterising teachers and researchers in higher education in the UK in the neoliberal phase. It is a habitus, I suggested, that is a product of Bourdieu’s political field directly shaping the semi-autonomous field of higher education. I drew attention to the introduction of university fees, initially by Blair’s New Labour regime in 1998 (fees up to £1,000 per annum), extended by this same government in 2004 (fees up to £3,000 pe annum), and then extended by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 (fees up to £9,000 per annum), and finally extended yet again by the Conservatives in 2017 (fees up to £9,250 per annum). Fees for overseas undergraduates had by then stage reached £10-35,000 per annum. I also referred to the Higher Education and Research Act, England, which received its royal assent on 27 April 2017. This Act: heralded the privatisation of higher education; removed direct funding of undergraduate programmes in the humanities and social sciences; opened the door to for-profit providers via an ‘Office for Students’; required research to be governed by a (utilitarian) ‘impact agenda’; and tied raising fees in the future to teaching appraisals in universities (TEF).

Universities had become businesses in financialised or rentier capitalism. I used a few fictitious but very familiar quotations to evoke this shift to a habitus of compliance: ‘the job description says’; ‘I’ve been set specific goals’; ‘it’s the stakeholders who matter’; ‘come on, we live in tricky times’; sociology is a broad church and I’m doing my bit’; and ‘I’m no collaborator’. But, I concluded, we *are*, sociology *is*, what we – between us – do. The taming process has been profound.

One of the criticisms of the theories of Bourdieu that I have briefly outlined and used in this sketch is that he privileges structure, and maybe culture too, over agency. It is a criticism made by Margaret Archer among others. Given her relevance to the development of my own take on critical realism, it is appropriate, not last chronologically, that I consider aspects of her considerable body of work next.

12: ARCHER’S MORPHOGENESIS

Maggie Archer has distanced herself from a significant post-doc mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, by suggesting that he paid too little attention to agency. It is a disagreement that trespasses on fine-grained philosophical territory, but it also provides a convenient opening here. What did Bourdieu argue? I will be brief and am again resorting to what I hope is an accessible precis. His thesis is complex and multi-layered, but the gist seems to be that agency can neither be reduced to intentionality nor to the pre-existing structures from which it emerges. His theory holds that our agency, what we do, arises out of dispositions accumulated via socialisation, and that *it is as much the product of factors of which we remain unconscious as it is of our intentions* (incidentally, I’m attracted to the idea of ‘unconscious mechanisms’, though I’ve not as yet integrated them with my theories). So for Bourdieu, our agency resonates deeply with our structurally and culturally acquired mindset, or *habitus*, which itself varies according to the social context, or *field*, in which we enter or find ourselves.

Archer requires more from agency than this. I draw in what follows on the Introduction I wrote with colleagues Mark Carrigan and Tom Brock to a collection we edited of Archer’s writings, published as *Structure, Culture and Agency: Selected Papers of Margaret Archer* in 2017. Archer explores structure, culture and agency in a way that owes much to Bhaskar’s critical realism, but which also shows a strong independent thrust. In her *Culture and Agency*, published in 1988, and more particularly in her *Realist Social Theory*, published in 1995, she complained that social theory, including critical realism, had long shown more interest in how structural and cultural properties are transmitted to agents and shape their thoughts, values and actions than to how these properties are accommodated and dealt with, sometimes innovatively, by agents. She sees culture not as a community of shared meanings, but rather as an objective system, replete with ‘complementarities and contradictions’, which agents both draw upon and elaborate. A desire to correct the bias ‘against agency’ runs through her work. She notes that what she calls ‘causal efficacy’ has tended to be granted more frequently to structure than to agency; and she proceeds to argue that denying autonomy to agency - what she calls ‘downwards conflation’ - has far exceeded the denial of autonomy to structure (‘upwards conflation’). She rejects Tony Giddens’ contention that structure and agency are ‘co-constitutative’, that is, that structure is reproduced through agency but is simultaneously constrained and enabled by structure (‘central conflation’). In sum, she rejects each of downwards, upwards and central conflations of structure and agency. Conflationary approaches, she insists, rightly in my view, precludes any sociological investigation of the relative influence of structure on agency *and agency on structure*. Echoing Bhaskar, she agrees that structure and agency are interdependent, and goes on to argue that at any given time pre-existing structures constrain and enable agents, whose actions produce intended and unintended consequences, which ‘reproduce’ (*morphostasis*) or ‘transform’ (*morphogenesis*) these structures. This is a thesis that certainly gives more latitude to agency than Bourdieu allows. My own inclination thus far is to accept Archer’s analytic distinctions, which accord true causal efficacy to agency, whilst accepting Bourdieu’s qualification that we exercise the agency we possess much less often than is commonly assumed. Much of our lives, *but not all*, are in fact lived travelling along pre-existing structurally and culturally laid and cleared pathways.

Archer donates a timeline and a formula: structural conditioning underlying/*leading to* social interaction underlying/*leading to* structural elaboration. She refers in this context to ‘morphogenetic sequences’. At any given time, pre-existing structures constrain and enable agents, whose actions in turn lead to structural elaboration and the reproduction or transformation of existing structures. She maintains that conceptualising things in terms of morphogenetic sequences permits both the isolation of those structural and/or cultural factors that afford a context of action for agents, and the investigation of how these factors mould the subsequent interactions of agents and how those interactions in turn reproduce or transform the initial context. Social processes are inevitably comprised of many morphogenetic sequences, but their temporal ordering opens the door to examinations of the ’internal dynamics of each sequence’. It is sociological practice, the doing of sociology, that guides her thinking here and elsewhere.

Once again it is neither possible nor necessary in a slim volume like this, which is oriented to outlining and reflecting on the largely unreflexive construction of a babyboomer career in sociology, to explore any theorist’s work in detail. Bear with me. But I must deal briefly with Archer’s notion of the ‘internal conversation’, to which I alluded much earlier in these sketches. Personal reflexivity, for Archer, mediates the effects of objective social forces on us. A direct quotation from *Structure, Agency and the Internal* Conversation, published in 2003, is warranted here, since the idea underlies many of my sketches:

‘reflexivity performs this mediatory role by virtue of the fact that we deliberate about ourselves in relation to the social situations that we confront, certainly fallibly, certainly incompetently and necessarily under our own descriptions, because that is the only way we can know anything. To consider human reflexivity play that role of mediation also means entertaining the fact that we are dealing with two ontologies: the objective pertaining to social emergent properties and the subjective pertaining to agential emergent properties. What is entailed by the above is that subjectivity is not only (a) real, but (b) irreducible, and (c) that it possesses causal efficacy.’

The internal conversation signals the way in which we humans reflexively make our way in the world. It is, Archer, argues, what makes us active as opposed to passive agents. It is via these that we devise projects which, if successful, translate into a set of practices. Moreover, this set of practices constitutes a personal *modus vivendi*. So, *concerns lead to projects lead* *to practices*. Our projects and practices can be undesirable as well as desirable!

I earlier described Archer’s distinctions between three dominant modes of reflexivity: communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity and meta-reflexivity. Drawing on her own small-scale exploratory study oriented to social mobility, she suggests that communicative reflexivity is associated with social immobility; autonomous reflexivity with upward mobility; and meta-reflexivity with social volatility. Expanding on this, it might be said that communicative reflexives contribute to social stability and integration through their ‘evasion’ of constraints and enablements, their endorsement of the circumstances of their births and infancy, and their active forging of a dense micro-world that reconstitutes their ‘contextual continuity’ and projects it into the future. By contrast, the autonomous reflexives act strategically, in Archer’s memorable phrasing, ‘by avoiding society’s snakes to ride up its ladders.’ They represent contextual discontinuity. The meta-reflexives are society’s ‘subversive agents’, as immune from social rewards and blandishments associated with enablements as they are from the forfeits associated with its constraints. They are the likely source of counter-cultural values. I must pause here to qualify my earlier self-analysis in terms of meta-reflexivity (with occasional interludes of autonomous reflexivity). It may well be the mode of reflexivity most appropriate to my biography and my career, but I have also suggested, picking up on Archer’s characterisation, that meta-reflexives might best represent sources of oppositional thinking in relation to the onset of contemporary rentier capitalism. As one colleague also writing on health inequalities retorted, this might be wishful thinking on my part (ie a case of self-projection). At any event, I shrink from any such inference.

In her *Reflexive Imperative* in 2012 Archer develops the notion of a morphogenetic society, in which the logic and global reach of ‘opportunity’ require the continuous revision of personal projects and serve as obstacles to any settled *modus vivendi*. This not only suggests a general shift away from communicative to autonomous reflexivity, but it also makes it likely that some people, maybe many people, become ‘fractured reflexives’. Fractured reflexives are those whose internal conversations add to their disorientation and distress rather than precipitating purposeful courses of action. It is communicative reflexives who are most likely to slip into this category of fragility. In a later paper in *Social Theory and Health*, on health inequalities again, I went on to suggest that it might be worth investigating possible linkages between fractured reflexivity and poorer health and reduced longevity.

To return briefly to the idea of a morphogenetic society. What does this imply? I have often heard Maggie Archer decry the modern tendency to write of our contemporary social world as ‘X’ or ‘Y’ society; and I confess to using the term ‘fractured society’ myself, a nomenclature I shall come to in due course. But Archer herself writes of the ‘morphogenetic society’. What this implies is that partial morphostasis has given way of late to morphogenesis. Society remains structured of course, but there has been a shift. Shifts like this, in agency as well as structure, occur in interlocking and temporally complex ways. Agents come to be who they are and to act as they do in contexts set by social structural parameters. On an altogether different timescale the structures themselves change as a result of the choices and activities of historically situated agents. This results in a series of ‘cycles’ with different timelines. Hence the formula we countered before: structural conditioning leads to social interaction leads to structural elaboration.

Archer asks herself what generative mechanisms might be at work here. She sees social morphogenesis as an umbrella concept, ‘whereas any generative mechanism is a particular that needs identifying, describing and explaining - by its own analytic history of emergence.’ In an essay published in 2014 she highlights three orders of emergent properties:

‘the three coincide with what are conventionally known as the micro-, meso, and macro-levels: dealing respectively with the situated action of persons or small groups, because there is no such things as contextless action; with ‘social institutions’, the conventional label for organisations with a particular remit, such as government, health, education etc at the meso level; and with the relation between structure and culture at the most macroscopic level.’

Her argument begins at the macro-level, but with the important rider that each – macro-, meso- and micro-level – stratum is ‘activity-dependent’ on that or those beneath it; and that both downwards and upwards causation are continuous and intertwined.

Society, this thesis insists, comprises the relations between structure and culture. It is the consequence of ‘relations between relations’, all of which are activity-dependent. While structures are largely materially based, culture has primarily to do with ideas. In what Archer calls ‘late modernity’ - and which Paul Higgs and I had deemed it more prudently cautious to call ‘high modernity’ - the interplay between (structural) economic competition and (cultural) technological diffusion has fuelled intensified morphogenesis across the whole array of social institutions. In this way the two - structural and cultural - constituents of the generative mechanisms have themselves undergone morphogenesis, and their synergy has extended this to the rest of the social order via knock-on effects.

It is a thesis that Archer announces and develops with a natural reserve and with a suspicion of overly easy generalisation. She resists writing of the determinate advent of morphogenetic society, preferring to draw the line as suggesting that both structure and culture can presently be said to promote morphogenesis. She goes on to contend that structure and culture issue in different and contrasting ‘situational logics of action’. The for-profit market sector promises to extend the *logic of competition* throughout the social order, embracing schools, universities, hospitals, and so on. But scientific and technological ‘diffusionists’ are committed to a *logic of opportunity*, and so are hostile to bureaucratic regulation and restricted access; outcomes are not appraised in terms of profitability. This tension between structure and culture, based on the discordance between their logics, has yielded a ‘relationally contested order’. No ready-made predictions or prescriptions are offered here. Archer prefers to suggest period of ‘gradualism’, adding the hope that the logic of opportunity will come increasingly to permeate economic activity and nudge things towards the common good.

Once more I have only offered a precis. If it inevitably falls short of doing justice to Maggie’s sociology, I can at least claim that she judged the text I have drawn upon as accurate (similarly, Roy Bhaskar before his untimely death deemed my summarises of his work to be sound). Where does this leave us? I have now given brief accounts of the extensive contributions to philosophy and social and sociological theory of Jurgen Habermas, Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer, proclaiming their salience for my own developing thought. I should reiterate and elaborate on a handful of earlier observations. First, as well as the compelling nature of their arguments, it has always been their ‘usefulness’ in relations to my own sociological projects that has mattered to me. Others have and will continue to have reservations about the compatibility of aspects of the theses of my triad, but I would argue for both the telling power of those aspects of their works that I have ‘borrowed’, and the limited compatibility of precisely these in relation to my own ongoing interests and projects. Later sketches will show just how much my own theory of the fractured society of rentier capitalism owes to these three original thinkers, as well to others.

This might smack of the kind of eclecticism of which colleagues are rightly sceptical. I reject this. I trust I have not just flipped through the canonical texts of my discipline and, like a jackdaw, nicked flashy bits and pieces with instant but superficial appeal. The test, I think, is the use to which I have put what I have taken from the prior works of others as well as the degree to which they hang together in my own theorisations. I shall have more to say later, but by the early noughties I was confident in deploying Bhaskar’s under-labouring philosophy of basic and dialectical critical realism; Habermas’s insistence on a formal universal theory of rationality and aspects at least of his theory of the evolution of (lifeworld-based) communicative and (system-based) strategic action; and Archer’s much more sociological analysis of the structure/agency dyad, reflexivity and morphogenesis. Naturally my own theories are ‘out there’ (in Popper’s as well as Archer’s ‘third world’ of public scrutiny) to be judged as fit for purpose, or not.

13: Revisiting Stigma

Having grown accustomed to arguing for the sociological importance of social structural analysis, maybe it was unsurprising that I came to turn this lens onto my own and others’ studies of stigma. As early as 2004 I published a paper in *Social Theory and Health* entitled ‘Re-framing stigma: felt and enacted stigma and challenges to the sociology of chronic and disabling conditions’. In all probability, however, it was the exacting ‘external’ critique of the 1980s medical sociological paradigm portraying long-term illness and disability as ‘personal tragedies’ by disability theorists and activists that occasioned a change in my thinking. Mike Oliver was quick of the mark in espousing a ‘social model of disability’. This switched the emphasis from the persons affected to those who labelled them and saw and treated them as ‘deviants’, as persons in need of ‘normalising’. It was a powerful intervention, though one that was in its turn to become a subject of critiques. The problem, if problem there is, Mike insisted, lies in the ascription of deviance to people with disabilities. I recall inviting him one year to address the Emory University Summer Programme on Comparative Health Care. I heard him tell the students that the day he broke his back was the best day of his life. If some students looked non-plussed, the programme director that year, Terry Boswell, who had just been diagnosed with motor neurone disease, turned to me and whispered: ‘I don’t think so!’ I think Mike’s point was that his accident had given him a new identity and purpose.

I will return to Oliver’s view that people with disabilities are treated as deviants and oppressed. But first it is necessary to consider the personal tragedy approach to disability in more detail. In the 1980s Mike Bury had written of the ‘biographical disruption’ that chronic and disabling illness occasions; Gareth Williams had discussed the need for ‘narrative reconstruction’ that it provokes; Kathy Charmaz had written of the ‘loss of self’ that it can involve; and I had published my own study of the salience of felt and enacted stigma. Each of these contributions had been routinely cited in subsequent research. It is not simply that they were ‘wrong’; there is, I would argue, value in their findings: people do vary in the way they come to terms with their lot, be it positively or negatively. But they were products of a limited and ultimately misleading and damaging paradigm. Moreover, we were unwittingly complicit in – to use Oliver’s term – the oppression of people with long-term conditions and disabilities. Our studies focused on individuals to the neglect of the social, on the labelled to the neglect of the labellers. In retrospect we should have known better!

When Sasha Scambler and I edited a volume entitled *New Directions in the Sociology of Chronic and Disabling Conditions* in 2010, we took pains to address this issue, and also to try and bridge the gap between two divergent and diverging literatures. ‘Disability Studies’ had by this time, very understandably, become separated from and antagonistic to a medical sociology still too much in thrall to biomedicine. I might add a tangential but important general point here: there have over the years been a number of new disciplinary perspectives that have grown out of disillusionment with the parent discipline of sociology. Notable examples include those focusing on women, race and ethnicity, post-colonialism, disability, sexuality and so on. While I entirely understand that these intellectual and organisational detachments from mainstream sociology have their origins in sociology’s failure adequately to extend its reach into these areas, I disagree with colleagues who celebrate their independence. In my view, sociology’s shrinking core is to be regretted. What I’d like to see is an overhaul of the parent discipline to re-encompass areas of interest and enquiry it neglected for far too long. But back to chronic illness, disability and stigma!

Sasha and I were pleased with the contributors to our edited volume. They were a stellar group: in addition to our own chapters, there were pieces by Kathy Charmaz, Carol Thomas, Tom Shakespeare, Nick Watson, Carl May, Alan Radley, Mike Bury, Gareth Williams and Simon Williams. We had, we hoped, encourages the process of constructing a bridge between medical sociologists and disability theorists. Tom Shakespeare and Nick Watson offered a more nuanced approach to studying disability than the combative stance adopted by Oliver. And the late and much missed Carol Thomas, a skilled bridge-builder in her own right, provided a way to go beyond what she called the medico-centric ‘social deviance’ paradigm long adopted by medical sociologists and the ‘social oppression’ paradigm preferred by breakaway disability theorists. Her concluding paragraph reads as follows:

‘I offer up *the sociology of disablism and impairment* effects to medical sociologists – as an alternative to their traditional *sociology of chronic illness and disability.* In my view, the former provides an analytic framework that avoids the medico-centric assumption that: ‘we study the ways in which people adapt to their socially deviant status caused by diagnoses of chronic illness.’ Rather, the emphasis turns to the social negotiation of the lived experience of both impairment effects *and* with encounters with disablism. Only time will tell if medical sociologists take up the offer – laying the foundations for a closer disciplinary alliance.’

I am pleased to say that Carol, whom we later invited to give a *Social Theory and Health* lecture in London, found my own revised position on stigma encouraging.

So how did my theorising of stigma relations move on from its earlier personal tragedy/social deviance orientation? If the 2003 *Social Theory and Health* paper was a prolegomenon, a fuller and extended account was given in an article in the *Sociological Review* in 2018 and later in my book *A Sociology of Shame and Blame*. I expanded on a distinction drawn previously between stigma, denoting an infringement against norms of shame, and deviance, referring to an infringement against norms of *blame*. It is a distinction which is implicit in much of what Goffman writes in his *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, where he distinguishes between ‘nonconformance’ and ‘noncompliance’; but I wanted to go ‘beyond Goffman’ both to incorporate the causal role of social structures like class, and to explore the dialectics of shame and blame. While I am reluctant to include more tables in these sketches, the two that follow might be helpful in clarifying the conceptual framework I came to deploy. The first table picks up on some concepts introduced in an earlier sketch.

**Concepts of Stigma and Deviance**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **STIGMA** (offences against norms of shame) | **DEVIANCE** (offences against norms of blame) |
| **Enacted stigma**  Actual discrimination (shaming) | **Enacted deviance**  Actual discrimination (blaming) |
| **Felt stigma**  Fear of discrimination and sense of shame | **Felt deviance**  Fear of discrimination and sense of blame |
| **Project stigma**  Active resistance to enacted and felt stigma | **Project deviance**  Active resistance to enacted and felt deviance |

The second table builds on this framework to postulate four categories of persons, three of which have severely negative connotations.

**Stigma and/or Deviance, Shame and/or Blame**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Stigma + Deviance +  **ABJECTS** | Stigma + Deviance –  **REJECTS** |
| Stigma – Deviance –  **NORMALS** | Stigma – Deviance +  **LOSERS** |

The negative trio of labels here might seem over the top, but on reflection I still think not, for all that they seem graphic and unforgiving: each announces and ‘performs’ abnormality. The essence of my argument was that there occurred a shift in government social and health policy, paradigmatically in relation to people with disabilities, as welfare state capitalism gave way to ‘Thatcherite’ rentier capitalism. Those with disabilities found avenues and options closed during the Thatcher years, and there was little let up in the Blair/Brown years: Blair launched the work capability assessment (WCA) in 2008 in an attempt to cut the benefits bill (conveniently redefining disability to this end). The Cameron coalition government from 2010 to 2015 contracted out this process to ATOS, to scandalous effect due to a mix of incompetence and profiteering. While these vindictive measures mobilised disability activists it was, and has remained, an uphill battle. It was in precisely in this context that I wrote of the *weaponizing of stigma.*

This phrase summoned the thesis that in rentier capitalism, *stigma (norms marking an ‘ontological deficit’, nonconformance or shame) has been redefined as deviance (norms* *marking a ‘moral deficit’, noncompliance or blame).* In other words, people who might in past eras have been treated as ‘rejects’, or imperfect outsiders, are now condemned for their difference as ‘abjects’, or morally beyond the pale. *And if people can be effectively rendered abject in the popular imagination, there are few constraints on how badly governments can treat them*. There is very solid evidence that people with disabilities, like other socially marginalised groups (eg asylum seekers), have been systematically ‘punished’ by the state for their putative abjection.

