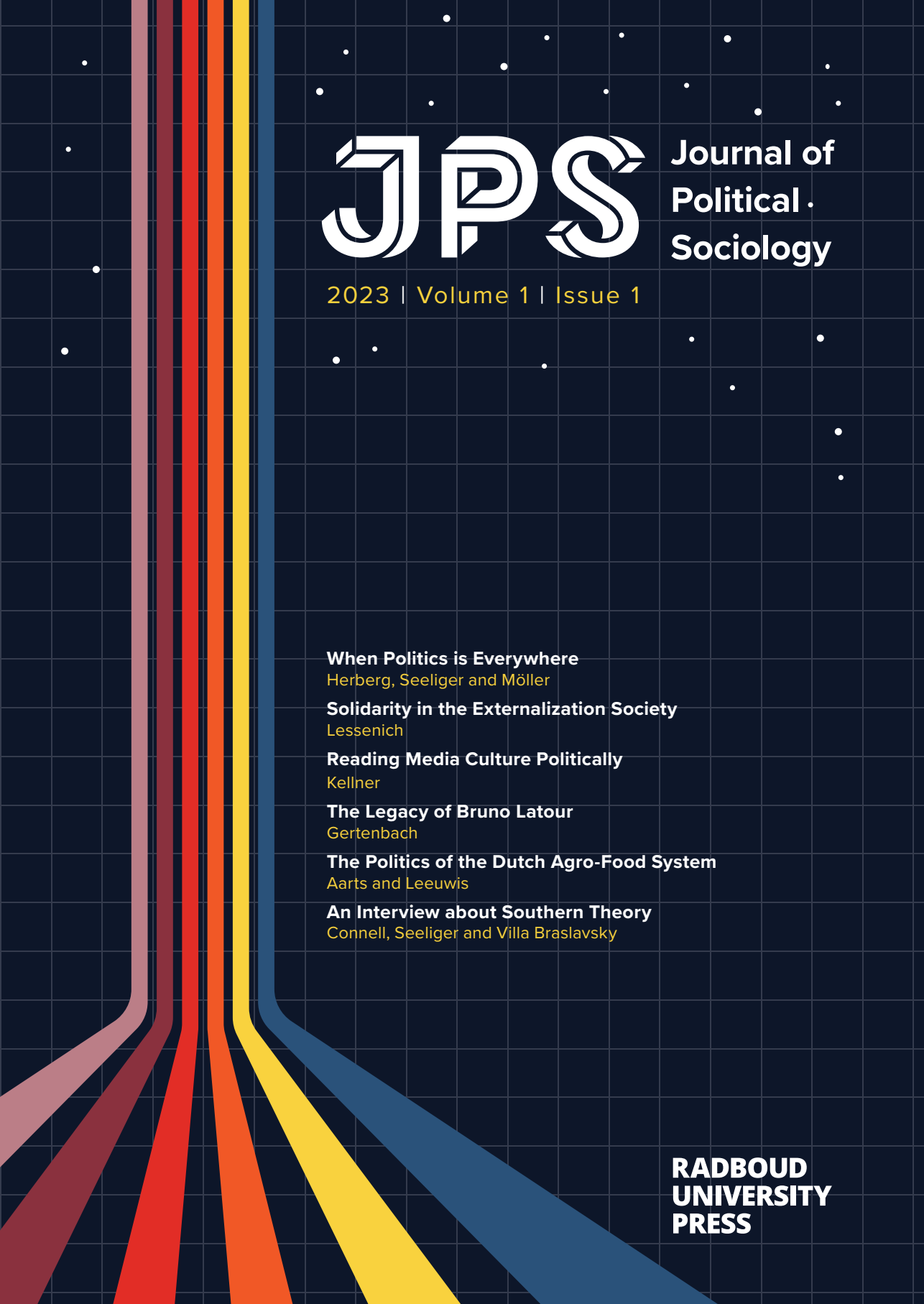

2023 | Volume 1 | Issue 1

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Journal of Political Sociology

2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1

RADBOUD
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Journal of Political Sociology
Published by RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Postbus 9100, 6500 HA Nijmegen, The Netherlands
www.radbouduniversitypress.nl | radbouduniversitypress@ru.nl

ISSN: 2950-2144
E-ISSN: 2950-2152

Website: journalofpoliticalsociology.org

Design: Textcetera, Den Haag
Print and distribution: Pumbo.nl

Contents

About the Authors

Noelle Aarts is Professor of Socio-Ecological Interactions, studying conversations for transformative change in life science contexts.

Raewyn Connell is Professor Emerita at University of Sydney and a Life Member of the National Tertiary Education Union in Australia. A new book at Melbourne University Press is forthcoming.

Lars Gertenbach is Associate Professor for General Sociology at the University of Osnabrück, Germany. His research focuses on the history of social thought and current developments in sociological and cultural theory.

Jeremias Herberg is Assistant Professor at Radboud University and Guest Professor at Ruhr-University Bochum. He studies the politics of sustainability, using approaches from relational sociology and Science and Technology Studies. *He is a founding editor of JPS*.

Douglas Kellner is Distinguished Research Professor of Education at UCLA and is author of many books on social theory, politics, history, philosophy, and culture, including *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* and six edited volumes of his collected papers.

Cees Leeuwis is Professor of Collaborative Research, Communication and Change. He studies processes of socio-technical innovation and (ir)responsible scaling.

Stephan Lessenich is Professor of Social Theory and Social Research at Goethe University Frankfurt and Director of the Institute for Social Research. His primary research interests are political sociology of social inequality, comparative welfare state research and analysis and critique of capitalism.

Kolja Möller is Substitute Professor of Constitutional Theory at Technical University Dresden. His work focuses on constitutional theory and sociology, political theory and studies on populism. *He is a founding editor of JPS*.

Martin Seeliger is a social scientist at the University of Bremen. He works on political sociology, labor relations and cultural studies. *He is a founding editor of JPS*.

Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky, is Chair of Sociology and Gender Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. She focuses on social and gender theories, biopolitics, embodiment, care, gender in politics and popular cultures.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

EDITORIAL

What Is Political Sociology, When Politics Is Everywhere? An Invitation to a New Journal

Jeremias Herberg,[1] Martin Seeliger,[2] Kolja Möller[3]

Political sociology has never been a closed shop. In 1960, amid a sense of growing global interdependencies, the Research Committee on Political Sociology was founded as a "latecomer" within the International Sociological Association (ISA Bulletin 1981:26-36). The committee had a boundary-spanning character, with seventeen founding members covering thirteen countries. Amid the ongoing Cold War, the committee included sociologists from both Western and Eastern sociology associations, and one Argentine representative.[4] The dominant topics during the first international meetings, which were partly sponsored by and reported to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), included "Citizen Participation", "The Entry of New Groups into Politics", "Problems of Political Modernization in Developing Countries", and "The Social and Cultural Bases of Political Cleavages" (ibid.:27). Early on, political sociologists addressed the wide contexts of formal politics, studying the far-reaching conditions and deep frictions of democracy.

Also the style of early political sociology is remarkable. As the institutionalisation of the discipline suggested, political sociologists assumed a foundational role as academic but practically minded researchers. They sought to contextualize and criticize but also inform state policy and transnational institution building. The themes

1 Assistant Professor at Institute for Science in Society (ISiS), Radboud University Nijmegen, Heyendaalseweg 135, 6525 AJ Nijmegen, Netherlands, jeremiasherberg@gmail.com.
2 Research Fellow at Institute Labour and Economy, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, Germany, seeliger@uni-bremen.de.
3 Substitute professor of constitutional theory at Institut für Politikwissenschaften, TU Dresden, von-Gerber-Bau, Bergstraße 53, 01069 Dresden, Germany, kolja.moeller@tu-dresden.de.
4 Mark Abrams (UK), Erik Allardt (Finland), Raymond Aron (France), Mattei Dogan (France), S.N. Eisenstadt (Israel), Gino Germani (Argentina), Roger Girod (Switzerland), Julian Hochfeld (Poland), Morris Janowitz (USA), Juan Linz (Spain), S.M. Lipset (USA), R. Lukic (Yugoslavia), R.T. McKenzie (UK), Stein Rokkan (Norway), Giovarmi Sartori (Italy), Otto Stammer (West Germany) and Jerzy Wiatr (Poland).

chosen for discussion emerged amid interdisciplinary exchange, mostly with political scientists, but also as a result of engagement with social movements and public debates. The student protest movement left a strong imprint on West Berlin's 1968 gathering for example, with a session notable for its *animated* discussions rather than paper presentations (ibid.:29). The uneven development of both Northern and Southern and Western and Eastern societies was also on the agenda, particularly during the 1975 meeting on *The Role of Ideology on the 20th Century*. Co-organized with the Polish Academy of Sciences, the session was attended by participants from Bangladesh, Bulgaria and India, among others. Clearly political sociology was institutionalised as a worldly endeavour, situated in a changing global *Zeitgeist* (ISA Bulletin 1981:26-36).

A signature statement of the 1960s was that anything, public and private, is, or can be political. The expansion of the concept and related proliferation of political questions has accelerated since then. The human body, the sciences and even the weather—to name just a few examples—are today all seen as sites of political concern, things fashioned by politics, and with distinct political implications. This is due to new perspectives on what the term 'political' means, but also due to growing recognition of, and work toward, the displacement of political processes beyond the confines of state apparatuses. At the same time, many other groups—policy experts, political journalists, public intellectuals and popular influencers—have joined sociologists in extending their analytical approach toward conventional political practices.

These developments mark the ongoing challenge of political sociology: on one hand, it has become commonplace (although never without risks!) to state that *something* is political. On the other, the conceptual and empirical solidity of this claim has become increasingly challenging due to the formulation of increasingly complex concepts and research methodologies. In doing so, the notion of the political has itself become subject to political disagreement. Can political sociology keep up with the politics of the politicisation of everything, and the manifold approaches that are emerging to understand such a world? Can the field retain its capacity to bring together diverse views and issues? In the 20th century, political sociology flourished at a time when politics became more ambiguous. We think the same could and should be true for more recent times. With the Journal of Political Sociology (JPS) we want to therefore establish a home for the study of *the political* in all its forms.

In the next section we reflect upon the research field that we chose our journal to contribute to. In the second section we suggest *the political* as a focus for pluralistic discussion. In the third, we discuss democracy as a foundational but expanding problematic of sociological research. We close by offering an overview of the first issue.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

1. What is Political Sociology? An Invitation to Inquiry and Debate

Starting a new journal raises the question of what this research field's main tasks, or the perhaps even trickier question of what the shared identity should be. Beginning a new journal in an established field of study is even more challenging in our case. After all, if anything can be seen as political, be it dog keeping as a retreat into private worlds, or the long-distance travel of rich Europeans as a form of neocolonial privilege, does this mean that political sociologists should study everything? Generally, we think, yes! As we debated among ourselves during the earliest discussions about the new journal, good research should make a systematic contribution to the 'state of the art' in the field of... yes, that's the problem, what field?

The shortest, though perhaps unimaginative way to pin down exactly what political sociology is, is to look at the things that clearly carry this label: textbooks, sections in professional societies, seminars, chairs, and so on. Another approach is to look at foundational texts. In the very early days, long before the Research Committee on Political Sociology. Think of Mosei Ostrogorski´s (1922) *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* and Robert Michels' (1915) work *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchial Tendencies of Modern Democracy* that constitute an early core of canonical political sociology of the state and its interest organizations, which led on to the work of Kirchheimer (1969), Neumann (1986) up until Voss and Shermann (2000). Most research and theory conducted under the heading of political societies was focused upon the state, interest organizations, social movements, and citizens' attitudes on specific topics deemed *political*.

One step deeper is to look at characteristic styles of political sociology. Most notably, and especially in the early decades of the discipline, analyses were regularly built around explicit political claims and critiques. Economic capitalism, modern democracy, and cultural individualism were aspects of social life about which the founding figures of sociology had strong opinions. The idea that different forms of progress and rationalization invite 'dilemmata', such as prosperity and exploitation related to capitalism, the equality and oligarchic tendencies of democracy, and emancipation and alienation of individualism, inspired political sociologists to develop explicitly political critiques of modern societies. A popular approach in the area of research contrasts the normative ideas of democratic politics with their often undemocratic practices. How far does representative democracy keep its normative promise of representing citizen' interests? A similar approach can also be found in contributions from and actual ongoings in the field of political communications. In his study on the structural transformation of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1989) pointed out discrepancies in public communication that arise between an Enlightenment-in-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

spired idea of collective rationality and the real troubles that occur within, what others more recently phrased as the "media culture" (Kellner 2020) of late capitalism.

Another approach to characterize political sociology is to look at its favored research topics. This is where it gets tricky though. Once the claim of politicality is made, it is hard to disprove it and state that a given matter—food habits or the deep sea—are in fact unpolitical. During our discussions, when we agreed to focus on political sociology, we could not help but note that in order to identify itself as a relevant contribution, a paper must conceptualize what the frame of reference is. You cannot study a political phenomenon without stating what is political about it. This in turn means that political sociologists must endorse reflexivity, they must reflect on the fact that their chosen focus and the act of research are themselves political acts. As such, no topic should be off limits. The defining feature of the *Journal of Political Sociology* (JPS) is not a certain sector of policy making or a certain sociological tradition, but a certain process that is all-pervasive in all human life.

2. What is *The Political*?

There is a need for themes that facilitate focused discussion while avoiding the tendency to homogenize. The political does not imply a definite article or a proper noun, it is a placeholder for an expansive and contested concept that is itself political. We might think of such themes as boundary concepts (Gieryn 1983). While political sociology was in fact never homogenous, prevalent boundary politics—very common between sociology and political science, for instance—can wrongly claim clear boundaries that demarcate political and non-political, sociological and non-sociological questions. An excellent review by Jörn Lamla (2021) shows how the field, especially in country-specific traditions such as the German one, has been somewhat hesitant to explore the political beyond disciplinary boundaries. A contrasting approach, which we favor as a leading motif of JPS, is the admittedly strange concept of the *political*. The closer one inspects it, the less clear it becomes, and it becomes less evident how it works; its fabric is nuanced and undifferentiated, it mixes with arenas such as culture, technology and spatial orders, which in a narrow understanding may seem non-political but under closer inspection are revealed to be thoroughly shaped by political concerns themselves. Consequently, ongoing debates, some of which we review in the following, circle around the questions of where the political is to be found, where it begins and where it ends.

In our broad understanding, the political is the question of what is, and importantly what is not made subject to contestation. One helpful feature of this focus is that we start the discussion with the basics, with the aim to go far beyond this. Particu-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

larly in political science, attempts have been made to theorize *the political* through a distinction between the concepts of *policy*, *politics* and *polity*. Originating from a primarily state-centered discipline most political science debates follow an understanding of the political as the order and process of general rule-setting through debates, conflicts and other procedures that allow the expression of heterogenous interests (see Deppe 2016). From this perspective, the political has at least three dimensions: a material side in the form of its executive apparatus, a procedural component through its rules, routines and (conformist or divergent) practices, and a normative component that manifests itself in an underlying ideological dimension, which means that the pursuit of political goals ultimately serves goals external to the political sphere as it is conventionally understood.

The notion of the political sheds light on a key feature of political life: it can quickly get out of hand. After all, an important aspect of modern societies, and potentially all human life is that anything can be politicized. By politicized, we mean made the subject of the aforementioned process of expressing heterogenous interest, be it via rule-setting, debate, conflict, coalition-building, war, diplomacy, more war, press-conferences, rallies and demonstrations, twitter meltdowns, peace-keeping missions, atomic war, strike action or other forms of class struggle, sanctions, backroom talks and public speeches, boycotts, handshakes, or simply sitting things out, and the many other forms of political expression. This general possibility of politicization means that the political does not only refer to the setting of general rules regarding a limited set of standardized problems. It means that literally anything can be made the subject of complex negotiation. We even argue that the politicization of everything has been a structural feature of modernity and, specifically, has become a strategic option in recent political struggles. To make something subject of debate shakes up assumed certainties, routines, and can often reveal embedded privileges. While politicization, which has had periods of boom throughout history, has regained prominence in recent years as a constant source of social conflict, political sociologists have lacked common arenas to discuss this multifaceted process. At JPS, we therefore want to offer to host this debate in many forms and styles.

A particular challenge for political sociology consists not only in its understanding of the relation of society and the political, but also in the discipline's related relation to the legal field. While the political exceeds the strictures of law, it is often regulated, proceduralized and constitutionalized within the framework of legal orders. In recent years, a scene of distinct constitutional sociology has emerged which has shed a light on how politics is configured and how the political plays out not only in the state but also in the legal system itself, and most notably in the transnational sphere (Teubner 2013; Thornhill 2016). In many cases, such legal politics are connected to

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

the rights-based dimension of constitutionalism and, in particular, human rights: They are invoked in order to articulate political claims, interests, values. However, how far they can be seen as a sound functional equivalent to politics or if they tend to distort or even undermine the initial political claims is something rightly debated (Moyn 2018; Kennedy 2002).

A particularly important, purposefully broad contribution to politicization of both understanding and practices emerged from the British disciplines of social history and cultural studies. This was based on the work of New Left thinkers, such as Edward P. Thompson (1963), Richard Hoggart (1957) and Stuart Hall (1971), among others, who set themselves the task of identifying the political essence of seemingly non-political objects. While Marx brilliantly—and against the conventional wisdom of his time (see most prominently Smith 2012)—theorized work organization as an essentially political issue, theories about the reproduction of the labor power are a less prominent feature of Marxian theorization at the same. By focusing on its cultural expression, scholars from the fields of Cultural (and soon after Feminist) Studies documented the cultural production and reproduction of labor power as a political process (Willis 1981). From this perspective, the presence of political phenomena was no longer limited to an industrial or political sphere, or subsystems of these areas. On the contrary, power relations, ideologies and what was later to be called identity politics, were arranged and reproduced through daily practices. Up until today, the attention on subjective embodiment is a critical element in the discussion on the political (McNay 2014). Cultural Studies and its unruly methodologies, which often deviate from the expectation that sociologists assume a sociological distance, were key to the political study of everyday life.

Life itself is of course a precondition of a political condition, and its very fabric can be politicized through research. Lately since Michel Foucault and many other interdisciplinary interventions, political sociologists have had to think far beyond human collectives and formal organizations. We think of gender studies, postcolonial studies and science and technology studies (STS) as the main approaches that have pushed for scholars to address the underrepresented, but constitutive substrata of official politics. In order to understand how authoritative governance is possible in the first place, sociologists arguably need to include the sociotechnical apparatus and the management of biological life (Barry 2001; Lemke 2015). STS scholars have argued that seemingly apolitical sites such as laboratories are places that make *politics by other means*, they manifest epistemic and ontological choices of political concern long before policy choices can be negotiated (as discussed by Lars Gertenbach, this issue). This dictum and its related methodologies, which has been notably elaborated in relation to public health systems (e.g., Latour 1993; Mol 1999), have long had

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

and somewhat obscure reputation in conventional sociology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic should have convinced even cautious readers that the technoscientific mediation of political rule implicitly prioritizes certain political voices or choices over others. The representation of legitimate interests is entwined with the representation of nature. This insight is not a token of *avant-garde* academia, but *Realpolitik*.

Not everybody is on board with such interdisciplinary interventions. By contrast, the assertion that something is political can be desirable from one standpoint, and problematic from another. With a critical look at both the dominant legacies of twentieth century sociology and more recent advances in the discipline, it is clear that political sociology is full of internal and external frictions. Those frictions do not necessarily amount to conflict, but they do create confusion and a need for fruitful debate about what political sociology is, or ought to be. We argue, this debate is urgent and should not start with the idea that the political merely is what happens within the political system, and during the negotiations about general-rule setting.

3. What is a Democratic Order?

Conceptual openness does not necessarily mean eclecticism. A common focus of both long-standing and new approaches to political sociology are the questions of democracy. Like the term *politics*, the concept of democracy is connected to several reference frames. Again, we can start with *political sociology 101*. A state-centered understanding of the term democracy draws on the legitimation of governmental authority through a mechanism for gaining public assent. An electoral understanding refers to the mechanism of having a vote between competing options or candidates as means to produce an outcome. In addition, an emancipatory understanding aims—in its most general sense—at assuring basic social rights and the empowerment for affected people to take public decisions collectively. However, as Jacques Ranciere argued, the term democracy can as much mean the limitation and enclosure of this same emancipatory and representative approach (Rancière 2006).

