

PREFACE

The questions we take up in these essays have part of their origin more than twenty five years ago when we were investigating ways of using Sociology as part of the design process for modern technologies especially computer applications and computational systems. Although there was enthusiasm on all sides, just exactly what Sociology could offer design was not all that clear. Even if we could have decided what might be offered, it was equally unclear how the exchange might be effected. Since that time, significant progress has been made in adapting some fieldwork techniques such as participant observation and some reporting methods such as ethnography to design need, but the alignment of sociological theory and design specification remains intractable. Nonetheless, throughout the intervening period, designers and especially members of the HCI research community have continued to advocate incorporation of forms of social and sociological theory into design but with very little substantive success.

As a result of our own experience and watching the efforts of others, we began to reflect on the relationships between disciplines and the possibility of a hybrid Engineering or Design Sociology. The work of developing those ideas is still uncompleted. The essays collected here focus solely on various aspects of the relationships among disciplines and some of the requirements for ensuring those relationships are well grounded. Whilst, much has been said about the virtues of multi-, inter- and, more recently, post-disciplinary research, it is our view that the transactions between disciplines which each of these mandates, will have to have a much firmer basis than simply the wish to borrow terms, concepts or approaches if any of them are to be fruitful and sustainable. In their different ways, these essays explore what such a basis might entail.

A second theme weaves its way through these essays; postmodernism and its consequences. Whilst it is certainly true that the high tide of postmodernism in the social and human sciences has ebbed, nonetheless issues and topics, and particularly ways of framing issues and topics, which were popularised when postmodernism was in full flood are still firmly embedded in social scientific analysis. Consequently, when others turn to the social sciences and especially to Sociology for insights, often what they take up are characterisations of questions or problems issuing from the analysis of postmodernity. Overwhelmingly, such characterisations are far from helpful (or even plausible) with the problems alleged to have been discovered by postmodernist analysis scaled out of all proportion to their likely consequences.

The forms of opposition to modernity taken up the various positions discussed in these essays provides a third theme. Simple opposition to a way of thinking is not, of itself, sufficient to overcome the assumptions that underpin that way of thought. More often than not, those that seek to overthrow modes of theorising unwittingly adopt the self same pre-suppositions as part of their own arguments.

Three conjunctions in particular display the entanglement of postmodernism, oppositional critique and cross disciplinary relationships. They are: the ambitions of Actor Network Theory to set the social sciences and Philosophy on a new path; the promotion of Sociology as the means by which the assessment of moral or ethical value might be incorporated into the design of computational systems; and the implications of

reflexivity for scientific (and sociological) method. A number of these essays take up the difficulties we see in all these proposals. Alongside them, we have put consideration of the incorporation of postmodernism within HCI and postmodernist theorising of the social significance of recent advances in digital technologies. Each illustrates the danger of enthusiasm and excitement regarding the 'radical implications' of some social theory blinding us to that theory's limitations and defects. Without careful appraisal of what a theory offers and how it might be put to advantage, we will, in all likelihood, end by violating Polonius' sage advice:

*Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.*

We realise, of course, our occasionally severe criticisms of some the positions adopted by sociologists and some of the sociological accounts incorporated into neighbouring disciplines might give the impression that we have a very negative view of sociology. In fact, this is not so. Where we do differ from many of our colleagues is in believing that although it is usual for the discipline to present an external face which depicts coherence and unity, and to speak of 'the sociological approach' and even characterising the adoption of such an approach as 'a turn to the social', in reality there is neither deep nor extensive consensus on what Sociology is or might aspire to, nor on what doing it properly actually means. The many views on these matters all contest with one another. From the inside, Sociology appears to be divided into a variety of wholly heterogeneous positions which themselves feature a plurality of ways of defining their own identity (one has only to think of the enormous, and still expanding, number of 'Marxisms'). At all levels, these positions are commonly quite hostile towards and even dismissive of each other. What makes us different, perhaps even maverick, is our conviction that the diversified and hugely contentious nature of Sociology should be kept in the forefront of one's mind when considering claims made about the discipline and what it needs, and even more so when such claims also contain recommendations for what Sociology can offer others. For us, it seems that far too often sociologists confidently assert a *droit de seigneur* for their own chosen version of Sociology, thereby demonstrating no more confidence in it as a unified and integrated whole than we do. The only difference between such views and our own is that whilst they hold that all but one or two sociological schemes contain fundamental and unresolved difficulties, we think they are all like this.

