



# In Conversation with Professor Mike Featherstone

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MF – Mike Featherstone

AD – Anjeline de Dios

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**AD:** Since it's about intellectual biographies, we would like to know how you got into the academe and sociology in particular. Maybe you could start with that. What were your first steps on this path?

**MF:** I went to a grammar school in England and took pre-university courses ('A levels') in English, History, and Geography, but for various reasons I was looking for something more challenging, and as I had been reading some philosophy and contemporary literature and politics ... sociology seemed to be related to this new set. I recall one of my geography teachers tried to scare me by saying 'Oh you want to do sociology... do you want to be a social worker then'. [laughs] So I realised not everyone thought sociology was necessarily wonderful.

When I was about to start university I remember looking at Ely Chinoy's *Society: An Introduction to Sociology* (1961). It was an American textbook with loads of beautiful images, graphs, and illustrations. It made sociology seem a science and was similar to economics and other social science textbooks. But at the time sociology was to me a very foreign term with low specificity. This was in 1964 and I couldn't easily get a handle on the term 'sociology' – or 'society' for that matter. In a way, if you look at people like Bourdieu, Elias, or Raymond Williams – they examine the history of concepts over time, and note that many concepts like society, emerged first in public and then became academic concepts. This sense of the social formation of knowledge seemed to be absent from much of the introductory literature of the time. For this reason another book published around the time I went to university, Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963), had a much bigger impact on me. It was a revelation that sociology could link as much to the humanities as to the social sciences and deal with literature, existentialism and phenomenology and for me it was a breath of fresh air. Nowadays of course the wheel has turned 180 degrees and for the many posthumanists and Deleuzians, humanism is the big enemy.

Historically, sociology, has not been a strong discipline in England. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was Herbert Spencer of course, but the main social sciences were economics and anthropology. My teacher at Durham University, John Rex, was a staunch Weberian and was very scathing about English sociology. To him it was an empiricist social book-keeping tradition without any theoretical analysis. Rather, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were the central figures that had to be emulated. An interesting comment on my time at Durham was that Rex was appointed in 1964 as the first professor in sociology. But they wouldn't call it sociology at Durham, which was quite a conservative

place, modeling itself on Oxford and Cambridge lines, with a lot of classics and theology people. For them sociology was seen as a bastard term, a mixture of Greek and Latin. So they couldn't possibly allow it. [laughs]

**AD: You mentioned that you had started your studies in sociology in 1964, which I guess placed you at the crossroad of big social upheavals of the time that were to follow. How was it like beginning your career as an academic and in a field that was not really sure of itself yet, being in the middle of all that?**

**MF:** I've worked on ageing and the life course, and one message, about generational consciousness (perhaps from Karl Mannheim) is that a large cohort tends to have a major influence – it has the numbers to alter institutions and has greater purchasing power and visibility. There was certainly a new confidence and young people felt a strong confidence that everything was going to open up and change for the better in the 1960s. I remember in Durham hearing a Buddhist monk talk about the bombing of Vietnam and we shared a sense of outrage and the feeling that things must be changed and of course there were lots of protest marches in London against the Vietnam War and it was a time when many social issues opened up and sense that sociology as a discipline could make a difference to further social reform. There was also a sense of generational conflict with many of the older generations unable to understand our perspective. In retrospect we must have seemed incredibly arrogant.

My relationship with sociology often swung dramatically. It often seemed overly abstract and dry with its obscure terminology, boxes and diagrams – too far from helping us understand our own society better. The analysis of actual everyday life, the lived society in England wasn't always there. There were exceptions of course, books like Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* (1961) and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) had a big impact on me and spoke to the important issue of equality of opportunity. I remember we discussed these books a good deal in seminars – also the work of Basil Bernstein, which proved to be a bridge to the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. I always found Sociological Theory important and it invariably focused on the so-called classical figures - Marx, Weber and Durkheim. But as far as contemporary theory, all we had were a few lectures on Talcott Parsons, who seemed to be of diminishing relevance in an age of social change and conflict. Some people had started reading Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964), but it didn't feature in our courses. When I started teaching

Theory a few years later, all sorts of material was coming through: the Frankfurt School, Habermas, structuralism, Foucault, phenomenology, ethnomethodology... The '70s was in some ways, an even more heightened time through this theoretical innovation. The new discipline of cultural studies was also developing and I remember subscribing to *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, the journal of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in the early '70s, which was ranged over theorists and important social issues in an innovative and exciting way.

**AD: It was in around the '70s and '80s that when you first started what would become some of your longer theoretical projects on ageing and consumer culture. I remember that in class, you always mentioned that how these topics were not always talked about in sociology for whatever reason. What drew you to these topics which didn't seem to be popular and even credible subjects at the time?**

**MF:** I was always interested in literature, the arts, and culture. For me they invariably offered more perceptive cultural analysis which could capture some things at the heart of the social that sociology often missed. There were people, of course, who sought to bridge the arts and social sciences: the Frankfurt School and German theory was significant here and I found a welcome profundity in the writings of Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Heidegger, Gadamer and others. There were also a number of inventive sociologists influenced by anthropology and ethnography who also were important. I think of Erving Goffman's writings on interactionism, also Howard Becker, whom I came across when I was involved in the early 1970s in the National Deviancy Symposium in England. They proved attractive to young academics who wanted to move away from what they saw as orthodox criminology towards deviancy and labeling theory.