I went on in these publications to suggest that what I called the ‘class/command dynamic’ was a critical causal factor in the emergence of this ‘stigma deviance dynamic’. A more comprehensive introduction and analysis of these and other causal or generative mechanisms or dynamics will have to wait for a future summative sketch of the ‘fractured society’, but a brief paragraph is indicated at this point. The class/command dynamic, as alluded to in an earlier sketch, captures the growing tendency in rentier capitalism for the small, global and nomadic hard core of the capitalist executive active in the UK (well under 1% of the population) to be able to afford to buy policy from the power elite at the summit of the state apparatus. This dynamic underpins the weaponizing of stigma in my view. How? It helps structure, without structurally determining, cultural norms like those of stigma and deviance that inform, reinforce and, if class push comes to political shove, *police* prescriptions of shame and blame. Hence the expedient state-sanctioned for-profit abandonment of inconveniently costly ‘abjects’ like persons with disabilities. I would emphasise that I think these dynamics a vital part of any credible sociological explanation of the current treatment of people with disabilities, *but they are of course only part of a complex story.*

I have often regurgitated my contention in these sketches that it is important for we sociologists to explore the inter-relations between macro-, meso- and micro-social phenomena. I have emphasised the salience of Habermas’ theories in this connection. In my *A Sociology of Shame and Blame* I pursued this theme, not only in relation to disability but also around other marginalised fragments of the population, such as asylum seekers, sex workers and foodbank users. Taking my cue from Kayleigh Garthwaite’s *Hunger Pains* published in 2016, I attempted to show how the dialogues between foodbank clients and staff can only be comprehensively - that is, sociologically - grasped if the wider societal context is factored in. On the face of it, staff/client relations are typically manifestations of communicative action oriented to consensus; they appear contained within and constrained by lifeworld norms and practices. Staff, many of them volunteers, are present to meet as well as they can despairing requests on the part of anguished clients already undermined by felt stigma and/or deviance. They are a last resort. However, this is only part of the story. Distorted communication - indicating the manipulation of clients in accordance with system imperatives - is doubtless rare. Systematically distorted communication - denoting the pursuit of system imperatives notwithstanding staff and clients each conversing in good faith - is by contrast far from exceptional. Making this point shifts our perspective away from Goffman’s focus on micro-phenomena to meso- and macro-theories.

Felt stigma and felt deviance are both detectable in the apparently just and solidary exchanges reported in Garthwaite’s disturbing study. By coming to the aid of people who are homeless or otherwise caught between a rock and a hard place in twenty-first century Britain, foodbank staff provide *compensation and cover* for the politics of post-2010 austerity and its associated welfare cuts, culminating in the introduction of Universal Credit (the deepest cuts predictably impacting the abject). These processes of compensating and covering ameliorate people’s suffering whilst simultaneously taking the sting out of government policy initiatives. At the same time, they are becoming institutionalised as part and parcel of a neoliberal, neo-Victorian or ‘Poor Law’ approach to welfare. Garthwaite herself highlights the risk of foodbanks being consolidated as an accepted mode of delivery, as part of the system, as it already has in other countries. One step further towards macro- or ‘big’ sociology returns us to the class/command and stigma/deviance dynamics derived from a critical realist approach to sociological explanation via the discernment of real social structural causal or generative mechanisms. It is these dynamics that I would still argue are pivotal not only for understanding/explaining the emergence of our finance-dominated rentier capitalism, *but also for understanding/explaining routine conversations between foodbank staff and their increasingly numerous, bewildered, vulnerable and hope-less clients.*

14: UCL AND A HYPOTHETICAL ‘VIRTUAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES’

It came out of the blue! It was an initiative taken from within the office of the UCL’s Vice-Provost for Research, David Price, and I was contacted as a likely lead for an exciting proposal, namely, the establishment within UCL of a Virtual Institute of Sociological Studies. It had long been a grievance of mine that while UCL was home to a significant number of first-rate sociologists, this disciplinary presence was all but unknown to UCL staff, let alone to people outside the institution. Here was a possible remedy, and one with sponsorship in high places. Contentedly at home in my office in Graham Hart’s Department of Infection and Population Health, I was visited by David’s super-efficient emissary Henrietta Bruhn. We collated what data we had on ‘sociology at UCL’ and pondered a strategy. Why not a Virtual *Institute of* *Sociology*, I asked? Internal politics, I was told. Meaning, I enquired? Objections from the Department of Anthropology I was informed. I’d like to report that I was surprised. We held a series of strategic meetings before holding a UCL-wide Town Meeting to test the waters more widely. This was well attended, went well and we were encouraged. Incidentally, I recall one UCL economist intervening with a plea for us to develop an institutional counterbalance to UCL’s orthodox neoliberal Department of Economics! I had chaired the Town meeting and it was agreed, with the support of David, Henrietta and Graham Hart, that I would be the inaugural Institute Director if the concept and associated bid for funding was approved.

A particular pleasure of this protracted episode was that I got to make the acquaintance of UCL sociologists whom I’d never met. The only colleagues I knew well were Paul Higgs, Mel Bartley and Fiona Stevenson, another excellent sociologist who had joined us in 2001 as a lecturer based in the Department of Primary Care (a department, incidentally, that she went on to lead). I met Brian Balmer and Alena Ledeneva and her colleagues from UCL’s celebrated School of Soviet and Eastern European Studies (SSEES). I was encouraged by David Price to put together a bid for a Virtual Institute for Sociological Studies under the auspices and guidance of Stephen Smith, Professor of Economics and at the time Executive Dean of the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences (2007-2013). Stephen was sharp, friendly, supportive and, I felt, cautious. He and David provided seed funding for raising sociology’s profile in advance of submitting a bid to senior management. Enjoying a brief bout of autonomous reflexivity, I set up a seminar series that included several internal speakers and well-attended talks by Bob Jessop and Tony Giddens (the latter courtesy of his persuasive partner, Alena).

Reflecting back, I have several observations. The first is that I became aware of just how instrumental my colleagues in sociology had become. ‘What’s in it for me?’ ‘Might it even work to my disadvantage?’ I could almost hear them thinking. In fact, I proceeded with caution. While the future possibility of converting a Virtual Institute into an Actual Department was broached with David, Stephen and a handful of Goffman’s ‘wise’, nobody was in any way precipitous or cavalier. In fact, the last thing we wanted or intended to do was to end up leaning on sociologists throughout UCL, many of whom might well have been content where they were, to leave their current locations in favour of joining a new and unknown ‘actual’ institute/department. A second observation is that, for all the whole-hearted support of David, Stephen and their offices, UCL’s internal politics were predictably less than straightforward. I was frequently given contradictory advice, and it was clear that these contradictions reflected the strategic ‘positionings’ of *rival* senior managers: please one and you offended another. Bread and butter stuff for a sociologist of course, but no easier to navigate for all that. While I had good reason to trust David and Stephen, it was less easy to trust others, especially within the senior management team. Tensions within this team were disguised or underplayed when I was present but apparent nonetheless. More challenging were direct contradictions. Adviser A: ‘How are you going to bring in revenue in the medium-to-long term?’ ‘Like this.’ Adviser B: ‘You can’t do that, and if you do I’ll block the initiative!’ I remain unconvinced that the Provost of the day, Malcolm Grant, was ever fully on board, and there were rumours of resistance to sociology’s expansion from on high (one regret in retrospect is that I never pushed for a further private meeting with the Provost). My third observation is that decision-making up to Provost level, and certainly within the senior management team, had an element of randomness about it. Our bid undoubtedly suffered from internal wrangling, haggling and trading over ‘priorities’. At the end of the day, at one long-awaited meeting of the senior management team, time apparently ran out before our bid could be discussed and decided on.

While all this was unfolding, I had queried my own role, wondering out loud if this meta-reflexive was failing as an autonomous reflexive lead; but I was assured by both David and Stephen that this was not the case. So I remained in place and in limbo until my retirement eventually loomed, and it seemed foolish to remain as lead and the potential inaugural Director of a UCL Virtual Institute of Sociological Studies when my tenure in the event would be very short. I made discreet enquiries and canvassed for a successor, but with little success: too few colleagues, or in sone cases their heads of department, were willing to commit. So in the end the initiative came to nothing. There was to be no return of the bid to the senior management team after it had been ‘talked out’. I am including here the executive summary from the proposal we submitted to the senior management team, which I think catches the ethos of our bid. Bear in mind though that it was written well over a decade ago now.

**UCL Virtual Institute for Sociological Studies: Executive Summary**

Sociology’s presence in UCL is considerable and influential but largely invisible. Colleagues within UCL and local, national and global communities might alike be forgiven for concluding that the discipline is not represented in UCL. There are a number of important consequences of this lack of visibility:

* The perception at home and overseas of a disciplinary gap or deficit in a leading global university
* Wasted opportunities for research collaborations due to ignorance of actually-existing expertise
* The misperceptions of leading public, private and charitable funding bodies
* A failure of representation for sociology and sociologists
* The isolation or estrangement of postgraduate sociology students and early-career researchers

The Institute would make good these deficiencies and, more positively, act as a springboard for new initiatives. Specifically, the Institute would raise the profile of sociology internally and externally. It would do this not only by familiar devices – like a designated website, a regular seminar programme, topical symposia, special guest lectures, globally marketed short courses – but also by actively promoting the multi- and inter-disciplinary synergy now pivotal for ‘outcome measures’ for leading twenty-first century universities.

The Institute would build sensitively on in-post UCL sociologists’ ongoing research and teaching commitments and aspirations: it would consolidate, complement and develop existing resources of staffing and expertise. It would enhance sociology’s contributions to (1) external research income and (2) postgraduate teaching and training.

As the budget demonstrates, the Institute would require relatively modest but nonetheless significant investment in the current financial climate. While there would be no additional salary costs for the Director, there would for full-time administrative support and for running costs, initially for a two-year period.

The Institute would be answerable to two discrete bodies. An international Advisory Board would oversee sociology’s research and teaching initiatives; and Executive and Management Boards would monitor the return on its intellectual and financial investment.

It is appropriate that I provide an update on what has been achieved on the part of the discipline of sociology after my retirement. If our bid for a Virtual Institute of Sociological Studies withered and died during Malcolm Grant’s period of office, it did not die in David Price’s imagination. A turning point was UCL’s seemingly predestined absorption of the nearby Institute of Education (IOE) in December of 2014, the latter becoming a single faculty school of UCL called the UCL Institute of Education. The IOE was well served by some excellent sociologists. On my occasional visits to UCL post-2014 I sensed a natural anxiety about the UCL ‘takeover’ on the part of IOE staff, but the net effect of the move was an even larger and more impressive sociological presence (UCL now offers 34 Masters degrees in sociology). Moreover, UCL now offers several undergraduate programmes in sociology as well as multiple opportunities for postgraduate study. My long-term grouse about the discipline’s invisibility inside as well as outside of UCL has, it seems, been answered. In fact, UCL sociology, I notice, is now ranked, and highly, in the awful metrical comparisons of universities and departments that plague us these days (of which more in later sketches). I was particularly pleased to see that the ‘UCL Sociology Network’, which I founded in 2009 and chaired until my retirement in 2013 (after which Paul Higgs took over until 2021), has been resurrected and revitalised as ‘a creative space for sociological doctoral students and staff across UCL’. It has initiated a series of annual lectures, with BSA President Germinder Bhambra giving an excellent inaugural talk on ‘Contemporary Sociology and the Reconstruction of its Canons’ that I was invited to attend (and which was followed by an equally excellent meal). I retain an input into the Twitter account associated with the Sociology Network that I also started, though since 2021 I’ve been pleased to share this responsibility with others. I like to think I paved the way for some of what has happened since my departure.

15: MY PART OF LONDON

One of the pleasures of working at the Middlesex and then UCL has been their locations in central London. Maybe this has even fuelled my career via the sheer number and variety of seductive cafes and bars available as unofficial workplaces. The Middlesex nestled on the edge of Fitzrovia, just north of Soho, while Bloomsbury, home to more prosperous and genteel dwellers, sits a matter of yards, or metres, away on the other side of Tottenham Road. I must say something here of my celebrated work environs since my various offices were contained within its borders for over thirty years (1978-2013). Indeed, I still return with some regularity post-retirement. I’d best begin with Fitzrovia, in which I was accommodated between 1978 and 2006.

I became more than familiar with Fitzrovia’s cafes and bars. Initially I read and wrote in a few chosen haunts, for many years writing with biros in exercise books. When I was joined by Paul Higgs I grew increasingly accustomed to coffee breaks, lunches and conversation, either in the canteen in the Windeyer Building, or along Mortimer Street, or more rarely along the more plush and expensive Charlotte Street. Twenty-eight years in an area lend it a comfortable familiarity (replete with what I later called health-bestowing ‘familiarity bonds’). There was a good deal of change to Fitzrovia during this period. Most conspicuously, the Middlesex Hospital was raised to the ground, its medical school, as I’ve recounted, having already been absorbed into UCL. Cafes have of course come and gone apace and hardly any of those I originally frequented remain. Paul and UCL Professor of Psychiatry Joanna Moncrieff and I still occasionally meet at *Pret a Manger*, located on the Fitzrovia side of Tottenham Court Road.

The local pubs, however, have a longer shelf life. The *Green Man* in Riding House Street was closest to my last office in Fitzrovia, and this became a familiar port of call. Of the many memories two stand out, the first involved our M.Sc students, and one in particular. After our six hours of seminars on a Friday, teachers and students alike sometimes adjourned to the *Green Man* for a pint or two. At the end of one term more alcohol was consumed than usual. After a bit a barman approached us with a degree of uncertainty and diffidence. ‘Are you missing one of your group?’ We weren’t initially sure. ‘Because’, he went on, ‘I think one of your ladies is asleep on the floor of the women’s toilet downstairs.’ A fellow student was dispatched and was able to confirm that this was so. Our conspicuously urbane, sophisticated, if bemused, student was gently awoken and escorted back to the group, and later accompanied to Goodge Street tube station and seen safely on her way home. The second memory Is preserved on the wall of our present home in the Surrey village of Mickleham. Shortly before I departed Fitzrovia for Bloomsbury I noticed that a series of evocative portraits of bar scenes had disappeared from the pub’s walls. I made enquiries and was told that following a refurb they had been left in the basement. ‘How about selling them to me?’ A bargain price of £30 was agreed and we shook hands. I deposited four of them in my office and took them home in two trips. A couple now hang in our hallway upstairs.

The *One Tun* was almost as accessible to us as the *Green Man*, and it too became a familiar stop-off. It was a place we tended to take our visiting speakers to for a pin and a chat: I recall taking Nik Rose and downing a few. It was also the site of a theft when a colleague suddenly became aware that her bag had been stolen (I’d long since developed the habit of transferring my wallet and ‘anchoring’ any other possessions with a foot or table leg when drinking in inner London). She informed the landlord who exited the pub at speed. He returned with some of the items from her bag and promptly left again. More items. He apologised: ‘I’m sorry, I got back what I could. I knew who it was and tracked them, but I had to give up when I was threatened with a knife.’

The *Wheatsheaf* in Rathbone Place was a less visited hostelry, but it is one with a history. In his *Bohemian London*, Nick Rennison recounts the adventures of some of its more renowned regulars. Perhaps predictably, he records that Dylan Thomas greeted diarist, former art student and, in 1943, a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), Joan Wyndham, with the blunt proclamation: ‘I’m Dylan Thomas and I’m fucking skint. Be nice to me and buy me another Special Ale.’ He was not only talented alcoholic to make the *Wheatsheaf* his regular abode. It was the first-choice watering hole for many an aspiring literary figure during and after WW2. The final Fitzrovia pub deserving of a mention because I used it now and again is the *Fitzrovia Tavern* on Charlotte Street. I often found it austere, at least outside of warm and sunny Friday evenings, but it too has a fascinating history. This was the pub favoured by many an artist in the 1930s. Augustus John and his acolytes were perhaps the most permanent fixtures. Wine (or beer), women, but not necessarily song. Suffice it to say that Fitzrovia was the natural - thronging and ‘unsafe’ – venue for artists and literary figures in the 1930s, ‘40s and beyond. George Orwell found it congenial, although if I remember it accurately, he, like many another, traipsed from Fitzrovia to Soho to escape the early closing of pubs (10.30pm as opposed to 11pm).

I could dwell on Fitzrovia much longer, but I’d best move on. Suffice it to add that it has an enduring historical appeal. It was once the haunt of European communists and anarchists. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin all spent time there in the first decade of the twentieth century; and the Communist Club had its HQ in Charlotte Street. Charlotte Street was also the setting for the dying days of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, and the setting for its fateful division into the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, led by Lenin.

Now for a few observations around Soho, with which I became familiar even before I transferred from Charing Cross to the Middlesex. While based at the former, I regularly took the tube to Charing Cross Road, usually with the second-hand bookshops at the forefront of my mind. In fact, those bookshops were like a second home. I got to know the booksellers and glimpsed the occasional familiar face (in *Any Amount of Books* I recall a brief chat with Michael Foot, another self-confessed bibliophile). It was the proprietor of *Any Amount of Books*, incidentally, who purchased hundreds of my books when I retired from UCL in 2013 and had to clear and vacate my office; she got them for the bargain price of £1,000.

Anyway, Soho was a London village I traversed routinely. It was a good deal more sleazy in the 1970s than it is now. Much of London, it seems, has been socially (and ethically) ‘cleansed’ during rentier capitalism’s tenure. ‘Walk-ups’ and ‘clip joints’ are spread more parsimoniously now, and there seem to be fewer unkempt and authentically bohemian haunts. Maybe this is a process that began to accelerate through the 1960s, because in the 1950s Soho still had more than its share of artists and literary figures who committed much of their lives to experiments with their sexuality and remaining in their cups. Some, like Dublin-born Francis Bacon and Berlin-born Lucian Freud, Sigmund’s grandson, managed sufficient self-discipline between bouts of drinking to become significant artists. I was personally more familiar with the book and musical outlets. As I grew more interested in jazz after my New Orleans excursions, I stopped often in search of new jazz cassettes in those pre-CDC days (I also accumulated a number of David Bowie recordings for daughter Rebecca). The bebop in general, and sax players and Charlie Parker in particular, fascinated me most, though I was also drawn to Billy Holiday. Now I have several hundred CDCs even as others have switched to the likes of Spotify. I can concentrate and work listening to jazz but not to other musical genres.

Like Fitzrovia, Soho has a rich cultural heritage. Seventeen-year-old Thomas Dr Quincy spent much time on the streets in 1802 after fleeing his lodgings in Manchester. He slept in shop doorways before taking temporary shelter in Greek Street. In his *Confessions of an Opium Eater,* he recounts how Anne, a street worker he had befriended, saved his life when, hungry and exhausted, he collapsed outside a house on Soho Square. In 1811 Shelley, fresh from being sent down *from* Oxford for authoring his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*, took lodgings in Poland Street prior to eloping to Scotland with the 16-year-old Harriet Westbook. Of the litany of adventures recounted in *Bohemian London*, special mention might be made of John Snow and Karl Marx. I remember visiting the site of John Snow’s water pump in what was then Broad Street, now Broadwick Street. In 1854 the physician John Snow, in a seminal moment for public health, demonstrated that a specific local water pump was the source of a severe cholera outbreak. This gave the lie to the common notion that cholera was spreads by ‘miasma’ or ‘bad air’. Dick Levinson, my old friend from Emory University, celebrated Snow’s achievement with me with a pint or two in the John Snow pub (from memory, the site of the pump is indicated on a - scarcely visible - stone outside the pub).

It is well known that Marx spent time living in Soho with his family in a two-bedroomed flat in Dean Street rented from an Italian cook called Giovanni Marengo. The family was subsisting on the edge of poverty despite Engel’s help. The accommodation was sparse and unkempt. Marx was mostly preoccupied with his life’s work, much of it being done in the British Museum Reading Room. But he did relax on occasion. His fellow German founder of the Social Democratic Party, Willhelm Liebknecht, recalls one epic pub crawl up Tottenham Court Road in the 1850s. They ended up, along with another German exile, Edgar Bauer, in the backroom of one drinking den in the company of a group of English clubmen known as the Oddfellows. Banter turned into debate, thence to argument. The three Germans exited at a canter and, much the worse for wear, began hurling paving stones from a pile they chanced upon at the street lights. They smashed four or five before a policeman on the beat heard the noise and summoned support. They were chased into Fitzrovia where Marx’s familiarity with the area helped them to escape.

Back to personal experience. I have long spent time writing in Soho, more in cafes than bars: too many to mention here. I will pick out one, *Café Boheme*, just off Cambridge Circus. Gone now, it was a venue for live jazz. It was a favourite port of call for another longstanding Emory friend, Terry Boswell, who would take his scripts for marking here. Like me, jazz drew him in and we would meet there for a beer and a chat. We were especially impressed by a young jazz singer whose name we never knew. Stacey Kent also sang there regularly and has gone on to greater things. Annette and I also went with Terry and other Emory friends to *Ronnie Scott’s* in Frith Streetseveral times (I have the t-shirt to prove it). These were the days of smoky darkness, just how a jazz venue should be we thought. You could sit with a drink for a set without being hassled, which was of course ideal for students. It’s all a bit sanitised now, and maybe Ronnie’s death was a turning point, but it’s still going strong. Ronnie, a tenor sax player himself, opened the club in October of 1959 in Gerrard Street: it moved to larger premises in Frith Street in 1967. Many a noted American jazz player has performed there. Jimi Hendrix’s last performance took place there in 1970. Ronnie himself was taught to play by Vera Lynn’s father-in-law. Charlie Mingus once said of him: ‘of the white boys, Ronnie Scott gets closer to the negro blues feeling, the way Zoot Sims does’. It was when he was depressed following surgery for tooth implants that Ronnie died from an overdose of barbiturates; he was 69. The last time Annette and I visited the club was to hear Clint Eastwood’s son Kyle perform there.

