Symptomatic social science: reflexivity, recognition and redistribution in the Great British class survey

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Symptomatic social science: reflexivity, recognition and redistribution in the GBCS

Tim May

Abstract

The article examines methodological and theoretical issues related to the GBCS. It acknowledges its importance for the public profile of sociology, whilst arguing that it needs to develop a better sense of what it stands for not only in terms of understanding societal changes, but contributing to human betterment. To achieve this it discusses the role of reflexivity in the GBCS with reference to position and disposition and accounts of its process. It then moves on to examine its normative basis in terms of an ‘existential analytics’ and suggests a series of ways in which it might advance its insights as the work develops.

Keywords: reflexivity, recognition, redistribution, transformation, methodology

Introduction

We exhibit a strong desire for tangibility: to make something real so that it becomes part of a familiar sense-making process. It then lies beyond our conscious thought and is placed in the realm of the taken-for-granted through a connection with experience. We need this process to navigate our way through the world. We know and shape events, things and relations and believe ourselves to be capable of acting on our environments. We define who we are through a capacity to act and we make claims about the sort of people we are in relation to what we have done and for what reasons: we act and justify our actions to ourselves and others utilizing the symbolic means at our disposal.

Through varying degrees of alignment between social positions, knowledge and being afforded recognition by others, a great deal rests. Chief Executives and senior managers of large organizations move from one to another based upon the value that is attributed to their leadership in terms of what are assumed to be unique qualities of character and experience; political leaders are elected because they extol claims about the world in which we should live and how they will apparently shape it to their rhetorical images; tasks are undertaken, in both public and private lives, where pride is taken in achievements no matter how small and invisible they may seem to others; close friendships...
are sustained through honesty and reliability and we are able to act because most of what we do is not subject to a close scrutiny whose exercise would lead to an unbearable weight of uncertainty.

These practices are reflected in social structures where we find processes of individuation that: ‘form the basis of social evaluations that are the social conditions constitutive of personal experiences of grace and abjection’ (Charlesworth, 2000: 285). To bring attention to these can shatter carefully nurtured frameworks of justification for existing states of affairs and provoke strong reactions: nowhere is this more apparent than when a powerful minority are measured against a disadvantaged majority. Here is the clearing in which critical social science operates: between the weight of justificatory practices from those who gain from the causes it exposes and those who carry the consequences of their symptoms. It is into this mix that the GBCS falls. We need to examine the content and dynamics of these processes to further our understanding of the role of social science in society and our dispositions and positions as part of them.

This is where the work of Pierre Bourdieu becomes of importance to our theoretical and methodological understandings. He is a key influence on the GBCS (Savage et al., 2013). In his studies we find reflexivity working to produce an improved science, alongside the wish to transform social conditions. No credence is given to the ‘usual somewhat fatuous discourse about “neutrality”’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 11), whilst mental states are seen as the embodiment of social divisions. Therefore, the social sciences need to exercise an ‘epistemological vigilance’ over the blurring of the boundaries between everyday opinions and social scientific discourse (Bourdieu et al., 1991) in order that a science of society encompasses ‘both objective regularities and the process of internalization of objectivity’ (Wacquant, 1992: 13).

Allowing cultural and social factors into class analysis, along with economic and occupational influences, is a welcome feature of the GBCS. Its aim is to reveal resulting forms of polarization and fragmentation and ‘recognise the ongoing salience of social class divisions in the stratification of British society’ (Savage et al., 2013: 28). Bourdieu’s ‘highly influential schema’ (Savage et al., 2013: 5) is deployed in recognition that the GBCS alone does not provide for a ‘representative model of class’ (2013: 7). Only by combining its results with a subsequent quota sampled survey conducted by a market and consumer research company (GfK), does a nationally representative model of seven classes emerge.

