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# Qui Vadis, Sociology? : On Using Metaphors in Sociological-Intellectual Practice

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## *Trajectories and Crosscurrents of Cultural Sociology and Sociology of the Arts*

# *QUO VADIS*, SOCIOLOGY? ON USING METAPHORS IN SOCIOLOGICAL-INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE

David Inglis

*Abstract:* Sociology is always at least two things at once. It is both an idealistic exercise and a realpolitik enterprise, involving both high-minded aspirations and down-and-dirty game-playing. Sociology is constantly caught between its *intellectual* aspirations, which often have liberatory intents to demonstrate how the world works and to speak truth to the powerful who generally do not want to hear uncomfortable truths, and its *academic* actualities, of careers, funding regimes, and governmental interference. It also routinely engages in massive and ceaseless self-criticism, and it regularly crucifies certain personages of the past of the discipline, while also resurrecting others. Above all, sociology is a metaphorical science. It needs metaphors to be able to name things that can then be studied, and the chosen metaphors will in turn influence how those things are to be inquired into. The problem is that once fresh metaphors can harden into clichés, standardised thinking is encouraged, and vital aspects of experience are lost to view. This paper considers these dangers and what to do about them.

*Keywords*: Sociology, theory, concepts, methodology, epistemology, metaphors, intellectual, creativity

Peter: *Quo Vadis?*
Jesus: *Romam eo iterum crucifigī*
(*I am going to Rome to be crucified again*)
From *The Acts of Peter*, apocrypha of the 2nd century CE.

*Prometheus is … the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.*
Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820

## Introduction: Sociology's Schizophrenia

Sociology, *quo Vadis*? Where are you going?

To answer that endlessly repeated question, in this essay I will both discuss and occasionally use metaphors.



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I began this text with a vignette of Christian imagery and metaphor, but I must immediately turn to matters pagan. Sociology is a very strange beast, double-headed like the Roman god Janus, and with odd corporeal contours. It is simultaneously a cross-border, transnational set of enterprises, as well as deeply shaped by national academic systems, their specific concerns, and the distinctive ways that they organise knowledge production. Sociology is often concerned with issues of unequal power relations and the nature of societal inequalities, but it is also riven with these very phenomena itself, such that established powerholders seek to hold onto and augment their power bases, while rival upstarts seek to carve out their paths to ascendancy.

Sociology is constantly caught between its *intellectual* aspirations, which often have liberatory intents to demonstrate how the world works and to speak truth to the powerful who generally do not want to hear uncomfortable truths, and its *academic* actualities. These latter constitute the mundane world of academia, comprised of such activities as sociologists being forced to seek funding in ever more competitive environments, and defending both themselves and their discipline from external harassment, be it by neo-liberalised university managers or ill-intentioned politicians.

Sociology, therefore, is always at least two things at once, each facing opposite directions. It is both an idealistic exercise and a realpolitik enterprise, involving both high-minded aspirations and down-and-dirty game-playing. It is both intellectual in its spiritual nature, where free and creative thought reigns, and academic in its institutional form, constrained by the bureaucratic and increasingly neo-liberalised structures of universities and the interfering educational apparatuses of governments.

To put it simply, sociology is *schizophrenic*. Its typical modes of thinking, doing, looking, and speaking always operate in two vastly different registers at the same time, one more spiritual and one more profane.

One might object that there is nothing unique to sociology about all of this. All academic disciplines exist uncomfortably between their potential and their actuality, between their modes of knowledge production as they could be, and their ways of doing things as they currently happen to be. That is true, but sociology possesses a further quality that makes its uncomfortable position between intellectual aspirations and academic realities especially acute.

It is the discipline's strong and ongoing tendencies towards beating itself up, engaging repeatedly in public bouts of self-criticism, picking obsessively at its own perceived flaws and airing them for all to see. Arguably it does this more, more frequently, and more deeply than any other discipline in the social sciences, and perhaps in the humanities too (Savage, 2010). Sociology has been diagnosing



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its own perceived tendencies towards crisis for at least the last 60 years (Gouldner, 1970). The crisis stories may pay lip service to the notion that crisis can lead to revitalisation and renewal, but, much more often than not, they imply something much more negative, a movement towards dissolution, dissipation, and perhaps disaster.

If sociology is schizophrenic, it is also a compulsive obsessive, bent on massive and ceaseless self-criticism. In a conventional way of looking at things, that is a serious weakness. But regarded in another light, one could say that those sorts of dispositions are constitutive of its strengths. Which other discipline has dared to engage so much and for so long in public discussion of its flaws? If orthodox Economics had done so over the last half-century and more, then many failed real-world projects would probably never have been inflicted on populations ill-equipped to deal with the fall-out from them.

