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The best is yet to come: A radical rejection of the predicted decline of the Sociology of work in the UK

Abstract

This paper takes issue with previous influential accounts of the evolution and contemporary potency of the Sociology of work (SoW) in the UK by challenging mythologies which have grown up around the trajectory of the sub-discipline. This paper is based on a sociological analysis of the political, organisational and social forces which have shaped the sub-discipline and comprehensive examination of its broad and complex canon. This enables a refutation of previous orthodoxies which suggest that a clearly defined SoW previously existed in, and emerged from, the narrow confines of Sociology departments only, and relatedly, that a ‘Golden Age’ of SoW research existed in the post WW II era and that its ending led to the irrevocable decline of the sub-discipline. These misinterpretations are politically problematic in that they laud an era of research which neglected complex and important questions of power and inequality within work and employment and furthermore, are based on a narrow interpretation of the SoW. This paper overturns conventional wisdom about the contemporary importance and relevance of the sub-discipline: where others have identified decline we explore SoW’s relationship to power and inequality and the spread and breath of its impact and concludes that the spread of discipline beyond the narrow confines of academia offers opportunities for radical social change.

Introduction

Many accounts of the progress of the SoW identify the years following the late 1970s as being characterised by conceptual fragmentation, dissipation and therefore decline. Those making these claims saw this as having positive or negative virtues and sometimes a mix of both (See, inter alia, Parker, 2015; Strangleman, 2005; Halford and Strangleman, 2009; Beynon, 2011; Edwards, 2014a; Strangleman, 2016; Warren, 2016). This led to the conclusion – wrongly in our view - that the sub-discipline faced an existential threat as a consequence of the institutional fissiparous character of the SoW in the mid to late 1980s. It is the view of those who bemoan the spread of SoW to management and business schools that the locale of the sub-discipline in sociology departments is vital in affirming its DNA. The supposed decline of intellectual-disciplinary coherence resulting from this intellectual and institutional *spread*, is a significant concern for Halford and Strangleman (inter alia Scott, 2005).

Concerns surrounding this *spread* are based on premises which require critical attention. It is a common feature of many narratives of the formation of the SoW to see the mid-seventies period described as the end of its Golden Age. This interpretation of the situation is based on questionable assumptions. The SoW has always been institutionally and disciplinarily contested. A reasonable challenge to those mourning the loss, dilution and decline of the SoW is to point out that while its institutional origins may have consolidated in Sociology departments, the SoW was never *only* practiced there, and probably never will be due to the fact that as Warren has pointed out, “...the meaning of work is contested” (Warren, 2016:46). Charting the changing nature of work, the sub-discipline not only mapped the evolution of work in capitalist society but has by necessity, changed in respect of its character, form and methods of enquiry. Those looking back to an assumed Golden Age will be disheartened to learn that

FINAL VERSION

it will never return. Rather than this being a weakness, this is a critical feature of its strength: the ability to mutate along three dimensions: institutional, ontological and hence, methodological lines.

This paper considers the changing nature of the SoW following the evolution of these three dimensions. Some of the work we point to can be placed readily in the canon of this so called Golden Age. However even those pieces that exemplify that age do not neatly alongside the related claim that the *real* SoW emanates from within Sociology departments: while Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter's much lauded and seminal work *Coal is our Life* (1956) in many ways exemplifies this Golden Age, it was shaped by anthropological as well as sociological themes. Furthermore the fact that what we term 'the register', the periodic review of work published in the British Sociological Society's journal *Work, Employment and Society*, beginning in 1987 with Richard Brown's editorial, indicates the global reach and disciplinary openness of work, that we would describe as sociological, makes a full account of the SoW unlikely. The fact that describing this work as sociological is contested could be taken as illustrating our point in relation to *spread*. A good example of *spread* could include developments drawing on areas of study previously laying outside a SoW agenda, for example radical geography, as exemplified in the work of Herod, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ, 2007. (21:2 pp 247-264). There is also the important theme of work and time explored by Hassard (1996) which we cannot address here though we do so in our forthcoming monograph on the sociology of work in the UK. And of course, as many have noted, many pieces addressing the SoW appear elsewhere and notably in the BSA's flagship journal, *Sociology*. An exemplary of this being the special issue from 2009 (volume 43:5) edited by Halford and Strangleman, a number of paper's from which we engaged with here.

