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# Time and method: After survival, for a renewed praxis of social theory

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### Time and Method: After Survival, For a Renewed Praxis of Social Theory

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## **Time and Method: After Survival, For a Renewed Praxis of Social Theory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an intervention in the debate on Big Data or the digital. Recognising the importance of engaging with what has become known as Big Data, I seek to re-situate the Big Data issue in a different perspective and to disrupt the debate around it.

The paper shows that the call to fully and inventively engage with the digital, or Big Data, is a strategic response which can be construed as a wager for the survival of academic sociology, and that underpinning such a wager there lies a rather coherent, but essentially unstated, vision which involves ontological and epistemological assumptions, and a whole stance. Once such assumptions are brought out through an ontological analysis, the paper is able to spell out the political stance within which the ‘politics of method’ advocated by many participants in the debate has to be situated, as well as to show how such politics overlooks the political economy of social data and displaces theory and critique.

Even more importantly, the paper seeks to expound an alternative view. Thus, to the temporality of running after an endlessly changing time, it opposes the temporality of subjectivation. To the emphasis on method, it opposes a praxis, or a conduct of life – a praxis encompassing and appreciative of method and methodological inventiveness, but subordinating it to theory and more in particular to a Machiavellian social theory. Thus, to the risk of falling into resignation in view of the inevitability implied in the aforementioned ontology, the paper is also a call for a more combative social theory – one which is still able to feel disquiet in view of what is happening in our present times, but never abandons hope. Only such capacity for disquiet, for wonder and astonishment, it is argued, can provide the impulse for a renewal of social theory – the impulse which was at the origin of the discipline and has to be at the core of its renewal. The paper is thus an invitation to widen the Big Data debate and to seriously consider so far unexamined perspectives and possibilities.

### **Key words**

Big Data; temporality; ontology; political economy; oligarchic metrics and logic; universal address; moratorium on measurement; subjectivation; Machiavelli.

## **Time and Method: After Survival, For a Renewed Praxis of Social Theory**

“On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the tower clocks were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris”

(Benjamin, XV Thesis)

Social theory, and more specifically sociology, would seem to be at the crossroads of yet another crisis. However, the current crisis, or at least the one affecting British sociology, seems to be of a kind rather different from most of the typical crises which permeate the history of the discipline – indeed which provide its very sustenance, to the point that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that sociology is constituted by an inherent endemic crisis which unfolds in the form of both foundational crises and crises of exhaustion. On the one hand, the magnificent foundational crises of its beginnings, of its (re)commencement and principle, when astonishment and disquiet at the sight of the dismal wonders of the modern world, above all ‘that most fateful power of our modern life’, in Weber’s famous expression, provided the impulse and the strength to create a new discipline. On the other hand, the dismal crises of exhaustion when, somewhat peremptorily and in a dramatic tone not exempt of a revealing enjoyment, sociology is pronounced in a nearly terminal state and its time declared to be up.<sup>1</sup>

We only need to recall the recent proliferation of crisis pronouncements, in the nineteen sixties and seventies, for example, which includes Gouldner’s (1971), but also others (see Bottomore 1975, chapter 3); or those that followed in the early eighties (Abrams, 1981; see Calhoun, 1987) and afterwards with the postmodern turn (Seidman, 1994; McLennan, 1995). But even if no crisis is explicitly declared and the feelings about the state and prospects of the discipline are more conflicting and mixed (Calhoun, 1995; Holmwood, 1996), yet, the crisis or its declaration always returns. This may well be due in part to the fact that sociology, or certain sociologies, tend somehow to pre-consciously register and react to the ups and downs of its object, but also because there arises now and then a strong desire, akin no doubt to the aforementioned foundational impulse although rarely having its strength, to revitalise a discipline the ambition of which does not always bear comparison with its actual capacity to meaningfully provide some orientation for action and the conduct of life – a desire which demands a transformation, or at least a softening, of such a direct and immediate connection with sociology’s object, with society and its multifarious dynamics.

This time things look a bit different. Announced as impending, and thus echoing Gouldner’s forecasting mode, by Mike Savage and Roger Burrows six years ago (2007), the current crisis is said to concern ‘empirical sociology’ – a designation whose demarcation is fairly clear (namely, sociological empirical research), but whose significance is rather ambiguous, as we shall see, in relation to the status of theory and other sociological ‘genres’ like critique, and by no means exempt of the risk of limiting sociology to a technical enterprise. But what makes the contemporary moment of social theory and sociology distinctive is that, firstly, the crisis they are undergoing is above all a survival crisis affecting academic sociology and, secondly, that the response that such crisis demands on the part of academic sociologists is eminently, if not exclusively, strategic.

Let us summarise the reasons behind the impending crisis and the response proposed to avoid its consummation: it all comes down to the exponential growth of the automated production, use and analysis of transactional and other digital and online data by private corporations, governments and researchers working for them or, at any rate, working outside academia. Since such data – ‘Big Data’ has become the tag name; from now on I will mainly use this expression – are apparently more and more relevant in social life or the latter is increasingly becoming an enactment of the former, this poses a radical threat not only to the status of

academic sociology, whose claim to “jurisdiction” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: passim) over the study and analysis of social life is today more of a fantasy than a reality, but to its very existence. This is due to the fact that “the research of academic sociologists appears somewhat peripheral to the multifarious research circuits which are implicated in the constitution of a *knowing capitalism*” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 888, original emphasis), while they themselves appear as secondary actors, as “only one – and by no means the most privileged – group vested in social research and analysis” (Savage, 2009: 157). This relentless march into disappearance or – what is basically the same but may be harder to bear – insignificance will not be halted ... unless academic sociologists recognise their true position and decide “to get their hands ‘dirty’ by” engaging with “these kinds of ‘contaminated’ data sources” (Savage and Burrows, 2009: 766; the “need to get our hands dirty” is also emphasised in Ruppert, Law and Savage, 2013: 32, and in Adkins and Lury, 2012: 14; see also Uprichard, 2012b) or, in other words, “casting our net wide, critically engaging with the extensive data sources which now exist, and not least, campaigning for access to such data where they are currently private” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 896) – this is in essence the proposed response, one that found a very favourable reception and has been or is in the process of being basically taken on.