Sociology's schizophrenic tendencies seem to go along with its habitual tendencies towards amnesia (Law & Lybeck, 2015). Previous schools of thought and authors that in the past were influential in the discipline go into decline and become forgotten over time. Then they may be resurrected again decades later, for the tendentious present-day purposes of those interested in staging a resurrection and engaging in forms of historical ventriloquism (Latour, 2002). Some such attempts to revivify the putatively dead will fail if latter-day audiences can find no resonating interest in the intellectual corpses laid before them (Scott, 2021).

Meanwhile, persons and ways of thinking that have been defined as 'classical', and therefore apparently beyond death, are routinely either set up as gurus or figures to be excoriated. Today, a popular way of damning the dead to eternal intellectual perdition is to label them as Dead White European Males, willing or unwitting apologists for, and obfuscators of, the wicked histories of colonialism and imperialism (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021).

This is just the latest iteration of Sociology's orientation towards crucifying certain personages of the past of the discipline, while also resurrecting others habitually over time. One may expect this current post-colonial orientation to be replaced in a few years by yet another mode of setting fire to the foundations of the discipline while erecting new edifices on the resultant ashes.

Once again, we can see that Sociology is double-faced: looking to its past in a highly critical manner, while gazing forward to the future in an uneasy fashion. Unsure of its foundations because it continually seeks to criticise and alter them, Sociology also constantly is in the business of bringing some of the dead back to life. The very major canonized figures, mostly French and German in provenance – the



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likes of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and a few select others – have been so subjected to earlier rounds of consecration that they have never been fully exorcised, and perhaps never will be, so constitutive to the discipline have they become. These revenants continue to haunt the discipline, and Sociology again looks at them in schizophrenic ways: as figures to be constantly adulated *and* abhorred, embraced *and* rejected, followed *and* adapted, in apparently endless hermeneutic waves spanning the decades (Alexander, 1987).

## On Sociology's Reliance on Metaphors

Fundamental to Sociology is how it looks at things in the world, and how it looks at itself, with each of these deeply affecting the other. How it self-scrutinises at any given point in time will strongly shape what it can see in the world and also what it cannot see well or at all.

The world, human and non-human, is not open to simple, direct observation (Popper, 1995: 8). Things can only be studied based on a range of assumptions and preconceptions held by the observer. These deeply influence their choice and precise formulation of research questions, as well as the methods used to gather information about the matters which they have decided are sufficiently important to be worth investigating. Injunctions are frequently made as to the need for the sociologist to inquire into the nature of her prejudices – in the sense of the unconscious and historically inherited prior evaluations that structure her thinking (Gadamer, 1989) – to master and overcome them, or at least keep them in orderly check (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In the absence of the world's capacity to name itself and all the phenomena within it, the sociologist must name the very things she wants to investigate. Things not named never come into discernible and thereby researchable existence. The specific system of names that the sociologist chooses to perceive the world with is the result of linguistic construction. Naming things necessarily involves drawing upon metaphors (Urry, 1999). These indicate that the things being studied are in some sense akin to, or comparable with, other things that we already have names for. Those will likely be drawn either from the common parlance of the language that the sociologist operates within (or is forced to work within), or from more specialist terminologies. A metaphorical operation is at work when a word describing a concept from one domain of experience is – unexpectedly – applied to an object in another domain. The juxtaposition sheds new light on the object being thus named or re-named (Swedberg, 2020).



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Sociology needs metaphors to be able to name things that can then be studied, and the chosen metaphors will in turn influence how those things are to be inquired into. Sociology cannot operate without metaphors. In that sense, it is a metaphorical science, and in a deep sense. Flowing through the intellectual lifeblood of Sociology are metaphors; they are the blood vessels that keep the body of Sociology going (Jacobsen & Marshman, 2006).

Consider one of the most central and by now very familiar, terms of mainstream Sociology, namely 'social stratification'. Hundreds of thousands of pages of sociology and related disciplines have been created over the decades in the conceptual modelling of such an entity and the pursuit of its empirical manifestations across time and space. So familiar has this term become, and so legitimated in scholarly discourse has it been, that the fact that it is a metaphorical description of reality has been by and large forgotten. But originally it was a metaphorical naming that brought certain investigatory objects into view. Relations between social groups could through this naming be conceived of as being vertically organized, in the same manner as geologists referred to the vertical arrangement of successive layers of the Earth. Looking at things called 'strata' allowed sociologists to think of groups and social hierarchies in certain new ways (Inglis & Bone, 2008).

Yet widespread use of the metaphor of strata also foreclosed other ways of thinking about and visualising such matters. Movements against the domination of a certain metaphor or metaphorical are very likely after a while. Some people grow dissatisfied with the metaphorical terminology, recognising and publicising the fact that the widely accepted language is indeed merely metaphorical, rather than somehow a natural and inevitable feature of the world. Such rebels reach out to other metaphors, to replace those which they condemn as variously hackneyed, misleading, unproductive, or dead (Levine, 1995).

