

The politics of imagination: keeping open *and* critical

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A simple phrase takes its meaning from a given context, and already makes its appeal to another one in which it will be understood; but, of course, to be understood it has to transform the context in which it is inscribed. As a result, this appeal, this promise of the future, will necessarily open up the production of a new context, wherever it may happen. The future is not present, but there is an opening onto it; and because there is a future, a context is always open. What we call opening of the context is another name for what is still to come. (Derrida and Ferraris, 2001: 19–20)

In adopting ‘keeping open’ as our motif for this set of papers, the phrase takes its meaning from the context of the theme of this special issue: ‘The politics of imagination’. This theme already makes its appeal to another theme from *The Sociological Review’s* 100th Anniversary Conference with which it was placed back to back: ‘Imagining the political’. Our aim is to provide an ‘opening’ to the first context that also transforms this additional context. This is because we think a re-imagining of the political has to go beyond the concerns of class, ethnicity and activism as well as do more than take in a much wider array of topics such as the body, gender, business and religion. We want to show that any re-imagining of the political has to go hand in hand with an exploration of imagination as one of the key sites in which all political and cultural agendas, large and small, are played out.

To our motif we have added the notion of keeping ‘critical’. Our view is that the political can be understood partly in terms of attempts to close the imagination down; a closure that seeks to fix the ways in which we think and conduct ourselves and make permanent the endless divisions that rivet the world into place. In all this the questions ‘In whose interests?’ and ‘Who benefits?’ still apply, but there are also simplicities here that we wish to avoid. For instance, it is clear others hold onto resources that should be shared, or deploy hierarchy to decide our futures ahead of our doing so for ourselves. What is perhaps less obvious though are the complex ways in which we have become embedded in technologies like risk assessment, budgeting, ‘tendering’, ‘proposing’ and bidding, as well as audit; and, further, how these estrange us by promoting

values, such as transparency, on our behalf. So much so that these matters are not only taken out of our hands so to speak, but become removed from our imagination as technologies. Proceduralised, legitimated and legalized, the *polis* becomes a site of silent contestation and invisible power, alien to the democratic ideals it is intended to support.

The 100th Anniversary conference 'Imagining the Political/The Politics of Imagination' took place in the UK in June 2009 and attracted many scholars from all over the globe. Two earlier publications have been generated from this conference.¹ The aim of this issue is to bring together papers that both open up sociological understandings of how the social comes about and emphasise the importance of imagination for the politics of everyday life and experience. Critically, we want to draw a distinction from C. Wright Mills' (1959) way of thinking about imagination. Although we have all benefited from being brought up in what Mills calls *the* sociological imagination, we think it is time to go beyond the confines of privileging any particular perspective. We are aware that keeping open may seem too easy an appeal, after all who wants to 'remain closed'? But we want to emphasise how hard it is. So we not only want to note who gets exploited, marginalised and excluded, but also work precisely at the site of any boundary drawing. For example, whilst we accept many of the critiques of the classifications of social class (and the problems of classification itself), we do not want to abandon the term. To the contrary we support work that opens up any closure on class. Particularly where the consequences of closure can be demonstrated; for instance, how such closure has allowed the psychological to be brought in as an explanation for the experience of structural inequality (eg Walkerdine, 2003; Gillies, 2007; Skeggs, 2004). So that keeping open and critical does not necessarily mean an abandoning of what has gone before; it may instead include finding ways to prevent it from deteriorating into dead metaphors. So that while we like the notion of *being* open – in what feminist epistemologist's press as an openness to Otherness and difference (eg Diprose, 2002; Haraway, 2007) – we are particularly interested in the movement and the space *in between* different perspectives. Questions arise, though, over how to open the margins, the boundaries and the spaces in between perspectives to re-mind us how moments of closure and settlement are intermittent. As such, as we squeeze and press, we can open out alternative perspectives on doing social science.

Yet we are aware of the difficulties that occur with the idea of perspectives. As Strathern (1994) notes in a discussion of social understandings of parts and wholes, when one switches from looking at a person as a unique individual to his or her relations with others (see also Latimer, 2009), a dimension from another explanatory order is added. Each perspective might be used to totalising effect, yet each totalising perspective is vulnerable to other perspectives that make its own explanatory purchase incomplete. As Strathern points out, to switch from one perspective to another is to switch whole domains of explanation. The parts are thus not equal since perspectives cannot be matched. One perspective can only attempt to capture the essence of another

by encapsulating it as part of itself. For instance, the attempts to understand gender as a class as happened in the 1980s from French feminism (Delphy, 1984) or the more recent attempts at intersectionality (Brah and Phoenix, 2004).