FINAL VERSION

Given that the term ‘the sociology of work’ is as fraught in the UK as elsewhere, it is incumbent that we specify the phenomena we think it analyses. Indeed, it was well into the 1990s before the descriptor Sociology of Industry fell out of fashion and this is especially interesting when we note its use by Eldridge et al (1991). Eldridge et al are of particular interest precisely because the subject matter discussed in their book addresses the relationship between the crisis in the political economy and the crisis they perceive in the study of the political economy by sociologists under the guise of sociologists of industry. In short, industrial sociology was in crisis specifically due to the fact that industrial work was itself in decline. We should state that we pay due homage to their critique which we are more than happy to embrace and in many ways echo. This is the view that the type of sociology of work (industry) practiced in any given era is reflective of the nature and form of capitalist work and employment. Their response to the disciplinary crisis was to reject what they recognised as Hyman’s otherwise fruitful call for the displacement of bourgeois social science by a Marxist critique of the political economy. (We explore the finer texture of this debate in our forthcoming book on the Sociology of Work in the UK). For Eldridge et al, disciplinary renewal would be better served by beginning with an appreciation of sociology’s broader recognition of crisis as set out in the work of, inter alia, Durkheim and Weber. For us, we take both Eldridge et al and Hyman’s perceptions to hold specific virtues. Our concern is to flag up their place in the sub-discipline’s evolution in the 1990s. Especially, we see Eldridge et al as illustrative of our claim that while the sub discipline evolves it has always done so with indeterminate fixity of endeavour or certainly of focus.

Our starting point is that as the SoW is disputed since the nature of work is disputed. The SoW in late capitalist Britain will change as the political economy evolves, methods change in our research of its form, character and trajectory, and thus the discipline will spread, and deepen, in its impact and influence across a

FINAL VERSION

range of disciplinary boundaries (for an exemplary account see Parry et al 2006).
‘Taking it back’ to rest only in the heart land of Sociology departments would be
a retreat: for us, *spread*, is a strength, not a weakness.

Thinking sociologically about the SoW: Institution, Ontology, Methodology.

It is not obvious why the SoW outside sociology departments, let alone universities, should be seen as any more problematic than when the sociology of culture or deviance become located in literature and criminology departments. Nevertheless, for some it is a reasonable concern, animating many including Halford and Strangleman (2009:819), and while it matters to us as sociologists it is not the central concern of our thesis. Moreover, from one vantage point their handling of the issue might be interpreted as pessimistic and contradictory. On one hand, they argue that the practice of the SoW in management schools has not confirmed earlier pessimisms (p: 818): they write that labour process analysis and critical management studies sit “alongside human resource management and mainstream management perspectives” (ibid). Then with the other, they cast into doubt the possibility that anything of critical importance might be gleaned from working in business schools.

Thus,

“Nonetheless, sociologists should ask what knowledge is produced under these conditions and what type of sociologist is produced in such circumstances? In business schools what comes to stand for the sociology of work is largely a mix of human resource management, labour process theory and critical management studies, alongside empirical studies of labour market and employment conditions” (p. 818, ibid)

At least these authors concede that this is a sociology of sorts, but one we will have to live with until we can bring it back into sociology departments. We would interpret this as somewhat myopic, considering the range of critical Sociology of

FINAL VERSION

work practiced by sociologists working outside sociology departments, including the great *bête noir*, the business school? In fairness, others such as Elger (2009) in the special issue edited by Halford and Strangleman, have also raised concerns at what they view as the problem of re-institutionalisation beyond the Sociology department. Yet, it would be interesting to see exactly what kind of critical SoW is practised in sociology departments. Aside from a handful of institutions, the study of the SoW is honoured more in the breach. The answer is evident: being in a sociology department does not confer the status of a disciplinary radicalism, and sometimes quite the contrary. Alternatively, “What might be critical in business schools might not be critical in a sociology department, and what might be critical in the US might not be critical in the UK” (Parker, p7). This notion of the social relativism of radicalism is important when we consider context given the view that, “In order to understand dissent, we need to understand the dominant” (ibid).