“[W]e certainly seemed to have touched a nerve” – Savage and Burrows declare two years after the original paper (2009: 765). And no wonder that, framed in such a way – “provocative”, they say (2009: 764 and 769); “Machiavellian”, Mike Savage further discloses (2009: 171) – their appeal struck a hypersensitive nerve, indeed a deeply resounding and enduring chord. Not only did their paper receive numerous positive and critical but sympathetic responses in the literature; it became a point of reference for reflection and debate, as it provided a clear focus around which both emerging and more advanced research strategies and programmes could converge, while probably helping to transform existing research worries into more articulated concerns. To this it has to be added the magnetic pull of the Big Data issue, which allows it to meaningfully enlist in its entourage other important problems like the so-called ‘Open Access’ to research publications or the right wing politics of imposing the ‘impact’ agenda in research (that is, the imposition of indicators of adjustment to the capitalist logic of commodification and managerialization, which will practically secure the dissolution of any remaining intellectual and professional independence) – problems which were not at the top of the agenda when Savage and Burrows published their paper. In part as a result of this, there have already appeared, in addition to a number of individual articles, five special issues in specialised journals which focus entirely on this debate (that is the case of *The Sociological Review* 60 (S1) 2012 and *Theory, Culture & Society* 30 (3) 2013), or address a central aspect of it as is ‘measurement’ and ‘the empirical’ (respectively *The Sociological Review* 59 (S2) 2011 and *European Journal of Social Theory* 12 (1) 2009), or consider it in a broader historical perspective (this is in part the case of the Centenary special issue, *The Sociological Review* 56 (1) 2008).<sup>ii</sup>

It is essentially this literature that I address here. But this article is not a literature review; indeed the references just provided do not pretend to be exhaustive; nor do I consider that literature as a homogenous unity. Rather, the article is an intervention in this debate. Let me make clear right from the start that my take on it does not consist in dismissing the attempt to engage, or to do it more fully and thoroughly than hitherto, with the “growing digital data deluge” (Uprichard, 2012: 124). Rather, I seek to re-situate the Big Data issue in a different perspective and to disrupt the debate around it; if by thus doing the whole thing appears in a very different light, this will at no moment imply ‘keeping our hands clean’ and ‘our practices unsullied’, since those hands are not clean, anyway, but confronting the problems of contemporary social life, including those posed by Big Data, by, for example, trading some good punches, which should not be seen as entirely unsuitable in view of the gravity of those problems and how they are engineered. For there are more uses for the hands than the dirty-clean disjunctive gives us to understand – indeed such a dichotomic framing is deeply problematic; yet it lies at the very heart of the debate. But there are other fundamental problems which need to be addressed here. I want to show that underpinning this wager for

survival as response to the impending crisis there lies a rather coherent, but essentially unstated, vision which involves three pivotal elements: ontological assumptions about the world and social life; epistemological and sociological assumptions regarding the nature and status of social theory and sociology; and an attitude and a mood, a whole stance, towards the world and action in the world. A major aim here is to bring out those unstated assumptions, to subject them to critical analysis, and to show that the vision they underpin is more a reflection and a symptom of the current world than a resolute endeavour to think that world through. The latter is a fundamental prerequisite for the renewal of social theory and sociology; my claim is that the perspective prevailing in the current debate on Big Data so far lacks both the theoretical grip and the practical impulse which will enable it to initiate such a renewal.

But the paper will not be limited to this critical task, since an even more important aim of my intervention is to expound an alternative view and to show by thus doing that other possibilities do exist and can be pursued if only we dare to construct and develop them. Thus, I contest the temporality of running after an endlessly changing and progressive time through the radically different temporality of subjectivation, one able to subtract itself from both the supposedly inexorable progress of time and the *presentist* temporality of the online and now-casting. To the emphasis on method, I oppose a praxis and a conduct of life – a praxis encompassing and appreciative of method and methodological inventiveness, but involving action in the strong sociological sense of agency and not only as *agencement* or assemblage. Against the risk of falling into resignation in view of the inevitability implied in the aforementioned ontology, the paper is also a call for a more combative social theory – one which is still able to feel disquiet in view of what is happening in our present times, but never abandons hope. Only such capacity for disquiet, for wonder and astonishment, I argue, can provide the impulse for a renewal of social theory – the impulse which was at the origin of the discipline and has to be at the core of its renewal(s). The paper is thus an invitation to seriously consider and weight the alternative view proposed here and to act accordingly.

### **An ontology of inexorable change, mobility and fluidity which breeds resignation**

It all starts with an all too neat separation posited between social theory and sociology, on the one hand, and the digital world, the world of online, live data generation devices, on the other – as if the latter, including its self-feeding data processes and its constant reliance on unsubtle but incredibly effective indicators and measurements, were almost totally alien to the former. Two separate worlds are thus posited, with one, that of the digital, setting the standard at many crucial levels for the other to follow. That world, the digital, is thought of as a continuously changing, moving, and increasingly accelerating one. Furthermore – and this aspect has absolutely decisive political implications that I shall address in due course – such change is posited, usually in a tacit way, as inevitable. All this constitutes an ontological conception, actually strongly metaphysical, which, although it does capture a very apparent and not insignificant aspect of today's world, is deeply flawed, for it privileges change – or, rather, a certain kind of change – while it is practically oblivious to what remains and weights heavily on what changes and those who undergo the changes (other critical consequences of this ontology will be addressed below). Although it is mainly soft variants of that ontology that underlie the debate on Big Data, the problem is compounded by that fact that it is almost never made explicit. Indeed the very fact that it is unstated but compellingly present in the sense of taken as a given which lurks spectrally behind or beneath the analyses and arguments, including the central argument regarding the relation between those two worlds (the digital and social theory), probably makes its effects more profound and subtler, and so more difficult to disentangle by bringing them under the focus of thought