Insofar as imagination becomes something territorialised, we want to question the ways in which imagination is always already tamed and ordered by our being enrolled in one tradition rather than another. So in this issue we have no intention of inventing a new 'sociology of imagination' (cf Atkinson, 1990; Willis, 2000). Since our interest instead is in exploring the relations between imagination and keeping open, which might include, for example, our tracing the politics of how a new movement in any domain (ecology, science, 'culture', theory, the academy and even sociology) is itself re-imagining relations, both conceptual and lived.

Our choice of the term 'keeping' is thus not incidental. 'Keeping' has ethical import (Latimer and Munro, 2009), even when ethics is itself made the target of critique and examination (see for example Latimer and Puig, forthcoming; Munro, 2010). Although 'being critical' can of course be one way of keeping open, especially when we examine our own role in expressing knowledge in the form of dogma, all too easily the means can also become an end in themselves. Keeping critical is not the same therefore as 'being critical', much as keeping open is not the same as being open. It takes a different energy to keep pushing and troubling. Nor is keeping critical the same as 'keeping open *and* critical'. Our motif 'keeping open' thus signals that the work we engage in is not only directed at uncovering 'truths' about the world, but registers the extent to which we have to, as sociologists, nurture and preserve the possibility of *difference*; that we have to defer on making the easy divisions and pause ahead of making judgments that are almost too ready to hand.

Keeping open: difference and reason

Some of the articles in this volume do take on Mills's (1959) call for an 'insurgent' intellectual practice that would exercise both a scholarly and a public (or political) service by articulating so-called social 'problems' and translating individually experienced 'troubles' into public 'issues'. Others though are more concerned with showing how, like any power effects, the value of imagining and re-imagining comes from its effects and affects. Here, imagination can be understood not just as topic and resource, but as a space to be found in between discursive and material events and practices, that is potentially transformative (Foucault, 2000): as a *force*, that transforms the present by opening up a different past and a different future.

We want to suggest that keeping this space open – as say a place through which reordering becomes possible – is critical for the enrichment and continuous reinvigoration of any institution, including the disciplines. For example, as Judith Butler (1990) demonstrated in her opening up of normative

gender and heterosexual relations and institutions this can involve ‘troubling’ what has been normalized. As Schillmeier (this volume) suggests, troubling how we live and what we can do to sociology and within it as a discipline, brings attention to how the many different forms, perspectives and institutionalisations of normativity are constructed and disrupted.

In practice this entails not only multiplying ways of imagining social realities, but includes our retrieving earlier ‘imaginings’ of relations from the dogmatic slumbers in which they have been preserved. We have all seen how sustained attention to issues, for example, of race and post-coloniality brings into view new ways of understanding power that cannot be reversed or re-settled, altering the very conditions of possibility for understanding power struggles over what constitutes knowledge. In all this, taking Strathern’s points about perspective seriously, we need to be careful: it would be a pity if, in reordering, something else gets lost or obscured.

Munro (2011) in his introduction to one of the other two sets of papers from *The Sociological Review’s* anniversary conference, presses how sociology works both theory and practice through its debates. It is vital in this context that we do not let our newer understandings erase what we have learnt from the past, including, as Verran (this volume) asserts ‘very useful humanist attachments’; to do otherwise, she suggests,

[..] . . . is bad politics, perhaps something that is more obvious to social scientists in Africa than in Europe. Social analyses should be generative for the people those analyses are about, opposed though their interests often are, and generative also in the academic collectives within which analyses as such are currency. (This volume, page 423)

In what follows we show how each paper in this volume finds ways to create the conditions of possibility through which opening critically can happen. In this last respect we should proceed by way of acknowledging some of the major ‘openings’ that are already present to hand. These would include Martin Heidegger’s attempt to make a ‘clearing’, where the target is not only what passes for Reason but culture, Michael Foucault’s emphasis on ‘curiosity’, where issues of Representation are at stake, Marilyn Strathern’s work on ‘extension’, where Relations are to be regenerated and rethought, and Jacques Derrida’s image of ‘fissures’, the written passages that can be transgressed, deconstructed, and made Radical.

Making ‘clearings’ in culture

If Heidegger’s (1962) sights were mainly on Western metaphysics, what counts and does not count as Reason, his more general remarks about ‘thrownness’ indicate the extent to which he saw human beings as deeply embedded in the cultures within which they are brought up. As anthropologists have traced

again and again, members of different cultures find it difficult to imagine other ways to understand what they fondly think they already know.

