Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie = Swiss journal of sociology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 26 (2000)

Heft: 3

Artikel: "Interpretative" sociology in Great Britain : the state of the art

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814803

Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol./Swiss Journ. Sociol., 26 (3), 2000, 507–529

"INTERPRETIVE" SOCIOLOGY IN GREAT BRITAIN: THE STATE OF THE ART

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1. Introduction

My intention is to locate the current situation of "interpretive sociologies" within the history and institutional context of the discipline of sociology as a whole in Britain. I shall also indicate the major developments and debates in what is termed "interpretive sociology" in Britain – developments and debates that, indeed, render problematic the term itself as a proper designation for many of the analytic practices that take place under its *aegis*. Even given that *caveat*, to write a paper on interpretive sociology in Britain will not be an extensive project as there is not very much of it, for reasons that will, I hope, become clear as we proceed.

Regarding the position of British sociology in general, I should begin by sketching out some of the generic facts about the institutionalization of the discipline that have had particular consequences for interpretive sociology. Therefore, before I come to these particular consequences, I should offer some idea about changes in the generic position of the discipline *per se*. In some respects, it would be misleading to suggest that the position of interpretive sociology shares nothing with that of other, more orthodox forms of the discipline. Indeed, all sociologists in Britain face many difficulties in common and often the particular problems of interpretive sociologists are no more than refractions of ones that apply "across the board" in the discipline.

The most basic fact of all is that the entire discipline of sociology is a newcomer to British academic life. When Ilya Neustadt, my former teacher, became Professor of sociology at the University of Leicester in 1965, this was only the third Professorship ever in this discipline in Britain. Before the second world war there had been a thin strand of sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and few institutions elsewhere, but by and large the pre-war approach preserved residual Victorian evolutionist concerns on one hand or quasi-empiricist or campaigning approaches to social problems on the other. Sociology was, thus, a minority pursuit, highly

marginalized compared with, for instance, the institutional position of Social Anthropology which had its roots firmly implanted in British colonialist soil.

The lack of institutionalization of sociology is the key to many other generic facts about the discipline. It explains, for instance, the vulnerability of the discipline to political and other incursions. One of the more highly publicized incursions was initiated during the Thatcher era. Aided and abetted by her then Minister of Education Sir Keith Joseph, Margaret Thatcher sought to deny scientific status to sociological research. She put great pressure on the then Social Science Research Council of Great Britain (S.S.R.C.) to drop the term "Science" from its title, and so it became the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (E.S.R.C.).

Mrs. Thatcher did not deny the *imprimatur* of science to sociology because she was an interpretive sociologist. Quite the contrary: when she first came to power she chose to place primary emphasis not on the fact that she was the first woman to become Prime Minister but that she was the first scientist to accede to that post. Her impulse was, of course, to detract from the academic credibility of sociology as a discipline, and much of this came from her apparent convictions that:

> *There is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women and there are families.*
>
> quoted in *Woman's Own*, 31st October 1987

The marginal position of sociology, which to some extent still persists, also accounts not only for what we might euphemistically term the variable quality of its research, but also for its permeability to academic but extra-disciplinary influences such as Cultural Studies. Even more notable, though, has been the way in which the political climate has served to stratify different modes of sociological research, greatly privileging the narrow preoccupation of British sociology with statistical and (far more frequently) *ersatz* statistical studies of social class. I shall return to this issue later.

Eventually, it became clear how sociology could gain its salvation: however, it was a salvation gained only at the expense of what many sociologists considered to be a Faustian contract. Sociology could be reinstated if it were rendered increasingly subject to the objectives of industrial and commercial efficiency, resolution of social problems as defined by government, etc. Thus, the thematic priorities (1997: Update) of the ESRC include the following: " The 'Technology and People' thematic priority stresses the relationship between people and technologies, and the ways in which we understand, manage, reshape and exploit technologies ... asking '... important questions about civil liberties and ethical judgements' and issues of 'competitive advantage'. Another priority is

Governance, Regulation and Accountability which attributes importance to issues of participation, democratic rights and an understanding of (regulatory demands) which influence company performance and competitiveness." The "Globalisation, Regions and Emerging Markets" priority similarly focuses upon new opportunities, new insecurities and new inequalities. "Environment and Sustainability" offers as a "central concern, ... How we achieve economically, technologically and socially – sustainable development."

The theme "Economic Performance and Development" emphasizes wealth creation, quality of life and the "... processes that determine economic performance, its sources and effects, its relation to economic policies and productivity and long-term economic growth", with a focus too on "economic integration at the European level and beyond". "Knowledge, Communication and Learning" focuses upon "... Our ability to perform as individuals, as an economy, as successful organizations", and includes a concern with "... Artificial intelligence and synthetic languages" as well as "lifelong learning". The "Lifespan, Lifestyles and Health" priority focalizes demographic changes on the "future wealth and well-being of the population", on work, unemployment, health, leisure and consumption. Finally, in the "Innovation" thematic priority "innovation", is conceived as an issue that "... has been identified as a high priority by users in business, government and other research councils". An aim of this priority is to "strengthen the national capacity for innovation", including the "management of organizational change" and the sustaining of innovative performance in large and small organizations.[1]

I am not, of course, claiming that the ESRC program leaves no space at all for scholarly research. I do, however, claim that the space for such research is increasingly circumscribed in terms of a picture of non-academic "users" of the research and that the priorities are increasingly cast in terms of these users. Nor am I saying that all the ESRC's priorities are necessarily ones with which we would, on a personal/ethical basis, disagree, even if they may on occasions to some of us seem to be in potential conflict e. g. those to do with enhancing economic performance and those to do with quality of life and social exclusion: certainly in the Thatcherite era this might have been claimed to be the case by people in coal mining and other areas of employment.