With a colleague and friend, Mike Hepworth, we discussed many new angles on the social and tried to work out how to investigate difficult researched areas, like missing persons. We wrote a couple of papers together on missing persons which sought to theorise the act of going missing via an interactionist and phenomenological perspective. Some of the questions we raised, especially in examining the existential decision to leave home, led us to look at the life of Gauguin, and his allegedly dramatic decision to leave his settled family life to paint masterpieces in Tahiti. 'Doing a Gauguin' had become a catchphrase for people who went through a major life change in media discussions of the male menopause and the mid-life crisis in the

mid '70s. We wanted to explore the role of the media in helping to create and institutionalize a new social problem such as the midlife crisis, or refurbish the menopause through HRT etc. This was a stepping stone into a sustained period of research on middle age, ageing and the life course, with a book *Surviving Middle Age* (1982) and many papers over the next couple of decades.

That led us to think about the social construction of ageing categories and the dynamic and interplay between the use of everyday and academic categories. I did quite a bit of work in that area. But I was also teaching sociological theory and reading Adorno and Horkheimer, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Raymond Williams and others. I was also struck how for social and cultural theorist topics such as ageing had very low relevance and indeed that much empirical sociology was looked down upon. But also I found that within cultural studies while youth culture was a central topic, middle and old age were of little interest. I remember arguing about this with Richard Johnson in the late '80s. Consumer culture too was seen as the wrong side of the tracks, having a Frankfurt School genealogy and it wasn't until the '90s after Stuart Hall had taken up the topic that it became of interest within cultural studies. Having developed an interest in the sociology of knowledge, the way disciplines constructed their own symbolic hierarchies of high value legitimate topics and also excluded other topics, looking at the process of syllabus construction and change became fascinating. I found the work of Weber, Elias and Bourdieu illuminating to help think of the way power and legitimacy operated in the academy. So for me there were inevitable clashes within disciplines and between disciplines.

**KB: How was this clash between sociology and cultural studies taken by sociologists?**

**MF:** Some welcomed the dialogue, but for the large part, it didn't register too well and there was mutual suspicion, certainly in the 1980s. Partly it arose from a tension from different ways of seeing the world and cultural studies had a much more politicized agenda which asked uncomfortable questions which went into gender, ethnicity and life politics. At the same time some sociologists saw them as too involved and concerned with 'positionality.' Cultural studies generally enjoyed less institutional power: this came out in the 1980s when the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies was moved into the Sociology Department which produced many tensions

But I think today, a good deal of cultural studies has

been taken onboard in sociology, especially in the UK, through a slightly different route, not the head-on route but the back door, and has enriched sociology. I think the sociology I was working towards before I encountered cultural studies was much more cultural sociology. For the most part, that was seen on the periphery of sociology, something to do with arts or something now historically remote like the *verstehen* tradition of Dilthey, and other later followers of hermeneutics such as Gadamer. Foucault became important later with his discussion of various neglected genealogies of the 'human sciences'.

I think these alternative traditions are important and interesting. Many people in cultural studies dealt with only a small part of the cultural sociology tradition, but often framed it as *passé*. In some ways my reading had been taking me in a similar direction as cultural studies. I think I shared the commitment of Raymond Williams and others to focus on how culture is used, to see culture as ordinary. At the time it was good to see an attack on the sociological tendency to over-generalize and the way in which higher level general sociological categories were problematized through a focus on the detail of case studies. But I dare say for many sociologists, they didn't necessarily share this impulse, or feel such a strong drive not to do an injustice to difference, or as Adorno put it 'seek to save the particular.'

Another way of looking at this issue, is through institutional frameworks. Sociology was more institutionalized than cultural studies, but less so than highly institutionalized disciplines like psychology, which sought to police its boundaries, professionalize and impose on its members a firm sense of what the discipline should be and do. To be a psychologist in Britain, you have to have a stamp, effectively, from the British Psychological Association. I think in America, sociology was going in that direction, quite formalised. English sociology since the 1960s was more loose and eclectic, taking in lots of things. But it was much more formalised than cultural studies! So you can see a sort of scale here. In cultural studies today, people talk about positionality and frequently align with lifestyle politics and radical cultural movements. People talk of taking positions. But in sociology that was often resisted, there was a different disciplinary framework supplying the tacit formative rules.