Heidegger's contribution can be understood in terms of his attempts to make a 'clearing' in which it becomes possible to think something different from the knowledge which has become embodied and the ideas in which we are 'emplaced' (Heidegger, 1996; Weber, 1996). He thus foresaw the difficulties we experience in attempting to extricate ourselves from these, so that making a clearing operates as a kind of 'working backwards'. Helen Verran in her earlier work (1998) captures these associations and distinctions in her analyses of Aboriginal ways of knowing, and the politics of establishing property rights, to make explicit the paradox of the 'Western' polarization of imagination and reason. She notes how at the very moment Kant sees the exclusion of the imaginary as the defining property of reason he can only imagine reason in metaphorical terms – as an island, thus excluding his meaning of reason from the canon of what is/can count as reasonable" (1998: 245). Here Verran is pointing to how all ideas involve an imaginary, not just as a form of expression, but rather as an artifact that performs. An imaginary is not just a metaphor, it is metonymic, a concept that stands for a way of thinking the world into being, and as such is a mode of ordering, because it opens a space, a way of seeing that makes absent, or marginalizes other ways of seeing, feeling and thinking:

The Imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library. (Foucault, 1998: 106, cited by Hetherington, this volume, page 470)

In this sense then we are never without imaginaries, but imaginaries are rooted in socio-political and cultural contexts, as at the same time they are performative and do their political work. Unpacking and contesting the specifics of the work imaginaries do, including our own, and the transformations they may afford, is the work of a critical social science.

In this volume, Verran pushes this way of doing social science further, pointing us away from epistemology into an 'ontic politics' that argues for a rethinking of sociation. In the context of Verran's paper the ontic around which politics is being played out, and through which something new comes into being, is Australian Nature. By detailing a hearing of three tender bids for environmental governance (in which 'capitalising upon nature' is the name of the game), she shows how, in order to win bids, environmental services have to be able to demonstrate how they can accumulate from a natural asset value. This involves reconceptualising Nature in which only external relations not internal properties matter. Working back from her disconcertment over one of the bids, Verran is able to make a clearing through juxtaposing two alternative analytical frames, that also, she asserts, engage alternative metaphysical commitments: it is only this switching perspectives, and metaphysical

commitments, that allows the ontic politics involved in the hearing of the three tender bids, and what it is that the winning bid is doing differently, to come into view. It is from working backwards that Verran makes a clearing in which she is able to reveal how the hearing is reconstructing Australian Nature:

Recognising multiple political domains that become visible when multiple forms of analysis engaging alternative metaphysical commitments are deployed, the strategy aims to bring into view the complex politics of ‘doing difference together’, and to suggest that among other things this is a politics of imagination. (This volume, page 422)

Verran shows not just how the new Australian Nature that comes into being with the winning bid is discontinuous with earlier imaginaries – it is neither romantic nor progressive. Rather, she opens a way to see how the politics through which Australian Nature is being reimagined also bring into being a new kind of governmental relation: and ‘a clear danger that the state, in the guise of the not-state, might end up firmly in control of strategic minutiae in the collective life of every Australian people-place’ (this volume, page 428).

Papadopoulos (this volume) also questions the affects and effects of different imaginaries. Looking across shifts in scientific explanations for brain-body relations (from behaviourism and cognitivism to what he calls connectionism, embodiment and the autogeneric) he explores how different scientific imaginaries come into being in specific socio-cultural and political contexts, which they then help to reinforce, or shift. Working backwards from these shifts he helps to make a clearing in which we can begin to see how these shifts bring into being different imaginary ‘types’ of persons and worlds. Papadopoulos argues that the latest imaginary of the brain-body relation – plasticity – puts into play a way of seeing the brain and body as amenable to recombination. Plasticity becomes a force which actively contributes to the making of the social, political and material realities we live in. He suggests that at the heart of the imaginary of plasticity lies the possibility of recombining brain-body matter and of the making of ecologically dependent morphologies. The paper argues that the vision of plasticity as recombination becomes not only a radical challenge to prevailing deterministic assumptions about the brain-body in Western thought, but also a forceful element of its regeneration and actualization. At first this sounds so appealing – our attachment to the notion of plasticity – with all its cultural and political assumptions – is almost assured, until Papadopoulos begins to set its transformatory possibilities in a wider political context of the culture of enhancement (Strathern, 1995), another site for the elicitation and seduction of persons as becomings, who can always, with just a little more knowledge or effort or technology, become *better*. Instead he offers plastic possibilities that escape the ‘various ethnocentric reincarnations of universalism and incorporeality of the imaginary of recombinant plasticity’ (this volume, page 450).