What I am claiming is that there is an increasing conflation of *sociological* problems with *social* problems. More and more, sociological (conceptual, empirical) problematics are being surrendered or re-defined in terms of what

1 I should emphasize that this characterization is, necessarily, selective given the eleven pages devoted to the thematic priorities of the E.S.R.C. I urge readers interested in the issue of government funding as administered by nominally quasi-autonomous agencies to consult the ESRC's website: http:\www.esrc.ac.uk

governments define as the practical problems of the day – failures of economic competitiveness, computer illiteracy, (note the stigmatizing terminology often employed), marginalization and the rest. In this sense, British academic life is increasingly subject, and increasingly responsive, to a political agenda and is operating in an increasingly *dirigiste* milieu. This *dirigisme* is cast in terms both of the British and European Union's research frameworks.

The increasing *distinction* between "sociological" and "social" problems lay at the heart of the development of sociology as a discipline after the early 1950's. Ilya Neustadt (1965), in the Inaugural Lecture of his professorship in sociology at the University of Leicester, placed that distinction as integral to the discipline itself and, therefore, as central to the proper establishment of the discipline in Britain. Neustadt pioneered this distinction in Britain and in so doing helped to differentiate sociology from such approaches as moral philosophy, social policy and social work. In his lectures, he constantly argued that the conflation of "sociological" and "social" problems led, *de facto*, to a selective focus on putatively manipulable aspects of society. In fact, Neustadt said, *non*-manipulable aspects of society were precisely the aspects that produced the unplanned consequences of planful social action.

In some other respects, however, the chickens of the later 1960's and the 1970's have come home to roost. The then purportedly libertarian arguments about the need for "relevance" in the discipline – relevance to the unmasking of the "Military-Industrial Complex" and the like – have now been re-cast to signify relevance to a governmental agenda. Despite Neustadt's arguments against any notion of "relevance" in terms of social problem-orientation, countervailing tendencies operated in ways that mitigated his efforts and, to say the least, rendered a hostage to fortune. It is an ironic thing to see the way in which these *soi-disant* "radical" sociologists so readily capitulated to government pressures on the definition of "relevance".

There have been some alarming results of this *dirigisme* at both British and European levels. A recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*[2] has reported that, for instance, British government departments are increasingly claiming the right to control various aspects of the academic research they commission, e. g. controlling dates of publication of research they have contracted, controlling the formatting and even the content of research, the pattern of its diffusion and the like. So, for example:

"(The researcher) shall incorporate the department's amendments (into the final research)." D.F.E.E. contract clause, 1998.

2 The *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 31st March 2000, page 1. The article's headline is "Labour Policy Poses Threat to Freedom", where it is academic freedom that is the issue.

"(Final report data) shall be produced in a form to be agreed with the Liaison Officer." Department of Health clause.

Given the thematic priorities of the British and European Union plus the tightening of the funding of universities it is hardly surprising that we have seen the rise of a business culture within the academy – primarily in the management of the university and of its academic departments, but which has filtered through into academic culture too. Applied studies, consultancy, the addressing in research of business and management problems, etc. have become increasingly prominent in academic life and have had an increasing influence on the academic research agenda. In a sense, what we have in Britain is Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) in reverse: the development of a business ethic and "enterprise culture" in scholarly life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the "new managerialism"[3] both in university administration and, by "osmosis", scholarly pursuit – the actual processes of teaching and research.

The combination of conflating social/sociological problems and managerialism has led to some odd uses of some major sociologists' work. For instance, Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" is used by universities to invoke excusing or mitigating conditions for poor student retention rates, inequalities in access to higher education, etc., in the face of government criticism and pressure. However, Bourdieu's (and Passeson's) conception of the role of the curriculum as culturally selective and in serving and reproducing power relations within education are all quickly and conveniently passed over. The total "*gestalt*" of Bourdieu's analysis is then selectively cannibalized for opportunistic purposes that its author would surely reject.[4] We see here some of the selective orientation to a situation via a *theory* of the situation, about which Neustadt had warned.

I have necessarily gone to some lengths to show that British sociologists (in common, it must be said, with researchers in other disciplines) face the same institutional problems. Given the "across-the-board" nature of these problems, "interpretive" sociologists bear much in common with their consociates doing other kinds of sociology. However, as I have also already observed, these general institutional problems do not affect all genres of sociology in the same way, and interpretive sociologies have been affected in distinctive ways in the face of these problems.

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3 On "managerialism", see H. Beynon (1973).

4 See Derek Robbins' wry but nonetheless pertinent comments in his review of P. Bourdieu's *The Weight of the World: Suffering in Contemporary Society, in: The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2 June 2000, page 34.

One of the features of the "new managerialism" in British academic life is that it carries with it a set of *methodological* preferences. In terms, at least of elective affinity, the preferred instruments of "managerialism" and of governmental administration are positivistic or *ersatz*-positivistic in character. Thus, the "new managerialism" and "enterprise culture" in British academic life have served to underwrite and reinforce the stratification of knowledge in British sociology: at its most extreme, we may even say that they have even set the agenda on "what counts as knowledge", (and thus "what counts as ignorance"), so far as sociology is concerned.[5] Here, for instance, the question of the corpus[6] – and canonical status of sociological books and articles is one issue: it has often been observed that attitudes to "what counts as sociology" can be seen in, for instance, the not infrequently heard claim that Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* does not count as "sociology" at all. Such stratification of sociological knowledges consequently serves to license ignorance of "interpretive sociologies".