The '70s and '80s, were quite a productive time, seeing these different approaches clash a little bit. But it wasn't all clashing. There was a very good conference around about 1975, at the University of Sussex in

Brighton: the British Sociological Association Conference on Culture. Some of the papers were reprinted in a volume edited by the organizers: Michelle Barrett, Philip Corrigan, Annette Kuhn and Janet Wolff, *Ideology and Cultural Reproduction* (1979). It almost seemed like cultural studies had taken over the BSA conference. The programme was incredibly wide-ranging and creative, and I think that opened a lot of people's eyes. It is not to say that the next year – which I didn't go to – sociology took all this on board. I am sure it didn't. But it opened a space for some people and I was one of those people who took advantage.

**AD:** You mentioned in '80s a lot of these previously conflicting tensions were finding their place somehow, and it was also in 1982 that you founded *Theory, Culture & Society*. I wanted to ask precisely how that came about, and how important do you feel the editorial role is in creating spaces for academic dialogue – primarily because you are most well-known for TCS and as well for the work you have done, not just in writing but also the spaces you have created for people to write on these issues.

**MF:** I think you can look forward and you can look backwards. When we look backwards, things always seems to fall into place and it is easy to construct a nice narrative. But there's an awful lot of contingency in life. British universities were going through a difficult time in the 1980s with the famous Thatcher 'cuts' and a lot of anti-sociology and academic rhetoric. We were under pressure to do something and innovate to make our research profile stronger. Along with a couple of colleagues at the University of Teesside we decided to start a journal and I remember after some discussion we agreed to focus on theory and culture which were my main interests and I wrote and outline and came up with the title *Theory, Culture & Society*. I'd also recruited Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner who were friends and we added a couple of former students Joe Bleicher and Brian Taylor who had become academics; Bryan brought in Roland Robertson and John Gibbins Anthony King and we had the first board. I dummied up the contents of issues for the first two years and made up an associate board and the people at the top in Teesside decided to back us for a year. I remember in the first editorial I began 'These are hardly the most auspicious times to launch a new journal' and certainly it was a tough climate in Thatcherite Britain. Yet we survived and flourished with strong special issues and sections on Consumer Culture, the Fate of Modernity, Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens etc. in the first few years. It was a big lesson to me that if you asked people to write or referee, then the people you thought would be support-

ive were not necessarily so, and people you didn't at all know or think could help, were often incredibly warm and supportive.

I guess I took to editing as I had enjoyed editing when I was younger. I had dabbled with school magazines and homemade magazines and things like that. At the time, in 1982 universities and sociology in particular, were in a siege mentality, at the same time this brought the best out of some people. They often say, art is often good in bad times. I think there was also a sense that the turbulent theoretical agendas, I mentioned happening in 1970s, were all the more vital in the 1980s tough economic climate, the attempts to bring together sociology and cultural studies, the emergence of interest in the body, consumer culture, postmodernism and globalization provided a new exciting agenda.

I too was also fascinated by postmodernism, but also trying to understand how postmodernism emerged sociologically using a sociology of knowledge approach influenced by Bourdieu and Elias. For me a postmodern sociology looked like a contradiction in terms and I couldn't take on board the idea we were in a new epoch, postmodernity. Rather I felt we needed a sociology of postmodernism which I thought was more plausible and useful to try mapping out. This featured in papers I'd been writing since about 1982 which I gave at conferences in Germany, the Netherlands and other places in the mid-1980s which became collected together in my *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* book. I also put together a couple of special issues on this area: 'The Fate of Modernity' (1985) and 'Postmodernism' (1988) which were well received.

Of course, being at the University of Teesside – you don't know where that is, I'm sure! [laughs] It's in Middlesbrough, in the northeast of England. We felt very much on the periphery. Around ten miles from Middlesbrough is a town called West Hartlepool, which was been jokingly referred to in some circles as 'British West Hartlepool', as if it were a colony in some remote part of British West Africa. In fact it was very much an internal colony. [laughs] A friend once commented that if I had been in a London university, it's possible that TCS might have never have happened, because it would most probably have been killed at birth [laughs].

This is an interesting dynamic. Sometimes things on the outside can grow, because people from the inside leave them alone. People from overseas may not be as much aware of the internal status hierarchies and the

centre/periphery inequalities. Being on the periphery in the UK, I found it easy to link to some of the people on the outside - from the United States – writing on critical theory and French theory, who were interested in ideas. They weren't too concerned with the symbolic hierarchies of another country, and were relatively indifferent to the status of the place and university where the journal was located. Likewise I found people in France, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany were also very open, helpful and supportive. Mutual misunderstandings can often be productive. I guess the globalization of academic life, which was starting to emerge in the 1980s and now is roaring on apace, helped our project a good deal.

