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What is This?

Introduction
What Is the Empirical?

Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury

GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UK

This special issue poses the question: what is the empirical? More specifically, it raises this question for the discipline of Sociology. This question, we believe, is a vital one to pose in our current juncture which witnesses two seemingly paradoxical movements in regard to the place, status and significance of the empirical within Sociology. On the one hand, the discipline faces what has been termed a 'coming crisis' of empirical Sociology (Savage and Burrows, 2007), an impending crisis created by the expansion of the production of data relating to the social world by researchers (and technologies) outside the university. This expansion puts in question the sociologist's claim to have a monopoly of expertise in the techniques of the generation of social data and the analysis of social life. The crisis threatens the status of the academic sociologist and raises questions about the role of Sociology as an academic discipline in contemporary society. On the other hand, and after a period of scepticism regarding the value of the empirical for the sociological enterprise – especially any claim to be able to know the empirical world, we are now witnessing what has been termed a 'return to the empirical'. Such a return, it is posited, is significant for the discipline in as much as, since its very inception, Sociology has declared itself as having a particular relationship to the empirical world. As Reed and Alexander succinctly put it in their contribution to this issue, 'to explore the empirical is, after all, the aim of our social scientific calling'. How, then, are we to make sense of this apparent paradox of both crisis and (overdue) return in regard to the empirical? Why and how does the empirical occupy a central position in debates regarding the status, role and definition of the discipline as a whole? In posing these questions, our hope is that the responses they provoke – in this volume and beyond – will shed new light on the shifting contours of the discipline, including its self-understanding, its relationship to other disciplines and to its publics.

The thesis that informs this issue is that the special relationship that Sociology has with the empirical is changing. The change in this relationship is not simply because our tools and methods for 'knowing' the empirical or social reality have changed, nor because new theory demands a new take on reality. It is not only, so our contributors suggest, brought about by broader social, economic and political shifts in the immediate academic environment of the sociologist (though a number do indeed suggest these shifts are significant – for example, Fraser notes the rise of what she calls 'strategic empiricism'). Nor does this shift amount to a

simple reassertion of the adage that the empirical is socially or culturally constructed and therefore open to contestation. Certainly the articles gathered here acknowledge a number of significant issues that come under these rubrics, but, individually and collectively, they also raise the possibility that the changing relationship between Sociology and the empirical is to be understood in terms of changes in *what the empirical is and how it matters.*

For many of our contributors, there is a shift in the very ground of the empirical itself, that is, there are changes in the very matter of the empirical that require us to reconsider the relations between fact and value, ontology and epistemology. All our contributors address the role of the empirical in the making relevant of Sociology today. The fundamental nature of their enquiries blows apart any simple idea of a 'return' to the empirical while at the same time querying the notion of a 'crisis' that can be explained by competition alone. The 'crisis' of the empirical is thus understood in this Special Issue to concern not so much a decoupling of sociological expertise and the academic sociologist (a decoupling which might be remedied via greater methodological creativity and innovation), as a necessary and productive destabilization of the functioning of the empirical in the determination of the character, status and role of the discipline.

Asking what role exactly the empirical may play in the making of Sociology relevant today is timely in a context where there are increasing calls from sociologists themselves to make the discipline more relevant to its publics. Arguing that there is an increasing gap between the sociological ethos and the world, Michael Burawoy (2004) has called for a renewed commitment to public Sociology on the part of sociologists. Such a commitment, Burawoy claims, is required in a context of ever-deepening social inequality, market expansion, coercive, rights-violating states, and the slow death of the idea of the university as a 'public good' as a consequence of the commodification and marketization of education. Public Sociology, he argues, is 'in part a reaction and response to the privatization of everything' (2004: 262) and requires Sociology to be brought into a *conversation* or *dialogue* with publics, by which he means people who are themselves involved in conversation. The viability and vitality of the discipline, Burawoy asserts, 'depend on the resuscitation of the very idea of "public"' (2004: 262). The hollowing out of both the 'public' and the 'university' underlies the need for sociological conversation with publics, but also for Sociology to 'have' and for there to 'be' sociological publics.

Drawing on essentially Habermasian ideas of the public sphere, Burawoy's public Sociology is one that involves a dialogic relation between sociologists and publics, from students through community organizations to labour movements. His hope is that Sociology as a form of communicative action will act as a foil to the 'privatization of everything', and will contribute to the sustenance of a public sphere that privatization has undercut. Yet can dialogue alone do the work of securing sociological relevance? Does Burawoy's assertion not only reduce the range of human senses which may contribute to dialogue (Back, 2007), but also ignore forms of communication that lie outside (adult) human experience (see our discussion of David Oswell's contribution to this Special Issue below). Does

it ignore forms of involvement and engagement – such as the green experiments discussed by Marres in this issue – in which new forms of sociality are emerging? As a number of our contributors demonstrate, raising questions about the empirical reconfigures how Sociology might be made public.