In many respects, the state of Sociology today is reminiscent of the description Thomas Kuhn gave of the early stages of some of the most prominent of the natural sciences. At the beginning, while there were areas of common interest, the whole field was divided among numerous, inconclusively disputing schools. Everyone's idea of how to advance the field was to tear down all existing schemes and start again. Kuhn did not suggest that this state of affairs was *necessary* for the sciences in question to mature in the way they have, and we do not imagine it must be necessary in Sociology either. We mention it only because Kuhn emphasises two features he thinks are typical of an immature discipline and which in the essays below we find also to be typical of Sociology. Because of the endless striving to start anew, the enthusiasts for any position have a tendency to exaggerate the extent that their doctrines are actually different from their predecessors and to understate the degree to which their proposals perpetuate rather than resolve the unresolved difficulties of those approaches they wish to overthrow. In as much as sociological schools tend to be overly indulgent to those who share their views and harshly uncharitable to those who don't, as we point out in Essay One *ambivalence* is almost the discipline's most characteristic feature. Moreover, this lack of charity extends to the views encapsulated by other scientific and scholarly disciplines as well as those more generally current in society.

In short, we suggest that it is almost always wise to take a cautious view of the advertising offered by sociological approaches on their own behalf. What you see is rarely what you get. Certainly, despite the self-confidence of the assertions, it is by no means clear whether (a) there is a need to adopt any particular approach to obtain the effects it promises (equivalent effects are often on offer from other, no less

sociological sources); and (b) the adoption of the approach in question (or any of its alternatives) can guarantee the realisation of its promised results.

So, Sociology is a domain of large ambitions and comparatively modest achievements with much of its work approaching more the promulgation of manifestos than it does the making and recording of solid research achievements. A dispassionate review of sociology's schemes would take them to be budgets of problems rather than catalogues of solutions. As a consequence, those who attempt to import Sociology into their own discipline are likely to find themselves embroiled in the inconclusive hostilities mentioned earlier rather than the recipients of robust and fully articulated solutions to the problems they hoped would be addressed.

Accepting and admitting all this does not imply hostility to Sociology. After all, the insistence of so many sociologists that hitherto all Sociology has been in error does not discourage them from continuing to practice Sociology or enthusiastically promoting its benefits to others. Neither does it faze us, having as we do only modest expectations for the discipline. The fact that the treatment of certain orders of problems has been somewhat clumsy or ill conceived does not mean we should not try to give them better and more thorough attention. However, what it does mean is that we should be sceptical of Sociology's ability to provide advice to others regarding the intellectual or even life worries that preoccupy them, when as its record all too clearly shows, it is hardly adept at dealing with its own.

Engagement with Sociology, then, requires an appetite for or at least tolerance of complicated, often confused, protracted, endlessly shifting and inconclusive controversies. Whatever might be said to the contrary, what is at stake is almost always *first principles*. Even when everyone within a particular school accepts the first principles have been agreed, as our earlier reference to manifesto production hints, there appear to be inevitable problems of follow-through. Sociologists, of course, recognise these difficulties and routinely use them to explain to each other why what was promised could not be delivered.