Suggesting that the study of work outside of Sociology departments will have long term negative consequences is misplaced (Halford and Strangleman 2009; p:820). We would argue that it was the lack of sustenance of the SoW in sociology departments that created difficulties for the discipline, rather than its reposition in management schools. We have rarely met SoW migrants who would not have happily remained in Sociology departments had the environment, both in terms of temper and purpose, been politically conducive. This is a broad statement since it was not as if the sub-discipline ceased to be practiced in departments of sociology. That said, we need to understand the reasons for this migration of approaches within the sub-discipline and why it led, contrary to the pessimists, to its invigoration (Parker, 2015; p: 7). Business schools, after all, did not concoct the so-called cultural turn but they did allow, as a response to the changing character of capitalism and its impact on the working class, space for

FINAL VERSION

the focussed study of labour and capital. This became possible for the explicable reason that Business Schools are where management cadre are trained (See Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011 for an intriguing take on the debate). Put this way, it could be argued that Business schools are the best place for sociologists of work to reside.

Yet this is only the first part of the story for SoW, since its re-institutionalisation clearly impacted on its evolution. It was important in that it allowed those working within the SoW to address more immediately the agenda of capital and variant management strategies. Moreover, for those interested in the sociology of sociology, it should come as no surprise that as the secular composition of the working class changed, that social scientists and those practicing variant forms of the SoW, should reflect these patterns and concerns, perceiving, misperceiving, or simply not seeing, the development of the new ideologies central to new management practices. Some sociologists took these changes as signs of wondrous new forms of social life, viewing the demise of determinate forms of collectivism through the variously coloured spectacles of capital. This was to be witnessed with the confusion generated by an obsession with the ideology, as opposed to the political economy of individualism and subjectivity derived from the extraordinary discovery that at one moment (historical) people were collectivistic, and at another moment (contemporary) people were individualistic.

Interpreting individual material concerns and subjective fears as having been invented by late capitalism led to the curious notion that collectivism was the antithesis of individual needs, and the obstacle to personal fulfilment.¹ Others, some from radical sociological traditions including those with Marxist and

¹. This debate, addressing as it does social change resulting from the structural evolution of late capitalism, comprises a considerable portfolio. See, inter alia, Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997; Parker, 1999; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Kunda, 1992; Linstead, 1997.

FINAL VERSION

socialist feminist formations, saw the space provided by the Business school as a precious opportunity to study capital in its re-foundation after the era of Fordist closure. In other words, and seemingly paradoxically, had it not been for the rise of the Business school the SoW – and certainly a radical SoW – might have been eclipsed.

A less generous perspective might be one that harks back to a period of disciplinary closure, dispensing from on high *ex cathedra* truths about the purity of the discipline, whilst nevertheless recognising that the SoW is “a contextually produced body of knowledge” (Halford and Strangleman op cit: p 818). Alas, full entry in to the pantheon is to be denied, because the products of this “contextually produced knowledge” are despised simply because of their location. The inherent bias becomes clear - Sociology departments, source of true sociological radicalism good, Business-school-sociology, bad sociology, - very easily by turning the question around. If mainstream sociology² and sociologists in Sociology departments were so radical and committed to a critical sociology of *capitalism*, why was the subject allowed to either atrophy or disappear from so many environments? (Beynon, 2011, p 19). If this SoW (inter alia, labour process studies, management and organisation research) was ‘impure’ why was a critical sociology of *work* not more evident in more than a handful of Sociology departments?

The issue of institutional and disciplinary *spread* forms the crux of the debate between Parker and Strangleman, and we are interested in the reasons for this spread. While recognising their concerns - pessimistic for Strangleman, more sanguine for Parker - we interpret *spread* sociologically and in structural as opposed to normative terms. Considering the implications of *spread* for the kind

² Whatever ‘mainstream Sociology’ is, people often use this phrase without defining it.

FINAL VERSION

of research conducted in the area of work (and employment) they dispute the outcomes of fragmentation for prospective sociological understandings of the workplace and wider social change. For us, the issue is neither whether *spread* is good or bad but rather, to what degree has this been a response to the changing character of capitalism, and to what extent is the SoW itself over-determined by societal change? That is to say, in the absence of an unshifting core to the SoW, how is the SoW itself defined by the period of capitalism in which it is practiced?

