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A manifesto for live methods: provocations and capacities

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Abstract: In this manifesto for live methods the key arguments of the volume are summarized in eleven propositions. We offer eleven provocations to highlight potential new capacities for how we do sociology. The argument for a more artful and crafty approach to sociological research embraces new technological opportunities while expanding the attentiveness of researchers. We identify a set of practices available to us as sociologists from the heterodox histories of the tradition as well as from current collaborations and cross-disciplinary exchanges. The question of value is not set apart from the eleven points we raise in the manifesto. Additionally, we are concerned with how the culture of audit and assessment within universities is impacting on sociological research. Despite the institutional threats to sociology we emphasize the discipline is well placed in our current moment to develop creative, public and novel modes of doing imaginative and critical sociological research.

Keywords: live sociology, methods, politics, collaboration, art, stories, design, digital

Sociology is facing an unprecedented challenge and opportunity. Historian Chris Renwick has pointed out that sociology was a radical movement in the 19th century because it was a new way of inquiring into society and thinking about it (Renwick, 2012). The history of methods helps us to think about what sociology was, is and might be. The early sociology of Lancelot Hogben, Patrick Geddes and Francis Galton signalled a move from the armchair to the field. Research methods became both tools of investigation and vehicles for thought. However, in the early 21st century, sociology can no longer claim exclusive jurisdiction over empirical techniques of investigation (Savage, 2009, 2010; Savage and Burrows, 2007). So, what might be sociology's value in the midst of a society that is producing more information at a greater frequency than at any other point in human history? What are the opportunities afforded to researchers where our primary tools are no longer confined to the survey or the tape recorder?

This volume brings together a range of writers and researchers who all share a commitment to re-thinking sociological craft and forms of representation.

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Despite the wide range of theoretical investments and significant differences, each of these articles combines a sense of liveliness to the present with critical reflections on the state of sociological research. Our starting point is an aspiration to cultivate a 'live sociology' (Back, 2007) equal to the new coordinated forms of social reality manifest in the contemporary social world (Adkins and Lury, 2009). We were unsure initially how we might approach this introduction. Should it be a user's manual and provide a guide to new methodological possibilities? Or should we think of it as a manifesto for live methods? In the end we settled on focusing on the provocations and capacities that reverberate throughout the entire volume.

We are not, however, arguing that live sociology is one thing. It is an idea that resonates differently across the papers in the collection. As editors we have composed the manifesto by drawing out key aspects from the articles themselves and in addition invited the contributors to convey their own investments and priorities. From these we have put together a composite that provokes specific directions and highlights the capacities for the sociological craft. At the same time we do not want to suppress the intellectual differences, tensions and dissonances between individual papers across the volume as a whole. Our intention is not to flatten the intellectual distinctiveness of each piece of work included here and in this respect what follows is our own attempt to draw together the implications of what we have learned rather than produce a statement that reflects the common thoughts of all of our contributors.

Live methods aspire to:

1. Develop new tools for 'real-time' and 'live' investigation

The tools and devices for research craft are being extended by digital culture in a hyper-connected world, affording new possibilities to re-imagine observation and the generation of alternative forms of research data. Part of the promise of live methods is the potential for simultaneity in research and the possibility of re-ordering the relationship between data gathering, analysis and circulation (Marres). This can be done collaboratively in real time to produce a pluralization of observers, which opens up new possibilities for 'crowd sourced' or transactional data. However, technological enchantment should not cloud critical judgement. New devices cannot fix longstanding epistemological problems with regard to how the social world is constituted through the methods and techniques we use to make data and enact social life (Law and Urry, 2004). We may be moving to a situation where the pencil and notebook is being replaced by the iPhone and iPad but these devices produce new kinds of methodological problems as well as opportunities (Back). Researchers now have to be adept in technological and intellectual skills that enable them to engage with the mediated nature of social life in information-based societies. What constitutes engagement remains open to debate. In a piece by Edward Said on *The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals* he notes that with the greater distribution of

digital networks, while we reach wider audiences than before, still 'the chances of retaining that audience are by the same token quite chancy' (2002: 28).