With this explicit debt in mind, I wish to examine some methodological and theoretical issues involved in the GBCS. In the first section I examine the role of reflexivity in the process and focus on the endogenous domain: that is, the ways in which the actions and understandings of researchers contribute to how research practices are constituted. The second section considers how the work has positioned itself in relation to the history of class analysis and suggests some directions in which the connection between objective realities and experiences in the work might be taken. I do so in the spirit of seeking
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a progressive research agenda in the referential domain of reflexivity: that is, where the production of social scientific accounts meet contexts of reception that seeks to render events, conditions and experiences intelligible.¹

Reflexivity in process

Whilst no single initiative can take on board the weight of the world, the GBCS has received a great deal of attention and placed sociology on the media stage. It falls into a deliberative and contested space populated by past understandings and present conditions and the forging of possible futures. My interest is in the context of this work in terms of its content. Reflexivity is not about producing a relativism that celebrates context over content, but enables a more rigorous social science. The relations between these require continual scrutiny in order to develop ideas from new experiences and understand the relations and possibilities for change that exist between the production, transmission and reception of social scientific knowledge derived from research (May with Perry, 2011c).

Reflexive social science encompasses how researchers submit to critique their ways of thinking about the world not as some act of psychological reductionism, but how presuppositions are built into concepts and practices in order to inform a ‘sociology of sociology’ (Bourdieu, 1990). The reason is not ‘to discourage scientific ambition, but to help make it more realistic. By helping the progress of science and thus the growth of knowledge about the social world, reflexivity makes possible a more responsible politics, both inside and outside of academia’ (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 194; original italics).

The flux and seeming chaos of the world is turned into explanatory frameworks whose components are recognized within the methodological and theoretical canons of established disciplinary gazes. How this occurs, for what reasons and with what effects, constitutes what it means to think and act within a discipline. To guard against the reproduction of dominant ideas, a reflexive vigilance is required to construct and retain a critical-scientific analysis. What are taken to be useful for understanding the objects of inquiry are seldom turned back upon those who deploy them, hence the ‘oxymoron of epistemic doxa’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 129; original emphasis).

Justifying practices according to a method or following a rule makes sense when called upon to represent our practices as if in conformity to a rule or method. This was apparent in earlier representations of the GBCS (Savage et al., 2013). In Bourdieu’s overall approach this does not apply because it assumes an unproblematic shift from implicit dispositions to explicit justifications disguised as acts of objectification that are inevitably partial: ‘the real principle of scientific practices is a system of largely unconscious, transposable, generative dispositions, which tends to generalize itself’ (Bourdieu, 2004: 41). In the scientific field the ‘ierenic vision’ of collaborative exchanges within normative ideals bends and breaks in the face of reality: ‘what one observes are struggles,
sometimes ferocious ones, and competitions within structures of domination’ (2004: 45).

In terms of the importance of reflexive learning, an account of the origins and process of the GBCS is welcome (Devine and Snee, this volume). Noting that the purpose of the GBCS was not just to analyse, but ‘generate debate’ about class in Britain and ‘direct attention to the complex strategies of privileged agents in their accumulation of capitals’ (Savage, this volume), what were the conversations that informed understandings and orientations among the team? What was the purpose of their engagement and what was expected to happen as a result? In the age of impacts and assumptions regarding the connection between knowledge and action, along with academic reputations and careers, how did the original contact between the BBC and the team occur and for what reasons?

Reading this account did not illuminate me concerning a crossing from the ‘scholastic frontier’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 58). Is it the case, for example, that collaborations with GfK were ‘pragmatic issues’ when the administration of this work is so important to understanding the cross-over between how people see themselves against the categories then deployed to understand their position in society? That process clearly relates to respondent ‘disidentification’ about which we would have hoped to hear more. The role of GfK is not subjected to a critical analysis which as Bourdieu put it:

Reflecting on the practices of polling organizations, together with analysis of conditions of access to the scholastic posture, helped me greatly to become aware of the effects of the gap between the intention of the questioner and the extrascholastic preoccupations of the respondents, which is the source of the distortions performed by the self-blind questioning of the doxosophers (2000: 59).

Here is a basis to populate the critical clearing and deploy concepts to understand class which is ‘fundamentally about politics’ (Savage, this volume). Not only does this beg questions concerning the process, perspectives and negotiations that are missing from this account, but perhaps about how this work was framed when politics itself begins with the ‘denunciation of a tacit adherence to the established order’ (Bourdieu, 1992: 127).

