De-signing the object of sociology: toward an 'idiotic' methodology

Mike Michael

Abstract: This paper outlines a version of 'live sociology' that enacts and engages with the openness and processuality of events. This is initially explored through a focus on everyday objects that, in their relationality, 'misbehave', potentially challenging standard sociological framings. Drawing on the work of Isabelle Stengers, it is suggested that such objects can be understood as 'idiotic' – possessed of an incommensurability that enables social scientists to 'slow down' and reflect upon 'what is busily being done' (not least by the social scientists themselves). This responsiveness to the idiot object is then contrasted to the proactive idiocy of Speculative Design. Here, artefacts – probes and prototypes – are designed to have oblique and ambiguous functions that allow both their users and designers to open up what is at stake in particular events. Examples taken from past and current research are used to illustrate how speculative designs can open up what 'the neighbourhood' and 'energy demand reduction' can be. The paper ends with a discussion of a possible 'idiotic methodology' and its implications for the conceptual and practical doings of social scientific research.

Keywords: design, event, idiot, methodology, process, sociology

Introduction

This paper begins to sketch out a way of doing sociology that is alive to the processes by which society is made, by which those bits of society known as sociology are made, and by which sociology makes society. In many ways, there is nothing new in such a proposal – after all, there are many authors who have addressed one or more of these processes. However, the present paper also aims to develop a particular version of 'doing a sociology that is alive' – a live sociology. Approaching this motif from a Deleuzian perspective, 'live-ness' can be seen to take on at least two connotations. In Ansell Pearson's (1999) reading of Deleuze and Guattari, life does not simply proceed in a linear fashion whereby one species evolves from another, branching out to form Darwin's famous tree

of life. There is also another mode whereby genetic material moves transversally, across species, generating monstrous, entangled becomings. So, on the one hand, a 'live sociology' can imply incremental, directional change in society, in the discipline, and in the discipline's enactment of the social. In this case, live sociology can be said to proceed through the depiction of, and response to, social change, and the critical accretion of theoretical and empirical 'knowledge'. On the other hand, live sociology can point to a much more chaotic, unexpected and 'involutionary' relation to other disciplines and to society. In this case, live sociology is sensitive to, and indeed actively seeks out, that which is empirically and practically nonsensical – what will later be called 'idiotic'. In the process, sociology potentially undergoes, and promotes, creative transformation. It is the latter version of 'live sociology' that is explored here.[1]

This project is developed through a consideration of the role of the object in society and sociology. In part this is a pragmatic move: it makes the analysis more manageable. In part this is opportunistic: recent studies of the object are particularly fertile in facilitating the perspective developed here. In part this is accidental: it is prompted by a chance encounter with a rather different disciplinary treatment of the object and its relation to the social, namely 'speculative design'.

On the subject of objects, it is commonplace to see them as an integral part of society. In the social sciences, they have been studied in very many ways. Objects have been, for instance, tied to processes of consumption, of production, of attachment, of identity, of exchange, of knowledge, of civilization, of representation, of corporealization, of spatialization and temporalization to list but a few of the most obvious. At the risk of over-generalization, objects have by and large been treated as inert matter: stuff which, while it has had a central part to play in the mediation of social relations, has nevertheless largely stood in contrast to the subject.

Objects as 'objects of study' have taken on a renewed significance in the last twenty or so years not least with the increasing prominence of science and technology studies (STS) and the rise of such approaches as 'material culture studies'. Along the way, the object has come to be regarded, by some, as altogether more lively and heterogeneous. In the case of STS, it might be seen as a black hole or an actant – each of these signalling the object's complex, relational and emergent character. Precursors to such formulations can be found in the anti-bifurcatory, processual philosophies of Serres (quasi-subjects), Deleuze and Guattari (assemblages), and especially Whitehead (societies, the concrescence of prehensions).

The present paper draws on this tradition to develop an argument that the object is not only an 'object of study', complex and variegated though this undoubtedly is, but can also be a part of the empirical 'process of engagement'. By this it is meant that objects can be a component of the ontology of empirical study. Over and above their role as tools (eg questionnaires, digital recorders, paper and pen, computers etc) objects contribute to the process of making the events that constitute 'society', including those aspects of society commonly

known as 'sociological research'. To be sure this is a convoluted formulation which will, hopefully, become clearer as some of the terms (eg event, process) are unpacked, and supplementary concepts (eg idiot, becoming-with) are introduced. Suffice it to say for the moment that objects serve in the 'making' of social events (including sociological empirical events such as interviews, focus groups, ethnograpies, etc), and this process of making is incomplete, that is, open and emergent. In any case, the aim here is to contribute to a live sociology that, in engaging with objects (and events) that are seen to be relational, emergent and open, enacts itself and society as relational, emergent and open. On this score, then, the present paper is not concerned with the methodological demarcation of sociological facts or social problems, but with 'matters of process'.

In what follows, after a brief overview of some of the more recent approaches to the object, the main theoretical underpinnings of the present paper will be laid out. Science and technology studies, especially recent variants of actor-network theory, will be central here, though also key will be the work of Whitehead, Deleuze and Guattari, and Stengers. What will emerge is a version of the object that is processual, emergent, relational and open but also, in principle at least, 'idiotic' – possessed of an incommensurable difference that enables us to 'slow down' and reflect on 'what we (as social scientists) are busy doing'. This is illustrated with an example of empirical research that went badly wrong, and the role of objects in this. The paper then moves on to argue that the idiotic properties of objects can be fruitfully mobilized in the doing of research. On this score, the paper draws on a different discipline – speculative design – to show how a 'proactive idiocy' can be operationalized partly through designed artefacts. The paper ends with an exploration of the implications of taking on this approach (distilled in the term 'idiotic' methodology) for the conceptual and practical doings of social scientific research.