In the first contribution to this volume, Reed and Alexander put forward the view that Sociology is indeed currently undergoing a return to the empirical and remind us that a commitment to the exploration of the empirical has historically distinguished Sociology from art, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other. A commitment to and special relationship with the empirical for Reed and Alexander establishes necessary disciplinary borders, and enables the uniqueness of sociological practice to be elaborated. But, they argue, an analysis of the contemporary situation reveals the current return to the empirical to pose problems for the future of Sociology. Contemporary Anglophone Sociology, they suggest, is characterized by an empirical exploration of a set of substantive research programmes in, for example, health, the body and brands. Such programmes, they say, are 'post-theoretical': they follow a sustained period of theoretical and philosophical reflection in Sociology from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. But Reed and Alexander do not understand the emergence of these concrete empirical research programmes as the implementation of the theories of Habermas, Bourdieu, Gouldner and others. The 'return' to the empirical is not, they say, a matter of the incorporation, routinization and normalization of new theoretical ideas. Rather, what is significant in the post-theoretical re-engagement with the empirical for Reed and Alexander is a shift in the structure of feeling of sociologists: 'a vague yet powerful sense that the time for crisis and renewal had passed, that the hopes and dreams of theory belonged to a different time'.

This shift in the sociological structure of feeling, they believe, is evident in the decline in the use of abstraction and linguistic invention, the loss of discursive possibility, and a falling away of the aspiration of sociologists to be able to speak to each other in generalized terms. In their account of the recent history of US Sociology, the return of the empirical is a consequence of the dismissal of the questioning of empiricism by the philosophy of hermeneutics and the erroneous embrace of an idea of social science as a form of realism. Realism, they propose, is limited insofar as it rests on an 'ultimately untenable metaphor linking the causal power of natural forces to the ontological theory of emergent social structures as the basis for sociological understanding'. The consequences of the contemporary subsumption of the empirical to the ontological wager of realism are, they conclude, a radical separation of theory from the empirical, and a divisive and impoverished academic politics. In place of this gamble, Reed and Alexander propose that the empirical must be understood hermeneutically. Researching society empirically involves a double reading: 'Social actors are "reading" reality . . . and we are "reading them", trying to get inside their own arrangements by using our own meanings. When we do so successfully, we have the beginnings of a sociological explanation.' To this end, Reed and Alexander envision the possibilities of Sociology as what they term a cultural social science, and in place of realist ontology propose a cultural-sociological theory of epistemology.

US Sociology is also the subject of Patricia Ticineto Clough's contribution to this Special Issue. Like Reed and Alexander, Clough argues that an empiricist social science dominates contemporary US Sociology. This Sociology, she suggests, typically surveys populations using quantitative methods, and has constructed a 'statistical personage' as the subject of the discipline. While Clough acknowledges that a qualitative empirical Sociology was also fashioned in the USA in the post-World War II years – indeed, was often self-consciously crafted as a critical response to quantification, this tradition also privileged empiricism, she claims, especially in its insistence on 'naturalistic observation'. But while for Reed and Alexander the escape from this impoverished empiricism is through the elaboration of a cultural epistemology, for Clough, a commitment to hermeneutics will not fashion such an escape, nor secure a better Sociology. That something other is needed is because we now live in a world of affects, a world that methods concerned with human interpretation and meaning cannot reach. The contemporary world, Clough argues, is one in which the modulation of affect of populations is central to a logic of securitization shared by economy and governance in a period of conservative neo-liberalism. And crucially for Clough, this world requires not better theory, improved methods or a revised epistemology, but the development of an *expanded* empiricism.

An expansion is required, Clough contends, since the logic of affective modulation is not organized through human agency or consciousness, but through a post-human ontology of matter. Drawing on the work of Brian Massumi (2002), Clough argues that affect is not an action but rather the capacity to affect or be affected. It is in excess of conscious perception and is prior to the individual. Affect subsists not in the human, in human consciousness or indeed in pre-consciousness, but in matter as incorporeal potential. Sociality comprised of this affective modulation is displacing the sociality of structure and action, of subject formation and ideological interpellation. Indeed, affect modulation is not only displacing socialization and Foucauldian discipline for Clough, but is also revising the subject of empiricism. The empirical itself now concerns not only the senses but also sensation, 'unexperience' (the coupling of affect with an 'incalculably qualitative unfeeling on which it has no rational dependence') and the posthuman. What is required is an empirical 'of affect at the very limit of the phenomenal'. For Clough, then, the need for an expanded empiricism is a consequence of a socio-historical shift to a sociality that comprises a post-human affective background, a quantum ontology of the 'subsisting unexperienced'. This is a world that necessitates the recognition of the significance of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism: an empiricism of the potential immanent to matter.