2. Avoid the 'trap of the now' and be attentive to the larger scale and longer historical time frame

Wanting to move away from the mole-like behaviour of sub-specialisms, Emma Uprichard suspects that today our 'case studies are not sufficiently ambitious enough to generate the kinds of descriptions and/or theories that enable us to radically re-think, re-describe, re-imagine social dynamics'. With reference to temporality this requires that one is not lost in the short time frame of the now, captured in real time digital methods, for instance. Lost in the 'latest', 'newest' and 'most recent' 'plastic present', caught up in the nets of a relatively small time horizon. In this genre of digital research 'people remain stuck in the traps of now', and are quashing the development of sociology and its ability to identify historical trends. If we remain stuck in the short time frame of the now we are also likely to 'become bereft in the imagination of futures' (Uprichard). There is a need to see the larger picture, temporally but also geo-politically, without which it becomes difficult to undertake the epistemic work of developing a sociological imagination that moves between personal anxieties to large, impersonal social conditions. After all, even the most intimate experience of dying (transnationally) is part of an ecology of pain in a world 'marked by creative and brutal geo-social networks and divisions' (Gunaratnam).

3. Develop capacities to see the whole, without a totalizing perspective

Bruno Latour's (Latour and Hermant, 1998; Latour, 2002) critique of the panorama as a totalizing device is contrasted with activist spatial methodologies and experiments. Based in the arts, touched by critical theory, live methods offer oppositional levers that valuably, in the confused mess of private troubles, provide aids to identify the 'sensitive nerve-centres' of contemporary capitalism. Herein Alberto Toscano finds, outside the academy, the qualities of mind identified by Mills for the making of the sociological imagination. Within mapping techniques there is a combined playfulness of aesthetics with the serious drive to make sense of 'power's fulcrums, structures and devices'. Sociologists are urged to work with critical forms of cartography – as artistic narratives, models and diagrams – which offer the potential to think and experience the world beyond our private traps, precisely because they provide forms of counter 'reconnaissance and spying' which don't give up the strategic practice of 'seeing it whole'.

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4. Make sociological craft more artful and crafty

Live methods seek to enhance our capacities towards an engaged 'artful craftiness to the craft of sociological methods' (Back). So, for instance, in the context of digital research, they encourage us to be aware but not inhibited by the expansion of corporate and state digital data sets. To intervene in this process and to develop alternative tools that institute 'method as intervention – online' (Marres). This alerts us not only to the challenges of reading digital data but also of assessing critically the way digital tools themselves shape our understanding of contemporary social life. The massive accumulation of digital data in the hands of corporations to generate (largely market driven) predictions is not approached as a threat which displaces the methodological edge of the sociologist, who faces an 'empirical crisis' (Savage and Burrows, 2007) and is left behind in the wake of digitally accelerated forms of observation and construction. Rather, these contemporary developments are a provocation to the sociologist to collaboratively invent devices which adapt, re-purpose and 'take advantage of the analytic and empirical capacities that are embedded in online media'. By developing research tools such as Issue Crawler (a web-based platform for hyperlink analysis) and Co-Word Machine (an online mechanism for textual analysis), Marres 'accords to these devices the capacity to generate potentially new methods of social research'. This also means that sociological craft is extended into technical realms that require us to care about new skills and techniques. Being more artful in our practice means learning to take an interest not only in photography or in creating an installation but also in how to make a data visualization tool like Gephi display word labels or create word clouds from wordpress sites. Caring about these practical problems of craft can lead to a deeper engagement with internal mechanisms and social realities of technology and informational cultures. Contrary to being dazzled by the profusion of data sets and reduced to a state of 'data envy' (Back), the emphasis is on adapting and remaking 'research tools that run on top of web devices, like Google' (Marres).

5. Develop empirical devices and probes that produce affects and reactions that re-invent relations to the social and environmental

The conversation between sociology and design expands the capacity to build new kinds of research devices or probes: this also is an invitation to encourage a playfulness that undermines and interrogates prevailing research conventions. On the basis that an object is part of the empirical process of engagement Mike Michael advocates 'proactive idiocy'. Influenced by speculative design, he reminds us that in this field 'probes proactively seek the idiotic'. This introduces a live sociology which 'actively seeks out' empirical objects and events that are 'idiotic' (Stengers, 2005). The 'idiotic' is 'possessed of an incommensurable dif-

ference that enables us to slow down and reflect on what we (as social scientists) are busy doing'.

We need to take our research tools and devices for a walk. Michel de Certeau's (1984) idle walker is identified as a precedent for designing sociological accounts. This draws on Charles Baudelaire's image of the 'flâneur', which has been appropriated in a range of ways from the gothic Marxism of Walter Benjamin (2006) to sexual politics and queer theory (Munt, 1998). As the idle walker evades the disciplinary grids of being in the city, they present us with a prototype that prompts unexpected relationalities with the environment, the body and the senses. Presented with strange encounters, alternative ways of categorizing and knowing the world emerge. Within this 'idiotic-methodology' we as researchers become exposed to openness and the liveliness of the events we try to get close to. The idea here is to generate better questions rather than fixed answers.