Keeping curious, targeting representation

Foucault (1996 [1980]) emphasises curiosity, and by implication imagination, as an ethical commitment to keeping open:

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy and even by a certain conception of science . . . I like the word however. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes ‘concern’; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; an acute sense of the real which, however, never becomes fixed; a readiness to find our surroundings strange and singular; a certain relentlessness in ridding ourselves of our familiarities and looking at things otherwise; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is passing away; a lack of respect for traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential. (Foucault, 1996 [1980]: 305)

In his notion of curiosity then Foucault is offering us another way to keep open and critical that relies on ‘looking at things otherwise’. Keeping curious thus entails not a looking inside, but ‘an acute sense of the real’ that does not become fixed but one ‘that helps make the familiar strange’. In other words, Foucault is pressing the conditions of possibility through which we can challenge representations as constitutive and as emplacing: as situating us inside a perspective from which we do not just see, but from which we are also made blind to other possibilities, other ideas of what is important or essential. In a sense he is urging us to *keep unpacking* the discourses that formulate our gaze (Foucault, 1973) and from inside which we get a particular perspective, a particular subjectivity.

In his paper on ‘Foucault, the diagram and the museum’ Hetherington (this volume) challenges the dominant representations of subjectivity and imagination, including that of any possibility of there being a perspective, as themselves forms of subjectivisation. He reopens understandings of heterotopia and the non-relation between discourse, visual apparatus and power. Specifically, Hetherington helps us understand how the museum is a diagram of power that offers processes and practices, artefacts and their discursive interpretations, as ways of imagining the world and our selves, but one that is different from the panopticon. In a meticulous unfolding of Foucault’s work on the relation between seeing and saying, Hetherington offers a rereading of the modern museum as a site not just of discipline, but of reflexivity, as a new form of power ‘*that makes visible the process of subjectivization to itself*’ (this volume, page 461). Through carefully tracing the making of the inside and the outside, addressing the very notion of perspective itself, through Foucault’s lesser known and incomplete works, Hetherington shows us how the non-relation between the outside and the inside reveals a *void* where the subject should be. Hetherington suggests, in his analysis of Foucault’s reading of

Manet's painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the emergence of the modern museum, and the modern form of the diagram, in which this void (and subjectivization with it), is made apparent. It is in Manet's 'museum-painting' that the 'humanist God-eye meets its sorry end in a bar' (this volume, page 468). And yet this decentering of the subject – even 'as the imaginative constructor of the representations that it sees' (this volume, page 468) – opens up other possibilities for understanding the relation between discourse and the visual, of seeing and saying, as always susceptible, as always fragile, because they can never totally line up. There is a space in between, an interval, that can be worked, and, Hetherington suggests, this is what all diagrams are like.

Hetherington thus celebrates an understanding of the modern museum as a diagram that both subjectivizes but also reveals the processes of subjectivization. As such it is neither a totalizing form of power nor a pure site of resistance, but a space in which there is a conjoining of both: a both/and. In offering this as a new understanding of heterotopia, he not only revisits and re-imagines his own earlier work but also presents us with the modern museum as a space of tension in which a politics of imagination is being continuously played out.

So at the same time as we are stressing the politics of imagination in terms of conditions of possibility for reordering, we are also wanting to question how the political works the imagination and so consider a need to 'unfence' what is seemingly open. For example, Boden and Epstein in this volume draw attention to the very conditions of possibility by which the sociological imagination is enabled and constrained in the academy. The conditions of production of academic knowledge are currently being radically restructured. Boden and Epstein claim that academic freedom is necessary to the sociological imagination; without it, they suggest, we will return to the flat earth society. They maintain a belief in 'essential freedom', which they define as the intra/inter psychic capacity to be hopeful. Drawing on the work of Kenway and Fahey (2008) they distinguish between a compliant and defiant imagination, proposing that the conditions necessary for a defiant imagination are infrastructure and time, both of which are now under sustained attack in the present austerity climate.²

Following on from the work of Evans (2004) and Strathern (1997), who each unpick the impact of earlier restructuring of higher education and the introduction of audit culture upon academic subjectivities, Boden and Epstein detail how a substantial number of academics have fully embraced the shift from the gift economy to the market economy. Many English Universities have become pseudo business organizations, (although as E.P. Thompson pointed out as long ago as 1971 how 'Warwick University PLC' (his title), was blasting its way into the privatized future). But the issue is not that capitalism determines all social relations. Rather it is to observe how the conditions of social production in current academic life encourage certain formations that constitute relations in terms of *economic* problems (Deleuze, 1994). For example, many aspects of the so-called 'progressive modernization' of the

academy is occurring through introduction of marketplace technologies, such as the research excellence framework, in which research and academic publication are figured intermittently in terms of their monetary value: as potential assets through which financial resources can be accrued. Boden and Epstein argue that many academics have yet to readjust to this business world, still thinking of themselves as having a vocation rather than doing a job on a production line. As such they are subject not just to increased exploitation but to the constraining of possible imaginaries, as they desperately try to reach all of their audit performance targets. Imaginary impairment is not just as a result of the fear of unemployment but is also driven by the individualised competitiveness that shapes academic lives. Virno (1996) argues that in much contemporary work the fears of insecurity, of losing one's privileges, of redundancy, of 'threatening' opportunities that 'haunt the workday like a mood' (p. 17) are transformed into operational requirements, into flexibility, adaptability, self-management and a readiness to continuously reconfigure oneself. Such that 'fear is no longer what drives us into submission before work but the active component of a stable instability that marks the internal articulations of the productive process itself' (p. 17).