Here, we must return to the E.S.R.C. and its new head (Chief Executive) Gordon Marshall. Marshall avows a commitment to pure, "blue skies" research, methodological pluralism and policy-free social science. However, his own statements and work, both prior to and during his present incumbency, send out what at best might be termed confusing, even troubling, signals. Some of his statements suggest that his commitment to pluralism might well turn out to take the form of what John Porter (writing about pluralism in a different context) has termed a "vertical mosaic". We must wait and see, and in the meantime consider as best we can the portents for interpretive sociology.

The stratification of sociological knowledges and the concomitant issue as "what really counts as sociological skill" for Marshall is surely given in his hyperbolic claim that: "National datasets like the British Household Survey are ... the social science equivalent of the Hubble telescope, Synchrotron radiation source or the 'Challenger' deep-sea exploration vessel. They are some of the most sophisticated resources available to policymakers anywhere in the world ..."

(Speaking of the alleged skills deficit in quantitative analysis in Britain) ... "We don't know why this is but it is an issue of great concern to many users. The ability to analyse complex datasets is immensely important".[7]

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5 For some general, often "interpretive" formulations of this issue, see M.F.D. Young (1972).

6 The notion of corpus status of items of literature is to be found H. Garfinkel (1996).

7 These quotations are taken from an interview with Gordon Marshall titled "Economic Forces", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6th June 2000, page 14. Readers will also note the "policy" and "(unspecified) user" orientation in these quotations: again, "mixed signals," given Marshall's avowed espousal of "pure" research.

Of course, the E.S.R.C. is a highly bureaucratic institution with its own *modus operandi* so we do not know what effect, if any, these views of its Chief Executive may have: but it is clear that if some of his views are implemented, that must surely influence its "climate" to some degree. Part of the problem, perhaps, is what seems to some British sociologists to be a culture of clientism in the "higher reaches" of British sociology, revolving around Nuffield College, Oxford and the University of Essex – departments noted for their privileging of quantitative approaches in sociology.[8] In some respect, the privileging and authorizing of some forms of sociology rather than others is both a condition and a reproduced outcome of the recruitment base of British sociology's "élite", and of its alignment to the management of the State. Thus the most privileged forms of sociological knowledge are transmitted to new generations, new "clients" largely within a very narrow institutional base.

The symbolic interactionist Julius A. Roth noted long ago how sociologists seldom turned their analytic skills and statements towards themselves, towards the social organization of their own discipline. We may observe that all those statements British sociologists make about élites, the monopolization, stratification and transmission of "cultural capital" (let alone the prerogative of defining what counts as such "capital"/knowledge in the first place) and the resultant social exclusion remain unexamined by British sociologists concerning their own profession. The *tu quoque* is often cited but very rarely taken seriously, as though sociologists themselves were somehow exempt from such processes. Seldom, for instance, is professional networking amongst selected sociologists seen in terms of what Ralph H. Turner has termed "élite sponsorship" rather than a "contest" form of mobility.

The upshot of this, for British interpretive sociologies, is that they are relegated to the bottom, or close to the bottom, of the hierarchy of knowledge and credibility. This is effected through the application, by a few well-placed people, of a single yardstick for "what counts as sociological knowledge" – a yardstick derived from a positivistic or *ersatz* positivistic frame of reference that has a pre-eminent position. Such an effectuation occurs despite the fact that the debates between positivism and interpretivism have never yet succeeded in sorting out sociology on issues of methodology. Instead, positivistic /quasi-positivistic approaches have come to be both privileged and sealed off from

8 *Ibid* p. 14. As the *T.H.E.S.* observes, Marshall's first job was in the formidable Essex University Sociology Department where he worked with a former E.S.R.C. head, Howard Newby and with Gordon Rose, who the *T.H.E.S.* wryly comments, "must wonder when he will get his turn to run the E.S.R.C." When Marshall was appointed to a chair at Bath in 1990 he was Essex sociology's 25th professor in 25 years, says the *T.H.E.S.* On the concept of clientism and its significance in accounting for intergenerational recruitment and reproduction, see Y. Winkin (1993).

other approaches, except in the matter of furnishing "criteria", however spurious, for the assessment of these others – or rather, for a remote, introductory textbook version of them. Conventional sociologists in Britain tend to sustain a highly superficial understanding of interpretive sociologies, often, regrettably, amounting to an as yet (again) unanalysed prejudice. Sociologists who doubt the existence of consensus in any other social formation frequently assume it in their own: all this is grist for Julius Roth's mill.

One set of "spin-offs" from all this is that the typical agenda of much interpretive sociology in Britain has come under increasing pressure. As more and more British sociology has come to be cast in terms of the objectives of State management it has become less easy to adopt the "underdog" mentality espoused in the U.S.A. by Howard S. Becker and many other symbolic interactionists within and beyond those shores. Such a mentality was, for sociologists of this theoretical persuasion, a requisite for "taking the role of the other", if that "other" were for instance, a marginal or member of a socially excluded category. The resulting sociology, which often described society from and in terms of just such an "outsider" perspective, is a disfavoured one, given the implied "management perspective" of, say, many of the E.S.R.C.'s thematic priorities and rationales.

Similarly, the traditional interpretive – sociological emphasis on informal organization – "goldbricking", "banana time" (see e. g. Roy, 1985) and the like do not always carry the same analytic "elective affinities" as are implicitly carried by some of the E.S.R.C. priorities: put at its very least, the priorities of the E.S.R.C. do not particularly facilitate established interpretive – sociological concerns, perspectives and ways of working. We can make this observation without denying that we share the adverse elements of the situation with sociologists who would not describe themselves as "interpretive". For instance, those sociologists who evince a Merton-type concern with the unintended, "latent" consequences of intended, "manifest", social actions might conceivably also feel the pinch – though (perhaps?) in lesser and more soluble ways. Interpretive sociology suffers a double marginality – it is marginalized within an already-marginal discipline.