An image that we recurs throughout these essays is that of cross border trading between disciplines. Building on that image, we want to say the difficulties we refer to appear not in Sociology's marketing materials but in the small print of the contracts governing the exchange. Just as in other realms, anyone considering engaging in trade with Sociology should be sceptical about the claims made in the sales pitch and look at the small print to assure themselves they understand exactly what they are likely to be getting. This means having to work hard to unravel complex, tangled and uncertain issues. There is no doubt that such close inspection will often reveal that advances being claimed for one kind of Sociology over another come by begging questions rather than answering them. Certainly, the prospective importer of Sociology cannot depend on the promotional materials for a careful, accurate and balanced assessment of the similarities to and differences between its own and rivals' capabilities. Similarities, commonalities and overlaps are often hidden by the use of what on the surface appears to be distinctive terminologies. In our view, there is both more and less to be said about the various approaches to Sociology than they usually say about themselves. There is usually more that should be said than their detractors allow; and less than their enthusiasts would have us believe.

The almost congenital contentiousness of Sociology is a first feature which those coming to it should be warned about. A second is that, despite its diversity, in large part it remains very much *a heritage discipline*. More than half a century ago, impatient of Sociology's then current state, Robert Merton approvingly quoted Alfred North Whitehead's apothegm that a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost. Merton wanted the discipline to move on from scholarly consideration of its founding fathers and to become an empirical, accumulating science. No doubt today Merton would be even more impatient since his call has hardly been heard let alone responded to. In the squabbles among sociologies, it is almost a *sine qua non* to locate the first principles for which one is arguing in the thought of one or other of the historic greats. Of course, the stock of any of the founding fathers rises and falls with fashion (early 20th century Pragmatism, for example, having had something of a revival of late). We take this broadly to imply, though we wouldn't want to over play it,

that Sociology is perhaps best seen as *scholarly pursuit* immersed in permanently re-thinking its relationship to its intellectual heritage wearing the guise of a research discipline. It is only if one accepts what is, perhaps, the dominant myth of academic life namely that research matters more than scholarship that this could be construed as a fault or even failure.

Of course, the concern with heritage is but one aspect of the preoccupation with first principles. By and large, sociological approaches adopt the view that *if* first principles can be sorted out *then* any operational difficulties can be resolved later, which, of course, means that such difficulties get little or no, and certainly no sustained, attention. Not all that long ago, James A. Davis (1994) answered the question "What is wrong with Sociology" by contrasting two kinds of questions; ones which sociologists could answer relatively easily and ones they couldn't. The main difference between these two as far as he could tell was that sociologists were only interested in the latter. The result is that it is a characteristic of sociological research reports (one which, incidentally it shares with many other disciplines) almost always to summarise the outcome of research as the call for yet more research. Rarely, if at all, do researches suggest that some topic or issue has, to all reasonable intents and purposes, been disposed of. The engine of this reproductive research process is the problem of matching data to issue. Overwhelmingly, the data used in sociological research is indirect or second order with the phenomena which the data are actually data of standing proxy for the issue said to be under investigation. This situation is not new; nor has it recently been discovered. The same concerns have been raised again and again throughout the discipline's history. Sociologists very well understand the difficulty of tying data to phenomena. It is just that it has come to be viewed not as a problem to be solved but rather as a condition to be lived with. The end result, and this is really Davis' point, is that empirical researches undertaken in Sociology are just as inconclusive as the disputes over first principles in whose service they have been constructed. Here is Davis' pithy analysis.

What is wrong is that Sociology is incoherent. It does not cohere ("to stick together; be united; hold fast, as parts of the same mass"). While each article/book/course may be well crafted, they have little or nothing to do with each other. They may share methods and even data sets (and grammatical voices so passive as to suggest a drug problem), but each is about a unique problem with a unique set of variables.

Try this test: list the key concepts/variables in each article of in the last two or three issues of the American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, or Social Forces. I expect the number of different variables will be at least 20 times the number of articles and few variables (save for a handful of demographics such age, sex and race) will turn up in more than one article.

Another indicator: List the major subfields of sociology. Then try to arrange them in some pattern that has more intellectual bite than alphabetization. Hard, isn't it?

Yet another: Why are there no conflicts over priority in Sociology? Because sociologists are nice? Nope. Because no two sociologists ever study the same thing so such conflicts are impossible (Davis, op cit, p 180).