**KB: What are your concerns for TCS in the coming days, on its thirtieth year?**

**MF:** The journal has gone through a number of stages. In the early years TCS was exciting and innovative, but since it has moved in to its twenties it has gained a certain level of import, solidity, and dignity. It has become more influential and has a reputation to maintain. It has had to become a sort of machine, and had to become more institutionalised and formalized in terms of schedules, issue planning and referring. When we started we struggled to get out two issues a year, now we produce eight. *Body & Society*, our companion journal produces another four. There is also the TCS Books Series published by Sage which has over 120 titles. So there has to be a lot more procedures and structures for quality control. I've managed to avoid becoming a head of department or dean so far, but TCS and associated activities have involved me in the management and administrative game, which takes up a lot of my time.

In retrospect there are lots of things we wanted to do we didn't manage. When we started, we wanted to have more material on popular culture, but we found that articles on everyday and popular culture were the ones theorists could gun down very easily and not many survived. That was a problem, having theory first in the title, and lot of theorists on the editorial board. At the same time our interest in theoretical innovation has opened up many interesting directions. I've been forced to read a lot of things I would never have touched had I not been a journal editor. If you look at what we have been doing in the journal recently and what we have in pipeline you can see this theoretical trajectory. We have an issue on Topologies coming through which is an unusual issue in its grounding in mathematics. It's partly to do with the attempt to conceptualise the form of multiplicities, but something figural or quasi-figural beneath form,

and the sense of a contingent, unfolding, processual dynamic. This is a long way from the type of conceptual formation I was used to in the 1960s.

**KB: Connecting to your response that disciplines like sociology and psychology once defended their disciplinary boundaries very strongly. How do they react to the aspect of interdisciplinary approach?**

**MF:** I think sociology, especially in Britain is a wider more connective discipline now. Many of the things we found for the first time in the 1980s, such as post-modernism, consumer culture, globalization, the body now, in some ways can be seen as part of the curriculum in sociology. I think this is an interesting phenomenon, the loosening-up of the discipline and taking on new agendas and the openness of some people to cultural studies. We've had our parts to play in this process. Of course, each country has a different sociological disciplinary history. But the globalization of academic life has meant that it is more legitimate to speak across the boundaries to people on the outside. As an outsider journal it can't be too bad to see this. Yet the opposite process monopolization and control is never far away and there are strong tendencies in the contemporary neoliberal corporate university, to see academics as functionaries, who can be easily monitored and controlled by the university senior management using metrics. The danger is a channeling of energies and a reduction of innovation and creativity, along with an obsession with performance league tables,. So you see globalization proceeds along a number of vectors – some innovative and connected to quasi-public sphere initiatives from below and others more to do with manageable universal performance measurement standards from above, the metrics which in the end come down to money and the markets, which stand behind much of contemporary social life.

**KB: There was another journal, *Body and Society*. What went into the making of this very accepted journal?**

**MF:** That agenda, drew on the work I was carrying out with Mike Hepworth on middle age and ageing. Bryan Turner had written a paper in '83 or '84 on the body, and his influential, *The Body and Society*, book came soon after. I had written a paper on the body and consumer culture in 1982, which got a lot of attention and is still cited today. We also had quite a few articles on the body in TCS and as we had just started the TCS Books Series in 1990, the three of us decided to produce an edited collection of these articles with some extra pieces, called *The Body*. It sold

quite well – and surprised the publisher, so SAGE became positive about a journal on this area. Bryan Turner and I put together a proposal and along with the help of people at the University of Teesside we brought out the first issue in 1995. In many ways it was conceived as a companion to TCS.

Going back to the origins of TCS, these sorts of interdisciplinary collaborative projects are quite difficult to do. You put a lot of work into something that you don't know is going to pay off, necessarily. In the UK for the past couple of decades we have had the REF (Research Excellence Framework) assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions. Increasingly they are moving towards metrics-based evaluations of individual academic's research outputs and away from considering department's cultures of research which are harder to measure. The finance also tends to go through the discipline route. This restructures academic careers in more individualistic ways and can lead to greater instrumental calculation. It makes people think of short term deliverables, and shy away from general collaboration and even to calculate the percentage of their effort in any joint research output such as a book. It makes people less concerned with risk and more likely to follow the big battalions down the accustomed paths and can discourage certain types of innovation and creative serendipity. As Foucault reminds us the neoliberal watchword is competition, which means winners and losers. Alternatively, you might want to read this through a Weberian frame of greater rationalization and bureaucratization with little cogs trying to become bigger wheels within an overall framework of routinization and running down of creative energy. Either way it means an increased channeling of energies, surveillance through individualized and institutional performance metrics, in which people increasingly get caught in the web, and in some cases hung out to dry.

I think with this current system it would be hard to start something like TCS today. There would be just too many criteria to fulfill and hoops to jump through before it was accepted and there would be problems about evaluating collaborative effort. The danger is that things become too rigid and formalised. At the same time I'm not over-concerned with this line of argument, as I always feel people will continue to find new opportunities and ways to innovation outside the main pathways.