Objects and things

Amongst recent writings on the role of objects in society, a number of terms have been developed to access the ways in which objects – in their material and semiotic complexity – interact with humans. A sample of such terms might include pre- and proscriptions (Akrich and Latour, 1992), sociality (Knorr-Cetina, 1997), affordances (Ingold, 1993), propensities (Miller, 2005), or enactments (Mol, 2002). Often associated with these modes of interaction are also a series of terms which aim to access alternative units of analysis that encompass humans-and-nonhumans-together. Again, a not especially representative survey could list: hybrids (Latour, 1999), monsters (Law, 1991), cyborgs, black holes (Haraway, 1991, 1994), ontologies (Mol, 2002), co(a)gents (Michael, 2000) and the more-than-human (Whatmore, 2006).

These concepts of heterogeneity serve to evoke the constitutive mixing of the social and material, the human and non-human, the subject and object: they

also presuppose an exchange between these entities such that each is partly comprised of its opposite. Thus Michel Serres (eg 1982) writes of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects, and Bruno Latour has put it thus:

> We are never faced with objects or social relations, we are faced with chains which are associations of humans (H) and nonhumans (NH). No-one has ever seen a social relation by itself . . . nor a technical relation . . . Instead we are always faced with chains which look like this H-NH-H-NH-H-NH . . . (1991: 110).

How do we empirically engage these relationalities between humans and objects? The answer to this depends in large part on the quality of those relationalities. In some cases, where the objects are relatively novel (say new information or biomedical technologies) then one could conduct ethnographic study of how these come to be 'domesticated' (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; Lie and Sorensen, 1996), or, where these technologies are more controversial, of how they emerge with their publics as political issues (Marres, 2007; Latour, 2005). Here, the general analytic strategy is one of tracing the processes by which the unfamiliar object comes to be rendered familiar. However, and in some ways more profoundly, the social world is, of course, profusely inhabited by objects that are familiar to the point of invisibility. In this instance, what is required is the development of a sensibility that, in one way or another, renders what is familiar in everyday life unfamiliar (eg Highmore, 2002; Gardiner, 2000). In some cases, this might be precipitated when the objects themselves 'go wrong' or misbehave – as when door-closers discriminate against the elderly and the young (Latour, 1992), or walking boots turn out to be excruciatingly painful (Michael, 2000). In other cases, this might entail particular sorts of close observation such as autobiographical reflection (Highmore, 2011), or attention to the experiences of others (Akrich, 1992). In the process, these sensibilities enable the analysis of the mundane role of objects: how they go about their business in the reproduction of everyday life.

However, what these objects are – what their ontology is – rests on the sorts of events of which they are a part. The different characteristics or 'qualities' of objects depend on their embeddedness within particular events. That is to say, objects emerge from the specific combination (Whitehead would say 'concrescence') of specific social and material components (Whitehead would say 'prehensions') in specific events or actual occasions (Whitehead, 1929, 1933; Halewood, 2011). Accordingly, there are no objects whose substance pre-exists their qualities: there is no abstracted car that is yellow, or is cold, or is broken; there is a yellow car, a cold car, a broken car. Or if we insist on an abstracted car, it is specifically abstracted by a philosopher or an engineer or a designer.

The event in which an object emerges can be conceptualized as taking, broadly speaking, two different forms. Drawing on Motamedi Fraser (Fraser, 2010) excellent discussion of the event in Whitehead and Deleuze, she notes that in contrast to Whitehead, Deleuze's version of the event is a moment where its component entities rather than simply 'being together' also 'become together'. In what we can call the 'eventuation' of an object – the making of an event in

which an object emerges – the constitutive elements do not simply 'interact' with one another while retaining their identity, but change in the process of that interaction (or to use a different terminology, intra-action, see Barad, 2007). As such, this version of the event can be characterized by a mutual changing.

As noted above, in much social science, the study of objects considers their role in the reproduction of social situations. They are instrumental in making events. However, also as noted, sometimes objects 'misbehave': they do things they are not supposed to. This can facilitate insight into the workings of the everyday. For instance, in a 'disastrous interview episode' (see Michael, 2004), a cassette tape recorder placed on the floor between the interviewer and interviewee was dragged away by the latter's cat to the point where none of the interview (such as it was) could be recorded. The initial insight this episode yielded into the everyday-ness of the social scientific interview was that a whole array of entities had to be disciplined in order for the interview to be possible. Objects and human and non-human animals, and the relations between them, must be made orderly if the (social scientifically) desired event – the interview and the production of social scientific data – is to take place. And yet, these constituent entities also changed in their relations to one another: minimally, the cat became playful, the recorder became a plaything. There was, a becoming-with in this particular event where cat and tape recorder co-emerged.

However, this becoming-with of the tape-recorder object also gives us pause to reflect on the interview event. Is it an interview event any longer? In the work of Isabelle Stengers (2005), we have the resources to operationalize such reflection. Her figure of the idiot – which she adapts from Deleuze – is particularly helpful. It is a 'conceptual character' who 'resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action' (2005: 994). Here, Stengers is thinking of what she calls 'cosmopolitical' events where politics embraces the human and non-human, but also, in part thanks to the idiot, where such events might proceed more carefully and slowly. This is because the idiot, as a figure that refuses to enter such events, whose responses are nonsensical in the context of those events as normally understood, can also serve to challenge their meaning. Stengers writes: 'the idiot can neither reply nor discuss the issue . . . (the idiot) does not know . . . the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know' (2005: 995). As such, the task becomes one of how 'we bestow efficacy upon the murmurings of the idiot, the "there is something more important" that is so easy to forget because it "cannot be taken into account", because the idiot neither objects nor proposes anything that "counts"' (2005: 1001). By attending to the nonsensicalness, we become open to a dramatic redefinition of the meaning of the event.

