

Sociology and Its Others: Reflections on Disciplinary Specialisation and Fragmentation

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Introduction

1.1 It is probably true to say that, until fairly recently, many sociologists would happily have described their subject as 'the science of society'. Nowadays we are rather more hesitant in using the 'S' words. This reflects the growing uncertainty about both the epistemological status of our discipline and its subject matter. There is also a deeper, underlying problem of the relationship between sociology and the other disciplines that comprise the social sciences and humanities. Sociologists seem to have been losing their confidence at the same time as many of these other disciplines have shown a greater concern for 'social' phenomena. It is, therefore, important to ask in what ways the existence of these 'others' threatens the practice of sociology itself.

1.2 This question was raised by John Urry (1981) at a British Sociological Association conference some 25 years ago. He posed the question in the form of an opposition between two rival visions of the sociological enterprise. On the one hand there was the view that sociology has to be seen as the Queen of the sciences, as the overarching and integrating framework for organising studies of human activity. On the other hand, there is the view that sociology is a mere parasite or scavenger living on bodies of knowledge generated elsewhere. We face a stark dilemma, held Urry: do we follow the royal road to intellectual dominance or track our way through the academic undergrowth?

1.3 The first of these views was that taken by Auguste Comte and envisages an all-embracing science of the social concerned with everything that happens in the world of human beings. It sees sociology as the culmination of disciplined intellectual endeavour, standing at the top of a hierarchy of sciences from which it can serve as the parent discipline for all the more specialised branches of enquiry into human affairs. Economics, political science, geography, history, and many other 'social' disciplines are merely subdivisions of this larger science of sociology.

1.4 The second of the views identified by Urry holds that sociology can be concerned only with the study of those social phenomena that are 'left over' as other, more autonomous disciplines develop. Sociologists are the parasitical or scavenging hyenas that grub around the intellectual remains and waste products of these other disciplines. Such a view allows that sociology may, on occasion, serve as a 'midwife' to new areas of investigation that do not yet form separate disciplines. However, these specialisms will eventually mature and leave home to start a life of their own, leaving sociology, once more, to try to identify new pastures to scavenge. Sociology as a discipline is merely an uncoordinated collection of 'sociologies of this or that'. Sociological specialisms arise as responses to the fortunes of other disciplines and the vagaries of social change in the external world. There can be no 'mainstream' of sociological research and the intellectual content of the subject is constantly renewed as it fragments and searches for new ventures. Where other disciplines develop autonomously and with confidence, sociology develops only in reaction to its others.

1.5 There is, in fact, a great deal of truth in both of these views, though neither can be sustained as a fully coherent position. In what follows, I will draw upon each of them, and I will put forward a rather more modest version of the Comtean claim and a rather more positive version of the second claim. I try to establish a position from which it is possible to understand the uncertainties that face sociology today while offering a way forward for its practitioners.

Thinking the Social

2.1 The broad and all-encompassing view of sociology as the central social science is not necessarily dependent on the related Comtean view that sociology is the supreme scientific achievement and stands above physics and biology in a hierarchy of all the sciences. Others may wish to argue this point one way or the other, but it is in no way central to my concerns here. What is important here is simply the claim that

there needs to be a foundational science that is able to grasp the central characteristics of the social in all its dimensions and all its particular applications. This *general* conception of sociology was - in one form or another - central to the sociological vision of most, if not all, of the sociologists of the formative period of the nineteenth century and they made it the cornerstone of 'classical sociology'. Advocacy of the general conception of sociology involved the articulation of the particular way of thinking about the human world that C. Wright Mills (1959) called the sociological imagination. This form of theoretical imagination invokes the social embeddedness of human activity as the basis of a distinctive perspective on human phenomena.