Negotiations with the media are fraught with issues and the BBC is hardly immune to these. We know, for example, that journalists tend to refer to scientists in terms of ‘reported’ findings, as opposed to ‘writings’. The former carries connotations of detachment, with the latter signifying a more attached, human element to its production process. Writing about the media and the conservative revolution, Bourdieu notes: ‘Even words are fashioned so as to prevent our speaking about the world such as it is’ (2008: 331). How social scientists seek impact for their work in the media and the forms of language that are used in the process enriches our understanding. Tactics and strategies are deployed that include: priming (‘how’ the public sees issues), mediation (accepted vocabularies) and gate-keeping (what can and cannot be said)
(Bastow et al., 2014: 222). However, an account of these issues and their link to the analysis itself is not presently forthcoming.

Sources of continuity in practice to negotiate and mediate these pressures derive from the institutional conditions that enable the scientific gaze. This is where universities and the position of the team within them become of analytic importance. Varying degrees of ‘epistemic permeability’ inform how practitioners can draw boundaries around particular phenomena and lay claim to its explanation without being seduced by the distorting effect of powerful, external interests (May with Perry, 2011c). Forms of knowing become the province of particular groups enabling them to constitute a separation and control between production and other elements in the knowledge production-reception process. What are the influencing factors? If dealing with the media, these relate to the capability to keep the justification for research and the application of research, separate. These conditions include: political economy of research funding; institutional contexts of knowledge production; attributed value afforded to the work by public and/or elite audiences; operating norms within a research community as to what counts as good work; the organization and power of a professional group to operate closure around the means of production and the existence of intermediary organizations that work to apply the results of research in the production-transmission-reception-application process.

Here we have an instance of a powerful corporation embarking on a novel piece of work where boundaries are inevitably questioned with consequences for the process itself. Justification and application become blurred according to attributed values of the work: the BBC for sponsoring it according to some idea of public interest and academics according to their standing in the field. What we have are points of view, but not the ‘point of view on points of view’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 224). Elites with the power to exercise their will over others and determine how the outcome will be evaluated can find the justifications for their actions in a ‘scientific practice’ that relieves them of responsibility. Resistance to this process is more or less successful according to the position of a discipline within larger institutional processes that are not normally part of the conscious elements of the work of its practitioners.

If we turn to a reflexive analysis of these institutional positions, what were the different pressures (time, changes of personnel, negotiations, communications in terms of consistency, coherence, etc.), particularly in terms of the absence of funding for the academics involved and needing to ‘fit in’ with other commitments? Here, there is little in the way of illumination. How time was negotiated in institutional contexts given different positions and the content of those negotiations in terms of expectation of impact/public engagement and symbolic advance in the field is a core part of methodological reflexivity. These are the contexts of the social organization of this work that informs the content of its practice.
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Here we can perhaps turn for analytic illumination to the work of the GBCS and the role of elite universities. In view of the elitist retrenchment taking place in Higher Education within the forward march of neoliberalism, such issues are becoming ever more important for social scientific production. After all: ‘there are many intellectuals who call the world into question, but there are very few intellectuals who call the intellectual world into question’ (Bourdieu, 2007: 23). By taking such a reflexive route we may find ‘uneasy parallels’ along with possibilities for improved critically engaged practices (May with Perry, 2011c; May and Perry, 2013a). What we find is a focus on the background and trajectories of those who travel through elite universities but not those who remain within them (Wakeling and Savage, this volume).

A reflexive vigilance takes account of the ways in which elite studies reflect back on the institutions from which the analyses are derived and ask to what extent they too are subject to the same pressures and with what consequences for knowledge production? Do they not contain the very elites who are the subject of the analysis itself? The average household income in Britain is £23,000 per annum and a couple with no children who earn £160,000 per year fall into the top 1 per cent. They earn only half of what is the mean average household income of that group in the UK (Dorling, 2014)! With the salaries of Vice Chancellors and their associated management teams of varying titles reaching the levels they are now, accompanied by justifications concerning competitive recruitment that have been mobilized by the banking sector, it is time to ask questions about this neoliberal gamble with universities (McGettigan, 2013) and its relationship to action, knowledge and advantage. We cannot assume the existence of autonomy to produce social science; it is ‘a historical conquest, endlessly having to be undertaken’ (Bourdieu, 2004: 47).