Troubling 'extensions', rethinking relations

In her work on relations (1993, 1991) Strathern elides the conceptual and the lived to offer an extension to dominant ways of Euro-American thinking and a way to keep opening up how relations are ordered. Critically, Strathern (eg 1999) through her thinking with other cultures, offers ways to reveal our thrownness, and disclose the ordering of relations that we take for granted. To glimpse, for a moment, not just the other, but other ways of being and thinking. Focusing on moments of attachment and detachment, Strathern (1991) helps make explicit how shifts in extension, and relations of power, are accomplished and reaccomplished as *affects*. Thus we can understand how sociality is also a process of mediated association that makes us aware that we live in extension. Indeed, as Munro (2005) proposes, extension is all we are ever in. Extension not only intermediates (transports) but also mediates (transforms) time and space. Politics is thus not merely a human affair. As Schillmeier proposes (this volume), we need to research social relations in ways that unbutton the normalcy of sociality as well as our attachments to particular modes of social observation.

In her article Skeggs (this volume) extends the sociological tradition of attaching us to 'other' subjectivities (eg Beynon, 1975) to shift dominant bourgeois perspectives on class. She demonstrates how taking the normative bourgeois perspective on class results in an understanding of aestheticisation, value and class relations that represents the working class as a deficient, even desperate, version of the bourgeois norm. She brings ideas of value from traditional Marxist quantitative abstractions together with moral philosophical

concerns to open understandings of how bodies and persons move between sites for value/values. Initially, following Bourdieu, Skeggs outlines how people enter fields of exchange, or what she'd prefer to call 'circuits of value', pre-disposed and pre-loaded with value (inherited or accumulated). Skeggs shows how circuits of value work because this embodied value gives people differential access to different economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals, which are in turn convertible into further value where people move into imaginary (possible and plausible) futures. Skeggs argues that Bourdieu's understanding of power and capital is based primarily on those who can play the game, of investing and accruing capital, while leaving others wanting, and often suffering (see Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991). She suggests an extension of Bourdieu's theory, one that also shifts the world, by attaching ourselves to working class persons. This shifting perspective allows us to reimagine what counts as value. In so doing Skeggs helps us to experience, for a moment, other ways of understanding value: not as the constant capitalising and projecting of ones self into the future, but one in which issues like justice and fairness, rather than individualism and self promotion, matter. Attention to and investment in others over space and time becomes one way of shifting perspective from the capital-normative singular self to the social relational subject, from epistemology to ontology. What she is proposing is a way to 'think with' (Puig de la Bellacasa, in press) autonomist working class persons/value/s to help us deconstruct the perspective of the normative (see also Aguiar, this volume). Skeggs thus offers an alternative theoretical framework, a different perspective, and an extended imaginary for thinking about how we both understand and live value/s as we circulate as corporeal persons through circuits of value.

Schillmeier (this volume) emphasizes the importance of multiplying perspectives and social actors, including the non-human, in sociology. He argues that this is particularly important for unconcealing what is made so normalized that it remains hidden, because such a view unfolds *research agendas and opens conceptual rooms of articulation* and makes visible those that have been excluded, marginalized, forgotten, unconsidered, or disfigured in the process of normalizing social and political action. Schillmeier suggests one way of doing this is to pay particular attention to *cosmopolitical events* that extend the history of sociological imagination to the social and political relevance of the non-human. Focussing on the recent event in Japan around the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear plant, Schillmeier shows how a cosmopolitical event disrupts, questions and alters taken for granted modes of ordering social life, and the different ways sociologists observe them, to give insight into the complex processes of normalizing social relations. He demonstrates how much energy is put into making the normative, but how quickly this is undone by events that cannot be predicted. By attempting to constantly normalise and rationalise that which is risky across a range of spaces and time, using a range of techniques, he posits that we do not have the radical imaginaries to deal with the unanticipated. All sociality is potentially risky but it has to be contained by the

unimaginative. The unimaginative is a conservative regulating imperative that attempts to control risk and rationalize the future. But as he notes, there is no institutionalized setting available that would be capable of relating to the past, present and future in a way that the unanticipated can be accounted for.