Any method adequate to this expanded empirical, Clough asserts, must be – is indeed necessarily – performative, as it becomes entangled with affect's capacity to self-organize. Yet quite how Sociology should intervene in this new world is left uncertain. On the one hand, Clough extends the possibility of opening infra-empiricism to the 'radical intervention' of a transcendental empiricism; on the other, she implies that sociological method is already at work, and is complicit in, the modulation of affect central to the logic of security shared by contemporary modes of governance and economy.

Reading each of these accounts alongside the other raises questions. Can the hermeneutics which Reed and Alexander uphold stretch to include the non-meaningful communication or exchange of information that characterizes the modulation of affect of which Clough speaks? Or is it too deeply entrenched in an understanding of signification that is tied to notions of text, of reading and writing, of meaning and interpretation, of semantics and human consciousness? Conversely, does the attention to the potentiality immanent in matter that Clough describes foreclose the question of epistemology that is so central to Reed and Alexander's understanding of the specificity of the empirical for the discipline of Sociology? Does she avoid the pitfalls of realism as described by Reed and Alexander? Is this a post-social world or a world in which there is no place for the social – and (interpretive) Sociology – at all? Or is, rather, the issue, one of how to understand representation and translation, of how to move from one strand of the double hermeneutic to the other?

The significance of Deleuze's transcendental or radical empiricism for contemporary Sociology is also made explicit by Mariam Fraser. Her contribution begins with a pessimistic but recognizable account of the current standing and authority of Sociology in the UK. This is the view that, as a consequence of the corporatization and bureaucratization of the university, Sociology has little other than 'internal' value; that is, it is increasingly perceived as irrelevant to social practices. Her bold response is to propose that the sociological enterprise be transformed and made relevant through a commitment not to historical social structures but to virtual structures. She takes C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* ([1959] 2000) as a touchstone for debate, noting his claim that what distinguishes the sociologist from 'ordinary men' is that s/he is able *to make relevant* the relations between experience in the here and now and historical structures and forces which are not visible. In her contribution, she asks: to what is Sociology now obliged to be relevant? And more exactly, what is the role of the empirical in establishing the relevance of contemporary sociological practice, for no special guarantee of importance should be assumed?

Fraser's response to these questions is to put forward a revised conception of relevance – one which neither relies on or confirms pre-existing experiences (as we confront in Mills) nor resorts to what she describes as the sociologization of experience, that results from a cut-and-run appropriation of post-structuralism. In the post-structuralist conversion of experience to knowledge, of phenomenology to epistemology, in which the subject moves from 'having' an experience to 'being' constituted by experience, Sociology positions itself – through its own epistemological sleight of hand – as a 'super science', uniquely able to research into the effects and conditions of knowledge production. That is, Sociology positions itself as a discipline with a special knowingness about knowledge and experience, including the experiences of the practitioners of other sciences, and thus as the discipline which has superior knowledge not only of the individual and the social but also of all other sciences. In place of this epistemological sociological superiority, Fraser wants to consider the possibilities of the virtual for reframing the sociological enterprise, and hence for reframing the relevance of Sociology. She is not proposing that Sociology take on a Deleuzian world-view,

but rather that the discipline has something to gain from putting the virtual to work, as in an experiment: a testing of experience. In other words, she proposes that Sociology should make use of the virtual as an experiment in sociological relevance, a lure for a different way of 'experiencing' Sociology.

To clarify her own position, Fraser elaborates one of the most influential trajectories in contemporary understandings of the empirical in UK Sociology: from experience, through knowledge, to performativity, or becoming. In the work of Law and Urry (2004), for example, this trajectory is conceptualized as a shift from epistemology (where what is known depends on perspective) to ontology (where what is known is simultaneously being made). This process of making knowledge is understood by Law and Urry in terms of enactment or perform-ance. In contrast to Reed and Alexander, rather than performance being confined to the making *persuasive* of sociological knowledge, Fraser notes that Law and Urry believe that performance should be seen to extend to include the actual making of worlds that is enacted in sociological knowledge production. This, for example, is how they pose the question of relevance: 'If methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to make realities. But the question is: which realities? Which do we want to help make more real, and which less real?' (Law and Urry, 2004: 404). The first approach, we might note as editors, though Fraser does not, can seem to imply that Sociology need only have relevance for itself (or that persuading others of the relevance of sociology is a secondary matter), while the second comes close to asserting that the relevance of Sociol-ogy is guaranteed because it is itself world-making.