The movement against 'strata' towards an alternative nomenclature like 'milieu' in the study of social hierarchies and group relations, a trend especially evident in German sociology, is a case in point here (Schneickert, 2023). 'Milieu' is a modern French word that derives from two terms, an Old French phrase for 'place' plus a very old Indo-European word meaning 'middle'. A metaphor of a social group inhabiting, or being a loosely bounded and deliberately fuzzily conceptualized space, suggests a very different, apparently looser and more flexible, way of understanding such groups and hierarchical and non-hierarchical relations between them than does the strata metaphor, and that is why its proponents say that it should either augment or replace the latter.

Sometimes the genesis of a metaphor that is to be utilized in Sociology is a result of very self-conscious and deliberate strategies. One such case is that of the



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'field' metaphor introduced into the discipline by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1971) took the original conception from Max Weber's account of a conflict between different sorts of religious specialists. By adding to it the meanings derived from imagery of sports fields – involving competition between individuals and between groups – battle fields – encompassing conflicts between rival forces – and magnetic fields – where actors are pulled around by more or less subterranean forces of attraction and repulsion – Bourdieu created a multi-sided, semiotically abundant concept to be used alongside other tellingly metaphorical terms, capital and habitus, as well as a series of auxiliary notions. Field's enduring appeal in many sub-fields of Sociology from its introduction in the 1970s until today probably partly rests in its being made up of multiple and overlapping metaphorical layers, which play on the diverse meanings of *champ* in French and *field* in English. If the field notion had been founded on less polyvalent metaphorical foundations, one might speculate that it would have had less appeal, and to less diverse audiences, than it otherwise has enjoyed (Martin, 2003).

Metaphors allow one to see the world in new ways, but they come at a cost too. They operate in ways akin to what C. Wright Mills (1999 [1959]) once referred to as 'methodological inhibitionism'[1]. The problem he identified under this term was the gap between what should happen and what happens when sociology is being done. What should happen in sociological research is that theory, in the guise of the conceptualisation of the things to be investigated, and the research questions formulated by it, are meant to shape the methodology of a project. In many cases, however, the methodology can take over and come to dominate the other elements in the project, becoming the tail that wags the conceptual dog. The methods come to shape both the theory and the research questions, partly as they may have taken on an independent life of their own, and partly because the adopting of those methods has become habituated over time among research groups and wider communities of researchers. The investigators come to see the world as the methods see it, and not as it otherwise might be regarded. What is findable and measurable by a given method shapes what is taken to be sociologically relevant about a specific set of issues, and so many other possible questions, concerning other potential phenomena, go unremarked and therefore not investigated (Vandebroeck, 2002).

Metaphors in Sociology can be productive of new ways of thinking, looking, and investigating in their early days. But even in their early days, they close down as many conceptual vistas as they open up. As time goes on, they may ossify, become widely accepted but hollow clichés, perpetuating habituated modes of thought, and foreclosing fresh points of view. Echoing Mills' formulation, one could call this problem one of *metaphorical inhibitionism*.



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A metaphor over time can freeze sociological thinking, turning ongoing investigations made in its name into exercises in seemingly endlessly reproduced normal science, or indeed just simple banality. This is especially so if such investigations are carried out by many different groups of researchers in different countries, each contributing to what seems like industrial production of standardised knowledge. What is gained here is the creation of common understanding across the various groups, yielding a common sense of purpose across national, linguistic, and other sorts of boundaries, and to some extent creating an accumulation of knowledge about certain phenomena as these are formulated by the particular system of metaphors. But what is lost under such conditions of large-scale, conventionalised knowledge production is that the original metaphor continues to exist over time only as a cliché, suspended in a kind of living death. It is kept going not by a sense of vital and unfolding intellectual curiosity, but by the vested interests of those who are invested in this kind of factory-style generation of knowledge and its ongoing perpetuation.

More than 100 years ago, Max Weber had already warned of the dangers of the trundling on of mechanical systems that had initially been animated by some vital spirit, but which had now atrophied, run along deadening clockwork lines by specialists without spirit. Hence one may point to modes of knowledge production in Sociology that have lost their initial spirit of metaphorical vitality and now operate with the flattened, stereotypical terms set by declining or dead metaphors (Beck, 2001).

It has been well known in Sociology since at least the time of Durkheim (2008 [1912]) that all systems of classifying the world are arbitrary, in that how one carves up reality into its terms is contingently different from how another one does the same job, and there are no *prima facie* bases for adjudicating that one classification system is superior to another in how it labels, or rather constructs, the phenomena of the world. Despite this knowledge of the arbitrary nature of ways of classifying the world, practitioners of sociology seem too often to forget that their own preferred and customary manner of making sense of the world, of constructing phenomena by labelling them, and of deploying metaphors to bring certain features of the world into high relief, are themselves contingent. When such metaphor-based systems become taken for granted, they will become naturalised and universalised. They impose upon what is usually a much more complex, ambiguous, and contested reality a rigid ideational apparatus, the edges of which are created and policed by cherished metaphors that have ceased to be seen as merely useful but ultimately discardable linguistic devices, and instead as literal descriptions of slivers of the world and the phenomena within them.