Adding further nuance, Claus Offe (2019:331) proposes an idea of liberal democracy that consists of four elements—stateness, the rule of law, political competition and accountability in the sense of elites being held responsible for what they do and do. As scholars such as T.H. Marshall (1950) have long highlighted, the state and the democratic political order have been historically evolving in a sequence of rights being granted to its citizens. Similarly, Habermas (1989) emphasized the necessity of basic bourgeois entitlements, such as free speech, freedom of the press, and basic education in the public sphere, as a framework, which allows modern society to identify and arrange its issues and problems according to their sense of relevance

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

and solubility (Seeliger and Sevignani 2022). However, the enlightenment ideas that underpin liberal democracy—for example the idea of the *citizen as the author of his own laws*—often fail due to conditions that are rarely achieved in political reality, let alone that they are guaranteed for all groups. Not only the feasibility but also the idealistic premises of communication and knowledge transfer are deeply connected with and have been subjected to European colonization and appropriation (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Regardless of whether one looks at the process, its conditions or its consequences, political communication and the plurality of affected publics is at core of, but perhaps also one of the weakest points of liberal democracy. For political sociologists, this means not only the challenge of criticizing exclusion, but also the need for self-critical reflection on liberal ideas of inclusion.

To be sure, political sociologists were never naïve about the conditions of democracy. With regard to a more narrow view, Seymour Martin Lipset (1960:28), a dominant figure in the Research Committee on Political Sociology in its early years, scrutinized and integrated economic development and the attempted political legitimation of capitalist democracies. Inscribed into the logic of modernity is the general idea of constantly improving living conditions (Nachtwey 2018). In order to satisfy the subjective needs of this ideology, the economy has to increase its output in order for its benefits to be distributed among citizens; a balance is sought between legitimation and accumulation (Borchert and Lessenich 2016). At the same time, this political system needs to somehow produce a majority (or sufficiently big minority) of assenting voters or nonvoters. Consequently, economic growth and relative political responsiveness are the two main preconditions for the political legitimation of democratic capitalism. The implied tensions inherent in such a system are an important field of study for political sociologists.

Recently, critical approaches have pointed out even more preconditions of democracy, especially when discussing the limitations of growth and nation-states. Even more tension fields come into play, when considering the male liberal subject, population and border controls, or the disposal of so-called natural and human resources (e.g., Fraser 2021). All of these conditions, which we hope authors will highlight in their contributions, mean that capitalist democracies are (de-)stabilized not only through economic accumulation and governmental legitimation, but also through technology, media, law, lifestyles, and more. Depending on the focus, various repertoires of political sociology offer a specific corridor into the discussion on the political. Those include public problems, sovereignty and deliberation as some of the classic approaches, but more recently also the politics of "new associations" and "governmentality" (Latour 2007). An additional discussion, which we explicitly encourage, relates to political ecology. As the impact of energy infrastructure on democracy

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

demonstrates in many ways (Mitchell 2009; Haas et al. 2022), environmental policy is more than a sector of government practice. Providing "cheap energy", "cheap food", and "cheap nature" goes hand in hand with the externalisation of associated burdens to people and places beyond Western nation states (Moore 2015; Lessenich 2019). A metabolic politics of human-Earth ecology is a dimension of political practice which is not easy to decode, given its complex interrelations with the environment, but one that has become a subject of seemingly existential importance.

All of this highlights the urgent task of political sociology to uncover the forceful conditions and precarious consequences of capitalist democracies as well as autocracies. To be sure, this also involves a reflexive dimension. Especially, when moving the concept of politicization to the center of political sociology, the construction of research methodologies, and the discipline´s logic of inquiry require immediate application to the question of what constitutes *the political*. The traditional blind spots concern a spatial focus on Europe or the US, a temporal focus on linear phases of modernization, a population focus on powerful groups, and many more aspects, all of which often coincide with a focus on nation states. The standard logic of inquiry is often based on setting a population of cases together within a preconceived timeframe, within which these cases shall then be studied. Even political theory-building can be said to have contributed to the blind spots of modern politics by obscuring seemingly apolitical questions. A historian of ideas has recently argued, for example, that concepts of nature underlie almost all political theories even when they do not explicitly address the environment (Charbonnier 2021). Political sociology should therefore reflect on its own intellectual history, to uncover both its conceptual innovations but also its politically revealing absences. Having set out this broad orientation, we invite social scientists from all fields to discuss the conditions, values, practices, consequences, and ideas of both democratic and undemocratic orders, and natural and social orders, in the pages of the JPS. Most importantly, we invite you to disagree with us, in the spirit of ongoing generative dissensus.

4. The First Issue

Given the many identities of political sociology and the unlimited amount of research subjects, researchers can have a hard time keeping up with the growing knowledge and amount of questions about the politics of contemporary societies. We argue that political sociology needs to maintain and constantly re-establish its capacity to assemble various discussions of politics, at least within the confines of sociology departments, but hopefully much beyond.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

Against this background, neither this nor future issues of JPS can possibly provide a complete or even fundamental picture of the current state of research. In fact, this totalizing ambition would run counter to the idea of political sociology as a dynamic and polymorphous field. The beauty of a new journal is that it is an opportunity to launch, update, and develop multiple lines of thought simultaneously. We therefore invite authors to respond to each other, to contribute knowledge or viewpoints that they feel are missing, and to write in a manner that aspires to not only achieve excellence and innovation, but also collective experimentation and reflection.

We have gathered authors and topics which we think are highly able to help to launch a journal that is true to the boundary-crossing spirit of political sociology. The contributions to this first issue are all in one way or another addressed to the unclear state of the art as to what constitutes the political and its boundaries. In several ways, these contributions combine old and new insights and classical and interdisciplinary literature, and they engage with how socio-economic, environmental, cultural and academic politics are related to processes of global change.

In his text *Doubling down on double standards: The politics of solidarity in the externalization society*, Stephan Lessenich addresses a bias of methodological nationalism within classical writings on the welfare state. Deriving its assumptions from the model of the European nation state of the 19th century, classical sociology develops a conception of solidarity that is based on the exclusion of non-citizens living outside of these European national containers. This friction is reflected in *Realpolitik*, and even daily attitudes. The maintenance of internal solidarity among citizens within this welfare state comes at the costs of indifference towards the causally-linked suffering that takes place on an international scale. The externalization society, as Lessenich calls it, is tied to a strictly national institutionalization of solidarity. This bias requires (political) sociology to employ historical approaches that allow them to reconstruct the preconditions, concomitants, and consequences of the welfare state at the level of a world society. In response to his findings, Lessenich calls for a corrected narrative of solidarity that is threefold: cooperative, performative and transformative.

Politics importantly also takes place in popular culture. In his paper, Douglas Kellner revisits a central concept in cultural studies and critical media studies, the idea of transcoding, which he introduced several decades ago (Kellner and Ryan 1988). Here he proposes it as a tool for political sociology. In an analysis of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), originally based on a novel by Margaret Atwood, he shows how the analysis of media productions is key to understanding the social and political history of an era. In this case, the production and reception of a televi-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

sion series is a testament to a highly polarized political culture in the United States. Rather than viewing popular media as the context of political systems, they are instead understood as political texts or even political processes in their own right, forms of media predestined for political sociological critique. Kellner shows how this approach can draw on a broad body of literature that emerged from the Frankfurt School, and structuralist and poststructuralist theories that trace the translation between formal politics and popular forms of political expression. Put simply, political sociologists need to develop media-savvy methodologies.

In addition, the first issue initiates a discussion of the distinctively political definition of *the natural environment*. Lars Gertenbach discusses this issue as one of the most important legacies Bruno Latour left to political sociology and other fields after his death on October 9, 2022. Latour's work, Gertenbach argues, was centrally concerned with political questions and should be recognized as an ongoing reflection on modernist bifurcations such as the division made between human politics vs. natural facts. Looking at his early work on science and technology, but especially his later interventions that endorsed a planetary scale of analysis and a focus on soil, the formation of political collectives from natural and social elements is taken as a fundament of Latour's work. The resulting perspectives, which go well beyond actor-network theory, show how a relational approach can actually get by without necessarily implying a holistic ontology, as is often suggested in talk of political systems. Political sociologists, Gertenbach argues, should engage with Latour as a political thinker and be political ecologists themselves.

One of the classic ecological aspects of modern politics—protests by farmers and rural populations—is discussed in a new light by Noelle Aarts and Cees Leeuwis, who launch our political commentary section. In the Netherlands, the national government has recently confronted farmers, especially livestock farmers, with agricultural reforms to reduce nitrogen emissions, which farmers and farmer organizations widely interpret as an unjust and divise act of blame allocation. The authors agree with parts of the protesters' argument: that responsibility for climate change and biodiversity loss has been unfairly shifted onto farmers. At the same time, the country's highly export- and market-oriented food system remains untouched, despite the fact that, in part through direct government incentives, it has brought farmers into dependence on efficiency- and growth-oriented practices in the first place. Aarts and Leeuwis argue that farmers should not be overburdened by top-down policies, technological innovations or even environmentally motivated devaluation, but should be supported by ambitious institutional innovations, for example, real pricing systems or responsible shareholding. However, if the national government is unable to also address the role of banks, supermarkets, consumers, and others

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14913

in the context, the authors argue that local collaboration involving citizens, scientists, and, most importantly, collectively binding coordination between farmers and grocers can go a long way.

All contributions also discuss the political, sometimes problematic, role of scientific institutions in general and of social scientists in particular. Some of the key power-related and intellectual implications of the spatial ordering of the world system are elaborated in an interview with Raewyn Connell. Her work on Southern Theory has highlighted the inherent bias of the sociology of the Global North, which is still the hegemonic form of knowledge production in the field. In conversation with Paula-Irene Villa and Martin Seeliger, who engaged her in a discussion of current politics and the development of political sociology, Connell draws on her extensive work on gender relations, masculinities, and other presuppositions of the political process. She particularly emphasizes the implications for the conduct of sociological research. We hope to continue to discuss these implications as well as the thorny issues around solidarity, media culture and ecological relations with future authors in JPS. We specifically extend this invitation to those who have not seen their perspectives or research topics reflected in the first issue.

Before we launch the journal, we would like to thank all those who have helped to set it up: Timur Ergen, Annette Hübschle, Azer Kılıç and Ines Wagner gave constitutive feedback in the formation of the journal. Ulf Bohmann, Jenni Brichzin, Willem Halffman, Timon Beyes, and Leopold Ringel were important conversational partners in framing our project. In the section of political sociology of the German Sociological Association, we benefitted from the ideas and encouragement of Jörn Lamla, Minh Ngyuyen, Holger Strassheim, Alejandro Esguerra, Tobias Werron, Isabel Kusche, Jan-Peter Voss, and many more. We specifically thank the organizers and participants of the political sociology conference in Bielefeld, 2022. For feedback on this editorial, we are grateful to Thomas Turnbull and Ulf Bohmann.

Elisabeth Elbers, Hanan Noij, Natalia Grygierczyk at Radboud University Press (RUP)—a new publishing house that puts academic publishing back in the hands of academics—have been relentless and enthusiastic in their support of the project. We are very grateful to them. At OpenJournals and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences we thank Jan Willem Wijnen and Kay Pepping for the facilitation of the website (journalofpoliticalsociology.org). At Textcetera we thank Nick van Silfhout for the beautiful journal design. Last but not least, we are very grateful to Maren Schiller for her reliable and meticulous work in assisting the editorial team. Finally, we thank the current and future contributors to JPS: Your confidence in and

commitment to the journal is essential. We look forward to plenty of studies and debates that discuss the political of contemporary societies.

Literature

Barry, Andrew. 2001. *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society*. London: A&C Black.

Borchert, Jens and Stephan Lessenich. 2016. *Claus Offe and the Critical Theory of the Capitalist State*. New York: Routledge.

Charbonnier, Pierre. 2022. *Überfluss und Freiheit: Eine Ökologische Geschichte der Politischen Ideen*. Frankfurt: Fischer.

Deppe, Frank. 2016. *Politisches Denken im 20. Jahrhundert*. Band 1. Hamburg: VSA.

Fraser, Nancy. 2021. "Climates of Capital for a Trans-Environmental Eco-Socialism." *New Left* Review (127): 94-127.

Gieryn, Thomas F. 1983. "Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists."*American sociological review* 48 (6): 781-795.

Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Penguin UK.

Haas, Tobias, Jeremias Herberg and David Löw-Beer. 2022. "From carbon democracy to post-fossil capitalism? The German coal phase-out as a crossroads of sustainability politics." *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 18(1): 384-399.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hall, Stuart. 1971. *Deviancy, Politics and the Media*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

Hoggart, Richard. 1957. *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special References to Publications and Entertainments.* London: Chatto and Windus.

International Sociology Association (ISA). 1981. *ISA Bulletin*, Autumn 1981, retrieved on May 25th, 2023 on https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/research-networks/research-committees/rc18-political-sociology/.

Kellner, Douglas and Michael Ryan. 1988. *Camera Politico: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.

Kellner, Douglas. 2020. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics in the Contemporary Moment*. London/New York: Routledge.

Kennedy, David. 2002. "The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem?" *Harvard Human Rights Journal* (15): 101-125.

Kirchheimer, Otto. 1969. *Politics, Law and Social Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. "Turning around politics: A note on Gerard de Vries' paper." *Social studies of science*, 37(5): 811-820.

Lamla, Jörn. 2021. "Political Sociology". Pp. 287–300 in *Soziologie—Sociology in the German-Speaking World*, edited by Betina Hollstein, Rainer Greshoff, Uwe Schimank and Anja Weiß. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Lemke, Thomas. 2015. "New Materialisms: Foucault and the 'Government of Things'". *Theory, Culture & Society 32*(4): 3-25.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2019. *Grenzen der Demokratie: Teilhabe als Verteilungsproblem*. Ditzingen: Reclam.
Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political Man*. New York: Anchor Books.
Marshall, Thomas Humphrey. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
McNay, Lois. 2014. The misguided search for the political. Cambridge, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
Michels, Robert. 1915. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Ontario: Batoche Books.
Mol, Annemarie. 1999. "Ontological Politics: A Word and Some Questions." *The Sociological Review* 47(1): 74-89.
Moyn, Samuel. 2018. *Not Enough. Human Rights in an Unequal World.* London/Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Nachtwey, Oliver. 2018. *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*. New York: Verso.
Neumann, Franz. 1986. *The Rule of Law: Political Theory and the Legal System in Modern Society*. Leamington Spa: Berg.
Offe, Claus. 2019. "Crisis and Innovation of Liberal Democracy: Can Deliberation Be Institutionalized?" Pp. 327-354 in *Liberale Demokratie und Soziale Macht*, edited by C. Offe. Wiesbaden: Springer.
Ostrogorski, Mosei, ed. 1922. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*. Vol. 2. Translated by Frederick Clarke. New York: Macmillan.
Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *Hatred of Democracy*. New York, London: Verso.
Seeliger, Martin and Sebastian Sevignani. 2022. "A new structural transformation of the public sphere? An introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 39(4): 3-16.
Smith, Adam. 2012. *Wealth of Nations*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.
Teubner, Gunther. 2013. "The Project of Constitutional Sociology. Irritating Nation State Constitutionalism." *Transnational Legal Theory* (4): 44-58.
Thompson, Edward Palmer. 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class.* Toronto: Penguin Books.
Thornhill, Christopher. 2016. *A Sociology of Transnational Constitutions. Social Foundations of the Post-National Legal Structure.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Voss, Kim and Rachel Sherman. 2000. "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement." *American Journal of Sociology* 106 (2): 303-349.
Willis, Paul. 1981. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Doubling Down on Double Standards: The Politics of Solidarity in the Externalization Society

Stephan Lessenich[1]

1. Introduction

A basic consensus concerning the history, distinctive features and crisis of the welfare state has become established among scholars in the social sciences and, through them, in the public political discourse of the Western European postwar societies. The following article takes as its starting point the claim that the sociopolitical common-sense view according to which the European welfare state is an arrangement of institutionalized solidarity draws its support from a one-sided scientific-political narrative. My reflections boil down to the claim that this, as it were, semiofficial narrative is completely right, and yet at the same time completely wrong. Its ambiguity is characteristic of a *politics of solidarity* that will be defined in greater detail here. This ambiguity is by no means exhausted in the discursive dimension, but has a variety of material implications, namely, in the shape of structures of social closure whose historical dynamics have proven to be remarkably stable but are conspicuously absent from the self-description of the European welfare state. However, since the welfare state in its European manifestation, as an arrangement of solidarity, is invariably at the same time invested with a pronounced moral meaning by its proponents as well as its critics, the politics of the welfare state is a prototypical example of the social double standard that can be regarded as the cultural signature of what I call the externalization society.

1 Director of the Institute for Social Research, Senckenberganlage 26, 60325 Frankfurt am Main, lessenich@soz.uni-frankfurt.de.

2. Completely Right and Completely Wrong: The Essential Narrative of the Welfare State

Following Thomas A. Herz, I understand by an essential narrative the construction or reconstruction of a historical configuration through narratives that conveys its socially dominant version, and thus the version that is recognized as legitimate (see Herz 1996). As such, corresponding narratives are fundamentally socially contested and constitute an unavoidable point of reference for all kinds of historical-political conflicts over the interpretation of socio-historical phenomena and entities. While Herz focused on National Socialism and its subsequent reappraisal as the essential narrative of the Federal Republic of Germany, what I am interested in here is the welfare state's essential narrative of *socially and politically organized social cohesion* in postwar Germany and Europe. Thus, my topic is as it were the civilizational contrasting or complementary narrative to the one which, since the 1950s, has sought to enable German and European society to come to terms with their original experience of the fascist breach of civilization.

In the relevant research in the social sciences, this basic understanding of its object has become known—and dominant—since the 1980s, simultaneously with the high and turning point of the postwar social policy cycle (see Shalev 1983), as *the social democratic model* of welfare-state development. The story line of the social-democratic narrative, presented in a concise but not unduly stylized form, goes something like this: in the beginning was the industrial class conflict. The historical roots of the modern, democratic-capitalist welfare state can thus be traced back to the specific organization of social production as a relationship between wage labor and industrial capital shaped by antagonistic material interests. The conflict dynamics of this extremely asymmetrical social relationship—the dependence of wage earners on the owners of capital is disproportionately more existential or potentially more threatening to their existence than the other way around (see Offe and Wiesenthal 1985)—which were virulent since the beginning of industrial capitalism, gained new momentum with the democratization of political relations. The turn in social history toward the welfare state was a result of the transformation of the proletarian class struggle into the "democratic class struggle" (Korpi 1983): by winning universal and equal suffrage in tenacious struggles against the classes that had hitherto ruled for the most part unperturbed by the will of the people, the working class equipped itself with a new, decisive power resource, namely (at least indirect) influence over how industrial production, work and employment are shaped by politics. The welfare state, with its ever-expanding system of *worker-friendly* interventions, ranging from occupational health and safety to the cluster of employee insurance and family benefits to a freely accessible public health and education system, is then the institutionalized expression of the historical compromise between capital and

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

labor. Although private ownership of the means of production and the discretionary management rights of employers remain essentially untouched, the regulative principle of "politics against markets" (Esping-Andersen 1985) means that the dependence of wage earners on the market is reduced, their working and living conditions are at least to some extent decommodified, i.e. freed from the silent coercion of their status as commodities. Although labor and capital still do not encounter each other on an equal footing in the welfare state, late twentieth-century industrial capitalism, according to the interim conclusion of this story, has been domesticated into democratic capitalism; through welfare state action, it has become a capitalism with a human face and social aspirations.