That sociology makes explicit the machinery through which *perspectives* work, helps to reorder sociology in basic ways. Here many of the papers we have discussed so far exemplify how, at moments, a particular and perhaps novel assemblage and juxtaposition allows a movement towards a different world, as much as a shift in perspective, a different way of thinking about or understanding relations. Leila Dawney's paper (this volume) exemplifies how this process occurs in everyday life. In her description of how walking enables different perspectives to come in and out of view (as the body makes sense of its own movements), Dawney demonstrates how imaginaries are affectively experienced by bodies as they move, not detached from them in some cognitive capacity. Drawing on two case studies of walking and telling, she shows how walking is understood as a therapeutic technique of the self, which offers people an opportunity to imagine lives 'otherwise', to make sense of their lives and work on dreaming differently. In this sense Dawney reveals how walking and telling emerge as ethical practices that shift perspective and subjectivity. Using the idea of 'magma' the walkers produce an idea of their 'selves' through the messy production of doing something in which thinking connects with moving and the imagination is somatic as the body moves through space. As we walk we make sense.

(Un)becoming women in Jayati Lal's paper (this volume) are relatively poor and work in factories in Southern India. They are *unbecoming* in that their way of life runs against normative patterns of women's lives and contravenes regimes of sociality, particularly over shifts from natal to conjugal relations and attachments. They are 'gender outlaws' because they are perceived to be *out of order*: their marital relations (as divorced, adulterous, or unmarried) and the kinds of lives they make (working and living away from home), figure them as transgressing Indian ideas of morality, kinship and femininity. This transgression means that rights and entitlements are no longer accorded them, since the granting of these depends upon the lifelines of Indian patriarchy. On the other hand neither do they adopt a politics of feminism or express notions of becoming autonomous, independent subjects simply by the fact that they are working. Rather, Lal shows us how in shifting their attachment to work, and through making extraordinary lives with others, they re-imagine the politics of their relations and so reorder the political and structural locations in ways that have made them become *otherwise*: living as other kinds of women, other kinds of persons. In so doing Lal attaches us as readers to the worlds these women imagine they are making together through their stories, gossip and rumour. All of which extends their sociological possibilities: 'their lives enlarge the social imaginary and repertoire of gender by challenging conventional plotlines and by chronicling new structures of feeling about work and family' (this volume, page 554).

Finding fissures, making radical

Granted that disorder spoils pattern; it also provides the materials of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. (Douglas, 2003 [1966]: 95)

An emphasis on imagination helps shift our focus from practices of interpretation, and the suggestion of a pre-given normative, to those practices for changing understanding that are disruptive, as well as constitutive (Veyne, 1988) and/or subversive (Grindon, 2007; Lohmann and Steyaert, 2006). Here imagination can be understood as a (temporary) site of resistance and alterity, that opens up the possibility of difference and even change. Derrida, for example, speaks of finding fissures (Derrida, 1982) sites of divisibility, in any text, that destabilizes, and defers. 'The *fissure* as relation to the other that we have dared to characterise as an interruption of being' is a working fissures that creates the possibilities for imagining differently, for a radical politics from 'elsewhere' (Derrida and Fathy, 1999).

Vitellone's essay (this volume) questions how and under what conditions is compassion elicited and whether such affects can institute social transformation. Compassion emerges as not simply to be located *in* political and cultural contexts. Rather the elicitation of compassion emerges in Vitellone's hands as helping to constitute those contexts in terms of political possibilities. Specifically, Vitellone helps us to see that the imaginaries through which compassion is incited are constitutive of its political effects. That is, the paper shows that the ways that compassion positions people affectively in relations with 'sufferers', includes the shaping of perceptions and understandings of causes and effects. Vitellone's analysis lays two visual representations of drug use, particularly the juxtaposition of text and imagery around the syringe, alongside one another. One is a Bernado's advertising campaign, and the other is a photoethnographic engagement project on drug addiction and suffering. The syringes in their juxtaposition to other images (eg babies) and texts act as moving devices. Vitellone describes the effort that is put into campaigns in which we are incited to feel (and donate), or commit to issues of social justice. Vitellone shows how both produce a perspective through the juxtaposition of objects and texts that is performative, not through naming (the traditional speech act of performative theory), or interpretation, but through connecting ideas to feelings. Indeed, she works the connection and difference between the two forms of representation to create a fissure. Specifically, she opens political arguments that perceive compassion for suffering as a

conservative distancing gesture as in opposition to the politics of generating compassion through images of suffering in order to understand structural injustice. In the (latter) optimistic imaginary particular strategies are deployed which connect aesthetics (photographs of suffering through drug use which do not focus on the syringe as device for evoking affect) with political narratives that locate and explain lives, making it impossible to turn away; affect is hinged to politics. However, this position has been shown to be less optimistic than initially imagined, as it was effectively deployed by the US Republicans to generate 'conservative compassion'. Figures and feelings are shown to be tools in the mobilization of politics that can be deployed from radically different perspectives (Right and Left).