Epistemic boundaries become more difficult to maintain in the face of neoliberal pressures on universities with implications for forms of engagement (May and Perry, 2013b). Engagement and impacts are regarded as the symbolic means to measure the status of its products and this means that the vigilance necessary to provide for a distinctive gaze can be easily compromised. There are all sorts of moves to avoid these issues and they exist across all dimensions of research from the humanities, through to the social and physical sciences. We can easily end up with the symptoms of this form of objectification being: ‘the blank surface on the back of the skull that has become indistinguishable from the purely external’ (Brunkhorst, 1996: 98; original italics).

All too easily we can enter the terrain of antiseptic analysis that has nothing to say of the issues of the world and that would be surprising given past wishes not to gloss over distinctiveness in the name of generalization (Savage et al., 2005). In the next section of this article, therefore, attention is turned towards issues associated with the content of the GBCS in relation to experience and analysis. In particular, I wish to draw attention to areas that I believe are fertile for it to engage with in the spirit of seeking greater insight into a politically contested terrain; contested, we should remember, because the stakes matter to those who benefit from the existing state of affairs.

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In the spirit of critique and transformation

The above processes all seek a refinement of methodological insight through the endogenous domain of practice, but it should not easily split itself off from, nor spill over into, the referential realm. If we take these boundaries seriously, experience suggests it is not easy to achieve once it is recognized to exist and taken into practice in a conscious manner that seeks to overcome the individualism in academia (May and Perry, 2013c; Perry and May, 2015). Here we find an ambivalence in the missing middle between the production and reception of social scientific knowledge (May, 2011; Perry and May, 2010). Such ambivalence can be avoided through a focus on engagement within the endogenous conditions set by a discipline. At one level that is a condition of a mature social scientific discipline. At another: ‘Any politics that ignores the probable that it seeks to prevent is exposed to the risk of collaborating to bring it about despite itself; whereas a science that reveals the probable has at the least the virtue of disclosing the function of laissez-faire’ (Bourdieu, 2008: 111).

As it currently stands, the GBCS is a science of the probable. To move into the realm of the critical there is an issue: ‘Social regularities present themselves as probable chains of events that can only be combated, if this is deemed necessary, on condition of their being recognized’ (Bourdieu, 2008: 195). From the point of view of social scientific analysis, forms of recognition start with the analytic frames that are used by researchers. These lie within domains of creativity within cultures of inquiry that draw upon and seek to transcend established attempts at representing social reality. The success of these falls within the realm of epistemic cultures where particular forms of judgement are found (Lamont, 2009). The potential for transformation, however, lies within a more general domain of reception and how works are taken up as part of the attempts through which society seeks to understand itself and its possible futures. In the tension between these we find the potential to develop Bourdieu’s ‘existential analytics’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1993).

To achieve a critical practice means more than differentiating between the ‘noise’ and the ‘signal’ (Silver, 2013). In the history of class analysis, one means has been to allude to pre-theoretical phenomena as a constant. In the case of particular variants of Marxist class analysis this concerns ‘interest’ as residing in the working class. Therefore, whilst the noise of the symptoms of capitalism grows ever louder through its insatiable appetite for profit, causal continuity in scientific gaze is enabled by having a basis for comparison over time and critical intent with an alignment of interest. However, the idea of interest as somehow unmediated by predominant normative frameworks does not seem to be a basis for critique unless, of course, it is assumed to arise in an intellectual class who are supposedly free from such influences. As indicated in the first part of this article, this is not a tenable position. This begs questions concerning the possibility for critique that is also sensitive to change.
In Bourdieu’s work, sensitivity to historical change is accompanied by the view: ‘It is only by being scientific, in other words revealing the hidden . . . that sociology has a critical effect’ (Bourdieu, 2008: 69). To reveal the hidden means to engage in class analysis in a manner that does not accord with dominant justifications. It is one thing to describe patterns of cultural value, it is quite another to question those in the name of transforming the very conditions that produce them. With the latter, the hidden becomes revelatory in some way due to uncovering elements in society that have not been viewed before or are reframed deploying explanatory resources. We know that practices of representation contain a set of implicit values that have consequences for how groups are seen in contemporary capitalism (Skeggs, 2004). There is a need to recognize aims that are in tension when operating in the political terrain of class analysis: to analyse positions objectively, understand points of view and do so in a manner that does not set up the ‘objectivising distance that reduces the individual to a specimen in a display case’ (Bourdieu in Bourdieu et al., 1999: 2).