Naturally enough, Davis' diagnosis is based in own preferred style of Sociology, one whose versions are usually lumped together as 'Variable Analysis'. But his depiction is not *parti pris*. Like us, he finds Sociology to be diffuse, personalised and resource stretched. Sociology is deployed on just those problems which individual sociologists finds interesting or challenging with theories, methods and materials being combined in whatever

ways the particular researchers think suits their purposes. Not only do sociologists study different things but the ways they do their sociologising are largely idiosyncratic too. Resources are not concentrated on a few key topics but spread thinly, with it being rare for more than one sociologist to work on a specific defined topic or, indeed, to work on it for any sustained period.

Add to all this the fact that data collection is a time-consuming affair. Replicated samples and data sets are difficult or too expensive to obtain and data cleansing and re-design in response to emerging issues impossible. The personal and financial costs of such re-work would be wholly out of kilter with the robustness of the data, being as it is the outcome of just one person's work. Even the largest teams consist in a small number of members with many of these being students for whom this will be the first time they have been asked to gather data 'for real'. Quite recently, many in British Sociology have been exercised (indeed, even in a panic) about sociology's ability to compete with the data collecting, collation and analysis capabilities of large 'data mining' companies (Savage and Burrows 2007). But this is to forget that the data sets used in the past by Sociology were often drawn from data bases created for administrative purposes and made available to the researchers without them having a clear understanding of the procedures that were used to collect and code the data and therefore of the relationships between such data and the phenomena the sociologists wished to study. This situation is only made worse when, in the face of the rising costs of large scale data gathering, researchers are pressured to re-purpose data collected by others. Poor data with unknown provenance is fast becoming our research stock-in-trade.

Davis is unhappy because Sociology is inchoate, contentious, unfocused, idiosyncratic, endlessly proliferating and not the integrated body of empirical, scientific knowledge servicing the engineering of social life he would like it to be. We don't have such visions for the discipline and so what he finds to be weaknesses, we find simply to be characteristic features. In our view, adding more resources and hiring more people to undertake Sociology will not change these things, only a scaling back of ambition and sustained attention to addressing their causes can do that. Sociologists know they face these problems; they are neither naïve nor secretive about them. Indeed, given that so much of the published sociological literature consists of texts about and commentaries on theory and method, they could hardly be. However, they are taken to be the inevitable requirements of doing sociological business-as-usual and so both largely ignored and relegated to the disciplinary small print. In the main, Sociology proceeds by using its own version of the hand waving "small matter of programming" injunction when considering how to overcome the conceptual and methodological difficulties which confront implementation. We accept it may be comforting for the anxious to be re-assured that a journey of a thousand steps begins with just one, the first step. But to complete the journey, 999 more steps need to be taken and having taken the first is no guarantee that all the rest (or even *any* of them) will be. It is easier, more entertaining and much, much more profitable to set forth a plan for an adventurous new approach to Sociology than to wrestle with the catalogue of stubborn, tedious and very, very tough problems which need to be dealt with in delivering any of the approaches we already have. Plaudits and career progression tend not to follow the deep, prolonged and largely anonymous work required to make any one Sociology actually work.

The modern idiom is to talk of 'the academic marketplace' and to think of different disciplines as sets of products or services. Hence the language of promotion and marketing is not thought to be as foreign nor as inappropriate as once it would have seemed. The notion of an economy of academic disciplines opens up the question of how far the products actually do confirm to the claims made about them; how far, to adopt the famous slogan, any one of them "does what it says on the tin". In most cases, and certainly those with which we deal in these essays, what is on offer is less a tin containing a product of predictable quality and more a can of unpredictable worms. For ourselves, we don't mind this. We like opening cans of worms and find them to be challenging, interesting and enjoyable. We even think rummaging in the small print has its own rewards. We are not saying that what Sociology offers is not serious, thought provoking or important, because it can be.

Though not as often, perhaps, as its proselytes would have us believe. However, getting embroiled in a fracas over open-ended, hugely contentious and quite likely irresolvable disputes is not necessarily what those who get invited to take the turn to the social were necessarily looking for.

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