To be sure, in European and transatlantic comparison different varieties of democratic welfare capitalism have emerged (see Esping-Andersen 1990), which present themselves in light of the essential narrative of the welfare state as different answers to the question of how the risks of a wage laborer existence (and, more broadly, life-course and intergenerational risks) are socialized. The various welfare state models can be described in this sense as different *models of solidarity* (see Esping-Andersen 1999:40-46), as institutional realizations of different—strong or weak, "thick" or "thin"—conceptions of solidarity. At the same time, these variants are identified more or less explicitly in the social-democratic narrative as normatively superior or inferior (see Manow 2002): the greater the role played by the state as the guarantor of a universalistic risk equalization encompassing all social groups and milieus, strata or classes, the *better*, i.e. the more valuable in terms of the politics of solidarity. On the other hand, to the extent that markets or family households or both are used, or at any rate are allowed to function, by the state as instances of social risk management, the air becomes thinner for social solidarity. Although risks can also be pooled and regulated through market mechanisms, each individual market player is then ultimately dependent on his or her own efforts to ensure individual well-being, with the corresponding consequences for inequality. And even in an intermediary model of communal solidarity, in which smaller or larger groups—ranging from the family to professional associations—ensure a mutual balancing of needs (whether in the form of childcare or accident liability) should the risk event occur, risk management remains in principle particularistic, leading to correspondingly unequal levels of protection and group-related graduated life chances.

So much for the narrative of the rise of the European welfare state that has become widely accepted in research on European social policy, even beyond academic milieus that are politically sympathetic to social democracy. Given that the welfare state was a product of the industrial class conflict and the struggles for democratization of the labor movement, the strength of the latter and its historical successes or

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

failures in class coalition building (see Esping-Andersen 1990:29-32) were essential in shaping the national welfare regimes and determining whether they spelled out the solidarity principle in more universalistic, particularistic or individualistic terms.

Social advancement, however, is always followed at some point by social decline—as has also been the case in the history of the welfare state. And this is the starting point of part two of the essential narrative that has become formative for much of the research on the welfare state in social science. As in the essential narrative of the Federal Republic of Germany, in which the people were "infected" by National Socialism, which supposedly befell them like "a plague from the outside" in a "treacherous attack"—according to the retrospective interpretation of no less a figure than the first postwar chairman of the German Sociological Association, Leopold von Wiese (see Dyk and Schauer 2015:141)—the image of being overwhelmed from outside is no stranger to the welfare-state essential narrative either. According to this narrative, foreign influences, operating exclusively under the banner of neoliberalism, have appropriated social capitalism.

Already in part one of the narrative, it was market socialization or the liberal welfare state in its American guise that featured as the opposed institutional horizon to the European social model or as the market-radical other of the European models of solidarity. For the 1980s, the standard narrative in social and political science assigned the role of *bad guy* once and for all to Anglo-Saxon welfare capitalism as the big bad wolf that began to threaten the solidarity worlds of those European societies that had managed to free their citizens from the welfare-individualistic state of nature just a few decades earlier with the help of the sociopolitical Leviathan. According to this view, the neoliberal transformation of the European welfare state came from outside, from across the Atlantic or at least the English Channel, from the houses of Reagan and Thatcher, and destroyed the good old-European model of sociopolitically organized social cohesion.

The rest of the story is quickly told. The capital side felt politically empowered by the neoliberal tidal shift to terminate the postwar democratic-capitalist compromise and it had the necessary power to impose its ideas concerning what form a new accumulation cycle should take (see Streeck 2014). With the active assistance of European social democracy, which saw a programmatic and political turn toward market liberalism as the sole guarantor of its viability in the competition between political parties (see Nachtwey 2009), the regulative logic of the European welfare state was consistently adjusted to *politics for markets*. Neoliberalism began its triumphant march across all spheres of social life (see Brown 2015), and the gradual recommodification of labor and the creeping marketization of social policy led to progressive

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

social desolidarization and the establishment of post-welfare-state conditions (see Butterwegge 2015).

What can be said in summary about this narrative, which is supported by social science that is often avowedly sympathetic to its subject? As suggested at the beginning, two things: on the one hand, a straightforward *Yes, that's how it was*. The history of the rise and fall of the European welfare state can indeed be reconstructed in this way. On the other hand, however, this is only half the truth. Or, to put it differently, this story is too simple—and too gruesomely beautiful to be true. There are also heterodox narratives, of course, but they have hardly been able to hold their own in the game of scientific truth against the mainstream of the social democratic narrative.

First of all, there is the basic counter-narrative of the theory of capitalism: at no time in social history were welfare-state policies tantamount to *politics against markets*; they have always been at the same time market-enabling, always both commodifying and decommodifying—and necessarily so in the democratic-capitalist social formation (see Lessenich 1999). The democratic-capitalist welfare state is permeated by structural contradictions, indeed it is a self-contradictory arrangement (see Borchert and Lessenich 2016:48-76)—an analytical insight that is systematically denied in social democratic politics of history and is confidently circumvented in the present-oriented diagnoses of neoliberalism (see Lessenich 2017). For their part, two other counter-narratives repudiate, as it were in a pincer grip, the reconstruction of the European welfare state as an institutionalized—and, above all, a universalistic—solidarity arrangement. The feminist critique of the *social democratic model* demonstrated as early as the 1970s how welfare state solidarity is only a half measure as regards productivity policy and gender policy, and how the social rights wrested from capital are in essence those of the normal male worker (see e.g. Orloff 1993). Critical migration research, in turn, points to more far-reaching structural limitations of the welfare state promise, insofar as the principle of citizenship rights is always also one of exclusion from citizenship and the stratification of rights through residency law (see e.g. Morris 2002). Welfare state solidarity is, prior to all other social selectivities, structured first of all along national lines.

The concept of the externalization society takes up all these analytical objections against the essential narrative of the welfare state and, combining the critiques based on the theories of capitalism, gender and migration, problematizes in a very fundamental way the scientific self-description of the European welfare state as an institutionalization of relations of social solidarity.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

3. Externalization: The Other Side of the Welfare State Solidarity Arrangement

By externalization I understand a specific mode of socialization, a historically situated and spatially circumscribed structural mechanism of social reproduction. Capitalist societies—or, more precisely, "societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails" (Marx 1990:125)—are externalizing societies: they unavoidably, even compulsively, externalize in order to be able to permanently maintain their mode of production and to reproduce it on a constantly expanded level. This constitutive mode of reproduction of capitalist societies, which became established in the European centers of the capitalist world system beginning in the late sixteenth century (see Wallerstein 2004), underwent an unprecedented expansion, deepening, and intensification with the consolidation of the industrial capitalist mode of production in precisely those central economies since the mid-eighteenth century. Embedded in the historically shifting political and economic configurations of capitalism with its tendency to spread globally (see Arrighi 1994), the externalizing societies of the Western world—or, to use the later, more comprehensive term, of the Global North—developed a socio-economic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural dynamic of development that allowed them to rise unchallenged to the pinnacle of the social structure of world society in the course of the twentieth century.

Describing the early industrialized capitalist societies of the Euro-Atlantic area as externalizing societies refers to the analytically central fact of the *unacknowledged preconditions, side effects and consequences* of their world-historical success. But this generally untold history of Western industrial capitalism in particular is apt to cast its macroinstitutional corollaries—the institutional systems of representative democracy and the democratic welfare state that count as co-evolutionary civilizational achievements—in a different, quite unflattering light. For the externalization perspective reveals that the social compromise structures that underpin industrial welfare capitalism and are central to the social democratic essential narrative have systematically produced *compromises at the expense of third parties*. Whether intended or implied, the failure of all those who remain excluded from these compromise structures is at any rate an objective functional necessity and is subjectively accepted. It must therefore be seen as the, or at least a very decisive, secret of the economic success and social cohesion of welfare-capitalist democracies.

Here I cannot offer a detailed explanation of the conceptual architecture of the notion of externalization. Based on an analysis of seven dimensions of the concept, however, I can at least hint at the nature of the essential structural mechanism involved. It is important to emphasize that functional mechanisms as such do not exercise social effects, but only insofar as they are mediated through the social prac-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

tice of really existing actors. Hence, each of the following categories also designates specific social practices, moreover practices that combine to constitute a specific functional nexus.

The original mechanism of externalizing socialization is the *appropriation* of goods and resources of relevance for production by the ruling strata. This is primarily a matter of appropriating living labor and living nature—a process of incorporating value indispensable for initiating and perpetuating a capitalist dynamic of accumulation and exploitation. From its historical beginnings, the material efforts of appropriation of European capitalism were designed on a global scale, and from its inception, the appropriation of labor and nature went hand in hand with the dispossession of those who had previously been masters over themselves or beneficiaries of their natural environment. This mechanism was immediately followed by a second one, namely the economic exploitation of the previously appropriated goods and resources. Exploitation is to be understood here in the most general sense as a social relationship in which it is possible for the more powerful side to exploit systematically—and thus over and over again—the socially vulnerable position of its less powerful counterpart to its unilateral advantage (see Tilly 1998:117-146; Haubner 2017). In the history of European capitalism, the central economies have succeeded in actively creating corresponding positions of vulnerability, and thus exploitability, on their peripheries, where such positions did not already exist in any case: first in the classical, violent variant of establishing colonial relations of domination and extractivist economies based on unfree labor, subsequently in the more modern, legally codified form of unequal economic and ecological exchange within the framework of asymmetrical global labor, production, and trade regimes (see Boatcă 2015:117-137).

The third mechanism, which completes the two previously mentioned ones or first makes them possible, is that of the material and symbolic *devaluation* of all of the goods and resources that are to be exploited after their appropriation. Labor and nature in other social spaces defined as external are, on the one hand, dear to industrial capitalist externalization societies, because they are directly relevant to accumulation; but, on the other hand, they are precisely not dear because they are subject to a systematic process of devaluation—up to and including complete loss of value. Accordingly, nature is assumed to be abundant and not to belong to anybody (until one acquires the title to it oneself), so that it is to be appropriated and exploited without restraint. The same holds for the labor of *savages* and indigenous people, slaves and day laborers, women and migrants: in the logic of externalization, they and their capacity for work can also be had cheaply; they are the industrial and reproductive reserve armies that represent an inexhaustible source of value creation and can be used in an uncontrolled manner and abused at will—that is,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

exploited in a "devaluing" manner (see Biesecker et al. 2013). All of them—*freely available* nature, the *weaker* gender, the *underdeveloped* economies—are socially marked as the other of industrial-capitalist modernity, which is at any time and without limit open to the sovereign (not to mention, white male) grasp of the more powerful side of the respective social relationship.

How can this functional relationship of devaluing appropriation and exploitation of goods and resources necessary for accumulation be made permanent and reproduced in a stable, dynamic way? This question is answered by a set of four further mechanisms. First, there is the fourth member of the dimensions of externalization, the *outsourcing* itself. This refers to externalization in the narrower and proper sense, namely the intensive effort to leave the collateral damage and follow-on costs of capitalist relations of exploitation as far as possible in the external economic and social spaces or to transfer them there. The corresponding cost portfolio goes far beyond the dimension of strictly economic costs, for example in the form of the one-sided world-market-dependent and hence extremely crisis-prone specialization of peripheral national economies. The ecological costs of raw materials and energy production without regard for losses, the social costs of the consumer goods and service industries based on systematic overexploitation of labor, the political and legal costs of the often semi-legal or criminal agrarian and fossil fuel capitalism in the countries of the global South are also immense and incalculable in every sense—the only thing that is calculable is that they do not have to be borne by the externalizing societies themselves (see I.L.A. Kollektiv 2019). The latter also seek to ensure this externalization of costs with the help of the fifth mechanism to be mentioned here, the maximally effective or calculatedly selective *closure* of one's own economic and social space against what is construed as the outside. Whereas the Western-dominated free trade regime was for a long time effective in promoting the competitive and standard-setting industrial economies of the center, the migration regimes of the rich democracies are designed to prevent uncontrolled immigration from the rest of the world or to enable the self-interested recruitment of labor. In both ways, closures are undertaken to ensure the monopolization of economic opportunities, thereby systematically reducing the opportunities for production and consumption, mobility and living of the economic and social regions on the peripheries.

Finally, the functionality of the entire externalization process as regards its political legitimation and social acceptance is based on two further mechanisms: on the one hand, the consistent *suppression* of the entire practical context of appropriation, exploitation, devaluation, outsourcing, and closure from the socially effective store of knowledge; and, on the other, the *postponement* to a supposedly distant future of the consequences of the externalization process that make themselves felt in the

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

externalizing societies themselves. In a way, both suppression and postponement are second-order externalization mechanisms, since the knowledge about and experience of externalization themselves are externalized. On the one hand, knowledge about the "imperial way of life" (Brand und Wissen 2017) of the rich industrialized nations is split off from the collective consciousness of society. It is communicatively silenced in an eloquent matter, or is entrusted to the care of specialized systems of actors (academia, churches, development policy NGOs, volunteers), where it can be processed in ways that do not threaten the logic of externalization itself. On the other hand, the material consequences of continued externalization policies—not least for the populations of the externalizing societies themselves—are systematically shifted, or attempts are made to shift them, into the future. This first enables or decisively promotes the social acceptance of a "sustainable non-sustainability" (Blühdorn 2018; Blühdorn et al. 2020) of production and consumption.

The seven dimensions of externalization form an essentially political and economic constellation. The specific mode of sociality that is historically constituted and established around or through this constellation is what first justifies us in speaking in terms of an externalization *society*—as a complex ensemble of mutually supporting social practices, forms of subjectivity, and normativities (see Lessenich 2018a). The latter include, on the one hand, the *taken-for-granted* aspects of the everyday lifestyle of large majorities of the population in the externalization societies of this world—ranging from practically unlimited spatial mobility to never-ending consumer offerings to the availability of a functioning infrastructure of public services and facilities. On the other hand, the political-economic logic of externalization acquires concrete form in the *self-conceptions* especially of the socially dominant middle classes with regard to lifestyles and personal life plans befitting their status.

The motivations and practical orientations of ordinary citizens in Western welfare capitalism are intimately bound up with bourgeois norms of material prosperity centered on individual ownership and with norms of social advancement, personal self-realization, and the individual and collective utilization of potential (see Lessenich 2018b). These social self-understandings and taken-for-granted realities are in turn embedded in a permanent process of explicit—and, in particular, also implicit—social *self-clarification* about the appropriateness and legitimacy of those global conditions in which one's own life unfolds. The externalization society is sustained by an economic-liberal moral economy that deems its own economic conduct to be ethically neutral. According to this view, markets and outcomes *in line with market conditions* are not subject to moral evaluations; free trade is seen as a positive-sum game in which the comparative advantages of all participants can play out; and although the earth may not be a disc, the global economy is seen as a single competitive plat-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

form that provides systemic opportunities to catch up for all those stragglers who are able to find and survive in their niches of the world market.

All of this points to the profound socializing effects of the externalization society. In their individual action orientations and social patterns of interpretation, the citizens of the externalization society are closely intertwined with its functional mechanisms and are part of an institutional arrangement from which they cannot escape through their individual decisions—and to which they are bound by very basic material and ideal interests. In this respect, they live in a kind of forced complicity, in a state of participatory compulsory integration. Their accustomed living conditions and everyday practices, the standard of living and the levels of entitlement they have achieved can be maintained over time only through the permanent reproduction of the logic of externalization. The citizens of the externalization society are thus dependent on its continued ability to function. In this specific sense, they are at once rulers and ruled: without having even rudimentary decision-making power over the concrete historical form of their socialization, possibly situated on one of the lowest levels of the national social structure of distribution of life chances, they nevertheless also unavoidably participate materially and symbolically in the externalization dividends that arise through the systemic social practice of appropriation, devaluation, and exploitation, of outsourcing, closure, suppression, and postponement. In for a penny, in for a pound: there is no right life in the externalization society.

4. Limits of Solidarity Or: The Double Standard of History

This insight points, in turn, however, to the possibility of an immanent critique of externalization or, more precisely, of a reflexive critique by the dominated of their enforced domination. In effect, the citizens of the externalization society can only maintain their positions in the system of social inequality and can only realize their participation, whatever form it assumes, in the context of the mutual recognition of claims to social security and protection that is established through public welfare institutions by systematically harming third parties who do not belong to this context. The mode of operation of the externalization society is based to a certain extent on the inversion of Rawls's difference principle: even the worst-off can only secure their social condition at the expense of others; the logic of externalization dictates that any absolute or relative improvement in their situation is accompanied by an increase in the costs for others.

It is only on this basis that *solidarity* becomes possible in the first place in the externalization society—only on this basis can programs for equalizing needs and risks,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

the production of public goods or the guarantee of social assistance be organized and financed. Therefore, solidarity *in the externalization society* is—beyond specific, more far-reaching practices of propagated or realized exclusion from the national community of solidarity (see Brosch 2007; Dörre 2016)—in principle exclusive or *excluding* solidarity. Even if we disregard all criticism of the current variant of basic income support for jobseekers, which is one of the last fallback positions of individual subsistence social security in the German welfare state, and accept that it is an act of institutionalized social solidarity with the weakest (i.e. those who remain unemployed in a society thoroughly geared to gainful employment), it nevertheless disguises a bitter truth. It is only thanks to the *artificial*, but in fact extremely violent, lowering of the social reproduction costs of labor power—because, thanks to externalization, the prices for clothing and food, energy and electronics are ridiculously low in this country—that it is possible to live or survive on a household income at the level of basic income support in Germany. This form of sociopolitically organized social cohesion has very demanding social preconditions and is exceedingly harmful to others, but at the same time is in itself extremely meager and threatening to self-esteem. Yet even this meagre level of support is repeatedly qualified in public discourse as *too expensive*, as a *misdirected social incentive*, or as a magnet for *immigration into the social systems*; and this generally serves as a pretext for taking further measures to secure the social exclusivity of the welfare system, whether in the form of group-related sanctions or the lowering of benefits below the supposed *basic income support* standard.

Analyzed as an externalization society, therefore, the democratic-capitalist welfare state has a second face. If we view it in a global context, it appears as a giant machine for destroying or restricting solidarity, and this as a matter of principle, already in virtue of its constitutive logic, even without its more recent *neoliberal* subversion or perversion. If we understand the "idea of a mutual connection between the members of a group of human beings" (Bayertz 1998, 11) as the descriptive core of the concept of solidarity and the idea of "mutual ties and obligations" (ibid., 49) between these group members as a way of investing this concept with a broadly acceptable, because relatively undemanding normative meaning, then the analytical instruments of the externalization diagnosis are certainly suitable for describing manifold reciprocal connections between the citizens of welfare capitalist democracies in the Euro-Atlantic area and their global social environment. But these transnational contexts have by no means become the historical point of reference in the democratic-capitalist welfare states of the Western world for the institutionalization of mutual ties and obligations. To the present day, their material binding effect remains entirely subordinated to the world of ideas of national solidarity.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

The inherent demarcations of this historically concrete conception of solidarity can be understood in turn, following the neo-Marxist rereading of Max Weber by the sociologists Frank Parkin (1974) and Raymond Murphy (1984), as multiple structural dynamics of *social closure*. *Internally*, industrial capitalist societies operate a twofold closure of the space of institutionalized solidarity in the process of becoming welfare states. A first demarcation—below the prior, capitalism-constitutive meta-boundary between owners of the means of production and owners of labor power—is that of the industrial-capitalist gender relation: "The ascription of the gender characters is the *basis* of the industrial society" (Beck 1992:104), which is founded "on an incomplete, or more precisely, a *divided* commercialization of human labor power" (ibid., emphasis in original). The "ascribed roles … of gendered status" (Beck 1992:106) of industrial capitalism are reflected in a modern, first and foremost gender-segregated "hierarchy of status" (ibid.) of the understanding of solidarity. While male production workers assure themselves sociopolitically of their mutual support in the vicissitudes of their wage-dependent existence, female reproduction workers are relegated to the status of dependency on wage dependency and must be content with security claims derived from the solidarity claims of their husbands. A second, complementary internal demarcation is that between natives and immigrants—a classic established-outsider configuration (see Elias and Scotson 1994), which is associated in industrial capitalism with a structural split or "horizontal disparity" (see Borchert and Lessenich 2016:49-54) in the labor market between different groups of production workers. The establishment of a guest worker regime in Western European industrial societies after the Second World War led to the systematic "underclassing" of national employment systems. This manifested itself not only in symbolic demarcations between the members of ethnically marked labor market segments, but also in the material structuring of the system of social legal rights and solidarity guarantees along the legal-political status differences among employed non-citizens (see, for Germany, Karakayali 2008).