I must say a few words about my latest base, Bloomsbury, a very different city landscape from Soho and Fitzrovia. My office, it will be remembered, was in Mortimer Market in Bloomsbury from 2006 until my retirement from UCL in 2013. I found myself more fully absorbed into the UCL community. Bloomsbury was not always a place for toffs and the privileged. At the start of the twentieth century, when Sir Leslie Stephens’ four children – Thoby, Adrian, Virginia and Vanessa – moved out of their house in Hyde Park Grove and took a house at 46 Gordon Square in 1904, their peers were astonished and concerned: this was not a place upper middle-class women could be expected to inhabit with equanimity. Now I’d best get the Bloomsbury Group done and dusted. The Stephens became the focus of a collection of like-minded individuals, most of whom had first met while attending Trinity College Cambridge. This is where Thoby, Lytton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Clive Bell and Leonard Woolf had all studied. They specialised, it seems, in art and sex. Nor was it all talk. As well as imbibing and propagating post-impressionist art, the members of the Bloomsbury Group were unabashed innovators in the field of relationships. Vanessa married art critic Clive Bell but had affairs with the artist and critic Roger Fand the painter Duncan Bell. Th bisexual Grant had several relationships with men, including the economist John Maynard Keynes, the novelist David Garnett and Lytton Strachey. Strachey was adored by Dora Carrington, although she married Ralph Partridge, who was an object of Strachey’s interest. Vanessa’s daughter Angelica thought her father was Clive bell but was told when she was 18 that it was Duncan grant. A few years later Angelica married David Garnett, who had been her true father’s lover two decades earlier. I can’t resist adding: so it has always been with toffs, for whom *the normal rules did not* *then and do not now apply*. I have very mixed feelings about the Bloomsbury Group. Undoubtedly a density of talent and a propensity for cultural, sexual and moral innovation; but a home too for snobbish arrogance and a vicious disdain for the less fortunate. Interestingly, I have taught often in that part of UCL that is 46 Gordon Square, once the home of the Stephens and, between 1916 and his death in 1946, of Keynes. There’s not much evidence of prior occupation now, but the views over the Square remain and an active imagination can fill in detail.

One way of broaching my long association with UCL is via mention of the *Jeremy Bentham* pub. Originally called the *Duke of Wellington*, the name was subsequently altered to celebrate Bentham, 1748-1832, who is frequently seen as a founder of UCL. Given that he was 78 at the time his role was doubtless more philosophical than practical. His contribution, whatever it amounted to, is preserved as an ‘auto-icon’ in a glass case in the South Cloisters of UCL (‘he’ apparently used to be wheeled into committee meetings to keep an eye on things). The foundation stone for UCL was laid on 30 April 1827, and it was from its opening in 1828, controversially to include students unable or unwilling to declare Anglican faith (the three principal benefactors were Catholic, Jewish and Noncomformist). UCL was mocked as ‘The Cockney College’, and the poet Winthrop Mackworth Praed wrote a spoof ‘Discourse’ delivered by a port-soaked Oxford college tutor to his peers in 1825 while the new university was under consideration:

‘Ye Dons and ye Doctors, ye Provosts and Proctors,

Who are paid to monopolise knowledge,

Come, make opposition, by vote and petition,

To the radical infidel college …

But let them not babble of Greek to the rabble

Nor teach the Mechanics their letters;

The labouring classes were born to be asses,

And not to be aping their betters.’

I got to know the warren which is the UCL campus quite well over the years, but I became especially familiar with one specific lecture theatre. This was the Darwin LT. The Darwin Building, which extends to Torrington Place, displaced the former home of Charles Darwin. Darwin lived in what is now 112 Gower Street, but was then 12 Upper Gower Street, between 1838 and 1842. In a letter of October, 1838, he wrote: ‘we are living a life of extreme quietness … we have given up all parties, for they agree with neither of us; and if one is quiet in London there is nothing like its quietness; there is grandeur about its smoky fogs and the dull distant sounds of cabs and coaches; in fact you may perceive I am becoming a thorough-paced cockney, and I glory in thoughts that I shall be here for the next six months.’ I taught medical students in the Darwin LT for many years, and as I’ve commented before I still miss my contact with these undergrads more so than postgrads, mainly because one could actually see (some of) their minds opening up to receive novel ideas. One memory: for fun, and hooked up to a roving microphone, I once walked up one side of the theatre, left the building to enter Gower Street, then re-entered the theatre to descend on its other side, lecturing the whole time. I got a round of applause. I was to wonder later if I might have crossed to Dillons/Waterstones whilst continuing to lecture, but I never tested this out.

To return momentarily to the *Jeremy Bentham* pub. It was here that I tended to meet students fresh from lectures or seminars, or more occasionally involved in various forms of political activism. Returning recently, I was appalled to find its innards ripped out and its transmutation into a wine bar, a symbolic act of the destructive end of an era. There is one other pub that I should comment on. This is the *TCR* on the Bloomsbury side of Tottenham Court Road. In my later years at UCL, and since, this became a favourite place to read and write. I even found its staff willing to dissuade other customers from occupying ‘my table’ by the plugs, and to pour my glasses of house white and tap water even as I entered the premises. It is difficult to over-estimate continuing salience of familiarity bonds!

16: CAFÉ AND BAR SOCIETY

I have in this series of sketches of my academic life often referred to the important role of cafes and bars. They have become over the decades part and parcel not only of the transfer of thoughts to manuscripts but also of who I am. I’m no fan of the current displacement of structural theory by identity theory, but I will accept that what I do is very much who I am, *and I spend a fair amount of time even in retirement sitting in cafes and bars writing*. Sharing this disposition with Norwegian colleague Aksel Tjora, we decided to put together a collection of pieces on the sociology of cafes that we eventually published in our *Café Society* in the year of my retirement, 2013. Given the continuing role of cafes in my life, a few additional remarks are indicated.

*Café Society* contains a number of interesting and engaging perspectives on the café as an historical and contemporary social phenomenon. I will not rehearse these here, but rather pick up on a handful of themes of personal relevance. First, a few preliminary points of context. Since its origins in the East, via the Viennese salons of the late nineteenth century, the Parisian retreats of Sartre and de Beauvoir, the coffee bars of London’s Soho, to the profit-seeking, tax-avoiding American chains of today, the café has emerged in Occidental modernity as an important social space. Several trends have been documented empirically:

* a rapidly increasing number of commercially viable cafes across contemporary Western (but not just Western) societies;
* a growing potential for these discrete and ‘bounded spaces’ to serve as third places;
* ready accessibility, extending beyond the affluent to accommodate the non-, un- and under-employed;
* a potential for cafes to be more than sites for sociablity or familiarity bonds;
* cafes as social spaces for multi-networking, stretching from weak to strong ties;
* cafes as possible resources for the enabling sector of civil society.

I want here to emphasise the last of these trends. The cafe is, as Ray Oldenburg discusses in our book, one of a diminishing number of ‘third places’, that is, places where people meet and talk (English pubs are another such place). Habermas has argued that in the eighteenth-century European cafes were providers of a space allowing for open and uncensored political debate and the ‘public use of reason’, a bastion of - admittedly, white, male and bourgeois - independent-mindedness. He rightly stresses that this was a limited and passing moment and that civil society and the public sphere have long since been neutralised and diminished. In my chapter I ask whether there is anything left of the café as a site of independent thinking. I recall visiting the famous *Café Royale* in Vienna - which in all honestly I didn’t much like, probably because it fell short of the café I had constructed in my imagination – which is famous for its clientele and the uses they made of it. The most well-known of all its users was Peter Altenberg, progeny of a rich Jewish, Austrian family and an ideal typical bohemian, an eccentric sponger whose life-size figure sits at the entrance of the café. Of more pertinence here, however, is that Trotsky and his friend Lenin were regulars who discussed politics and strategies at its tables. A contemporary painted a picture of Trotsky and Victor Adler, founder of the Austrian Socialist Party, deep in conversation at one table, while Lenin and Stalin, worked in their revolutionary manifestos at another.

Is today’s café a realistic candidate for what I call the ‘enabling sector’ of civil society? This concept of an enabling sector of civil society had its origins in a paper with the late David Kelleher in *Critical Public Health* in 2006. We argued that it is helpful to distinguish between an *enabling sector* of civil society, defined as a popular meeting place where public discussion, debate and agitation might have its origins, and a *protest sector* of civil society, representing an arena in which the contents of soundings in the enabling sector might spill over and transmute into more organised forms in pursuit of effective influence in the public sphere of the lifeworld.

After presenting typologies of cafes and café users in my chapter, I returned to this theme, asking what if anything remains of yesterday’s white, masculine and bourgeois, *yet independent and politically oriented*, input into the public sphere of financialised or rentier capitalism. I set out some contextual parameters. First, non-bourgeois solidarity is still likely to have its roots in social class membership; second, the short-term prospects of working-class consciousness leading to effective collective action for political change have receded since the 1970s; third, it is new social movements that may prove the most promising avenues of resistance to the neoliberal status quo; fourth, new social movement initiatives might yet trigger class-based activity; and fifth, the café, in the enabling sector, ‘is an as yet under-investigated site of (middle-class *and* working-class) political opposition (in the protest sector).’ In my defence, I was cautious and fully aware that ‘it is difficult to foresee a reprise of John Dryden’s role as fulcrum of public debate at Will’s Coffee House in seventeenth-century Covent Garden, counting the likes of Samuel Pepys and Alexander Pope among his avid listeners.’ It is, I insisted, the cell phone and *virtual* communication that establish rationale and framework for many an elite and oppositional *actual* encounter in what we would now call ‘platform capitalism’.

In Habermasian terms, the gap between the ‘formal’ democracy of parliamentary process and ‘substantive’ or participatory democracy has been exposed for what it is. Moreover, to pick up on an ongoing theme in my work over the years, if social class has increased its *objective* salience or causal power over people’s circumstances, it has indubitably lost much of its *subjective* salience or causal power for identity-formation. Oppositional consciousness is likely to be revived, I suggested in my chapter in Café Society ten years ago, ‘at a remove from extant elites, and maybe, via conversations, arguments, compromises, shared interests, and *ad hoc* and local campaigning, serendipitously, amidst the proliferation of outlets of our ‘café society’.’ It is an argument that has possibly regained some traction via the spontaneous formation of local WhatsApp Groups during the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

Looking back, I would not dismiss these suggestions. Clearly, the likely contribution of café society to system decolonisation/lifeworld rationalisation should not be exaggerated. There may yet be some milage, however, in the transmission of ideas and action from an enabling sector of civil society with its roots in the private sphere of the lifeworld to a protest sector firmly lodged in the public sphere of the lifeworld. Cafes are one possible mediating site.

A few personal notes on my own continuing predilection for writing in cafes might be in order. I have even written a poem or two about this (see my *Rhythmic Musings*, ‘published’ courtesy of my daughter Rebecca, who also designed and produced the volume). With appropriate apologies to more practised poets:

**Alone in Company**

Solitude is not loneliness

and familiarity comes in many guises.

I nudge the cafe door and check

the table with the plug is free;

quick, stake my claim!

I drape my bag on the chair,

hook up the charger

and stay vigilant at the counter.

Strange how we apportion trust

among anonymous inner-city strangers,

let instinct trump reason.

Word is my laptop is my friend.

I relish the bustle around me,

hear and don’t hear the chatter,

the guffaws, the squawks of chairs

levering in and out.

A companionship of papers and jottings

to the right, cappuccino to the left.

I usually have a plan, maybe several:

it’s the book today, though there’s

a chapter whispering impatiently

in my ear and the omnipresent threat

of seduction by blog.

The phone’s a prop, as once was my pipe

before the smoke was banished in public;

(in any case I was biting through the stems

and they made my canines wobble).

Check the news, cricket scores, Twitter,

Facebook: catch up with virtual friends.

There! I said solitude is not loneliness.

There’s nothing like ‘an independent’,

wooden tables and benches and whatnot,

but in truth I can settle on chequered plastic:

kitted out with exercise book and biro I drafted

my first textbook pieces over coffee and chips

in a Wimpy on Waterloo Station in 1980.

Four decades on and no space left for Luddites:

I can barely write or read my longhand now.

Before we were ambushed by COVID

I spent six hours most laptop Wednesdays

Writing my way through the cafes

In Tottenham Court Road, Guildford, Dorking,

And I loved it.

Café society bestows the gift of absence

In presence; silence in a landscape

of shifting bodies, clearing of tables,

stacking of dishwashers and passing gossip;

and there’s just that smidgeon of sociability

to reach out for if and when,

*but on my own terms.*

These lines catch once more something of what I find attractive about writing in cafes, summed up in the phrase ‘alone in company’. I have always liked writing in the midst of hustle and bustle, with the omnipresent option of engaging with others*, but on my own terms*. I have a confession to add though. Aksel Tjora and I planned a companion volume to our book on *Café Society* to be entitled *Bar Society*, and I have yet - nearly a decade later and despite drafting a proposal - to finalise our plans and to attract a publisher.

17: METRICS

I retired on 1 October 2013, shortly before the deadline for being entered for the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF was introduced to satisfy a threefold purpose: to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment; to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the higher education sector and for public information; and to inform the selective allocation of funding for research. It is a process of expert review, conducted by panels for each of 34 subject-based ‘units of assessment’ under the overall guidance of four main panels. Expert panels are made up of senior academics, international members and research users. For each submission, three distinct elements are assessed: the quality of ‘outputs’ (eg publications, performances, and exhibitions), their ‘impact’ beyond academia, and the ‘environment’ that supports research. At least, that’s the theory. Sound reasonable?

There is a general point to be made upfront. The introduction of ‘targets’ and the increasing use of metrics to judge the extent to which they are met constitute a means of institutional control over personnel. This is not just because each individual can be deemed a success or failure based on a definitive score, it is also because the very process constrains that individual and binds him or her to projects and activities that ‘count’, that attract a metric reward. After all, poor metrics threaten prospects of salary increments, promotion and continuing/future employment.

In the years before my retirement loomed sociologists were largely unrecognised within UCL. There was certainly no formal entry to the sociology panel. Readers might recall me being invited to publish in *Nature* by a lab-based Head of the Department of Medicine, Patrick Vallance, who was clueless both about me and about sociology. Notwithstanding the positive feedback he received about my work when he made enquiries, further down the line I was to receive a letter from UCL stating that my record in ‘non-hospital-based clinical subjects’ was not strong enough and that I would not be ‘returned’. I replied that I was equally inept at radio astronomy and music: I was a sociologist. I insisted that a letter be sent saying that I was not to be returned for ‘strategic reasons’, and that my record was in fact strong, or that I be returned to my own panel in sociology. The latter option was ruled out because UCL did not have a Department of Sociology. The eventual compromise was that I would be returned with a referral across to the sociology panel. Another coming of the REF was set for the year of my retirement, but I just escaped its clutches by retiring on1 October 2013.

I was and am aware that many excellent sociologists with enviable reputations have found themselves disadvantaged by the REF, some of whom have never been returned despite significant accomplishments. Sometimes this is simply ignorance on the part of heads of departments or senior managers, and sometimes it’s a function of more perverse motives. The risk of not being returned can be that one is left in a ‘dustbin’ category of the miscellaneous comprising the ‘research inactive’. I know of one colleague who was informed, apparently with a straight face, that her work was ‘too scholarly’ and that she should be focusing on random control trials (RCTs). It is only too apparent that the REF is: intrinsically flawed, no such simple metric of the type deployed being possible; allows for over- and under-estimating academic worth (several past Nobel Prize winners would simply not have been returned according to REF criteria); cannot cope with anomalies, like sociologists in medical or dental schools; is open to abuse by universities, who rather than use discretion can and do use the REF as a management device; and exercises a corrosive surveillance over the research of academics many years in advance of its submission deadlines (by rating total research revenue over its products, and productivity in high impact journals over the contents of papers).

The senior management teams of universities will argue that the ‘REF game’ is one they cannot afford not to play. I am reminded of a point I used to make to my students when they were unhappy about a new university policy: ‘You do realise that if you all walked out, they’d drop it, don’t you?’ In similar vein, if all Vice-Chancellors declined to play the ‘REF game’, it would quickly be abandoned. This, incidentally, is a core and enduring sociological quandary: how to mobilise people to defend their interests, or better, how might they mobilise themselves. But as things stand as I write this, most line-managers feel stuck with the REF. They are charged then to insist on and use discretion. If they do not exercise discretion, if for example, they abandon or maliciously define first-rate sociologists in the likes of medical or dental schools as under-achievers, then they are guilty of what Bourdieu called *symbolic violence*. They are jeopardising their careers and should be held to account. As I was ultimately to be informed by an ally, UCL’s Vice-Provost for Research David Price, there is no excuse for not referring a sociologist to the sociology panel.

Universities are now awash with metrics, spewing ever-more precisely formulated ranking tables and systems of appraisal for academics. Indeed, people are beginning to refer more widely to the ‘metric society’. I recently went online to research what my own metrics amount to. I then compared then with subsequent generations of academic sociologists. As has been made clear, I personally was able to side-step the worst of this process through a mix of babyboomer luck and determined resistance. But well into retirement I visited ‘google scholar’ and signed up. I was assailed by the ‘h-index’, which apparently refers to the number of publications for which the author is cited by another author at least that same number of times (eg an h-index of 17 means that the author has published at least 17 papers each cited 17 times). I discovered that an h-index of 20 is ‘good’, 40 no less than ‘great’. The ‘i10-index’ is the second one of some import. It is simpler: it refers to the number of publications with at least 10 citations. Consulting google scholar as I write (on 22 October, 2022), I find that my h-index is 49 (so, ‘great’), and my i10-index is 108. I have logged up a total of 10,248 citations to date.

There are several points to make. When I initially checked google scholar I was surprised, and not unpleasantly, that my work was being cited. But, second, closer inspection of the figures led me to qualify their value. Consider the i10-index. On the face of it this seems a reasonable indicator of something like ‘impact’. However, I looked - am looking at this moment, as I sit in a local cafe - at my most cited publications. Top of the list is my 1986 article in *Sociology of Health and Illness* on ‘Being epileptic: coming to terms with stigma’, which is gratifying; this had been cited 1,022 times to date. Second comes another contribution to *Sociology of Health and Illness*, ‘Health-related Stigma’, this one published in 2009 and with 768 citations. Bear with me while I continue down this list for a bit longer. Third is a multi-authored paper in the *Lancet*, published in 2014, called ‘Culture and Health’, with 724 citations. Fourth: another *Lancet* paper, ‘Stigma and disease: changing paradigms’, published in 1998, with 428 citations. Fifth: a co-authored paper in *Social Science and Medicine* entitled ‘Health work, female sex workers and HIV/AIDS: global and local dimensions of stigma and deviance as barriers to effective interventions’, published in 2008 and accumulating 302 citations. Finally, in this ‘short’ short list, a paper accepted by *Social Theory and Health* called ‘Re-framing stigma: felt and enacted stigma and challenges to the sociology of chronic and disabling conditions’, published in 2004, with 292 citations. Apart from the focus on stigma, which is perhaps predictable, it should be obvious that two of my supposedly ‘top’ publications are in the *Lancet*, which for me is a secondary outlet, a bit like a magazine and therefore of little moment.

Having checked my own metrics, I then looked up several colleagues, an exercise that on the face of it put me firmly in my place. There were two lessons I learned. The first confirmed that

what is key for ‘good metrics’ is not only where you publish (ie in high-impact journals with a wide, non-specialist readership) but the subject-matter. To expand on this second lesson, it is clear that papers on methods, (meta)review articles, and contributions on issues of immediate current concern (eg presently, COVID-19) attract most interest, and therefore most citations. The second lesson was that fellow sociologists a decade or more younger than me typically have much ‘better’ metrics. I accept that this likely reflects scholarly excellence and appeal as well as increased productivity, but there is surely a question mark over *what else this new level of productivity could or does reflect and amount to*. What exactly am I saying here? My hypothesis is that the ubiquitous use of metrics is indeed constraining colleagues both to be more productive and to be more selective in the kinds of publications they concentrate on and where they place them. For sociologists this amounts to a taming of the discipline. It is a general hypothesis, if a vitally important one. I do not for a moment want to denigrate colleagues’ high-outputs or the quality of their work, but I do wonder how much will survive their sometimes-stellar careers. This is an issue that picks up on my previous explications of system imperatives and lifeworld colonisation.

The retrospective application of metrics to my own career is another matter of interest, at least to me. When I was promoted to professor the question arose as to which ‘band’ I should be allocated. The problem as I saw it was that the whole of my career up to that time had been geared to scholarly excellence, and indeed I was rated highly for my international reputation. However, a new set of criteria had been newly appended, encompassing the likes of policy and public engagement and service. Unsurprisingly my CV had not been geared to such criteria. I ended up in the lowest pay band and was to remain there for the rest of my time at UCL.

A broader point amounts to the now commonplace assertion that we inhabit a ‘metric society’. In other words, the constraining arena of seemingly well-intentioned but ultimately taming metrics has become the norm for many citizens in many walks of life. It is a mode of control and intentionally constructed as such. In relation to the NHS, I recall that when New Labour required GPs to hit targets for seeing their patients, my local surgery - predictably enough - took steps to cook its books. If no consultation was available on the day patients telephoned for one, they were told to ring back the next day, and so on until an appointment became available *that day*. Insisting there was no great urgency and an appointment made now for a few days later cut no ice. The upshot was that every patient could be said to get an appointment on the day they telephoned. This sleight of hand ran right through society and became symbolic. What mattered was not what kind of service was delivered but whether enough boxes could be ticked to satisfy the specified criteria for a good service (ie as with the GP example). This phenomenon was ubiquitously termed ‘box ticking’. A metric society is in many respects a box-ticking society; and this privileges appearance over reality. Fake reality and cover your backs at the same time! It is the epitomy of what Ritzer in his *The McDonaldisation of Society* calls ‘the irrationality of rationality’.