To be sure there are other figures we might draw upon – the fool, the jester, or the trickster, for example. However, these figures might best be regarded as primarily oppositional – turning events 'on their head' does not radically undermine the meaning of those events, and indeed can serve in their re-enactment.[2] In contrast, the etymology of the idiot – as the private individual who has no

interest in the demos, that is, politics – suggests a figure whose (non-)actions are so incommensurable with those (political) events that it chaotically disrupts the orthodox interpretation of those events.[3]

In the case of the social scientific interview event, the tape recorder has become idiotic in that it 'misbehaves': it has, in its guise as a plaything, mutely 'refused' to enter into the event of the interview. But, paying it proper attention – by practising a listener's art as Les Back (2007) would call it – we can also begin to query this interpretation of the event: this is not a disastrous interview episode (an oppositional view), but an event of a cat-become-playful playing with its new found tape recorder-become-plaything. The idiot allows us to slow down – to take time to question our own assumptions about the event and to reinterpret it. The idiotic object affords an opportunity to engage in a process of, as Motamedi Fraser (Fraser, 2010) puts it, 'inventive problem making'. Accordingly, the 'disastrous interview episode' becomes not only a playful event enacted with non-human animals, but an occasion for inventively rethinking the 'social' and 'social data' in relation to the non-human.

In sum, the object can be regarded, through its various (intra-)relations, as something that is in process, becoming-with and, crucially, idiotic.[4] As such, it can resource a radical rethinking of the meaning of social and social scientific events. Yet, thus far our relation to the idiotic object has been a reactive one. As analysts we are simply *responsive* to the waywardness of objects. Moments of evident idiocy and spontaneous becoming-with serve as opportunities for doing a particular sort of analytic work. That is to say, the emergence of idiotic objects occasions a radical rethinking of the events in which they emerged.

However, notice that this 'occasion of radical rethinking' is itself an event – a becoming-with the event that is studied and the data that are analysed. What this points to is the radical openness of the event (DeLanda, 2002): events, as argued above, are processual. They open out onto a 'virtuality', and the idiot has allowed us to get a particular grasp of this. Specifically, in the case of the 'disastrous interview episode' the idiotic tape recorder illuminated the role of (the disciplining of) animals in the making of social data. In the process, we have become a different sort of analyst, not of the topic of the interview (which was on the risks of radiation) but of the part played by the non-human in social ordering. The suggestion here is that it might be possible to approach this openness or virtuality through a practice of *proactive idiocy*. Thus, we might pose the question: is it possible to invent objects which have this property of idiocy (and becoming-with-ness) as a novel way of engaging with the processuality or openness of a specific social event? In the next sections, I will explore this question by drawing on the practices and processes of 'speculative design'.

Critical and speculative design

Design as a discipline is routinely represented as oriented toward both objects and the future. It is concerned with the making of stuff that will shape the future

for the 'better' (though this better future takes divergent forms – see Papanek, 1984). In contrast to such standard forms of product-oriented design, there are versions of design that are less interested in the making of objects that fulfil specific functions or meet particular needs or ends. To set the scene, I begin with a brief discussion of critical design because it has been crucial in opening up the potential of design to rethink its relation to the object. It also serves in highlighting what is peculiar about speculative design, which, it will be claimed, produces 'idiotic' artefacts.

Critical design, typically identified with the interaction designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (eg Dunne and Raby, 2001; Dunne, 2005), aims critically to address the possible futures entailed by contemporary technological developments. As such, the aim is to design 'prototypes' whose function is to enable a critical engagement with such futures. While the methods of critical design might draw on art practice, there is nevertheless a distinction insofar as critical design must navigate between the extremes of contemporary art (shocking, highly personal) and the normalities and normativities of functional design. For instance, in the 2009 'What if . . .' exhibition at the Dublin Science Gallery curated by Dunne and Raby, the aim was to present 'people with hypothetical products, services and systems from alternative futures . . . [that] probe our beliefs and values, challenge our assumptions and encourage us to imagine how what we call "reality" could be different. They help us see that the way things are now is just one possibility, and not necessarily the best one'.[5] In response to the question 'WHAT IF . . . Robots were designed from an emotional point of view?' Dunne and Raby themselves contributed nervous or needy robots that raised such questions as 'What new interdependencies and relationships might emerge in relation to different levels of robot intelligence and capability: intimate, subservient, dependent, equal'?[6]

Key here is the oppositional stance that underpins the design of these robots: a predominant future of emotionless robots is countered by the designs. In the idiotic terms set out above, the encounter with these objects does not necessarily yield a 'becoming together' in part because the objects are grounded in a particular critique: it is hard to see how these might yield 'inventive problem making' when the 'problem' is so clearly staked out. In addition, these critical designs are eventuated in an exhibition space that also serves to delimit the range of possible meanings that they might carry. The upshot is that for all the apparent strangeness of these designs they are unlikely to serve as idiots that prompt 'inventive problem making'. For this we turn to speculative design.

Speculative design is associated particularly with the work of Bill Gaver (eg Sengers and Gaver, 2006; Gaver *et al.*, 2008) and, like critical design, produces objects that are obliquely functional in order to provoke reflection on the complex roles of new technology (in the case of Gaver, this also means emerging computational capacities such as ubiquitous computing). However, for speculative design, the designs' obliqueness is not set critically against a particular sociotechnical future. This is because the designs partly emerge from an initial engagement with the public – an engagement that is itself oblique. This initial

engagement through such techniques as 'cultural probes' generates a series of disparate materials that through the design process yield prototypes which are then implemented (installed in users' homes, for instance) and subsequently 'ethnographically' studied.