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To take up and adapt the terms of the art historian Michael Baxandall (1995) to these issues, metaphors are very much bound up with, and to a large extent may drive, the conventionalised and habituated ways of thinking that in a given area of knowledge or artistic production allow a person or a group to see some things and not see others. The widely accepted metaphors shape deeply the typical 'structures of attention' of scholarly production in that area. Just as the structures of attention can become overly rigid in a field of artistic endeavour, so can they become so in scholarly fields. That danger is particularly acute in a discipline that is so dependent upon metaphors as Sociology is. Investigators of realities can become imprisoned in the metaphor-driven structures of attention of their research group, their scholarly community, or even perhaps their whole sub-discipline (Dutton, 2008).

As Bourdieu (1977) himself liked to say, the model of reality has in such cases been transformed into the perceived reality of the model. The verbal categories of one scholarly way of looking at the world have become misrecognised as describing the very nature of phenomena in and of themselves. And yet, as his critics have averred, Bourdieu was arguably not above doing this himself when it came to pushing his preferred conceptual armamentarium and imposing it on realities that it might not be particularly well attuned to.

A veritable army of followers have trod in Bourdieu's posthumous wake, all concerned to colonise conceptually those dimensions of the world not already subjected to *Bourdieusianisation* or *Bourdieusification* (Atkinson, 2020). This is not at all a phenomenon unique to the case of Bourdieu, for it is like disciples to try to spread the Master's message to as-yet unconverted realms. But the Bourdieu case is a particularly ironic instance of such widespread trends, for the hero figure had himself issued multiple warnings about non-reflexive and naive uses of his conceptual system to understand anything and everything in the world. Yet the potentially imperialistic aspects of Bourdieu's ideas mean that the metaphors in which they are expressed continue to spread seemingly unabated up until the present time (Wacquant, 2022) through the efforts of well-placed reputational entrepreneurs. Their role is to perpetuate the fanning of the flames of posthumous reputation, and to prevent the fires of fame from going out, apparently for reasons of remembering the virtues of the deceased, but also for reasons which benefit themselves in some manner (Fine, 1996).

By such means are words, concepts, and metaphors coined by the departed either reproduced over time, lost, or resurrected again. In this sense, there is an arbitrariness and randomness to how sociologists think at any given time because this partly depends on who has pushed the reputation of whom and to whom, and with which contingent degree of success or failure (Law & Lybeck, 2015).



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## The 'State of Play' in Sociology is Always Stated in Slanted Ways

How one describes a scholarly domain is completely dependent on words, especially words which have connotations which are more positive or negative. If I were to describe current popular ways of thinking and researching in Sociology or one of its sub-fields as a 'fad', that would be to deploy a negative labelling, as would the phrase' fashionable'. Yet I could call the same things 'cutting-edge' or 'innovative', conjuring up conventional images of novelty and of boldly pressing ahead into the future.

Moreover, if I call something a 'classic', I not only assert its allegedly 'timeless' nature, in the manner of the supposedly ageless 'little black dress', but in so doing I also inoculate it from accusations of being outdated, whatever that may be taken to mean. Still, someone else may come along and berate my putative 'classic' as precisely that, seeking to bring it down from the empyrean into which I have placed it and pull it right back to earth with a degrading bump. These sorts of dynamics happen constantly in the ongoing, and these days often highly politicised and fraught, construction, de-construction, and re-construction of scholarly canons, including in Sociology (Susen & Turner, 2011).

A conventional genre of academic writing involves depicting the current 'state of play' in a specific scholarly field or sub-field. It is noteworthy that the English word 'play' is used in such a regard, as if the business of scholarship is a game, and as if scholars were competing with each other within it. They are if one follows the account of Bourdieu (1988) as to the agonistic nature of fields of academic production.

The genre of the state-of-play review involves creating texts that seemingly provide straightforward and objective reports about longer-term and more recent trends in the area under scrutiny. But such report-like texts are fictions in the sense that they can shape, more obviously or (usually) in a more subterranean fashion, the field as it is presented to the readership. They are always tendentious, highlighting some features while downplaying or even ignoring others, elements that another narrator may have opted to emphasise.

This is often less about directly stating that some theoretical and methodological positions are simply better than others, and more about subtly shading which of these are more moribund and in decline, and which are emerging and are on the way up. Such reviews of a field thereby can imply that certain individual scholars and wider schools of thought are on downward trajectories, in terms of influence and reach, while others are ascending. Sometimes the terminology of 'rising stars' is



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invoked as a means of saying that the new hegemons in the field are, or soon will be, persons X, Y, and Z. It is as if scholarly domains were like the publicity-driven field of Hollywood film and TV production, and the reader is to watch out for the hot new talent coming up over the epistemic horizon (Korom, 2023).