It is not unreasonable to liken the metricalisation of academia and society to the way head coaches of international sports teams adjust tactics not by observing players’ performances but by scrutinising GPS data on their laptops. It is as if academics must be constantly alert to senior management’s moving verdicts on their worth to the institution in the lead up to the latest national review of universities’ comparative productivity. Metrics in this context represent a crude Weberian ‘juridification’ or bureaucratisation of an academic field now infiltrated and ‘caged’ by neoliberal political agendas. Theorists like myself are at a particular disadvantage because they attract less funding and rarely edge their way into the public sphere or fuel policy decisions. Contrastingly, we often raise challenging and uncomfortable questions for the institutions in which we work.

18: RETIRING FROM UCL AND DISCOVERING SOCIAL MEDIA

I was ambivalent about retiring but not worried at the prospect. Grieving occurs when something irrevocably ends, and for academics there is often a prospect of continuing to work, but in such a manner that it is no longer seen or experienced as ‘work’. In my case I was set on doing some more lecturing/teaching and continuing to write. But the actual process of retiring was intrinsically interesting. I announced my decision to retire on 1 October 2013, which was accepted without demur. Paul Higgs generously said he would like to organise a leaving ‘do’ and asked me which speakers I would like him to invite. Graham Hart equally generously said he would supply the necessary funding. Unsure who might say what but concerned not to put anyone into a difficult spot, I opted for a balance of longstanding colleagues I had taught alongside - David Blane and Ray Fitzpatrick - and others I had come to know well and whom I thought broadly sympathetic to my kind of sociology, namely, Nicky Britten, James Nazroo and Gareth Williams. Fiona Stevenson told Paul that she would like to say a few words too, which delighted me.

They all spoke kind words to an impressive audience replete with professorial peers. David Blane ruminated on our joint teaching at Charing Cross, the projects we had devised, the textbook (first edition, 1982, second edition, 1986, third edition 1991, fourth edition 1997, fifth edition 2003, sixth edition 2008, and seventh and latest - and maybe last - post-retirement edition 2018), and our joyful experiences teaching the Intercalated B.Sc in Sociology as Applied to Medicine over many years. Ray recalled contributing a chapter on Claus Offe to my edited collection *Sociological Theory and Medical Sociology* which he insisted had never been cited. He was actually incorrect since I have cited his excellent chapter more than once myself. He concluded by suggesting that my recent publications had been ‘more polemical’. When all the speakers had done their bit, I felt obliged to return to this statement briefly at the rostrum. It raised an issue that I will only allude to here as I return to it in more depth later. I did not then, and do not now, accept the underlying premise that sociology is a value-neutral or non-normative discipline. For me, any worthwhile sociology is/should be oriented to the betterment of society, which was all I thought I was doing.

Nicky Britten and James Nazroo recollected some joint experiences before discoursing on their own intriguing research, on prescribing practices and ethnicity and health respectively. Nicky remembered a time when she, Myfanwy Morgan and Charlotte Humphrey had attended a handful of seminars/discussion groups on the evolution of social theory that I led when I was still based at the Middlesex (‘how often do three professors attend seminars led by a colleague?’ she asked, rhetorically). James called to mind another incident from the past. He was undertaking research for his Ph.D with my old supervisor George Brown at the time. I think he must have asked me to attend a meeting he was due to have with George. Anyway, attend I did, and I listened to George hold court, expounding his work ethic to James: James should only take alternate weekends off. James said it was the only time he ever saw me angry. I do remember telling George that unions were formed because of people like him! All water under the bridge now, but the upshot was that I became James’ Ph.D supervisor in place of George and saw his excellent study through to completion.

I was not to know it at the time, but his partner Eva later told me that Gareth Williams’ talk was to be the last he gave before his stamina failed him and he became progressively more ill. Another first-class speaker, he spoke entertainingly about possible derivations of the name ‘Scambler’, and was complimentary about my attempts, not least via the ‘greedy bastards hypothesis’, to fuel public debate and discussion about health inequalities. Finally, Fiona Stevenson spoke about our teaching of medical students at UCL and what a good team she, Paul ad I made. After responding gently to Ray’s comment on my ‘new polemics’, I thanked Paul, Graham and all the speakers for coming and for their kind, informative and entertaining words. As we sipped wine and consumed nibbles I was able to rove around and chat to friends and colleagues. It was a particular pleasure to see two medical students, Rita Issa and Timesh Pillay, both of whom I’d taught and who had expanded their interest in medicine to become vigorous political activists (they still are). When all was done a group of us went to a local restaurant and we were treated to a meal and more relaxed conversation.

So my retirement was announced and celebrated by a ‘do’. I mentioned to Graham Hart in passing that I was surprised that I had heard nothing from UCL’s powers-that-be. A while later I had a letter from UCL’s then-Provost, Michael Arthur. Unfortunately, he included in his missive an apologetic reference to the fact that he had forgotten to note, let alone respond to, my retirement; he clearly had no idea who I was. It was all rather self-defeating.

If I was not unduly put out by the idea of retiring, the process required a level of adjustment. Courtesy of Paul and Fiona, I was invited to teach sociological theory – Marx, Weber, Foucault and Bourdieu from memory - which was to last until COVID-19 forced zoom onto UCL’s staff and students and I opted out. It is worth a passing mention that UCL had outsourced the organisation and remuneration of non-permanent staff to a company that declined to recognise my emeritus professorial status and demanded that I repeatedly identify and justify myself and put in for payment session by session. Without the diligent help of one of the secretaries I would probably have drawn the experiment to a close early on. I did a few other invited talks and, thanks to Aksel Tjora, Annette and I still made our annual trip to Trondheim, and occasionally to Oslo and Tromso, to meet ever-friendly Norwegian medical sociologists. Writing in 2022, I confess that I still miss regular contact with undergraduates. As opposed to Arthur’s understandably casual, dashed-off lines marking my retirement, I treasure the ‘top teacher awards’ generated by UCL’s medical students for each of my final five years lecturing there. How unlikely such recognition for a sociologist teaching medical students would have been when I began my stint at Charing Cross in the mid-1970s.

Without ever planning it, my writing continued into retirement. Writing books assumed its old importance, but I have also submitted what for me is a goodly stream of academic articles. The statistics are interesting. Compare my final nine years in employment with the nine years between my retirement and the time of writing. In the period pre-retirement I authored or edited five books and wrote or co-authored 27 chapters and 30 peer-review articles. In the period post-retirement I authored or edited six books, and wrote or co-authored 22 chapters and 16 peer-review articles. Okay, so my productivity - statistically - has dropped off a bit, but what is surprising in many ways is that I have been as productive as I have in the absence of the spur or threat of institutional pressure. But has the content changed? I think it has, if only as a matter of degree. In Ray Fitzpatrick’s terms, I have likely become (even) more polemical. I have sought to underpin and add substance to my evolving sense of what ‘doing sociology’ should encompass. I have increasingly promoted sociological engagement in the politics of phenomena like health inequalities and the weaponizing of stigma by the state.

One further point might usefully be aired before the issue of retirement is confronted in all its intellectual and emotional complexity. As a certain level of academic seniority, either achieved or ascribed, invitations to delivery plenary lectures and papers and to contribute chapters or papers to special issues of journals usually increase. This can spell danger. It is of course gratifying to feel wanted, the more so when in retirement and whilst dwelling in the quiet seclusion of a rural village with London a far distant glow on the commuter horizon. The hazards as I see them are twofold. First, there needs to be a coming to terms with the fact that one’s CV has loosened its grip, unless that is a second career beckons (after all, 65 barely qualifies someone as a ‘third ager’ these days). Abandoning the longstanding addiction to the CV is easier said than done. If I quickly stopped appending items to a multifaceted list of putative accomplishments, I do nevertheless still record my publications on my website. But I think I can claim at least to be in remission with respect to my CV. The second hazard concerns how easy it is to be flattered by invitations that, when paired down to basics, are to repeat oneself. I have come to realise, possibly belatedly, that there is a limit to what I am able to say, on stigma and health inequalities for example, without simply duplicating ideas I have already made accessible. More recently I have tried to circumvent this trap by focusing more on the philosophical and macro-theoretic context of such phenomena and the role of specific causal or generative mechanisms in delivering and shaping the ‘fractured society’.

Back to the appurtenances and ramifications of retirement. Grieving, I have suggested, is associated with terminal absence. The fact that I could continue with selected activities, notably in my case teaching and writing, removed any necessity to grieve. Yes, I missed, and miss, standing at the podium of a UCL lecture theatre and addressing 360 medical students, odd though this might seem to some of my colleagues. I wish COVID-19 had not stymied other opportunities for face-to-face seminars, but, again, I have moved on. As for writing projects, it will be apparent that I have continued these with what is possibly untypical enthusiasm and vigour. But writing is not quite the practice it was. So what has changed, other than the diminishing salience of my CV? There is one predictable ongoing tension, since writing no longer constitutes ‘work’. I have certainly discovered a newfound freedom to express myself, and this has spawned different kinds of media outputs, perhaps most surprisingly involving the sphere of the *virtual*.

When I retired my daughter Rebecca suggested that an online presence might help fill a gap in my intellectual life. As a talented freelance website designer herself, she offered to launch me into cyberspace. As an only partially reformed Luddite this proved an eye-opener for me. I slithered effortlessly from having my own website to enter the arenas of Twitter and, later, Facebook (and now Mastodon). For all the real and actual fissures and cacks into which one can fall in these virtual fields, I have also encountered benefits. Maybe these should be split into two basic if heterogeneous categories. First, I have found both Twitter and Facebook repositories of information and expertise. Given the post-Thatcher establishment-co-option of the print and other mainstream media, Twitter has proved a vital resource, not least in the form of ‘leaks’ of otherwise clandestine corporate and state initiatives. Academics are also generous in sharing their work and pointing others in the direction of up-to-date publications and data. Reciprocal support, not least emotionally, is another dimension of online activity. I have admittedly also come up against the downside, especially of Twitter. I was repeatedly attacked as a ‘fucking racist’, for example, for calling out the pro-Israeli weaponizing of antisemitism to undermine the bid for government of the resolutely anti-racist *but pro-Palestinian* Jeremy Corbyn. But I have been spared excessive trolling to date. Facebook has proved a good way of re-establishing lost contacts and sharing views and experiences with a valued closed network of ‘friends’, some old, some new.

The second category is blogging. It was only in retirement that I was coaxed into considering writing blogs as well as material for more orthodox forms of publication. What I have enjoyed about it is the freedom to ‘think out loud’ that it affords. Importantly, I am no longer concerned - if I ever was, which I doubt - that people might nick and elaborate on any thoughts I might have. As I sit today in a café on Piazza Garibaldi in Sinalunga, I note that I have so far posted no fewer than 419 blogs. These fall into discrete classes: café and bar society; critical realism; critical theory; education/careers; general sociology; health/medicine; interventions; notebook series (ideas in progress); poems; sociological autobiography; sociological theorists; sociologists; sport; travel; village life; and ‘greedy bastards’ (a technical term defined in previous sketches). Anyone tempted can find these at: [www.grahamscambler.com](http://www.grahamscambler.com). There is no single format that my blogs conform to, excepting that I like to restrict their length to around 1,000 words. Routine academic-style publishing aside, blogging has settled in as a significant way of communicating ideas. Moreover, it has an extended reach. It compares very favourably with that of academic publications. I find it staggering but checking today I find that there have to date been no fewer than 335,000 views of my website to date, mostly people accessing my blogs. I am led to wonder how long it will be before this additional metric will figure in university assessments of both accomplishment and public engagement (not that UCL would likely look positively on some of the forms of ‘public engagement’ that I indulge in or commend).

I am reproducing two blogs here and the ones I have selected are not jottings of my own thinking but explications of research conducted by Bukodi and Goldthorpe and taken from their exemplar of good quantitative sociological research. The blogs themselves date from 2019. I’ve opted for this duo too because their findings speak to my own lifecourse. I am including them verbatim.

A Sociological Autobiography: 77 – Shifting Work Patterns

In a new book by Erzebet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe, entitled *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, the class (as defined by NS-SEC) distributions of economically active men and women are calculated at the census years of 1851, 1971, 1991 and 2001. Why is this relevant to my ‘sociological autobiography’? And does this Weberian conceptualisation of class not offend my longstanding Marxian sensibilities? Well, it’s horses for courses.

NS-SEC critically ‘absents’ what I have come to call the capitalist executive in general, and the miniscule minority of well under 1% comprising capital monopolists in particular, and is thus unhelpful in investigating how an ever more concentrated hard core of capital-owners have become increasingly well placed to buy political power to shape policy in their interests.

Notwithstanding this absence, NS-SEC remains an appropriate tool for indicating changing degrees of absolute and relative social mobility.

Analyses deploying NS-SEC graphically illustrate the stark changes in the distribution of work over my lifecourse (I was born in 1948 and have just now turned 70). And much follows on from these changes, hence this rather technical fragment.

A cursory outline of the class breakdowns in NS-SEC reads as follows:

Class 1: Higher managers and professionals (eg general managers in large companies and organisations, higher-grade civil servants and local government officials, architects, lawyers, medical practitioners, professional engineers, scientists, university teachers)

Class 2: Lower managers and professionals (eg general managers in small companies and organisations, site managers, office managers, workshop managers, lower-grade civil servants and local government officers, librarians, nurses, physiotherapists, school teachers, social workers, surveyors)

Class 3: Ancillary professional and administrative (eg computer maintenance staff, draughtpersons, library assistants, nursery nurses, paramedical staff, cashiers, clerical workers, data processing operators, personal assistants, secretaries)

Class 4: Small employers and own account workers (eg garage proprietors, builders, café proprietors, craftsmen, market traders, publicans, shopkeepers)

Class 5: Lower supervisory and technical occupations (eg foremen and site and works supervisors, auto-engineers, heating engineers, instrument technicians, laboratory technicians, printers, took and pattern-makers TV and video engineers)

Class 6: Semi-routine occupations (eg care assistants, caretakers and housekeepers, chefs and cooks, chemical process workers, crane drivers, factory machinists, fitters, postal workers, receptionists, sales assistants, store controllers and despatchers, traffic wardens)

Cass 7: Routine occupations (eg bus and van drivers, construction site and other labourers, craftsmen’s mates, food process workers, counter and bar staff, house and office cleaners, kitchen assistants, packers and fillers, porters and attendants, refuse collectors, warehouse workers)

You can see why NS-SEC is conspicuously unhelpful in considering capital ownership and power. Ok, horses for courses. But I also feel compelled to add that this categorisation is no measure of the value added to society by those working in the clusters of occupations it specifies. For example, care workers are undoubtedly a positive for our collective wellbeing, financiers no less indisputably a negative (I’ve blogged on this elsewhere).

Bukodi and Goldthorpe offer the following summary statements. As far as men are concerned, they write:

*In 1951 the wage-earning working class, as represented by NS-SEC Classes 6 and 7, was predominant, accounting for well over half the active male population. In contrast, the managerial and professional salariat, as represented by Classes 1 and 2, accounted for little more than a tenth. But over the period covered the working class contracts and the salariat expands, and especially rapidly between 1951 and 1991. Thus, by 2011 the working class is reduced to less than a third of the active male population while the salariat comprises around two-fifths. The three intermediate classes NS-SEC Classes 3, 4 and 5, remain more stable in size, although some slight decline is indicated in the proportion of men in Class 3, that of employees in ancillary professional and administrative occupation.’*

And for women:

*‘In the care of women, the distributions change for the most part in the same way as with men, even if somewhat more slowly, and in particular the increase in the proportion in the higher-level managerial and professional positions of NS-SEC Class 1 is less marked. The one major difference from men comes with NS-SEC Class 3, which between 1951 and 1971 expanded so as to account for over a third of the active female population but then contracted so as to account for only a quarter by 2011 – reflection chiefly of the rise and fall of the office secretary and typist.’*

If it’s not too esoteric or rude, I’d like to include a table. It records the class, NS-SEC, distributions (%) of economically active populations, 1951-2011. Here goes:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **MEN** |  |  |  |  |
| CLASS |  |  |  |  |
| 1 | 4 | 10 | 15 | 18 |
| 2 | 7 | 15 | 20 | 22 |
| 3 + 4 + 5 | 10, 10, 14 | 8, 10,12 | 8,10,12 | 7,13,10 |
| 6 + 7 | 55 | 45 | 35 | 30 |
|  | 1951 | 1971 | 1991 | 2011 |
| **WOMEN** |  |  |  |  |
| CLASS |  |  |  |  |
| i | 2 | 4 | 7 | 8 |
| 2 | 6 | 10 | 20 | 22 |
| 3 + 4 + 5 | 30, 6, 6 | 36,4,4 | 30,4,4 | 25,6,4 |
| 6 + 7 | 50 | 42 | 35 | 35 |
|  | 1951 | 1971 | 1991 | 2011 |

Such has been the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial social formation that I’ve lived through.

I will – and accept I must – return to the much misunderstood distinction between absolute and relative social mobility in a subsequent contribution. For now I want to register the much-altered workforce with which my predecessors, consociates and successors have been faced, are facing, or will be facing. In this respect among many others, my mum and dad, Annette and I and our four daughters have inhabited/inhabit different eras. Annette and I graduated in 1971, beneficiaries of the *exceptionally* mild, tamed era of welfare state capitalism. Not that life even then was without its challenges!

A Sociological Autobiography: 78 – Relative Mobility

This is the second of a two-parter and cannot be properly grasped on its own. In the last blog in this seemingly interminable series I drew on Bukodi and Goldthorpe’s excellent research to show that the changes of absolute social mobility over the course of my lifetime (I was born in 1948). But as these authors make clear, there is crucial, if often neglected, distinction to be drawn between *absolute* and *relative* social mobility.

In the proverbial nutshell, absolute mobility refers to ‘the proportion of individuals moving between different class positions’, and this can be shown in terms of percentages (see my last blog for reservations about the concept of ‘class’ deployed here - I shall cavil no more!). Absolute rates are conditioned by two independent factors: first, by the structure, and changes in the structure, of the class positions between which mobility occurs; and second, by relative rates of class mobility.

So what of relative social mobility? This, Bukodi and Goldthorpe argue, is more difficult to define. Their initial stab is:

*‘ … it may be sufficient (as a starting point) to think of relative rates as ones that ‘compare the chances’ of individuals of different class origins being found in different class destinations, and that thus reflect social processes which, as they operate within the class structure, generate the absolute rates that are actually observed. The class structure sets the context of class mobility; relative rates determine how, within this context, absolute rates are realised.’*

The general picture painted by the data is of ‘constant social fluidity’ over the course of my lifetime. This confounds many a myth, most notably those postulating long-term increases or decreases in social mobility.

I cannot do any justice here to the statistical subtlety of the analyses presented in *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*. I will have to resort to summarising some of the more striking findings and conclusions. These pertain to politics and policy - and political and policy *failure* - as much as to the nature of the changes that have occurred. These can be listed as follows:

1. equality of opportunity, and its expression via social mobility, ‘appears to be systematically compromised by inequalities of condition’;
2. there is a significant disconnect between political and policy approaches to and assessments of social mobility and sociological research. While the former targets inequalities of opportunity, the latter teaches us that it is inequalities of condition that needs targeting;
3. notwithstanding a significant postwar rise in the overall educational level of the British population, this has had ‘very little effect in weakening the association that exists between individuals’ class origins and their class destinations;
4. if education is going to play a role in promoting social mobility, the association between individuals’ social origins and their educational attainment must weaken;
5. rather than focusing on employers’ *recruitment* practices, focusing on their *promotion practices* might show a greater return: ‘that is, with the aim of discouraging credentialism that effectively blocks promotion from below for those without some, perhaps quite arbitrarily determined, level of qualification, and of encouraging the wider development of internal promotion programmes and associated training provision’;
6. political and policy identifications of social mobility ‘cold spots’ in different parts of the country often overlook ‘the possibility that in such areas working-class children, especially, may very well grow up with a fatalistic sense that people, or at least people of their kind, do in fact have little control over what happens to them in their lives, which them limits the extent to which they actively seek to translate such educational success as they may achieve into such labour market opportunities as may exist’ (the implicit reference here is to what psychologists call an ‘external locus of control’);
7. opportunities for lifelong learning provide ‘second chances’ not so much ‘for men and women whose disadvantaged social origins have had limiting effects on their educational attainment prior to labour market entry, but more for those of more advantaged origins who while in full-time education have not realised their advantages to the full extent that they might;
8. when Britain is compared to other (European) countries, what stands out is that the balance of the upward and downward components of the mobility rate is less favourable than in many other countries. In west-central European countries upward mobility still predominates over downward. Not so in Britain. Moreover, the kind of remedial policies likely to be effective ‘will require political intervention of a kind likely to meet with strong opposition.’

So there has been no decline in absolute intergenerational mobility over the course of my lifetime (if treated in terms of class, as defined by NS-SEC). BUT, *social ascent in Britain no longer predominates over social descent* (a key point for me); and in this sense younger people now face less favourable mobility prospects than I and my babyboomer consociates did. *This change is primarily the result of the course of development of the class structure – in particular, of the slowing down of the previous rate of growth of the managerial and professional salariat*.