It is just here that the interface with the *external* demarcations of industrial capitalist solidarity arrangements is located. Paradoxically (or perhaps not paradoxically at all), the social category of citizenship, which in the theoretical tradition in sociology stemming from Thomas H. Marshall has always been commended as an instance of inclusion of virtually the entire population in almost all functional and performance systems of democratic industrial-capitalist society (see Marshall 1992; Mackert 1999), also is just as originally an instrument of effective social exclusion. "Citizenship laws in industrialized capitalist countries … operate to prevent the dilution of the benefits of industrialization (spread them more thinly among a large number) through the exclusion of people born elsewhere" (Murphy 1984:559; see Scherschel 2018). In addition to class, gender, and race as structural categories of

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

demarcation generated by the politics of solidarity, another, fourth one comes into play, namely the structural category "place" (see Milanovic 2012), on the basis (or literally, on the ground) of which the three aforementioned forms of social structuring operate. A person's place of birth, and the nationality and citizenship it confers, is the very first, fundamental limit and boundary of solidarity drawn and institutionalized by national welfare states. This demarcation implies going beyond the division in relations of solidarity in industrial capitalist society as a result of gender and migration policy, "an additional line of class cleavage beneath property classes—the line separating the working class of advanced capitalist countries from the poor of the Third World" (Murphy 1984, 559). Citizenship rights, their institutional guarantee or the negation of this very guarantee, draw a solidarity boundary antecedent to the entitlement structures within the welfare state, through which the national community of solidarity, "including the most disadvantaged fraction of the working class" (ibid.), protects itself against any solidarity claims from its external social world. Raymond Murphy therefore describes the working classes living outside the industrial capitalist centers as a "citizenship underclass" (ibid.) who are excluded from the internal processes of democratic-capitalist status allocation but whose life chances are affected directly or indirectly by these processes.

Historically and sociologically speaking, these connections can be translated into the figure of a dual social contract that sustained the democratic forms of capitalism in the West and their welfare-state development during the twentieth century, especially during the long postwar period. At its core, the Western social contract consisted of a social exchange relationship: the political acceptance of private property and free enterprise was secured in exchange for the increasing social share of the non-owning classes in the prosperity of the respective nation. This arrangement found institutional expression in the industrial solidarity pact of the modern welfare state and cultural expression in the democratization and concomitant expansion of opportunities for consumption. In different variants and historically out of phase, this "implicit contract" (see Moore 1978, 18ff.) has become a basic component of society's self-image that is semantically represented, for instance, in the formula of the social market economy in Germany or the New Deal in the United States.

However, the democratic-capitalist social contract had a second side. For it was based in turn on the agreement across social classes that the negative consequences of the industrial welfare capitalist model of growth and distribution outside one's own borders should be effectively kept at a distance from the Euro-Atlantic nations themselves. The exploitation of natural resources and the overexploitation of labor power in distant regions beyond the Western world, without which its modes of production and consumption would not have been possible or sustainable at all, were supposed

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

to proceed as smoothly and unnoticed as possible. Accordingly, this flip side of the much-vaunted success stories of (more or less) "social capitalism" was not trumpeted from the rooftops—either in Germany or in the U.S. or any other Western welfare state; it was the fine print, the truly implicit part of the implicit social contract.

Today, however, this double social contract has become precarious in both of its dimensions. Even as the wealth of industrial capitalist nations continues to increase, social security guarantees and promises of advancement have been shaken right into the middle of society; the experience of precarious working and living conditions is by no means merely a marginal social phenomenon. The resonance with the German public of sociological diagnoses of an impending "society of social decline" (Nachtwey 2018) speaks as much for a profound feeling of insecurity among broad sections of the population as does the unmediated political success of Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential election. Like the rise of neo-nationalist movements in Germany and Europe, the *Trump effect* also points to the fact that the perceived erosion of the democratic-capitalist social contract is not being attributed to *the economy* or the economic functional elites, but instead to politics or the "political class" (see Borchert and Lessenich 2016, 123ff.).

At the same time, however, the political rulers are now coming under pressure from a second side. For the secret clause of the democratic-capitalist compromise is also increasingly losing its validity. In this respect, too, Western societies are currently experiencing an erosion of the conditions for their stable reproduction. Climate change and migration are the symbols of the growing public awareness of the fragility of the two foundations on which the entire Euro-Atlantic model of society rests, namely the energy regime based on fossil fuels and the global system of inequality. It is therefore not only the socio-economic situation, narrowly understood, of large parts of the population that is feeding a social feeling of precarity—in the literal sense of the revocability of an achieved social condition or status. The discontent in and with democratic welfare capitalism runs deeper. It is grounded in the unnerving premonition of a way of life that is unsustainable in every respect, one that can no longer rely on the inexhaustibility of natural resources and the reticence of the Third World proletariat.

However, this reveals the fundamental contradiction in which the overwhelming majority of citizens of the externalization society are compelled to live for structural reasons, and thus in which they are trapped: themselves excluded from the central resources of power—the possession of productive assets—they depend for their social existence not only on those in power who exclude them, but at the same time on the fact that other, structurally even more powerless, groups are excluded

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

from the democratic-capitalist game of distribution. With Murphy (1984:562) one can speak here of an almost schizophrenic positioning, of a "Jekyll and Hyde relationship" in which the "derivative exclusionary groups"—the dominated in and of the externalization society—stand to the "principal exclusionary group," those who dominate them: "the former are dependent on and hence allied with the latter and yet they are dominated and excluded by the latter and therefore provoked to usurp the latter's exclusive power and advantages."

How can and will this tension between wanting to extract more welfare from those who dominate internally, but thereby inevitably harming the welfare of the externally dominated, be resolved? One possibility that is not only conceivable, but for which there are unmistakable signs at present, is an adaptation of the essential narrative of the welfare state in the direction of a more offensive and aggressive emphasis on the exclusive character of sociopolitically organized social cohesion—that is, on the national in the social. This would be, or is tantamount to the initially discursive, but subsequently also material intensification of the solidarity-political double standard typical of externalization. This strategy certainly comes in milieu-specific variants (see Koppetsch 2018), ranging from the naturalizing codifications of social hierarchies in the upper classes to the attempts to restore the claim to exclusive cultural representation of the (white male) middle classes to the symbolic devaluation of outsiders in the context of social distribution conflicts at the lower end of the social structure. In any case, however, here the boundaries of solidarity—toward the underclasses, women, immigrants, those who are kept out—are tightened, and all emancipation claims and concerns other than one's own are rejected.

A second, opposed possibility, which for the time being is generating much less social discussion, would be changed practices of solidarity (see Lessenich 2019:96). These would be practices that do not seek to reconstitute the solidarity arrangement of the democratic industrial-capitalist welfare state—following the *neoliberal* attack—but rather to transcend it. They would be solidary practices based on a new essential narrative of the welfare state. The narrative I have in mind is one of solidarity as a practice that is *cooperative*, *performative* and *transformative* all in one—cooperative, in that the idea of mutual connectedness is not spelled out in terms of vicariously standing up for the concerns of others, but of *jointly* standing up for shared concerns; performative, in that it does not rely on the notion of a prior attitude of solidarity, which, if necessary, could only find individual expression, but instead makes clear that the awareness of mutual connectedness only grows *in the act* of jointly standing up for shared concerns (which in turn only prove to be such via the detour of this collective action); and transformative, in that the goal of the obligations arising from mutual connectedness is not defined as, for example, the mainte-

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14915

nance or restoration of a given structure of privileges, but as fundamentally *changing* the social system of unequal life chances.

In this respect, the history of Western welfare capitalism will have to be rewritten in two ways: retrospectively, by historical sociologists who systematically reconstruct the preconditions, concomitants, and consequences at the level of world society of institutionalized social solidarity at the national level; but prospectively, by social individuals whose social practice is capable of pushing solidarity beyond the boundaries and limitations of its previous institutionalization in the national welfare state.

Translated by Ciaran Cronin

Literature

Arrighi, Giovanni. 1994. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso.

Bayertz, Kurt. 1998. "Begriff und Problem der Solidarität." Pp. 11-53 in *Solidarität. Begriff und Problem*, edited by K. Bayertz. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. London*: Sage.

Biesecker, Adelheid, Sabine Hofmeister and Uta van Winterfeld. 2013. "Draußen? Zur Dialektik von Aneignung und Enteignung und zu deren aktuellen Erscheinungsformen." *Das Argument* 55: 522–538.

Blühdorn, Ingolfur. 2018. "Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit auf der Suche nach ihrer politischen Form. Konturen der demokratischen Postwachstumsgesellschaft." *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 28*:* 151–180.

Blühdorn, Ingolfur, Felix Butzlaff, Michael Deflorian, Daniel Hausknost, and Mirjam Mock. 2020. *Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit. Warum die ökologische Transformation der Gesellschaft nicht stattfindet*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Boatcă, Manuela. 2015. *Global Inequalities beyond Occidentalism*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Borchert, Jens, and Stephan Lessenich. 2016. *Claus Offe and the Critical Theory of the Capitalist State*. New York: Routledge.

Brand, Ulrich and Markus Wissen. 2017. *Imperiale Lebensweise. Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur im globalen Kapitalismus.* Munich: oekom.

Brosch, Matthias, Michael Elm, Norman Geißler, Brigitta Elisa Simbürger, Oliver von Wrochem, eds. 2007. *Exklusive Solidarität. Linker Antisemitismus in Deutschland*. Berlin: Metropol.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution.* New York: Zone Books.

Butterwegge, Christoph. 2015. *Hartz IV und die Folgen. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Republik?* Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.

Dörre, Klaus. 2016. "Furcht vor Veränderung. Abstiegsängste und exklusive Solidarität." Pp. 331-336 In *Freiheit, Angst und Provokation: Zum gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt in der postdiktatorischen Gesellschaft*, edited by Jürgen Klose and Werner Schmitz. Dresden: Thelem.

Van Dyk, Silke and Alexandra Schauer. 2015. *"...daß die offizielle Soziologie versagt hat": Zur Soziologie im Nationalsozialismus, der Geschichte ihrer Aufarbeitung und der Rolle der DGS.* 2nd ed. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Elias, Norbert and John L. Scotson. 1994. *The Established and the Outsiders*. London: Sage.

Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1985. *Politics against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1999. *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haubner, Tina. 2017. "Ein unbequemes Erbe. Die Ausbeutung von Pflegearbeiten und der marxistische Ausbeutungsbegriff." *Das Argument* 59: 534-547.

Herz, Thomas. 1996. "Die "Basiserzählung" und die NS-Vergangenheit. Zur Veränderung der

politischen Kultur in Deutschland." Pp. 91-109 In *Gesellschaften im Umbruch: Verhandlungen des 27. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Halle an der Saale 1995*, edited by Ludwig Clausen. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

I.L.A. Kollektiv. 2019. *At the Expense of Others? How the imperial mode of living prevents a good life for all.* Munich: oekom.

Karakayali, Serhat. 2008. *Gespenster der Migration. Zur Genealogie illegaler Einwanderung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.* Bielefeld: transcript.

Koppetsch, Claudia. 2018. "Rechtspopulismus als Klassenkampf? Soziale Deklassierung und politische Mobilisierung." *WSI-Mitteilungen 71:* 382-391.

Korpi, Walter. 1983. *The Democratic Class Struggle*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Lessenich, Stephan. 1999. "Vorwärts und nichts vergessen. Die neue deutsche Sozialstaatsdebatte und die Dialektik sozialpolitischer Intervention." *PROKLA 29*: 411-430.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2017. "Rezension: Immer, nur und überall: Wendy Browns Kritik des Neoliberalismus." *Ethik und Gesellschaft*, *1/2017*. Last accessed: 01 March 2020.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2018a. "Externalisierung als soziale Praxis Wachstum als Lebensform. Kommentar zum Hauptbeitrag von Rahel Jaeggi." *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsund Unternehmensethik 19*: 423-428.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2018b. "Die ewige Mitte und das Gespenst der Abtiegsgesellschaft." Pp. 163-178 in *Die Mitte als Kampfzone: Wertorientierungen und Abgrenzungspraktiken der Mittelschichten*, edited by Nadine M. Schöneck und Sabine Ritter. Bielefeld: transcript.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2019. *Grenzen der Demokratie. Teilhabe als Verteilungsproblem*. Ditzingen: Reclam.

Mackert, Jürgen. 1999. *Kampf um Zugehörigkeit. Nationale Staatsbürgerschaft als Modus sozialer Schließung.* Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Manow, Philip. 2002. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Esping-Andersens Sozialstaatstypologie und die konfessionellen Wurzeln des westlichen Wohlfahrtsstaats." *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 54: 203–225.

Marshall, Thomas H. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marx, Karl. 1990 [1867]. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy.* Volume 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.

Milanovic, Branko. 2012. "Global Inequality: From Class to Location, from Proletarians to Migrants." *Global Policy*, *3*: 125-134.

Moore, Barrington. 1978. *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt.* White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

Morris, Lydia. 2002. *Managing Migration: Civic Stratification and Migrants' Rights.* London: Routledge.
Murphy, Raymond. 1984. "The Structure of Closure: A Critique and Development of the Theories of Weber, Collins, and Parkin." *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35: 547-567.
Nachtwey, Oliver. 2009. *Marktsozialdemokratie. Die Transformation von SPD und Labour Party.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Nachtwey, Oliver. 2018. *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe.* London: Verso.
Offe, Claus and Helmut Wiesenthal. 1985. "Two Logics of Collective Action." Pp. 170-220 in *Disorganized Capitalism*, edited by Claus Offe. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Orloff, Ann Shola. 1993. "Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: The Comparative Analysis of Gender Relations and Welfare States." *American Sociological Review, 58*: 303-328.
Parkin, Frank. 1974. "Strategies of Social Closure in Class Formation." Pp. 1-18 in *The Analysis of Social Structure*, edited by Frank Parkin. London: Routledge.
Scherschel, Karin. 2018. "An den Grenzen der Demokratie Citizenship und Flucht." *Berliner Journal für Soziologie 28 (1-2)*: 123-150.
Shalev, Michael. 1983. "The Social Democratic Model and Beyond: Two "Generations" of Comparative Research on the Welfare State." *Comparative Social Research, 6*, 315-351.
Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism.* Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
Tilly, Charles. 1998. *Durable Inequality.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction.* Durham: Duke University Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Reading Media Culture Politically: The Case of *A Handmaid's Tale*

Douglas Kellner[1]

From the 1960s to the present, media culture in the United States has been a battleground between competing social groups with some artifacts advancing liberal or radical positions, and others conservative ones. Likewise, some artifacts of media culture promote progressive positions and representations of gender, sexual preference, race or ethnicity, while others articulate reactionary forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and rightwing values and beliefs. Hence, media cultures articulates a contradictory matrix of liberal, radical, and reactionary representations, discourses, and narratives.

From this viewpoint, media culture can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and *transcodes* the political discourse of the era (Ryan and Kellner 1988; Kellner 1995). I am using the term transcode to describe how specific political discourses and positions like liberalism or rightwing nationalism are translated, or encoded, into media texts. For example, films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Woodstock* (1970) transcode the discourses of the 1960's counterculture into cinematic texts in image, sound, dialogue, scenes, and narrative, while feminist films like *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) transcode feminist discourses.

From the political right, films like *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Missing in Action* (1984) transcode the conservative discourses of Reaganism, while the 2017 TV series based on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* could be read as a protest against the global rise of conservatism throughout the world and against attacks on women. Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* became a global sensation, as women throughout the world donned the white hat, cloak, and modest uniform of the handmaids as symbols

1 Distinguished Research Professor of Education at Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, Moore Hall; Mailbox 951521 UCLA Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521, USA, kellner@ucla.edu.

of resistance to the attack on women's rights in the Trump administration and elsewhere, while debates raged whether Trump's America was coming to embody features of Atwood's dystopia (Robertson 2016, Engelhardt 2019). In this article, I will first present my multiperspectival method of reading media culture politically and then will illustrate this through a reading of Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and a 2017 TV mini-series that is based on it.

Films, TV series, and other forms of media culture are multiperspectival and polysemic, containing multiple and often contradictory meanings open to numerous and variant interpretations, as I demonstrate in *Cinema Wars* (2010) and *Media Culture* (1995). Yet, there are a number of recurring themes in Hollywood films and TV series of the past decades, which articulate some of the key events and socio-political and economic relations of the time. Indeed, many of these texts of media culture resonate, and can be interpreted, within the history of the social struggles and political context of their period. In this way, media culture can help interpret the social and political history of an era, and contexualizing media culture texts in their matrix of production, distribution, and reception can help interpret the multiple meanings and effects of specific films, genres, or filmmakers.

1. Media Culture and Socio-Political Struggles

This study focuses on U.S. media culture in the 2000s, covering the eras from the Bush-Cheney Gang's militarist and conservative regime (2000-2008) to Trump's hard right and extremely erratic presidency (2016-2020), culminating in the attack on democracy in Trump's insurrection of January 6, 2021, in which his Stormtroopers invaded and tried to occupy the Capitol. This has been a particularly turbulent and contested era of U.S. history and media culture reproduced its passionate polarization, intense political struggle, and often surprising and dramatic events.

I take the artifacts of media culture as providing illuminating access to social and political realities of their period, and see media interpretation and critique as contributing to knowledge of the present age through contextualization, interpretations and critique of popular media culture artifacts. In general, media texts can display social realities of the time in documentary and realist fashion, directly representing events and phenomena of an epoch. Yet media entertainment can also provide symbolic-allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray realities of an era. Finally, there is an aesthetic, philosophical, and anticipatory dimension to media culture, in which they provide artistic visions of the world that might transcend the social context of the moment and articulate future possibilities, positive

and negative, and provide insights into the nature of human beings, social relations, institutions, and conflicts of a given era, or the human condition itself.

Realist media texts would include critical documentary and films like Oliver Stone's historical dramas that attempt to provide a representation of events like the Kennedy assassination (*J.F.K.*), the Vietnam war (*Platoon*, or *Born on the Fourth of July*), *Nixon*, or countercultural figures like *The Doors* and the counterculture they influenced. Of course, both documentary films, however rigorous, and realist films are constructs, and as the Oliver Stone examples easily suggest are interpretations and specific versions of social and historical reality. It is similar with documentary films by committed filmmakers like Michael Moore whose *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, or *Mr. Hoover and I,* properly interpreted and contextualized, can provide key insights into specific historical persons, events, or eras (Kellner 2019 and 2013).

Allegorical films include fantasy and horror genres which require theoretically-informed interpretations concerning what socio-political realities, or fantasies, specific artifacts of media culture represent. The series of haunted and collapsing house films of the 1980s (i.e. *The Amityville Horror* and the *Poltergeist* trilogy; see Kellner 1995), for example, can be interpreted as projecting fears of middle class families losing their homes or having their families torn apart during the Reagan era in which the middle class was indeed downwardly mobile, divorce was up, and families were losing homes (as happened again in accelerating fashion during the Covid lockdown in which many people could not keep up their home payments).

Likewise, a series of political thrillers in the 2000s can be read as allegories articulating liberal fears of rightwing oppression under the Bush-Cheney administration, including *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Syriania* (2004), and *V for Vendetta* (2006). The texts of media culture thus provide insight or illumination into the contemporary moment through their images, scenes, or the narratives as a whole. As the German exile writers Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno argued, cultural forms can provide *dialectical images* that illuminate their social environments, as Adorno claimed regarding the poetry of Hölderlin, or as Heidegger claimed that Greek tragedy and epic poetry illuminated the world of the Greeks (Kellner 1989). Media culture is, to be sure, a less sublime mode of culture, although its artifacts have their moments of beauty and transcendence, and modernist moments of style, innovation, contestation or resistance.

More aesthetic and philosophical readings of media culture engage themselves with the *aesthetic dimension* (Marcuse 1978) that ranges from analysis of media form and style to the transcendent visions of another world presented in some media artifacts

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

(Kellner 2007). By virtue of style and form, innovative and visionary works of media culture can present visions of a better life, as well as provide critical insight into the present moment. Media culture has a utopian dimension which enables audiences to transcend the limitations of the present moment to envisage new ways of seeing, living, and being. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out (1981 [1979]), popular films like *The Godfather* or *Jaws* can have utopian moments, as the opening scenes of a communal family life in the *Godfather* wedding scene, the New England community before the shark attack, or the male bonding and heroism of the disparate men seeking to protect the community from the shark attacks.