**AD:** Would you say that this tendency toward rigidity would be a challenge for young scholars today? You mentioned something about how things are

**obviously so different from when TCS was formed. Back then it seemed easier to experiment.**

**MF:** Yes. I certainly didn't feel too much pressure, when I was in my twenties. I was carrying out various research projects, but didn't have a massive amount of teaching - I could read a lot and think and there was little regular monitoring. Sometimes you need to put petrol into the tank. It's hard to create conditions for this type of serendipity. This ranging-around is something I return to, when thinking about the TCS New Encyclopedia Project and problematizing global knowledge – considering the process of knowledge formation and trying to rethink conceptual structures in a broad transcultural and transdisciplinary manner. There are many unusual connections and frameworks developed in the humanities, which can enrich the social sciences and sociology. In TCS we have a foot in both the social sciences and the humanities. Now, I don't really feel uncomfortable about that, but I know some people might be happier with rigid separations, but I'd like to think the exploration of the borderland area can be productive.

I think the other challenge for sociology is public relevance. There's been a lot of discussion on this in the United States and in Britain (Michael Burawoy, for example). But I also think we have to address public relevance in the age of new media and the Internet. The authority of traditional intellectuals and academics is being undermined through the multiplicity of outlets and general de-monopolization of knowledge; but this process has many positive features to it. At the same time there are also numerous large corporations and Internet companies collecting large detailed data sets about all their customers, which often contain more comprehensive information than social scientists can accumulate. I think there is a danger of traditional quantitative research methods based on sampling being left behind and universities losing out in this area. We think of the data sets accumulated by Amazon, Google, Facebook, YouTube and others which permit a new type of profiling.

**AD:** In the age of Google.

**MF:** Right. The age of Google, YouTube and Facebook, we need to think a little bit more on how we present ourselves to the various proliferating publics; how we address the question of relevance. The danger is some of sociology might get left behind and just become sustained by a self-protective set of true-believers. As Elias once said some sociologists seem to be happy to gather together in conventicles and remain remote from the public, something which is

reinforced by the difficult and obscure terminology we use. Elias also used the term 'myth-hunter,' and like him I've always felt that some of the best sociologists were perhaps anti-sociologists willing to tackle myths where ever they came from. I've always felt we have to try to explain ourselves to the world and justify our existence in terminology that a lay-person could understand. But I don't know that we all necessarily want this - some people are happiest behind the protective walls of the university and the smoke-screen of hyper-specialist language. They fear being labeled 'merchants of astonishment.' We just have to engage various publics and address the question of relevance more.

**AD: You've spent a lot of your time as an academic pondering questions that have a surprising freshness about them. Even your earlier writings are almost prescient of what's happening today. What then would you say are the issues and questions that excite you in so many of these new developments happening now?**

**MF:** That's an interesting question. C. Wright Mills said that when he was often stuck, he would throw his papers up in the air, and write down the headings in the order he picked them up and this would get him a different angle on his research. I quite like that. Some of the people in the Collège de Sociologie, like Bataille and Caillois, often had a bizarre, slightly wacky take on the world. But this was often very productive to think with.

So either you try and rethink existing approaches, or cast around for something exciting or interesting which can start you off in a different direction. Sociology somehow has to illuminate the world. It has to be creative conceptually. It has to find something worthwhile to say. That's why I think it had to be near culture. It involves writing. And writing has a rhetorical side to it. Not to speak of the potential for poetics, to enable us to see and think something which hide in the gaps between the words, something beyond the conventional. But this does not mean obscurity - or worse the parroting of jargon. I still find good writing very persuasive. I think good conceptualisation and good writing generally go together.

At the same time, when you write you are necessarily writing from a time and space. You've got to feel that place, and feel the issues of the time and not seek to erase them. To me, that is important. You are in this one-way street of life, and you're not going to come back again! And so, I think there's a sort of vitality that comes through if you are attentive and listen to

life, which should emerge in our writings. I'm not saying everybody should always be searching for dramatic issues, but certain things I've come to by chance and I've not really intended to write about have become important. If I found a topic interesting or original, and it started me thinking of lots of questions and no answers, I would become happy. It never occurred to me that I shouldn't be doing it.

For example, I wrote on the heroic life, and I knew a lot of people don't like heroes and heroic lives: it carries a strong academic political incorrectness. Well, I was interested in it from a certain angle, how we make and sustain the narrative, and how some people, like Max Weber wrestled with the problem of consistent conduct and the formative dimension of life, the possibility to live an integrated coherent life forwards, not just through a dubious retrospective narrative. I was also interested in what was the opposite of a heroic life and its relation to everyday culture. To take another example: as you know, I've been working on luxury, and it isn't that I am yearning for a life of luxury. Many academics pretty much live lives of austerity and as far as I can see, for some a form of poverty vows seems to come with the job. But the very excessiveness of luxury and its social power down the centuries, made it worthy of investigation. So I agree with the sentiment that if something falls at your feet, pick it up and have a look at it, turn it around, consider its aspects and see where it takes you.