Speculative idiotic prototypes carry the open-ended potential to re-imagine future inhabitations and relationships. Given that the relation of subject to object is one which is in 'perpetual animation' we could, arguably, be led towards a frog's eye rather than a bird's eye view (Lury). Celia Lury makes a case for an 'amphibious sociology', on the basis that this is a categorization which references animals that live both in water and on land, living in two media. Taking this further she says that 'we live in (at least) two media'. We exist 'in a dynamic or live space that is the product of artificial, para-textual forces', an insight that prompts us to re-conceptualize how specific properties of our humanity are incorporated into and divested from the methods we use in the craft of thinking sociologically.

6. Curating sociology within new public platforms

Explicit research questions can be critically transformed into aesthetic practices. Thus in our craft we consider 'learning new strategies for telling society and for affecting and persuading audiences' (Puwar and Sharma). The curation of public performances and exhibitions, for instance, involves morphing and becoming 'apprentices in the craft of curatorship through practice' (Puwar and Sharma). Tools are developed for sharing, adapting and absorption. Experiments are conducted to generate prototypes for collaborative working practices across disciplines. According to Bruno Latour scholars and researchers have a limited capacity to make things because they are inhibited by the modes of cultural critique that they were schooled in. He writes provocatively 'what performs a critique cannot also compose' (Latour, 2010: 475). The challenge for live sociology is how to undertake making and critical thinking in equal measure. Puwar and Sharma, for instance, use the notion of *call-and-response* drawn from oral and musical traditions and reinvent it as a method that allows for both autonomy and exchange for collaborations between academics, film-makers, artists and musicians. Without bearing the impossible weight of becoming 'Jack of all trades' and the 'master of none' [*sic*], dialogue and collaboration is insti-

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tuted across disciplines and creative movements. Working with artists, designers, musicians and film-makers enables new modes of sociology to be developed and performed. The approach remains alert to regimes that direct collaboration towards measures of social impact or other criteria (Strathern, 2004). We open ourselves to collaborative relations wherein these specialists do not simply service sociologists. Rather we induce capacities for a respectful exchange, with both partners open to mutation and becoming otherwise.

7. Utilize our senses equally in attending to the social world

The attentiveness that heightens our capacities as researchers needs to be in touch with the full range of the senses and the 'multiple registers' within which social life is realized. Pushing further the already emergent multi-modal forms of sociological methods, as researchers we learn to embody movement so that 'ethnography becomes a kind of social ballet' (Back). In this process the very 'quality of data makes other kinds of critical imagination possible'. Thus, the sociologist becomes not only attentive to what people say but also to the *doing* of social life. We become mindful of tacit co-existence, the fleeting, the emotional and sensory. The challenge is to do this without falling into an 'intrusive empiricism' that carves up the life of life. As sociologists are in the middle of the process of recovering the senses in relatively new methodological directions, let us not forget that the sensory has always been constitutive of the social texture of life. Sociological attentiveness and listening has been put to use in warfare through enlisting academic researchers in the Human Terrain Teams operating within the US Military. Commercial organizations are continuously re-calibrating their products and our senses for new markets; market research consultancy firms specialize in being attentive to the senses. We have to train ourselves to be alert to what uses the sensory has been put already, as well as where else we can take it. Thus we not only argue for an alternative future but we also have to 'craft one into existence' (Back). *Noise of the Past* acknowledged the very production of war, memory and nation as a sensory set of encounters and resonances. At the same time this creative public production sought to reroute current resonances into new moments (Puwar and Sharma). We launch these pieces as kinaesthetic provocations in the social world.

8. Foster the liveliness of words

Fostering the liveliness of words requires that we provoke ourselves as writers to recognize that what we do is 'closer to sculpting (something material) than writing (something discursive)' (Motamedi Fraser). It requires that we develop capacities for recognizing how the 'make believe' might be an aid to the sociological imagination: if, for a moment, we slow down to consider what sociology

'does with its materials and methods', we may better grasp the kinds of relations we are in and could be in (Motamedi Fraser). Sociology need not lose its disciplinary distinctiveness within the 'make believe', as we craft 'patterns of relations' between facts, fictions and truths.

Storying can thus be a provocation, as it has been to Motamedi Fraser who has sculpted the 'vitality of words' from an uncatalogued archive which she has found and started to care for in the Bodleian library. In the '*Irradiant Archive*', the very liveliness of 'words as forces in the field of research' has led her to imaginatively explore Iranian and British relations. Myth, affect and historical fact come together in her novel, which has been written outside the confines of sociological chronicles. The 'make-believe' does not sit comfortably in the inventory of methods. Nevertheless, widening the parameters of what counts as sociological research will strengthen rather than weaken the discipline.

