Passion, Curiosity, Integrity, for Twamly, K., Doidge, M. and Scott, A. (eds.)

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To me sociology is a way of approaching the world; it’s not only a perspective but also a passion. It’s a way of understanding who we are, how we are and how to understand other elements such as people, organisation and technology. It’s a way of understanding that moves through different scales, from the individual (as it is constructed in its singularity through the idea of the self) to the multiple global scales of capitalism operating throughout the world. I love the way sociology enables us to move through scales with specific forms of understanding. For instance, sociology show us how the self is produced as an *idea* over time, repeated until it appears as common sense – so that we do not notice that it is a very specific idea, based on promoting and consolidating the interests of a particular group against it constitutive opposite- the mass. We grow up hearing, seeing and learning to believe in such ideas and use them to make sense of our lives and then suddenly we encounter sociology which enables us to see how the self is a fabrication, a way of insulating ourselves from others, a way of owning property in ourselves, of becoming a ‘proper person’ and a way of blocking off other ways of seeing. When C. Wright Mills talks of the sociological imagination he is talking about perspectives – what we can see and how.

I love the way that sociology never ceases to surprise me, of how it enables me to switch into new ways of seeing. I excitedly anticipate being exposed to the assumptions I take for granted that will be blown apart in the future. This is why I love finding new books, new articles and hearing people talk about new areas. I remember when I first came across Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of ‘cultural capital’, I was doing a PGCE at the time (preparing to teach Sociology in FE colleges) and it literally changed my life. It made me understand the world differently from a range of perspectives. I had the same experience previously when reading Marx as an O Level (16 yr. old student in an FE college), I can say, working with the seeing metaphor, that my eyes were opened. I suddenly saw things that I had never seen before. The same happened when as I came across different forms of feminism – they enable me to see the world differently. I was offered new forms of interpretation, understanding and ways of doing and being.

Sociological knowledge can enable switches in perspective by offering a range of ways of understanding. This range is incredibly useful when doing research, operating as a theoretical tool kit, enabling one to work out which explanations are the most useful, which ones have ‘explanatory power” and which theories cannot make sense of what is happening and what matters.

The metaphor of seeing translates into experience. By seeing things differently you come to experience the world differently. So Marx, feminism and Bourdieu enabled me to understand not just my position in the world but how the world operated. Instead of understanding my experience as tragic failure, a feeling generated from being at a very posh university with very posh people, living constant humiliation for being the wrong person, knowing the wrong things and doing everything wrongly, I instead came to understand myself as differentially positioned by historical material relations which restricted my access to the things that other’s considered important (such as culture and taste), things which I did not know about and which did not make sense to me. My perplexity of feeling as if I was matter out of place was given a powerful political explanation. I was. The understanding of being the ‘improper person’ helped me not just to understand my own experiences but also those of others, and gave me life-long research questions, such as how some people can and want to invest in their own superiority at the expense of others. Many of my sociological inquiries have actually led me to the question of investment – why do we invest in certain ways of being and not others? That is a great sociological question which pushes me into different sociological explanations – is it because of lack of alternatives ?( what would alternatives look like?), is it because of psychic fear and insecurity? (what would security look like?), is it because of a different relationships to the past and to the future? – where investment is either possible or impossible. Does investment always carry over time? Do we actually know what we are doing? Are we just caught up in performing ourselves without knowing? Being pushed by concepts is a positive experience. They put us to work, extending us, taking us into different domains. I think ‘investment’, ‘paying attention’ and performing our value are absolutely key to understanding all social relations.

This is also why I love doing empirical research. People are complex creatures. We live multiple contradictions over time and space. This is why I’m less keen on the hit and run one-off interview approach that can only capture a moment of a speech act produced through one social encounter. To understand whom we and others can be we need to concentrate our attention over time. I did a longitudinal ethnographic study of subjective formation (*Formations of Class and Gender*), to understand how class and gender shaped who, what and how we could be over time. I loved exploring the gaps between words and deeds, always evident when you spend time with people, perplexed, interrogating the different explanations, plausibility and possibility structures brought into effect. Most of all I loved being surprised: when the research participants said things or behaved in ways I could not understand, I’d be forced to really think about what was going on and *make* sense, ditching preconceived assumptions and theories.

There is a great sociological delight in making things make sense when they don’t appear to do so. In a study of the LA Watts riots in the 1960’s Guy Debord ([Debord 2008](#_ENREF_1)) notes how people were looting fridges even after the area had been burnt down and there was no electricity. What a great act to challenge and understand the desire for objects presented as desirous to those who have no access to them. The London rioters were much more practical.

I also really appreciate being alerted to new things that have been latent and lurking in my head. When we were doing the research project on reality TV (*Reacting to Reality TV: Audience, Performance, Value*) I had been reading books and listening to people speak about affect and they linked me back to a memory of something I’d read years ago (Larry Grossberg on affect as the missing link in ideology –on popular music). I tracked it down and it helped me make sense of a strongly affective medium (RTV is a sensation-generating form of TV), generating strongly affective responses from our participants. But what a lot of theories did not explain was how affect was converted: what happened to it after it was expressed. This gave us a great way to understand how affect was channeled and how position and ideology were highly significant. This analysis also took me back to thinking about value and judgment, which made me realize that all my work has been about e/valuation and value formations and it made me question Bourdieu’s analysis (which began in depth when I tried to make Bourdieu connect to feminism; an experiment that failed as Bourdieu does not understand how gender proceeds through ambiguity. I’m now trying to develop this further and have just embarked on an ESRC fellowship on ‘a sociology of value and values’, which will be the culmination of all my research pushed in new directions (how digital social relationship and prosperity theology connect value to values).