If you ask me about qualities we need to bring to our investigations and writing, I think there are three things you need. Firstly, you need a certain amount of intelligence. That's important - but it is not everything. I know some very intelligent people who are incredibly bright and quick. But in my experience they don't always have judgment. This is the second quality: good judgment and it is very important. But I think there's a final thing that's equally important, if not more so, which is passion. You have to have some commitment, to find something of interest and importance and persist in nailing it down. I remember Norbert Elias, once was asked why he [kept] writing all day and every day in his late eighties - he died in his nineties - he replied 'because I have to'.

Expanding this, suggests that you feel you have to, because you think it could make a difference. I don't necessarily feel what I write will make a difference to the world. Even less do I think I am writing for posterity. I enjoy the act of writing, the formulating and expression, which enables me to see and concretise things which are inchoate. Of course, I also enjoy it when people find it useful and that it works for them.

Then again, sometimes, I am surprised by what I've written, which is quite interesting. When someone mentions a phrase I've written, it is gratifying to think, 'Oh! I can still see something there, in a phrase from twenty years ago'.

I'm not saying the bon mot, or good phrase is the be all and end all. But it is that little well-constructed fragment that is important to me, in that I've managed to illuminate something, and got an insight going which can help me jump to a further one. So for me writing is a craft; it's about the passion to make things, and somehow illuminate, and put some order into something you didn't understand sufficiently. To bring some coherence to different theoretical approaches that you were playing with and didn't quite understand, or rejected through prejudice... that again is very, very interesting to me.

Then there's the sort of automatic writing that comes to you at a certain point, often when exhausted – where things seem to flow in a different way than you previously decided. It's just a question of getting your teeth into something and not letting go; hanging on until something is delivered. So I think writing is an interesting exercise and regime. We should dwell more in courses for graduates on writing and editing. Not only editing writings but also editing visually. Editing as a sort of general metaphor for what we do in society at large. We have to cut and paste and throw out, and hopefully make more concise and persuasive what we do.

All these techniques and technical matters of expression and writing need more consideration. The archive that opens up through the Internet, and the way we find things on the Internet, the way in which the vastness of material available and the speed of access change scholarship: these are things I find very significant. But I think without the passion, something that you find eventful or that moves you – it wouldn't necessarily work as well: we need something that questions, cuts and opens up the sea of data.

Those three things are important. A lot of people have got that first quality in universities. They've got high intelligence. But they don't always have judgment. A lot do, but not everyone does. Then they don't always have passion. It's not always acceptable, let's say. Some people can be larger than life: they can perform. There are always enthusiasts we're impressed by. It is fine to be an enthusiast, but to analyse that process of enthusiasm, the process whereby passion is generated and sustained and directs us towards certain things is something more. This is what Weber called relevance

for value. And what is relevance for our values, is an important question.

**KB: I have two questions I'd like to ask. The first is I wanted to know more about Theory, Culture, and Society New Encyclopedia Project.**

**MF:** In many ways this is an over-ambitious project. It is an experimental project which doesn't aim for completeness, such as the production of a new 200 volume academic encyclopaedia for our global age – far from it. In some ways it could be described as 'encyclopaedic interventions,' seeking to explore the ways that encyclopaedias are good to think with. I became interested in the relationship between the archive, the encyclopaedia, and the formation of disciplines that frames our accustomed scholarly apparatus; yet it rarely gets into the syllabus as a topic. The idea for the project came out of the paper I wrote on 'Archiving Cultures' (2000). I was interested in the way archives are formed and deformed: the ways archives are globalised with changing geopolitics and digital media. Currently archives are being shipped to the East again and we have the reconstitution of the China archive. So it is interesting to inquire into what the Chinese resurgence means not just for global geopolitics, but academic knowledge classification. Following Jack Goody's (*The Eurasian Miracle*, 2009) work on history, we can see the movement backwards and forwards across the Eurasian continent of economic power, but also knowledge. I think those shifts are certainly behind the project, for me. Not that we just want to do justice to those countries and parts of the world that have been wrongly categorized by Western classifications of knowledge, but to theoretically examine the process and focus on some case studies. For example, I've visited Japan many times and was really surprised at the lack of reference to Japan by most prominent Western sociologists. They either wanted to put forward a cultural exceptionalist model or incorporate it into a variant of the Weber thesis. So to modernize Japan must have had its own version of the Protestant ethic – really? [laughs]. Well maybe it is a samurai ethic, or a Confucian ethic, that does the business. Always Western categories are the starting point for conceptualization and other parts of the world interesting exceptions. As Naoki Sakai (*Introduction to Traces* no 1, 2001; see also discussion in my introduction with Couze Venn to *Problematizing Global Knowledge* special issue, TCS 2006) put it, the Western controls the production of theory and the peripheries were reduced to the production of raw data. But the situation is changing. Until recently the rest of the world was seen as on the periphery to the West and not that relevant. The only way you could

be relevant was to go to the centre and sit at the table of the great names there, and become an apprentice. Then go back as a subcontractor and open up a franchise – and then you're okay. [laughs]

But as many people have pointed out this mode didn't really get behind seeing other cultures through a one-way mirror, as a projection or exoticization of the centre's own values and frames. So I think in today's emergent multipolar geopolitics we are seeing an enlarged archive, and re-evaluating the contribution of China and Japan and India. It is instructive to note that in the 17th century, China was very highly regarded in European thought and culture, only to practically disappear in the 19th century. So it's the question of thinking through this process of what gets onto the agenda and what is erased, that interested me, partly from a sense of disbelief in the stereotypes and racisms, and partly from a sense of justice.

