

Between Cabbages and Kings: Speaking Across Forms of Life
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I would like to thank Leandro Rodriguez Medina for his generous and unexpected comments¹ on my article.² It's always a privilege to have someone read one's work carefully, and his review has served the added welcome end of drawing my attention to the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*. I am happy to learn that this initiative itself embodies a feature of knowledge production I tried to highlight in my article: its perennially evolving nature as a conversation amongst a community of enquirers.

Imagination and Social Science

In order to avoid the risk of agreeing too much, the majority of my response here will focus upon Rodriguez Medina's more critical comments, mainly in relation to the canon, and the possibility of dialogue across potentially incommensurable "forms of life." First, however, a brief note of strong agreement.

Rodriguez Medina raises the centrality of "imagination" to quality social science. With this, I really couldn't agree more. I am proud to practise a discipline whose unofficial manifesto to potential new recruits is so often Mills's classic *The Sociological Imagination*.³ Mills chose the title for his book carefully, and expressed his unease with the term "social science," since, as he wrote, "the word 'science' has acquired great prestige and rather imprecise meaning" and he did not feel "any need to kidnap the prestige or to make the meaning even less precise by using it as a philosophical metaphor."⁴ Foregrounding the importance of imagination is not merely useful as a proselytising tool, it also allows for a reflexive awareness of the subjectivity that inevitably goes into creating sociological knowledge, combined with a recognition that such knowledge is none the poorer for that fact.

The creative impulse that drove the founding of institutionalised sociology in the nineteenth century no doubt derived from its dream of science. However, to maintain its scientific credentials these days, we must either expand the notion of science beyond the capacity for language to maintain a usefully stable connotative function (the looser German term "*Wissenschaft*" might pose fewer problems), or else commit ourselves to the uneasy claim that the majority of activity carried out under the banner of sociology is in fact not really sociology at all. To insist upon their inherent connection, it seems that one of the terms—"science" or "sociology"—has to give.

In many ways this debate has in fact long been settled, and I doubt any social scientist (even an economist) would nowadays feel comfortable locating him or herself in the unlikely image that Hobbes painted in the *Leviathan*, wherein the social sciences were to constitute a sub-branch of physics. This is not to say that the natural sciences do not provide a potentially useful model for disciplines like sociology, for certain ends they surely do and to deny the central role of systematic empiricism within the social sciences would be foolish. However, social scientific knowledge can in no simplistic

¹ Rodriguez Medina 2016.

² Morgan 2016a.

³ C. Wright Mills 1959.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18n2.

way be understood as determined by empiricism. All sorts of non-empirical and *a priori* inputs go into shaping empirical perceptions of the world, and there can be no theory-independent observational language with which to describe that world. Empiricism usually involves “seeing as” rather than simply “seeing that,”⁵ and this holds true for the natural sciences too, even if under conditions of normal science such non-empirical inputs are typically well concealed by their taken-for-granted nature.

The model provided by natural science has also been revealed by historians, ethnographers, and philosophers of science not to be the singular unified approach that it was once presumed to be, and nor is it the only model on offer. Such things as literature, history, social activism, art, linguistics, even punk⁶ have all proven their utility as inspirations for studying society effectively and imaginatively. Much of my defence of sociology as a specifically humanistic discipline elsewhere⁷ is intended to reassert its debts to, and resonances with, the collection of disciplines usually grouped together under “the humanities,” as much as its connections with the empirical sciences.

Rodriguez Medina suggests that acknowledging that notions of knowledge verification need to be situated in “forms of life” implies the need for reform in sociological education: “the very idea of the canon, which still informs many, if not all, textbooks in the disciplines tends to overestimate some forms of life at the expense of others.”⁸ This is certainly true, though as long as we insist on certain conditions of knowledge production, I’m not sure I see the continuing presence of a canon as *necessarily* pernicious. This is firstly for fairly mundane and functional reasons, such as the practical purposes that a canon serves in providing an historical anchor and organising discourse in an otherwise relatively amorphous and intellectually promiscuous discipline. Sociology is a broad and internally-dissenting church indeed, but its admirable openness is won at the risk of a potential loss of intellectual coherence.