This precis dies scant justice to what I regard as outstanding sociological research on the part of Bukodi, Goldthorpe and colleagues (and there are *always* colleagues). But it is *my* sociological autobiography, so I feel free to – and must – append a few comments at the risk of repeating myself.

The first may seem ungrateful to Bukodi and Goldthorpe, but it isn’t. Nothing in their study surprises me. Inequalities of condition, for me the issue of enduring capitalist class structures or relations, as defined in neo-Marxist rather than NS-SEC terms, ineluctably intrude into people’s lifeworlds in the guise of ladders or snakes. Post-1070s financial capitalism has altered this not one jot.

Second, I must refer once again to the class/command dynamic and governing oligarchy. Capital, ever more concentrated in the hands of the capitalist executive in general and capital monopolists in particular, buys power from the power elite straddling the apparatus of the state to make policy in the interests of its further accumulation. *It’s (very nearly ALL)* *down to the ruling class innit?*

I was fortunate to pass the 11+ and to attend Worthing High School for Boys. My father knew the significance of the 11+ while I just wanted to be with my friends. But I’ve written of this before in earlier fragments. Time to move on. But times have indeed changed for successor generations.

The second blog ends here. There is little I would alter had I not committed to reproduce them verbatim.

19: RURAL LIFE

We had lived in Epsom since 1972, for no better reason than it happened to be the place we found a decent flat; subsequently, we bought our first house a few hundred yards away. My mother, Margaret, had died aged 84, spending her last days in Shoreham Hospital. My father, Ron, two years older than Margaret, soldiered on at 43 Gerald Road until, aged 90, he had a fall and was himself admitted to hospital. The advice was that he could no longer safely live on his own, despite having kind and solicitous next-door neighbours. We asked him whether he would like us to help him find a good local home (at least, until his money ran out) or, alternatively, if he would prefer to come to live with us in Epsom. He opted for the latter and for two years we did our best to make him feel at home. Ironically this was viable, despite our limited space, because although his dementia became progressively more intimidating his dodgy hip meant his mobility was severely impaired and he couldn’t take it on himself to leave the house without warning. We purchased football coverage from Sky, which diverted and entertained him. As his short-term memory collapsed he could no longer differentiate between teams. We could in fact have played the same match over and over. Rightly or wrongly, I resolved from the outset on a policy of telling the truth. ‘Where’s mother?’, he asked me one day, ‘upstairs?’ I explained as gently as I could that she had died half a century ago. Occasionally he would ask if I was his brother. But through it all Annette and I sensed that he felt *secure*: whoever we were, we were of his own; he was *safe*. Agency, I firmly believe, is never entirely lost.

We were denied ‘advice’ in the new Epsom-and-Ewell marketplace for carers, but we eventually found our way to decent support. Carers, all but one of whom were kindness personified - has there ever been an occupation more under-rated and under-paid? - got Ron up in the mornings. I put him to bed. He was soon doubly incontinent. I ‘had to’ wash and clean him before settling him for the night. He was acutely embarrassed initially, which I understood: ‘I’m so sorry. I never thought it would come to this!’ But I *discovered* that I was not embarrassed. de Beauvoir wrote in *Adieu* of Sartre’s dying days and was, wrongly in my view, criticised for it. The fourth age is what it is. It will overcome many of us. I learned that any stigma should more appropriately accrue to third parties who signal shame in a natural process. My daughters added their support to Annette’s: our youngest, Miranda, humbled me with her readiness to step in with her sensitivity and skills. I am very lucky with my family.

Towards the end of this two-year stint, I had to write out a note for Ron explaining who he was, who I was and where he was currently living. He would read this note continuously, unless diverted by football on TV; and if I was in the room he would ask me the same questions at intervals of around 20 seconds, making meaningful dialogue almost impossible. More than once he said he had had enough: ‘if I could buy a pill for £10 to end it all, I would.’ I would guiltily distract him by changing the subject.

After these two years at Epsom, we made a ‘collective decision’ to sell Ron’s house in Worthing and, pressed for space, put the proceeds towards a larger house. This is how we ended up transferring from town to country. We fell in love with a semi-detached house in the nearby village of Mickleham in Surrey’s Mole Valley. Ron was to remain with us for a further six months before quietly passing away at the age of 92. Given that I taught medical students about ‘death, dying and bereavement’ for 40+ years, I feel justified in adding a few very personal notes on Ron’s passing. First, a quick comment on Margaret’s death on a ward in Shoreham Hospital. When visiting, I asked a junior house officer (HO) how she was and what the prognosis was. He recognised my name as editor of the medical student textbook *Sociology as Applied to Medicine*, which clearly made him nervous. BUT he stuttered and stammered his way to a clear appraisal for which I was most appreciative: ‘good communication’. She would not be leaving the hospital. As a result, we were able to collect and take Ron to see her to bid her farewell. I couldn’t help comparing the HO’s sharing the news of Margaret’s imminent death with the ‘bad communication’ of a consultant in his 60s in the same ward, who, when asked by a family clustered around the bedside of a sick patient who was clearly drifting in and out of consciousness about his prospects of recovery, I overheard simply blurt out: ‘Well, he’s had a good innings!’

It was early one Saturday evening that Ron said to me: ‘I’m feeling very tired.’ ‘Would you like to go to bed?’ ‘Yes, I think that would be a good idea.’ As I was helping him get ready and move the two metres from his chair to his bed, he said: ‘I just want oblivion.’ As I’ve said, he had expressed this view before, if never so bluntly. ‘Have a good sleep’, I said. He was weak and traversing those two metres was not easy, but then it often wasn’t. No sooner had I settled him down than he died, no more than moments after what proved to be his final words. As his departure dawned on me, to be honest my mind emptied of … well, it just emptied. Annette was as ever an impeccable source of support. Ron had been clearly and unambiguously ready to die. It is worth adding here that this is the more comprehensible the older you are. At the age of 74 at the time of writing this I can at least empathise with a desire to depart, although I am far from ready to depart myself. To make this point to my students I used to say: ‘I can’t think of anything worse than going clubbing, and I expect you can’t get your head round this!’ I was in my 50s. ‘Well’, I went on, ‘what you can empathise with depends at least in part on the phase of the lifecourse you currently occupy. People who are fourth agers - although not exclusively those in this group - can indeed, to paraphrase Kubler-Ross’ classic account of the stages of dying, be accepting or at least resigned to death.’

What to do if someone dies at home? I rang our local general practice ‘out-of-hours’ service, and a message was relayed to a locum who was on a call. She would attend asap. Apparently, the police require to be informed and a post-mortem carried out if the deceased has not been seen by a doctor in a two-week period prior to death. Two police officers came by, drank tea and were kind and sympathetic. The locum arrived and confirmed the death. It occurred to me that, okay, Ron had left his body behind, and I am an atheist, but it was ‘as if’ his soul had vacated its embodiment. What followed was worthy of a Monty Python script and would have amused Ron. An ambulance arrived at the summit of the rather steep hill on which we live. It was not its crew’s normal vehicle, which was being repaired. Unfortunately, its brakes were not up to parking, and it kept slipping back down the hill; the driver had to ask our neighbours to move their car so he could take advantage of their flat parking space. The body was prepared for removal. A second unanticipated problem. Our house is 56 steps down from the hill. The outside lighting failed, so I had to carry a torch to illuminate the way for the stretcher. No soul, and now no body. Nor was this the end of a veritable comedy of errors.

A series of subsequent phone calls on my part failed to locate Ron’s body. The undertaker’s local office was closed (permanently), and nor were any other mid-Surrey ‘branches’ able to trace its whereabouts. Eventually it was tracked down to East Surrey Hospital, where the post-mortem was to be carried out. They would ring me with the results. They didn’t. When all was eventually resolved I noticed that Ron was recorded as a ‘female’. I was less amused than Ron would have been, but I made no complaint. Nor was I distressed by what seemed like a conspiracy of incompetence: when we are gone, we are gone. Ron was no part of this farce.

To return to our new home in Mickleham, which provided more than enhanced space, although my commute to UCL over the next nine years became more complex. Epsom had been an excellent hub for commuters, then offering services every 15 mins to Waterloo and Victoria, with access also to London Bridge, each journey taking about 35 minutes. The travel from Mickleham involved catching the half-hourly 365 bus from close by to Dorking Station, a 50-minute journey to, usually Waterloo, and a tube up the Northern Line to Goodge Street. It meant a very early start if I had a lecture at 9am. But we had fallen in love with Old School Cottage from a first sighting. In fact, so enthusiastic were Annette and I when we first gazed down its 56 garden steps that we put in a bid before I had viewed the property inside and went on to purchase it before clinching the sale of 58 South Street in Epsom, a risky expedient. The estate agents, *Wadsworths*, donated a bottle of champaign to mark our moving in. The move itself was not quite the stress-inducing life event that Brown and Harris might have predicted from their classic study, *Origins of Depression*; but it was heavy physical labour nevertheless. Our overriding challenge will be anticipated by any academic, at least of my cohort - *books*! We had thousands of them (our daughters had counted over 6,000 not so long before the move). The removal firm was excellent, not least in carrying Ron in his wheelchair via our ‘right of way’ through our new neighbour’s garden - even as he repeated ‘Will I need a parachute?’ - and I wish I could now remember their name.

I imagine we had heard of Mickleham prior to our move, and we had certainly by-passed it on the A24 a few hundred times when visiting Ron and Margaret in Worthing, but we knew little about it. We discovered that the rough track leading to our new home, Byttom Hill, had some history to it. In 1789 Sir Charles Talbot had made over a parcel of land to the parish of Mickleham for the construction of a poor house. Since 1601, due to the declining fortunes of the Church, courtesy of Henry VIII’s suppression of the monasteries, parishes had been charged with a responsibility to provide relief for their local poor. The means to do so came from a levy on the better-off and was distributed by overseers as either outdoor or indoor relief. According to a local historian, Ronald Shepherd, outdoor relief sufficed until 1789 when a poor house was judged essential. Poor houses were austerely functional, designed to stigmatise and deter. The one half-way up our hillside track, was apparently an elongated, two-story building containing eight dwellings. As if to anticipate the present neoliberal era of accelerating inequality and the redeployment of stigma as a weapon against the disadvantaged, whether poor or disabled, it was soon put about that the inhabitants were ‘taking advantage’. Furthermore, after the Napoleonic War the numbers of ‘needy poor’ rose nationally, leading to the passing of a new Poor Law Act in 1834. Individual parishes lost their responsibilities in favour of ‘unions’ of neighbouring parishes, leaving Mickleham’s high and dry. In 1838 a proposal was made to convert the poor house into an almshouse, but it came to nothing. Another Talbot stepped into the breach, this time Sir George, who in 1845 supplied the means for the reconstruction of what was by then a dilapidated building; and an almshouse was erected. A fire in 1864 levelled this to the ground. Shepherd defines this as a blessing in disguise: the eight sets of rooms Annette and I now drive past daily are apparently a significant improvement. Nestling beside these rooms is the King William IV pub. Built in 1830, this one-time resource for workers on the nearby Beaverbook Estate offers wondrous views across the A24 to Norbury Park. As any readers of my blogs will know, this pub has over the years become a writing retreat for me, the more so under its present owners, Eamonn and Anne and manager Kat. Old School Cottage might not have the Elizabeth 1 vintage of 58 South Street, but it does have a story and a certain age attached to it. It was built and founded as a National School in 1843. Its conversion into a dwelling took place in 1900. Old School Cottage is a conversion of the school, while our neighbour’s Old School House is a conversion of the schoolmasters’ house. While both properties are semi-detached, they each enjoy near-complete privacy.

20: RETURNING TO SURREY UNIVERSITY

When in 1998 I had been a visiting professor at Emory University in Atlanta I was slightly envious of Mike McQuaide’s post on Emory’s Oxford campus. This was because the Oxford campus was much like a village, affording Mike an opportunity to get to know a small and manageable number of undergraduate students well. The contrast between Oxford and the larger and more cosmopolitan Emory community was one thing; but the contrast between Oxford and UCL was quite another. UCL’s site in busy Bloomsbury in central London made even Emory look attractively communal and self-contained. Moreover, I lived a not inconsiderable commute away. Relatively new to Twitter, I tweeted my frustration one day: wouldn’t it be wonderful, I mused aloud, to belong in an out-of-town university campus community. To my surprise this elicited a response. Rachel Brooks, then Head of the Department of Sociology at Surrey, said ‘why don’t you email me Graham?’ I did, and the upshot was that in May of 2014 I became a Visiting Professor of Sociology at Surrey. It was an act of great generosity on the part of Rachel and her colleagues. I had returned to the institution that had first sparked my interest in the discipline and to a department with an enhanced and well-deserved reputation for scholarly excellence.

I was allocated the share of a room in the department, cohabiting with ex-LSE sociologist Martin Bulmer in a room occupied until recently by Keith McDonald, now in his 80s, who taught Annette and I industrial sociology as undergrads. Martin kindly rook me to lunch on my initial exploratory visit. I promised to repay his kindness, but in the event this never happened. Why not? I think there was a combination of factors that meant I was never to integrate with the department *qua* community. I probably harboured an unrealistic notion that I might, for example, devise and teach an undergraduate course. But on reflection why would my new colleagues be accepting of this kind of intrusion into their worlds? I made several trips to Guildford initially, although I often ended up writing in a town I knew well from undergrad days, or in a campus café, rather than visiting the department. I asked for a parking permit but was told ‘no’, these were like gold dust. I was asked to give the occasional talk and seminar, invitations I gladly accepted. I also contributed a couple of departmental blogs and spread the word about department personnel, achievements and activities on social media (which I still do). But with time scarcer than I had anticipated, plus a growing desire to write, and limited stamina, I found myself reluctant to ‘hang around’ the department. It was in this sense entirely my fault that I remained essentially an outsider. Hanging around would have been a vital prerequisite for integration. The Surrey campus was never to become my equivalent of the Oxford campus of Emory University, and the responsibility was mine.

My precarious tenure, accompanied by sporadic guilt, lasted several years, spanning three department chairs, Rachel Brooks, Jon Garland and Andy King, all of whom, excellent scholars and chairs, were generous and undemanding. I hoped during this period that my list of publications would accrue to and benefit the department, but I was never to discover if this was the case. It was only in writing this briefest of sketches that I finally decided that it was inappropriate for me to continue as a visiting professor given my hands-off approach. In the midst of writing this sketch I emailed the trio of departmental chairs with whom I had enjoyed direct contact to tell them that I was resigning as visiting professor of sociology in their department.

21: THE CONCEPT OF A ‘FRACTURED SOCIETY’

In terms of my theorising a good deal had happened during my protracted if somewhat threadbare tenure at Surrey University. One way of encapsulating this is by reference to a concept that I began to deploy to characterise contemporary British society. Chairing a meeting of critical realists in the British Library, I once heard Maggie Archer decry such single-word summary characterisations (though I noted at the time that she herself refers to the ‘morphogenetic society’). But I had come to see the irresistibly sharp resonance of the ideas of fracturing and fractures in the era of financialised or rentier capitalism, hence my reference to a ‘fractured society’.

In fact, I wrote or edited several books as well as chapters and articles within a short timeframe. In 2017 Mark Carrigan, Tom Block and I published an edited volume bringing together a selection of Maggie’s writings entitled *Structure, Culture and Agency: Selected Papers of Margaret Archer*; my contribution was to write the Introduction, but Mark and Tom did the bulk of the labour. In 2018 I edited the seventh edition of *Sociology as Applied to Medicine*, the latest in the series and one which at the publisher’s request included material of global rather than just UK relevance; I also involved colleagues new to the enterprise, like Ewan Speed, Nick Fox and Deborah Lupton. I confess that I found it quite hard work nagging contributors and trying to impose a degree of uniformity of length, style, accessibility, referencing etc. In 2018 also I published a book that offered the fullest treatment of the fractured society: this was entitled *Sociology, Health and the Fractured Society: A Critical Realist Account*. This was followed in 2020 by *A Sociology of Shame and Blame: Insiders Versus Outsiders,* and currently in press is *A Critical Realist Theory of Sport*, each of these later works making implicit and occasionally explicit use of the concept of the fractured society.

I have come over these years to describe the fractured society in terms of eight core properties. The first of these is *environmental threat*. A strong scientific consensus has emerged that the future of multiple species on planet Earth, including humans, is under threat from ‘climate change’, and that this change is down in substantial part to historic and contemporary human exploitation of the environment. We have become inhabitants of Ulrich Beck’s perspicuous *Risk Society*. Two historic ‘givens’, namely, the natural world and human nature, have been penetrated and reflexively shaped by our rapacious species; and this penetration has been exposed as beyond hazardous. My focus has been on the natural world rather than human nature, but it is worth pointing out that, in his *Human Nature*, JurgenHabermas has highlighted the risks associated with genetic advances; and Stephen Hawking, in a posthumous study, has argued that artificial intelligence (AI) may constitute a significant threat in its own right: the human species, he projected, may not be recognisable as such within a century.

The term ‘Anthopocene’, denoting a putative geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth’s geology, climate and ecosystems, was coined in the 1980s and popularised in the noughties. It is a nomenclature that remains contested, but it has focused attention on the ‘Great Acceleration’ of the last 60 years especially, during which carbon dioxide emissions, global warming, habitat destruction, extinction and widescale natural resource extraction have presented as significant phenomena and major challenges. In *A Critical Realist theory of Sport* I discuss the implications of the Anthropocene for global sport, stressing that, as so often is the case, the most severe threats are already being faced by to poorest ex-colonial nations.

The second core property of the fractured society is the *nomadic proletariat*. Environmental threat is one motive for the upsurge in global migration, others being political or military conflict, absolute or relative poverty, and a desire to join family and kin. No fewer than one in 110 people worldwide are presently ‘displaced’. While Beck understandably wrote of the ‘boomerang effect’ of contemporary mega-risks, as with environmental change it is invariably the poorest in the poorest nations who are most and most rapidly impacted. It is a current scandal in Britain that successive Conservative Home Secretaries - notably, Theresa May, Priti Patel and Suella Braverman - have openly promoted racist policies, not only against members of ethnic minorities but, more recently, against refugees and even asylum seekers, hoping to profit from stirring the pot of public emotions against the background of political austerity and the cost of living crisis. With wars raging throughout the globe, fuelled by the selling of ever more vindictive armaments, and extending to the very edge of Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the numbers comprising the nomadic proletariat might be expected to rise significantly, and sooner rather than later.

The third property is the *new inequality*. I have noted and offered a partial explanation for this phenomenon in previous sketches on the GBH, but a brief revisit is in order. Escalating levels of material inequality are a documented and recognised function of the transition from welfare state to rentier capitalism in countries like Britain. In a global context, Oxfam noted that in 2020 the world’s 2,153 billionaires had more wealth than the 4.6 billion people comprising 60% of the world’s population. This is a staggering statistic. As I write, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has just confirmed that in Britain wealth has grown rapidly compared with earnings since the 2008 financial crisis, driven by a surge in house prices and financial assets like stocks and shares at a time of flatlining progress for average wages. As the next sketch will show in some detail, this pattern of wealth inequality in relation to income inequality was exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2022 ‘cost of living crisis’, dramatically deepened by the ill-fated Conservative regime of Liz Truss and ‘truss-economics’, has brought things to something of a head even as I sit at my laptop typing this.

The fourth property is *class and precarity*. A facet of the new inequality is the emergence of an exclusive band of super-rich alongside growing poverty, with people in relative poverty slipping and sliding into absolute poverty, unable to feed and clothe their children and accruing significant personal and household debt just to keep their heads above water. Class relations are biting deeper into people’s lives even as the prospects of growing class consciousness seem to be diminishing. In Britain as elsewhere, precarity, or radical insecurity, stemming from changes in job markets (eg zero hours contracts) and in welfare provision (eg the parsimonious introduction of Universal Credit), is part and parcel of this dynamic. It is not lost on the power elite heading the state apparatus that people who are worried sick day-to-day trying to pay for food, clothing and heating are disinclined to combine with others to organise for change.

Fifth comes the property of *post-national ‘othering’*. While nation states remain important global actors, what have been termed post-national ‘imaginary communities’ have assumed a greater prominence than hitherto. This is especially salient in relation to the nomadic proletariat in general and to the new pattens of migration and asylum-seeking in particular. But these processes of othering go beyond racial and ethnic difference to encompass the long-term sick, the disabled and the under- and unemployed, against whom stigma has been ‘weaponised’ as a form of political and social control. I have addressed these issues in some detail in *A Sociology of Shame and Blame: Insiders Versus Outsiders*.

Sixth comes *gender dissolution*. Capitalism has from its onset in the long sixteenth century been gendered as well as racialised and relations of class have utilised and exploited this. Obstinate patriarchal relations have retained their vibrancy in financialised or rentier capitalism. Repeated bouts of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ have been documented in Britain and globally. We have also seen a cultural and rights-based challenge to cis-defined binaries, sometimes under the rubric of a putative fourth wave of feminism. This is not the occasion to debate trans activism, but a few comments are in order. The challenge from some trans activists extends to an argument that *sex*, like *gender*, is socially constructed (ie not a biological given). This argument has gained considerable traction and prompted a no less determined response. My own view, which I cannot resist appending here (it’s my series of sketches after all), is that it is by no means coincidental that this oft-toxic debate has focused almost entirely on people ‘born male’ who want to ‘identity as’, to ‘be/become’, women. In other words, it can be recast as a symptom of patriarchy. While I fully support the right of these people to ‘perform womanhood’ and to live as women, I want to insist that biology (and real biological mechanisms) - and psychology (and real psychological mechanisms) for that matter - cannot simply be trumped by social fiat. More importantly in the present context, the trans dispute is indicative of an evolving practice of identity-formation reflective of a wave of cultural relativity.