Also drawing on the mobilization of aesthetics and affects for political effects, Stephen Shukaitis (this volume) focuses on the work of Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective from Slovenia and their usage and fusion of fascist and avant garde aesthetics as a form of political intervention into the collective imagination. Shukaitis explores how using 'overidentification' as a tactic, a rabid and obscenely exaggerated use of fascist insignia, is the most appropriate political intervention in the political context of Slovenia. He argues that Laibach and NSK's political mobilization finds fissures by hollowing out spaces that the State attempts to deploy for its own power. Such mobilization prevents legitimation by disrupting mediation, offering a form of 'minor politics', a minor composition of a social movement that works with the virtual rather than the actual. Shukaitis compares these Slovenian challenges to the more recent Western activism of the Yes Men and Billionaires for Bush which aim to be more critical than the critics of governance. Like Laibach and NSK, by presenting themselves as the worst critic they turn the tables on the critics and deprive critique of its ammunition and substance, generating legitimation through disbelief, a productive politics rather than a politics based on repression. Yet, for the moment, it should be emphasized that all this depends on a context that contains a high degree of ambivalence.

João Valente Aguiar (this volume) also interrogates the imaginaries of aestheticisation, but his focus is the West in which ambivalence is less present and evident. But rather than explore the mobilization of aesthetics for political challenge he notes how normativity is repeated and legitimation achieved through the use of aesthetic resources. This has consequences for the immobilization of political challenge through the deployment of theoretical imaginaries in the maintenance of normativity. He points to the increasing gap between economic and cultural belonging in which aestheticisation has become a resource that contributes to the formation of a middle class ethics, radically distinguishable from an industrial working class habitus. Aestheticisation he maintains is one of the devices deployed to argue for and legitimate declassification, mobilized to evidence the decreased significance of class. Using Nietzsche to argue that everything becomes known through form, he proposes an understanding of plasticity in lifestyle (again, like both Verran and Papadopoulos (this volume) plasticity is about relational extension, not

internal properties). Aguiar demonstrates how theories of ephemerality, randomness, and fragmentation appeal to the new middle class, as they mobilize and normalize perspectives which both constitute and unsurprisingly explain the complexity of their lives. When applied to the lives of others, these theories make the working class appear as inadequate and deficient against the middle-class vanguards, aesthetic complexity, a point echoed by Skeggs (this volume) in relation to social theory.

In taking on social capital as a key sociological imaginary, Ranji Devadason (this volume) unpacks some of the ways in which it has dictated current research directions. Critically, she depicts how the idea of social capital has travelled, influencing government agendas and spawning much policy research. In setting out the salutary tale of her own research on ethnic groups, participation and social capital, she analyses ways in which the concept has closed down research avenues as much as it has opened them up. Noting the well-discussed gulf between ‘appreciators’ and ‘depreciators’ of metaphor, Devadason begins by opening up the fissure that she helps us to see as contained and concealed in any metaphorical imaginary. Specifically, she analyses how metaphors such as ‘social capital’ work to cut out perspectives as at the same time they create perspectives but in very special ways. Metaphors excite creativity and imagination and cross boundaries, enrolling and enlisting as they go because, like symbols, they are ambiguous and their meaning has to be worked at. In particular, they work between what is ‘like’, and to be included and what is overlooked because it is not ‘like’. As Kuhn (1981) emphasized in his analysis of a thought experiment, ‘overlap is not identity’. Thus Devadason presses how the generative power that stems from noting an overlap between social ties and economic phenomena is one thing, but quite another to become blind to the massive differences each entails.

Concluding remarks

If there is a sociology of the imagination it is not to be found in our seeking to valorize one sociological imagination over another. Or by our simply connecting one spatial configuration to one another. Rather it may exactly lie in our avoiding the popular conception of (social) science as definitive and certain. To be critical is, in our view, to resist the temptation to find fixed points of view and to strive to avoid closing down on issues.

Rather than thinking of imagination as a property of individuals – as, for example, the mental capacity to make images of things that are not present – and conflate imagination with image in cognitive terms (Foucault, 1993) – we have approached imagination as a complex location. First, as a time-space of emergence, not the before but the yet to come. One that has been neglected, certainly, but one that comes into existence through certain conditions of possibility, that require squeezing through the blockages of certainty and pushing through the barricades of normativity.