2.2 The category of the social refers to intersubjective phenomena that cannot be reduced to the merely subjective or to the mentalities of particular human agents. It was Durkheim's (1895) crucial claim that these intersubjective 'social facts' had an autonomy *sui generis*: they are irreducible to psychological facts and biological facts, and they form the disciplinary core of sociology. Explored in a slightly different way by Simmel (1908; see the partial translation in Wolff 1950), intersubjective phenomena were seen as existing only in and through the subjective meanings that actors give to their actions, but as irreducible to these meanings. Durkheimian social facts and Simmelian social forms are the interpersonal outcomes of the subjectively meaningful orientations of one agent to another. The social facts constituted through intersubjectivity are social structures, reproduced by and forming the conditions for individual and collective actions. These are built from the normative expectations that actors hold concerning the actions of the others that they encounter, and they organise the actual patterns of interconnection that result from these encounters. As institutional and relational phenomena (Lopez and Scott 2000), they are also embodied phenomena: they are inscribed in the bodily hexis of agents as socialised dispositions and generate tendencies to act in one way rather than another. It was on this basis that C. Wright Mills was able to conclude that the sociological imagination allows its practitioners to explore the intersections of social structure, history, and biography. It is the means through which it is possible to advance a distinctively sociological understanding of economic, political, educational, religious, familial, and other human activities.

2.3 In recent years, the nature of the 'social', whose theorising this sociology defends and articulates, has rarely been defined with any precision, despite its centrality to the integrity of sociology as a discipline. In 2000, the Quality Assurance Agency for British higher education sought the support of professional associations in the 'benchmarking' of their disciplines through producing consensual statements of the expected knowledge and understanding that should be possessed by its practitioners and codifying the defining characteristics of degree schemes. The panel charged with producing the benchmarking statement for sociology invoked the idea of the social for rhetorical purposes, much as the historians had invoked 'the past' as their disciplinary identifier (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/sociology.pdf>). The panel, however, evaded the task of giving the social a precise definition. This evasion, of course, reflected the prevailing political conditions under which the exercise took place and the purposes for which the benchmarking statement was produced; it should not be ascribed to any lack of intellectual rigour on the part of the members of the benchmarking committee.^[1] It is, nevertheless, striking how the concept of the social has become a taken-for-granted, but rarely explicated, feature of sociological debates. It is, in these circumstances, all too easy for a discipline to lose its sense of identity.

Disciplinary, Specialisation, and the Social

3.1 Disciplinary distinctions are rarely based on coherent and logical divisions within knowledge that reflect essential forms of understanding. They are historically contingent products of the development of educational systems within particular national contexts. Each discipline arises at a particular point in history, alongside other already established disciplines, and in response to pragmatic academic issues and wider political concerns. Disciplines are competing groupings of teachers and researchers that become concretely institutionalised as distinctive social entities whose characteristic methods and concepts change over time in response to both internal and external conditions. The particular pattern of disciplinary differentiation found in a society exhibits a division of scientific labour that is the negotiated outcome of a particular balance of power among socially organised academics, each discipline laying claim to its particular intellectual territory.

3.2 It is for this reason that the sociological imagination, as a particular way of thinking, has not been confined to Departments of Sociology or to card-carrying sociologists. It is a way of thinking that can be found in many other disciplines as well. Practitioners of the sociological imagination can be found in history, political science, law, geography, business studies, cultural studies, the study of education, and in many other special areas of investigation. Each such discipline may define itself in relation to specific concerns and other forms of intellectual imagination, but they have, since the growth of sociology, increasingly incorporated a sociological dimension to their work. Many of them have actually developed out of sociology itself. A crucial achievement of those in the formative generation of 'classical' social theorists was that they infused a whole range of disciplines, concerned with a wide variety of specific objects, with a

new, sociological mode of investigation. Durkheim, for example, spent most of his academic life as a Professor of Education, while Weber worked as a legal theorist and an economic historian, before, all too briefly, becoming a Professor of Sociology. However, their work was no less 'sociological' because of their disciplinary affiliation. The general conception of sociology was articulated and carried forward in a number of disciplines.

3.3 This is not to claim that the various 'specialised' disciplines are simply branches or subdivisions of sociology and could be claimed by imperialistic sociologists as truly parts of their essential territory. Many are self-consciously eclectic or synthetic in character, while some explicitly embrace a 'multidisciplinary' or 'interdisciplinary' identity and draw on a variety of 'parental' disciplines. Historians, for example, may write from a psychological as well as a sociological orientation and distinctions are often drawn between economic history, political history, the history of religion, and numerous other specialist forms of history that stand in complex relations to economics, politics, religious studies, and so on. Human geographers share many concerns with sociologists and anthropologists, but give particular emphasis to the relationship between social phenomena and the 'natural' phenomena of climate and geology studied by physical geographers. Cultural studies draws its characteristic intellectual power from both the literary analysis of texts and the sociological understanding of their social context.