The seventh property is precisely that of *cultural disorientation.* Once discussed under the no-longer fashionable rubric of postmodernism, it denotes a relativisation of culture functional for, but not determined by, the economics of rentier capitalism. It is perhaps best captured by Lyotard’s well-worn distinction between *universal* and *petit* narratives. The former reflects the European Enlightenment approach to understanding and responding to the natural and social worlds we inhabit and highlights narratives of ‘progress’ towards the good society. The latter arises out of the dissolution and subsequent abandonment of universal narratives and the uptake of less ambitious or partial narratives, a shift of orientation often lauded as a form of emancipation from constraining rather than enabling individual, group and societal perspectives. The result is a pick-and-mix resource of petit narratives affording an inexhaustible mosaic of ‘choices’ for personalised identity-formation, for what Tony Giddens has called ‘life politics’. It is this form of cultural disorientation that has in my view opened the door for the more uncompromising representatives of trans activism. A more general point is that cultural disorientation via relativisation, paradoxically, can make fundamentalisms more rather than less probable.

The final property in this series is *disconnected fatalism*. This is a step beyond cultural disorientation. It signals growing feelings of abandonment, bitterness, hopelessness and kindred aspects of vulnerability. It marks an unwitting sense of detachment from events, typically born of a feeling of impotence. In a paper published in *Society, Health and Vulnerability* in 2019 I discussed ten dimensions of vulnerability, each of which can be, and often is, associated with an individual’s sense of disconnected fatalism. They are: anomie; alienation; powerlessness; marginalisation; exclusion; stigmatisation; deviance; cultural imperialism; loneliness; and symbolic violence. Disconnected fatalism clusters and is most virulent among members of the working class, and perhaps most conspicuous among the under- and unemployed in the former mining and manufacturing communities of the midlands and the north.

This series of properties of the fractured society is not intended to be exhaustive, nor am I able in this sketch to do them justice. But I do want to claim that each reflects a deeply concerning crack or fissure in the fabric of British society, and that taken together they warrant describing contemporary British society as fractured. But what I have also attempted to do in publications and blogs in recent years is take a few tentative steps towards *explaining* the fracturing process. This has led to the commending of a quintet of causal or generative mechanisms. Each is articulated in the form of a dynamic.

The first is the *class/command dynamic*, which has been introduced and addressed previously*.* Critically, this dynamic underpinned the GBH. To reiterate, I have argued that a reinvigorated dynamic of class and command (or state) relations has been decisive for the emergence and consolidation of financialised or rentier capitalism. With regard to class, it is that fraction of the 1% - in fact, less than 0.1% - of the British population, that is, those I have called ‘capital monopolists’, that is of pivotal importance. The capital monopolists constitute a hard core of the capitalist executive. They comprise those rentiers, financiers and major stakeholders and CEOs of transnational corporations whose ever more concentrated ownership of capital enables them to buy ever more influence from the power elite atop the complex and tentacled apparatus of the state to shift policy in their favour. To repeat the now familiar formula*: capital buys power to make policy in its interests*. It seems to me that this thesis, which I elaborated in relation to changing patterns of health and longevity back in the 1990s, is becoming commonplace *even in medical sociology and social epidemiology* (for which I take no credit). A final point here is that, as has been documented in the USA, it is increasingly the case that capital monopolists and their immediate allies are *in government*. Witness the undemocratic and ‘eccentric’ emergence of Rishi Sunak as the UK Prime Minister in 2022.

The second dynamic has also seen the light of day in earlier sketches. This is the *stigma/deviance dynamic*, which focuses of the weaponising of stigma, or the ‘heaping of blame on shame’. People who have conventionally been shamed are now routinely face the further calumny of being blamed for their shame. The logical endpoint is ‘abjection’. Abjection, the ideal attribution on the part of a state seeking oppressive compliance, is the unequivocal product of a calculated political strategy (which is in turn a product of the class/command dynamic). If people can be blamed for their shameful difference, even if not rendered fully abject, then they can more readily be scapegoated or abandoned by the state, in the process opening the door wide for cutting tax-funded welfare expenditure.

The third dynamic is the *insider/outside dynamic*. The insider-outsider binary has been omnipresent in sociology (in remembrance of Wittgenstein’s polar opposites argument, there can be no insiders without outsiders). Recalling Durkheim and the American structural-functionalist school, outsiders (the abnormal) have an important social function in that they allow for the possibility of insiders (the normal) celebrating their mainstream status and inclusivity. In rentier capitalism a racialised coalescing of this binary/dynamic has fuelled support for a reactionary, alt-right and proto-fascist populist politics. This recasting of the dynamic has further skewed the already command relations of the state (ie May’s ‘hostile environment’ policy and the ‘Windrush scandal’, and Patel and Braverman’s crude racialised othering implicit in the detaining of refugees and asylum-seekers indefinitely in appalling conditions, and in sending as many of those surviving crossing the British Channel in small boats as possible to Rwanda on one-way tickets).

A fourth dynamic is the *party/populist dynamic*. Once stable political alignments are being undermined by both the intrusion or ‘overlay’ of cultural issues and by populist politics. It currently seems that the ‘hegemonic bloc’ of progressive individualism is withering on the vine; that we have entered an interregnum; and, as Nancy Fraser has suggested, a contest is now raging between a ‘reactionary’ versus ‘progressive populism’. There is a toing and froing of trends. Corbyn came and went in the UK, and Bernie Sanders nearly came and has almost gone in the USA. I suggested in 2020 a paper in the Australian journal, *Health Services Review*,that Britain is succumbing to a period of state authoritarianism, though an important rider is that it is a state authoritarianism largely in hock to capital monopolists.

The last of the quintet made its first appearance in my latest book, *A Critical Realist Theory of Sport*, but warrants inclusion here. I called it the *elite/mass dynamic*. This is not just a predictable product of growing class power and/or the populist impulse, but rather captures the growing distance between those involved in (proximal) elite governance, that is, those who run national and local institutions and bodies, and the (distal) mass of the public who comprise a largely detached, remote, disenfranchised and increasingly virtual other. An argument made with reference to sport has a wider purchase. The relations between elites and the mass have become hyper-rationalised (in Weberian terms), commodified (in Marxian terms) and, to cite Ritzer once more, McDonaldised. For all the nominal-cum-token representation of members of the working class, women and people from racial/ethnic and other minorities, unaccountable elite governance is now the norm.

It needs to be stressed that these summary accounts of today’s societal fractures and the generative mechanisms that have played a causal role in delivering and enlarging them are a precis of more considered prices in publications and blogs. Nor, even in the latter, is too much being claimed on their behalf. I will append a few comments by way of elaborating on this confession. It has long been a personal project to promote what some have called ‘big sociology’, namely, engagement with the classical sociological concerns with social order and social change, or, in general terms, macro-phenomena. I tried to show in a previous sketch, using the broad-reach sociology of Habermas, how micro-phenomena like conversations between foodbank users and staff can only be fully grasped and explained by reference to rentier capitalism’s growing inequalities. So my ‘bias’ in writing of the fractured society and some of the mechanisms that have contributed to it has been in favour of macro-sociology. I make no apology for this, but it needs to be factored in.

Given this bias, if that is an appropriate word, my focus has unsurprisingly been on social structural mechanisms. Much of what I have said on culture and agency has been somewhat tangential, though later sketches will contain more on both. I will venture a few points of clarification and elaboration at this juncture. They concern the interface between structure and culture, and the distinctive causal role of class relations as opposed to those of gender, race, and so on.

Andrew Sayer has commented on both these topics with his customary eloquence in his *The Moral Significance of Class*, published in 2005,and his *Why We Can’t Afford the Rich*, published a decade later. In the second of these he writes:

Neoliberals - New Labour for example - can appear quite progressive about gender, race, sexuality, disability and condemn those who discriminate against people on these grounds. Unsurprisingly, the elephant in the room is economic inequalities or class difference. Though it never admits it, neoliberalism is a political-economic movement that seeks to legitimate widening economic inequalities and defend rentier interests above all others. Rentiers live off others regardless of their gender, race, sexuality and so on.’

This is an argument I have repeatedly made myself. It does nothing to diminish the salience of gender and race; but it does insist that social class and class relations remain *the* prepotent causal or generative mechanism for understanding and explaining capitalist systems. This holds despite the fact that class divisions succeeded those of gender and race historically. Class relations have in fact typically taken advantage of pre-existing gender and race relations, although, as Mike Savage shows in his *The Return of Ineauality*, published in 2021, there are important variations by time and place.

Another distinction Sayer makes is consistent with one of my own. In *The Moral Significance of Class*,he contrasts what he calls ‘identity-neutral mechanisms’ with ‘identity-sensitive mechanisms’. Capitalism he contends, is not dependent on identity, and for him one of the great disappointmentsof contemporary research on inequalities has been ‘a tendency to invert the former neglect of identity-sensitive cultural influences by denying the co-presence of identity-neutral mechanisms.’ This confers more precision on my regular differentiation of ‘objective’ (identity-neutral) versus ‘subjective’(identity-sensitive) concepts of class, which I have deployed to assert that while objective class relations have grown in relevance and explanatory power in post-1970 financialised or rentier capitalism, subjective class relations have diminished in salience and explanatory power for identity-formation in the wake of the relativisation of culture. In other words, class has come to exercise more influence over people’s material wellbeing even as it has provided less fuel for who they think they are and how they fit into society. It is a fundamental mistake for sociologists to allow the latter to swamp the former: we must beware reducing structural to cultural relations here. I would add that nor should we *conflate* structural and cultural relations, as happened for example with the LSE/BBC Great British Class Survey. Just as Archer has rightly insisted on an analytic distinction between structure and agency, allowing for the study of how they impact on each other, so we need to maintain an analytic distinction between structure and culture for the same reason.

Building on this, it is not that people no longer recognise and acknowledge their class location - on the contrary, they remain very aware of this - but rather that contemporary society has provided a telling and fragmented ‘cultural overlay’ that often serves to distract them. The pieces in this cultural jigsaw have become ever more distracting and bewildering even as they afford a plethora of resources for identity-formations in the guise of come-hither *petit* narratives. It is in this context that notions like ‘post-truth’, ‘fake news’, ‘wokeness’ and the like have gained traction. It is not that this cultural shift, once more or less accurately represented by the outmoded 1960s phrase ‘postmodern culture’, is somehow reducible to, or explicable in terms of, the structural shift in class relations reflected in my class/command dynamic. What I would suggest, however, is that the turn in cultural relations is functional for our class-based oligarchic or plutocratic regime. I once in a blog planted the notion, tongue in cheek, that our relativised culture might be seen, after the philosopher of science, Lakatos, as a kind of protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses that serves to protect or deflect attacks on the hard core of neoliberal ideology.

22: THEN CAME COVID-19

I will not rehearse yet again the genesis of the COVID pandemic, but rather precis what happened in the UK. Enough has been reliably established to affirm a series of propositions. I draw here on a paper I published in *Frontiers in Sociology* in 2022:

* the UK was ill-prepared for a pandemic, having paid too little attention to prior warnings about shortages of hospital beds, equipment and facilities;
* the background to this pandemic-specific lack of readiness was a health system, the NHS, that had been systematically under-funded during the decade of political austerity from 2010- to 2020;
* austerity was a calculated political choice that reflected a Conservative government agenda to open up public sector institutions, including the NHS, to competition from private providers/businesses;
* once COVID entered the UK, and even factoring in the lack of readiness, the governmental response was inadequate in terms of: delayed action, strategic errors, inefficiency and loss of trust;
* COVID has provided prolonged cover both for the assault on the NHS and for other political initiatives;
* Politically, COVID has permitted the systematic pursuit of state authoritarianism.

To these preliminaries should be added evidence of outright corruption (well beyond chumocracy and cronyism). In a chapter in press, co-authored with Benny Goodman and Miranda Scambler, we document and commend the tradition and role of ‘muckraking journalism’ in exposing this corruption, revolving as it did around the inept and crooked Health Minister of the day, Matt Hancock. I return to this theme and comment on the virtues of a muckraking sociology later.

My concern at this point is to broach the idea that COVID represented a kind of ‘breaching experiment’ (after the manner of the American ethnomethodologist, Harold Garfinkel). I first suggested this in my paper in the *Health Sociology Journal* in 2020. This amounts to a claim that COVID disrupted the social status quo, and in the process revealed in a harsher light the nooks and crannies, faults and fissures of the fractured society. The most obvious way in which this was accomplished was via a sudden and distinct surge in material inequality. John Leslie of the *Resolution Foundation* was quoted as saying that it is unusual for wealth to increase during a recession but that the impact of events during 2020 and 2021 had ‘turbo-charged’ the gap between rich and poor. In fact, the UK experienced the biggest one-year fall on output in over three centuries in 2020. Overall, total UK wealth increased by £900 billion to £16.5 trillion during the pandemic, but the poor were more likely to have run down than increased their savings. As for the super-rich, the category subsuming my ‘greedy bastards’, the *Sunday Times Rich List* noted an additional 24 billionaires during 2020-21, making a total of 171, the highest number in the 33 years of the paper’s rich lists. For context, these gains coincided with the UK government’s interventions to pay the wages of millions of struggling citizens.

As for income inequality, this too grew both during the decade of political austerity and during COVID. Interestingly, the typical working-age income level in the UK is £29,437 while in France it is £29,350; however, the poorest fifth of working-age households in the UK are 20% poorer than their French counterparts, while the richest fifth are 17% richer. Overall, the combination of lower incomes at the bottom level of British earners, comparatively low levels of private savings, and a less generous security safety net has meant that UK households were particularly exposed to economic shocks like the COVID crisis.

Given my natural interest in population health, it was no surprise to discover via Michael Marmot and his colleagues that this increasing level of material inequality had a knock-on effect on health inequalities. Moreover, once more, this COVID-related uplift in health inequalities both built on those already documented in relation to 2010-20 political austerity and followed the anticipated tramlines of class, gendered and racial disadvantage. This disadvantage, as predicted, was also spatial, impacting the north and midlands with the greatest severity. I will not stop here to do so, but it is my opinion that this can all be summarised using my idea, previously espoused, of the clustering of asset flows, with strong flows being conducive to health and longevity and weak flows predisposing to poor health and a reduced life expectancy.

In some ways these debates are best conducted in the academic/scientific literature, though it has been important to allude to them here. But I have personal comments about COVID to append too. While keeping in touch with evolving and divergent counsels of epidemiologists, Annette and I, like most other people barring the partying Conservative leadership in and around Number 10, were challenged in our mid-Surrey rural retreat by the series of government-imposed lockdowns. We were of course fortunate to live in a house of our choosing that nestled on the edge of the attractive village of Mickleham. How different our experience of voluntary-to-compulsory ‘confinement’ was destined to be from those families walled into too-small high rise inner-city flats with insufficient resources to pay the rent and to feed, school and entertain the kids, that is, with weak asset flows; and then there were those, mostly women, effectively ‘imprisoned’ with abusers with nowhere to escape to. Such class-related hardships were to be eloquently captured by Lisa McKenzie and co in their *Lockdown Diaries*, a project I was pleased to help sponsor and support. Inevitably, realising our good fortune brought with it feelings of guilt. To guilt I should add impotence. I was into my 70s by then and suffering from type 2 diabetes, which meant we elected to self-isolate. This meant we were not well placed to offer help to our neighbours. Our daughter Rebecca helped us order food and other essentials online, which was a godsend.

Guilt and impotence are negative emotions, but there were positives too. There was a deceleration in the pace of life, perhaps paradoxically for someone well into retirement. Life was suddenly less structured and punctuated by mundane everyday rituals and activities. I missed ‘café society’, the more so since I had become accustomed to writing different things in different locations. My solitude was no longer tempered by others bustling around me, which I have bizarrely always found conducive to concentration. My study demanded more of me. But back to the positives. I found I had time to stand and stare. I started to look at things, most frequently growing in or visiting our hillside of a garden. And in a quite unanticipated development, I started writing poetry. I had occasionally dabbled before, but with results even I found disappointing. It took me by surprise. I ‘published’ one or two efforts on social media and met with encouragement. What I had noticed whenever I had put pen to paper in the past was that the results always seemed forced. Now the poems began to flow. I have a few observations to make here. First, I have over time found the practice of writing easier; second, I quickly discovered that it was critical to ‘have something to say’; and third, a poem doesn’t have to represent some sort of statement, but rather must strike a chord with the reader. Poems offer a counterbalance to sociological and philosophical exposition and analysis: they speak in a different voice. Not long after my experiments with poetry, Rebecca and I went on to make them available in a selection, *Rhythmic Musings*, which Rebecca herself illustrated and produced. I harbour no illusions as to their worth, but I found writing them cathartic and diverting. I reproduce two here: the first conjures up the image of my father’s last trip to the South Downs and the second celebrates spring.

**A Moment Please**

‘Can you give me a minute on my own?’

And he froze like a statue, head inclined,

gazing across the Downs, seeing nothing,

but owning a moment of open space,

thinking nothing, but feeling to his skin,

absorbing nine decades of this and that.

‘Ok, thank you, we can go now’, he said.

**The Crocus**

The ground is matted,

gouache brown

with slivers of ice;

it’s just stopped raining

and it’s numbing cold.

As if in defiance

of this season

of crystal stillness,

at the earthenware base

of the statue of a maiden,

her thought far away,

there’s a thin etiolated

thread of life,

the umbilical cord

of a single blue crocus.

The petals are bathed

in droplets of rainwater

and it looks pale but pert.

For aeons the crocus

has laid down its challenge:

‘Now let’s think of Spring.’

Over this period of intermittent lockdowns through 2020-21 I predictably experienced a degree of restlessness. My home base was more than comfortable, and the enforced slowdown had its compensations, but our lives seemed to hover between this and that, be it watering the garden, catching up with the news - invariably via the more informative social rather than the mainstream media - or watching TV dramas, going for brief walks, getting dinner, reading or writing, and so forth. There was a slow-burning edginess to my restlessness. Naturally I ruminated on the volatility of the politics that COVID accentuated, but I have already commented on this. There is one further observation. Our village of Mickleham, like many other communities, gathered itself in support of the vulnerable and struggling. Central to this was the formation of a WhatsApp group, which shared local news re-services, online deliveries, local food shops, and so on. Impressively, younger members readily used WhatsApp to offer intensive personal support to those isolating. This was charity in its acceptable form, quite different from the type of bourgeois philanthropic charity that substitutes for tax-funded state services and that Attlee once described as a ‘cold, soulless thing’. Allowing for the fact that I inhabit a mid-Surrey, middle-class enclave, it cut across class, race or ethnicity and gender (without of course dissolving them as structures). People who hitherto hadn’t ‘got on’ buried or put aside their differences and came together. Our local pub, the King Willie, cooked and distributed fish and chips on Fridays (in the process scoring over its rival, the Running Horses). Innovative communal forms, in short, were accomplished, warranting an empirical investigation. I began just such an enquiry myself, tracking inputs into the local WhatsApp group, but I had to abandon the study for lack of time. It is worth recording that the WhatsApp group lives on, though its use has understandably shifted. The focus continues to be on sharing local information about services, events, lost dogs and escaped cows; but the traffic is increasingly focused on a few members who swap unwanted goods (including expensive items of furniture etc). Maybe I should one day return to my study of this transition from COVID-inspired communal solidarity to post-COVID communal swap-shop.

23: BACK TO SPORT

Having never lost my fascination for sport, especially but by no means only rugby, cricket and track-and-field athletics, I returned to it as the subject matter of a new book in the noughties. As I write this I have - literally - just finished correcting the proofs on *A Critical Realist Theory of Sport*, which is due for publication in December of 2022. In some ways this is a follow-up to my *Sport and Society: History, Power and Culture*, published in 2005, but it breaks considerable new theoretical and empirical ground. I will not attempt a synopsis here, but rather suggest a few ways in which my approach and perspective have shifted in the years between the two volumes. I once again drew inspiration from the critical theory of Habermas and the critical realism of Bhaskar, called upon the notion of rentier capitalism’s fractured society, and used the class/command, stigma/deviance, insider/outsider and party/populist dynamics to strategic causal advantage. But I added a further dynamic, that of the elite/mass, testifying to a now yawning gap between the owners, regulators and managers of sporting endeavours like football and rugby clubs and a fandom more ubiquitous but also more virtual than actual.