There is, for instance, the relationship between surrealism and mass observation studies (Hubble, 2012) or the *cinéma vérité* forged between the film-maker Jean Rouch and the sociologist Edgar Morin in the making of their 1960s documentary *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer).[1] Today, technical innovations have further enhanced the researcher's capacity to work with the 'make-believe', to develop multimodal forms of analysis which incite the researcher to do the craft differently. Using multimedia and new devices we can produce pieces of work that are 'compounds of word, image, sound and text' (Back).

9. Recover sociology's history of inventive craft

Within sociology's past, tendencies can be recovered that provide the historical foundation for live sociology. Invention and methodological innovation were very much part of the early days of sociology. Nowadays, there is also a yearning for researchers to achieve proximity to social phenomenon and this includes scientific techniques along with forms of artistic experimentation. It is relatively well established that Francis Galton (1822–1911) invented the statistical questionnaire; for him society was a statistical phenomenon and statistics provided a means to question what was known, seen and heard. There was a profound search at the London School of Economics (LSE) through the work of Lancelot Hogben for scientific methods that were equivalent to the scientist's laboratory. Until recently it was little known that Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) created innovative, site-specific sociological experiments like the 'Outlook Tower' in Edinburgh to foster a sociological attention and reconfigure looking and listening (Bates, 2011; see also Scott, 2007). L. T. Hobhouse, who beat Galton and Geddes to the prize of the first chair of sociology at the LSE, was preoccupied with first principles and theory that steered sociology away from inventive craft. Returning to this history and recovering in it the experimental combination of art and science provides a licence for methodological experimentation today.

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We argue for a re-examination of the history of sociological craft and the need to exhume the full range of methodological experiments to be found there (Puwar and Sharma). We also remain sceptical of the cultish compulsion for innovation for its own sake or hollow and showy inventiveness. Paul Connerton, in *How Modernity Forgets*, reminds us of two corollaries – the cultish memorialization of specific pasts and the need for newness and the erasure of memory in the market (Connerton, 2009). While we excavate creative practices, which have largely remained off the radar of the textbook version of sociological methods, we do not want to do this in a manner that becomes embroiled in the parochial history of British and North American sociology. At the same time, as we invent new future oriented methods, we do not want the institutional (career) imperative to merely display inventiveness like the emperor's new clothes. Thus it is important to look back over sociology's history and tease out lessons for developing live sociology now (Puwar, 2012).

10. Take time, think carefully and slowly

We need to rethink the relationship between time and scholarship. The governmental regimes of audit and measuring produce a frenzied rhythm of research assessment exercises in the UK. The imperative to publish fast threatens both the attention that social researchers can apply and the quality of our writing. Fostering alternative ethical and political reasons for being 'there' in the context of research offers a counter-weight to the forces of instrumentalism and timidity within academic sociology. The long-term intellectual future of the discipline is best served by participating in modes of knowledge that are beyond the instrumentalism of the audit culture and what is referred to in the United Kingdom as the 'impact agenda', that is, the need to demonstrate the value of sociological research and writing through providing evidence of its impact on the economy or social policy.

Live methods involve immersion, time and 'unpredictable attentiveness', allowing for a 'transformation of perspectives that moves slowly over time, between fieldwork sites and the academy' (Gunaratnam). For instance, the transformative experience of switching modes from researcher to archivist requires the long immersion of attentiveness (Motamedi Fraser). The patience of long-term studies rather than the 'quick encounter' meant it took Veena Das 20 years to write her book *Life of Words* (2006), which has subsequently been used by critical theorists as well as artists. From working with the terminally ill, Yasmin Gunaratnam notes that just as 'attentiveness to the situation' of total pain requires 'experimental care' from the carers, researchers also have to attend to 'improvisations of methodology'. She notes the circuits of 'inter-dependency between learning to be affected and being affected'. Some forms of connection and understanding cannot be resolved in short time-spans. They require time. She reminds us of how it took Pierre Bourdieu a decade of repeated listening to tape-recorded interviews with two farmers to appreciate the precarious nature of their existence.

Yet in the academy outputs are speeded up and 'time is short', leaving very little room for failure or open-ended research (Motamedi Fraser). Research and the outputs of research have to be decided in advance of funding applications and sabbaticals. We need to provoke ways of interrupting this rushed temporality because it works against good quality immersive and attentive research. Or, as Emma Uprichard puts it, we need to find ways to destabilize our bureaucratic modes of measure and value. Yet she fears that sociologists have lost the confidence in our discipline and are not 'brave enough or confident enough to stand up and refuse to accept some of the conditions that increasingly obstruct our own work and knowledge systems'.