Probe

In a recent reflection on cultural probes, latterly shortened to probes, Kirsten Boehner, William Gaver and Andy Boucher (in press) describe them in terms that place them at odds with typical social scientific methods. Thus, rather than addressing 'what is', probes are oriented to 'what might be' (and as such they echo the engagement with the emergent and the virtual mentioned above); rather than producing a coherent and generalizable account of a particular setting or situation, probes are used to develop singular and fragmented understandings; rather than aiming for faithful interpretations (even if these are presented with heavy doses of modesty and reflexivity as is routinely the case for qualitative sociological methods), probes celebrate idiosyncrasy, risk and uncertainty in the interpretations of both the designers and the participants in the design process (Gaver *et al.*, 2004; Sengers and Gaver, 2006).

So, what are probes? In brief, they are items, often gathered together in small packages, that are sent to volunteers (typically recruited through small advertisements in local newspapers). The items set seemingly peculiar tasks. For instance, the packet might contain a disposable camera that has been customized with instructions that ask the volunteer to take a photograph of something seen from their kitchen window or of the spiritual centre of their home. Or there might be a 'listening glass' – an ordinary drinking glass with instructions to press against the wall in order listen to unusual sounds around the house. This is packaged with a marker pen which can be used to record details about the noise directly onto the glass. Or there might be a 'telephone jotter pad' that encourages volunteers to doodle in it, or respond to various images or questions contained in it, while doing other things (such as answering the telephone). Importantly, the designers are clear that there is nothing compulsory about the use of the probes: volunteers can use them if, as and when they felt the urge. Living with the probes for about a month, volunteers are asked to mail the individual items back to the designers at their own discretion.

As Boehner *et al.* (in press) elaborate, the probes are part of a speculative design process that is less concerned with developing instrumental or utilitarian devices than objects that enable playfulness and exploration, and that precipitate new thinking about technology. This is not necessarily a comfortable process because the aim is to throw up the peculiar, the unexpected, the troublesome, the incommensurable. In the terminology of this paper, the probes proactively seek the 'idiotic'. This window on the 'idiotic' is reinforced by virtue of the array of responses that flow back with the return of the different probe items. The result is a process in which otherwise unthought design routes become exposed – or, to rephrase it, 'inventive problem making' becomes available.

How are the probes derived? Usually, the designers will discuss at length the potential participants and settings, attempting to derive a series of questions that address the range and complexity of participants' views of the target setting (eg the home) or activity (eg energy demand reduction). The outcome is a tightly considered array of themes such as community, connection, responsibility, nature, information. The probes are designed around a particular aesthetic (eg bright, cheerful) and a sense of the balance of the items (some are serious, some playful, some professional, some amateurish). Overarching all of this is the requirement that the probes probe: they must be sufficiently provocative, novel, entertaining, open, inviting to prompt answers that are unexpected, expressive and creative.

Once the probe items (not all of which are successful – some are simply not used by the participants) are returned, how is the material processed? Given that the subsequent design objects are meant to embody uncertainty, opaqueness, playfulness, multiple interpretability then the returned material is treated accordingly. It is not regarded as 'information' but as a prompt to intuition, multiplicity, uncertainty (just as the probes were meant to prompt such responses in the volunteers). Some material is sidelined, some enters the foreground, some is met with ambivalence.

This piecemeal appropriation of the returned material suggests a relationship to the empirical that is very different to that typically found in social science. In contrast to typical modes of social scientific analysis which seek out patterns, the material from the prototypes is mobilized in intuitive, open, uncertain ways in relation to the emerging design of prototypes. It can be likened to a process of de- and re-territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) in which idiotic responses (to the idiotic probes) come to the fore to prompt the emergence of new idiotic ideas that will affect the designers and enter into their designs.

One is tempted to say that this 'idiotic sensibility *cum* sensitivity to the idiot' that is bound up with the emerging design object reflects what we might call 'corporeal' or 'sensory' or 'affective' scholarship. Here, the term scholarship echoes Mick Billig's (1988) use: the idiosyncratic, wayward but serious, accumulated knowledge of the scholar whose peculiar engagement with history enables them to provide fresh insights (not least into the operations of ideology and rhetoric). Reference to the affective, sensory and corporeal serves to connote the embodiedness of this scholarship. Over and above the recourse to design history and principles, there is also a set of tacit skills, aesthetic sensibilities, complex intuitions that come into play. In other words, there is a 'feel' for, or put differently, a non-representational theorization of (Thrift, 2008), what in the probe returns can count as productively idiotic. As such, the probe material is mobilized through a dialogue with its future design objects that entails ongoing mutual shaping of both: there is a becoming-with.

Now, this becoming-with extends to the dialogic relation between designers and participants (Boehner *et al.*, in press). After all, probes are designed to be open to volunteers' eccentricities while also complex and multiple in their interpretability. Beyond this, the probes are meant to resource, in a productively

fragmented way, another object – the prototype – which will subsequently be deployed with volunteers. Here, we get glimpses of the ways in which the probes serve as a sort of mediator (which according to Latour, 1999, is something that mediates relations in unreliable and contingent ways) between designer and participant who, in the process, become-with one another or, phrased otherwise, are each other's idiots.

From a social scientific perspective, the tacit model behind this entire process is one in which the world is open, inventive, ambiguous, complex, emergent, relational. If that were not the case there would be no point in designing and giving probes or prototypes to participants. The value for a social scientist is that these speculative design techniques neither aspire to yield more or less accurate representations of the social world nor aim to establish particular relations between various variables however 'soft' these might be.[7] Rather they concern 'matters of process' – they are not about problems or facts, but about the process of emergence of new relations which, potentially at least, can reconfigure what the very 'fact' or 'problem' might be. This rather gnomic formulation and its implication for sociological methodology will be elaborated below. However, before that, the discussion will turn to the deployment and ethnographic study of the speculative prototypes.