As for the salience of the dynamics as causal or generative mechanisms, I repeated my longstanding view that the class/command dynamic permits a hard core of global and nomadic owners of capital to buy power to their advantage in policy making, which has meant some have entered the sporting arena unhindered, indirectly by monopolising new communication technologies, and directly by buying up leading football and rugby clubs and their associated brands. This has led to a multi-faceted polarisation between system privilege and lifeworld participation and fandom. I redeployed the concept of asset flows in this context. The stigma/deviance dynamic was referenced to emphasise the often-overriding ideological appropriation of the notion of personal responsibility. This has led to sporting success and failure being put down to individual talent and effort. While sporting failure in the past might be accompanied by shame, it is now more likely to be accompanied by blame. Young Asian cricketers who failed to make the grade in Yorkshire were blamed for not fitting in or for not working hard enough. This (mis)use of personal responsibility ’absents’ the causal role of social structure and culture. The insider/outsider dynamic is relevant in that there is a new societal intolerance of outsiders and ‘otherness’ that has impacted on sport, particularly in relation to race or ethnicity. The party/populist dynamic has promoted and underwritten the ownership of extreme wealth by the exercise of increasingly executive extra-parliamentary power and - an example of Bhaskar’s dominant power 2 relations - made resistance to Habermas’ system colonisation or lifeworld rationalisation more challenging. This was accelerated by COVID. Reform to sport has become correspondingly difficult. A final dynamic, that of elite/mass, was added in *A Critical Realist Theory of Sport*. This refers to the growing polarisation in society between elites of all shapes and sizes and the mass of the public. In the context of sport, this is apparent in the governance as well as the ownership of sport, and it is often reflected too in the near-absolute control over teams and individual competitors vested in managers and coaches. But in sporting terms, the elite/mass dynamic is most conspicuous in the gap that has opened-up between system-driven elites and lifeworld-based, increasingly virtual public fandoms.

In some respects, this discourse on sport stands as a companion volume to my *Sociology, Health and the Fractured Society*. The themes certainly overlap and are sometimes elaborated on and developed. As a form of recap and consolidation, it might be as well to dwell for a moment on my general conclusions to the sport book. I stressed that the relationship between society and sport is dialectical, but that society shapes sport more than sport shapes society. The primary responsibility for us sociologists, it follows, is to acknowledge, define and examine the relations among social structure, culture and agency and sport at any given historical juncture. Critical realism, I insisted once more, offers a useful and subtle philosophical frame for studying these relations, not only within the stratum of the social but also - drawing on the notion of emergence - for accommodating interdisciplinarity via upstream and downstream causal inputs from and to psychological and biological strata. Habermasian critical theory affords an expedient social framework for synthesising macro-, meso- and micro-sociological approaches. Especially useful are theories about the de-coupling of system and lifeworld and the accelerating colonisation of the latter by the former. Many extant, and overlapping, paradigm-based sociological theories of sport afford rich resources for a critical realist/theoretical sociology of sport in the fractured society.

More substantively, I drew attention again to the cracks and fissures that have been probed and enlarged with the advent of the post-1970s fractured society and have had both direct and indirect effects on sport. Directly, and in line with the class/command and elite/mass dynamics, the ownership, governance and control of professional or elite sport, together with its contemporary modes of dissemination in the lifeworld, have become further concentrated in the hands of individuals or consortia featuring super-rich global nomads who profit either financially or in the currency of cultural legitimation. This constitutes an extension of Weberian rationalisation, Marxian commodification and Ritzer’s McDonaldisation and it is reasonable to frame this in terms of a ramping up of the system colonisation of the lifeworld in a phase of financialised or rentier capitalism that remains volatile, unpredictable and, according to some advocates of ‘big sociology’, terminal. More indirectly, lifeworld-based fans have been recast as largely passive, celebrity and avatar-oriented consumers of sport in ever-expanding global and high-tech virtual arenas.

There are no studies examining the salience of my notion of ‘asset flows’ as pertaining not only to health and longevity but, in adapted form, to sporting accomplishment. It is reasonable to hypothesise, however, that in a fractured society further shaken and disrupted by COVID a degree of polarisation will have taken place between those with advantageous clusters of strong asset flows and those without. In the wake of COVID this polarisation will likely have re-affirmed and deepened class, gender and race-based disadvantage, both in the context of lifeworld participation and professional scouting and recruitment.

After the manner of both the class/demand and party-populist dynamics, the state has been subject to class infiltration and grown more unaccountable, non-transparent and given to right-wing authoritarianism. To the extent that politics have become more populist, governments like that in the UK have found the new cultural relativity something of a bonus. Given the absence of any imminent threat of a state legitimation crisis - ironically, given the global financial crisis of 2008/09, Brexit, COVID, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continuing ‘cost of living crisis’ - the Tories have for the time being consolidated system-based power. The government has shown no more interest in bottom-up lifeworld sporting initiatives like that emerging out of the tragedy of the Grenfell fire than it did in the fire itself.

Phenomena like cultural relativity and the new individualism, together with the switch of focus from structure to identity, can be broached via the insider/outside dynamic. Identities signify insider inclusion and outside exclusion in actual and virtual worlds alike. Moreover, identity has become as relevant to superstars as it has for those pick-and-mix versions of celebrities or avatars projected onto the lifeworld. ‘Identity myths’ abound, fuelled by the Internet and social media. What has been called ‘identitarian politics’ is highly compatible with, and expedient for, rentier capitalism’s neoliberal ideology. It divides people and undermines prospects for structural change and reform in sport as elsewhere. They also provide cover for societal fractures germinated in structural divisions of class, gender and race.

Linked with today’s dominant narratives on individualism, identity and the like is the concept of personal responsibility. It can be argued that in sport this emphasis on personal responsibility - with ‘behavioural conditionality’ the other side of the coin - not only sits comfortably with but is positively related to structural advantage via the clustering of strong asset flows for sport. Put differently, socially structured and underwritten opportunity renders personal responsibility in relation to commitment, training, on the pitch, square or track, much easier to demonstrate. As the stigma/deviance dynamic bears testimony, there is a degree of fluidity to cultural norms and they can be adapted, even ‘weaponised’, to fall into line with system imperatives: those who win are those who deserve to win.

These claims, which I like to think are empirically fortified in the book, centre on the special relevance of system imperatives and what Bhaskar calls ‘power 2 relations’ for sport. This, I guess, echoes a general theme of my theorising for some years.

24: SOCIOLOGY IN THE FRACTURED SOCIETY

Despite numerous suggestive remarks, some of them uncompromising, I have not directly confronted the circumstances facing sociologists and sociological practice in the rentier capitalism of the 21st century. Anyone who has been with me from the start of this series of epistles will have noted the enormous changes that have impacted academia in general and sociology in particular since I joined my career path in 1972. Relaying my experiences in London University’s medical schools has born testimony to this. In this sketch I pull a few threads together. Unsurprisingly perhaps, I refer most often to medical sociology and to sociological theory. I also superficially draw on a paper co-authored with Alice Scavarda and Sasha Scambler and presently awaiting an editorial verdict (from the journal I helped found in 2003, *Social Theory and Health*).

Life has incontrovertibly got tougher for sociologists pursuing a career in higher education. I have already noted my relative unproductivity compared with my successors at UCL, Paul Higgs and Fiona Stevenson; and I was without doubt myself more productive than my predecessors. How many of the sociologists teaching at Surrey University when I was an undergrad would today be appointable to equivalent posts? This is not to criticise them, or for that matter my own cohort. But it is to raise the issue of the criteria according to which putative bars have been raised. Certainly the ‘dead wood’ has long since gone from universities, and there indeed was some. Now, to replace the dead wood we have a plethora of temporary, insecure and often underpaid posts that suit management far more than the workers. It has become normal not only for undergrad ‘paying customers’ to scan fields for credentials that promise decent salaries, but for postgrads and post-docs to have to sprint before they have learned to jog. Universities, like the society in which they are nestled, are fractured. They are essentially neoliberal regimes of precarity, oriented no longer to education but to the system imperatives of the job market.

Remembering Bourdieu once more, universities might be said to constitute ‘fields’, arenas of struggle in which different types of capital - economic, cultural, social and symbolic - might be employed and deployed. But, critically, the ‘field of power’ (politics) is core and intrusive, structuring the university as with all other fields. How does this play out? It is an opportunity to pull some threads from prior sketches together. I do so with primary reference to those areas in which my own efforts have been concentrated, namely, social theory and health. Universities, to reiterate, have morphed into neoliberal institutions. They are now, as literary critic Stefan Collini, writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2018, argued: ‘forced to regard each other as competitors in the same market, where flourishing will be dependent on the accuracy with which they pitch their products to their particular niche of consumers.’ UCL, like other elite Russell Group universities, is relatively well placed, most other institutions of higher education less so. The TINA-dictated ideology of neoliberalism has turned many senior management and administrative teams into its representatives, teaching and research staff into its practitioners and students into clients or consumers. Added to this, there is growing evidence that the Conservative government is instigating a general system of rewards and punishments designed to undermine and kill off many courses in arts, humanities and social sciences as superfluous to the capitalist ‘imperative to work’ (whilst doubtless sparing Oxbridge and other elite institutions from this vandalism).

Mention had repeatedly made to contemporary precarity. Employmees in universities share the characteristics of many other stressed and depressed members of the so-called ‘precariat’. Moreover, academic ‘tenants’ forced into time-limited posts are frequently required to demonstrate high levels of productivity whilst planning for their next career move. Ph.D students must scrupulously tick institutional boxes and give and publish papers even as they proactively contrive curricula vitae in anticipation of … well, what exactly? In our paper submitted to *Social Theory and Health*,we coin the term ‘proactive manoeuvering’, which typically involves a reflexive mix of demonstrable productivity, networking and multiple job applications. And all this in an era of unnerving uncertainty and volatility.

Tony Giddens writes in his *Consequences of Modernity*, published in 1990, of the compression of time and place. In line with this, sociological careers in rentier capitalism are severely time-constrained and monitored, calling for improvised decision-making on-the-hop. Time is oriented to the ‘now’, a trend that impacts not only on Ph.D students and early career short-term contract researchers but extends also to leading peer review journals, editors, and many reviewers prioritising new or recent over older references. It is as if algorithms rule over common sense (another example of Ritzer’s ‘irrationality of the rational’). Older references according to this way of thinking suggest scholarly tardiness or simply being out of touch or trapped in the past. One entirely predictable result is that wheels are constantly being reinvented. This has the effect of distorting empirical investigations and reportage and theoretical input alike. It is a distortion exacerbated by the longer-term tendency within sociology to split empirical and philosophical-cum-theoretical thinking and outputs into discrete categories, neither one informing the other.

This often-institutionalised division of labour between theory and empirical research - remember, I was told my chances of being promoted to professor at UCL would be simplified/increased if I presented as a theoretician rather than as some sort of catch-all or hybrid sociologist - has been further compounded during the unfolding of rentier capitalism by new forms of specialisation. In the theoretical domain this has led to the virtual abandonment by the mainstream discipline of studies engaging with and representing women, people from racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, those with non-heterosexual preferences, and so on. Sections of the British Sociological Association have become progressively detached and independent, often critiquing mainstream sociology in the process. But, as we argue on our paper, theoretical specialisation has gone beyond the generation of autonomous discourses in third or fourth waves of feminism, post-colonial, disability and sexuality studies. Within the parent discipline as well as among its rebellious offspring, divisions have become more pronounced, as is reflected in the number of new highly specialised peer review journals. A by-product of this hyper-specialisation is a growing detachment from sociology’s canonical theoretical core. As we put it: ‘together with the bathwater of the largely male, white, European sociological *canon*, featuring Marx, Durkheim, Weber and on and off a handful of select others, which did indeed require ‘deparochialising’, has gone the baby of a family of macro-social issues around social order and change.’

I need not say more about the ubiquity of hierarchical metrics, which I have denounced in a previous sketch, but a further word or two about what have been called the ‘cultural turn’ and ‘normative sociology’ are in order. The postmodernisation or relativisation of culture, featuring the collapse of Lyotard’s *grand* in favour of his *petit* narratives, the foregrounding of concepts like post-truth and cancel culture, plus the emergence of identity politics, has opened the door to a plethora of imaginative paradigms and theories. I have often described these processes as more akin to the disinhibition induced by excess alcohol consumption than to genuine forms of emancipation; but they have had the effect of easing the path of many a novel specialisation. As for normativity, or ‘normative sociology’, a case might perhaps be made for its hiving off to become yet another specialised output, semi-detached (at best) from the sociological mainstream. But it is regarded as institutionally suspect by many sociologists let alone by university employers. On this point, a paper I co-authored commending ‘muckraking sociology’ on political/public health governance in relation to COVID was rejected out of hand by the leading UK journal, *Sociology*, as ‘polemical’. To develop this point, it is helpful to revisit my ideal types of ‘six sociologies’.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sociology** | **Sociologist** | **Mode of Engagement** |
| Professional | Scholar | Cumulative |
| Policy | Reformer | Utilitarian |
| Critical | Radical | Meta-theoretical |
| Public | Democrat | Communicative |
| Foresight | Visionary | Speculative |
| Action | Activist | Strategic |

I have long argued both for foresight and action sociology to be appended to Troy Burawoy’s original quartet, and for these two additions to be part and parcel of what it is to ‘do sociology’ in the twenty-first century. As Ruth Levitas, expert on utopian studies, has shown in her excellent *Utopia as Method*, they were once deemed intrinsic to the discipline but have since been nudged aside. My view is that Burawoy’s four types of sociology are undoubtedly important components of the discipline; *but what is the point of sociology if it is entirely focused on presence to the exclusion of absence, on what is to the exclusion of what might have been and might yet be?* It is an issue I shall return to when introducing a manifesto for a social transformation. What I want to emphasise here is that the sociological community-as-a-whole, *not of course each and every sociologist*, should embrace a foresight sociology oriented to possible ‘alternative futures’, and an action sociology that ‘fights back’ when findings of the discipline, say on Conservative corruption around COVID, the calculated undermining of the NHS, deepening health inequalities or the weaponizing of stigma to remove benefits from recipients redefined as abject, are neglected, ignored or rubbished by advocates of - usually nowadays, but not always - right-wing neoliberal agendas.

Forgive the detail in the example that follows! Consider the continuing assault on the NHS. It is incontrovertibly the case that the NHS, while not without its faults (what health care system is?) *was* before Margaret Thatcher started tampering with it in the 1980s with a view to involving the private sector, something of a model of health care delivery. All the international evidence said, and says, keep private providers and markets away from clinical and allied health services. What Thatcher began was to gather momentum. Major’s principal contribution was to introduce Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs), an attractive proposition for government because private contractors rather than the government paid for new hospitals and other facilities, afterwards leasing them back to health care Trusts, often at extortionate rates. PFIs enjoyed a massive boost under Blair/Brown’s New Labour. The problem, pointed out at the time by Allyson Pollock and others, was that Trusts would eventually find paying for PFI facilities all but untenable. Indeed, the chickens have long since come home to roost. But while Blair/Brown improved funding for the NHS in real terms, this all changed after 2010 when the Cameron’s Conservative coalition government introduced ‘political austerity’, systematically underfunded the NHS and looked with increasing sympathy towards the private sector. Chomsky has spelled out a very familiar neoliberal strategy: first you underfund a public body like the NHS, which leads to an increase in public dissatisfaction with services, then you send in the for-profit cavalry to save the day. The short-lived regimes of Theresa May, Boris Johnson, the hapless Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak have all sought to implement and foster this same strategy.

The results at the time of writing are already clear. The Health and Social Care Act of 2012 left the door ajar for private providers. I remember asking a Dean at UCL if organising a public protest against it when it was at the Bill stage would count as a positive public engagement, but he just looked confused. The Health and Social Care Act of 2022 opened the door further. This is not the place to go into the details of this second Act, but it is worth dwelling for a moment on one aspect of the growing private provision of health care ‘under the NHS brand’. Operose was formed early in 2020 when the American company Centene Corporation brought together its UK subsidiaries, The Practice Group (TPC) and Simply Health. TPC had been acquired by Centene in 2016. In January 2020 Centene had increased its stake in UK-based health care by investing in Circle Care (a 40% stake according to Company House). In February 2021 Operose Health acquired AT Medics and its various GP surgery contracts in London. Previously owned by six GP directors, AT Medics had been operating 49 GP practices across 19 London boroughs, providing services for around 370,000 people, with 900 employees. AT Medics was taken over and its directors resigned to be replaced by Samantha Jones, CEO of Operose, ex-head of NHS England’s new care models programme and previously chief executive of Epsom and St Hellier University Hospitals and West Hertfordshire Hospitals Trust, Nick Harding, Director of Operose and formerly Senior Medical Adviser to NHS England for Integrated Care Systems and Right Care, and Edward McKensie-Boyle, Chief Financial Officer of Operose. See a pattern here?

There are historical links to be made. Under the auspices of ‘modernisation’, ‘partnership working’ and ‘patient/consumer choice’, neo-Thatcherite New Labour had actively encouraged initiatives like AT Medics, which was set up in 2004. The six founding ‘doctorpreneurs’ won several contracts under conditions allowing GPs and their companies to run publicly funded GP surgeries and to employ doctors. Patients did not pay fees, but ‘GP Consortia’ companies could profit from public NHS funds to run GP surgeries. So it was in fact New Labour who pioneered new business models that the Conservatives went on to develop post-2010 and refine post-2020.

To return to Operose. In June of 2022 the Operose website listed contracts for 20 GP surgeries, plus one treatment centre in Birmingham (and nine ophthalmology clinics). The same website also listed the contract for AT Medics to provide the out-of-hours services for all of Croydon and some of the South-West London Clinical Assessment Service. With the addition of the AT Medics contracts, the company will have 69 GP surgeries and become the largest GP surgery network in the UK. A BBC Panorama programme shown on 13 June 2022 drew on the research of an undercover reporter, who found that Operose employs less qualified - cheaper - US-style Physician Assistants (PAs) to see patients and that they were inadequately supervised. Reports from admin staff confirmed that some correspondence had not been processed and seen by a GP or pharmacist for up to six months. The undercover journalist working as a receptionist at one of the London GP surgeries quoted a GP as saying that they were short of eight doctors, and that the practice manager had confirmed that they hired less qualified PAs because they were cheaper.

This case study is important for two reasons. First, it confirms that the NHS is indeed being privatised by stealth. And second, I believe it fortifies my argument in favour of pro-normative, foresight and, especially, action sociology. The journalists who exposed the profiteering activities of Operose might be seen as successors to the noted muckraking journalists in the USA in the 1960s. It was British journalists too who probed the corruption, comfortably beyond ‘chumocracy’ or ‘cronyism’, around Conservative-placed COVID contracts, a story that Benny Goodman, Miranda Scambler and I tried and failed to tell in two leading sociology journals (though we have a chapter in Fran Collyer’s forthcoming edited collection, *Research Handbook for the Sociology of Knowledge*). It seems to me that we sociologists have a responsibility not only to conduct professional and policy research into these matters, as scholars and reformists respectively, but also to re-engage with the tradition of muckraking sociology and campaign to effect change, as activists. To remain passive is to sanction rentier capitalism’s neoliberal status quo. For such endeavours to be dismissed as ‘polemics’ says a lot about the state of sociology in the UK.

25: SOCIOLOGY, HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

It has frequently been intimated in these sketches that sociology *ought* to lead to commitment and engagement beyond Burawoy’s recommendations, and one that recovers and explores alternative modes of social organisation that promise a better society. I have drawn on critical realism to suggest that this is consonant with a general notion of human emancipation. I want briefly to return to Bhaskar’s ideas of ‘human flourishing’ and the ‘eudaimonistic society’, both of which have been attracting attention within and without the critical realist network. In Bhaskar’s *The Order of Natural Necessity*, which saw the light of day in 2017, he includes the following statement:

The eudaimonistic society, the goal put forward by critical dialectical realism, depends on the transcendence of all master/slave-type relations. Here is it useful to distinguish between two concepts of power: power 1, which is transformative capacity, and power 2, which is oppression. Clearly what we need to do is for the oppressed to have more of power 1 in order to transform the power 2 relation between their oppressors and themselves and in order to transform the relationship itself … the other thing perhaps to mention is in the ethical dialectic of dialectical critical realism; a big role is played by what I call the logic of dialectical universalised ability. We can get the gist of this logic by looking at two kinds of ethical dialectics that it postulates. The first, the dialectic of desire or agency: this proceeds from an agent having a desire. Then what is argued is that this desire contains with it a meta-desire to abolish any constraints on that desire. The logic of universalised ability insists that an agent so committed must logically be committed to the abolition of all dialectically similar constraints. And so it moves in the direction and necessitates a solidarity with others. Similarly, in the dialectic of discourse the starting point is the expressive veracity of the statements of solidarity, which entail commitment to the person and situation one is in solidarity with, entailing action, which again, proceeding through the logic of universalised ability, will be aimed at the transformation of all dialectically similar constraints, and ultimately all dialectical constraints on human freedom and flourishing as such.’

I have tried to avoid quotations in these sketches, especially longish ones, but this summary statement of Bhaskar’s manages to combine, and link, human flourishing and the eudaimonistic society. I am not concerned here to open up debates that have exercised philosophers since, even before, the pre-Socratics. What I want to emphasise is precisely the *necessary* relationship between individual flourishing, which has been represented historically by many different words and phrases, and the eudaimonistic society, which has often been broached via some version of the ‘good’ society. Bhaskar catches this necessity.

It will be apparent from previous sketches that I judge extant structural and cultural conditions in Britain to reflect power 2 relations, see them as typically oppressive; and that, taken in combination, these conditions cut across many contexts or figurations to constrain the multiple opportunities for power 1 relations, and in consequence for human flourishing, for many citizens. It should not need pointing out that this sits comfortably with Habermas’ portrayal of system/lifeworld dynamics in modernity. As a neo-Marxist, I have put considerable emphasis on the resurgence of objective/identity-neutral class relations in post-1970s financialised or rentier capitalism in Britain. To repeat myself, this is not to underplay either the undoubted fact that capitalism was from its onset both gendered and racialised or that it remains so. Britain lives on a both as a patriarchal society and as a neo-imperial/colonial power displaying, and currently rebranding and re-energising, many of the properties of ‘internal colonialism’. There is a predictability to people in which sectors of society are likely to be constrained/oppressed by power 2 relations. It helps, for example, to be born a white male to parents with fulsome resources in terms of Bourdieu’s four types of capital or my asset flows. To those who preach gradualism via parliamentary reform, my riposte is always: ‘how many generations do you want those who are structurally/culturally ‘disadvantaged’ to wait, and are you going to tell them, or should I?’