Spread is important, and the fact that today it is different from past *spread* is related neither to loss of disciplinary/sub-disciplinary identity, nor the apparently relentless loss of institutional rootedness in sociology departments. It is more related to the changing relationships between the trajectory of contemporary capitalism, and the ways in which this is interpreted by sociologists of work. This is another way of saying that it is completely possible to be relaxed about the nature of the *spread* of the SoW. Furthermore the *spread* can be more properly understood as a strengthening rather than weakening process. To illustrate, the growth of employment flexibility under neoliberalism has resulted in significant levels economic and social vulnerability. The academic response to this has emanated from beyond the confines of Sociology departments and, in some instances, from cross-discipline collaborations of scholars in, for example, geography, social policy and social work and business/management settings. Simultaneously we see a *spread* of the discipline to other disciplinary sites and an extension of focus beyond the normal confines of the sphere of formal, regular paid employment (see Standing 2011, 2014, 2017; McDonald et al 1991, 2005 and 2014; Stephenson and Wray, 2009). By understanding this we can make better sense of the ways in which the sub-discipline has changed in the post war period. Arguing that *spread* has been axiomatic to the SoW allows us to chart what we take to be key moments of change by reference to what we take to be significant and in some instances iconic work. From this perspective, institutional

FINAL VERSION

coherence is less significant than is supposed. Furthermore, disciplinary coherence is not reducible to institutional recognition following the subject's consolidation in the academy between the late 1950s and early 60s (Eldridge, 2009 and Elger, 1975; Beynon, 2011 following Savage, 2010).

While we note above that the definition of the SoW is not 'settled', in order to identify seminal studies to illustrate our claims, we clarify our political position by drawing reference to what we take to be exemplary studies of work and employment, paid and unpaid, its nature and its absence *in relation to class struggle and conflict* and the implications of this for the lives of working people and their class situation. Thus, we seek to ask questions about the predicament of labour in a conflicted society. Our view is close to Therborn's (1974) conjecture on the origins, formation, and *social* orientation of the discipline. For Therborn, since sociology is historically formed, it must be located within the spirit of the age (1976:37).

Inevitably, since there is a vast quantity of published and unpublished work in the area, we agree with others, in particular Watson (2008 pp xv and 1-3), who suggests that to attempt a full-spectrum account of the twists and turns since the Second World War presents a near impossible task. An apologia also highlights the difficulty with definition and the import of *conceptual spread*. Specifically, there can be no consensus, either about what it is that sociologists working in the sub-discipline mean by the SoW, for the very reason that there is limited agreement on what it is that we mean by work (Komlosy, 2018; Watson *ibid*; Warren, 2016; Edwards, 2014a; Halford and Strangleman, 2009). For example, while many would concur with Watson's view that the subject-phenomenon line must be drawn somewhere, we would demur that drawing it at the interface between paid work and unremunerated work easily sorts out the problem of 'object of study' and 'means of study' (Komlosy, 2018). Watson's presentation

FINAL VERSION

of the dilemma is particularly apposite and clear, but for us it does not sufficiently resolve the problem. Advanced as a sympathetic critique of Glucksman's concept of the total social organisation of labour (TSOL) (1995), his argument is that TSOL too readily blurs the boundary between work and what he sees as activity per se; those aspects of work not directly part of the sphere of labour market activity. Recognising Glucksman does this in order to link work and non-work activity, and specifically consumption as a means of redefining the agenda of the SOW, Watson feels this casts the net too wide.

Yet, it remains unclear why this could not constitute the object of study for the SoW. What is more, even if his 'object of study' does not include "packing a bag" for the beach as part of our object of study, why can this not be included as a fruitful field for research? A number of others he cites, including feminist researchers³ and, in a different register, Marxists emphasise the link between work and non-work activities, as we shall see. For Marxists working in the field, it is precisely the importance of what are conventionally considered to be non-work activities that constitute the terrain of the social reproduction of surplus value. Inseparability does not mean work and non-work are the same but, on the contrary, the meaning of each cannot be understood as being mutually exclusive, as separation occurs within the same domain. Watson counsels compromise to limit the object of study. Rather than study paid work only, and in order to draw in perspectives such as the TSOL, he argues that,

"There are two main aspects of work that a sociological concept of work needs to recognise. The first is the task-related aspect of work and the second the part played by work in the way people 'make a living'."