The putative objectivity of the state-of-play report conceals the author's preferences for some positions over others, while also working to naturalise her preferences. The report renders her favoured authors and viewpoints as apparently on an upswing that is beyond question and simply real, rather than in any way constructed. The narration of 'new agendas' replacing older ones makes the former seem as if they have just organically arisen, rather than having been formulated and pushed by certain sorts of people in the scholarly game in question. The presentation of 'hot topics' implies that other topics unfavoured by the narrator are becoming lukewarm or are already stone cold. The delineation of 'rising stars' implies that others are now falling, into obscurity or something worse, but such narration usually does not dare to vocalise the imagery of decline and fall so bluntly.

Already in the 1960s Roland Barthes (1990) had indicated that the trick of fashion journalism was to attribute independent life to garments and their elements: knee-high boots are going to be very 'in' this coming season, sleeves are shortening now, etc. Such rhetoric works to give the impression that what is coming into (and implicitly, going out of) fashion has nothing to do with actors with vested interests trying to impose their visions on what is fashionable, and therefore what will sell on certain markets, in the sartorial fashion field. Likewise, the state-of-play report presents a world of the advent and rise to prominence of phenomena wholly disconnected from matters of vested interests, tendentious attempts to win influence and dominance, varying levels and types of prestige (individual, institutional and ideational), and unequal power relations between the various players in the field in question.

Usually, the state-of-play report is not quite an outright and vulgarly obvious exercise in cheerleading for one scholarly faction over another, although it can be so if the field being narrated is particularly politicised. Normally, the effects of the narration are subtler, more often implying than baldly stating that some things are better, livelier, and with more of a viable future ahead of them than others. Indeed, authors of such reports may genuinely feel that they are painting pictures of the state of play with an even hand. But that view on oneself and one's writing practice implies a version of the 'God trick' identified by Haraway (1988). This occurs when a putatively omniscient narrator tells things simply 'how they are', meanwhile occluding all the various materials that would lead to the recognition of what is most



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likely a much messier, fractured, spiky, and ambiguous representation of what it is that is being told.

Smooth narrations of the development and current status of a scholarly field are therefore exercises in smoothing out not just rough edges but rough substances too. Particularly smooth, and therefore ultimately untrustworthy, accounts draw on certain metaphors. These, in the manner of the terminologies of Barthes' fashion journalists, promote the fetishised notion that ideas, theories, methodologies and other appurtenances of scholarship rise and fall in a non-institutionalised vacuum.

Particularly notable in this regard is the use of the metaphor of 'waves'. Usually, this involves narrating the scholarly field as involving a succession of related tendencies, each of which is dominant for a while (often about a decade or two) and then recedes, being succeeded by another such 'wave' (McDonnell, 2023). The wave metaphor sustains a significant amount of shaping work by the narrator deploying it, allowing them to present as naturally occurring what is usually a very tendentious story which favours their preferred sorts of things. The wave metaphor is particularly used in marketing language, to depict 1st, 2nd and 3rd waves of products like coffee (1st wave: basic filter coffee, 2nd wave: Starbucks, 3rd wave: hipster coffee shops; and suchlike simplifying narratives of historical unfolding)[2].

Thus, a wave-based narration of a scholarly field likens it to a consumer field, where the reasons for the construction of the history of that domain as a series of waves almost always go unremarked and unchallenged. Moreover, wave series are usually narrated as coming in threes, with the third and last wave presented as somehow the 'natural' result of the preceding ones. The narrator is then enabled to fill in the third wave with contents she prefers and to downplay those she does not favour so much, making the alleged present-day dominance of her preferences seem like the inevitable and incontestable outcome of undulation, of natural wave-like processes. Presenting the current state of play as involving a fourth wave is riskier than drawing upon the magic of threes and triads, which are particularly entrenched in post-Christian Western metaphysics, as well as in post-classical oratory's rhetorical device of the three-part list. While a third wave seems to have a finality to it, implying a sublation of the two earlier ones, to posit a fourth wave invokes a messier story that lacks the sense of a clear current endpoint, fourth waves generally being less clear-cut in terms of their contents than are third ones. They also forcefully imply that a fifth wave is already on its way, which would complicate the story still further, perhaps in ways that do not suit the vision and interests of the narrator.

The upshot of this wavey or undulating animadversions is to advocate that readers read state-of-play reports very sceptically, and those using wave metaphors



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even more so. An author who presents a third wave as just the ways things are today in a given scholarly field is most likely engaged in a sleight of hand manoeuvre, whether they realise it or not. They have created a naturalising fiction that simplifies the almost certainly messier and much more contested reality of the field at any given time. They have generated another instance of one of the most widespread features of human existence, and one which sociologists are meant to be very sensitive to, namely arbitrary classification systems being imposed upon what is usually a more untidy reality (Bloor, 2005).

They have probably underplayed issues of the always highly contested, sometimes viciously fought, politics of knowledge in all scholarly domains. They have generally airbrushed out phenomena to do with the conflictual relations between leaders and followers, the influential and the non-influential, influencers and influenced, the legitimated and the illegitimate, the loudest voices and those which are silenced, as well as the fraught dynamics between the field's centres, semi-peripheries, and peripheries.