It is not a matter of refusing or moving away from the use of 'metrics' but rather subjecting them to a critical investigation of their deployment within the audit culture that has taken hold in academic life. Along with Roger Burrows (2012), we argue for the need to subject the metrics like the 'H Index', used to create a single measure of a scholar's value, to serious sociological investigation.[2] The usefulness of metrics should not be reduced to the perverse means by which they serve the audit institutional market culture. This includes measurements of research and teaching including university admissions figures in the neo-liberal era of education. Metrics have the capacity to make complex social processes legible and empirical sociology needs to keep open the possibility that they may be re-purposed to 'disclose and enact social liveliness' (Marres).

11. Engage political and ethical issues without arrogance or the drum roll of political piety

In 1895, in the opening essay of the first issue of the *American Sociological Journal*, Albion Small stressed the importance of the discipline's capacity to intervene in public issues (Small, 1895). More recently, the American Sociology Association has rallied to the promise of a public sociology (Burawoy, 2005). Notwithstanding the contentious issue of what constitutes a public aversion to connecting the craft of the sociologist to politics continues (see Bourdieu, 2003). We are not proposing a commitment to a programmatic or party political manifesto (Latour, 2010), neither do we want to play God in saving the wretched of the earth (Chow, 1998). Bearing in mind these potential traps and pitfalls, Back argues that politics cannot be put on hold and in fact a 'renewed political purpose' is what the sociological craft requires. There is potentially the 'underlying drive of methodology as a disposition and imperative to care about and to ameliorate suffering' (Gunaratnam). What we choose to be concerned with, or focus on and listen to, involves making judgements not only about what is valuable but also what is important. Sociology has a public responsibility to pay attention to vulnerable and precarious lives and to seek to establish the conditions that offer them a 'livable and breathable "home" ' (Latour, 2010: 488). To this end the discipline has the capacity to 'develop strategic knowledge in the public practice of social science' (Toscano).

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Turning our backs on sociology as an ethical vocation is tantamount to what Toscano graphically describes as a 'lobotomy of the relation between social research and political action'. Let us not forget that the power of sociology can precisely be its performative capacity as a subject. Speaking of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Merton, Uprichard notes that their 'detailed multi-dimensional and historical descriptions . . . effectively produced theoretical and empirical descriptions that were causally influential in thinking change and continuity in the social world'. The exercise of reflexivity in knowledge production has productively situated the claims that scholars in sociology can make. However, within an increasingly regulated university context the preoccupation with 'ethical approval' and 'risk assessments' results in anxiety among researchers producing something close to a kind of 'ethical hypochondria' (Back). Adjoining the medical analogy with the spirit of a manifesto, Uprichard urges us to consider the ways in which sociology is 'rotting from the inside out and not empowering anybody anymore, as a way of going some way towards trying to create desired changes both to the discipline and the world in which it is situated.'

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In the 20th century, sociology's distinctive position relied on its research methods (survey, interview and focus group), which gave it a special capacity to produce empirical data that formed the basis for new forms of social understanding. Today we are less confident about articulating the sensibilities that make up the researcher's craft. Government agencies and the corporate world have incorporated these empirical methods, from statistical analysis to ethnography, into the statecraft of market research. For sociologists, this should not produce methodological defeatism or inhibit using technological possibilities to create new tools for investigation.

We are arguing for the cultivation of a sociological sensibility not confined to the predominant lines of sight, the focal points of public concern. Rather, we are arguing for paying attention to the social world within a wider range of senses and placing critical evaluation and ethical judgement at the centre of research craft. Sociology's authority is not only based on its capacity to develop novel empirical techniques of inquiry. The researcher's craft is now to measure and weigh data and to evaluate the unprecedented volume of information being produced by humankind. Amid these changes, it is a timely moment for conducting a contemporary *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988), and to debate the forms of work we are doing, the kinds of academics we are producing, and the institutional and life worlds we occupy as well as make.

Notes

1 *Chronique d'un été* is a documentary film made during the summer of 1960. It begins with Rouch and Morin discussing whether it is possible for those filmed to act honestly. The director camera-

man Michel Brault in large part shaped the visual style of the film. A cast of ordinary people from Paris and Saint-Tropez discuss a wide range of issues relating to French society and at the end the participants watch the recorded footage. The film was released in 1961.

2 This figure aims to capture both the number of publications and how often the work is cited by other scholars. It is arrived at by ranking an author's papers by number of citations. The metric is the number of papers with an H number of citations or more. In other words a scholar will have an H Index of 11 if he or she has published 11 academic papers that have been cited in other academic papers 11 times.

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