A second set of "spin-offs" from the increasing pressure for British sociologists to address issues related to the management and governance of the State is that a set of hybrid "fields" has emerged – fields that not only cross-cut epistemological, methodological and perspectival logics in sociology but which also seek to "unite" theory and practice, with the latter often taking precedence over the former. These are the fields of Human-Computer Interaction (H.C.I.) and Computer Supported Collaborative Work (C.S.C.W.). Departments of Management Studies as well as Sociology Departments have in several

universities set up research centres just to address one or other facet of these fields – multimedia uses, communications technology, control systems, new technology in office systems, video-based monitoring and the like. These fields do gain considerable amounts of "soft" research money which, in addition to making money for the university, are necessary to pay the way of the centres themselves. They are often set up explicitly to address, and gain funds from, E.S.R.C. and E.U. funding programmes cast in terms of thematic priorities.

We might here invoke Paul H. Hirst's philosophical distinction between the notion of a "field" and a "perspective".[9] H.C.I. and C.S.C.W. are both fields like education, in the sense that a variety of perspectives are adduced in the addressing of one substantive area. These fields gain extra legitimation through their concern with "worksite practices", the analysis of work stations, work-flow and the like, which, of course, chimes well with the E.S.R.C.'s and EU's priorities on improving performance in the world of work. In spite of Marshall's characterization of labour and skill shortages, it is in these fields where unfilled vacancies exist: sociology is a series of niche.

One problem with the move of sociology towards substantively defined fields and away from methodologically driven perspectives is that of analytic and technical incommensurability. Typically, a diversity of research-based papers that are "on-topic", (e. g. on the theme of H.C.I.) are conceived as composing and constituting the field. Thus, for instance, studies of computer users' following of on-screen instructions that are conceived in some H.C.I. studies in terms of mentalistic reductions such as cognitive plans are juxtaposed with anti-cognitivistic ones that, for instance, are based on a later Wittgensteinian or ethnomethodological anti-cognitivist approach to "learning", "understanding", and the like. Each kind of study deals in its own way with issues that may be conceived as addressing issues of "knowledge" and "interpretation", (though see my *caveat* below) and seems to manifest a thematic congruence (learning to use computerized instructions), but these "similarities" are glosses that actually mask an enormous epistemological and methodological divide.

This divide is not one that can be described through the familiar clichés of complementarity such as "two sides of the same coin", such that an additive formula would work to give the "full picture", a plenum, where both sides fit together. Instead, the methodologies on each side of the divide constitute what Garfinkel has termed "asymmetrical alternatives", where the necessary complementarily is, quite simply, lacking. The term "asymmetrical" is, then, crucial.

9 P.H. Hirst (1965). See also chapter 3 of that volume.

The Cartesian presuppositions of cognitive science are quite opposite to the anti-Cartesian ones of Wittgensteinian/ethnomethodological praxiologies. To attempt to integrate or even to "add on" one set of presuppositions with another would be what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle terms an error of logical category, to create logical disjunctiveness, dilemmas of reasoning and sheer analytical senselessness[10]. Of course, none of this has impeded analysts from attempting at the levels of description, depiction or explanation to "synthesize" studies which show such incompatibilities. However, with regard to these attempts it is worthwhile quoting Ryle on how logical difference comes to be glossed over in such attempts:

> *It is ... (just these) smothered differences, which need to be brought out into the open. ... (to dissolve feuds), their dissolution cannot come from the polite compromise that both parties are really artists of a sort working from different points of view and with different sketching materials, but only from drawing uncompromising contrasts between their businesses ... Indeed this smothering effect of using notions such as "depicting", "describing", "explaining" and others to cover highly disparate things reinforces other tendencies to assimilate the dissimilar and unsuspiciously to impute just those parities of reasoning, the unreality of which engenders dilemmas.*
>
> Ryle, 1954, 81

This has not been the only way in which "interpretive" sociologies have been "smothered" through a "glossed-over" association with other sociologies. In the 1960's, for instance, there was instituted a kind of "nested interpretivism", where interpretive sociology was, by and large, placed in service of other sociologies.

2. The Incorporation of Interpretive Sociologies

The incorporation of interpretivism into more orthodox methodologies mainly occurred under the *aegis* of the York Deviancy Symposium, (later, the National Deviancy Symposium). It involved the yoking together of interpretive sociologies – particularly symbolic interactionism – and a vulgarized version of conflict theory. Thus, interactionist analyses were conducted under the rubric of a macroscopic model of society that derived, in highly simplistic form, from that propounded by Marx and to a lesser extent, Weber and other

10 For some conceptual and empirical aspects of the debate, see: L. Suchman (1987), S. Hughes (1990), G. Button, J. Coulter, W.W. Sharrock and J.R.E. Lee (1995). On category – mistakes, see G. Ryle (1954), especially Chapters 1 and 5.

sociologists of the canon. The invocation of these canonical theories largely operated to privilege, *a priori*, certain concepts such as "power". Such concepts were to use Kenneth Burke's words, employed as "God terms" and created overlaps with the self-proclaimed radical approach called "the New Criminology".

This development also conducted its analysis in a self-proclaimed spirit of "radical engagement" and "relevance", – the latter of which, as I have noted, came to be turned against the former in succeeding decades. "Relevance" is now conceived in relation to the practical problems of the management of the state – not entirely what was intended in the initial incarnation of this term, as I have observed above.