As an alternative to both these positions, Fraser puts forward the virtual as a potentially useful tool. She asks: how would the notion of explanation be trans-formed if the basic commitments of a research project were not to historical social structures but to virtual structures? What would the sociological problem be like if it were refracted through the virtual? Her answer asserts that while virtual structures cannot do explanatory work, they can be used to understand the emer-gence of the actual. This is a process in which, as Reed and Alexander and Law and Urry also propose, the social researcher's embodied participation, along with the concepts and methods that she deploys, will contribute contingent diver-gences. But what distinguishes Fraser's position is that it institutes an openness of what is and is not (to be) relevant. Sociological explanations are temporary (epistemological) solutions to (ontological) virtual problems. There is no true actual solution, no final answer to virtual problems, only the further develop-ment of the problem in particular ways. Moreover, while not all research projects develop a problem that is worth trying to extract from actuality, when the problem (rather than the social scientist or the ordinary man) is enabled to make things that cannot be identified in advance relevant to each other, the experi-ences of both the social scientist and the ordinary man are likely to be trans-formed. It is a sociological ascent to the virtual, so Fraser argues, that will reanimate the discipline and secure its relevance.

The value of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism for the relevance of con-temporary Sociology is further expanded in Nicholas Gane's contribution to this

Special Issue. Gane goes a step further than Fraser in claiming not simply that Sociology may have something to gain from putting the virtual to work as an experiment, but that Deleuze's writings are in fact already beginning to inspire a new empiricism in the social sciences. For Gane, this empiricism offers Sociology a radical alternative to existing definitions. This alternative is to be found in Delueze's understanding of the aim of empiricism not as the rediscovery of the eternal or of the universal but as finding 'the conditions under which something new is produced'. Thus, Gane details how, for Deleuze, giving status to experience should not concern a simple movement from an experience of sensory data to its representation in the form of the idea, but rather should concern recognition of the fact that sensory data is not subsumable under any general law or procedure and will always present challenges to thought. But Gane argues that before Sociology can fully take on the new empiricism, some serious questions also need to be raised within the discipline about concept formation. Sociology must ask itself: what are concepts, under what conditions do they emerge, and to what purposes can they be put? Asking such questions is of some significance in a discipline whose empirical scope and imagination has been limited by 'zombie concepts' (Beck, 2000). In short, in Gane's diagnosis, the new empiricism promises Sociology potentially greater empirical relevance through the opening up of a specific process of concept formation.

Gane's exploration of the conceptual is developed through a consideration of what he sees to be a neglected yet central element of Deleuze's empiricism – namely the insistence that 'states of things should be analysed in ways [such] that non-pre-existent concepts can be extracted from them'. For Deleuze, concepts should be developed neither as universals for the classification of the empirical world, nor as channels for the production of economic value, but 'as experimental tools that are born out of tensions with the empirical world'. Concepts are never simply 'at hand' and nor do they capture or represent the complexities of the empirical world in knowledge. Instead concepts open the theoretical imagination to things as they might be; concepts deal with possibilities, they involve the creation of an event. And just as Fraser observes that if the sociological problem is refracted through the virtual there can be no guarantee of relevance (or of importance), Gane notes that there can be no guarantee of the effectiveness of the creation of concepts, or indeed of where they might lead.

While this understanding of the process of concept creation may seem at odds with established socio-theoretical ideas of concept formation, Gane notes some perhaps surprising resonances between Deleuze's writings on concepts and those found in the sociological canon, in Simmel, for example, and, especially, in Weber. For Weber, concepts are forged through the abstraction and accentuation of the fragments that make up the pure difference of the empirical world. This understanding, Gane argues, parallels Deleuze's insistence that concepts are not simply abstractions (indeed, for Deleuze, the abstract must itself be explained) but are themselves drawn out of a confrontation with the pre-conceptual world of the empirical. The links Gane draws between classical social theory and the new empiricism clearly returns us again to the question posed in Reed and

Alexander's and Clough's contributions, namely whether Sociology's hermeneutic and interpretative (and realist) traditions are adequate to the investigation of pre-conceptual matter, of which our contemporary – possibly post-social – world is said to increasingly consist. But Gane leaves this issue aside, since what interests him more is the work a new empiricism might do for Sociology. For Gane, Deleuze's concept creation may prove inspirational for Sociology at a time in which the discipline suffers from a paucity of attempts at concept formation. The commitment to concept creation, he proposes, has the capacity to enable a more relevant empirical Sociology to emerge, one which is in tune with – and in fact will arise out of – the problems and issues of our times.