3.4 Nevertheless, many of these specialised disciplines are, in fact, organised around the investigation of objects that have the kind of autonomy from their social context that allows them to be analysed without the need for any direct and continuing reference to the social relations that give rise to them. Economics, for example, is based around the claim that the social processes of exchange and market transaction exhibit *sui generis* relationships among financial variables that make it realistic to investigate them with little or no reference to the human relations that make this possible. In such cases, a 'social' approach is employed but has become so specialised that it is barely recognised as sociological. The general conception of sociology, then, is found throughout the social sciences and humanities. It is not confined to Departments of Sociology and professional sociologists.

3.5 Where, then, does this leave sociology as actually practiced in Departments of Sociology? This 'professional sociology' originated as a specific institutionalisation of the general conception of sociology, articulating a sociological imagination that had, until its emergence, been an underdeveloped aspect of intellectual discourse. It outlived this approach and applied its ideas to both established and novel topics. Professional sociology nurtured the application of the sociological imagination to areas ignored by existing disciplines and areas that were of growing importance in the world of its time. Its successful expansion was the basis for its growing influence within neighbouring and cognate disciplines. Its growth, however, has been marked by a tendency towards the fragmentation of its disciplinary concerns. Those working in whole subject areas that began as specialisms within professional sociology have built links with others interested in the area and have split off to form separate and distinct disciplines. The intellectual content of professional sociology, as institutionalised in its disciplinary practices, is not fixed and given for ever but is continually restructured and reformed in relation to disciplinary others. Over time, successive sociological concerns have crystallised, expanded, and then differentiated from the parent discipline. Educational studies, criminology, health studies, business studies, media studies, and so on, have all grown at the expense of sociological specialisms and have recruited many of their practitioners from the ranks of actual or potential sociologists. The growth of established disciplines may often be at the expense of specialisms within professional sociology.

3.6 The growth of political studies as a specialised discipline concerned with strategic struggles over the distribution and exercise of power within states has had an impact on sociology. As the study of politics has taken a more 'scientific' turn - as 'political science' - so it has incorporated concerns previously central to political sociology, and this specialism has virtually disappeared from Departments of Sociology. Concern for states and power, and increasingly for class, has become almost a residual element in professional sociology.

3.7 It would appear, then, that professional sociology might well be described in Hollywood B-movie terms as the 'incredible shrinking discipline', settled on the descent into nothingness. That professional sociology has not disappeared reflects some of the claims made by advocates of the second view of sociology: that it is a parasite and scavenger. Disciplinary fragmentation creates opportunities as well as problems. It opens up spaces that can be filled by new specialisms and so it allows sociologists a great flexibility in their responses to a changing world. The sub-divisions found in a Department of Sociology at any particular time will, therefore, form a somewhat arbitrary collection of specialisms rather than a logical and coherent intellectual system. Professional sociology has established an openness to the formation of new specialisms, investigating neglected areas and concerned with issues of growing importance. This was why the study of social class as a central element in the structures of modern societies was such an important feature of sociology for so long, and it is the reason for the emergence of new specialisms concerned with

gender, race, the body, consumption, popular culture, and many other issues. It is easy to forget how new and innovative such specialisms are. A survey of almost 1000 professional sociologists in Britain in 1968 reported only one who was working on feminism (almost certainly Olive Banks). This was equal to the number then working on 'the sociology of sea bathing' (Carter 1968). The intellectual ideas developed in such specialisms have helped to reinvigorate and transform more mainstream theoretical concerns, leaving a permanent residue of powerful ideas. Such has been the case, for example, with the recasting of theoretical concerns around gender and the important broadening of the sociological investigation that this has achieved.

3.8 Sociological scavenging has contradictory effects on the discipline. As intellectual concerns have developed into autonomous specialisms, their practitioners have often developed links with scholars in other disciplines and with whose concerns their interests overlap. Those interested in the body, for example, have worked closely with social psychologists and psychoanalysts, researchers in cultural studies, feminist theorists, specialists in health care, and even biologists (see the radical conclusions drawn from this in Sayer 2000). These intellectual links mean that professional sociology as practised in Departments of Sociology necessarily has an 'interdisciplinary' dimension to its work and that sociological research develops through debates with scholars in other disciplinary areas. These interdisciplinary links - inherent in the expansion of professional sociology - encourage the migration of scholars from the related disciplines into truly interdisciplinary ventures with autonomy from each of their parental disciplines. The transformed sociological imagination brought about by the study of gender has been taken up in other disciplines and has been the basis of a massive growth in Women's Studies, where researchers from history and literature have worked fruitfully with sociologists. As this interdisciplinary area has grown, however, so it has drawn into itself many sociologists concerned with gender issues and could, in the long-term, reduce the significance of gender as a specialism within professional sociology. A renewed concern for 'political' issues has been taken up in transformed ways in such novel concerns as the study of surveillance and in new specialisms concerned with citizenship, human rights, and migration. These specialisms have developed rapidly in interdisciplinary form and may well become foci for an efflux of specialists from professional sociology into new disciplines.