The importance of this ontology is so decisive that it largely decides the fundamental lines along which the problem is addressed in the debate: first of all, it obviously defines the very nature, the *being*, of the world, or, rather, of the two worlds posited: the dynamic, mobile and

fast moving world of Big Data or the digital, and – as we shall see – its obverse, the world of contemporary social theory and sociology, or at least that part of it, quite large it seems, which is static, closed upon itself and stuck. Secondly, and inseparably from the first point, it defines the temporality characterising the world of Big Data – and, by implication, that of its obverse. Thirdly, the very conceptual and methodological tools relied on seem to have been developed in order to fit as much as possible the fluid and fast moving world of Big Data. Finally, but not less fundamentally, in approaching that world there is a whole mood and attitude which is so apparently well attuned to it that it would have to be characterised as fluid – at any rate, a mood and attitude distrustful and suspicious of any strong commitment or attachment. Perhaps I should add that the relations between that ontology of fluidity and change and the four aspects just mentioned (world, time, approach and attitude or stance) is such that they could be said to constitute a rather well arranged assemblage.

This section has then to engage in some elementary ontological investigations. But I must say that this is done strictly on account of the need to examine the ontological assumptions which underpin the debate on Big Data, and not in order to join in the current ‘ontological turn’, so prominent in contemporary social and political theory and philosophy and by no means absent, at least by way of not infrequent references to ontology, from the debate on Big Data – a turn whose status and significance is rather ambiguous, to say the least. It is therefore not a question of staging yet another chapter of the innocuous dramas setting flux against stasis, virtuality against potentiality, difference against totality and, as Marx would say, other metaphysical niceties, but of undertaking an ontological enquiry into the very being of Big Data as posited in the debate thereof. This section will thus address the first two aspects just mentioned (world and time), while the next one will outline the political economy of Big Data, an issue of central significance, but overlooked in the Big Data debate.

Tacit and unstated for the most part, yet such ontology is by no means absent from the explicit, if often in the form of referencing or attributing it to others like the well-known article by Law and Urry (2004),<sup>iii</sup> which may well be considered as a kind of precursor of the debate in what concerns the methodological stakes, or Latour.<sup>iv</sup> But whether explicit or tacit, and even more in the latter case, the ontology of fluidity, mobility and change lurks like a spectral but powerful presence around the debate. It is apparent both in the language resorted to, permeated as it is with terms such as mobility, transactions, and the like, including challenges and opportunities, and in the very construction of the overall argument about the crisis and how to respond to it. Both, language and argument, convey the idea that the object of attention (Big Data, the digital, data-generating and tracking and tracing devices, as well as modes of analysis of such data) is something that exists in a strong and dynamic sense of existence, that is, as something that exists not merely in abundance, but in the mode of an existence that grows, becomes more and more prolific and installs itself as routine processes, as e.g. in the following typical renderings of this idea: “the proliferation of ‘social’ transactional data which are now routinely collected, processed and analysed” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 885; see also e.g. Marres, 2012). “Digital devices and data are becoming ever more pervasive and part of social, commercial, governmental and academic practices” (Ruppert, Law and Savage, 2013: 23).

This idea of a dynamic existence that propagates and multiplies itself is characterized by four further features: its dynamism is unidirectional or at least oriented in a dominant direction: toward further and speedier growth, increase and proliferation. Secondly, this process of growing and faster expansion finds practically no obstacles, no disruptions worth examining or simply mentioning. Thirdly, it is a dynamism which brings about “material and productive effects” (Ruppert, Law and Savage, 2013: 25) in social life. Finally, it is not a self-generating dynamism, but it is caused by or – since causation has become a suspected relation, currently being re-examined and reframed along contingency and non-linearity – attributable to ‘knowing capitalism’, the modality of capitalism most frequently referred to in the literature addressed here. Or perhaps we should say that such dynamic character is provided by the fact

that Big Data (both as data and data-processes) is a creation or at least part of “‘knowing capitalism’ ... which wants to ‘know everything’” (Savage and Burrows, 2009: 766).

We thus have a dynamic entity which is continuously moving fast and in a single direction: towards more and faster growth and expansion, and always toward the future, but a future with no promise other than the accelerated continuation of the present. A time is thus defined, the time of the digital, of networked communications, of Big Data, which has all the appearances of being a sequential time which ascends as it advances, which progresses not only in sheer volume but in technical efficiency, e.g. in terms of the digital devices and tools which allow ever more refined data analyses. In brief: this is a linear and largely progressive time – a rather surprising idea. Was not this conception of time meant to be *passé*? But this linear time encompasses a seemingly different temporality: the *presentist* temporality, that is, the ephemeral and frenzied present involved in the recursive mediations of the online, digital world – a temporality which may well be qualified as a *presentless* present. Emma Uprichard (2012) has opportunely cautioned social researchers against the serious risk that the new genre of digital, Big Data research runs of being stuck and trapped in the ahistorical time of the ‘now-casting’, so that it may end up simply reflecting and reproducing the digital world instead of thinking it through. The latter, which is also the temporality of conceptualization and theory, risks being “over-taken, even taken over” by the former, with the added consequence that such a “temporal take-over of theory displaces sustained critical thought” (Dean, 2010: 1 and 2). The distance needed for thought can only be provided by a radically different temporality which I would like to call the temporality of subjectivation, one able to subtract itself from the fleeting urgencies and *jouissances* of the ‘now-casting’ not less than from the linear time – an equally profoundly ahistorical time in which practically no event takes place – that underlies many interventions and prevails in the Big Data debate.