The next three articles provide different ways of, and reasons for, expanding the empirical. Monika Büscher and John Urry propose that 'the mobilities turn' – investigations of movement, blocked movement, potential movement and studies of immobility, dwelling and place making – is transforming conceptions of sociological inquiry, explanation and critique. Their argument is that the mobilities turn 'folds analysis into the empirical in ways that open up new ways of understanding the relationship between theory, observation and engagement'. This is, in large part, because the attention to mobilities engenders new kinds of researchable entities. The novelty of these entities is partly a consequence of a previous sociological neglect of the various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information, or objects, but it is also because movement as a researchable entity is necessarily to do with motion, change or emergence. Certainly, they propose, sociological investigations of movement must involve attention to the non-human, to bodies, to affect, that is, to dimensions of social life that others (including some of the contributors here) have argued challenge existing sociological methods. But, more than this, the specific opportunities that the study of mobilities affords the social researcher is to develop research methods that are themselves 'on the move'. This is because the turn to mobilities understands movement to be governed not by rules, but as 'methodically generative', and thus the focus of investigation is necessarily on – and with – the methods that people and material agencies use to achieve and coordinate 'moves'. For Büscher and Urry, this is a shift away from trying to find and define 'underlying' grammars, rules, orders and structures, and instead a matter of the description of, participation in, adaptation to, reflection on, and anticipation of, movement. It is an 'interfering' or refractive (Haraway, 1997) rather than critical orientation that resonates with contemporary 'engaged' programmes of sociological research. Rather than a double hermeneutics, what is being put forward here is a double transparency: 'Analysts being "on the move" . . . create a kind of "double transparency" that allows them to study and describe mobility phenomena in the making while simultaneously drawing the methods used in their production to their own and their audiences' attention.'

Noortje Marres' account of green living experiments – focusing on the adoption of smart electricity meters in the home – complicates this notion of double transparency. As she points out, such experiments open up fundamental questions regarding Sociology's relationship to both the ontological and to the empirical.

They do so by intervening in and transforming the character of sociological publics. They do so not simply by producing new knowledge but – in as much as they involve the introduction of new entities into society – *by performing the work of reconfiguring socio-ontological relations in public*. As such, green living experiments involve a new relation to the empirical. This is not because the relation between the experiment and making publics is itself new; as Marres points out, there is a long-standing scientific experimental tradition in which the empirical is brought into being in various forms of public display. Rather, she argues, the empirical mode of presentation that is characteristic of green living experiments is now such as to 'enable the performance of a particular form of metaphysics in its own right, one that is characteristic of technological societies'.

In order to illuminate this metaphysics, she introduces a three-fold under-standing of ontology. First, she says, social theory classically locates ontology at the conceptual-epistemological level whereby ontology typically refers to basic assumptions regarding the entities and relations that constitute social reality. The recent 'turn to ontology' in social theory – by which is meant the commitment to take non-human objects seriously as constitutive of entities – is, for example, located at this conceptual-epistemological level. Ontology may also, and second, be situated at the level of the empirical, whereby ontology refers to historical changes in entities and relations that make up social, moral and political life. Related to this register of ontology is a third level, namely what Marres terms a 'techno-normative project' which emphasizes not only socio-historical changes in the kinds of entities that populate societies, but also a specific twentieth-century development, namely the rise of design regimes in which objects are deliberately equipped with moral and political capacities, including the capacities to engage and enrol publics or subjects. It is in this third register, so Marres suggests, green living experiments and a technological metaphysics are to be located.

As she goes on to show, the deployment of such devices blurs practices of (socio-material) entanglement and forms of (public) involvement, and they do so precisely because they 'reformat public involvement as an enactment of socio-material entanglement'. What, we ask, should Sociology make of this blurring? At the very least, we suggest, it draws attention to the limits of the terms of engagement of Burawoy's public Sociology. It also complicates Büscher and Urry's notion of double transparency, for as Marres says, while devices such as green experiments might be seen by some to be able to foster alternative conceptions of 'involvement' by affording material capacities to engage people, the impli-cations of this mode of formatting for the doing or enacting of Sociology are opaque. Rather than contributing to a moralistic imperative of 'improvement', the sociological promise of green experiments appears to enable actors to approach involvement as an experimental matter of concern. Yet, in practice, actors seem to become mired in the 'trivialities, deviance and deceptions' of entanglement, and the sociological promise of such experiments is dissipated.

