

Afterword: Beyond a Materialist Sociology

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As a child I always enjoyed taking clocks to pieces. There was a real pleasure in examining each inner piece of the system. The precision of this machine that measured time delighted me. When I held the spring that energised the system it felt as if I held the soul of this time machine. Yet, as you may guess, I was never able to put the clock back together. This is the problem with systems—we can pull them apart but something reconstructive always eludes us. Even though the spring held the energy my young mind thought of as the soul, the spring itself lay loose and unmoving upon its extraction. This has led me on a long search for the soul in things. I have discovered that we cannot access this intangible element through conventional methods of reductive analysis, even though this process is its own reward. My approach has been to solicit various intuitive, embodied, creative, aesthetic and spiritual modalities to delve beyond the conventional givens of my Western tradition's epistemic processes.

Analogy has been one such creative method. For instance, if I think of the 'Church of Sociology', understanding the discipline as a religion rooted in Enlightenment yearnings and longing for liberation through epiphanies realised via the scientific method and channelled through the words, insights and actions of various prophets, then I can see what the problem is. David Tacey, for instance, captures such a condition when he observes:

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Every spiritual revolution is an attempt to recover a living spirituality from the deadening effects of religiosity. Religion is easier than spirituality, because everything is done at a distance, through clergy and middlemen, through doctrine and law. *The spirit tires of this lack of authenticity and starts to disrupt the religious systems to generate change.* The cycle of civilization is about maintaining an authentic spirituality in the face of the arthritic pressures exerted by lawmakers who think they know how to dispense justice and discern God. (2015: 72)

Beyond Sociology is a text that responds to this need for authenticity. In this edited volume we find a number of thinkers investigating the aporias immanent to all essentialist yearnings for clear and coherent boundaries. It is an important response to the fact that our world has gone ‘pear shaped’. As scholars struggle to define, analyse, reinvent the world around them they are confounded by the *constant rejection* of the object of our gaze—the so called ‘world out there’—of such definitions, analyses and reinventions. The sociological spirit cannot be contained within a singular monotheistic disciplinary frame as its subject—the ‘world out there’—is far too glorious, too textured, too intimately part of us to be contained within neat academic boundaries.

We are living in what Ziauddin Sardar has quipped are *post-normal times* (2010). Sociology has for a long period appeared to have a clear mandate to study society. But what does this mean? What does it involve? The authors who have contributed to this volume suggest it now requires us to *go beyond* whatever answers are currently proffered to these classic undergraduate questions.

In *Beyond Sociology* Ananta Kumar Giri and his colleagues have taken up this challenge. Their collected thoughts explore, from a range of perspectives, the interesting question of what to do with boundaries in a post-normal world. Boundaries make us feel safe, secure, but they also confine us. Much of the tension in this bounded dilemma is that we are at a point when those essentialist yearnings of an earlier stage in the history of ideas are confounded by the self-evident failure of boundaries to answer deep questions and speak to and for deeper truths. Sociology is not alone in this, of course—all disciplines are being deeply challenged. Yet, as Clammer notes in his chapter, sociologists are now being called to go deeper into the mess of life and its relational flows. Thus he notes:

Sociology has in fact both underestimated the complexity of social processes and their rootedness in biology (the body, mortality, health and illness), ecology and elaborate but not fully articulated meaning and creativity

systems (of which formal religions and formal art are simply institutionalized expressions), and has overestimated the ability of sociologists to formulate true and accurate models of those processes.

It is always the case that the powerful underestimate the weak. Yet weakness is often the guise of rich alternative murmurings, and is always the label applied by the powerful to those who do not fit the systems designed to contain them. Dahl speaks to this point in his critique of agency and victimhood as offered in sociological and anthropological discourse. Today, as the air crackles with contradictions and the deep violences of people struggling to impose boundaries on both themselves and others, being a victim is just one category amongst many for describing the pain of growing beyond bounded identities into a pluralised universe of co-travellers. Yet even this statement sanitises the fact that suffering is real, injustice manifest everywhere and abundance—the disowned in a materialist universe—is illusory.

This last point is a central feature of this set of chapters: the *materiality and religiosity of sociology has impoverished the discipline*. It denies the possibility of spirit walking amongst us. It denies the traditions of spirit touched on by many of the authors in this book. Thus Ananta Kumar Giri (Chap. 3) speaks to a ‘surplus of meaning’ (citing Fuch 2004) that promises to inundate the dry world of materialist sociology and challenge the biopolitics (Agamben 1998) at work in reducing all to discrete individuals in a depoliticised social void. Similarly, Philip Wexler (Chap. 5) argues that ‘a “new mysticism” arises at the juncture of: this de-politicization; the continuing intensification of the “cult of the individual”; and a reduction in the transcendental system of theistic belief in favor of inner-life spirituality’. Daya Krishna in addition draws on a rich intercivilisational strand of thinking, tracking the spiritual into the cultural domain and challenging the Eurocentric nature of traditional sociology—its geophilosophical roots as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) called it—with the alternative and equally rich epistemological and ontological insights and narratives of traditional Hinduism and Buddhism.

The spiritual and the mystical are zones of existential possibility that have eluded sociologists who prefer to focus on the structural and collective religious dimensions. But we need not mark out spirituality or religion for special attention. Strydom’s (Chap. 8) focus on the emergence of an integrated cognitive social science takes evolution and a weak naturalism as a starting point for rethinking the practice of social theory. Evolutionary biology combines here with critical theory to go

beyond traditional sociological concerns and embrace an integrated cognitive social science committed to the ‘expansion and justifiable development of the socio-cultural world by means of explanatory critique’. Once again the folded nature of our epistemic and ontological fields is questioned and opportunities arise from the rupture points where hybrid forms of engaging the social beyond the sociological come into their own.

This whole process is as exciting as it is disturbing. As new forms of interrogating and engaging our world emerge, old ones are rethought, expanded and rejected. This thinking is an important practice in which many voices from many fields are coming together not to sing a requiem for a dying ‘Church of Sociology’, but instead to point towards new possibilities for the field. Conceptual creativity is called forth in such work. The sociological imagination expands as the cultural resources of the post-normal generate new forms to think by and new conditions to think through. The sun may be setting on certitude, but that is not a bad thing. We are finding, through struggle and pain, through camaraderie and joint effort, a new space to engage with the human challenges before us. Fragmentation, loss of meaning and purpose, the degradation and commodification of local cultures, a pervasive sense of loss, flagrant injustice and ecological terrorism all demand our attention. This is fomenting what Paul Hawken (2007) called a ‘blessed unrest’. The local and the universal meet in this unrest as complements to the unfolding drama of Being-Becoming in which we find the inherent local in the social. This unrest, to which this collection of chapters speaks, invites introspection and also a collective effort to step beyond old patterns of self-definition into richer and more nuanced hopeful patinas of identity.

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