State-of-play reports and wave stories tend to favour the overdogs over the underdogs. They are performative in that what they purport to describe – the rising or achieved hegemony of some people and positions – they help to bring into being, by enforcing and reinforcing a sense among readerships that this is the way things are. Such narrations are engaged in the legitimation of some things and the de-legitimation of others. Some ideas and positions are defined as declining or in a state of stasis, so the implicit message is that you – the reader – should drop them. Like the stars and the sun, others are rising in their natural courses, so you should at the very least accept their inevitability, if not indeed welcome their ascension wholeheartedly.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of such narrations happens when in such reports overdogs and hegemons are presented as plucky underdogs and brave subalterns, fighting against the alleged injustices perpetrated by a mythologised power complex (that may not exist outside of the rhetorical presentations of the mythologisers). When those self-representing as the underdogs enjoy great advantages and privileges in terms of, for example, institutional location in elite universities, enjoying large amounts of social capital in terms of who can assist them in becoming (ever and even more) hegemonic in a scholarly field, and deploying political rhetoric of fights against injustice for their ends, then we are in the presence of institutionalised hypocrisy on a very significant scale.

All of this was dramatised to great serio-comic effect in Malcolm Bradbury's (1975) novel from the mid-1970s entitled *The History Man*, which showed how such



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tendencies played out in the microcosm of an English university's sociology department. The political rhetoric has changed since then, but the essential field dynamics have not.

## Things Always Could Have Been Different Than They Are

Most people, most of the time, tend to accept the current form and content of their scholarly field as natural, inevitable, and 'just the way things are'. They seek to contribute to existing debates in their field(s), especially those defined and led by the most legitimated players in those domains. They use the existing and dominant metaphors used in those debates to describe reality and to create objects of research. They deploy the conventional methodologies of the day to research those objects. They may make claims about innovation in methodological approaches to such objects, but any such innovations are constrained by, rather than transformative of, those objects themselves and the metaphors which have conjured them into existence and then regulate and police them.

Innovation usually takes very conventional, incremental, and regulated forms, involving the application of already established concepts and methods to such groups and locations in the world as are not yet researched within the terms of the mainstream debates and funding regimes of the time. Even self-conscious rebels are as much contributors to, and products of, the 'normal science' of the time as are the more obviously conventional personages, just as those espousing anti-fashion sentiments in the field of sartorial fashion are as much shaped by what is currently fashionable as are the dedicated followers of it (Rouvière, 2017).

Historians of a certain persuasion like to construct thought experiments whereby they speculate on what would have happened if certain events of the past had not occurred or had happened differently from how they did. Counterfactual history poses questions such as how the 20th century might have been different if World War I had never happened, how that war could have started for different reasons, or why it might have had a different ending than Germany and the Ottoman Empire being defeated. The point of such exercises is to discern the possible alternative historical paths that humanity could have taken (Gallagher, 2018).

One might take inspiration from such inquiries to try to disrupt the reproduction over time of scholarly fields. One can think in manners that seek to upset what the majority of people within them habitually take to be the declining and ascending intellectual trends of those fields, as well as their customary and legitimated foci, and the accepted ways of conceptualising and researching these. What if specific



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scholarly fields had not been set up and developed in the specific ways they happen to have been?

Imagine how different sociological theory in general, and the concepts, metaphors, research foci, and methodologies of specific sociological sub-fields, such as the sociology of culture, would have been if what is widely taken to be such a major figure as Pierre Bourdieu had never existed, or had never written a word of sociology and became a baker or plumber in his native region of the Béarn? There might be no focus, or at least very different sorts of focus, on many matters we assume to be central, concerning key metaphors that Bourdieu coined, diffused, and popularised, such as myriad issues to do with types and variants of 'habitus' and 'capital'. Perhaps the notions of cultural fields, and all the phenomena that sociologists typically go looking for in them, would not exist as research objects, which suggest certain methodological approaches but not others. Many conceptualisations of the relations between social class and 'cultural' objects, widely accepted ideas that have become so prominent because of Bourdieu's influence, might not have come into existence at all, or at the least would look perhaps very different from how they have come to be.

We can certainly say that sociologists would nowadays be on the hunt for different sorts of things than Bourdieu has bequeathed to them. Bourdieusians, whether of more orthodox or heterodox persuasions, would not exist, and neither would anti-Bourdieusians. Analytical positions that have taken shape by being ranged against what they take to be the pernicious influence of Bourdieu on sociological thinking would look very different from how they are today. Perhaps some of those would never have come into being at all, without such a theoretical antagonist to push against. To put it another way, some major conceptual positions in sociology today strongly bear the imprint of Bourdieu, especially when they seek to go against him, for they have become themselves precisely by reacting against the outline of the conceptual figure that they think they stand against. It is probably misleading to say that they have bent themselves out of shape as a result, because they likely would have no shape at all if there had not been a Bourdieu to react against and so bring themselves into existence through (Vandenberghe, 2006).