Being able to refer to Durkheim or Simmel, or figures who are slowly being pushed from the margins to the centre of the canon such as Du Bois or Martineau, allows for the otherwise highly unlikely feat that a sociologist researching the effects of economic liberalisation on homelessness might engage in a meaningful sociological conversation with one researching the social life of test-tubes. Paradoxically, limiting the number of books or authors we take as sacred can encourage a greater degree of open engagement across the discipline and provoke encounters that otherwise might not occur. The fewer the number of canonical bridges linking the various research sites, the more likely meetings are to take place on such crossings. These encounters, and the conversations that spring from them, may themselves form the basis for canon reform.

Beyond these functional purposes of the canon, there are also normally good, albeit debatable, inherent reasons why certain works become sacralised. Such works typically contain a higher-than-usual degree of intrinsic intellectual merit, if one is

⁵ Norwood Russell Hanson 1958.

⁶ David Beer 2014.

⁷ Morgan 2016b, Ch. 4.

⁸ Rodriguez Medina 2016, op. cit., 68.

able to talk of such a thing in a sociology of knowledge context. How to identify and measure this merit is of course contentious territory. One potential identifier is that really good books (the few that deserve to be considered for canonical status) are almost always productive grist for the hermeneutic mill, and classics ought only justly become such if they are capable of sparking original and useful re-readings and reinterpretations in the present. The best texts seem to share this capacity for provoking fresh ideas in each new generation of readers. Once they cease to do this (unless they are to continue to serve as what Kuhn calls “exemplars”), I agree that they should indeed make way for others.

This is not to say that the insularity of a canon and barriers to access are not dangers, nor to deny—as the recent movements around ‘decolonising education’ have made clear—that questions about the content of the canon are always political questions too, and especially so since they hold effects on how neophytes are to be socialised and therefore how the discipline is likely to reproduce itself. The insistence on “certain conditions of knowledge production” that I referred to above must certainly include mechanisms for open contestability in terms of which works are to be included and, when the time is right, excluded from the canon. This is a matter on which bright, well-read, and often politicised students are frequently one step ahead of overworked faculty, who are themselves invested in avoiding the extra labour that inevitably comes with periodically revising curricula.

On Indigenous Knowledge

Quoting from Harding’s new book,⁹ Rodriguez Medina raises the question of “indigenous knowledge,” and what I understand to be the issue of the demand for reincorporating the excluded and the peripheral, and questioning the universality of the conceptual apparatus developed in the core. In terms of sociology, not only was much of the classical canon constituted in reference to the oriental or colonial “other,”¹⁰ but so too was the very conception of modernity that it took as its primary object of study.¹¹ I am therefore in agreement that “other” ways of knowing (historically, as well as culturally) ought to be put in conversation with “our own” accounts of knowledge, and the humanities and social sciences seem to me to have led the way in achieving this. Another interesting and related question is how European and North American thought has been transformed in the process of its reception in other areas of the world, a field Rodriguez Medina has himself contributed to,¹² and which I am currently exploring through the case of Black Consciousness in South Africa.

However, it should also be remembered that attacks on the idea of the sociological canon have not only come from those at work in upsetting claims to epistemic universality and pushing for a reconsideration of the place of the marginal within the centre. Critique of the value of a sociological canon has also come from the centre itself, in the form of sociologists concerned with defending a more strictly scientific conception of the discipline. This was especially so in post-war America, when it was suggested that the history of social thought must not get muddled up with the primary

⁹ Sandra Harding 2015.

¹⁰ Craig Calhoun 1996.

¹¹ Gurminder Bhambra 2007.

¹² Rodriguez Medina 2014.

task of building a unified systemic body of sociological theory. Past sociological insight, in this critique, was relevant to present research concerns only to the extent that its claims had been empirically verified, and so could be incorporated into contemporary social models. “After all,” wrote Merton, “schools of medicine do not confuse the history of medicine with current medical practice, nor do departments of biology identify the history of biology with the viable theory now employed in guiding and interpreting biological research.”¹³ Merton’s choice of analogues is telling, and it should hopefully be clear that my own views diverge from these, and again, mainly because I see characteristics usually associated with the humanities—and in particular the claim that there is never simply a single use for knowledge and therefore never a single way of judging it—as central to sociological knowledge development.