In the critical clearing there is a responsibility to deploy concepts that have value for those to whom they are meant to apply. They create experiential spaces that cannot simply be dismissed by those who have the power to judge others: ‘The concept of cultural capital, for instance, shifts power and agency back into the hands of those who have restricted access to it. It helps explain why some groups are not in the position to formulate academic concepts’ (Skeggs, 1997: 166). If may be accepted that a prior deficit of class analysis resided in its reliance upon an ‘industrial paradigm’ (Savage, this volume) that did not take account of financial and corporate elites in conceptually adequate ways. However, just who is this work for and what is it trying to achieve given recognition that it resides in a politically contested terrain?

It is difficult to know where the GBCS stands. The current tendency is to engage in comparison with past approaches in order to formulate its place in the history of class analysis. However, these past forms of analyses often had explicit normative aims. Whilst the organized working class provided a foil on which capitalism could be occasionally blunted and concessions drawn, the new spirit of capitalism is said to undermine these defences (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). So when it comes to understanding the emergence of a supra-managerial class, we can see the growing significance of systems of impersonal possession from the late twentieth century where control now rests with financial institutions, whilst property-holders find ever greater means of diversifying their investments (Scott, 1997). What does this mean for power and how we resist and transform it? Bourdieu approvingly quotes Spinoza’s observation that ‘true ideas bear no intrinsic force’, but sociologists can engage in debates about the role that they can play in these new divisions of labour. In so doing they can provide: ‘a visible and sensible form to the invisible but scientifically predictable consequences of political measures inspired by neoliberal ideology’ (Bourdieu, 2010: 185; original italics).
With attention oriented towards disciplinary standing, practitioners can be relieved of reflexivity and refer to the objects of their attention over the course of a particular history. In the case of the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), this is manifest through reference to the NS-SEC model (see Mills, this volume). That model is not seen to be superseded by the analytic approach of the GBCS, but complemented (Devine and Snee, this volume; Savage, this volume; Savage et al., 2013). In the previous model we find a motivation to explain the persistence of symptoms over time whose ‘major task’: ‘must be seen as that of accounting for the long-term stability of class relations and associated inequalities – for, in effect, their inherent self-maintaining properties’ (Goldthorpe, 2000: 181).

Whilst John Goldthorpe and his associates are credited with innovative studies on social mobility, the so-called ‘problem of the proletariat’ in studies of class is compared to those who have been inspired by Bourdieu. Here we find an emphasis upon divisions within occupational classes that leads to differentiation between professional-executive and middle and lower managers (Savage, this volume). Elite studies need to be located in class analysis with an emphasis upon social and cultural capital. Yet does this not point to a major deficit in the overall approach? For instance, in terms of the deployment of rational action theories, Bourdieu found these to be symptomatic of ‘deductivist epistemologies’, ‘intellectualist philosophies’ and ‘atomistic’ and ‘discontinuist’ in furnishing the idea of a ‘perfect market’ (2005: 220–221).