3.9 The transformation of new sociological specialisms into autonomous interdisciplinary ventures, then, becomes a further basis of disciplinary fragmentation. The scavenging strategy followed by professional sociologists leads to renewed fragmentation and a need for further scavenging activity. The fragmentation of sociology as its specialisms become its others is built into the very nature of sociology as a mode of intellectual investigation. If professional sociology were to lose its openness to contemporary developments in the world, it would, indeed, be in danger of stagnation and extinction. The discipline has been cursed with eternal youth, as it is forced to respond creatively to social change and to the intellectual expansion of its others. It is its openness and flexible response to new opportunities that keeps sociology alive as a discipline.

3.10 The ability of professional sociology to follow this strategy of openness and intellectual renewal, however, depends on its ability to maintain the core ideas that are central to the general conception of sociology. Professional sociology cannot merely be the nursery of new disciplines. It must remain the home of the distinctively sociological perspective that is the basis from which new interests and concerns can be identified. Like the picture of Dorian Gray, the core sociological ideas must be maintained and allowed to mature if its specialisms are to maintain their youth and vitality. Professional sociology must combine *both* particular specialisms *and* the general foundational theory of the social.

Economic Theory and Economic Sociology

4.1 The trends at work within sociology are especially clear in its continually changing relationship with economic theory and attempts to study economic life. Economics originated as 'political economy', in close association with the general conception of sociology as a specific exercise of the sociological imagination. Many early social theorists moved easily around the study of social economics in its broadest sense. Weber's works show very clearly the easy shading over between what would now be regarded as economic theory, economic history, and economic sociology.

4.2 Professional economics today is a discipline concerned with the relationships among commodities as expressed in monetary terms, and it pursues such issues with little or no attempt to relate economic relations to the social context that gives them meaning and from which they have achieved their autonomy. The contemporary autonomy of economic processes has allowed the monetary relations among commodities and their impact on other financial measures to be investigated without any consideration of patterns of property ownership, the social division of labour, the structure of the household, and the myriad other social relations that were so central to both Marxist economics and classical political economy.

4.3 Professional sociology retained a concern for many of these issues and the embeddedness of

economic phenomena within them. These were developed largely as 'industrial sociology', 'industrial relations', and the 'sociology of organisations'. By the middle of the twentieth century, these had become major divisions within sociology and were prospering as core teaching and research specialisms. The study of British sociologists in the 1968 already referred to reported that 121 sociologists were specialising in one or the other of these areas (Carter 1968). The 1960s, however, were a period of growth for interdisciplinary research centres on industrial relations and for the massive expansion of the Business Schools. Concern for such issues in professional sociology developed in close association with these trends and many sociologists migrated into the new ventures.

4.4 Mainstream concern for economic sociology fragmented. The growth of Departments of Organisational Behaviour, Industrial Relations, and Business Studies has created large new disciplines, generally housed in Management Schools, that have drawn in many of those who would previously have been recruited to Sociology Departments. Residual concerns for economic and industrial issues have survived, but they have been transformed through the expansion of alternative and successive specialisms with a fundamentally different character.

4.5 However, contemporary economic transformations have opened-up new areas that are ripe for sociological study, and the departure of organisational behaviour and industrial relations from most Sociology Departments has created the intellectual space in which new economic phenomena could be considered. Studies of work and economic activity are now to be found in specialisms organised around such issues as leisure, consumption, and globalisation, though these have, so far, only a tenuous base in sociology. Scholars in the United States have sought to re-establish a 'New Economic Sociology' (Swedberg 2003; Smelser and Swedberg 1996) that combines these concerns with more traditional ones, but this has had little success in establishing itself in Departments of Sociology in Britain. Even in the United States it derives much of its support from those who work in the Business Schools or other interdisciplinary units.