David Oswell's article also suggests that sociologists (and philosophers) need to be cautious of assuming the nature of the experience that is the subject of the empirical, particularly in as much as laying claim to experience is tied to claims

to language – to organized voice. Drawing on the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Oswell questions his structuralist invocation of the infant without speech and voice – as bare life – as indicative of the configuration of biopolitical power as a form of sovereignty. To do so, Oswell tracks and explicates Agamben's concept of infancy, noting that in contrast to accounts that understand infancy as developmental or as phylogenetic, for Agamben, infancy is between nature and culture: '[m]an, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language – he has to say *I*'. As Oswell notes, for Agamben, the constitution of the subject in language presumes a splitting between language as system and speech as parole, between the voice of nature and the speech of social organization. Agamben thus draws attention to the radical heterogeneity of the experience of language, defined as an *experimentum linguae*, and argues for the need to recognize the thingness of language, the materiality of speech, its whatness. While emphasizing the value of this conceptualization of language as a medium of experience, Oswell introduces a sociological perspective to counter the structural linguistic model that Agamben adopts. Specifically, he introduces a socio-historical account of changing relations between children, the household and the state, showing the biopolitical figuration of children with speech or organized voice to be a condition of a new form of sovereignty. The point of this account for Oswell is not simply to describe how children come to be experiential subjects. On the one hand, it offers a revision of the universalist framing of Agamben's argument, but on the other, it requires sociologists to be attentive about whether and *how* they acknowledge the historical experience of subjects as the empirical. Moreover, it does so by pointing to the importance of language understood as comprising multiple registers of signification, not only symbolic but also indexical.

In the penultimate contribution in this volume, Mike Savage, identifies 'a descriptive turn' in Sociology, and explores its implications for the changing relationship between the empirical and the discipline. A shared appeal to the descriptive, he suggests, characterizes contemporary sociological writing. To illustrate this point, he outlines how the three writers Andrew Abbott (the 'contemporary torch bearer of the Chicago School'). John Goldthorpe (a quantitative sociologist of stratification), and Bruno Latour (the chief protagonist of actor network theory) all elevate the descriptive above the explanatory in their work. Despite their considerable theoretical differences, Savage identifies a common concern refusal of explanation and a shared preference for describing processes, whether this is as patterns, clusters, assemblages, sequences, or associations (cf. Fraser et al., 2005). He further proposes that the rise of the descriptive in Sociology needs to be placed in the context of the 'tortuous' relations of the discipline to the natural sciences and the humanities. The use of the descriptive in Sociology, he suggests, is indicative of a shift away from the humanities (which he largely identifies with literature and history, and the use of narrative within these disciplines), and a move towards the natural sciences. The third section of his argument is that, as part of this move towards the natural sciences, visual analysis has a new, more important, place to play in sociological argument, alongside the more traditional use of narrative and number.

For Savage, the rise of description in Sociology is a consequence of the fact that existing methods of explanation can no longer provide the basis of the distinctiveness of Sociology, not only because they have not been successful, but also because of the increasing availability of a wide range of data that previously was not easily accessible, but is now routinely collected as part of the use of information and communication techniques. Such data now offers itself for use in social and natural science accounts. Indeed, the availability of this data – often, it must be said, at a considerable price and subject to different conditions of access and availability than that typical of academic knowledge – is one of the factors identified by Savage and Burrows as responsible for the current challenge to sociological authority. Savage notes here, however, that the use of this data has been characterized by some as 'mindless empiricism' and writes that, from some points of view, 'the descriptive appears to be a fundamental impasse for Sociology'. For Savage, however, this impasse need not be a final resting place.

The proposal put forward by Savage is that while the descriptive turn challenges the earlier sociological emphasis on the centrality of explanation, it also provides a new basis – operating across theoretical differences – for rethinking the role of social scientific knowledge itself. This rethinking does not require a privileging of theory for Savage. While Reed and Alexander explicitly argue that the decline in the role of the discussion of theoretical generalization is a major loss to contemporary Sociology, Savage does not. Instead, he advocates engagement with the inscription devices that currently describe the social, inside and outside the academy:

> a core concern might be to scrutinize how pattern is inscribed and produced in social inscription devices, as a means of considering the robustness of . . . derivations, what may be left out and made invisible from them, and so forth.

But he leaves open both the question of how this scrutiny is to be exercised and the question of relevance that is of such concern for many of our other contributors. Whereas, for Clough, the complicity of sociological methods in the creation of contemporary sociality is a fundamental problem and a challenge, for Savage, there is an acceptance of shared methods of knowledge production by social researchers inside and outside the discipline. Like Fraser, he is concerned with the relevance of Sociology, but while Fraser foregrounds the importance of the potential of the virtual as a tool to establish relevance, and Gane identifies the role of concept formation, Savage leaves the question of how to define the specificity of Sociology's relation to the empirical unanswered.