Clarification arises in the endogenous realm, but can easily spill over into the idea of resolution in the referential domain. In the referential domain engagement and the possibility of transformation arises. Here is a direct confrontation with technocracy and its media manifestations that seek to disguise politics. A knowledge that is limited and abstracted can meet one that is: ‘more respectful of human beings and the realities which confront them’ (Bourdieu, 2010: 107). In this space of possibility what we witness are celebrations of innovative fluidity with indifference to consequence that often find justification in antiseptic scientism. Neoliberal doctrine has no place for government in the conduct of firms, whereas business being influential in the conduct of government seems perfectly permissible. Chief executives of large companies can rely on financialization as an intermediary strategy to justify their activities (Savage and Williams, 2008; Froud et al., 2006) which leaves the reproduction of advantage without any apparent link to performance (Hildyard, 2014).

If the symptom of which politics speaks in the clearing occupied by the GBCS is the need to change lines of domination to bring voices and recognition to those who are not in the economic mainstream, it hits a serious impediment: exploitation. Politics concerns the denunciation of the concrete other, embodied as a representative of a class whose interests are dominant. Running under this practice is a concern with affirmation of recognition that can leave the transformation of redistribution unaffected (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). If the struggle is then over cultural goods, we would expect the forward march of investment by the wealthy to be in assets, not production as such and against
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the background of constant attempts to reduce the barriers of distance and movement in capitalist development (Harvey, 2010).

So now we have the ‘cultural industries’. These form part of the desire for urban growth with a new set of elites operating as its gatekeepers in the hope of providing sufficient attraction to places for inward investment, with scientific activity operating in a similar manner (May and Perry, 2011b). Whilst seeking to understand how the practices of this accelerated form of capitalism is (dis)organized in the name of an undefined future and a permanent struggle for ever greater concentrations of wealth, we also need to connect it to the consequences it produces: precarious employment and increasing inequality. These are symptoms of conditions where experiences of being upwardly mobile are less frequent and downwardly mobile more common (Bukodi et al., 2014), with the result that: ‘It may be harder to change places in a society where the rungs of a ladder are further apart’ (Hills, 2009: 323).

When thinking about inequality without a connection to class, Mike Savage refers to a tendency to ‘moralize’. His direction of interest is again towards other studies, yet this is very much alive in the constitution of class and often reduced to an exchange-value as groups compete for their place in the social structure. In the analysis of class, morality does need attention (Skeggs, 2004) as well as how, in general, it links with power (Sayer, 2011). The terrain should not be passed over to those who base it on self-interest with an all-pervasive idea of who we are and thus what we must become. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, we can easily enter into the terrain of adiaphorization as exemption from the realm of moral evaluation: ‘A consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the economy; it sprinkles sand into the bearings of morality’ (Bauman in Bauman and Donskis, 2013: 15).

Those who are the economic beneficiaries of this consumerism may well exhibit geographical patterns in terms of their location (Cunningham and Savage, this volume). In terms of position, however, one can be ‘in’ but not ‘of’, society and that requires an understanding of the dimension of belonging that, again, was apparent in earlier work (Savage et al., 2005). They are neither of, nor in, society, but exist over it and through it. It is not necessary to live with the consequences of one’s actions for these can be anaesthetized through acts of cognitive dissonance ably supplied by justifications of entrepreneurship, entitlement and ‘trickle down’ or ‘radiating out’. Social withdrawal into safe and homogenous communities, or even islands, guarded by private security organization, is another route through which to separate oneself from the world. For those concerned with the future and the ethics through which we live, this is a form of play that does not release human dignity, but excludes it by separating itself off from a relation to the real that defines us (Jonas, 1984).

Given the difficulty of access and researching elites and the current data produced by the GBCS, an understanding of the dynamics of these processes is likely to remain within a quantitative-extensive dimension of social research. Therefore, it will be a positive development to complement this work with qualitative research. That means the GBCS is less likely to remain at the
level of methodological perspectivism and move into the terrain of engaged
critique in the spirit of Bourdieu’s ethos as a necessary guard against repeating
generally accepted reasons for structural symptoms. A fusion of internalist and
externalist perspectives can put it within a place in which it is content neither
with a reflection of people’s views on social life, nor an objectification born of
distance. These need holding together: ‘the point of view of the agents who
are caught up in the object and the point of view on this point of view which
the work of analysis enables one to reach by relating position-takings to the
positions from which they are taken’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 189).