I feel an obligation to accept the challenge to address the complex and controversial issue of how best to promote human flourishing and the eudaimonistic society. Predictably, while professional, policy, critical and public sociology have helped furnish relevant theories and data, this thorny but pivotal issue also brings foresight and action sociology into play. By way of a prolegomenon, a few general points. The signs for change are not propitious. Britain’s rentier-rich economy is rampant even as I write this. Moreover, an increasingly ‘hollowed-out’ authoritarian state is more subservient than ever to members of the capital executive in general and to capital monopolists in particular (who have now personally burrowed their way into the Conservative cabinet and even, recently, into Prime Ministerial office in the form of Sunak). Underlying this is the shift of the entire party/parliamentary spectrum to the right. The MacMillan/Home Conservative governments, let alone the Wilson/Callaghan Labour governments, were well to the left of Starmer’s current neoliberal-friendly, exclusionary, ‘Stalinist’ Labour Party. Moreover, as Ralph Miliband argued long ago, the ease with which Corbyn’s tenure as Labour leader was undermined - largely from *within* the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) - merely confirms that the PLP is a wholly improbable agent of social transformation. The joke is that Ralph had two sons to prove his point.

The ease with which the Corbyn/McDonnell left-populist moment was seen off, culminating in the two general election defeats in 2017 and, more decisively, 2019, is instructive. Indeed, the way ahead for left-oriented theorists and activists is less than clear. John McDonnell was surely perspicacious and right to argue in the aftermath of the 2019 defeat that the cart had found itself ahead of the horse. A briefly rejuvenated Labour Party had found itself contesting an election before the sufficiently robust extra-parliamentary movement that might have underwritten and powered it had been formed. So what remains of ‘the left’, and what now are its prospects of advancement? It is striking that of the many contemporary commentaries from left-supporting writers, and however sophisticated these scribes may be, many manifestos seem to add up to a despairing: ‘Well, I wouldn’t start from here!’ Others have proposed a series of principles upon which future action might be based. In her discussion of ‘utopia as architecture’ that concludes her *Utopia as Method,* Ruth Levitas goes beyond this to advocate strong emphases on: the notion of human flourishing; the necessary linkage between dignity and equality; a basic income guarantee alongside improved public services; a restructuring of work away from the longstanding capitalist ‘imperative to work’; a recognition of the value of unpaid work, especially caring; and an overriding commitment to sustainability. Levitas adds that what she calls the ‘‘architecture’ in ‘utopia as architecture’ is, of course, a metaphor, but the actual architecture, the physical infrastructure, matters too. Sustainable, energy-efficient and affordable housing, schools, hospitals and the availability and physical character of public spaces are all fundamental to material and social wellbeing.’ Sociologists, she rightly observes, are too often marginal to discourses and action oriented to societal transformation.

In my paper in *Frontiers in Sociology*, I make a concrete and illustrated distinction between ‘attainable’ and ‘aspirational’ reforms. Before exploring this in more detail, it might be helpful to characterise the confrontation between the structural and cultural, or power 2, impediments to transformative - utopian - change achievable by agential, or power 1, drivers. It should not be surprising that I continue to put the emphasis on relations of class, not least via the class/command dynamic, the most potent of the quintet of dynamics that have informed my sociologies of health and sport. I take my point of departure from the writings of Eric Ohlin Wright, sadly no longer with is. He distinguished between ‘smashing capitalism’ (involving that subset of revolutionaries who regard capitalism as unreformable); ‘dismantling capitalism’ (involving those who eschew the notion of rupture and emphasise state-directed reforms that incrementally introduce a socialist alternative ‘from above’); ‘taming capitalism’ (involving those committed to neutralise the harms of capitalism without replacing it); ‘resisting capitalism’ (involving those who resist capitalism from outside the state and lack the motive or ambition to capture state power); and ‘escaping capitalism’ (involving those hold that capitalism is too powerful too resist and take refuge in sheltered or cooperative communities). Wright himself commends an amalgam of these logics, basically exposing and exploiting the fissures of what I have called the fractured society, which he refers to as ‘eroding capitalism’. He goes on to address the thorny issue of structurally and culturally constrained ‘collective agency’.

I will stick to Wright’s analysis for the moment since his neo-Marxism is much allied to my own. He argues that three concepts require elucidation before the potential of the collective actor can be adequately addressed: *identities*, *interests* and *values*.

* ‘Identities’ are crucial for recruitment for collective action, especially those forged via structured inequality and domination leading to what Wright terms ‘real harms’ (eg disrespect, deprivation, disempowerment, bodily insecurity and abuse). Identities are malleable and those emergent from movement engagement, activity and struggle are of special import.
* ‘Interests’ vary along a spectrum in line with what matters to a person and his or her hope and chances for a better life; but people can be (subjectively) unaware of their (objective) interests.
* ‘Values’ have to do with what people think is good and right and occupy a fraught relation to interests. People might, for example, look positively on the false neoliberal/ideological view that cutting taxes for the well-off will ‘trickle down’ to the benefit of all citizens.

Obviously, this trilogy of identities, interests and values does not, as it were automatically, precipitate collective action. Bearing the trilogy in mind, Wright considers three challenges to the task of constructing and mobilising collective actors capable of sustained political action: overcoming privatised lives; building class solidarity within complex, fragmentary class structures; and forging anti-capitalist politics in the presence of diverse, competing non-class-based forms of identity. He ends up prescribing a series of building blocks towards eroding capitalism:

1. *Unconditional basic income* (UBI) – UBI represents a fundamental redesign of income distribution. It would be funded from taxes paid by higher earners and would lead to the elimination of public programmes of income support (except those relating to special needs); and render redundant minimum wage laws. As well as eliminating poverty, Wright contends that UBI would allow people to say ‘no’ to the capitalist labour market, thus opening up new possibilities like worker cooperatives and other ‘life-affirming’ ventures.
2. *The cooperative market economy* – the notion of ‘cooperatives’ embraces a range of non-capitalist possibilities, like consumer, credit, producer, housing and solidarity cooperatives. Preconditions for setting up worker cooperatives are: UBI, which would reduce the dependency of worker-owners on market income generate by the cooperative enterprise; public programmes to facilitate the conversion of capitalist firms into worker cooperatives; specialised public credit institutions to support worker cooperatives; publicly supported cooperative development initiatives (g local municipal and community trusts); and publicly funded educational programmes for cooperative organisations and management.
3. *The social and solidary economy* – an umbrella term covering heterogeneous community-anchored organisations committed to social justice (eg non-profit, mutual, voluntary). UBI relevant here too. Underwritten by the state, such organisations might prove the optimal way of providing certain services, like childcare or care for the elderly.
4. *Democratising capitalist firms* – this involves extending constraints on the property rights of capitalist firms (eg minimum wage laws, health and safety laws), plus enhancing the decision-making power of workers to counter authoritarian workplace practices (eg in large firms, via bicameral board of directors, one elected by shareholders and the other by workers on a one-person one-vote basis).
5. *Banking as a public utility* – the introduction of public banking: ‘in capitalism the mandate of banks is to maximise profits for their owners; in a socialist economy, banks would be treated as a public utility and their mandate would be include a range of social priorities.’
6. *Nonmarket economic organisation* – increasing the role and prominence of nonmarket organisation via, for example, the decentralised state provision of goods and services (eg health and social care); peer-to-peer collaborative production (eg Wikopedia, Linux), notably decentralised IT-enabled small-scale production, extending to non-proprietary design libraries, and the knowledge commons, via the creation of ‘open access’ licences (eg Copyleft, Pantentleft, Creative Commons Licences, and Biological Open Source licences)

Wright’s citizenship of the US is apparent in places, but his propositions nevertheless warrant attention; and there have been signs that similar political moves are seeing the light of day in the UK, witness some of the ideas in the Corbyn/McDonnell Labour manifestos for 2017 and 2019 (and John McDonnell’s edited volume entitled *Economics for the Many*, published in 2019).

My own take on transformative change is underpinned by a reconstructed Enlightenment project oriented to the ‘good society’. I advocate extra-parliamentary alliances and mobilisation on multiple fronts, including building pressure on the state. The phrase I have used to represent this approach is *permanent reform*. This strategy of permanent reform might perhaps best be cast as ‘escaping capitalism’ plus ‘resisting capitalism’ through ‘dismantling capitalism’ towards ‘smashing capitalism’! In my paper in *Frontiers in Sociology*, I summarise it along the following lines. Social structures like class, gender and race, understood as enduring (beneath-the-surface) causal or generative mechanisms, have long and firmly established tap roots and are exceptionally resistant to (on-the-surface) agential efforts to revise, deconstruct or disassemble them. Within the UK’s existing system of a rentier capitalist democracy, a parliamentary route to transformative structural change is all but inconceivable, as has been evidenced by the rapid and effective undermining of the Corbyn challenge. Principal among the mechanisms responsible for wealth and income (and health) inequalities is the class/command dynamic, reinvigorated during rentier capitalism, which, to reiterate, asserts that these inequalities derive above all else from the transnational sway of a tiny minority of owners of capital assets who buy power from the political elite to implement policies to their advantage. Given the ongoing ‘contamination’ of the state’s power elite and the impotence of parliament, the only way to affect structural change is by mobilising the populace. A precondition of the effectiveness of a people’s movement is that it is class-based, in other words, underwritten by the working class, which, as Wright maintains, when push comes to shove unites the bulk of those who ‘work to live’. The likelihood of this kind of working-class unity and class-based collective action - and hence of an effective people’s movement - remains slight, and it can (perhaps only) occur in the event of a ‘trigger event’ occasioning what Habermas has called a crisis of ‘state legitimation’. Such a people’s movement will necessarily involve a series of alliances across overlapping interest and campaign groups. A crisis of state legitimation typically occurs after a major world event, like WW2. The global financial crisis in 2008-9 and/or COVID in 2020-21 might have precipitated such a crisis but didn’t for want of a trigger event. The optimal strategy in present circumstances could be one of permanent reform, that is, a continuous and coordinated push for reform across a spectrum from the *attainable* to the *aspirational* (eg. from local municipal and/or cooperative initiatives to those that expose and call into question enduring social structures and cultural recipes).

To append to Wright’s prescriptions for change, I have defined and illustrated attainable versus aspirational reforms. This is not the occasion to go into detail, and I will restrict myself here to mentioning a few candidates for *economic* reforms. Attainable reforms are on the cusp of the possible, while aspirational reforms go deeper and are all the more ambitious and tougher for doing so. For example, such measures as ‘cost of living’ public sector pay increases, restoring trade union rights, abolishing fire and rehire practices, ending zero hours contracts, increasing sick pay, raising and extending Universal Credit, increasing the UK’s parsimonious state pension, doing away with the charitable status of ‘public schools’, resisting further privatisation and restoring adequate funding to the NHS, and expanding public housing, might be regarded as attainable measures, or at least feature towards that end of the spectrum. As we move towards the aspirational end of the spectrum, we might include the likes of UBI and go on to engage with the kind of policies advocated by Wright and by Brett Christophers in his *Rentier Capitalism* (published in 2020). Christophers focuses on competition policy and countering the negative policy of pervasive monopoly routinely facilitated by the state: what he terms ‘unconstrained’ capitalism tends towards the monopoly conditions favoured by its most powerful actors. He counsels attainable-to-aspirational reforms to modify the tax system to limit rentiers’ ability to make excess profits, for example by reducing the present tax-based subventions supporting rentiers as well as by increasing tax rates. Tax havens should clearly be closed.

As mentioned before, in his ambitious best seller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* published in 2014, Pikkety estimates that the return on assets (*r*) globally before tax has always been greater than the rate of economic growth (*g*); and for the bulk of the history of capitalism, *r* after tax has also been greater than *g*, hence his claim that, all things being equal, wealth inequality increases under capitalism. Unusually during the decades of welfare state capitalism after WW2, *g* exceeded net (post tax) *r*, in the process stalling inequality by a combination of unusual growth and progressive taxation policies. Now, in rentier capitalism, Pikkety argues for higher taxes on assets to bring *r* back below *g* to counteract surging wealth inequality. George Monbiot has likewise exhorted, in his article *Wheel of Fortune* (2014), breaking the power of ‘patrimonial capital’ and the vicious circle of wealth accumulation and inequality.

Christophers correctly asserts that UK governments have done more than ‘featherbed’ rentiers. They have actively encouraged them to become rentiers by the device of tax subsidies. Taxes on incomes earned from non-rentier activities could be lowered, he suggests, ‘utilising what economists refer to as the ‘negative reinforcement’ aspect of taxation: removing an aversive stimulus in order to strengthen what is deemed to be a positive behaviour or outcome’; and taxes on rentier assets and income streams could be introduced, or increased, thereby discouraging rentierism (eg by introducing a land-value tax). He also promotes the idea of a state investment bank, which would have the potential to contribute to seeding/funding a transition away from rentierism. *This would need to be accompanied by a shift towards a low-carbon future.* The state should invest in workers and their skills rather than non-human assets and their sealing off from competition. He adds that investment should also focus on the collective consumption of essential ‘foundational’ goods and services, including material services (eg pipes and cables, networks and branches distributing water, electricity, banking services and food), and ‘providential’ services (eg education, health and social care and income maintenance).

I am not an economist, as will have become apparent I’m sure, but special reference should be made to the issue of ownership. Any meaningful transition out of rentier capitalism must see the present transfer of ownership from the pubic to the private sector reversed. This requires shrinking the portfolio of exclusive proprietory assets on which the rentier is able to ‘earn’ private rents. As Monbiot puts it, ‘the economic power of owners of wealth translates into political power. The richer a tiny segment of society becomes, the better it is able to capture politics and undermine democracy. Eventually, we get a government of the elite, by the elite, for the elite.’ Christophers argues that this is the current state of play in Britain. It will, I hope, not have escaped the attention of any readers, that my class/command dynamic fits neatly with, and helps explain, precisely these phenomena. It is not a field that should be left to the economists.

None of this of course amounts to an economic programme, let alone a more comprehensive manifesto that would have to include cultural change. But it does define and illustrate the attainable/aspirational dichotomy and its orientation to permanent reform: that is, the progressive exposure of and accumulation of pressure on structural and cultural ‘constraining ills’ leading to a legitimation crisis. I have one further point to make. It is apparent that cross-issue coalitions uniting class fractions require leadership. I have argued, with Wright, that working-class unity, in its broadest sense, is critical. What I have gradually learned after many virtual conversations with Lisa McKenzie and others is that working-class leadership is also vital.

26: AND IN CONCLUSION …

I was born and socialised in a social world markedly at variance with the one entered by my grandchildren. WW2 had thrown our parents’ plans and prospects into disarray, destined for the most part to construct DIY biographies in a world radically departed from the one they had been used to in the interwar years. I always took it for granted that I was middle rather than working class, I imagine because that’s what my parents’ backgrounds, outlooks, mannerisms and accents suggested. Ron and Margaret were, materially and culturally, solidly middle-class; but they were obliged to reinvent themselves to adjust to a lower-than-expected middle-class lifestyle. I imagine that my passing the 11+, grammar school experience and predictable entrance to university helped cement my sense that I was middle rather than working class. According to the Registrar General’s Classification of Occupations, on which I was reared as a researcher, and now NS-SEC, I have been upwardly mobile, though this is mostly a function of the rapid emptying of traditional working-class (‘manual’) jobs and the creation of more middle-class (‘non-manual’, professional and service) jobs. But as a university professor at UCL, a leading Russell Group university, I have more status than clout.

In this final sketch I want to add a few personal reflections and comments on the sequence of events that have constituted my career. I have implied that I was only intermittently a pro-active autonomous reflexive, committing most of my time to meta-reflexivity. I, and my career, were also of course deeply impacted, without being determined, by the prevailing social structure and culture of post-WW2 Britain. Looking back to my apprenticeships in sociology in the early 1970s, I was fortunate to have the latitude and space for agential decision-making: there was a choice of jobs! I was fortunate too to get a foothold in medical sociology at a time the subdiscipline was expanding into UK medical schools, courtesy of the background lobbying of Margot Jefferys and Margaret Stacy. I also benefitted from co-editing with Donald Patrick in 1982 the first edition of the instantly influential textbook for medical students, *Sociology as Applied to Medicine*, which brought name recognition, and ‘Scambler’ is in any case an unusual name. Having moved from a half-time job at Charing Cross to a full-time post at the Middlesex, I was once more rewarded when the Middlesex, along with the Royal Free, was incorporated into UCL: whatever reservations I might have felt and expressed at the time, I had serendipitously (been) shifted into one of the UK’s and world’s leading institutions. Hence my present title: Emeritus Professor of Sociology, UCL.

Would I pursue a similar career now? Well, I would if possible: I can think of no better way of earning an income. But it’s a different set of circumstances in rentier capitalism’s fractured society: universities are not what they were and are under renewed threat by a private sector-oriented Conservative regime betraying all the prejudices against the social sciences, as well as the arts and humanities, that Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph exhibited in the 1980s. I am often asked for advice, as ‘senior’ academics are wont to be. If your prime investment is in ‘getting on’, I suggest, then the route is deeply pitted but straightforward: specialise, whenever possible create a niche, bring in research revenue, publish in leading international peer-review journals and look to move institution regularly to speed up promotion and boost income; above all, promote yourself: Goffman’s dramaturgical portrayal of self-presentation is highly relevant. All this is compatible with being a good sociologist (especially, a scholar and reformist sociologist, and even, with qualifications, a radical and public sociologist). However, for some of us, the genuine independence of currently unpopular, discouraged and institutionally unrecognised and unrewarded thought and practice is vital (most notably but not solely, as visionaries and activists). Indeed, I have contended that a discernible diminution of independence in sociology has led to a general taming of the discipline. I have always argued that it is necessary to take out sufficient insurance to keep one’s line manager off one’s back to win the space to do what matters (happy are those whose insurance covers what matters to them). I readily accept that far more insurance is required now than it ever was for us babyboomers, but the principal stands. Looking back, I think I was in fact always willing to fight my corner.

One question I occasionally ask myself is ‘what does my own career *amount to*?’ At least, my career so far. I am content that I have held my own in a field that Bourdieu would insist, like all fields, is competitive. I think I have taught well, at least to undergrads, if less so, or to less effect, to postgrads. One of the things that gives me most satisfaction is the series of ‘best teacher’ awards generated by UCL’s medical students covering my last five years in UCL’s employ. I admit that I have privileged time on my own over the sustained effort required to do justice to Ph.D students (the more so since the introduction of bureaucratic tick-box log books recording all aspects of supervision). Embarrassingly, I have on occasions seen dodging Ph.D students as part of fighting my corner. I have, however, taken considerable and conscientious pleasure in examining almost 50 Ph.Ds. Nor have I sought administrative responsibility, with the welcomed exception of founding the UCL Sociology Network, which I still tweet for, and leading the ultimately frustrating and frustrated initiative to establish a Virtual UCL Institute for Sociological Studies. Within the domain of the sociology of health and health care I am perhaps largely seen as ‘the stigma person’, and this is reflected in numbers of citations. My publications on health inequalities are generally viewed as polemical and avoided by specialist sociologists of health inequalities. Interestingly, my predilection for authoring books, and even chapters, rather than articles is appreciated more in the US than the UK. But what do these books and other texts amount to? Will they survive me, and does that matter? The short answer to this last dyad is that it is the ideas and theories that matter, not authorship; and it may be that the positionings on stigma and the fractured society will live on for a while. The first question commands a more considered response.

One product of my voluntary isolation as a - hopefully empirically informed - social theorist is that I have denied myself collaborators and their inputs, and this might be expected to have impeded my progress. If pushed, I’d suggest that I have been and remain an obstinately independent-minded thinker, but not a particularly innovative one. Moreover, my writing style, while less impenetrable than that of the much more original and inspiring Roy Bhaskar, does not admit of easy reading. This may not be a general view, but I think Roy’s writing is very clear, and I hope mine, if compressed and a tad ‘wandering’, is clear too. I still love writing and now, well into retirement, am asking myself if this has the properties of an addiction. As I conclude the 75,000 words that comprise these 26 autobiographical sketches, I am about to sign a contract to deliver a book on health and healthcare; and I have three journal articles submitted and under consideration.

It is appropriate to close with an expression of love and thanks to Annette and my four daughters. Arguably Annette, my support, has made the greater value-added contribution to education by teaching second-chance students on behalf of the Open University for a quarter of a century. But had she not been a woman, she would unquestionably have embarked on a university career and secured a senior university post. I sometimes wish contemporary feminists were more aware of the battles their predecessors fought as part of the second wave. Sasha Scambler is currently a Reader in Medical Sociology at King’s College London and demonstrating the breadth and reach of accomplishment that I scrupulously avoided. Her metrics are excellent! My other daughters also have jobs that come into the category of value-added: Nikki Scambler manages the office that looks after the personal interests of students on the Epsom campus of the University for the Creative Arts; Rebecca Scambler is a talented Cambridge-based graphic designer; and Miranda Scambler is an extremely conscientious public health practitioner based in Brighton. Rebecca and Miranda each took a turn as administrator of our journal *Social Theory and Health*. I am immensely proud of all of them. That they have not figured in my sketches is merely down to the facts that the focus has been on my career as a sociologist rather than on my personal life and my respect for their privacy.