Prototype

The eventual outcome of the use of the probe material described above is a prototype or a range of prototypes: these are highly finished design objects that have the characteristics of openness, playfulness, provocation, uncertainty and so on. Over the course of various projects, Gaver and his collaborators have developed such objects as: the drift table, the photostroller, the history tablecloth, the prayer companion or the key table. Each of these, in their own peculiar ways, invites not only multiple interpretations by their users, but also, in part because of their complex and ambiguous semiotic and material composition, emergent and unforeseen orderings and disorderings. Novel relations amongst participants (humans and non-human) and between participants and prototypes develop that are often at odds with the designers' own initial expectations.[8]

For present purposes I will focus on what Gaver *et al.* (2008) call 'threshold devices' which entail gathering information from the home's environs to generate new and surprising views on the domestic situation. These devices look out from the home, collecting particular forms of information from its surroundings in order to suggest novel ways in which the home is connected to and situated within its wider physical and social environment. As such, these devices were designed to serve as means or resources through which inhabitants are invited to contemplate how the home emerges out of, and mediates, where it is, and what and who is around it: in other words, these devices encourage exploration of the home as it is at once bounded and blurred. The aim is to access these homely engagements in their richness and complexity, which might well incorporate interpretations that span the utilitarian, the emotional and the aesthetic.[9]

Of the three devices Gaver *et al.* (2008) report on – the 'video window', the 'plane tracker' and the 'local barometer', for ease of exposition I will discuss only the last.[10] The local barometer was made up of six brightly coloured devices, each with a small screen across which texts and images scrolled. These images and texts were selected from Loot.com, an online classified advertisement site. The selection process was determined by local wind speed and direction measured by a commercially available anemometer mounted to the outside of the home. As such, advertisements were taken from areas upwind of the home, and were closer or further away depending on the strength of the wind. The idea informing the design of the local barometer was that it could inspire people to think about the social, economic and cultural complexities of their environs: for example, ads might be seen to reflect, or contradict, the reputation of different neighbourhoods.

The local barometer was deployed for around a month with a volunteer, R, who lived in, and worked from, a small apartment in London. After the six devices were positioned around R's home, R's time with the barometer was studied through ethnographic methods. Over the course of the month, R was visited several times by one of the design team (visits lasted approximately half a day, about 30 hours in all). The main materials collected took the form of field notes (of observations of R's use of the device, informal interviews) and photographs.

Through the local barometer a wide range of advertised items 'blew' into R's home, including: antiques, books, furniture, musical instruments, property, toys, vehicles. R's initial interpretation of the barometer was that it was another unwelcome medium for marketing or advertising, and he was generally resistant to using it. He became more attentive to the devices after noticing items that were of special interest to him (eg having been a musician, he was taken with the image of a collectable guitar). His interpretative stance began to shift: rather than to intrusive advertisements, the devices introduced him to ironic 'gifts' or 'surprises' that prompted a range of strong emotional responses (the guitar prompted attachment, a sports car provoked dislike and distrust). But further, the barometer began to interact with his historical sense of the local area, sometimes reinforcing it, sometimes undermining it. Some items were seen to be indicative of the particular neighbourhoods from which they were advertised, while others sat uneasily with his understanding of the character of their neighbourhood. Over and above this, and much to the surprise of the designers, R began to use the devices as a means to attending to local weather conditions: he began to read the weather according to the types of advertisements and the neighbourhoods from which they were blown.

In sum, we can say that the local barometer, as a speculative prototype, served to render open and unravel, but also reconfigure, some of the complexity of, put crudely, the relations between commerce and aesthetics, neighbourhoods and reputation, and nature and culture. Put another way, the perceived 'function' of, and the practical engagement with, the barometer drifted (at the very least) across the commercial, the demographic, the personal, the political and

the meteorological. The idiocy of the local barometer 'lures' R into an event in which there is a sequence of 'becoming-withs' between R and the barometer.

Accordingly, the local barometer also idiotically generates the opportunity for some 'inventive problem-making'. We have hinted at how this might occur for R: not only are apprehensions of particular neighbourhoods deterritorialized, but we can see how, for example, the idea of a neighbourhood itself becomes problematized – perhaps tending toward something like a shifting mélange of weather, people, wealth, artefacts, electromagnetic waves, etc. Further, the barometer also inventively problematizes our own sociological – or more broadly, analytic – eventuations: what are the complex, piecemeal combinations and concatenations of categories such as class, status, nature, technology, place, consumption, aesthetics, identity and so on? Finally, speculative design can itself be portrayed as sociology's idiot: it enacts a way of engaging with the (social) world that, in principle at least, affords the opportunity for inventive problem-making within sociological practice. It is this last prospect that the next section addresses.

Conclusion: toward an 'idiotic' methodology

What lessons do the ethos and practice of speculative design hold for sociology and its methodologies? Given that ethos and practice, and the general analytic of this paper, this is, arguably, precisely the wrong question to pose. Rather, at stake is the mutual 'becoming-with' of these disciplines. In contrast to the juxtaposition of speculative design and sociology, we begin from a more topological grounding: what are the common byways along which they travel? Where are the junctures at which they touch? How can the engagements between these be rendered open, multiple, uncertain, playful?