This argument will certainly trigger immediate protestations and denials; and truly the recurrent and emphatic declarations of non-linearity, contingency and similar terms pointing to a like effect would seem to indicate that the argument is simply wrong. Thus, Adkins and Lury, to provide an example among many, argue that sociology has “to confront a newly co-ordinated reality, one that is open, processual, non-linear and constantly on the move” (Adkins and Lury, 2009: 18). On closer examination, however, one can easily see that only in the context of a conception of linear time like the one just brought to light is it possible to make sense and understand the meaning of, first of all, the language of ‘challenges’ (and ‘threats’ lurking beneath the challenges) and ‘opportunities’ to which a majority of participants in the debate profusely resort (e.g. Savage and Burrows, 2007 and 2009; Back and Puwar, 2012; Back 2012; Adkins and Lury, 2012; Savage, 2013; Ruppert, Law and Savage 2013); and, secondly, of the overall argument within which such language is used, that is, the argument opposing a very dynamic and fast moving world (the digital) to a discipline characterised, as we shall see in more detail later on, as petrified, dogmatic and complacently sticking to habits and methods which are quickly losing relevance and efficacy – a discipline that runs the risk of being left behind, unless immediate and effective action is taken. In Les Back and Nirmal Puwar’s words: “The massive accumulation of digital data in the hands of corporations to generate (largely market driven) predictions is not approached as a threat which displaces the methodological edge of the sociologist, who faces an ‘empirical crisis’ (Savage and Burrows, 2007) and is *left behind* in the wake of digitally accelerated forms of observation and construction” (Back and Puwar, 2012: 9, emphasis added). Even for the editors of one of the special issues devoted to the debate and major contributors to it, whose disagreement with the initial framing of the debate is more apparent than real, is there a clear, an unequivocal sense of an inexorable time that moves ahead faster and faster and somehow interpellates us to urgently change gear and move with it: in fact, such a time brings into existence opportunities which, unless “embrace[d]” (Back and Puwar, 2012: 6; Back, 2012: 20) right now, will for ever be lost.



I understand that the debate on the Big Data issue is relatively recent and has been, it seems to me, more inspired by the urge to expound the problem diagnosed and the appeal to act than by a thorough discussion in which alternative perspectives are confronted. And yet, one cannot help wondering how it is that so apparently deep-seated assumptions about time as I have just exposed have not been subjected to more critical scrutiny. After all the matter of time has received some serious methodological treatment in the sociological literature, for example, by Andrew Abbott (2001), one of whose central concerns has been precisely to reflect on and disclose basic temporal assumptions in the trade of empirical sociology. Conceptions of time have consequences which may be extremely serious, e.g. politically, the more so when not sufficiently subjected to critical examination and so taken for granted. This is precisely the case, in my view, of the conception that prevails in the Big Data debate – a conception whose relations with the dominant temporality promoted in our present as a smooth and inexorable advance go well beyond an elective affinity. How not to notice, in this connection, its proximity to the very metaphysics of flux and mobility overtly used to promote the self-image of the capitalist world(s), that is, as we should probably say, of capital? Now to the extent that this is so, which seems a rather considerable one, the debate itself, and the conception of sociology and the conduct of empirical research it fosters, is terribly depoliticising, that is to say, it tacitly or explicitly nurtures a very specific politics which takes the established order, the *status quo*, as a given, while it breeds a totally devastating resignation which further stifles the possibility of simply imagining a different politics, not to mention the strength required to develop a daily praxis in accordance with it. I will return to this issue at the end of the article.

### **The political economy of Big Data: some preliminary remarks**

One of the merits of Savage and Burrows (2007 and 2009) is to recognise the political character of the Big Data issue; what is surely not a merit is the fact of not recognising this sufficiently. In other words: all the politics referred to in their and other participants' interventions – that is, mainly the politics of method, the politics of social data, the politics of measurement, transactional politics (Ruppert and Savage, 2012), but also the “political debates over method and data” (Savage and Burrows, 2009: 762) – are domain or regional politics which as usual, unfortunately, take the established order as a given, so that, the politics of method, for example, is a proposed way for sociologists to address the methodological situation of the discipline entirely *within* the bounds of the established order and its prevailing politics. I find it very significant that the single most significant issue in this debate as is the economy, that is – since there is no economy which is not political – the *political* economy of Big Data is not addressed. Only Anna Gross mentions it and makes two very relevant considerations: first, that the problem is not only a question of the politics of method, but also of the political economy of Big Data; and secondly, that at stake in the latter is the question of ownership and the devices that serve to “facilitate and secure – she says – specific forms of value” (Gross 2012: 126).

Given the scope of the question of the political economy of Big Data I can only point out here some very basic, indeed preliminary, aspects of it, starting from two very simple observations: Big data is, of course, not just raw material, or only a question of assemblages, but a corporate field, and as such, organised and produced (including through the state and private industry of securitization, surveillance and control that *necessarily* goes with it) for the extraction of value. Secondly, the injunction of *jouissance* is there given a particular form through more specific and constant injunctions for the production of ‘sociality’ (participate, opine, find out by yourself, share, make friends, choose, criticise, decide and so forth) and their systematic capture, registration, tracking and subjection to automated algorithm-based calculations and devices which feed the results thus obtained back into the system, so that new searches, choices and opinions are shaped by those calculations, and so on in endlessly recurring loops.

All the searching, commenting, friending, texting, opining, etc. is divested of any symbolic value: every view and every expression of affect are made equivalent, injected into the data

mass and subjected to the endless circulation of information. In this process the participants are also divested of subjectivity: they all become users or consumers. Divested of symbolic efficacy and made equivalent, every operation carried out in the digital, every searching, commenting, etc. acquires economic, exchange value. Value in this world, as defined by the algorithms designed to measure it such as, e.g. Page-Rank, is essentially the density and weight of the digital links, that is, of the social relations, and the result of its measurement is the establishment of hierarchies of power and inequality whose visualization brings into view the superb pyramidal figures (terrifically slim at the top, wonderfully immense at the base) they form.