That stage has yet to be reached. When it comes, the GBCS cannot escape an
inevitable outcome where we can expect to see: ‘discoveries swept aside as triv-
ial observations that have been known for all eternity, and violently contested,
by the same people, as notorious errors with no other basis than polemical
malevolence or envious resentment’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 190). The fusion may
be obtained through a concern with the dimensions of both recognition and
redistribution which would enable a link with social suffering, moral discontent
and injustice in the critical clearing (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). It is Pierre
Bourdieu’s enduring legacy to understand how economic and political elites
seek a monopoly on cultural traditions with a resulting effect on what feelings
of social injustice are then manifest and recognized as being legitimate. Whilst
any illumination of these matters requires social research, it cannot escape
the point that: ‘all investigations of this kind are informed, via categories and
criteria of relevance, by a theoretical pre-understanding’ (Honneth in Fraser

The representations of this analysis are inputs into the forms of reception
through which we seek to understand ourselves. To be critical, the GBCS need
to be more than a reflection of forms, but a contribution informing transforma-
tion. When it comes to this possibility it is not just instituted in the dimension of
representation, but of ‘intention’ and ‘affect’ (Castoriadis, 1991). If representation
is content to remain at the level of a probabilistic science, it is inadequate
without reference to the affects that are part of social life: that is, the ways we
live with ourselves and the world. This is the intensive-qualitative dimension
that checks against the theoretical imputation of motives and reasons that people
deploy in their everyday lives. To this we add the ‘intentional vectors’: the
push and drive of society that is not about conservation, but a past-present that
contains within it the seeds of a future that is being fashioned now. Here we
find a critical clearing of possibility: ‘which invests with meaning the biggest
unknown of all: that which is not yet but will be, the future’ (Castoriadis, 1991:
154).

Summary

If universities and the social science that is practised within them are to continue
to be distinctive sites of critical knowledge production that are not regularly
produced in other places, practices require a reflexive scrutiny and that means
more open dialogues about how work is done and what is studied. These methodological issues need spaces that should not be exceptional, but more routine in order that we can refine practices and know their limitations, as well as strengths. Fields of endeavour have always contained tensions, but pressures upon them are intensifying in the name of narrowly constituted neoliberal ideas. In terms of class analysis, where one is positioned is part of the possibilities that are held open for the future. We can learn in better ways from each other. We can put aside the conventions of method and open up our methodological imaginations to factors that are too often hidden by selective accounts of the research process. Symptomatic social science is not just the confusion of effects with seeking to establish causes, but a process of co-optation to which we are all subject that should be open to analysis. Academic careers are made on the back of reproducing conventional wisdom with neologisms which are attributed with insight by those who benefit from them.

The GBCS is inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and its team need to ask just how far they intend to take his practices on board. We cannot doubt the sincerity with which he sought to resist the symptom and exercise a reflexive vigilance in order that the epistemic boundaries of social scientific practices remains as clear as possible. That is difficult to maintain when public profiles and impacts are regarded as symbolic means to measure the status of disciplinary products. The vigilance necessary for distinction and the validity upon which its interventions into public debates rest, can be compromised in the desire to achieve this status. We all have a responsibility to seek to create the practical conditions in which the ‘collective intellectual’ (Bourdieu, 2010) can function as effectively as possible and some have better positions in which to try and achieve that.

I have suggested that issues of reflexivity, recognition and redistribution are important in the development of the GBCS and its critical potential as an example of existential analytics in action. In the process a two-stage analysis is implied between internalist and externalist approaches. First, there is an analysis of the relations that exist between identity, experience and actuality within class relations. Taking the GBCS forward in a complementary intensive-qualitative phase would therefore be welcomed. Second, there is a probabilistic analysis that reveals the class effects of contemporary society and the ambivalences and oscillations that inform our actions and aspirations. These hold out the possibilities for change. Engagement is more than pointing out the deficits of other approaches and traditions. It requires the GBCS to formulate its own position more clearly and link with current issues of injustice and social suffering and move beyond the current constraints on potentiality imposed by existing configurations of class.
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Note


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Symptomatic social science: reflexivity, recognition and redistribution in the GBCS


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