These dynamics cascade down into the works of sociologists who are famous in their respective sub-fields, at least in some national contexts, but less well-known than more widely known counterparts like Bourdieu. In the sub-field of the sociology of culture, we can see this in the case of the American sociologist Richard A. Peterson. Simultaneously inspired by, and reacting against, Bourdieu, Peterson (1992) coined the metaphors of 'cultural omnivores' and 'cultural omnivorousness'. The aim was to re-orient studies of the relations between social



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class and cultural phenomena away from some of Bourdieu's (apparent) preconceptions, opening up the possibility that higher class people today do not consume univorously (i.e. liking only 'high culture'), as Bourdieu seemed to suggest. They consume selected forms of middlebrow and lowbrow popular culture too. The metaphors of univorousness and omnivorousness were taken from the world of animal nutrition, to describe cultural consumption patterns in ways that escaped from Bourdieu's vision and its metaphorical range. Peterson probably was compelled to move towards such metaphors because they are part of the wider symbolic world created by the widespread use of the master metaphor of 'consumption' to describe what people read, watch, or listen to. There is no particular reason why these sorts of activities have to be metaphorically rendered as being akin to creatures ingesting food, but 'consumption' has become a taken-for-granted metaphor in a very wide range of discourses over the last century or so. Thousands of studies of class and cultural consumption were thereby launched across multiple countries which drew upon these nutritional metaphors, either seeking evidence of omnivores in particular places or aiming to rebut Peterson's thesis, sometimes to reinforce the apparent Bourdieusian claims of class-based univorousness that Peterson himself had sought to transcend (Brisson, 2019).

If Peterson had not decided to create and disseminate the omnivore metaphor, and if he had not taken umbrage at some points that he believed Bourdieu to have made, then the field of the sociology of culture would look very different than it does now. That field need never have had omnivores within its analytical purview. There did not have to be an industry of omnivore chasing which happened to come into being, partly because of the appealing and seductive ring that the metaphor seems to possess, at least for significant numbers of sociologists who have been active over the last three decades. When doubts have been cast over the plausibility of construing the sociological study of culture as the search for proof or disproof of the existence of omnivores, the scepticism takes the form not merely of pointing out that Peterson himself admitted on the occasion that omnivores might be methodological artefacts, products of collecting and interpreting data in certain ways, rather than 'real' entities. It also involves reflection on the limits of his metaphors, directing sociologists' attention, time, and energy in certain ways, while foreclosing other possible lines of inquiry. Arguing in this manner, Brisson (2019) says that one should not mistake the newness of phenomena with the newness of sociological interest in them; already at least one American study conducted in the late 1940s could now be read as indicating upper-class omnivorousness in musical tastes. We could add that one should not mistake a certain set of metaphors as coterminous with all that sociologists could see



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in a given sliver of social reality, for metaphors are by their nature as limiting and delimiting as they are refreshing and insightful.

It remains to be added that positions in or near the field of the sociology of culture, such as the brand of 'Cultural Sociology' propounded by the Yale School, which are deeply anti-Bourdieusian in nature, are also usually ranged against Peterson's modification of Bourdieu, which is regarded as insufficiently breaking with a mistaken belief system (Alexander, 1995). There are similarities here with Protestants viewing Anglicanism as embodying too much of a compromise with the thought system that has to be fully rejected, namely Catholicism. Yet the positions taken by the dissenters are still deeply shaped by both the despised antagonist and by the insufficient compromiser, precisely because so much intellectual energy has been put into rejecting them.

Protestantism is what it is today because it became what it became, and it became thus because it was a (violent) reaction against Catholicism. So too do almost all contemporary positions in the sociological study of culture bear the imprimatur of Bourdieu, in more positive or negative ways, and more explicit or implicit manners, because they are marked by their reaction against, or movement in tandem with, a way of thinking and researching that, for various contingent reasons (Santoro, 2008), seemed to have become unavoidable in the recent decades. As one of Bourdieu's major antagonists, Bruno Latour might have phrased it, when something – such as an intellectual creed – becomes an *obligatory passing point* for all intellectual traffic in a specific region of reality, then everyone and everything will be touched by it. This was not inevitable: it could have been quite otherwise, as the wider sociology of the rise and fall of intellectuals' reputations and influence illustrates (Lamont, 1987; McLaughlin, 2024). But when things happen to fall out historically as they have done, the ramifications can be felt for decades and across intellectual generations. This point applies to all of sociology's sub-fields and not just the particular one I have discussed here.