³ See p 2 reference to Pettigrew et al, 2006.

FINAL VERSION

Will this allow us to include aspects from another agenda but in such a way that they might also be subordinated: the TSOL is fine, but not too much of it please? Leave out the bag packing.

Our perspective links societal shifts not only, as we have emphasised, to changes in focus, but more with the way in which the ontology of the sub-discipline evolved as capitalism in the UK, and more widely, changed after 1945. There is no reason why practitioners should not proceed as prompted by Watson, or that they should not adopt an agenda following the ontological commitment of the TSOL. Nor a Marxist perspective, such as our own. What variant understandings serve to highlight therefore, is the scope of the SoW and what the SoW should address and second, that the *object* of study is determined by the *perspective* of study. The latter will always constitute the meaning we attribute to human activity and its significance for the way in which we go about our work in the sub-discipline. Again, our view is that this emphasises the importance of doxa to the perception (and practice) of the sub-discipline.

While disputing consensus around a disciplinary doxa, nevertheless we can be sure that something known as the sociological imagination is necessarily central to the SoW, even though, aside from citing Mills (1956), it is difficult to find a clear explanation of what is meant by this. It is as if the term, Sociological Imagination, itself offers an incantation of protection against common sense and the other social sciences and this is understandable since it is not only ourselves, sociologists of work, who study work, as can be seen in the WES periodic register.

Specifically, our thesis challenges the perception of the sociology of work as a trans-historical discipline standing outside the historical formation in which it seeks to make sense of the world. A note of caution is important for our argument.

FINAL VERSION

Some practitioners have indeed seen the SoW as relatively unchanged, as an implement which can be used to make sense of changes in the development of work (and employment) and sometimes in work beyond the labour market. This is not to deny that changes in methodology, epistemology and broader research agenda are not recognised, rather that despite societal shifts including the rise in the importance of research on gender and ethnicity, some stick fast to an unchanging sociological ethos informing the way in which we go about constructing our research activity. While, as we have argued, it is important in the constitution of the Strangleman (2005: 6-9) Parker (2000; 2014) debate on what we describe as the concern with *spread*, it also constitutes an element in the sensibility of more radical writers such as Beynon (2011: 21) who argues that despite the pros associated with what he terms “weak professional control” promoting “collaboration and involvement with other disciplines” (2011: 21) that,

“‘openness’ [...] also contributed to the ease with which sociology was practiced outside of sociology departments. This has been most debilitating for the study of work and labour which has been increasingly practiced within Business Schools.” (p 21).

While the second sentence certainly does not echo Strangleman’s locational reductionism, whereby management schools undermine the kind of SoW practiced there by dint of department or faculty ethos, orientation and curriculum, nevertheless it insufficiently recognises the political economy in the practice and location of the sub-discipline. Sociologists working in these tainted places, whatever their needs for employment, are participating in “arguably a dilution of its critical edge” (Strangleman, 2005: 6). Writing with Halford in the 2009 key note piece this adverse judgment, while less audible, persists nonetheless. Along with Parker we are less gloomy. While Beynon is certainly not arguing that we

FINAL VERSION

are witnessing an ersatz SoW in Business Schools (nor applauding by condescension its occasional virtues as does Strangleman 2005) it is nevertheless tinged with regret that “the study of work and labour” often takes place elsewhere. We understand this anxiety and of course more research on work and employment would be welcome in sociology departments. But it has to be remarked that the lack of a required radical political economy understanding of disciplinary *spread* is disappointing.

The time has come to welcome, *spread*, rather than campaign against it. *Spread*, whether in locational or disciplinary terms, has been central to the SoW since the beginning. While changes in the nature and object of study of the SoW are recognised by many, these are understood in terms of methods and agenda, not changes in ontology. It is sometimes a matter of emphasis and thus the search for a core, defining the persistence of sociology in the SoW *sui generis*, tends to rely on the idea that the SoW has an ontologically distinctive centre. From this perspective, the SoW is a kind of tool kit, ready with some adaptation, for any historical period in capitalism.