It is the interrogation, not just of common sense but of sociological sense, that I think makes us push the barriers to our knowledge. To be a good sociologist I truly believe that you have to be open and curious and to do so you need a range of sociological tools. These range from detailed conceptual understanding (always define your terms, always know why you are using a particular idea/concept, know its etymology and applications), to historical knowledge of how things appear to be the way they appear to be, why people do the things they do (alternatives, investment and incitements) to a methodological tool kit for understanding why people speak in a particular way (discursive framing), and are likely to tell and perform in the research encounter.

To be a sociologist means using sociological explanations, perspectives and critiques that understand not just the individual and their motivations but the social relations in which we are all located. It is a relational way of understanding the world – whether the relations between capital and labour, or mothers and daughters. It is the social relations that shape our conditions of possibility. And ‘conditions of possibility’ is such a useful frame for understanding. Possibility will always be complex because we are located in many social relations, but it is by interrogating the complexity of those relations that we forge new ways of understanding.

For somebody starting out in sociology I’d say ‘stick to your instincts’. When I’ve come across new ideas via new books, papers etc. sometimes they speak directly to me (for me Marx, feminism, Bourdieu), but sometimes I feel they are instinctively wrong: I’ve done that will many major male theorists who just theorise their own experience and somehow seem trapped, unable to see beyond themselves unable to switch perspective. For instance, when they talk about there being no such thing as class (as they try and promote their own brand of banal theory instead) all I see is a very privileged person who cannot understand the privilege they inhabit and their own conditions of production. Even when they become fashionable and everybody cites them I’ll stubbornly refuse. Concepts must have explanatory power not just trending status. Sometimes I’ll be forced to mount a critique but to be frank I’d much rather work with good ideas and build on or modify, that which makes sense rather than waste my time taking apart rubbish.

So it’s a matter of working with what makes sense but also recognizing that some ideas take time to work. I was skeptical about performativity when I first came across Judith Butler in the early 1990s but I felt there was something in it (via the heterosexual matrix). I read and re-read, discussed and tried to write my way through it. And I finally realized there was much more there than I had initially seen. My early ethnographic research showed how conscious performance can blow apart performativity (unconscious iteration) as class disrupts gender and sexuality; the ‘forced’ performances spectacularly revealed by reality TV intensify this breakdown, challenging how we come to understand different forms of classed gender. Some things are worth spending time on.

It’s also great going back to things you found interesting and re-reading- they often offer up new perspectives. It’s sad that as academics we have been under so much pressure since the 1990s to publish not fully worked out ideas in order to be REF-able (the method that measures our productivity from writing, research grants and impact, and like Macdonalds burger chain rewards us with stars that are then collectivized to our departments, universities and lead to the distribution of government funds). We don’t need to keep finding new ways of saying the same thing as is often the case. Sometimes it’s good to dwell and inhabit ideas for some time. I now see all my writing as work in progress rather than a fully formed product. It is an engagement and an intervention in a debate rather than a steadfast result, product or truth.

A connected point to trusting instincts is to ‘keep integrity’. When people continuously said to me ‘class doesn’t matter’ – right through from the fashion of post-modernism into Latour, I stuck to my guns. I was able to argue why it did. And now I’ve learnt that every time a new theory comes along it’s not very hard to work out is class production and location. I’ve fought hard to keep class on the agenda in both feminism and sociology and now as we enter horrific austerity (where people are having to use food banks to survive in the seventh richest country in the world), we have plenty of understanding of how and why the term is useful. Class is an idea that enables us to speak and understand these inequalities as the imposition of coherent policies by a government that represents a very specific class fraction - the rich who are becoming richer at the expense of the poor- the redistribution of wealth upwards, class war! I’m completely aware of how class is a rhetorical device but I’m also aware of how the affective and economic injustices people feel flounder and have no form for political critique if not attached to a powerful rhetorical idea - class - that can explain their circumstances. Hence, why every government for the last 30yr (supported by some sociologists) has tried to deny that class exists. I’m still angry, frustrated and upset by these issues.

Also, if things are not happening in your sociological world make them happen – organize things to surround yourself with the people and debates you want to hear. There is something very nurturing about heralding people to discuss the things that matter. And as we get older I think we have a duty to support younger scholars to enable them to make things happen. We should recognize the significance of regeneration (not reproduction).

But I’d also say learn how the world of sociology works. Read all the great work on audit and metrics, the REF, the way universities as institutions work and why and how the government intervenes. I never cease to be amazed by the people who work in sociology departments who do not understand the conditions in which they work – being a head of department has been very revealing of how those who study power do not often understand their own location in it. I think its because they don’t have to and they don’t think about work as work.

And most importantly remember what matters. Stick with your project. Think about what you really want to do and how to make it happen. It takes time. I began with three part time jobs in three different institutions. But it was a great experience although it could have been easier. I knew where I wanted to be –Lancaster Women’s Studies. I know I like to be surrounded by people who are really smart so that I can learn from them. There’s a huge pleasure in enjoying just the corridor conversation with colleagues. I also love teaching, without teaching I am not tested to fully explain my ideas: there is nothing like a group of smart students telling you that you don’t make sense to make you re-think your ideas.

Is there anything I’d do differently? Plenty. I’d not be so precocious and mean in book reviews. I’d not be terrified by the proper posh male Marxists that made me feel that I had nothing to offer their incredibly limited critiques. I’d learn more quickly that just because people can speak well does not mean they have anything clever to say; I’d spot snobbery as a disguise for lack of sharpness rather than revealing of it. I’d be more generous to those I disagreed with. And I’d learn to say no. Insecurity and curiosity are a lethal combination. I’m very proud of being a sociologist and doing sociology. It changed my life and hopefully it will change others.

Debord, G. (2008). The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy. A Sick Planet. G. Debord. Oxford, Seagull Books.