In addition, media culture has been a rich terrain and a productive field for aesthetic and philosophical exploration of its texts. Films and television at their best interrogate the human condition as well as specific social relations and deal with universal aspects of human being-in-the-world as well as specific socio-historical conditions. Thus media culture can be engaged by the disciplines of aesthetics and philosophy, and categories from this realm can be applied to analyze and interpret its artifacts. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2002), for instance, combines fantasy, dream, and scenes from everyday life with characters discussing issues of philosophy in which aesthetics and philosophy, form and content, are combined (Bradshaw 2002; Wartenberg and Curran 2005; Carroll 2008).

Indeed, the texts of media culture can be used to illustrate and discuss a wide range of philosophical, religious, or social-political issues and can be an effective pedagogical tool that engage contemporary audiences in a direct and immediate fashion. The audio-visual spectacles of cinematic and televisual culture are a crucial part of contemporary cultures and are embedded in fundamental economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of the present age. The artifacts of media culture raise issues and can provoke debates concerning salient issues of the present moment as when Andrew Light claims in *Reel Arguments* (2003) that contemporary films raise important issues concerning surveillance technology, identity politics, or environmentalism, generating arguments and debates that contribute to political enlightenment or philosophical understanding.

In this and other critical studies, I use history and social and political theory to analyze media culture, and deploy its texts to illuminate historical trends, conflicts, possibilities, and anxieties of the era. From this diagnostic perspective, media culture can provide important insights into the psychological, socio-political, and ideological make-up of U.S. society at a given point in history. Reading culture diagnostically allows one to gain insights into social problems and conflicts, and to appraise the dominant ideologies and emergent oppositional forces. Moreover, diagnostic

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

critique enables one to perceive the limitations and pathologies of mainstream conservative and liberal political ideologies, as well as oppositional ones (Ryan and Kellner 1988). This approach thus involves a dialectic of text and context, using texts to read social realities and context to help situate and interpret key artifacts of media culture in the 21st century.

Much as Benjamin (1997) used the poetry of Charles Baudelaire to illuminate the scene of Paris in the mid-19th century, as well as other historical and political sources and artifacts, and the ephemera of everyday life, so too can we use media culture to provide critical insight and knowledge into our own historical era. For diagnostic critique, media culture is an important source of knowledge, used judiciously with the tools of theory and cultural studies, that provides privileged insight into how people behave, look, and act in a particular era, as well as their dreams, nightmares, fantasies and hopes.

In addition, German exile writer Siegfried Kracauer, once close to Benjamin and Adorno, laid bare the allegorical dimension of film and provided one of the first systematic studies of how films articulate social and psychological content. His book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) argues that German inter-war films reveal a highly authoritarian disposition to submit to social authority and fear of emerging chaos. For Kracauer, German films reflect and foster anti-democratic and passive attitudes of the sort that paved the way for Nazism. While his assumption that "inner" psychological tendencies and conflicts are projected onto the screen opened up a fruitful area of sociocultural analysis, he frequently ignored the role of mechanisms of representation, such as displacement, inversion, and condensation in the construction of cinematic images and narratives. He posits film-society analogies ("Their silent resignation foreshadows the passivity of many people under totalitarian rule" (Kracauer 1947:218) that deny the autonomous and contradictory character and effects of film form and the multiple ways that audiences process cinematic material.

Hollywood has long been seen as a dream machine that articulates the subconscious yearnings and fears of a culture, as well as an ideology machine that inculcates the dominant ideology—and, as well shall see, projects dreams of liberation, resistance, and a world of freedom, happiness, and justice. Sociological and psychological studies of Hollywood film proliferated in the United States in the post-World War II era and developed a wide range of critiques of myth, ideology, and meaning in the American cinema.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

Parker Tyler's studies of *The Hollywood Hallucination* (1944) and *Myth and Magic of the Movies* (1947) applied Freudian and myth-symbol criticism to show how Walt Disney cartoons, romantic melodramas, and other popular films provided insights into social psychology and context, while providing myths suitable for contemporary audiences. In *Movies: A Psychological Study*, Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites (1950) applied psychoanalytical methods to film, decoding fears, dreams, and aspirations beneath the surface of 1940s Hollywood movies, arguing that "(t)he common day dreams of a culture are in part the sources, in part the products of its popular myths, stories, plays and films" (1950:13). In her sociological study of *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, Hortense Powdermaker (1950) studied an industry that manufactured dreams and fantasies, while Robert Warshow (1962) in *The Immediate Experience* related classical Hollywood genres like the Western and the gangster film to the social history and ideological problematics of U.S. society.

Building on these traditions, Barbara Deming (1969) demonstrated in *Running Away From Myself* how 1940s Hollywood films provided insights into the social psychology and reality of the period, providing a diagnostic critique the complex relations between politics, society, and consciousness and an exemplary text of political sociology. Deming argued that "(i)t is not as mirrors reflect us but, rather, as our dreams do that movies most truly reveal the times" (1969:1). She claimed that 1940s Hollywood films provided a collective dream portrait of its era and proposed deciphering "the dream that all of us have been buying at the box office, to cut through to the real nature of the identification we have experienced there" (1969:5-6). Her work anticipates later, more sophisticated and University-based film criticism of the post-1960s era by showing how films both reproduce dominant ideologies and also contain proto-deconstructive elements that cut across the grain of the ideology that the films promote. She also undertook a gender reading of Hollywood film that would eventually become a key part of film criticism.

The same models of interpretation that critics of an earlier era applied to film can be applied to the texts of television. In addition to laying bare the socio-political fantasies and personal dreams and nightmares of an era, critical analysis of film and television can help dissect and deconstruct dominant ideologies, as well as show key ideological resistance and struggle in a given society at a specific moment, providing diagnostic critique of the form, content, and effects of media culture.

The groundbreaking work of critical media theorists like the Frankfurt School and French structuralism and poststructuralism revealed that media culture is a social construct that reproduces dominant ideology and its contestations, intrinsically linked to the vicissitudes of the social and historically specific milieu in which it is

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

conceived. Media and cultural studies unavoidably had to engage the politics of representation, which drew upon feminist approaches and multicultural theories to fully analyze the functions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual preference and so on socio-political dimensions that are vital to the constitution of cultural texts and their effects, as well as being fundamentally constitutive of audiences who appropriate and use texts (Durham and Kellner 2012; Winter 2010).

Feminist film criticism of the 1970s to the present combined critical theories like psychoanalysis and poststructuralism to interrogate how cinematic and televisual form, production, and reception contributed to the oppression of women and could contribute to their liberation. During this period, British cultural studies adopted a feminist dimension, paid greater attention to race, ethnicity and nationality, and concentrated on sexuality, as assorted discourses of race, gender, sex, nationality and so on circulated in response to social struggles and movements (Gilroy 1991; McRobbie, 1994; and Ang 1998). An increasingly complex, culturally hybrid and diasporic world calls for sophisticated understandings of the interplay of ideological representations, politics, and the forms of media, challenging the critic to draw on a wide of critical theories, thus developing models of multiperspectival cultural studies and media critique.

Poststructuralism stressed the openness and heterogeneity of the text, its embeddedness in history and desire, its political and ideological dimensions, and its excess of meaning. This led critical theory to more multidimensional interpretive methods and more radical political readings and critique, which combine discourses and methods from these multiple traditions of critical theory, cultural studies, and film and television criticism to provide diagnostic critiques which show how media texts reproduce dominant ideologies and struggles over race, class, gender, sexuality and other major components of human socio-political existence.

Critical social theories, like the Frankfurt School, show how global film and television industries are an important part of the culture industries through which mega-corporations seek mega-profits through producing blockbuster films and TV shows, which can be recycled in reruns throughout the world in various media and their digital reproduction, circulating commodities that can generate a high return. From the 1980s to the present, media culture was increasing corporatized, commodified, and produced often mediocre works to gain maximum profits. Hence, familiar *high concept* films that can be *presold* because of recognition of their source material and recycled through sequels can become franchises that can sell merchandise and spin off other products like the *Star Wars* and *Disney* films, while many popular films became blockbuster TV series like *The Lord of the Rings*.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

Thus, increasingly, the culture industry has been producing media culture that can be sold through saturation advertising and booking to turn-over large profits in a quick release that brings in mega-audiences before going into DVD, TV, foreign release, streaming and other digital forms. Nonetheless, media culture in the US in the past decades has managed to turn out a surprising number of critical and oppositional films, television, and popular music in the 21st century.

The radical movements of the 1960s spawned movements of independent film and radicalized Hollywood film directors, actors, and many throughout the production community. A generation of *movie brats* emerged from film schools in the 1970s to make ground-breaking and in some cases immensely successful films such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and others who were able to make a great variety of projects in the succeeding decades and opened the way for others. Younger independent filmmakers emerged from the indie movement range from male filmmakers like John Sayles, Spike Lee, David Lynch, and Richard Linklater to female cineastes like Chantal Ackermann, Martha Coolidge, Cheryl Dunye, Miranda July, and Ava DuVernay. The success of their early low-budget films gave them access to higher budget cinema production in some cases, or at least steady financing of their projects.

In the next section, I will carry out a case study of how Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* provided a global feminist intervention against patriarchy from the time of its publication and has continued to articulate with struggles of women against patriarchal oppression such as have been especially visible in the United States in the struggle against the anti-feminist politics of the Donald Trump administration and then the Supreme Court's shocking attack on Roe vs. Wade and women's reproductive rights. I will accordingly interpret in the following section the 2017 TV mini-series version of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopic critique of a patriarchal society that intersects in interesting ways with the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020) and rightwing attacks on women.

Thus Atwood's novel and the TV mini-series based on it can be used as a social text to illuminate the struggles over gender, class, and sexuality during the Trump era and beyond. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a global popular that has been received as an iconic feminist critique of patriarchy and the TV mini-series was especially relevant during the Trump era and continuing attacks on women, as I shall demonstrate in the following study.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

2. The Handmaid's Tale as Dystopia and Ecological/Political Critique

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985 as a critique of what she saw as disturbing conservative trends in U.S. politics during the Reagan era, embodied in groups like the Moral Majority, rightwing segments of the Republican Party, and evangelical religious groups, and in their attacks on women's freedoms and rights. Having taught at Harvard and lived in Boston and the Cambridge, Massachusetts area during this time, Atwood set her novel in a Northeastern U.S. urban area in a near future time frame.

Atwood's father was an environmentalist and she spent much time in the north of Canada and thus became involved in the ecology movement of the era. It is often overlooked that Atwood's dystopic novel is also an ecological parable showing a U.S. society some few decades further along than our own which has poisoned the environment, caused infertility in most women, and thrown modern industrial-technological societies into crisis.

The Handmaid's Tale envisages a small rightwing U.S. male cabal carrying out a revolution, murdering the previous power elite, and establishing the *Republic of Gilead*, a religious patriarchal theocracy in which women are reduced to child-bearing and reproduction or, oppressive forms of servitude. In Atwood's dystopic vision of Gilead, women have no rights and are the property of their husbands. Women are either the wives of the dominant male caste, or "Marthas" who serve in household as servants, "Handmaids" whose sole task is production of children, or "Jezebels" who are condemned to serve in houses of prostitution for the male elite, or are sent to the colonies to engage in slave labor in a nuclear polluted area where their lives are nasty, brutal, and short.

In 2017, shortly after Trump's election, the Hulu channel inaugurated a TV limited series of Atwood's novel and *The Handmaid's Tale* became a global sensation, as women throughout the world donned the white hat, cloak, and modest uniform of the handmaids as symbols of resistance to the attack on women's rights in the Trump administration and elsewhere, while debates raged whether Trump's America was coming to embody feature of Atwood's dystopia (Robertson 2016, Engelhardt 2019). The first season of the Hulu broadcast focused on the events told in Atwood's novel, whereas the second and third seasons went beyond Atwood's text, envisaging the main character Offred/June (Elizabeth Moss) escaping from bondage, encountering a resistance movement, then returning to her bondage as a Handmaid to try to save her daughter who had been taken away from her, while still attempting to resist and help cultivate a movement to overthrow the fascist theocratic state of Gilead.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

The proliferation of cable channels in the 2000s and growth of streaming channels like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and others has proliferated TV production to previously unimaginable levels, and allowed for the production of more radical series and movies like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2019), Joseph Heller's anti-war novel *Catch-22* (2019), Armistead Maupin's gay drama *Tales of the City* (2019), and countless other series or films that embody a diversity or productions by different races, creators, and individuals previously kept out of conservative white male dominated TV production.

The Hulu TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* opens with June Osborne attempting to escape to Canada with her husband, Luke, and daughter, Hannah. June is captured and due to her fertility, she is made a Handmaid to Commander Fred Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy, and is now known as "Offred". The handmaid's names are created by the addition of the prefix Of- to the first name of the man who owns them, so Offred is Of-Fred, the property and reproductive handmaid of Fred and his family. When handmaids are transferred, their names are changed, and at the end of the first episode and throughout the series, Offred keeps reminding herself and the viewers that she is really *June*. This narrative device highlights how in patriarchal societies women are the *property* of men and must submit to their domination, as well as to a class society in which the underclass is forced to labor in the interest of the ruling elite.

The Waterford's are part of the Gilead elite as Fred Waterford is a high-ranking government official and his wife Serena Joy was a former conservative activist, writer, and celebrity. Serena has accepted her new role in Gilead, despite losing her fame and cultural power. Infertile herself, she yearns to have a child and willingly participates in the bizarre sexual ceremony, whereby Serena folds Offred in her arms as the latter copulates with Fred, attempting to impregnate Offred and have her much desired child.

Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) is in charge of the training of the Handmaids and is a major figure in the plot, and in early episodes she indoctrinates the handmaids with their role as childbearer and their importance to the survival of the society. Aunt Lydia uses a fundamentalist version of Christianity to indoctrinate the handmaid's into performing their roles as bearers of children and submissive underlings. While Lydia appears to be deeply religious, she is capable of great cruelty and embodies an authoritarian personality who serves to discipline and control the young women, thus showing how religion can take authoritarian forms and serve as instruments of domination.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

Early episodes depict Offred/June and other Handmaids going shopping and meeting on the street and in various stores where they are doing errands which also affords the opportunity to present the oppressive features of Gilead such as a wall where men are hung for being gay, or not conforming in some way. The handmaid's also observe *Savagings* where rebels are hung to death or executed in public ceremonies. The Handmaids wear long red dresses, heavy boots and white coifs, with a larger white coif to be worn outside, concealing their facial figures from public view and restricting their own vision. Indeed, the women of different castes wear different clothing, with "Marthas" who are housekeepers and cooks, wearing long, loose-fitting dull green garments and covering their hair with headwraps. The upperclass "Wives" wear elegant, tailored dresses in blue and turquoise, cut in styles evoking the 1950s, while "Jezebels" who work in brothels to service the male elite dress in provocative lowcut blouses, tight skirts, and clothing to show off their bodies.

Flashbacks show June and other women losing their jobs, having their bank accounts frozen, and forfeiting all their rights, in cautionary warnings that oppressive patriarchy can return women to second class citizenship and worse. Throughout, there are also flashbacks to June's past pre-Gilead life, her relation to her husband Luke, her child Hannah, her feminist mother, and her friend Moira, creating contrasts between the former human life and the inhuman life of Gilead. In many images in the series, the camera tightly focuses on June's face and depicts the story from her point-of-view, showing the misery etched on her facial expressions and the indignities and oppression forced on her and the other Handmaids, although on occasion June's face expresses flashes of anger and resolute resistance, while the final episodes of Season 3 depict June as relentlessly focused on freeing the oppressed women and children.

The first season that follows the storyline of Atwood's novel and focuses on June's relations with the other Handmaids, depicting their shared oppression and moments of solidarity, and June's increasingly complex relations with the Waterford family. Seeking to humanize the nonhuman relations, the Commander Fred invites June/Offred to his private study where they play Scrabble and eventually talk like normal people; he also takes her to a brothel, meant for the entertainment of the male elite where she meets her friend Moira and begins forging relations of resistance. Serena, jealous of Offred's relation with Fred and afraid he may be infertile, encourages Offred to have sexual relations with Fred's driver Nick, which she does and begins to have a relation with him that will eventually yield Serena's much desired child.

At the end of the first season, Moira escapes to Canada where a Gilead resistance movement is forming, and Offred is arrested and taken away in a black van. In the

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

second season, Offred escapes her imprisonment, but decides to stay in Gilead to unite with her first daughter Hannah. She ultimately hopes to go to Canada with Hannah to join her husband Luke and second daughter who is stolen from Serena near the end of the second season and who Moira spirits to Canada. Thus the series depicts the transformation of women as the object of male desire and domination contrasted to depictions of women as autonomous and active subjects of resistance and liberation.

The second and third season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, produced during the Trump era, depict the growing resistance to Gilead, parallel to growing resistance to Trump, and *The Handmaid's Tale* is widely discussed as a critique of Trump's America, although Trump's defenders attack the interpretation making the series one of the most contested and debated TV series of all time (for a warning against fast analogies, see Crispin 2017; for a conservative rejection of the analogies see Lowry 2017). As states from Georgia and Alabama to Missouri have been banning abortion rights for women, protestors often show up with the Handmaid's uniforms and hats, and Atwood's novel has periodically jumped to the top of the *New York Times*' best seller's list, decades after its initial publication in 1985.

The first three seasons of the Hulu TV-series of *The Handmaid's Tale* were broadcast from 2017-2020, during Trump's presidency and served as a critique of the patriarchal nature of his administration, as well as anticipating the deep roots of an oppressive patriarchy in U.S. institutions. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court passed a landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade*, in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States conferred the right for women to have an abortion. The decision struck down many federal and state abortion laws, and over almost fifty years this ruling served as law of the land, guaranteeing women the right to abortion.

Trump had promised when he was running for President in 2016 that he would overturn Roe. v. Wade, and subsequently nominated three conservative judges who were committed to overturning the law that guaranteed women the right to abortion. Although Trump lost his re-election bid in 2020 to Joe Biden, in 2022, Trump's Supreme Court passed *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning Roe v. Wade and ruling that the court held that the Constitution of the United States does not confer a right to abortion. This decision caused an uproar in the highly divided U.S. political scene and may have be seen as Trump's most consequential and controversial action of his presidency.

Atwood's novel and the Hulu TV mini-series anticipated the extreme measures that a patriarchal male-dominated society would take to control women and how women

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

could rebel against their oppression in resistance movements. The final episode of Season 3 *Mayday* (August 14, 2019) opens with a flashback depicting June, after being captured, witnessing women being rounded up and presumably executed, a scene transcoding the brutality of Gilead that has led June to become a leader of revolt. In this episode, June is organizing a flight from Gilead for the children and the "Marthas", creating a network of resistance that will lead the oppressed women and children to a transport plane that will fly them to safety. The "Guardians" learn of the escape plan and send out patrols to the woods to apprehend the rebels. A determined June ambushes a Guardian, seizes his gun, and forces him to declare "All Clear", allowing the group to escape to the plane and freedom. In a triumphant scene, the children disembark in Canada, are greeted by the Handmaid's who have escaped and in some cases are reunited with their families.

June, however, was left behind, as she and some other "Handmaids" and "Marthas" threw stones at soldiers in order to allow the children to board the airplane. June is shot in a scuffle with a soldier, but in the closing scene is found alive by some of her fellow handmaids who carry her to an indeterminate future as she closes her eyes and recites scripture. The popularity of the *The Handmaid's* Tale TV-series and its divided reception shows a country split between those seeking to defend women's rights and democracy and those who deny they are under attack or are happy to oppress women along with Trump, his most rabid defenders, and rightwing media.

A diagnostic critique thus shows how popular media texts can transcode, anticipate, and comment on current socio-political texts and even become weapons of critique in political struggle. It can also evaluate how specific media texts provide positive or negative representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality—or ignore certain of these representations and issues altogether. In an otherwise positive review of the TV-series *Guardian* critic Ellen E. Jones (2017) accurately notes that the TV version of Atwood's novel contains "the inclusion of race without the depiction of racism". While the TV-series has, unlike the novel, a variety of characters of color, it never addresses racism, despite its critical optic on gender, class, and sexuality, constituting what "*New York Magazine* has described as the show's "greatest failing"."