Before continuing perhaps we need to remind ourselves that all this activity involving metadata is done legally *and* illegally – which nowadays surprises nobody, even if people may sometimes wonder about the seemingly ‘disproportionate’ extent of this phenomenon today. To understand it we have to refer to an elementary category of political sociology: ‘oligarchy’ (rule of the few, which stands also, as is manifest today, for ‘plutocracy’ and ‘cleptocracy’, i.e. rule of wealth and rule of thieves), a sociological category very much needed today and by no means an abstract or ‘totalizing’ concept. Yes, an oligarchy is not a homogeneous group at all; yes, it is internally divided and hierarchically organised, very much so. To these empirical observations we only need to add a small but crucial detail to start to understand better the category and the good work it can do, and this is that an oligarchy *is* constituted by the antagonistic relation it has with its other, let’s call it the people – for now. So the fact that the aforementioned (and many other) activities and operations are carried out legally as well as illegally is just business as usual, exactly as it is not paying taxes and being untraceable, since oligarchic rule rests on contempt for and impunity before the law. Indeed for the oligarchy we endure today, which is by far the most advanced one in this and similar terrains, the law is a funny invention at best. For an example currently in the headlines one only needs to have a look at the gigantic secret surveillance programme carried out by the NSA (US) and the GCHQ (UK) and the unprecedented scale of what is involved there: on the one hand questions of privacy and fundamental civil rights affecting every individual, all and each; on the other, the dense, the profound connections – to the point of indistinction in the ‘delicate’ zones that matter – between the internet largest and better known corporations and the North American and British states and governments. Many things are at stake here for the oligarchy, foremost among them the huge industries and markets around metadata and other kinds of data, the security and surveillance industries and markets to prevent other industries from acting illegally, and so forth.

Legally or illegally, the question is that what starts as equivalence ends up as inequality; that the removal of symbolic value, of the substance and meaning of communication, and thereby the making ineffectual of the capacity for reason and thought, is the very condition of the institution and entrenchment of the oligarchic power regime that prevails in the digital, and not only there. This may sound too much of an overstatement. It is not. I am simply referring to the oligarchic metrics which defines the algorithmic devices for measurement (e.g. search engine algorithms) and modelling, but also citation indexes, indicators of ‘quality’ and the corresponding league tables, the ‘impact agenda’ in research, and things as apparently simple as feedback forms (e.g. for course evaluation), and the oligarchic logic that drives the design and development of these instruments. The reason why I am suggesting that *oligarchic* metrics and logic – and not, as is regularly the case, ‘popularity’ metrics and logic – are the proper names to be used in order to account for the dynamics and processes enacted and produced by the aforementioned devices, is because the dominant dynamics driving such processes is a downward, top-down dynamics. This “perverse authority dynamic” (Marres, 2012: 155), which includes, but is not confined to, the phenomenon commonly known as the ‘tyranny of reputation’, is typical of corruption – corruption understood not merely as bribery or similar things which are only the effects of corruption, but in the comprehensive Machiavellian sense of political disablement, a process which always ‘comes from the head’, from the top, and is endemic in highly inegalitarian societies.

According to the logic of such top-down dynamics the only thing that counts and is authoritative, in a digital declination of voluntary servitude, is the proximity to power (to avoid frequent misunderstandings, let me clarify that voluntary servitude is the indissoluble link between upward servility *and* downward tyranny); so it induces and encourages reactions, behaviours and conducts that consolidate the very power structures that produce and enact them. In this connection, to say that the “processes of the valuation of knowledge are captured by social dynamics of popularity” (Marres, 2012: 156) is much more consequential than we may in principle think, for such statements, which are highly representative of the literature, convey only half of the truth in the best of cases, and not the most important half: the fact that, prior to that, such popularity dynamics has itself been shaped, triggered and captured by the oligarchic algorithmic devices. Inadvertently obfuscating or overlooking this strongly contributes, in my view, to further consolidating the widespread political disempowerment and incapacitation that characterise our times. This is a basic problem of politics, one that, as we can see, cannot be separated from *political* economy – a problem about which social theory can do a lot of good work, including by re-visiting some classics like Niccolò Machiavelli (to whom I shall turn in in the last section).

Of course those are rather elementary observations. An in-depth treatment of the oligarchic logics and the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ involved in these processes of sustained extraction of value is obviously needed here – one relying, for example, on Marx’s analysis of the commodity form (actually the appropriation of value in the digital world makes still more complex the step of the commodity, which can be relatively circumvented and social relations directly captured; what makes this possible is probably the fact that social relations are already de-substantialised and pre-commodified), and on Weber’s perspective on rationalization, much more complex and subtle than is commonly thought, and particularly suitable to deal with the algorithm-driven processes of sustained capture, retrieval and extraction. While the Marxian perspective has already produced very significant studies, that is not the case, as far as I am aware, of the Weberian one, nor of studies combining both. Such in-depth treatment should also include, and situate at its core, the problem of financialisation, above all the question of debt, of the *urbi et orbi* extension of indebtedness and compulsory debt-financing (including to ever younger people like students), but also financial modelling, some important aspects of which are currently addressed in the social studies of finance.