Now justice is a very elusive thing, you can't always achieve it, and it's constantly being remade. But when we are talking about the big picture using terms like knowledge, or modernity, or global modernity – it opens up these types of issues. We do need to think about concept formation, and ways in which concepts travel around the world. We need to engage in thought-experiments and ask, 'Why were concepts traveling in that particular direction? Why weren't concepts traveling from China, India and Japan to Europe?'

The project was really to try to problematize the received forms of global knowledge. Not upset or reverse it, we can't upset it – because it's there. It's there in the conceptual and classificatory apparatus we use. It's entrenched not just in the disciplinary structures, but also in the technologies of scholarship we use, the scholarly apparatus. The New Encyclopaedia Project seeks to try and think more about where our accustomed knowledge practices come from, how they circulate and are used; along with the origins and location of knowledge in time and space, something which is regularly erased.

We were influenced by some of the French encyclopaedists – not necessarily the Enlightenment ones, but also Bataille with his parodic and humorous Encyclopaedia Acephalica (trans. 1995) with its bizarre set of entries which included 'my big toe,' 'spittle' etc. – a little book which provided a big critique of the accustomed rationales of academic classification. Also Derrida with his notion of the supplement – that every description is essentially unable to achieve closure and completeness and is potentially supple-

mentable ad infinitum. So you can never assume you will get the final story, and you necessarily have to write in the expectation that your writings will be supplemented. This should make you think and write in a different way. So the question of the authority and legitimacy of knowledge were and are very important. The term 'problematizing', of course, came from Foucault – suggesting the the need to consider the structures and processes of categorization and classification – which he looks at in *The Order of Things* (trans., 1970) and other places.

**KB: The connected question, my second one, is [about] the ethics of knowledge creation. The other day, in class [a graduate seminar on consumer cultures at the National University of Singapore], when we were discussing luxury, you mentioned that not many people have studied luxury within sociology and cultural studies. And it was due to certain power relations: you can go to a poor household and knock [on] the door and get interviews, but not for rich people. Does that mean in knowledge creation, the poor people enter academic journals, while the rich people enter glossy magazines and coffee table books?**

**MF:** Some people would see it that way. By chance I've got a copy of Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism* (trans. 1967) on the desk here! [laughs] So some important figures have studied luxury. But it is interesting to note that in the tens of thousands of articles we've had submitted to TCS over a thirty year period, I can't recall a single one on luxury. The additional point I was trying to make was reinforced many times to me in my sociological education: it's easier to knock on the door of a working class household and the chances are they will let you in and even invite you to 'have a cup of tea', and tell you much of what you want to know. [laughs] But we can't do that with the rich, or the new super-rich which enjoy high mobility and the new luxury lifestyles. You can't go and knock on the door of, say, a private jet, or exclusive residential or corporate business complexes because you can't get near it.

It is a difficult research topic. I think sociology has always faced this problem and there is a certain disciplinary historical formation which from the early days, certainly in England, for some defined it as policing the poor. Foucault would certainly see the formation of the human sciences as centred around the intention to produce disciplined bodies in institutional settings like prisons, schools, hospitals, barracks etc., to increase the efficiency of state governmentality. At the same time there were always

other sociologists and anthropologists who like Foucault himself looked the other way, sought out alternative genealogies, forgotten histories and ventured into unusual areas. I did my masters thesis on the Chicago School and in the interwar years Robert Park encouraged his students and associates to go out into the city and it produced wonderful ethnographies from people like Nels Anderson, Thrasher, Zorbaugh and others, of not just the gang, the slum and the hobo, but also the Chicago gold coast, upper class area. The tradition continued into interactionism with Erving Goffman's work and on to Howard Becker and I remember him speaking about how to do ethnographies of difficult topics – such as frontline soldiers in the Vietnam War at the National Deviancy Symposium in the 1970s.