Perhaps never before has media culture become so politicized and during the same period blockbuster hits like *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* show the resistance of women and people of color to rightwing oppression and how new superheroes have entered the pantheon of major Hollywood icons, exhibiting a desire to diversify media culture and its heroes and ideals. Thus a political sociology and cultural studies provides theories and methods that situate media texts within the context

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14921

of their production and reception, while deploying multiple perspectives to interpret the text and to show what popular media texts reveal about existing society, its modes of oppression and struggles to transform it.

Literature

Benjamin, Walter. 1997. Charles *Baudelaire*. *A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism (translated by Harry Zohn)*. London: Verso Classics Series.

Bradshaw, Peter. 2002. "Waking Life review – wildly invigorating, unexpectedly thrilling and even moving. Will Richard Linklater's Rotoscoped film look very dated in a few years' time? Maybe. But just now it looks like idealistic, and superbly cerebral state-of-the-art movie-making." *The Guardian*, April 18, 2002 at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/apr/19/1 (accessed May 2, 2023).

Carroll, Noël. 2008. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Crispin, Jessa. 2017. "The Handmaid's Tale is just like Trump's America? Not so fast. Many women are comparing their lives with that of the characters in the new Hulu series based on Margaret Atwood's novel. That is problematic." The Guardian, May 2, 2017 at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/02/handmaids-tale-donald-trump-america (accessed August 21, 2019).

Deming, Barbara. 1969. *Running Away From Myself: A Dream Portrait of America Drawn from the Films of the Forties*. New York City: Grossman Publishers.

Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. 2012. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Engelhardt, Tom. 2019. "Trump's America Is Worse Than Orwell's '1984.' As global warming intensifies, our world is becoming bleaker than one of the darkest dystopias ever imagined." *The Nation*, August 12, 2019 at https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trump-george-orwell-1984/ (accessed August 21, 2019).

Jones, Ellen E. 2017. "The Handmaid's Tale's race problem. How the acclaimed show's racial utopia kickstarted a new debate." *The Guardian*, July 31, 2017 at https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/31/the-handmaids-tales-race-problem (accessed May 2, 2023).

Jameson, Fredric. 1981 [1979]. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture". Social Text 1:130-148.

Kracauer, Siegfried. 1947. *From Caligari to Hitler.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kellner, Douglas. 1995. *Media Culture*. New York and London: Routledge.

Kellner, Douglas. 2010. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. Malden, Mass.: John Wiley & Sons.

Lowry, Rich. 2017. "Conflating 'Handmaid's Tale' is lunacy," Lacrosse Tribune September 20, 2017 at https://lacrossetribune.com/opinion/columnists/rich-lowry-conflating-handmaid-s-tale-is-lunacy/article_5e4bd2b2-a9c0-5503-95a2-e77a41cba684.html (accessed August 21, 2019).

Marcuse, Herbert. 1978. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics.* Toronto: Beacon Press.

Marcuse, Herbert. 2007. *Art and Liberation. The Collected Writings of Herbert Marcuse* (Ed. By Douglas Kellner). New York and London: Routledge.

Powdermaker, Hortense. 1950. *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.

Robertson, Adi. 2016. "In Trump's America, The Handmaid's Tale matters more than ever. Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." *The Verge*, November 9, 2016 at https://www.theverge.com/2014/12/20/7424951/does-the-handmaids-tale-hold-up-dystopia-feminism-fiction (accessed August 21, 2019).
Ryan, Michael and Douglas Kellner. 1988. *Camera Politica. The Politics and Ideology of Hollywood Film.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
Tyler, Parker. 1947. *Myth and Magic of the Movies*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Warshow, Robert. 1962. *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theatre and other Aspects of Popular Culture*. New York: Doubleday.
Wartenberg, Thomas and Angela Curran, eds. 2005. *The Philosophy of Film: Introductory Text and Readings*, Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell.
Winter, Rainer. 2010. *Der produktive Zuschauer. Medienaneignung als kultureller und ästhetischer Prozess*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.
Wolfenstein, Martha and Nathan Constantin Leites, 1950. *Movies: A Psychological Study*. New Glencoe: Free Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Gaia and Political Sociology: On the Legacy of Bruno Latour (1947-2022)

Lars Gertenbach[1]

> *"Politics is not a science [...]. It is an art, or rather it is arts, what is rightly called the art of politics. The art through which one seeks to compose, little by little, a common world."*
> (Latour 2013b:29, own translation)

If one had to discern a center of gravity in Bruno Latour's voluminous and multi-layered work, one could find it in the question of the political. At first glance, this may seem unexpected. After all, it is only with his decidedly political texts since the turn of the millennium that many have become aware of the political dimension of his work. Are we not rather dealing here with the familiar case of a sociologist or philosopher who finally turns to questions of justice, ethics, or politics in his late work? And would this not be a prime example of the lure of retrospective reinterpretation? But what is mostly true for Bourdieu, Derrida, and numerous others, does not quite apply to Latour, for we are dealing with a different case of political writing, a different case of work, and not least a different case of politics. On the contrary, however, it would be a mistake to believe that Latour's sociology was ever developed in isolation from his engagement with politics and political theory. Rather, Latour's most recent work leaves no doubt that there is no way around the topic of politics (anymore) in the discussion of his writings in general. Given the death of Bruno Latour on October 9, 2022, this genuinely political dimension of his work will be re-examined in the following. In doing so, I would like to address some strands of Latour's political sociology while emphasizing that he is to be understood as a political sociologist through and through—and not just in passing.

1 University of Kassel, Faculty of Social Science, Nora-Platiel-Str. 5, 34109 Kassel, Germany, lars.gertenbach@uni-kassel.de

1. The Politics of Society

In order to clarify what political sociology can mean in Latour's sense, it is first important to ask where and in what form political issues appear in his work. It is obvious that recent writings, such as *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Latour 2017a), *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Latour 2018), or *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (Latour and Schultz 2022), completed shortly before his death, are permeated by or virtually converge in the question of the political. But to what extent is this also true of his earlier works on the sciences and in sociology? In retrospect, it is remarkable how little the political dimension of his work, but also of actor-network theory in general, was present for a long time in the broader debates on Latour and the ANT. Despite a flourishing discussion within Science and Technology Studies, yielding numerous seminal works (see, e.g., Mol 1999; Gomart and Hajer 2003; Marres 2007; de Vries 2007; Law and Singleton 2013), in general sociology as well as in political sociology, this dimension was predominantly left out. Yet actor-network theory, as a project to redirect sociology toward a study of associations, to overcome the discipline's one-sided constructivism, and to take into account the role of nonhuman actors, has always been concerned with politics. This applies both to the study of the natural sciences and to the attempt to renew sociology.

With respect to the sciences, Latour's interest in their political dimension proved to be one of the greatest sources of misunderstanding toward his work. By viewing the a priori separation of science and politics as an epistemological obstacle standing in the way of an analysis of scientific truth production, he found himself to be one of the favorite straw men of furious science warriors (Latour 2000:299). Even a superficial glance, however, shows how much their accusations miss their intended target, since his aim was precisely to explore the actual process of scientific knowledge production—and, moreover, to do so empirically. In addition, his approach downright emphasizes the unique inner logic of science and thus by no means amounts to an indiscriminate conflation of science and politics: "Science is not politics. It is politics by other means. But people object that ‚science does not reduce to power." Precisely. It does not reduce to power. It offers *other means*." (Latour 1988:229 emphasis in original) Even if in the earlier works such statements may still provide grounds for ambiguity, since the publication of *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013a) there should be considerably less doubt as to the prominence of this argument. For the point here is not to level the differences of politics, science, law, etc., but to be able to understand them as different regimes of truth and, building on this, to inquire about their entanglements.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

With respect to the notion of society, the argument is quite similar. From the very inception of actor-network theory, it is apparent that Latour wants to dissolve sociology's concept of society in two directions: first, through a notion of collectivity that understands contestation regarding the composition, unity, and limits of society itself as a political practice of assembling and composing (Gertenbach and Laux 2018; Latour 2010b); and second, through the study of associations, which amounts to understanding power as a key element in the stabilization and hierarchization of relations (Latour 1986). Both of these aspects have been important in the discussion of Latour's work so far—but they have rarely been treated as political questions (Gertenbach, Opitz, and Tellmann 2016). This shortcoming is remarkable for another reason as well. After all, Latour's recourse to the concept of the collective reintroduces a political trope into the discipline from which sociology believed it could detach itself with the concept of society or the social. The concept of the collective breaks with their premises and, conversely, makes it clear that sociology is not able to detach itself so easily from politics. In fact, its main category has always been and remains a political one.

Even in one of the inaugural texts of the actor-network theory, the essay *Unscrewing the big Leviathan* (Callon and Latour 1981), this argument can be found. There, together with Michel Callon, Latour dismantles this sociological phantasm of society as an already assembled entity that can be taken as the mere object of sociological description. Finally, this culminates in objecting to an ostensive understanding of sociological categories and advocating a performative understanding of power and knowledge (Latour 1986, 2005:37). In this sense, even the most disengaged and neutral sociological description of society still has a stake in the assembly and creation of collectives. The performativity argument erodes the neat separation of sociology and politics, of sociological description and political articulation—and turns sociology as such into political sociology (in a broad sense). According to Latour, we must abandon the purity and totalization of the concept of society and find ways to engage with the political dimension of the practice of assembling the collective. This dissolution of boundaries, of course, affects political sociology above all where it sees itself as a sociological approach concerned with politics as a discrete and distinct social sphere; but it is also of central importance to Latour himself, for it is one of the main reasons why he has always been attracted to interdisciplinary work and has time and again refrained from seeing himself as a (mere) sociologist.

All these questions and elements reveal certain thematic and programmatic continuities. They traverse Latour's work and can already be found in the foundational writings of actor-network theory. However, they do not only manifest themselves in the critique of the concept of society. It is precisely here that the more recent

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

writings reveal this to be only one aspect in a more radical problematization of the "modernist parenthesis" (Latour 2004:130, 2010a). In addition to the concept of society, there is—widely visible at least since *Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004)—also its counterpart: the concept of nature. For politics, so the essence of Latour's political sociology, concerns not only the institution of the social, but also includes what we are accustomed to designate with the problematic concept of nature.

2. The Politics of Nature

In Latour's writings, the engagement with the concept of nature is somewhat mirroring the critique of the concept of society (Gertenbach 2015). In both cases, the focus is on the practices of purification that distinguish between values and facts, construction and reality, or words and worlds. And in both cases he employs a political sociology that is attuned to mediations, entanglements, and hybridizations. In numerous writings and through a wide variety of examples and case studies, he demonstrates that nature and culture as well as science and politics cannot be separated from one another in the way postulated by the modern constitution (Latour 1993). Finally, this approach is increasingly vindicated in the face of current developments and crises that reinforce the urgency of a politics of nature and things—from the climate crisis and the undeniable ecological consequences of human activity to the numerous creations of technoscience; from the containment of zoonotic viruses to security infrastructures; and from the effects of artificial intelligence to the fatal energy policy dependencies of the present, and so on.

Thanks to the more explicit engagement with political questions since the late 1990s, Latour has at least been more widely perceived and discussed as a political theorist—albeit not always with a particularly favorable outcome. In general sociology, discussions of his political writings (see, e.g., Lindemann 2011; Noys 2010; Werber 2016 and, reflecting on this, Laux 2011) are to this day largely dominated by two aspects: first, the indignation about the proposition of an agency of things which ultimately leads to an expansion of the political, with accusations already sufficiently familiar from debates on actor-network theory (often without delving deeper into what is actually meant by this). And secondly, the astonishment about the invocation of Gaia as an alternative to the concept of nature—due to all the mystical connotations and the mainly esoteric contexts in which this figure is referred to. Thus, the centrality of the Gaia reference and the omnipresence of ecological issues in Latour's recent writings have led many to perceive this as a departure from his earlier work—albeit ecological issues have had a prominent place in his writings for some time (Latour 1998). A closer look, though, reveals rather far-reaching continuities here as well. What changes, however, is the vigor with which these questions now arise in

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

Latour's work. Yet this should not be taken as a sign of a major shift in his thinking, but rather a reflection of the greater urgency of the task to measure the political and epistemic challenges posed by the ever-worsening climate crisis. "The uniqueness of Gaia opens a new definition of a polity just at the time when the situation summarized by the term Anthropocene reopens the connection between what philosophers used to call the domain of necessity—that is, nature—and the domain of freedom—namely, politics and morality." (Latour and Lenton 2019:678)

Accordingly, Latour's last writings before his death (see for example Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet 2018; Latour 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Latour and Lenton 2019; Latour and Schultz 2022; Lenton, Dutreuil, and Latour 2020) above all reveal that his previous efforts to renew sociology and to move away from the problematic concept of nature converge in his work on Gaia. It would be rather misguided to dismiss this—irritating as it may be—invocation of Gaia or to dissociate it from what appears to be a more analytical and thus also: non-political part of his writings. On the contrary, without Gaia, the discussion of Latour remains incomplete. Hence, it is imperative to clarify what motivates this reference to Gaia and what significance it has for Latour's political sociology.

3. Connectivity without Holism – Gaia and the New Body Politic

When *We have never been modern* appeared in 1991, Latour still left open the question of how to replace the inappropriate modernist concept of nature (Latour 1993). Over time, he also articulated more and more skepticism about related concepts like Umwelt, earth, environment, and world (Latour 2017b; Latour and Lenton 2019:662). Drawing on James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, at the turn of the millennium he instead proposes for the first time to speak of Gaia in order to herald once and for all the "end of the modernist parenthesis" (Latour 2013a:176). The reason why the notion of Gaia should be able to do this is shown by Latour's specific reference to the works of Lovelock and Margulis (Latour 2016c:353ff.). He reads their writings mainly as contributing to a different conception of the earth, one that is fundamentally distinct from the classical concepts of nature, the external world, and the environment. That Lovelock's reference to Gaia as a living organism may sound highly disconcerting has, for Latour, more to do with the modern conception of nature than with the Gaia hypothesis itself. "Contrary to so many interpretations, [Lovelock's] Gaia hypothesis was not the vision of the earth as a single organism [...], but, on the contrary, as a formidable jungle of intertwined and overlapping entities, each of them creating its own environment and complicating the environment for the others." (Latour 2016b:168)

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

What is implied in this description is precisely what Latour is starting to be fascinated by in this figure: it is not the supposed animism or the esoteric and holistic overtones, but rather the rupture with that identitary and totalistic conception of a singular and unified nature. And furthermore, it allows him to address the specific urgency of the climate crisis, since Gaia cannot be seen as a merely passive entity—a point, which Latour emphasizes by referring to Isabell Stengers notion of the "Intrusion of Gaia" (Stengers 2015, 2017; Latour 2017a:5). Although the talk of Gaia has a rather idiosyncratic appeal, in the end the underlying idea is hardly spectacular at all. For Latour, it is primarily a term for a certain model of connectivity, with the advantage, however, that it can also be extended to the realm of nature. The formula he finds for this, following Lovelock and Margulis, could as well be found in numerous other texts by him or even be used as a motto for actor-network theory. It simply reads, "Connectivity without holism" (Latour 2017b:75; Opitz 2016).

Consequently, Latour also uses the Gaia approach to counter the environmentalist models of protecting and conserving nature and the environment with a different political ecology. For him, two key consequences of the Gaia hypothesis follow from this: first, it forces a turn to the "terrestrial." This contributes to a reorientation of the political to the questions of the soil and of territory, since this call to become terrestrial must be understood in a proverbial sense as grounding (Latour 2016a, 2018). Latour's pragmatist conception of politics is reflected here, as it is a matter of "finally making politics turn around topics that generate a public around them instead of trying to define politics in the absence of any issue, as a question of procedure, authority, sovereignty, right and representativity." (Latour 2007:814f.; see further Marres 2005) And secondly, the Gaia hypothesis conflates the question of "nature" with the question of political collectivity, as Latour has just highlighted once again in some recent texts in which he takes up the concept of body politic—for instance under the rather telling title *Composing the New Body Politic from Bits and Pieces* (Latour 2020).

Without being able to expand on this here (see further Gertenbach and Laux 2018), it should be apparent where this leads based on the above-mentioned symmetrical critique of the concepts of nature and society: Latour is not solely concerned with the critique of certain models of nature that are problematized following the natural sciences. The Gaia discussions also point back to sociology. After all, the principle of "connectivity without holism" ultimately condenses once again the contribution of actor-network theory to social theory: namely, the attempt to think relationality and hybridity without the fiction of a wholeness that always already exists—or, as Latour puts it in a text on Gabriel Tarde that further elaborates on this kind of connectivism: *the whole is always smaller than its parts* (Latour et al. 2012). In the end, this all comes

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

together in a notion of Gaia which "should modify political concepts on both sides of the older division between nature and society." (Latour and Lenton 2019:675)

Despite all the problematic implications that are no doubt apparent to Latour as well, it is nevertheless obvious why he has continued to adhere to the concept of Gaia and why this might even be the most important contribution of his thinking. Ultimately, it enables a demarcation from two dominant models of thought that is difficult to achieve by other means: on the one hand, from the model of the environment and the resulting notion of "entities-in-contexts"—an ontology of the social that has already been intensively criticized in actor-network theory (Callon 1991:137; Callon, Barry, and Slater 2002:292). And on the other hand, the model of a totality and universality of nature, which is sometimes echoed as well in political notions of totality such as the global or the planetary (Latour 2016c). Thus, for Latour, the Gaia hypothesis by no means leads to a departure from ANT. On the contrary, it makes it possible to raise some fundamental questions of actor-network theory once again (although in a slightly different way), and it also enables us to see even more clearly the extent to which the latter, too, has always renounced the bifurcation of nature and culture.

4. Challenging Sociology (again)

As should have become clear, the notion of a politics of nature does not amount to a clumsy phantasm of political omnipotence, surrendering even the realm of facticity and natural laws to a voluntaristic play of meaning. Rather, we can draw from Latour how inadequate the bifurcations of modernism are in the face of these issues. For it is precisely the a priori separation between culture, society, and politics on the one hand and nature and materiality on the other that is the problem here. With its limited understanding of politics (presumed to be decoupled from the realm of nature) modernism reveals itself incapable to adequately confront the problem of its own agency vis-à-vis nature; and with its limited understanding of nature, modernist politics is unable to break out of the notion of a passive and mute matter. Latour has, and this is probably not to be valued highly enough, identified with remarkable persistence which obstacles have to be overcome and which problems have to be dealt with, if one wants to face the problem of the climate crisis in a way that takes into account its existential magnitude. Thus, it is not to be expected that henceforth talking about Gaia will lose its irritation. But perhaps that is a good thing in a sociology which, for a long time, regarded the realm of nature as irrelevant. It is to be hoped, then, that Latour will continue to be a somewhat disruptive element for sociology by pointing out the task it must face if it wants to grasp the urgency of the current crises.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14928

Literature

Arènes, Alexandra, Bruno Latour, and Jérôme Gaillardet. 2018. "Giving Depth to the Surface: An Exercise in the Gaia-Graphy of Critical Zones." *The Anthropocene Review* 5(2):120-35.

Callon, Michel. 1991. "Techno-Economic Networks and Irreversibility." Pp. 132-61 in *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, edited by J. Law. London/New York: Routledge.

Callon, Michel, Andrew Barry, and Don Slater. 2002. "Technology, Politics and the Market: An Interview with Michel Callon." *Economy and Society* 31(2):285-306.

Callon, Michel and Bruno Latour. 1981. "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan, or How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So." Pp. 277-303 in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, edited by A. Cicourel and K. Knorr Cetina. London: Routledge.

Gertenbach, Lars. 2015. *Entgrenzungen Der Soziologie. Bruno Latour Und Der Konstruktivismus*. Weilerswist: Velbrück.

Gertenbach, Lars and Henning Laux. 2018. *Zur Aktualität von Bruno Latour. Einführung in Sein Werk*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Gertenbach, Lars, Sven Opitz, and Ute Tellmann. 2016. "Bruno Latours Neue Politische Soziologie – Über Das Desiderat Einer Debatte." *Soziale Welt. Zeitschrift Für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung Und Praxis* 67(3):237-48.

Gomart, Emilie and Maarten Hajer. 2003. "Is That Politics? For an Inquiry into Forms in Contemporary Politics." Pp. 33-61 in *Social Studies of Science and Technology: Looking Back, Ahead*, edited by B. Joerges and H. Nowotny. Dordrecht: Springer.