Needless to say, there already exist points of partial crossover. In the sociological tradition of action research, objects regularly feature in the collaborations between social scientists and communities (see Reason and Bradbury, 2001a, for a range of examples; also Lewin, 1946; Bargal, 2006). While action research takes many forms, it can be broadly defined as 'social research carried out by a team that encompasses professional action researchers and the members of an organization, community or network ('stakeholders') who are seeking to improve the participants' situation' (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 3). This finds echoes in the tradition of participatory design where objects emerge out of close collaborations between designers and users (eg Muller, 2008). In both cases objects are part of a process whereby experts and lay people, working together, come to identify particular problems and open up routes to solutions. Clearly, then, these objects,[11] insofar as they are solution-oriented, do not have designed into them the sort of idiocy found in speculative prototypes.[12]

Nevertheless, drawing on the problem-orientation and collaborative ethos of action research and participatory design traditions, and combining this with the openness, uncertainty and playfulness of speculative design, we can tentatively

propose 'ludic action research'. In broad outline, ludic action research would draw on the following range of 'sensibilities'. If action researchers together with participants aim to identify social problems and propose and implement possible solutions to those problems, ludic action research would seek to open up possibilities. Most relevantly in the present context, this could be done by introducing into particular situations (domestic, workplace, public) artefacts that embody openness, ambiguity, playfulness. These can take the form of probes – a medium (or rather mediator) by which participants' apprehensions can be collected. For example, in a current research project 'Sustainability Invention and Energy Demand Reduction: Co-Designing Communities and Practice',[13] participants are asked to document on a map the aesthetics of energy in different parts of their home (the sound of energy in the hallway, the smell of energy in the living room, etc). This oblique – that is, idiotic – means of gathering 'data' is a way of inviting the participants playfully to engage not with the closed problem of reducing energy demand, but with the open prospect of re-imagining their relation to energy. This probe is designed as a prompt to play and as such is characterized by emergence and contingency, exploration and provisionality (Gaver, 2009). Instead of seeking out solutions to such questions as 'how do we change energy consumption behaviour?', the probe facilitates the open prospect of re-imagining one's very relation to energy, of inventing new problems (What 'is' energy in the home? What sort of individual and collective body is enacted through energy use? Can there be a 'unit' of energy that incorporates experience?).

As is well known, there are numerous means of deriving patterns from sociological data sets (eg Mason, 1996; Silverman, 1993). However, the probe 'data' that will be returned will be treated idiotically in order to enable 'inventive problem-making'. This will mean they will be used in a piecemeal, playful, unsystematic, open way to develop idiotic prototypes (yet to be determined!). These prototypes will subsequently be installed in a setting (yet to be determined!) to eventuate more idiotic participant responses, that is to say, more 'inventive problem-making'. As such, ludic action research is a processual 'collaboration' between 'experts' (designers, social scientists) and 'participants' that would generate events where the idiocy of objects (in this case a map and subsequent prototypes) eventuates something like a process of serial 'inventive problem-making'. The aim here is to circumvent the standard and not especially successful perspectives on energy demand reduction (see, for example, Shove *et al.*, in press) by redefining the parameters of the problem.

The probe and the prototype reflect speculative design's ethos of inventing artefacts whose openness prompts unexpected relationalities (for the home, the neighbourhood or energy consumption, for example). This might be reframed as a form of 'de-signing', in the sense of loosening, or 'ambiguating', the significations that contribute to the eventuation of objects. There are precedents for this sort of de-signing in sociological accounts, perhaps most notably in the guise of de Certeau's (1984) 'idle walker'. This figure moves through a panoptically surveilled society tricksterishly, evading, albeit momentarily, the strictures

(and particular productivities) of disciplinary grids (see Michael, 2006). In other words, idle walkers are contingently heedless to the meanings that are inscribed into the objects that comprise their environment. This suggests that, in principle at least, any object can be 'de-signed', rendered idiotic.[14]

On the surface, there is a contrast to be drawn here. On the one side, in the sociological case, the process of de-signing takes place through re-ordering the event (eg idle walking) out of which the ambiguous object emerges. On the other side, for speculative design, the probe or prototype is deployed to de-sign the relations through which it might emerge (eg those relations that make up the home of which the prototype is becoming a part). On the one hand the event deterritorializes to allow a new 'thing' to emerge; on the other, the object deterritorializes to allow new events to emerge.

However, this contrast misses the mark. After all, as sketched above, the probes fed playful, designerly events that yielded playful, open prototypes that fed open relationalities for their users. These events were documented in a way that did not seek patterns but odd specificities, specificities that might resource inventive problem-making for both users and designers. The local barometer opens a space of strange encounters between, say meteorology and demography that hints at an alternative way of categorizing the world (eg in terms of naturecultures and the sort of politics these might imply). In this trajectory where event and object interweave we get a glimpse of the processuality of the idiot. But also, we get a sense of the potential mutuality of idiocy. The actions and reactions of participants can be just as idiotic for the researchers: it is those actions and reactions that escape analytic patterning or theoretical sense-making that can engender becoming-with and inventive problem-making within the research process itself.

Above, mention was made of 'collaboration' between researchers and participants, but over and above the usual, explicit forms of interaction that makes research 'do-able' (eg arranging meeting times, having ethics forms filled, exchanging ideas, explicit learning from one another etc), there is also a subterranean form of 'sociality' being enacted, what we might call the mutual idiocy between researcher and participant. This can be likened to a non-dialogical conversation where mirrored incommensurability nevertheless triggers affects, reactions and responses which mediate a parallel inventive problem-making (see Horst and Michael, 2011): for both the participants and researchers this might entail a re-imagining of home, energy or neighbourhood.