4.6 Within professional economics itself, however, some are now arguing for a return to some wider sociological concerns. The models of rational action developed in professional economics, which deliberately eschew any question of whether they describe the actual motives of particular actors, have rarely been seen as the highly specialised *social* actions that they are. Paul Ormerod (1994) has argued that the specialisation of economics around the use of rational models of action and mathematical techniques of differential calculus has become self-destructive. Theoretical economics has become so far detached from any concern for cultural values and social relations that it can no longer generate viable economic predictions about the contemporary world.

4.7 Work in the Business Schools and in the new economic sociology is able to contribute to these debates within economics, but the huge intellectual gap between the concerns of economic theory and studies of leisure, consumption, and globalisation within professional sociology is so great that there is little dialogue as yet. This is likely, however, to become a major area of debate in the future, and a renewed interest of economists in these matters could, eventually, lead to further restructuring of sociological specialisms as these concerns are taken into the mainstream of economics.

4.8 It is striking, however, that a sociological concern for new economic matters has involved an emphasis on the cultural construction of economic actions rather than structures of economic relations themselves. What is often referred to as the 'cultural turn' has led those studying economic phenomena to take ever more seriously Durkheim's (1893) emphasis on the 'non-contractual element in contract' (see the argument in Slater and Tonkiss 2001). The focus is, increasingly, on the normative orientations and cultural representations through which people relate to each other in their economic encounters. This shift of attention has not been confined to economic sociology, and it reflects a broader trend at work within professional sociology.

The Cultural Turn and the Sociological Imagination

5.1 The most striking transformation of professional sociology has been in its relations with cultural studies. The need to take seriously the cultural dimensions of social life has led to a growing engagement with those investigating literary and media matters and to a growth of fruitful interdisciplinary endeavours. The so-called cultural turn has revolutionised sociological work in area after area and it has become a major influence on many of its core concerns. Sociologists have learned a great deal from cultural studies, enriching their long-standing concerns with the cultural formation of human activity (Scott 2005). Despite its many positive consequences, however, the growth of interest in the purely cultural aspects of social phenomena has posed a danger for both professional sociology and the general conception of sociology. The very core of sociology has become less and less distinct *from* cultural studies. The consequences of this can be observed in any high street bookshop, where sociological material is now included under 'Cultural Studies', just next to the section on 'Mind, Body, and Spirit'. The incredible shrinking discipline

might at last become a reality as the scavenging of cultural matters leads to the incorporation or absorption of professional sociology into cultural studies.

5.2 Why should this be such a problem? Why should not professional sociology be replaced by cultural studies? If the general conception of sociology has been so successful and is found throughout the human and social sciences, perhaps professional sociology has done its job and there is no need to be worried about the disappearance of that particular collection of specialisms currently linked together as professional sociology? Indeed, many do seem to embrace this transformation of the sociological identity and seek to abandon the 'old-fashioned' and 'out-moded' ideas that have dominated sociology until recently. Such a reaction is short-sighted.

5.3 The danger is that the demise of professional sociology as hitherto practiced would threaten the very survival of the general conception of sociology and the sociological imagination. The general conception of sociology became established in discipline after discipline *only* because, at the same time, a professional sociology was built that served as its guardian discipline. Professional sociology has been a discipline in which the sociological imagination could be sustained by those who saw it as their professional obligation to do so. Without the institutionalisation of sociology as a discipline, the sociological imagination and the framework of fundamental concepts could never have been established and sustained and it would not have had the influence it had in the more specialised disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. Historians, economists, and political scientists have no professional obligation or commitment to promoting and protecting the sociological imagination, no matter how useful they may currently find it. It is only the consideration and articulation of the general conception of sociology by professional sociologists that can ensure the survival of the sociological imagination. It is through debates and dialogues with professional sociologists that the sociological imagination has attained its presence across the human disciplines. Without professional sociology there would be no dialogue.

5.4 This points to the contradictions inherent in the scavenger role. This strategy has allowed professional sociology to prosper and has nurtured new specialisms and new disciplines. At the same time, however, it has led to a situation where the general conception of sociology is more difficult to sustain within Departments of Sociology. The time has arrived when the task of consolidating and maintaining the sociological imagination must be re-affirmed. This does not mean promoting the study of sociology in the imperialistic way advocated by Comte. Rather, it involves recognising the centrality of this particular intellectual endeavour to much of the work currently carried on in the human and social sciences.