Latour, Bruno. 1986. "The Powers of Association." Pp. 264-80 in *Power, Action and Belief. A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, edited by J. Law. London/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1998. "To Modernise or Ecologise? That Is the Question." Pp. 220-41 in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*, edited by B. Braun and N. Castree. London/New York: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno. 2000. *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. "Turning Around Politics: A Note on Gerard de Vries' Paper." *Social Studies of Science* 37(5):811-20.

Latour, Bruno. 2010a. "A Plea for Earthly Sciences." Pp. 72-84 in *New Social Connections. Sociology's Subjects and Objects*, edited by J. Burnett, S. Jeffers, and G. Thomas. Hampshire: Palgrave.

Latour, Bruno. 2010b. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" *New Literary History* 41(3):471-90.

Latour, Bruno. 2013a. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2013b. "Versuch Eines 'Kompositionistischen Manifests.'" *Zeitschrift Für Theoretische Soziologie* 2(1):8-30.

Latour, Bruno. 2016a. “Let’s Touch Base!” Pp. 11-23 in *reset Modernity!*, edited by B. Latour. Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press.
Latour, Bruno. 2016b. “Sharing Responsibility: Farewell to the Sublime.” Pp. 167-71 in *reset Modernity!*, edited by B. Latour. Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press.
Latour, Bruno. 2016c. “‘There Is No Earth Corresponding to the Globe’. An Interview with Bruno Latour by Lars Gertenbach, Sven Opitz and Ute Tellmann.” *Soziale Welt. Zeitschrift Für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung Und Praxis* 67(3):353-64.
Latour, Bruno. 2017a. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity.
Latour, Bruno. 2017b. “Why Gaia Is Not a God of Totality.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34(2-3):61-81.
Latour, Bruno. 2018. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity.
Latour, Bruno. 2020. “Composing the New Body Politic from Bits and Pieces.” P. 1937 in *A Book of the Body Politic: Connecting Biology, Politics and Social Theory*, edited by B. Latour, S. Schaffer, and P. Gagliardi. Venedig: Fondazione Giorgio Cini.
Latour, Bruno, Pablo Jensen, Tommaso Venturini, Sébastian Grauwin, and Dominique Boullier. 2012. “The Whole Is Always Smaller Than Its Parts. A Digital Test of Gabriel Tarde’s Monads.” *British Journal of Sociology* 63(4):591-615.
Latour, Bruno and Timothy M. Lenton. 2019. “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand.” *Critical Inquiry* 45(3):659-80.
Latour, Bruno and Nikolaj Schultz. 2022. *Mémo Sur La Nouvelle Classe Écologique*. Paris: La Découverte.
Laux, Henning. 2011. “Das Parlament Der Dinge. Zur Dekonstruktion Einer Rezeptionsblockade.” *Soziologische Revue* 34(3):285-97.
Law, John and Vicky Singleton. 2013. “ANT and Politics: Working in and on the World.” *Qualitative Sociology* 36(4):485-502.
Lenton, Timothy M., Sébastien Dutreuil, and Bruno Latour. 2020. “Life on Earth Is Hard to Spot.” *The Anthropocene Review* 7(3):248-72.
Lindemann, Gesa. 2011. “On Latour’s Social Theory and Theory of Society, and His Contribution to Saving the World.” *Human Studies* 34(1):93-110.
Marres, Noortje. 2005. “Issues Spark a Public into Being. A Key But Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate.” Pp. 208-217 in *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. London: MIT Press.
Marres, Noortje. 2007. “The Issues Deserve More Credit: Pragmatist Contributions to the Study of Public Involvement in Controversy.” *Social Studies of Science* 37(5):759-80.
Mol, Annemarie. 1999. “Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions.” *The Sociological Review* 47(1):74-89.
Noys, Benjamin. 2010. *The Persistence of the Negative. A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Opitz, Sven. 2016. “Neue Kollektivitäten: Das Kosmopolitische Bei Bruno Latour Und Ulrich Beck.” *Soziale Welt. Zeitschrift Für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung Und Praxis* 67(3):249-66.
Stengers, Isabelle. 2015. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Lüneburg: Open Humanities Press/meson press.
Stengers, Isabelle. 2017. “Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116(2):381-400.
de Vries, Gerard. 2007. “What Is Political in Sub-Politics?: How Aristotle Might Help STS.” *Social Studies of Science* 37(5):781-809.
Werber, Niels. 2016. “Der Letzte Κατέχων Oder: Das Übel Der Differenzierung. Latour, Luhmann, Schmitt.” *Soziale Welt. Zeitschrift Für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung Und Praxis* 67(3):267-80.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14922
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DEBATE

The Politics of Changing the Dutch Agri-Food System

Noelle Aarts,[1] Cees Leeuwis[2]

In recent years, tensions between farmers, government and society have been running high in the Netherlands. Dutch farmers are furious with the national government because of the ever- stricter nitrogen policy that is supposed to save nature in the Netherlands, in line with European directives. The current plan states that nitrogen emissions need to be reduced by 50% in 2030. The consequence of this policy is that farmers who live near vulnerable nature areas have to sharply reduce their livestock numbers, and that some of them may be forced to sell their farms to the government and quit farming altogether. In a small country like the Netherlands, with many fragmented nature areas, this implies that the majority of farmers is affected. Thus, farmers are regularly blocking highways with their tractors and taking other actions around the country to make their dissatisfaction loud and clear. They protest against the sharp deadline of 2030, propose technical innovations instead of reduction in livestock numbers, and are against forced buy-outs.

The disagreement over how to tackle the nitrogen issue is a deeply rooted conflict that goes back decades. In this political commentary, we analyse the conflict and argue that the solutions proposed in the public and political debate tend to ignore the systemic nature of the problem. We suggest that it is important to work towards innovation in the rules and arrangements that govern agricultural value chains to create a more conducive and enabling environment for the regional initiatives that have emerged in response to the current crisis, several of which challenge the currently dominant food system.

1 Professor of Socio-Ecological Interactions, Institute for Science in Society (ISiS), Radboud University Nijmegen, Heyendaalseweg 135, 6525 AJ Nijmegen, Netherlands, noelle.aarts@ru.nl.
2 Professor of Collaborative Research, Communication and Change, Knowledge, Technology and Innovation group, Wageningen University, Droevendaalsesteeg 4, 6708 PB Wageningen, Netherlands, cees.leeuwis@wur.nl

1. A Historical Perspective

The severity of the current conflict can only be understood when taking into account its historical antecedents. Immediately after the Second World War, Sicco Mansholt, son of gentleman farmers from the north of the country, became Minister of Agriculture. Under the motto *never hungry again*, he restored the food supply and started a major operation to modernise Dutch agriculture. The purpose was not only to ensure food security, but also to raise the standard of living of the then mostly very poor farmers. At the time, there was a broad consensus in society that scale enlargement, specialisation, export orientation and intensification of production would be in the collective interest. Intensive cooperation between research, policy and the agricultural industry enabled the modernisation process (Van der Ploeg 1990). A publicly funded agricultural extension organisation, helped farmers to translate research findings and policies geared towards large-scale agriculture into individual business plans (Leeuwis 2000).

The results were indeed impressive: almost all farmers changed direction asked banks for investment funds, and collectively realised a highly productive sector that gradually produced mainly for export (Grin 2013; De Boer and Van Ittersum 2018). However, the downside of the success soon became apparent: while in the 1960s and 1970s only a few groups in society pointed to the pollution and reduction of biodiversity caused by intensive agriculture, from the 1980s onwards, many citizens, political parties and non-governmental organisations became worried about the negative impact of agriculture on nature and the environment. The earlier consensus about the desired direction of agriculture collapsed, and governmental agencies published several policy papers proposing measures to reverse the negative influence of agriculture. One of these was the first Dutch nature policy plan published in 1990. This plan, which was mainly about realising a so-called ecological main structure, consisting of nature reserves and connecting zones, immediately caused great commotion among farmers. Whether you and your farm fell inside or outside that structure was of great significance: in addition to the measures limiting farmers within the structure, the market value of the land immediately dropped in the designated zones. Instead of serving as a trigger for consultation and creative solutions, the nature policy even then led to fierce reactions from farmers across the country. Moreover, the additional administrative burdens and restrictions that went along with the new nature policy were experienced as the straw that broke the camel's back (Aarts and Van Woerkum 1995). "The book containing all the rules for farmers does not fit in this room," sighed one Brabant pig farmer 30 years ago.

In a process where nature conservationists and environmental organisations kept sounding the alarm over the deterioration of nature, the rule system has become

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14922

even more challenging for farmers as well: More and more far-reaching measures for agriculture were demanded, which in turn were systematically watered down by the agribusiness lobby. As problems were not resolved, the call for new requirements and rules continued, and these were again weakened, and so on. The result eventually was that farmers made investments in interventions for the benefit of nature and the environment in order to meet rules that changed again after a few years, leading to a need for further adaptation and additional investment. Not only did this unstable policy prove disastrous for small farmers in particular, which had to quit farming in large numbers. Farmers have also experienced these developments as an attack on their identity (Aarts 1998). While they felt respected as the guardians of the countryside who also ensured enough food for everyone in the period before the massive scale enlargement that happened since the 1970s, farmers are now mostly portrayed in the media as destroyers of nature and the environment and—in the context of the fierce protests—as disrupters and law-breakers. To be sure, Dutch farmers vary widely in terms of the scale of their operations and their response to the challenges of sustainability. Nevertheless, virtually all of them are angry and call for policies that provide clarity about two things: first, what is expected from farmers and others who emit nitrogen and, second, a vision for a sustainable future in which farmers can continue to make a living.

2. The Politics of Change

While the history and protests have fostered a great deal of discussion about the food system, it is striking that much of the political and public debate is about what ought to happen at farm level. There is a large variety of options and labels to describe novel directions (e.g. organic agriculture, regenerative agriculture, agroecology, strip farming, sustainable intensification, see e.g. Klerkx 2023) and these are often described and defined in terms of how farmers should alter their way of treating soils, plots, plants, animals, weeds and pests and diseases. Similarly, much of the policy debate is about the regulations that are to be imposed on farmers in order to combat damage to biodiversity and the environment. In addition, we see some attention to the role of the consumers, including persuasion strategies that may enhance their willingness to pay a higher price for food that is produced sustainably (Fischer et al. 2021).

However, when we look at the drivers that have created the current predicament, it is important to signal that market failures have caused almost all problems in agriculture (OECD 2015). Some farmers, and especially banks, input suppliers, food producers and supermarkets make huge profits, but at the same time cause great damage to nature, environment, landscape and public health. In doing so, the costs

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14922

are passed on to the public and the community. All this is a logical outcome of how the Dutch agri-food system is embedded in the broader economy of the country. Farmers can only realistically protect the environment and conserve biodiversity if others in the value chain agree on arranging higher prices at the farm gate. In the current system, however, there are no effective arrangements and legal frameworks for sharing responsibility and costs among interdependent market parties in the value chain. Food processors and supermarket chains, for example, can and do easily resort to sourcing from cheaper countries when the production costs in the Netherlands increase. If we do not change the rules of the market and the system at large, these market failures will continue to exist, and farmers will continuously be confronted with new measures that threaten their identity and livelihood.

3. Changing the System

The above discussion highlights that there is a lot of discussion and effort to influence the behaviour of those at the fringes of the food value chain (farmers and consumers). However, there is less attention to changing the logic of other prominent parties in the value chain (e.g. banks, food processers, purchasing companies, supermarket chains), even if these yield a large share of profits and have considerable power and leverage over others. Historians who study longer-term processes of system change have established that systems tend to be characterised by a particular configuration of technologies, cultural repertoires, infrastructures, market rules, policies and legal arrangements. Such configurations (or socio-technical regimes, see Geels and Schot 2007) tend to be stable and resilient since powerful interests benefit from maintaining the status quo, including the market and other rules and institutions that govern interaction in the system. More in general, we know that problems can often not be resolved with the same logic that produced the challenges in the first place (Luhmann 1995).

Thus, in order to change the Dutch food system more than farm and/or consumer level change and innovation is needed. To change the logic of the system we also need to develop and experiment with new *rules of the game*. In other words, we need to develop and test institutional innovations (Leeuwis et al. 2021). For example, the public sector could develop measures that require food processing companies and supermarkets to obtain an increasing percentage of their sales from sustainably certified products. In the Netherlands and other European countries, something similar has been done with fossil fuel companies who are obliged to add 10% biofuel to gasoline in order to meet European guidelines for renewable energy. Policy-makers can also introduce true pricing systems or fall back on successful formulas from the past: guaranteed prices for sustainably produced crops, dairy and meat. Regulators

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14922

can link bank licenses to the share of sustainable investments they make. In addition, the government can explore ways to limit the power and influence of short sighted shareholders in the agri-food industry, for example, by establishing rules for responsible shareholding and giving non-humans a place in the boardroom of companies. Such measures could ensure that the long-term interests of future generations and ecosystems (e.g. rivers, catchments, forests, oceans) are given greater priority; they prevent shareholders from continuing to drive large corporations to make short-term profits rather than contribute to the sustainable development of their sector.

Since such measures challenge the interests and limit the freedom of powerful private sector parties, there will be resistance to these forms of institutional change, too, and people may claim that they are impossible and even illegal. That is, however, precisely the point. By changing the rules of the game, we change what can and cannot be done, which is a necessary part of any fundamental transformation: no system change without changing the rules of the game (Loorbach 2007). Innovation of laws and regulations is the mandate and essentially the duty of politicians. Currently, the responsibility for change is only placed on the weakest parties in the chain—the farmers and the consumers—while the potential for change among actors that can effectively make a difference remains unexploited. With the type of institutional innovations we are proposing, the attention to what farmers can or cannot do, is broadened to what other parties in and around the value chain must contribute in order to build a sustainable food system. This is necessary and fair.

4. Connecting People, Initiatives, Policies and Politics

Based on our analysis, we conclude that it is crucial to involve the whole value chain in the transformation of the current Dutch food production system: the feed producers, the crop protection industry, the banks, the food processors, the supermarkets, the knowledge institutions, the farmers and, of course, the consumers.

Meanwhile, all over the Netherlands, many conversations are taking place in policy networks and numerous advisories are being drafted emphasising the need to work with farmers and other stakeholders at the regional level. Farmers themselves have a lot of knowledge, and are keen to learn from each other and to improve their craftsmanship. The government's task is to support them with independent advice and with new rules of the game for the whole value chain that include fair prices and reasonable income models. At regional level, sustainable solutions can be designed and achieved collectively. Farmers and other stakeholders know each other, can easily exchange information, help each other and make up rules by which they can

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14922

meet the set requirements, including setting-up sanctions for those who then fail to comply.

It is important to note that a number initiatives already exist in regions throughout the country where local level actors try to challenge, change or bypass the dominant system logic. Think of the many sustainable initiatives that farmers are developing, of nature-inclusive and animal-friendly collaborations between farmers and citizens, and of the many so-called living labs in which farmers, together with scientists and other stakeholders, set up and carry out experiments for the benefit of biodiversity and a healthy soil. Municipalities are coming up with biodiversity restoration plans for rural areas, and are looking for ways to realise them.

It is up to politicians to create the conditions to stimulate and facilitate people to strengthen and scale up existing initiatives and develop new ones. This is, however, where we still see a serious challenge. Measures that involve the broader value chain, in which farmers operate, including new institutional arrangements that change current modes of interaction, are so far successfully resisted by the agro-industrial lobby. At the same time, many political parties remain very hesitant to support institutional innovations that regulate markets and foster value chain responsibility. It is therefore essential that local initiatives, non-governmental organisations, scientists and politicians from various levels invest in efforts to build stronger coalitions for change, and use small-scale successes as an inspiration and leverage to overcome resistance. Clearly, political courage and leadership are essential to making such coalitions effective.

Literature

Aarts, Noelle. 1998. "Een kwestie van natuur. Een studie naar de aard en het verloop van communicatie over natuur en natuurbeleid" (A matter of nature: a study of communication about nature and nature policies). PhD dissertation, Wageningen University, Wageningen.

Aarts, Noelle and Cees M.J. Van Woerkum. 1995. "The communication between farmers and government about nature." *European Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* 2(2):1-11.

De Boer, Imke J.M. and Martin van Ittersum. 2018. *Circularity in agricultural production*. Wageningen University: Wageningen.

Fischer, Daniel, Julia Reinermann, Georgina Guillen Mandujano, C. Tyler DesRoches, Sonali Diddi, Philip J. Vergragt. 2021. „Sustainable consumption communication: A review of an emerging field of research" *Journal of Cleaner Production* 300.

Geels, Frank W. and Johan Schot. 2007. "Typology of sociotechnical transition pathways." *Research Policy*, 36(3): 399-417.

Grin, John. 2013. "Changing governments, kitchens, supermarkets, firms and farms: the governance of transitions between societal practices and supply systems." Pp. 55-79 In *Food practices in transition*, edited by G. Spaargaren, P. Oosterveer and A. Loeber. London: Routledge.

Klerkx, Laurens. 2023. “Towards agricultural innovation systems 4.0?” Published Academic lecture, Wageningen University, Wageningen, February 9, 2023.
Leeuwis, Cees. 2000. “Learning to be sustainable. Does the Dutch agrarian knowledge market fail?” *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* 7(2): 79-92.
Leeuwis, Cees, Birgit K. Boogaard and Kwesi Atta-Krah. 2021. How food systems change (or not): governance implications for system transformation processes. *Food Security* 13(4): 761-780.
Loorbach, Derk. 2007. *Transition Management. New mode of governance for sustainable development.* Utrecht: International Books.
OECD. 2015. *Public Goods and Externalities: Agri-environmental Policy Measures in Selected OECD Countries*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
Luhmann, Niklas. 1995. *Social Systems.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Van der Ploeg and Jan Douwe. 1990. *Labor, Markets, and Agricultural Production.* Boulder: Westview Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2023 – Volume 1 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DEBATE

Power, Masculinities, Southern Theory: An Interview With Raewyn Connell About Political Sociology

Raewyn Connell,[1] Martin Seeliger,[2] Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky[3]

Raewyn Connell began work in political sociology in the 1960s and has not entirely stopped since. However, her approach to power now transcends a narrow focus on the state and extends to fields such as culture, education and gender. She is best known in Australia for her research on inequalities in schooling and on class structure, and internationally as a leading figure in studies of men and masculinities. More recently, under the title of *Southern Theory*, her work on the global dynamics of social science has contributed to debates about epistemology and the decolonization of knowledge. In her reflections on the prospects and challenges of political sociology, she emphasizes the workforce, the transformation of universities and the employment conditions of young scholars responsible for creating the future of the field. This interview was held via e-mail with a first round of questions posed in February 2022 and a second round in June 2022.

The Interviewers are Martin Seeliger and Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Political sociology can be understood as sociology of *the political*, or as a perspective in its own right. That has itself political implications and is, thus, subject to political negotiation. As you state in an interview with Marcos Nascimento (2017), your personal history of becoming a political activist starts in the 1960s. Looking at the contemporary situation, where do you detect the continuities within the interplay of sociology and social movement politics?

1 Professor Emerita at University of Sydney, Camperdown NSW 2006, Australia. Raewyn.connell@gmail.com.
2 Research Fellow at Institute Labour and Economy, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, seeliger@uni-bremen.de.
3 Chair of Sociology and Gender Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Sociology Department, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Konradstr. 6, Room 310, 80801 Munich, Germany, Paula.Villa@soziologie.uni-muenchen.de

Connell: When I began working in political sociology, back in the 1960s, the point of reference in almost every debate was the nation-state. Social movements, including the anti-war movement I was involved in, were understood as trying to influence state policy and action. Electoral sociology was a study of how parties or leaders captured the national state, or failed to. Social classes were imagined as ruling through the state, alternatively as resisting or opposing the state… and so on.

In the mid 1970s I wrote a book called *Ruling Class Ruling Culture*, which presupposed all that. Twelve years later I co-wrote a book about gender politics and the state, called *Staking a Claim*, which had much the same idea of the state. However, it shifted outside the boundaries of the old sociology, since it was informed by the Women's Liberation movement in Australia. Particularly our book was informed by Australian feminism's distinctive *femocrat* strategy. This tried to gain power within the patriarchal state to use its power *for* gender equality—seeing state/society relationships through a feminist lens.