To be sure, the foregoing is rather programmatic and abstracted: at best, it is an initial sketch for what has been called an 'idiotic' methodology. Inhabited by a series of intra-related terms such as ludic action research, de-sign, becoming-with, the idiot and mutual idiocy, and inventive problem-making, the aim has been to set a particular scene for the development of practical, processual, open methods. Underpinning this suggestion of 'idiotic' methodology is the view that social events are ontologically open, in-process, emergent. This openness is also a marker of the 'liveness' of social events: 'idiotic' methodology is simply meant to afford a point of access to such openness and liveness, and

hopefully, along the way, make some small contribution to the larger project of a live sociology.[15]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 This differs somewhat from Abbott's (2001) chaotic, that is fractal, version of disciplinary change in that the emphasis here is less on repeating patterns and more on dramatic disjuncture. It should also be noted that this contrast between the two versions of live sociology are ideal typical. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988) made clear, the linear, branching, 'root-like' (territorializing) model of life, and promiscuous, topological, 'rhizomic' (deterritorializing) model are thoroughly and necessarily interwoven. The same applies no less to the relation between a sociology that undergoes progressive, linear development and a sociology that changes abruptly in unexpected directions.

2 There is much that can be said about the relation of the present perspective to critique. For instance, the present paper could be aligned with Latour's (2004) claims about the exhaustion of critique. Suffice it to say, and this point is reiterated in the discussion of critical design, critique does not well accommodate the possibility of a co-emergence of researcher-and-researched: the problem is pre-figured in critique, rather than inventively emergent. In the case of critical theory (eg Geuss,1981), for example, this pre-figuration might refer to a utopia (transcendental critique) or a standard of non-contradiction (immanent critique).

3 For a different rendering of the idiot that stresses its malleability and manipulability, see Lezaun and Soneryd (2007).

4 It can also be thought of as 'thingly' in the sense that Rheinberger (1997) uses the term 'epistemic things' to contrast with 'technical objects'. If the latter are stabilized components within the context of an experimental system, epistemic things – the objects of scientific study – physical structures, chemical reactions, biological functions – 'present themselves in a characteristic irreducible vagueness . . . [because they] . . . embody what one does not yet know' (1997: 28). For a more cultural studies version of 'thingliness', see Highmore (2011). For a philosophical perspective that stresses the vitality of the material object, see Bennett (2010).

5 http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/projects/512/0 – accessed 12 March 2011.

6 http://www.sciencegallery.com/emorobotsSG – accessed 12 March 2011.

7 One can also attach this discussion to the issue of 'surprise' that can accompany social scientific analysis. One of the great pleasures of such work is 'seeing' the pattern in the data. In the case of speculative design, the pleasure lies less in this 'solving' of the riddle of, or in this 'discovery' of a hermeneutic handle on, data (a mode of territorializing, though often this is knowingly contingent). Rather, it is associated with an active proliferation of possible design trajectories.

Having noted this, the next stage is to reduce these to yield a single designed object, the prototype.

8 Details of the specifications and unexpected interpretations of these and other speculative design objects can be found at: http://www.gold.ac.uk/interaction/public/ – accessed 12 March 2011.

9 These devices can again be linked to Thrift's non-representational theory but this time to its focus on play and experiment for the sake of 'seeing what will happen . . . [of letting] the event sing you [as 'experimenter']' (Thrift, 2008: 12).

10 Michael and Gaver (2009) have addressed these devices in terms of their 'poetical' qualities and their relation to issues of 'dwelling' in and 'caring' for the environment reconceived as techno-culture or natureculture. While this analysis is partly echoed here, the primary concern is with the implications of the deployment of these devices for social scientific methodology.

11 While the focus here is on objects, solutions take many forms including systems, programmes, sociotechnical arrangements, resources and so on.

12 Having noted this, these collaborative endeavours can certainly possess elements of contingency and uncertainty. This is because they can be situated as part of broader social projects: in the case of Action Research, this might include, for instance, the re-enchantment of the world (see Reason and Bradbury, 2001b), and for participatory designers this might include social democracy (eg Gregory, 2003).

13 For details see www.ecdc.ac.uk (last accessed 24 May 2011).

14 While not elaborated here, this can also be linked up to the procedures and proposals of the Situationists.

15 However, lest this paper end on too triumphalist a note, there is also good reason to treat idiotic methodology and ludic action research circumspectly. The emphasis on creativity and play is not something that can be promoted without some consideration of its emergence elsewhere, not least in business and managerial training practice. Thrift (2005) suggests that techniques of inculcating inventiveness and creativity reflect a new managerial subject position that is able to adapt to the chronic emergency that faces capital. Ludic action research, while it might not directly feed into the (re)production of capitalism is not immune from negative outcomes. There is nothing in this processually oriented methodology that can preclude, for example, the eventual emergence of a more profligate consumption of energy or a more prejudiced view of neighbourhoods. In the end, ludic action research does not directly address problems but opens up the possibility of creatively re-inventing those problems, and as with any process of invention, things can go wrong.

References

Abbot, A., (2001), *The Chaos of Disciplines*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Akrich, M., (1992), 'The de-scription of technical objects', in W. E. Bijker and J. Law (eds), *Shaping Technology/Building Society*, 205–224, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Akrich, M. and Latour, B., (1992), 'A summary of a Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies', in W. E. Bijker and J. Law (eds), *Shaping Technology/Building Society*, 259–263, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ansell Pearson, K., (1999), *Germinal Life*, London: Routledge.

Back, L., (2007), *The Art of Listening*, Oxford: Berg.

Barad, K., (2007), *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bargal, D., (2006), 'Personal and intellectual influences leading to Lewin's paradigm of action research: towards the 60th anniversary of Lewin's "Action research and minority problems" (1946)', *Action Research*, 4: 367–388.

Bennett, J., (2010), *Vibrant Matter*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Billig, M., (1988), 'Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation', in C. Antaki (ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation*, London: Sage.

Boehner, K., Gaver, W. and Boucher, A., (in press), 'Probes', in C. Lury and N. Wakeford (eds), *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social*, London: Routledge.

De Certeau, M., (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

DeLanda, M., (2002), *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London: Continuum.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., (1988), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.

Dunne, A., (2005), *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Dunne, A. and Raby, F., (2001), *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects*, London/Basel: August/Birkhauser.