In this hybrid form of sociology, "labelling" theories (by Howard S. Becker and others from the E.C. Hughes tradition) and theories of secondary deviation (E.M. Lemert, Edwin Schur and others) were put together with "macro" theories of society, of the media, of power and social control and were addressed to phenomena that were often conceived as "social problems" – drug use, collective behaviour such as football hooliganism, "Mods" and "Rockers" and so on.[11] The family of approaches that flourished under the York (National) Deviancy Symposium operated to create a "societal reaction" model of deviance and, associatedly, an "amplification" model of deviance. Whilst these concepts originated in the work of such interpretivists like Becker (on labelling), Lemert (on secondary deviation) and Orrin Klapp (on amplification), the outcome in the symposium members' writings resembled Durkheim's schematic comments on the collective reaction to crime in *The Rules of Sociological Method* being forced into an uneasy relation with an emergent, conflict theory-orientated, self-proclaimed "new criminology" (see e. g. I. Taylor et al., 1973). Indeed, it is not difficult to discern the seeds of the approaches now known as "Media Studies" and "Cultural Studies" in this tendency of late 1960's and 1970's sociology – approaches that have been seen by many as coming to challenge many of the disciplinary bases of sociology itself in the past fifteen years or so.

The outcome of this "nested interpretivism" was the occlusion of the radical methodological potential of interpretive sociologies. These sociologies were, instead, incorporated into a framework that preserved all the hallowed dualisms in terms of which conventional sociology was cast – "macro" and "micro" levels (and sometimes "meso" too), "individual" and "society", "subjective" and "objective", "action" and "structure" and so on. This incorporation, in other words, operated in a way that was curiously analogous to what sociologists had called the "incorporation thesis", where, for instance, industrial conflict

11 See, among many others: S. Cohen (1971; 1980).

came to be incorporated into Trade Unions and the State apparatus, thereby "spiking its guns". Interpretive sociology was similarly "spiked" and it has to be said that the equivocations of many symbolic interactionists themselves on (for instance) "macro"/"micro" issues rendered their work amenable to a respecification according to the dominant agendas of orthodox sociologies: Considering the methodologically radical potential of the work of some interactionists, there had been a failure of nerve.

However, help – however abrasive – was at hand. During the time of the York (National) Deviancy Symposium, ethnomethodologists had kept their own counsel. At the time, theirs was a fledgling discipline that had been ushered in by Erving Goffman when he was visiting Simon Professor of the University of Manchester's Anthropology and Sociology Department in 1966.[12] To some extent, the Symposium regarded ethnomethodology as beyond the pale, as not being "relevant" and as not being a suitable case for treatment. They were right: ethnomethodology had an essentially independent approach and gradually gathered momentum on this basis. The nearest Symposium members got to ethnomethodology was in the work of Jack D. Douglas, which was not near enough to compromise this somewhat maverick approach. The approach offered "interpretive" sociologists a methodologically radical set of options that was not to be compromised by the stubbornly held dualisms of orthodox sociologies (see e. g. W. Sharrock and R. Watson, 1988) or by the concessive character of some "interpretative" ones.

3. The Development of an Autonomous "Interpretive" Sociology

In the early 1970's, with ethnomethodology as a catalyst, some interpretive sociology escaped the confines of the Deviancy Symposium and returned to the wild. Ethnomethodology became the cutting edge and yielded a cognate discipline, conversation(al) analysis. In its California incarnation, it essentially derived from phenomenological philosophies – Husserl, Schütz, Gurwitsch and others, as adapted for empirical inquiry in sociology by Harold Garfinkel and, later, others. One of the main arguments was that orthodox sociologists' professional knowledge of society was tacitly and inescapably founded upon ordinary society-members' commonsense knowledge of social structures, and that, for instance, professional sociologists' interpretive/*verstehende* work

12 It is a little-known fact that Goffman not only brought an awareness of ethnomethodology to Britain, but was also instrumental in arranging for Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* to be published in the first place. The contribution of Goffman and also of Aaron V. Cicourel to the early development and promotion of ethnomethodology has yet to be chronicled.

irremediably counted upon lay members' held-in-common cultural methods for making sense of their everyday world, their ordinary actions.[13]

The argument was that ethnomethodologists should achieve a decisive phenomenological break from orthodox sociology by turning lay members' cultural knowledge and reasoning as incorporated in their situated actions into an explicit topic for analytic exploration in its own right. By contrast, orthodox sociologists were seen by ethnomethodologists as simply counting upon the corpus of commonsense-knowledge-in-action in taken-for-granted ways as a resource that did unrecognized "underlabourer" work in their professional descriptions of society.

Society members' shared mastery of a natural language was deemed by ethnomethodologists to be at the heart of their sense-making practices, as well as comprising the key to understanding the intersecting of "commonsense" and "professional" knowledge of social structures. This position originated in Alfred Schütz' argument concerning language as the quintessential typifying medium, the storehouse of members' everyday knowledge and which had its own systematic workings. Edward L. Rose of Colorado University, Boulder, who developed an approach that runs parallel to ethnomethodology that he termed "the ethno-inquiries", perhaps formulated this issue most lucidly when he argued that a "natural sociology" was incarnate in ordinary language.[14] He used an historical dictionary to analyse diachronically how the common meanings of key sociological terms such as "society", "role", etc. had evolved. He showed how orthodox sociology, as a natural language pursuit, had appropriated such terms and how their common usage nonetheless continued to operate in their professional (re-)specification, despite professional sociologists' attempts to occlude and replace that ordinary usage and indeed to set up in competition with it.[15] It was in this way that the descriptive resources furnished through common usage continued to shape the professional one, e. g. in forming professional sociological descriptions of the social world. In this way, the social world is encountered, by lay and professional sociologists alike, as a "worded

13 Indeed one of the many things that make "interpretive sociology" such a slippery term is the distinction between those who conceive *verstehen* as a professional heuristic as opposed to those who conceive of verstehen in terms of lay members' intersubjectively-held methods for making ordinary sense of their world. The distinction is nicely exemplified by D.L. Wieder (1974).