What emerges across the contributions to this Special Issue is that there is a set of inter-related changes which relate to this question, including: changes in both the 'what' of the empirical and the 'how', that is, the ways which experience is tested, by whom and for what purposes. For many of our contributors, these changes are expressed in terms of a need to redefine the relations between ontology and epistemology, and in particular a problematization of surface-depth models as this is articulated in historical understandings of representation in relation to, for example, hermeneutics, translation, concept formation, involvement of publics, and so on. Our own view is that a socio-historical understanding of surface is

helpful as a way of 'grounding' or orienting the changing relations between representation, experience and Sociology that is at issue in these changing understandings of the empirical.

To elaborable: many of the turns outlined here and elsewhere may be understood as part of a more long-term 'turn to the surface', noted as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s by the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer ([1927] 1995) in his analyses of the mass culture of the Weimar Republic. To develop an understanding of what he calls the mass ornament, Kracauer pays special attention to the cultural forms of his day – the hotel lobby, arcades, the Tiller girls and bestsellers, as well as cinema and photography. The turn to surface is understood by Kracauer in terms of the penetration of this mass culture by *ratio*: famously, he describes what he calls the mass ornament as 'the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires' (1995: 79). Kracauer describes this rationality in terms of a (mathematical) logic – a 'Euclidean geometry' – that organizes the mass. This is the logic of a 'linear system', and the 'elementary components' of physics, such as 'waves and spirals', training 'the broadest mass of people to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions' (1995: 77). But the logic to which the prevailing economic system aspires *now* is neither Euclidean nor linear. Rather – as a number of writers (Adkins, 2005, 2008; Delanda, 2006; Lash, 2002, 2007; Lash and Lury, 2007; Lazzarato, 2004; Thrift, 2005; Urry, 2003) variously argue – the logic of the complex, co-ordinating, constitutive assemblages that characterize contemporary societies is non-linear and non-Euclidean. And, so we propose, it is to the reflexivity of this logic that that we must look to understand a surface that, as Savage implies, is no longer defined in contradistinction to depth, causal or explanatory models. This is a surface that is a space in itself: a multi- or n-dimensional space that is mapped and brought into being by a logic of complex functionalities and is known and acted within without reference to a supplementary embedding space/time (DeLanda, 2006). This surface is the topological space of all possible states that a system can have.

The occupation of such a surface poses fundamental questions for Sociology's relation to the empirical, and its relation to the epistemological and the ontological, as our various contributors acknowledge. However, it does not, we suggest, require turning away from the cultural. Indeed, to do so seems slightly perverse, in our way of thinking, given the resources of cultural theory, analytics and practices for understanding *and* engaging surfaces, transparency, performance and performativity, reflexivity, affects and effects by means of simulation, analogy, allegory, repetition, installation, listing, imitation, gaming, matching, tagging, tracing, tracking, naming, modelling and mapping. Let us take the example of the recent interest in the use of inscription devices, other than narrative and number, such as, for example, diagrams.

A diagram, while not representational, is a (particular kind of) sign. In mathematics and the natural sciences, the contemporary use of diagrams is sometimes understood in terms of (a renewal of the notion of) indexation. In 'classical' mathematical calculation, Gilles Chatêlet (2006) argues, a set of indices was neutral: indexation remained external to the development of the calculation.

Indices were operated as if notation was completely indifferent to that which it noted. In 'contemporary' calculation, he proposes, notation is becoming concrete. Indexation is no longer determined by an external 'set' (of numbers or data) but by a process of deformation and modification of diagrams themselves. In the resulting graphic reason, indexation is no longer reduced to the external evaluation of a collection or set, he says, but becomes 'the protagonist of an experiment which secretes its own overflow' (Chatêlet, 2006: 40). Here, we are reminded of Marres' argument that the use of meters that offer an index of green living in homes as domestic experiments complicates and confuses the terms of sociological engagement, precisely because of the ways they overflow (Callon, 1998). Certainly, as Marres points out, such experiments may trivialize and confuse, but they are also one means by which Sociology may come to think again about how to pose problems that have relevance.