Let me just add that what in the Big Data debate is regularly referred to as ‘sociality’, and in other social theory literature as ‘the common’ (for example, by Hardt and Negri (2004), particularly in a chapter on methodology entitled ‘Method: In Marx’s Footsteps’), is continuously captured – it is captured at the very time of its coming into existence – by capital, itself a huge arrangement of social relations. Sociality, the common, has therefore no outside, so that entering into sociality, or initiating a process thereof, which most often means entering into a pre-formatted dynamics, amounts to fuelling capital and at some fundamental levels is practically indistinguishable from it. Although, recalling the ‘lessons’ of uncanny historical developments related precisely to modern capitalism, as well as the effects that measuring devices have on the fields they capture, we should be mindful of dwelling on the prophetic mode, it is in principle clear that there, in sociality, in the common, capital has an inexhaustible – at least until humankind dissolves into stellar dust – source of value, actually of surplus value. We should also be mindful of the metaphysics of unobstructed, free mobilities and flows, a digital variant, we could say, of *laissez-faire*, and the very mantra of global capital. In many fundamental respects, such metaphysics constitutes the obverse of the actual political economy of social data. It is not that categories such as mobility and flow are wrong in themselves or should never be used; rather the question lies in maintaining the indispensable critical distance needed in order to think through, rather than reflect, the digital world or any other world or problem.

## **The case for a methodologically inventive academic sociology**

I have referred in a number of occasions to the fact that the world of the digital, of Big Data, dynamic and always on the move, finds its obverse in the world of sociology, which is portrayed as static and self-indulgently refusing to follow suit. Let us see how this portrait is constructed. According to Savage and Burrows, academic empirical sociology is losing existence, importance vis-à-vis “commercial sociology” (2007: 887), and this process is only bound to quickly deepen due to the enormous research capacity existing outside academia, particularly in the corporate world. This is an empirical argument, and the evidence Savage and Burrows provide is in my view very compelling, not so much on account of its detailed and comprehensive character (they never intended to provide a comprehensive survey of the state of the discipline), but because of the undeniable significance it has in the context of the developments and tendencies they also describe. This is beyond doubt; the problem I am posing here lies in how they and other participants in the Big Data debate portray the response, or lack thereof, of academic sociology to this situation.

According to Savage and Burrows (2007), academic sociology tends to be indulgent and complacent towards itself, and condescending towards others, i.e. potential rivals like commercial research. These seem to be deep-seated attitudes, so much so that, confronted with the critical situation affecting the discipline, academic sociologists are likely to, letting the old dispositional pattern set in, “emphasize [their] superior reflexivity, theoretical sophistication, or critical edge” (p. 887); or “be precious and condescending to those who work in the [non-academic] sector, and bemoan their limited awareness, their instrumentalism, and so forth” (p. 888). These and similar reactions involve “taking refuge in the reassurance of our own internal world” (p. 887), complacency, when “any complacency here is very misplaced” (p. 893), or a “retreat into the comfort zone of generalized descriptions of the nature of our present” (Osborne, Rose and Savage, 2008: 520). These views seem to be widely shared; the diagnosis would be that, to the extent that sociology continues to be yoked to the old ways and patterns – and this seems a rather significant extent – its survival as an academic discipline is more than doubtful. Some participants in the debate venture as far as to proclaim such sociology “a dead sociology that is characterized as objectifying, comfortable, disengaged and parochial” (Back, 2012: 18), or at least as “embarrassingly lagging behind” (Uprichard 2012b: 94).

So, what to do in view of this situation? The answer lies – we already know – in ‘getting our hands dirty’ with Big Data. But, to do what? Well, to embrace methodological innovation and inventiveness or the practice of the “politics of method” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 895) and “descriptive assemblage” (Savage 2009), that is, to “abandon a sole focus on causality (which we are very bad at) and analysis and embrace instead an interest in description and classification” (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 896). In the current situation of academic sociology, any instantiation of such a politics of method and descriptive assemblage is also presented as “a further attempt (Savage and Burrows, 2007; Byrne, 2002) to jolt the discipline out of a methodological complacency that the ‘coming crisis’ will exploit mercilessly to the detriment of us all” (Uprichard, Burrows and Byrne, 2008: 615).

It is here where the problems with the proposed survival strategy begin. For, what would it be specific, distinctive, about an academic sociology practising such politics? Does this mean that commercial research is not engaged in methodological sophistication? According to Savage and Burrows nothing could be further from the truth. Commercial research, above all in the digital world, is much more sophisticated and data-rich and methodologically powerful than academic sociology, incomparably so – this is one of their central empirical arguments. I have striven to find the distinctiveness that academic sociology will bring but to no avail. In the final analysis this is seemingly not a problem for Savage and Burrow. It is not a problem because an academic sociology practicing such politics of method and descriptive assemblage will be engaged in doing something which is “an intrinsic feature of contemporary capitalist

organization” (Savage and Burrows 2007: 895). This will guarantee, if not a place at the core of mighty capitalism, at least some share in it, because such methodologically sophisticated academic sociology can attract the *interest* of certain “powerful agents”, “key agents” placed in strategic locations both at the level of the state and “in the research apparatus of contemporary capitalist organizations” (Savage and Burrows 2007: 886 and 890). The survival of the discipline is thus dependent on the ability of academic sociologists to persuade those influential interests groups that what academic empirical sociology does is interesting for them. It is also dependent on “campaigning”, now presumably at the state level, “for access to such data where they are currently private” (Savage and Burrows 2007: 896). Such campaigning will see sociologists resorting to the right of access, the benefits to society that such access will have and the like.

However, there are still some questions in need of an answer. To begin with, what would those powerful agents gain by accepting academic sociology as a partner – of course a very minor player, but still a player – since they themselves can do or can pay for the kind of things sociology is to give them? Once again one cannot find an answer, presumably because, somehow, it goes without saying. A methodologically inventive academic sociology would seem to be in a position to provide powerful and influential social agents and groups some pedigree, or something similar – which undoubtedly is an interesting argument, since after all those powerful agents, both in the market and government, have worked really hard, and rather successfully, in the last decades to disparage and degrade the university and its academics and students in the name of the infinitely superior worth of the market. Well, this is very surprising, but I have to say that Mike Savage and Roger Burrows probably have a point, and it is their merit to have spotted it, even if they don’t say it, and to act accordingly: *academic* research, and methodologically active sociological research in particular, may well be in a position to provide the market and corporate sectors, and even the state, with research that has *legitimacy*. I am not going to deny that this is a very important contribution that can indeed persuade those powerful groups on whom the fate of academic sociology ultimately depends. But it seems to me too close to the branding and re-branding operations typical of the market and corporate sectors as to have any realistic prospects of preserving in the long run the little pedigree that academia seems still to have.