14 See E. Rose (1960), also W. Sharrock and R. Watson (1993). This paper is a response to another paper by Rose (1993) that is pertinent to the current argument.

15 A classic case in point is Norbert Elias' notion of the "civilizing process". Whilst Elias protests that his definition of the term is non-evaluative, any proponent of ethnomethodology or of Rose's ethno-inquiries would deny that such a re-definition of the logical grammar or conventional usage of the term would ever work and that lay conventional usage would, perforce, continue to dominate.

entity"; with, for professional sociologists, the evolved lay usage of key sociological terms providing the dominant influence. Any attempt by these sociologists to arbitrarily re-define the ordinary language terms they use would, for a proponent of Rose's work, seem to equate with the Queen of Hearts' unilateral and absolutist attempts to make words mean exactly what *she* wanted them to mean, (see Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*). Rose's argument in some respects presaged the "linguistic turn" in British ethnomethodology.

This position, when imported to Britain, had a great effect in the development of a sociology that eschewed "methodological irony" and instead of dismissing, bypassing, ignoring, downgrading or relativising society-members' mundane, culturally-based reasoning sought to explicate its bases and its workings in social action. As an aside, it was the unprincipled juxtaposition of methodologically ironic and methodologically explicative analyses, with their mutually exclusive epistemological bases in correspondence and coherence/congruence theories respectively, that made fields such as H.C.I. and C.S.C.W. seem to many to be such a congeries of logical disjunctiveness and senselessness. To some extent, this also applies to some of the contemporary ethnomethodological inputs into the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (S.S.K.) too. Some would argue that this input has been severely compromised by its juxtaposition – and, on occasion, conflation – with methodologically ironic approaches to natural scientific work.

Meanwhile, symbolic interactionism had continued to be somewhat compromised as a non-ironic project through its appropriation by the York/National Deviancy Symposium, through its ongoing equivocation concerning the conceptual oppositions ("micro" – "macro" etc.) that serve to distribute the analyses of conventional sociology (see above) and through a continuing methodologically-ironic cast to many of the studies in the E.C. Hughes strand of the approach. This irony was particularly evident in the use of what Kenneth Burke (1965) has termed a "perspective by incongruity", the planful mis-naming or mis-description of settings in deliberate contrast to the names/descriptions/conceptions that are given in the "natural attitude" of lay society members (see D. Anderson and W. Sharrock, 1983). Some of the works of Erving Goffman stand in the Hughes tradition: the use of a confidence trickster model to highlight the interactional adaptation to failure in non-criminal settings and his use of extended dramaturgical similes are a case in point. This use of tropes has rendered problematic some symbolic interactionist studies in the Hughes strand and it has been argued that such incongruity procedures undercut the inter-subjective interpretations as deployed by the actual parties to the setting concerned.[16]

16 See, for instance, R. Watson (1989 and 1999 for a somewhat revised and extended version of my analysis).

Thus, in Britain, it was left to ethnomethodology to carry forward the unequivocally non-ironic methodological project; apart from a few ethnographic studies, ethnomethodology was "the only game" in town so far as interpretive sociology was concerned. At the outset, this project was pursued in terms of Garfinkel's sociological re-specification of Schütz' philosophy. However, a further re-specification was about to be ushered in, one which lent a distinctively British "fingerprint" to the ethnomethodology that was done there: by this, I mean that ethnomethodology was re-worked according to a distinctively British philosophical tradition, albeit one that was ushered in by another Austrian philosopher – not Schütz at the New School in New York but Ludwig Wittgenstein at Cambridge University, England.

4. The Wittgensteinian Turn in British Ethnomethodology

It was the later works of Wittgenstein that provided the inspiration for the re-specification of the ethnomethodological program in Britain and this has differentiated it from the continuing broadly phenomenological cast of Californian ethnomethodology (see e. g. Garfinkel, 1996). In Britain, ethnomethodology gained also from the work of the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle, whose work had considerable affinity, as well as contemporaneity, with that of Wittgenstein. It further gained from a critical dialogue with J.L. Austin and other "linguistic philosophers" on the "performative" aspects of language, on speech as action.[17] This dialogue also lent impetus to the development of conversation(al) analysis (C.A.). C.A. had origins that overlapped with those of ethnomethodology and developed in parallel with it, – though there has been an increasingly critical bifurcation between the two approaches (D. Bogen and M. Lynch, 1994). Conversation analysis, with its increasing emphasis on the sequential organization of speech exchange systems in ordinary and institutional settings, diverged more and more from ethnomethodology, both in Britain and the U.S.A. The divergence itself came to be associated with the taking of the "linguistic turn" by British ethnomethodologists. Here, the methodic, practical uses of language were an (perhaps the) explicit object of sociological – especially "interpretive" sociological – concern. Moreover, professional sociologies themselves came to be understood as natural language pursuit, a major issue then became the alignment of professional sociological terminologies or language uses with lay ones – hence the concern with methodological irony. These concerns and emphases became more and more

17 For a critical appreciation of Austin's work from a broadly Conversation Analytic point of view, see R. Turner (1974).

distinct from those of conversation(al) analysis as it evolved from its original conception. Meanwhile, most orthodox forms of sociology still have not taken the linguistic turn, and thus still lags behind others (e. g. philosophy, anthropology) in this respect by approximately fifty years.