Accounts of developments in the sub-discipline for the most part treat the actual changes in the SoW in a relatively unproblematic way, which is to say that while there is recognition of a relationship between what the SoW *does* and the *way* capitalism changes, there is less consideration of way in which the changing nature of capitalism frames the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the SoW itself. That is to say that the actual practice of the SoW is itself a product of the society of which it is a part. In this respect, we argue the need for greater attention to Castillo’s (1999) quest, echoed by Strangleman (2005), for a sociology of the SoW. We argue that a sociology of the SoW allows us to detect phases in the evolution of the SoW, delineated by three periods in the development of post war British capitalism.

FINAL VERSION

In the post war era three broad periods of focus can be identified. The first is Fordism (1945-75), followed by the rise of a period that witnessed the slow unravelling of the Fordist period of regulation (1975-1990s). Often this is described as the period of post Fordism and while we do not think it an entirely adequate descriptor we find it useful, bearing in mind that it is the problematical counter point to everything Fordist. The third, began in the late 1990s taking us in to the 2000s and is the period described as the neo-liberal moment of global financialised capitalism, or following Wilder (2015) “neoliberal imperialism”. This latter is taken to represent the current period determining the way in which the SoW is practiced, both conceptually and methodologically.

It is important to understand that these three periods can also be seen as illustrative of the kinds of agenda and research practices that defined the SoW historically. Recognising that describing what comprises the scope of the SoW is often a contested matter (Watson, 2009) our view is that this can be taken as measure of the concerns of the current period. Accepting that time categorisation is not straightforward, as some texts overlap what might be seen as neat period boundaries, we see these nevertheless as exemplifying the zeitgeist of the social and political periods within which they were researched and written.

Given the importance of delineating the central characteristics of the SoW, it is hardly unusual that the sub-discipline’s biographers should seek to identify the developing characteristics of the SoW in a linear way. This is not to say that these accounts (above) straightforwardly describe the sequence of new areas of research together with, for some commentators, new departures in capitalism. It is necessary to understand the ways in which various patterns of work, together with the changing *forms* of research practice in the genre, impact on the focus given to research in the area.

FINAL VERSION

It may have been more obvious in the post war period that the SoW could be described as having had an agenda defined by a focus on issues of perceived national importance, above all as reflected in a concern with the social character of labour productivity, exemplified by the work of Trist and Bamforth (1951) (Eldridge, 2009; Watson, 2008). By contrast, it is less evident that writers are concerned to make a pitch for similar approaches to understanding the practice(s) of the SoW today. We argue that the need to interpret the relationship between extant ontologies and methodologies of the SoW, and societal change, are less evident in contemporary surveys and accounts of its development.

It is less than surprising that the SoW should have developed as a response to issues concerning the social character of labour productivity by exploring the nature of work place cohesion and social solidarity. The SoW is, after all, defined by its variant interpretations of change, sometimes transformation. Moreover, it always seeks to address the social nature of the forces of cohesion and dissonance at the centre of the social processes of work, and this forms part of our leitmotif. This is concerned with the ways in which the SoW has explored order and conflict in relation to work, and its impact of on working class lives.

The post war settlement saw an emphasis on the origins and problems surrounding the preoccupation with labour productivity and in so doing produced a sociology reflecting the interests of dominant social groups. Yet, the fact that this is never addressed as part of an internal critique, a sociology of sociology, is itself a matter of interest. This period, from the early 1950s through to the late 1960s and early 1970s, is typically described as a period heralding a Golden Age for the SoW and the wider discipline of Sociology. For us, however, it is the thing – the idea of a Golden Age - that must be explained, because as sociologists writing in the 21st Century given the insights about both newer and older forms

FINAL VERSION

of subordination provided by a range of approaches from our own and other disciplines, the myopia of 1950s and early 1960s, work stands like the proverbial elephant in the room. Otherwise, we would have to assume that the great sociologists typically cited in the Golden Age literature simply ignored the plight of the work of newly arrived Irish, Asian, Caribbean workers of whatever gender, to mention, women workers more widely, deeming them unimportant. It wasn't until after this Golden period did we witness the emergence of a more concentrated investigation of gender and race inequality in the workplace as exemplified by, among others, Oakley, (1974), Pollert (1981), Cavendish (1982) and Westwood (1984).