Fraser, M., (2010), 'Facts, ethics and event', in C. Bruun Jensen and K. Rödje (eds), *Deleuzian Intersections in Science, Technology and Anthropology*, 57–82. New York: Berghahn Press.

Gardiner, M., (2000), *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London and New York: Routledge.

Gaver, W., (2009), 'Designing for Homo Ludens, still', in T. Binder, J. Löwgren and L. Malmborg (eds), *(Re)searching the Digital Bauhaus*, 163–178, London: Springer.

Gaver, W., Boucher, A., Law, A., Pennington, S., Bowers, J., Beaver, J., Humble, J., Kerridge, T., Villar, N., and Wilkie, A., (2008), 'Threshold devices: looking out from the home', in *Proceedings of the 26th Annual SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Florence, Italy*, 1429–1438, New York: ACM Press.

Gaver, W., Boucher, A., Pennington, S., and Walker, B., (2004), 'Cultural probes and the value of uncertainty', *interactions,* 11 (5): 53–56.

Geuss, R., (1981), *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Greenwood, D. J. and Levin, M., (2007), *Introduction to Action Research*, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gregory, J., (2003), 'Scandinavian Approaches to Participatory Design', *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 19: 62–74.

Halewood, M., (2011), *Alfred North Whitehead and Social Theory: The Body, Abstraction, Process*, London: Anthem Press.

Haraway, D., (1991), *Simians, Cyborgs and Nature*, London: Free Association Books.

Haraway, D., (1994), 'A game of cat's cradle: science studies, feminist theory, cultural studies', *Configurations*, 2: 59–71.

Highmore, B., (2002), *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

Highmore, B., (2011), *Ordinary Lives: Studies in Everyday Life*, Oxford and New York: Routledge.

Horst, M. and Michael, M., (2011), 'On the shoulders of idiots: Rethinking science communication as "event" ', *Science as Culture*, 20: 283–306.

Ingold, T., (1993), 'The temporality of the landscape', *World Archeology*, 25: 152–174.

Knorr Cetina, K. D., (1997), 'Sociality with objects: social relations in postsocial knowledge societies', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 14 (4): 1–30.

Latour, B., (1991), 'Technology is society made durable', in J. Law (ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters*, 103–131. London: Routledge.

Latour, B., (1992), 'Where are the missing masses? A sociology of a few mundane artifacts', in W. E. Bijker and J. Law (eds), *Shaping Technology/Building Society*, 225–258, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B., (1999), *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B., (2004), 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30: 225–248.

Latour, B., (2005), 'From realpolitik to dingpolitik – or how to make things public', in B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, 14–41, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Law, J., (1991), 'Introduction: monsters, machines and sociotechnical relations', in J. Law (ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters*, 1–23, London: Routledge.

Lewin, K., (1946), 'Action research and minority problems', *Journal of Social Issues*, 2: 34–46.

Lezaun, J. and Soneryd, L., (2007), 'Consulting citizens: technologies of elicitation and the mobility of publics', *Public Understanding of Science*, 16: 279–297.

Lie, M. and Sorensen, K. H. (eds), (1996), *Making Technology our Own? Domesticating Technologies into Everyday Life*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Marres, N., (2007), 'The issues deserve more credit: pragmatist contributions to the study of public involvement in controversy', *Social Studies of Science*, 37: 759–780.

Mason, J., (1996), *Qualitative Researching*, London, Sage.

Michael, M., (2000), *Reconnecting Culture, Technology and Nature: From Society to Heterogeneity*, London: Routledge.

Michael, M., (2004), 'On making data social: heterogeneity in sociological practice', *Qualitative Research*, 4 (1): 5–23.

Michael, M., (2006), *Technoscience and Everyday Life*, Maidenhead: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.

Michael, M. and Gaver, W., (2009), 'Home beyond home: Dwelling with threshold devices', *Space and Culture*, 12: 359–370.

Miller, D., (2005), 'Introduction', in S. Küchler, and D. Miller (eds), *Clothing as Material Culture*, 1–19. Oxford: Berg.

Mol, A., (2002), *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Muller, M. J., (2008), 'Participatory design: the third space in HCI', in J. Jacko and A. Sears (eds), *Handbook of HCI*, Mahway, NJ: Erlbaum. Available at: http://domino.research.ibm.com/cambridge/research.nsf/0/56844f3de38f806285256aaf005a45ab/$FILE/muller%20Chapter%20v1-2.pdf (accessed 23 March 2011).

Papanek, V., (1984), *Design for the Real World*, 2nd edn, London: Thames and Hudson.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds), (2001a), *Handbook of Action Research*, London: Sage.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H., (2001b), 'Introduction: inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research*, 1–14. London: Sage.

Rheinberger, H-J., (1997), *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Sengers, P. and Gaver, W., (2006), 'Staying open to interpretation: Engaging multiple meanings in design and evaluation', *Proceedings of the 6th Conference on Designing Interactive Systems, University Park, PA,* 99–108, New York: ACM Press.

Serres, M., (1982), *The Parasite*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M. and Watson, M., (in press), *The Dynamics of Social Practice*, London: Sage.

Silverman, D., (1993), *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, London: Sage.

Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E. (eds), (1992), *Consuming Technologies*, London: Routledge.

Stengers, I., (2005), 'The cosmopolitical proposal', in B. Latour and P. Webel (eds), *Making Things Public*, 994–1003, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Thrift, N., (2005), *Knowing Capitalism*, London: Sage.

Thrift, N., (2008), *Non-representational Theory*, London: Routledge.

Whatmore, S., (2006), 'Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world', *Cultural Geographies*, 13 (4): 600–609.

Whitehead, A. N., (1929), *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: The Free Press.

Whitehead, A. N., (1933), *Adventures of Ideas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.