And then there are other problems: what about the genre of critique, for example, which in different ways and to different extents has surely been a defining mark of the discipline – a genre, critique, which they themselves repeatedly claim, e.g. as many as five times in the short paragraph which concludes their initial article, where they calmly state that by doing as they say “we can renew the critical project of sociology” (Savage and Burrows 2007: 896)? Critique here can only mean ‘up to a point’, the limit being not displeasing those powerful agents who are so important for the survival of the discipline. Such critique has practically nothing to do with ‘the critical project of sociology’ – indeed it is contrary or alien to any such project. The same happens with theory, which is reclaimed after having practically dismissed it quite a few times as one of the typical delusions of the old sociology and as ineffectual in relation to the challenges posed by Big Data. In brief: critique, theory, public sociology (which is also claimed and praised), in truth anything can be considered part of the sociological politics of method – anything because none of these things really matter; they are simply add-ons which may help in providing good narratives or sophisticated arguments, ornaments with which one embellishes the trade, but not the trade itself.

### **Recapturing the present: the time of social theory**

In my view, a methodologically inventive social theory, which I support as much as most participants in the Big Data debate do, puts method in its place, which is (except for a very old-fashioned positivism) dependent on the ‘problematics’ addressed, and therefore in part

subordinated to and in part at the very core of the theoretical and conceptual developments. This means that problems and theory have logical and epistemological priority.

In what concerns problems and theory, it is evident that the Big Data problem is a major expression, so to put it, of contemporary capitalism. However, the debate on Big Data rarely mentions capitalism; it is only ‘knowing capitalism’, nearly always rendered in scare quotes, what is mentioned and for the most part taken as a given. Apparently ‘capitalism’ is too general, abstract and ‘totalizing’ a term. And yet the study of Big Data would gain much depth, the depth that it is to a considerable extent lacking today, by relying on what Alberto Toscano (2012) has called ‘seeing it whole’ – a very elegant way of launching a devastating critical charge against the most salient aspects of actor-network theory, probably the most prominent theoretical current resorted to in the analyses of the digital. And yet many participants in the debate refuse, as actor-network theory does, depth and instead advocate description and assemblages. This emphasis on surface, the horizontal and the smooth fits and reflects pretty well contemporary capitalism’s self-image, but hardly its reality, constituted by a radically different time: a time of fractures, tremors and, as the current crisis shows, terrible shocks.

Pursuing instead of repressing the desire to ‘see it whole’ therefore involves bringing capitalism fully in the study and analyses of the digital and Big Data. But this would surely unsettle the position many participants in the debate have chosen, not to mention the fact that it would definitely displease those powerful agents referred to above, including research funding bodies and agencies. This means, to continue with the obvious, that confronting the problems we face, including the problem of Big Data, in an open-minded and resolute manner and therefore not recoiling from addressing capitalism and the oligarchy that rides it today involves some risks, indeed risk and courage. As I have argued elsewhere (Frade, 2009), this is a crucial point in Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination*; however, it is never mentioned in a literature which not infrequently evokes and even uses Mills’ work in its attempt to find ways of imaginatively studying Big Data. When this is lacking, when one is oneself in a rather comfortable position involving no risk, one does not have the right nor the credentials to, in what has become a major motif in the appeal to engage with the Big Data issue, indict the discipline, in *toto* or in part, and admonish its practitioners for being complacent and taking refuge in comfort zones. After all, since both positions are roughly equally comfortable, it is up to everyone to judge whether to swim with the stream is better than to hang on the banks.

Social theory, and particularly sociology as an academic discipline, has a serious problem of *address*. Not because it lacks one, but because it has many, and is perhaps too concerned to please them. We have just seen that the newly proposed academic empirical sociology based on the politics of method has a privileged addressee: the interests groups which ultimately decide its fate. We can also see how sociology – and this is very much the case of British sociology, if I may be forgiven for considering it for a moment as a whole – strives to appeal and show its relevance to society at large and to as many audiences and publics as possible. It is on this impulse, I believe, on what in it is reminiscent of universality rather than of a tendency to pay homage to opinions and identities, that we can build a renewed discipline. This means that it is above all the universal address that matters; it also means – and this is the second implication of my suggestion – that audiences, publics and any other particular groups disappear from the address of social theory. This is so because social theory, sociology and the social sciences in general are addressed to all, and therefore to *anyone*, in their condition as thinking beings, for “to the person who thinks, all the civil distinctions disappear” (Rousseau, *Émile*, book IV) – ‘all the civil distinctions’, that is, those social features allocated to everyone (sex, civil state, occupation and so forth) and constituting them as particular social identities, groups or audiences. Let me add, to avoid possible misunderstandings, that this does not of course mean that sociologists cannot address particular publics of all kinds; they can and they will. What it means is that it is on their condition as thinking beings that first and foremost such publics will be addressed. The most

decisive consequence of the universal address (all, without distinctions, and so, in the figure of the singular universal, anyone), assuming that it is taken on and therefore deployed on an everyday basis as part of a praxis, is that it enables social theorists and sociologists to regain and maintain that inner independence without which they risk falling prey to the tastes, opinions and interests of the groups they may seek to impress. This is the only power social theory and sociology have – it may not be a very impressive one, but it is the only *real* power they have.