In short, if sociologists are indeed to follow the advice of Savage to attend to the generative capacity of devices and diagrams, we believe they must recognize and understand the capacities and complexities of diverse processes of signification in the making of the empirical. To do so, will open Sociology up to the possibilities of a 'roving empiricism' (Thrift, 2005: 223). And here we would point to recent work that is seeking to develop a (material-) semiotics that aims to restore immanence of movement to the processes of signification, whether this be image, object or narration-based (Haraway, 1997; Latour, 2005; Peirce, 1978; Thrift, 2008), and that explores the multiple dimensions, rhythms and senses of signification. The relation of signs to the real such a semiotics enables is not one of representation, but of implication. As such, it does not need to be guided by linguistic rules of equivalence and resemblance and cannot be secured by the co-ordinates of surface and depth, or even by *a priori* rules at all, but rather takes place in a set of relations that unfolds in events as they happen (Thrift, 2008).

Such a semiotics, we suggest, does *not* require a choice between ontology and epistemology in relation to the empirical. While this surface is a space in which Sociology cannot easily recognize its epistemic objects, since the surface and depth co-ordinates that enable representation are not fixed, it does not follow from this either that epistemology has no place. Rather, the space of the surface may be seen to open up possibilities for the development of differently co-ordinated – multidimensional, multi-situated, processual and open-endedly engaged – knowledge claims. It makes possible the emergence of new kinds of sociological critique, produced in a process of relationality. But, as Fraser argues, this is not simply a matter of the sociologist embedding him or herself and methods, but of establishing relations in which a situation can be tested for sociological relevance.

In the final contribution to this Special Issue, Scott Lash highlights why what we have described as the turn to the surface necessarily involves the embrace of the empirical. At its inception, Lash contends, (positivist and phenomenological) Sociology was a discipline of *a priori* rationalism, that is, it was a discipline preoccupied with the question of what makes society possible. This was because Sociology was a science searching for sources of stability in the context of the destabilization associated with the shift from traditional society to the modernity

of manufacturing capitalism and the hegemony of the nation state. Such a search for the *a priori* typically (for instance, in Durkheim) elevated the social fact (symbols and values) over the empirical fact (sense impressions). But the classical sociological *a priori*, Lash argues, is reaching its limit point in the contemporary context of flow and flux and necessary self-organization. This is a context that requires of Sociology not the establishment of *a priori* of stability but the ability to engage with chronic uncertainty. What our contemporary context requires, Lash claims, is a sociological reasoning not of the *a priori* but of the *a posteriori*. This would be a Sociology that takes on not the causative mechanistic assumptions of reproduction, but a self-causing vitalism of production. It employs a form of reasoning that instead of asking 'What makes society possible', asks 'What is this social stuff we are experiencing'? In short, for Lash, our contemporary condition requires a Sociology not of social fact but of the sensate empirical. This is a Sociology that looks not at ideal conditions but 'real existing stuff, real existing social processes', a Sociology that can deal with uncertainty, chaos, complexity and multiplicity. The relevance of such an *a posteriori* empiricist Sociology is made obvious at the cutting edge of social change. In China, for example, property rights are relational, collectivist and contingent, not rationalist regimes of ownership by legal persons. They are multiple, contingent and in process rather than fixed and *a priori*.

The paradoxical narratives of a crisis of and a return to the empirical are, we suggest, a consequence of the way in which the turn to the surface both forces Sociology to break with representational models of the empirical (and with this, to make a move from why to how) and requires the discipline to confront a newly co-ordinated reality, one that is open, processual, non-linear and constantly on the move. This co-ordination does not take place in relation to an externally fixed space, that is, a space in which epistemology is 'above', 'behind' or 'beyond' ontology, but in relation to a surface in which the co-ordinating axes or categories of knowing are implanted, producing a space of possible states. It is an epistemology in relation to the virtual, rather than to the actual that is required. The occupation of surface does not mean that reality is not real, but it requires of Sociology not a banal return to a realist empiricism of what has been, or even what needs to be, but an empiricism and epistemology of what is and can be. In this regard, we are united with our contributors in a willingness to understand Sociology's relationship with the empirical as an experiment of – or with – the yet to come (Simone, 2004).

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■ **Lisa Adkins**   is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written and researched extensively in the areas of economic sociology, social and cultural theory, and the sociologies of gender and sexuality. Her books include *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity* (Open University Press, 2002) and *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Blackwell, 2005) and her papers have been published in a wide range of journals including *Theory, Culture & Society* and *Economy and Society*. Her current research involves a study of the changing temporalities of labour and value. *Address*: Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW. [email: l.adkins@gold.ac.uk] ■

■ **Celia Lury**   is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written widely on feminist and cultural theory. Her substantive interests include the global culture industry, brands, intellectual property and consumer culture. Recent publications include *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (with Scott Lash) (Polity, 2007), and *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (Routledge, 2004). She is currently director of an EU research network on 'A Topological Approach to Cultural Dynamics' (www.atacd.net). *Address*: Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW. [email: c.lury@gold.ac.uk] ■