**AD: To add to that question – what is the point of studying the poor? Would it be too idealistic to say that we try to change their situation through sociology?**

**MF:** Many people continue to believe that, and I would like to believe it, but I'm not totally persuaded. Some still retain this Enlightenment vision and its positivist derivative from August Comte that sociology should be a science which can investigate, explain, and predict and then rebuild society through social engineering. At the same time we also know from both Weber and Elias that social processes are things can't easily be understood, explained and controlled. Often history is the history of unintended consequences, so we can only really understand things in retrospect. And we do know that many social experiments like the Soviet Union did not work very well at all. [laughs] Indeed, state socialist and fascist regimes have produced human destruction and misery on a massive unbelievable scale in the twentieth century. So it's a difficult one. We are challenged to intervene in the world: we would like to think we can improve human lives. We hope that the World Social Forum's slogan 'A Better World is Possible' can be realized and that global social inequalities can be reduced. But we are currently stuck with the market in its neoliberal forms with induced competition as the only social mechanism governments feel has efficiency, legitimacy and credibility. Sociologists have long sought to understand and go beyond the economization of social life, yet our record is not very good and we seem to have been pulled back into the same familiar loop again. This makes me recall the remarks of Max Weber in his 'Science as a Vocation' essay, where he refers to the protracted wait for the messiah. Two millennia have gone by and still we wait. Many cannot bear to endure the fate of our times, to live in

empty times. Of course, for some, this suggests a reconceptualization of modernity and acknowledgement of post-secular societies, which is an interesting conceptual shift; it may well be the case that we have over-estimated the incompatibility between modernity and religion. Be that as it may, it still doesn't point to new social mechanisms and modes of organization that could move us beyond the market. Weber's watchman will have to wait a little longer...

At the same time, if a prophet, dreamer, or diviner of new worlds is to be ruled out (and many would add a hoorah here as in some ways we have had to live with the consequences of having dreamed to much), the more mundane role of commentator is still available. You can try to make some sense of the world, or more specifically little islands of it. Lots of people claim to be able to link up all the islands of knowledge. But the authorization is questionable. Rather, you can illuminate the little things, and show the multiple facades of something which might be illuminating. But it is difficult to be confident we can make those big, overall connections.

In the past when I looked at postmodernism, one of the angles I took was to raise the questions 'What are the interests behind people talking about postmodernism?' 'Who is pushing postmodernism?' So I think you might find certain people might have an interest in proliferating a certain type of discourse. It isn't necessarily that people are just intent on furthering their own glorification. But I think there is a certain level of fashionableness, of demonstrating knowledgeable and being up-to-date, able to parade the latest concepts, which is encouraged by institutional structures and the knowledge apparatus.

There are certain dynamics in social life, in organizations and in people's writings. There are certain points when rigid social structures open up and de-monopolize to create possibilities for innovation. The innovation comes in as exciting and good, but it may not necessarily always achieve what you think it will achieve. It can be good and creative in itself, but it may not illuminate society in the comprehensive way that people want. It is not surprising, then, there are lots of people who are sceptical about the power of the searchlight, the illumination, the 'Enlightenment'...

At the same time, even people who seek to go against these sentiments, and talk about modest claims and singularity, come back to some large, epochal thinking at times. Deleuze talked about societies of control, suggesting the movement from Foucault's disciplinary

societies to societies of control. Perhaps we get trapped by others' expectations - it's very hard to avoid. You can say, 'no, no, we mustn't inflate our claims', but the way we write tends to push us in that direction. Many people want that type of prophetic knowledge.

But it seems to me, part of what sociology has to do is inoculate people against this type of knowledge. As I mentioned earlier Norbert Elias described the sociologist as a myth-destroyer, or a myth-slayer. [laughs] I think there is an element where we should be happy with just cutting down some of the illusions and grandiose claims if we can. This might lead to a more sober, measured approach. But you can see it's a very double-edged thing. For some people conjuring illusions and inflating claims is their very bread and butter, and today's celebrity culture pulls hard in this direction. People want the big picture. So when a new figure arises, or new theory emerges, or somebody invents something new, you have to ask yourself: is it just hype; is it old wine in new bottles. Bourdieu talked about the importance of naming. A lot of people like to name, to invent new master theories and sets of classifications. I wonder sometimes if the new names are justified. Many past innovative theories end up in the dustbin of history. When we look back over a hundred years or so, there were lots of American sociologists like Frank Giddings Albion Small, Robert

Park who we hardly refer to now. Even Talcott Parsons, whose influence in the 1950s through his power base at Harvard was immense and led him to spawn many disciples. But as Parsons famously remarked at the start of his influential *Structure of Social Action* (1937): 'Who now reads Herbert Spencer?' And of the teller the tale is also told: who now reads Talcott Parsons. So there is the sense of a shortening historical memory and relevance along with the feeling that we aren't necessarily in either the game of accumulating knowledge or paying respect to the ideas of our forefathers.

I think this is an interesting question we should address: what exactly are we trying to do and why? So I think it's not a bad thing then to see us moving across the border and into the territory of humanities and literature, from time to time, as it encourages a reflexive questioning and problematizing. I've nothing against numbers and data sets, which I find fascinating. But I think this is just one part of the field. I wouldn't want anyone to say that sociology should stick to one corner of the field. There's a lot of productive potential in being able to move across the field - also into adjacent fields, into the humanities and natural sciences, and mathematics for that matter. Such moves can yield new insights and illuminate things in different ways.

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