Wittgenstein's rejection of the empiricist theory of language and his emphasis on the ordinary, conventional "logical grammar" of concepts clearly resonated with ethnomethodology's focus on mundane reasoning as incarnate in members' shared, methodic mastery of natural language. This praxiological approach, too, had many affinities with similar concerns within ethnomethodology: his focus on "practices" in, for example, furnishing *in situ* practical determinations of rules is also most pertinent. His notion of family resemblances (or "family likenesses") has a bearing on the ethnomethodological notion of indexical expressions and actions. This bearing has been well-formulated by Heritage (1978).[18]

> *Ethnomethodologists focus on the multiplex, overlapping characteristics of descriptors and descriptive accounts available to society members in unrelievedly situated ways, whose evaluation may be the object of situated, persuasive activity.*
>
> p. 93

and:

> *The characteristics of descriptors ... may now be briefly summarized by suggesting that the use of a descriptor "captures" an array of family resemblances where this array itself displays both lateral and vertical indefiniteness*
>
> p. 93

In the University of Manchester in the early 1970's W.W. Sharrock, J.R.E. Lee and, later, J. Coulter (subsequently of Boston University)[19] pioneered the use of Wittgenstein's later works in relation to both the theory and practice of sociology. By and large, their Wittgensteinian orientation was used to advance the concerns of ethnomethodology, but a collateral concern was a critical evaluation of orthodox sociologies. It should be observed that since 1958 there had already been something of a Wittgensteinian critical presence in sociology and anthropology through the work of Peter Winch (1958; 1970) – a

18 Whilst the quotations here stand as glosses of the Wittgenstein-Garfinkel "connection" on descriptive work, I urge readers to consult Heritage's article itself for its extensive and cogent consideration of these matters.

19 Examples of their Wittgensteinian orientations and those of others may be found in G. Button (1991).

work that had considerable stature in these disciplines and one which continues to be discussed by ethnomethodologists[20] and others. However, for ethnomethodologists, sociology was in some respects a somewhat inchoate counterpoint: but a much more formidable one came to prominence in the late 1970's and early 1980's – that of cognitive science and its philosophical defenders.

Classical sociologies tend to assume that the distinction between sociology and psychology had already been formulated and stabilized by Durkheim. Indeed, Anthony Giddens' early work (1965; 1966) on that distinction furthered and updated Durkheim's arguments (though by no means unproblematically). One problem is that (arguably) in making the sociology/psychology distinction Durkheim and, more evidently, his latter-day interpreters have given away far too much to the latter. In particular, they consigned what we might term "mental predicates", e. g. "motive", "intention", "understanding", "thinking" and the like to psychology. Cognitive psychology, a major basis of cognitive science, has capitalized maximally on that consignment. It conceives of mental predicates in "cognitivistic" and "mentalistic" terms, i. e. in terms of the internal cognitive processing of information which is taken in through the sensory modalities. The "internal" – "external" distinction upon which this model rests also works to effect an irony of decontextualization, i. e. a disattending or reduction of the specific social context in which each instance of reasoning occurs (R. Watson, 1998).[21] Attempts have been made to "let a little context in" to these cognitive operations, thus preserving a "relaxed" version of cognitivist assumptions, notably by the "distributed cognition" school of thought in the U.S.A. and the "discursive psychology" school in Britain. However, there remains in these schools an attempt to keep cognition safe from the social, if only residually. Because of this, Wittgensteinian ethnomethodologists have found in these schools fertile ground for counter-attack. A major example of such counter attack is to be found in J. Coulter (1999).

Indeed, the cognitive psychologists and their philosophical proponents have gone further and have advanced an argument – more promissory notes than delivery, but a trenchant one nonetheless – some forms of which Coulter has dubbed "neural Cartesianism". This is where "folk taxonomies" (members' knowledge) are conceived by cognitive scientists and their philosophical defenders in terms of a "folk psychology" that can in principle be mapped onto the physical grids described by neuroscience. In other words, our "folk psychology" is defined by cognitive scientists and their philosophical fellow

20 See. e. g., M. Lynch's review (2000) of Winch's book and of C. Lyas' study (1999).

21 This paper contains some elements of a critique of cognitive science of the physicalist variety (discussed below).

travellers as an aggregate of internal states and processes of the brain, and are conceived by these analysts in terms of the structure and operation of various neural grids, of neural stimulation across synaptic gaps and so on.

Thus, we have a "physicalist" or "materialist" position, where there is an ironic reduction of mental predicates to the status of inner physical mental states,[22] a position where all social and cultural-situational elements are leeched out of the analysis. In effect, sociology's abrogation of any analytic concern for the study of mental predicates has, by default, handed such concerns to non-sociological and, indeed, anti-sociological analysts. Certainly, cognitive science has laid claim to the study of people's sense-making, and only ethnomethodology, with its focus on *in situ*, culturally – methodic sense – making practices has taken on cognitive sciences on this fundamental issue.

One result of the immense upsurge in cognitive science studies is that a "computational" model of human mind has developed and, indeed, a correlative claim that computers themselves can effect "cognitive" operations. These claims have found their way into the H.C.I. and C.S.C.W. fields described above and the methodological ironies of cognitive science loom large in these fields: to say the least, they sit uneasily alongside non-ironic approaches there. In Ryle's terms, the bringing "together" of such studies under the *aegis* of such a field can, in fact, only lead to linguistic and logical dilemmas. On issues such as, for example, how people make sense of and follow on-screen instructions concerning computer use, there are irreconcilably contrasting approaches: attempts to synthesize them lead to logical disjunction.