It is in connection with the universal address, but specifically concerning methodology and the politics of method, that I would like to propose a *moratorium on measurement and data gathering*. Let me justify this proposal, which to some colleagues may appear as the ultimate sacrilege. I believe that sociology tends to be too concerned, almost obsessed, with measuring – a tendency that the Big Data issue has reinforced. Now, as we are practitioners of an eminently empirical science, let us give empirical observation its due. For it is a massive empirical fact, so massive that Nietzsche, not suspect of empirical delicacies, already reported it, that measuring is the kernel of a regime and a culture for which the only thing that ultimately counts, “the question of questions” applied “instinctively and all the time ... to everything, and thus also to the productions of the arts and sciences, of thinkers, scholars, artists, statesmen, peoples” is: “who and how many will consume this?” (*Daybreak*, §175). So, since it is not, despite the ‘impact’ agenda, ‘who will consume’ our trade the only thing that counts for social theory and sociology, but rather who will think with it, we can devote that ‘moratorium time’ to rethink measurement and data gathering. Among other tasks, we can try to envisage ways to track, trace and assemble precisely those organisations and groups like multinational corporations which have become quasi-pure modes of agency dressed in a variety of mutable organisational forms with in-built mechanisms and immunities against legal and statistical inscription devices and traceability (for more details, Frade, 2007).

All this, the quest to ‘see it whole’, the universal address and the moratorium on measurement, are fundamental instruments for social theory to recover the present and be able to image an *avenir*, rather than simply a future. They are also essential to undo the ruinous depoliticisation that pervades the Big Data debate and to a rather considerable extent social theory and sociology themselves. It may be worth mentioning, in connection with this grave problem of depoliticisation, Bruno Latour’s puzzlement (2005: 252) about the fact that actor-network theory “has been accused of two symmetric and contradictory sins”, namely: “of extend[ing] politics everywhere” and of “indifference to inequalities ... being content only to connive with those in power” (2005: 251). Actually this is not a bad characterisation of depoliticisation; only Latour seems to believe that the latter does not involve a very specific politics. It is not only that “they [the two sins] are not necessarily contradictory” (2005: 251), it is that they are the two necessary sides of a single politics, a depoliticising politics which feels at home within the established order. Of course the politics of actor-network theory are surely complex; they may even be contradictory at some point, without this being a sufficient ground for an unnuanced critique. And yet the doubts about such politics, or at least Latour’s, are considerably clarified, even at some point cleared up, by this declaration: “ANT is nothing but an extended form of Machiavellianism” (Latour, 2005: 252). Indeed, regardless of whether it is ironic or defiant, or whether it tries to flout or mock some idol, there is something in this declaration, a weighty remainder, which definitely exceeds Latour’s attempted enunciative modality, to wit: the recourse to the most vulgar form an anti-Machiavelli propaganda, which places Latour squarely – whether out of ignorance or craft is of little consequence – on one side of the field of politics.

I cannot address this here with the detail it would require, the more so when the social theory I have begun to outline in the above pages is a deliberate Machiavellian social theory, one *totally* opposite to the ‘Machiavellianism’ advocated by Latour and by some participants in the Big Data debate. Suffice it to say, to avoid widespread misunderstandings and deep-rooted prejudices, that Machiavelli’s is a revolutionary thought of emancipation unambiguously

addressed against all kinds of resignation, fatalism and cynicism, and involving a very specific revolutionary project of liberation against the oligarchy. This is the reason, a very powerful one, it seems, why the oligarchy undertook an unprecedented large-scale campaign against Machiavelli which goes under the name of ‘Machiavellianism’ and continues to be highly effective today. Naturally in this undertaking the oligarchy was helped, in what is a rather strong historical link worth further investigation, by many intellectuals from both its own ranks and other social stations – most famous amongst them are those I have called the ‘court humanists’ (Frade, 2013). It seems to me that it is from these court humanists, rather than from Machiavelli, that the proponents of an extended ‘Machiavellianism’ have gained their inspiration.

Now in view of this I can only manifest the following, paraphrasing Weber: the social science we want to pursue is a *Machiavellian* social science; a science able to nurture an active hope against resignation and to provide some orientation for the conduct of life. We seek in particular to understand the transformative potential existing in reality, to unearth the possibilities for emancipatory change and to examine in detail the ways and means whereby such possibilities are stifled.

A Machiavellian social theory trusts the people. This is a consequence, and not a mere strategic rule, of the universal address, of the idea that people, women and men, can think. It involves self-confidence and, as Machiavelli explained in detail, hard but beautiful work. Today one wonders whether social theory and sociology have the self-confidence required to be Machiavellian.

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<sup>i</sup> A draft version of this paper was presented at the ESA (European Sociological Association) 2013 Conference – *Crisis, Critique and Change*, held in Torino (Italy), within the Social Theory strand. It seemed to arouse quite some interest among the participants and I am grateful to them for the many comments and critiques it received.

<sup>ii</sup> The strategic import of this move is further revealed by the fact that, as I write these pages, the British Sociological Association has launched a Presidential Event addressing ‘The Challenge of Big Data’ which will take place at the end of October. The Big Data issue has also figured rather prominently in the first issue of *Discover Society*, the online monthly magazine (a renewed version of *New Society*) devoted to showcase the relevance of social research which has just been launched by the British Sociological Association and the Social Policy Association.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, Savage and Burrows (2007: 894) refer to “the kinds of myriad mobilities, switches, transactions, and fluidities that are claimed to make up contemporary social life (Urry, 2003)”. Or Les Back, when, relying on Law and Urry (2004), he refers to what current method cannot admit, namely: “the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic aspects of sociality” (Back, 2012: 28).

<sup>iv</sup> Mike Savage (2009: 162), for example, refers to “Latour’s evocation of flow, mobility and contingency?”. For cases in which a language of mobilities and flows appears more explicitly and profusely see e.g. Büscher and Urry (2009), and Lash (2009).



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