Well, in some respects that was true, the discipline did see them as less deserving of study because the SoW was attuned almost entirely to the concerns of the leading beneficiaries of the post war settlement – strongly unionised blue collar workers often with significant workplace control. Today, obsession with the spirit of individualism and consequent paeans to individual freedom are the hallmark of much contemporary SoW, as many recognise. This is because attempting to understand the spirit of the age, and those who promote it at work and in employment, is what the SoW does.

Our wider point is to argue that it is not as straightforward as this. To get a tighter grasp of the nature of the SoW and its formation it may be helpful to take on board Therborn's view that Sociology, as an "historical product" (1976:37) has to be understood in the context of the spirit of the age. Concerned with making sense of a newly developing industrial capitalism, sociology was an important part of a "type of ideological community" (222) that it both reflected and articulated (224). Moreover, it was central to an ideological community that was terrified of the masses and especially as the 19th century progressed, the latter's

FINAL VERSION

organisation in the form of labour unions and sometimes revolutionary practices. Since the point of the story is to show that it has been the job of the SoW to reflect the concerns of the dominant social actors and their discourses, consequently, as these change and society is transformed, it is not just a tale of the actors and narratives.

It is also a tale of the changing character of the narrators themselves. Therborn tells a very interesting story of the opening up of American sociology in the 1960s and 70s to “a militant opposition [...] the Sociology Liberation Movement [...] Sociologists for Women in Society” (13). This process of institutionalisation-deinstitutionalisation could be seen to provide a helpful framing for our own time. One way to develop this is to go somewhat further than Strangleman’s intriguing socio-historical agenda, after the inspiration of EP Thompson, to restore the lost history of workers in their various attitudes as one of the objects of the sub-discipline. More than this, for it is not about restoring the lost innocence of the SoW, of telling the story of the heroic Golden Age, but rather, that those telling the stories can be reflective of those who were previously (and contemporarily) socially, subordinated and culturally and intellectually excluded. The diversity, the lack of institutional rootedness in departments of sociology, is testimony to the fact that the SoW might now be seen to speak for a range of “ideological communities” now that class solidarities have been redefined in the period of neo-liberal subordination. This matters, for it is visible in the sociologies challenging subordination, that the SoW it is no longer the intellectual endeavour of mostly white, originally mostly middle class, mostly male, academics only. This opposition, this contrast between the SoW in the 1950s and the 2000s in itself goes some way to explaining why the great sociologists from the LSE and Liverpool in the 1950s, did not think immigrants and their work, or women and their work, constituted the most important object of study for the sociology of work. (In a retrospective on his early formation in the sub discipline in the 1960s,

FINAL VERSION

JET Eldridge refers to his work on the Thurley's project on supervisors which took him to an engineering plant in the English Midlands. While he highlights the fact that all the shop floor works were women it is an observation that does not, even at this distance, bear (re)consideration).

Today's *spread* of the SoW within and beyond the academy is a positive turn, representing as such an encouraging assault upon the genesis, and the motor, of contemporary patterns of subordination in the discipline and in wider society. This *spread* can be reconfigured and understood as an opportunity to reach beyond the narrow boundaries of academia to develop a truly public sociology which facilitated a mutually beneficial and cross-disciplinary discourse with workers, trade unionists and activists. in the way in which Critical Labour Studies has sought to do. From this standpoint the best is yet to come.

The Golden Age was not immune from cultural and ideological pressures. It is not just a question of recognising that the SoW considered different themes and topics as capitalism evolved, but that the way in which it considered different concerns was reflective of the zeitgeist of the era. Today's zeitgeist reflects a very different set of obsessions as reflected and reproduced in the SoW. As Dardod and Lavel (2013) point out, neoliberal ideologies are not just about economics, but are in the very air we breathe. For the authors, "...neo-liberalism, far from being an ideology or economic policy, is firstly and fundamentally a *rationality*, and as such tends to structure and organize not only the action of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled" (4): it is the "*rationality of contemporary capitalism*". Finally, "An historic construct and general norms of existence, neoliberalism can be defined as a set of discourses, practices, and apparatuses...."