Second, focusing on *imaginaries* helps us move sociology beyond the reductionist ideas of identity and difference (with its reliance on wounded attachment as epistemological justification) into debates on corporeality (Gatens, 1996; Weiss, 1999), matter (Barad, 2007), aurality (Back, 2007), relationality (Blackman, 2008) and relational extension (Latimer and Munro, 2009). Toward attempts to think beyond the imaginary of the individual, and the singular self-governing soul for which ‘the market’ has become the new God (Frank, 2001) and psychology the new religion. As Thoburn (2007) and Papadopoulos (this volume) note, these aspects of control function happily with the democratic articulation of subjectivities:

Control thus operated less through the moulding of ‘individual subjects’ in mass formations (family member, student, worker, national citizen) than in the modulations of ‘dividuals’ – sub- and trans-individual arrangements of matter and function (forces, genetic codes, affects, capacities, desires) – that are configured, known and modelled as samples, data, propensities, populations and markets. (Thoburn, 2007: 83)

Third, through performing the importance of the relation between imagination and the political. Some papers in this volume exemplify how opening critically involves practices, for example the laying alongside of different orderings, to work the interval or fissure between them, their ‘partial connection’ (Strathern, 1991), or working backwards from ‘disconcertment’ (Verran, this volume) to reveal relationalities and different ontologies, different possible worlds to those that dominate. Here the authors in this volume are not simply suggesting paths to follow, but exemplify how clearings, fissures, openings have to be made, by for example ‘walking’ (Dawney, this volume) as a way to shift perspective and rewrite the social. Moreover they help make explicit how the relation between imagination and the political cannot be underestimated for keeping social science critical.

In our current political moment in the UK (cuts, cuts and more cuts, increased wealth and tax breaks for the super rich) and amid serious political challenges to autocracy around the world, we need to stretch our imagination of what is political and theoretical. We want to understand not just what is happening but how to make connections. We can clearly see ‘in whose interests?’ the restructuring of higher education benefits. As academics we are being restructured³ in ways that are likely to impact not just upon our future employment but upon our future relations. After all the Research Assessment Exercise (productivity measurement) led to people becoming overproductive and referring to themselves and others as ‘five star’ academics (see Evans, 2004; Skeggs, 2008 and Boden and Epstein, this volume),⁴ making the production of capital value into a morally loaded individualised disposition. Guattari (1996) notes how all human activities in capitalism operate through ‘integral’ or diffuse ‘universes of value’ organised in the interests of extracting profit from every activity. That we are culpable and

collusive in making this extraction so easy should make us pause for thought. We know that the French word *assejettir* means both to produce subjectivity and make subject and this is what is happening in the present. We are aware that we are living a bad dream, *somebody else's imaginary*. If these changes are accomplished through relations of power and extension that elicit affects such as insecurity, fear, dread and competitiveness, then we need to pay attention to how these affects themselves work to effect and enable technologies such as audit, propensity and performance measures to be implemented.

We offer these papers in this volume to make a 'clearing' in which issues of representation, relationality, corporeality, plasticity, aesthetics, affects and value are used to disrupt the closures and the boundaries to reveal different modulations, orderings and ontologies. They draw on the performative elements of perspectives, devices and bodies that bring different imaginaries into effect. But the performative aspects of ethical and political imperatives that undo, trouble, keep open and push boundaries requires relentless energy. They all involve doing as well as being, and paying attention to the external relations that enable 'doing' and that effect the conditions of being. As Vikki Bell (2007) notes, performativity is inseparable from a critique of the 'value of values'. The practice of giving value is performative as we have seen in nearly every paper in this volume, creating constituencies, mobilizing power, extending, repeating and solidifying relations. How these take place is a political-ethical question.

So as to keep unpacking, revealing, opening and unconcealing, we need also to think differently. Alongside unpacking and connecting we need to argue for different worlds to those which dominate us. This is why Verran points us away from epistemology into an 'ontic politics' – that argues for a rethinking of sociation in order to reimagine the political.

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Notes

- 1 *Sociological Routes and Political Roots* Michaela Benson and Rolland Munro (eds), Wiley-Blackwell, May 2011 and 'Imagining the political', edited by Nicki Charles and Dennis Smith, *The Sociological Review*, November 2010, Volume 58, Issue 4: 527–730.
- 2 Much UK Higher Education is experiencing a substantive withdrawal of government funding for all arts and humanities subjects, which amount to 40% of all Higher Education funding in 2012–13.
- 3 Not in any way as significant as welfare cuts meted out to young single mothers and the increase in child poverty. See Stefan Collini's outline of the current restructuring of Higher Education at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>.
- 4 The RAE (last conducted in 2008) referred to a collective 5* – an award made to the department. The new measure called the REF (Research Excellence Framework) disaggregates the department into its staff and uses 3* and 4* ratings for individuals before it makes the aggregate measures public. So each department knows the percentage of 3* and 4* research output: matter modeled through function and configured as data for an education 'market' by which competition can be induced and value extracted.

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