Wittgensteinian ethnomethodologists such as Button, Coulter, Lee and Sharrock (1995) have launched major attacks on cognitive science arguments.[23] Taking their starting point from Wittgenstein's position on the "private language argument", on the public availability of mental predicates, on "rules and practices" and other issues, they seek to develop a genuinely praxiological approach that, in its emphasis on embodied action, undermines Cartesian dualism. An integral feature of this ethnomethodological approach is the abolition of the "internal" – "external" distinction upon which that dualism depends and its replacement by, for instance, an approach to situated, embodied practice. Mental predicates are re-emplaced in what Coulter refers to as "a human weave of life". In many major respects, the concern for mental predicates is radically transformed into the study of, for instance, members' culturally-methodic practices of motive-avowal and ascription – practices that are not only

22 One philosophical assertion of this materialist/physicist position is to be found in P.M. Churchland (1984).

23 See also J. Coulter (1979; 1983 and 1991: especially the section on "Turing's Computationalist Account of Human Thought/Thinking"). See also L. Suchman (1987).

irremediably situated in a weave of "local" (*in situ*) interaction but which are orientated – towards as such by the participants involved.[24] It is these culturally – methodic aspects ("knowledge how" rather than "knowledge that") which comprise the prime topic of ethnomethodology.

The Wittgensteinian approach to so-called "interpretive" sociology brings us full circle, namely to the questioning of this title itself. To me, it is not sure that *"verstehende"* is, in this context, adequately rendered in translation by the term "interpretive". The English "logical grammar" of the term "interpretation" typically bears an ironicizing, downgrading effect: "That's your interpretation!" or even "That's your interpretation, not mine!" In such a usage, "interpretation" demotes a given claim on a commonsense scale of certainty, knowledge and authority: indeed, that usage may be part of the reason why "interpretive sociology" is so often accorded second-class status (or worse) in the hierarchy of sociological knowledges. In addition, in the works of symbolic interactionists such as Herbert Blumer, "interpretation" tends to be conceived as a "mental process" as a preparation for action rather than as part of the action itself. For Wittgensteinian Ethnomethodologists, this again gives far too much away to the cognitivistic or mentalistic models that they oppose, and some ethnomethodoligsts certainly accuse G.H. Mead and many of his sociological followers of a residual cognitivism (Watson, 1998). In at least these two senses, then, the very subsumption of ethnomethodology under the title "interpretive sociology" is quite misconceived, particularly in its Wittgensteinian rather than its phenomenological mode.

In the latter part of this paper I have only been able to sketch in a most superficial manner the ethnomethodological position *vis-à-vis* orthodox sociologies and cognitive science. The only remedy for this is for readers to follow up the bibliographic references I have provided. Moreover, I have no doubt that others will claim that there is an undue emphasis on ethnomethodology, given that, in Britain, there are other schools of "interpretive" sociology with, as I have said, an easier relation to the title. To this, I plead guilty but with a plea for mitigation. This is that ethnomethodology has undoubtedly furnished the "strong programme" for issues usually identified as those of interpretive sociology. It has been at the cutting edge of so called "interpretive sociologies" and has, perhaps, been the least compromised and most radical of those sociologies: it has certainly given orthodox sociology the most trouble, and after more than thirty years, ethnomethodologists still await a convincing,

24 On the ethnomethodological arguments concerning the mental predicate "motive", see W.W. Sharrock and D.R. Watson (1984). This paper is part of a debate with two other interpretive sociologists, S. Bruce and R. Wallis. On some practices in motive-ascription, particularly categorization practices, see R. Watson (1997).

coherent critique from their more classical colleagues despite their several attempts to provide one.[25]

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the position of "interpretive sociologies" in Britain cannot be extricated from the institutional position and politico-economic context of sociology "as a whole" (if it is a "whole"). However, these institutional and politico-economic pressures have affected "interpretive" sociologies in a special way that has rendered them "doubly marginal". I have also sought to outline the discipline's postwar historical developments as they affected "interpretive" sociology in its relation to orthodox and classical sociologies. Citing the case of ethnomethodology, I have attempted to show how a distinctively British strand of "interpretive" sociology emerged and developed – partly in response to a challenge not from orthodox sociologies but from a psychology based cognitive science. Finally, I hope to have cast some doubt on the title "interpretive sociology" itself, especially as it applies to ethnomethodology. Unlike the term "qualitative sociology" which is a (largely semantically vacuous) title imposed upon interpretivists and others by those propounding quantitative sociology,[26] "interpretive sociology" is a title that some of its own practitioners employ to describe themselves: perhaps they ought to reconsider.

This paper has been about a minority tendency in British sociology: but it is a tendency that has had considerable significance and not a little notoriety since the mid-1960's.

6. Acknowledgements

An earlier, truncated draft of this paper was presented as the Opening Address at the National Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association, Fribourg, Autumn 1999. I wish to thank participants in that conference, and particularly Jean Widmer, for their comments. Wes Sharrock and Andrew P. Carlin have

25 On the misconceived nature of the extent conventional-sociological critiques of ethnomethodology, see the chapter "What About the Critics?" in W.W. Sharrock and B. Anderson (1985).

26 One is reminded of Sacks' "hotrodders" (1979) disavouring the categorization "teenagers" as being one that is administered and imposed on them by adults rather than being a category that is indigenous to their own culture. See also B. Conein (2000).

also assisted me in discussions of this paper: my thanks to both of them. As ever, none of the above bear any responsibility for what I have made of their observations.

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