Since those decades, the state has not exactly withered away—recent events in Ukraine don't allow us to think that! But new thought and changing social movements on several fronts have made the project of political sociology look rather different.

Perhaps the biggest shift is realizing that the most powerful states, back at the time when sociology as a discipline first crystallized, were not nation-states but empire-states. And realizing that an empire-state had colonies, with colonized peoples in them. And realizing that most contemporary states are descendants of colonial power structures, with still-embedded racial hierarchies, and reconstructed colonial economies, and dependent positions in global power relations. Claims of indigenous sovereignty, strongly heard in Australia now from indigenous movements, disrupt how we conventionally think about the political. If the old model of the discipline sought for *social bases* of political power, we now have to recognize that power (in the form of colonial conquest and rule) has transformed social structures, and has done so on a world scale.

For other reasons too, the nation-state framing doesn't work as well as it once seemed to. Worldwide markets, transnational corporations, global media, new communication technologies, international finance, and so on—however unsatisfactory the 1990s concept of *globalization* has turned out to be, the facts that it referenced were solid enough. We need to think of political processes as running far and fast across old national borders, reconfiguring the geometries of power and struggle in ways we are still coming to terms with.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

I would argue that if we are to speak of a ruling class or a power elite now, we have to recognize that a large part of it has been off-shored and automated. To the extent it is still human, the ruling class resides in corporate jets zooming around the world overseeing huge wads of capital and operating mighty intranets, which now have only a limited connection with any particular nation. State power-holders can only be understood in their articulation with that ruling class and the institutions and dynamics it (however imperfectly) controls. In Australia, for instance, we currently have a Labor Party national government, a historically social-democratic party grappling with the mad task of reconciling a battered working-class constituency to a destructive market ideology. The government is only a little beholden to the local business elite, who supported the conservative coalition that lost the 2022 election; but is massively reliant on transnational markets and transnational corporations for the export earnings on which the de-industrialized economy now depends. Hence its embarrassing subsidies for the fossil fuel export industries, despite its rhetoric of climate action.

How social movements deal with that transnational formation of power is an enormously important new question. The climate movement, I think, is currently the most vigorous in exploring these issues and trying to find the chinks in the armour. The tech anarchists too are active in penetrating the secret databases of the corporate and political world.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Masculinities and their negotiation are a core element of contemporary politics. We may identify an updated version of an aggressive, some say even *toxic* masculinity, performed by Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro and the like. A bullying masculinity that *grabs*, that insults and mocks all those who appear weak or sensitive, a masculinity centered on the egocentric domination and exploitation of all persons and things regarded as others, i.e. nature, women, non-hegemonic men. But, at the same time, we do see new, plural forms of masculinities, especially within social movements such as ecological or anti-racist ones. How would you, after so many years of research on the complexity of masculinities, see the political dimension of contemporary masculinity or masculinities?

Connell: It is seductive to analyze the masculinities of public figures, especially those who make a big display of themselves on mass media. It can be a trap, especially if we forget the highly crafted image-making that such men rely on. Trump, for instance: although his image is one of extreme spontaneity, *telling it like it is*, he was an experienced media operator as well as a real estate mogul before he ran for president. He was the star of a reality TV show, no less! I rather doubt his actual personal style is very different from Nixon's. The corruption, the aggressiveness, the racism and

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

misogyny, the egotism and disorganization, the obsessive search for enemies, are all there. But Nixon, being a more experienced politician, kept it behind closed doors, until those doors were forced open by Watergate and the tape-recording fiasco.

I'm always inclined to look behind the super-visible front man, not to a conspiracy, but to the organizations, networks and milieux the front man works from. I think hegemonic, complicit or subordinated masculinities are above all *collective* masculinities. Such terms refer to positions in a structure of gender relations that are occupied by considerable numbers of men (and in different ways may be occupied by women). The different masculinities are in part constructed by the institutions of the world their bearers live in.

There's nothing radically new about this idea. Back in the 1950s there was a fuss in the USA about the conformist *organization man*. This representative man was supposed to have been created by a new era of giant corporations and expansive governments. That was the time we now imagine as the golden age of welfare capitalism!

I do not think the Trump/Putin/Bolsonaro show of aggressive masculinity, which is certainly a notable phenomenon, has become *hegemonic* in a sociological sense. The antagonism these figures have aroused is significant: there is not general social buy-in to their model. You are right about the presence at the same time of models of masculinity which are very different; they include the more feminist-influenced masculinities found (though not universal) in the Green movement. I would also point to the striking popularity of queer and even trans stances among students and other young people in the affluent Anglosphere. I don't know how far this is true in Germany, though I have seen some interesting queer work from there.

In some circumstances, the minor political advantage that can be given by a display of strong leadership, racism, even cruelty against the marginalized, may be enough. I understand that in Trump's election victory in 2016 the general profile of his support followed the established pattern of the Republican vote. There was no mass swing of working-class men towards him, as many have supposed. But there was a small swing, and with an unpopular Democratic Party candidate, that was enough to get a narrow win. Biden's campaign restored the status quo. If this is correct, it may explain why a lot of Republican Party politicians in the US now are taking extremely hostile stances towards women's abortion rights, trans children, gender studies and critical race theory in universities, etc. They probably don't care two cents about these issues, but are trying to get the little edge now, as Trump did back then.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: A question on German politics: With the *Schuldenbremse*, privatization of large parts of the hospital sector, or the austerity measures enforced mostly in Southern European countries during the so-called *Euro Crisis*, former Chancellor Angela Merkel holds responsibility for important neoliberal reforms in Germany and the EU. At the same time, her reluctance to take a clear stance on central issues of common concern, as well as her blunt rhetoric, often contributed to what could be perceived as a de-politicization of would-be political questions ("If the Euro fails, Europe will fail!"). How can this *particular* approach to politics be located by drawing on your theoretical framework? Is the technocratic rule of authoritarian neoliberalism easier to legitimize when relativized through quiet appearance? And, if so, could this eventually challenge patterns of masculinity adopted by populist politicians such as Trump or Bolsonaro?

Connell: I have been intrigued by Merkel's long-term survival as Chancellor, but I have never made a study of her political techniques. The attempt to de-politicize issues that are in fact deeply political is now a familiar one, practiced by right-wing politicians here in Australia too. One of our Prime Ministers famously declared that he wanted to get sport rather than politics back onto the front page of the newspapers.

It is, arguably, a very important mechanism of hegemony in a privatised, corporate economy to make important decisions about the allocation of resources and the distribution of income appear as impersonal, technical questions answered only by *the market*. There is something profoundly circular in free-market ideology. The right answer is only found by market mechanisms; at the same time, whatever market mechanisms decide, is the right answer. This is *in practice* compatible with heavy-handed political action to defend the interests of the financial oligarchs, for instance the European institutions' thunderous response to the Greek economic crisis of 2009-2015.

Whether there is an ideal political personality to preside over a corporate economy and a patriarchal state is an interesting question. I can certainly think of other examples of a quiet, ordinary-person style being successful in this role. Biden perhaps is the current example. Another case is John Howard, a true-believer neoliberal who survived as Prime Minister of Australia for ten years at the beginning of the century. (He was considerably aided by dog-whistle racism, right-wing media oligopoly, and an opposition that had lost its way, as many labour and socialist parties have done recently.) The current Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese, who won the national election in May 2022 after nine years of persistent racism and increasingly open corruption by the conservative parties, seems to be another example.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

It may be that, with the high visibility of the Trump/Bolsonaro/Putin political style, we are now seeing a split in patterns of masculinity in the world's ruling classes. This would not be the first time such a split emerged. There is some fascinating historical research about how, two generations ago, technocratic and financial managerialism displaced more paternalist, hands-on forms of ownership and management. One might even see the current polarization between Republican and Democratic parties in US politics, and the divisions in the Republican party shown in the struggle over election of the House of Representatives Speaker, as driven by such a split.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Your writings on globalization highlight the role of multinational corporations in exercising political power in order to exploit labor and the environment. A central role within this nexus of political dominance is undertaken, as you have pointed out, by male power elites, namely, first, the managers of transnational corporations, second, the oligarchs, possessors of extreme wealth, third, the dictators who control authoritarian regimes, and finally the state elites of the global metropole. However, your approach does not engage with the power of images transported and negotiated via popular culture. How can the cultural imaginary, the sphere of popular culture, especially its visuality, be systematically included into your theoretical model?

Connell: I wrote the paper you mention, *100 Million Kalashnikovs*, for *Debate Feminista* in Mexico. It was intended to bring the discussion of masculinity and power on a world scale back to the terrain of institutionalized power. The men in the groups I discuss are able to influence our lives because they control major concentrations of capital, large and powerful organizations, concentrations of weapons, and the communications systems that go along with them. They operate in heavily masculinized and often very closed milieux, not easily studied from outside. We get, at best, fragments of information, trickling out from behind a massive screen of manipulated media.

Let me give one example. We're all very familiar with Vladimir Putin, at least with his imagery. How many have heard of Valery Gerasimov? A handsome lad, though rarely photographed except in a very formal setting. He's the Chief of Staff of the Russian Federation armed forces, and has a reputation as the leading military intellectual in Russia. His career began in the Soviet Union's Red Army, where he commanded mobile units, and he's risen to the top in the nuclear-armed successor state. Probably he was the main strategist behind the current attack on Ukraine; there have been rumours he was to be sacked when the attack did not go well. It's not clear who is the effective battlefield commander, though likely someone with a similar background and the same deeply-rooted organizational culture.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

You are quite right, I have not made a particular study of imagery in popular culture. There are other people doing that, much better equipped for the job than I am, and their work is very interesting and useful. For instance, I've read excellent analyses of Putin's media enactments of masculinity. (I promise not to mention Putin again!) I've been interested in cultural constructions of femininity as well as masculinity, in religion, literature, fashion, and other forms.

I have tried to include such work in a theorization of gender in two rather different ways. Back in the 1980s, in chapter 11 of *Gender and Power*, I tried to do it through a theory of ideology, bringing the spirit of Mannheim and Lukács to haunt feminist analysis. I emphasised the practical character of communication and symbolism, analyzed some typical distortions in the cultural handling of gender, speculated about the large-scale cultural dynamics involved, and perhaps most important, discussed ideologists of gender. By this I meant the intellectual workers who generate images, interpretations and utopias around gender relations, who construct and contest hegemony. I even created a little table of the main groups of intellectuals who do this work in relation to gender.

Unfortunately for this splendid analysis, no-one took any notice. So I tried again. When revising the theory fifteen years later for *Gender: In World Perspective*, I treated culture, symbolism and communication as one of the four principal dimensions of gender as a social structure. That moved cultural issues into a more central place in the argument, and allowed a more post-structuralist approach to them—all to the good. Yet, perhaps a certain critical edge was lost by shelving the concept of ideology and the idea of misrepresentation of the world in the interest of dominant groups. I think there is a great deal of misrepresentation and distortion in the sphere of mass media and commercial popular culture, and it generally does benefit the rich and powerful.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: In your genealogy of Sociology as *Northern Theory*, you spell out an agenda for social science on a world scale. In this context, I have especially enjoyed reading your critique of the wanna-be-cosmopolitan theory of Ulrich Beck. Today, over fifteen years after the publication of *Southern Theory*, do you see us anywhere near to achieving a truly cosmopolitan sociology which takes into account the multiplicity of local perspectives and particularities?

Connell: No, I don't think we are anywhere near a genuinely world-centred, rather than North-Atlantic-centred, sociology. In the league tables, the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology* are still at the top. International students still hope to go to Harvard, Berkeley or Yale rather than Hyderabad or KwaZulu Natal.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

Even in the pages of *International Sociology*, the theorists cited are likely to come from the global North, though the data may come from the South.

In some ways, indeed, the situation has got worse. With corporate-style management now pervasive in university systems, metrics have become more important than they were. Our managers press us to publish in A-star journals, which are mainly from the global North. Universities are now usually defined in policy terms as competitive firms. So their rankings have become more significant, on measures that favour the rich countries of the global North. Research grant dollars have now become an important performance indicator, and there is far more research funding in rich countries than in poor countries. Funding for research in the global South from development agencies, whether NGOs or government-based, normally comes with the expectation of following established research paradigms. There are self-reinforcing mechanisms in global academic hierarchies, and I think the neoliberal ideology and its techniques of implementation now are deeply entrenched in the global university sector.

But there is also considerable criticism of those mechanisms and their implications for our intellectual life. In that respect we have definitely advanced. There is not just one school of post-colonial and decolonial critique, but several. There have been student movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall* in South Africa and *Why is My Curriculum White?* in Britain. Many academic fields have now begun to debate the idea of *decolonising* their discipline. In the last ten years I have been invited to address conferences, or give public talks on Southern perspectives, in eleven different disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

At the 2021 annual meeting of the *American Sociological Association*, particular attention was paid to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Most attention of course went to his research and activism around racial inequality within the United States. But Du Bois was also a notable internationalist, an anti-colonial campaigner, and specifically a supporter of African independence and renaissance. This side of his work is also now recognized and discussed.

So there is, I think, significant change under way in the disciplinary culture of sociology. Perhaps not in all its sub-fields—I have yet to see a discussion of how to decolonize rational-choice theory! But issues about coloniality are getting into the curriculum, into undergraduate textbooks, in sociology as in other fields.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: What do you perceive to be the challenges for political sociology over the next decades?

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

Connell: Being asked to name challenges for the future is a terrible temptation! The impulse is to outline the research one would like to do oneself, given some very generous grants, plus a dedicated research institute staffed by hardworking angels. But then, *ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich…*

I'll resist that temptation by thinking sociologically about the question. If political sociology is to exist in the future, like any other field of knowledge it must have a workforce.

When I began to work as a social scientist in the late 1960s and early 70s, there was no problem about the demand. Students were clamouring for critical social science, and sociology classes were packed. In Australia, an institutional base for sociology in the form of university departments had just been established. Many young people from varied backgrounds were employed to teach sociology, and most got their training *on the job*. My Australian degrees were in history and psychology, then in political science. I made the classic colonial move and went for a postdoctoral year at a famous US sociology department, and published a paper in a leading US journal. That helped me get quick promotion back in Australia. In the following decades, the university departments in Australia grew and consolidated, and sociologists began to fan out into other areas of public-sector employment.

But now, under neo-conservative regimes, the public sector has ceased to be buoyant. With the rise of authoritarian nationalism, more governments have become suspicious of universities and positively hostile to critical social science. University administrations, which formerly left the academics to make their own decisions about teaching and research, have mutated into corporate-style managements. The managers have become very much more intrusive and controlling, and generally do not like humanities and social sciences.

Most important, the university workforce is being eroded by the growth of precarious employment, by the destruction of secure career paths, by overwork and exploitation, and by outsourcing. Many talented students now are refusing a career in the university world. I believe the social need for higher education and research is still great. But a disconnect has opened between that need, and the institutional means of meeting it. I've been active in my union against these trends, and eventually I wrote a book about universities, their pasts and their futures. It is called, with a mixture of irony and hope, *The Good University*.

So to answer the question at last, I would say the same for political sociology as for any other discipline. Pay attention to your workforce, to the situation of young

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

people coming into the field, and join the struggles to give them a decent working future. And trust them to work out the future directions for themselves. The discipline they make will be different from what it has been in the past, for sure. I can't wait to see it!

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: We know that academia is marked by deep inequalities based on the intersection of socio-economic background, race and gender. What do you regard as the most profound change in this regard over the last decades?

Connell: First, a change that has continued: the long process of opening universities to women. When two of my great-aunts were students at the University of Melbourne in the 1880s and 1890s, they were among the first women in Australia to get a higher education. When my mother and father both went to the same university, that was becoming more common for middle-class women, but universities were still mainly for men. So it was typical enough for that generation that my mother did not graduate (her family could not afford to keep her at university), while my father did graduate, and he then went on to higher degrees. When my sisters and I matriculated, parity of numbers was approaching. When our daughters fronted up on campus, there was an actual majority of women in their undergraduate cohorts.

But not among the academics. Men are still a large majority among the most senior academic levels in Australia. Understandably, there has not been the radical change in curricula that feminists once expected. Change in the gendered culture of universities has been important, but does not move fast.

Second change, the commercialization of higher education—spurred on by neoliberal ideology and state policy—has had important social effects. World-wide there has been a great expansion in the number of universities and colleges during the last thirty or forty years. There are now about 200 million students enrolled in higher education, so the sector as a whole has enormously greater numbers of middle-class and working-class students than ever before.

But this global expansion has been mainly through the creation of fee-charging private universities and colleges, which now account for a large majority of enrolments in some countries including Brasil and Chile, about half the enrolments in India, and so on. These private institutions, designed to make profits and mainly offering vocational courses, have an insecure workforce and very much smaller resources per student than the public universities, or the elite private universities, of the global North.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

The result is that great class inequalities are now visible *within* higher education, especially when we look at the sector on a world scale. Hence the ridiculous and offensive *league tables*, which purport to be comparisons of the quality of institutions, but more profoundly are indicators of the amount of money they have. I once spent a year teaching at Harvard University, and learnt a little about the way it works. With its 53 billion dollars of endowment and its deep ruling-class roots, this is simply not the same kind of institution as—to pick two examples at random—Southeast University in Dhaka division or Universidade Salvador in Bahia state. To overcome divisions such as that is a huge undertaking. It requires global redistribution of resources as well as a deep rethinking of universities as institutions.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Could you connect these issues with your research on the *Good University*? What are the radical changes you suggest?

Connell: I confess that the 'radical change' phrase in the subtitle was the publisher's idea, not mine. But it catches the spirit of the book well enough. I attempt several ways of encouraging people towards deep change.

First is to re-think the history of universities. There exists a complacent story told in official histories, policy studies, UNESCO reports and so forth. This is a tale of grand progress, funded by enlightened governments, directed by wise academic leaders, bringing the sunshine of higher education to more and more happy people… you can fill in the rest yourself. But there is another story to be told. Universities have always been privilege machines too: selective in their admission in terms of race, class, and gender, usually aligned with the powers of religion and state, helping to form professional elites and ruling classes. They have often used top-down pedagogy and sustained a rigid, narrow curriculum.

So there is also critique, resistance, and a search for alternatives. In *The Good University* I tell some of this Other History too. There is a rich though lesser-known story of radical and experimental colleges, anti-colonial universities, democratic projects in knowledge creation, participatory pedagogies, and resistance to managerialism. I was involved in the experimental Free University in Sydney in the 1960s. In today's grimmer environment, I'm charmed by the idea of the *Slow Professor* as a point of resistance to management demands for speed-up and over-work in the academic world.

Drawing on all this, I propose some general criteria. A good university will be democratic (the idea of industrial democracy has gone out of fashion but seems very relevant to universities); engaged (with its society and environment as a whole, not just

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

with employers); truthful (as against the pressure to lie and manipulate which we see in universities' marketing and PR); creative (since its business really is the advancement of knowledge and students' varied capacities); and sustainable (in terms of a continuing workforce, as well as a survivable environment).

I also propose criteria for a university *system*, since individual universities do not stand alone. A good university system will be co-operative (competition between universities is destructive not creative), public not private, socially inclusive, and connected to the wider world. Finally, I take those ideas and indulge in a little science fiction, imagining what some universities might look like, 10, 50, and 200 years into the future.

I don't have a Trotsky-style transitional programme for universities in general. I think that change will be generated locally and will rightly take many different directions. But the more we can bring to bear our knowledge and understanding—from political sociology among other resources—the better chance we have of a creative and sustainable university sector for the future.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.14227

STUDYING POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

Journal of Political Sociology (JPS)

Debates in science and society stress the politics of change. Such discussions afford new approaches, dialogues, and methodologies. But, claiming that something is "political" demands further scrutiny. The Journal of Political Sociology (JPS) opens a forum to discuss "the political" of societal change – be it in military conflicts, global inequalities, decolonization processes, ecological crises, digital innovations, or public health emergencies. JPS goes beyond a narrow understanding of political sociology to study state organizations, public policy, and much more: articles investigate political processes in art, economics, education, ecology, science, technology, religion, and identity formation. Engagement with inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, novel methods, and diverse publics is particularly welcome. JPS is committed to empirical inquiry, theoretical reflection, and critical debate.

ISSN: **2950-2144**
E-ISSN: **2950-2152**

Radboud University

www.radbouduniversitypress.nl