Transforming the Curriculum

6.1 The key to renewing and maintaining the sociological imagination and its conception of the social is to be found in the organisation of the teaching curriculum in professional sociology. It is through school, undergraduate, and professional education in sociology that future generations of sociologists are produced, and their understanding of the subject reflects the content of the curriculums through which they have been trained.

6.2 The undergraduate curriculum has, in recent years, been narrowed down, reducing the scope of the core of compulsory courses covering the areas most directly related to the general conception of sociology. There has been an almost complete disappearance of courses on comparative and historical sociology and of similar 'social structure' courses. There has, at the same time been a trimming down of sociological theory courses to a very narrow range of social theorists, often in a drive to increase the coverage of theorists from literary and cultural analysis. Students now can complete their undergraduate studies without any significant exposure to the ideas that have defined the core of sociological work since the earliest days of the discipline. The growth of modularity and an increase in the range of options has transformed many degree courses into a collection of specialisms with only very loose and tenuous areas of integration. The great bulk of curriculum time is allocated to specialist modules from which it may be difficult to acquire a proper understanding of the inter-connections among phenomena that comprise a social structure. Students can graduate with a very narrow view of the subject that they have studied, and this shapes their ideas about what they might pursue in research for a PhD and in later research if they follow an academic career. Indeed, the reorganisation of postgraduate training by the Economic and Social Research Council, which introduced guaranteed four-year funding for top graduates, requires that students choose their future research specialism and topic before they have completed their undergraduate work - before they have acquired even the partial understanding of sociology that is possible in the undergraduate curriculum today. Nor is this problem rectified at postgraduate level, where a laudable attempt to enhance the teaching of research methods skills has reduced the amount of time that can be given to substantive sociological issues.

6.3 This has been greatly reinforced by developments in the teaching of sociology in schools. Modularisation has become well-advanced in the schools as the A/AS level split has made itself felt.

Students and their teachers can be highly selective in what they cover as part of a sixth-form training in sociology, and they are not oriented to a rounded and holistic view of the subject. School students are, of course, particularly inspired by the more cultural subjects such as the mass media - these are often the interests that brought them into sociology - and their teachers are likely to teach these subjects as a way of attracting and retaining students. Many teachers have themselves now been trained in the shrinking university syllabus, and they pass this constricted view of the subject on to their students. When these students arrive at University they have an already narrowed conception of sociology and are impatient with courses covering areas regarded as 'old-fashioned' or unfamiliar. No wonder these courses are disappearing.

Sociology as a Vocation

7.1 The combined fragmentation and reconstruction of sociology has been the way in which a concern for the sociological imagination has been articulated, but there is now a danger that fragmentation may outrun reconstruction and that the sociological imagination, as a consequence, may be weakened. It is, therefore, important that our cautious approach to sociology as the midwife or seedbed of novel disciplinary advances be combined with the larger Comtean vision of sociology as the general science of the social. It may not be the imperialistic 'Queen of the Sciences', but it cannot simply be the ever-diminishing parasite.

7.2 The core concerns of the sociological imagination have to be sustained within the sociology curriculum. There is a general framework of ideas about social relations that may be the *common* concern of the social sciences but is the *particular* concern of sociology. Professional sociology is the specific guardian of these intellectual concerns. It is only professional sociologists whose vocational identity ties them to protect and promote them. This intellectual task centres on the idea of what it is to talk about human 'society' in all its complexity. It is within the core social theory courses and in courses on comparative and historical sociology that the general conception of sociology is sustained. It is here that the idea of the 'social' is explored and articulated. We must ensure that the design of degree courses reflects general intellectual concerns rather than market pressures and specialised research interests. General ideas about social relations and the ways in which they have been explored by sociologists must figure centrally in the training of future generations of sociologists. While it may be true that the idea of 'societies' constrained by nation state boundaries is a thing of the past (Urry 2000; Walby 2003), the general idea of society as the specific form of intersubjective association through which human beings are able to live their lives remains our central concern. The concept of 'society' must be brought back in to become the unifying centre of the discipline: sociology needs to once again define itself as 'the study of society'.

Notes

¹ To declare an interest, I was a member of the Benchmarking Panel.

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