(7)

FINAL VERSION

It is in this sense that we can begin to understand the absences in the evolution of the SoW. From the early post war period until the late 60s, a myopia, or a plain nonappearance, was especially evident when it came to understanding gender and other social inequalities, migrant workers, and until more recently, the existence of class. For sure, there was much discussion of inequality, but this was not the same as discussing the dynamics of class divisions. This period of hegemony, of dominant power narratives of social structure with consequent assumptions about how and what were legitimate fields of study, persisted until the slow breakdown of the post war social settlement in the 1970s and it is to a more recent critical sociology of work *and employment* that we need to reach for contemporary understanding of work.

Conclusion

During the 1950s, that the SoW acted in the service of power should not be taken to imply that the sub-discipline benefited capital in some straightforward, instrumental, fashion. On the contrary, this was a social science in the service of a dominant power coalition constituted by social democratic norms and value systems, an ideological community no less, in which sociology played its part. It was a period of ambiguity that resulted from the post war settlement founded as it was on working class strength. As such, while the labour movement may have been complicit as a servant of power, engagement and outcomes were more ambiguous and reflected competing class interests. It was a hegemony that depended upon a vibrant class struggle from below and while incorporation was its vital characteristic, dominant working class communities were its significant beneficiaries. It was not that the excluded, women workers, migrant workers and others were not important. For a sociology of the sociology of work however, it is important that we try to understand the way in which sociologists of work wrote about (or more usually did not) the various social, economic, and political exclusions during the Golden Age.

FINAL VERSION

Neo-liberal rule, characteristic of the current period, is revealing of a different kind of hegemony. Now, inclusion is not through incorporation via collective class institutions. On the contrary, a different type of class struggle, class struggle from above, depends upon incorporation via collective exclusion. The fragmentation of working class institutions has encouraged, while at the same time depending upon, an ideology of individualism, an essential ingredient of Dardod and Lavel's (p4) "rationality of contemporary capitalism". If the Fordist era can be characterised as one whereby the working class was subordinated by *collective* incorporation, the so-called post Fordist era can be seen as one in which the working class is subordinated by *individual* incorporation even while, ironically, as with group and team building measures, these take pseudo-collectivist forms. Among a range of other things sociologists of work could be expected to unpack are the various conceits lying at the heart of neo-liberal ideologies of victory. One such, is that broadcasting the peculiar notion that individualism is now more salient than collectivism. Despite empirical work illustrating the shaky ground on which this dogma is constructed, it is argued that people today are more individualistic than they were when they voted to go on strike in the 1950s and 1960s. As if, that is to say, it can be argued that the idea of instrumental collectivism had nothing to do with a self-serving individualism in the past.

The mantra of the Golden Age fails to acknowledge how the post second world war context presented opportunities for research but at the same time legitimated and facilitated the narrowness of the gaze of that work (typically *within* the workplace). It elevates an era as though it were the endeavour of the 'greats' to produce 'pure sociology' without recognising both the limitations of that body of work and the socio-political context that made it possible. The 1970s and 1980s would bring about significant change; the feminist focus on the nature and

FINAL VERSION

meaning of work; the growing acknowledgement of racism; economic decline and the assault of neo-liberalism on work practices and trade unions. If the 1950s in some respects reflected the supersession of equality struggles over class struggles, the late 1990s saw the beginnings of a new focus on class: class from below, as articulated in a series of research agenda whose lineage we trace back to Beynon (1973) and then, as feminists trained in the profession, women in paid and unpaid work.

Perhaps we should move on from the negative view of struggles by work sociologists within sociology departments, and forget the concern with institutional and disciplinary *spread* since the 1960s. To do so means that we might be better placed to develop a sociology of sociology that can address the issues of disciplinary struggles beyond sociology departments. Thus, can we begin to better position the discipline as an ‘historical product’ (just as important in our time, as it has always been), as a crucial feature of a ‘type of ideological community’ contested in myriad ways according to social class, power, status and orientation?

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