## No Conclusions, Just Beginnings: Prometheus (Slightly) Unbound

If sociology is a metaphor-driven science, then the problem it constantly faces is the ossification of its metaphors, turning them into rigid cognitive constraints, which police thought rather than enable it to develop. Sociology must therefore be an exercise in the constant creation of new metaphors, which are either mutations of previously used ones or are generated apparently out of the blue. The latter will



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be imported from domains of experience disconnected from what has up until the moment of importation conventionally passed as the realm of sociological concerns. Once upon a time, the geological metaphor of stratification and the zoological metaphor of omnivorousness was freshly imported from other conceptual worlds. When they go stale, they need to be thrown out of sociology's conceptual storehouses and the latter must be replenished with new supplies. When older metaphors are dropped, habituated and stale mental associations that have been typically been made between things (e.g. cultural consumption and animal eating habits) are problematised. When new metaphors come into play, this involves the generation of new mental associations being forged between different things, between sociological concerns and aspects of the world that have been unfamiliar to sociological processing mechanisms. Previously unseen, because hitherto unthinkable, patterns start to emerge. This is not just a case of finding new patterns that exist 'in the world', but also of creating them in the mind's eye.

These claims are part of the message formulated by Baxandall (1995) as to how new ideas have refreshed artistic practice in the West over the centuries. The 'structures of attention' have altered through two main mechanisms. New conceptions were imported into a given artistic domain, such as painting, from outside that field. That in turn allowed for re-evaluating processes to occur, whereby people were further enabled to (re)consider older concerns in light of new angles that could now be used to reappraise them.

This happens constantly in sociology already. Just as El Greco, whose reputation had been very low for centuries, was rediscovered by the likes of Delacroix, Manet, Cezanne, Sargent, and Picasso, putting his techniques to work in the new circumstances of the 19th and 20th centuries, so too can sociological figures who have languished in the reputational penumbra for decades or centuries be brought back into attention, and their metaphor-driven depictions of realities brought back to life in new forms (issues brilliantly described by Sgourev, 2021).

A spectacular case in point here is Bruno Latour's (2002) rehabilitation of Gabriel Tarde. The latter was a major figure of the late 19th century who had been subsequently eclipsed by the hero-making reputational entrepreneurs who had set Tarde's great rival Durkheim up as the more important figure in the founding of sociology. Latour endeavoured to reverse this process, and to promote Tarde's terminology of 'monads' as a more satisfactory basis for sociological thinking than anything promoted by Durkheim and his followers.

This example, however, warns us of the dangers of such processes. It was because Latour had achieved such a consecrated position in the field of global sociol-



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ogy (Inglis & Almila, 2023) that his attempts to position Tardeian metaphors as valid alternatives to Durkheimian conceptions of Society as a whole, social facts, collective classifications, and so on, were given such a wide public airing. A more obscure promoter of Tarde would not have had such wide channels of communication open to them nor audiences at least willing to listen. And yet the apparent failure of Latour's attempted conceptual revolution, as evidenced by a seeming lack of take-up of Tarde as a basis for contemporary sociological thinking, also testifies to the fact that you can be very famous and influential and still your metaphor-construction endeavours may not find sufficiently receptive audiences. Precisely why that is the case remains opaque and difficult to ascertain. It may be the case that certain sectors of the audience reject metaphors precisely because it is a major figure propounding them and they may resent such persons and their attempted further colonising of the field of sociological vocabulary. It may be the case that the promulgation of new metaphors by less dominant voices may make the proposed terminologies more appealing to certain constituencies. But again, the problem of wolves in sheep's clothing emerges: are those less dominant voices the dominant in disguise?

Such issues concerning the dirty tricks employed in academic games point to the claim on which I will end. Sociology develops constructively when there is a widespread and collective dropping of old metaphors when they have become *intellectually* redundant. Academic systems often keep these metaphors going after their intellectual usefulness has been exhausted, and actors with vested interests continue to flog conceptual dead horses if it suits them. That means that within the intellectual (not academic) practice of sociology, it is vital to engage in a constant uphill struggle: towards inventing genuinely fertile new metaphors constantly, in the hope that some of them take off among certain audiences, and then spread to other constituencies too. Perhaps most will die off in the first few years of their existence, but if sufficient numbers are generated all the time, and if certain (as yet unspecified) conditions apply, then at least some will fly.

When they do so, Sociology's future direction operates in a more positive and hopeful direction. To move again from the Christian to pagan imaginaries, when good new metaphors take root in the discipline, its trajectory into the future feels a little less like a reoccurring crucifixion and more akin to the freeing of Prometheus from the pain inflicted on him by the Furies, the (academic) enemies of intellectual daring in Sociology and of conceptual effrontery.



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## Notes

1 "Those in the grip of the methodological inhibition often refuse to say anything about modern society unless it has been through the fine little mill of The Statistical Ritual. It is usual to say that what they produce is true even if unimportant. I do not agree with this; more and more I wonder how true it is. I wonder how much exactitude, or even pseudo-precision, is here confused with 'truth'; and how much abstracted empiricism is taken as the only 'empirical' manner of work" (Mills, 1999 [1959]: xx).

2 See e.g. https://myalmacoffee.com/blogs/news/what-are-coffee-waves.

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