On a slightly different issue, but again taking his impulse from Harding, Rodriguez Medina writes that

Perhaps one of the few shortcomings of Morgan’s text is a lack of reflection about the possible dialogue between forms of life, between different “truths”, between epistemic communities whose knowledge has actually affected their way of relating to the world... he does not seem to be sensitive to situations, in practical everyday life, in which those who use “truth” in one way have to communicate with those who use it in a different—or contradictory—way.¹⁴

This issue of communicating across different forms of life comes to the fore most prominently with the intensification of globalisation processes, and it takes on normative stakes since value judgements infuse epistemic communities and often define their borders. In addition, epistemic communities hardly ever possess explicit and formally developed propositional accounts of the particular theory of “truth” they subscribe to. For both of these reasons, the debate around the philosophy of the social sciences is pushed towards a debate around ethnocentrism (and on a more speculative reading, anthropocentrism too). This is also an area where my own views depart radically from the complacent ethnocentrism (or “anti-anti-ethnocentrism”) of Rorty.¹⁵

On this matter I think Geertz was right—in both an epistemological and a moral sense—to warn against “the attractions of ‘deafness to the appeal of other values’ and of a relax-and-enjoy-it approach to one’s imprisonment in one’s own cultural tradition.”¹⁶ He was also correct in drawing our attention to the problematic assumption of consensus within communities. As he put it, “foreignness does not start at the water’s edge, but at the skin’s,”¹⁷ and although Geertz grants Wittgenstein the benefit of the doubt, it was in part on this point—about the internal coherence, isolation, and stability of communities—on which Gellner famously took issue with Wittgenstein and his devotees.¹⁸

¹³ Robert K. Merton 1949, 4.

¹⁴ Rodriguez Medina 2016, op. cit., 69.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty 1991, 203-210.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz 1986, 257.

¹⁷ Geertz 1986, op. cit., 261.

¹⁸ Ernest Gellner 1959.

In this way, Geertz's, as opposed to Rorty's interpretation of "forms of life" seems far more adequate to me (whether or not it is in fact a more accurate reflection of what Wittgenstein himself actually meant). Rather than taking the notion that thought and judgement are located in a form of life as meaning that "the limits of my world are the limits of my language," Geertz instead reminds us that what Wittgenstein in fact said was that,

the limits of my language are the limits of my world, which implies not that the reach of our minds, of what we say, think, appreciate, and judge, is trapped within the borders of our society, our country, our class, or our time, but that the reach of our minds, the range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live.¹⁹

On this reading, ground is cleared not only for communication, but also for learning, and indeed doing so from forms of knowledge we might impulsively find absurd or repugnant. Rather than recoiling from such knowledge, what Gadamer termed a "fusion of horizons" is instead placed back on the agenda. Cultural diversity, including alternative notions of "truth," is understood in Bernard Williams's phrase as providing not merely "alternatives to us," but also potential "alternatives for us."²⁰ Even where communities are not imbricated, they are seen as at least having windows in Geertz's vision, and humans are understood as capable of translation, interpretation, and of "defining the terrain reason must cross if its modest rewards are to be reached and realised."²¹

Conclusion

Whilst not wishing to abandon the term, Harding's new book draws out the irony and confusion that stems from the fact that appeals to the epistemic norm of "objectivity" so often lack the thing they claim themselves to have. Values, she stresses, are at the centre of most of what we do, in science as elsewhere, and there is no ultimate way of surgically excising them from our activity. In many ways her appeal to the notion of "strong objectivity" from below is in fact congruent with two arguments I have supported elsewhere.

These are, firstly, that the kinds of truths generated by the social sciences tend to exhibit characteristics of what James Clifford called "partial truths,"²² in the sense of being both committed and incomplete.²³ This partiality—again in both senses of the term—derives from our simultaneously limited and privileged location within the world, as well as our interests, which in the process of developing more adequate research methodologies Harding and others have called a "standpoint."

Secondly, that the production of social knowledge ought never be separated from the development of grounded forms of social hope, aimed ultimately towards the

¹⁹ Geertz 1986, op. cit., 263.

²⁰ Geertz 1986, op. cit., 260.

²¹ Geertz 1986, op. cit., 270.

²² James Clifford 1986.

²³ Morgan 2016b, op. cit.

contestable ends of social justice, and especially so since the social sciences are performative in their effects.²⁴ Admittedly, as Rodriguez Medina correctly points out, these are somewhat grand pursuits, especially once foundationalism has been abandoned, much easier to give lip service to than consistently follow. They might also, however, be conceived as pragmatic orientation devices, and I am sure Medina would agree that the promise of sociology is better served by faltering towards valuable goals, than by consistently meeting less worthy ones.

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²⁴ Marcus Morgan 2016c.