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From *Power Elite* to Governing Oligarchy

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The American historian David Landes once observed that men of wealth buy men of power. In this post-1970s era of financial capitalism, the ‘super-rich’ or ‘plutocrats’, a new nomadic species that has outgrown the nation state, now possess wealth almost inconceivable a generation ago. In his *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit us All?* Bauman tells us that by 2000 the richest 1% of adults owned 40% of global assets, and the richest 10% owned 85%.

Within the UK the top 10% of the population is now 100 times as wealthy as the bottom 10%. As far as income is concerned, in 2010 FTSE 100 CEO pay was 145 times the average salary for workers, and it is on track to be 214 times the average salary by 2020 (Scambler, 2012).

And yet sociologists have been slow to go beyond journalistic or descriptive analysis of this remarkable phenomenon. Journeying back past some rather arcane late twentieth-century debates about the salience of class in post-industrial societies, C Wright Mills’ classic analysis of America in the 1950s, *The Power Elite*, strikes as more brave and compelling than polemical. His documentation of the clustering of power in the hands of very small, interconnected minorities of military, corporate and political elites still resonates. But the world has of course changed and the Britain of 2013 differs from the USA of the 1950s. But he has much to teach us.

There has been a reluctance to return to classical structural notions like class. Class, the new orthodoxy now has it, may have been the dominant aspect of stratification in industrial society in the past. But now class is one form of social division among many, and one rivalled by age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. Moreover, structure has ceded territory to culture: post-industrial or consumer society is characterised by pressing matters of identity-formation and recognition. Who we are is no longer a simple business, more or less predetermined by the class location of our parents.

But class, I suggest, is a *more important* driver of circumstance and opportunity in financial capitalism than it was in the postwar years; that is, class relations have re-asserted themselves *objectively*. I accept however that class is *less important* for who we think we are, or less salient *subjectively*. The failure to make this distinction has bedevilled recent debates about class.

When class is factored into sociological reflection or research it is often via socio-economic classification systems like NS-SEC or, in 2013, the much more culturally oriented Great British Class Survey (GBCS). There is no need here to rehearse the pros and cons of NS-SEC and the GBCS. *What they both lack is any way of capturing the less than 1% of the population with true wealth and/or power.* The privileged citizenry I have in mind are under-researched, in part because they can hide in large data sets.

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This fraction of the 1% that the Occupy Movement contrasts with the rest of us, the 99%, is the key to understanding and explaining what is happening in the current phase of financial capitalism. One way to grasp this is through the concept a new dynamic of *class/command*. Back to Landes: if the wealthy have always purchased power, they can now get more for their money than has been the case for a generation or three. We can track this transition to the present grotesque maldistribution of wealth – and income too - but sociology should aspire to more than the explication of *on-the-surface* trends.

The class/command dynamic points *beneath the surface* to a new structural asymmetry between class and state. More precisely, a small hard-core of capitalists - rentiers, FTSE100 CEOs and Directors and, most conspicuously, *financiers* - have gained more leverage over the power elite of the state. Together, this privileged cabal of capitalists plus power elite now comprises a *ruling oligarchy*.

A very predictable consequence is growing inequality and creeping social disintegration and fragmentation. These are accomplished via market de-regulation, in general, and the associated growth of more part-time and transitory work, weakening health and safety regulation, loss of work autonomy, outsourcing, zero contracts, the termination of final salary pension schemes and benefit cuts in particular. While the ruling oligarchy enters a stratosphere of privilege, tugging its think tank and new middle class allies in its wake, the squeezed middle/precariat and, far worse, a more-or-less abandoned segment of the old working class fall further and further behind.

The reverse side of the prevailing neo-liberal ideology that underpins the ruling oligarchies in Britain and elsewhere is *disconnected fatalism* (Scambler, 2013). The riots of August 2011 perhaps best articulate this mind-set: a sometimes inchoate, sometimes articulate, rage of isolation and hopelessness on the part of the disproportionately young and black marginalised.

Adam Smith alerted us to the risks when wealth purchases too much power, although it was Marx of course who added a subverting theory of exploitation.

These assertions of a revised class/command dynamic and emergence of a ruling oligarchy from the early to mid-1970s are, I suggest, sociologically unobjectionable and entirely consonant with the data. And yet the silence is, if not deafening, disconcerting. This is itself a matter of sociological interest and concern in its own right. Two challenges might be proffered.

The first arises out of a straightforward professional obligation. Implicit in all I have said is the need to research the recruitment, connections and day-to-day acts of those comprising the ruling oligarchy *in order to more fully understand and explain the lot of*

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the newly disadvantaged. Investigating the changing circumstances of the disadvantaged remains important, but the *secret* of their plight lies in the ruthlessly strategic behaviours of our ruling oligarchs. C Wright Mills' analysis of the power elite of 1950s America is our model here. Where are the analyses – beyond journalism, that is – of the collateral damage occasioned by wealth's newly acquired leverage over power?

To what extent and across which domains is class the principal driver? How comprehensively are the landowning, business, financial and political elites interconnected? If they rarely have to conspire, how do they yet accomplish what Mills called 'tacit understanding'? Critically, what are the mechanisms that have permitted the ruling oligarchy's undemocratic usurpation of influence, and how might these be exposed and countered? And, topically, how readily available to the governing oligarchy are forces of repression – the police and the military – should publics evade increasingly pervasive forms of surveillance. Such interrogations used to be the bread and butter of classical sociology.

Finally, sociology must extend its compass, reach and engagement in at least two respects. First, picking up on Giddens' (1990) idea of 'utopian realism', there is surely a requirement for the positing of 'credible alternatives', for *foresight sociology*. I do not mean by this an offering up of utopian blueprints for a better society, with all their totalitarian connotations. Rather it is an invitation to explore in detail how our institutions might more optimally deliver goods and services. If the Health and Social Care Act is demonstrably regressive – and it is – then what kind of system would most likely meet the criteria for providing good quality health care justly and efficiently? And there are equivalent questions in relation to the economy, housing, education and so on. Sociologists interested in ecological matters, energy conservation and sustainability have pointed us in this direction.

And second, there is a need too for public engagement beyond making research findings accessible and proffering policy advice, for *action sociology*. It is not enough to shrug shoulders when policy-based evidence is politically gift-wrapped as evidence-based policy. Logically and morally, the sociological project continues: 'speaking truth to power', to coin a phrase.

So in my view there is urgent need for *foresight sociology* as well as *action sociology*, neatly rounding up Burawoy's four types of sociology to six. Plenty to do then.

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