The Sociology of Education

A personal view

ROBERT YOUNG, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

After thirty five years of sociological work, Young reflects on the failure of sociology of education to sustain practical policy connections in democratic societies. He argues that sociology has largely marginalised itself by its own meta-theoretical and methodological decisions. He presents an analysis of the reasons for this and suggests a form of sociology that can avoid such marginalisation. This is a critical sociology which is engaged first of all with citizens, and which employs methods and concepts that valorise action by citizen movements, rather than offering them distopian critique from an assumed epistemic height. In such a sociology, educational sociology moves to the centre of policy development and social analysis, since effective critical action (praxis) has the same form as pedagogy.

After thirty five years of the study of sociology and social philosophy I have reached the conclusion that the most significant issue as far as the future of sociology of education is concerned is that it is triply marginalised.

Together with many intellectual pursuits, whether in the humanities or social sciences, or for that matter the pure natural sciences, sociology and its sub disciplines such as sociology of education, is separated from the day-to-day concerns of much of social life. For example, unlike the study of medicine, engineering, or law, sociology in general has no close and holistic links with a professional constituency.

While sociology’s other fragments, such as sociology of law or health might be said to have potential constituencies, in lawyers, or medical professionals, their relation to them is still a marginal one (and, of course, it is not only Sociology that is in this position). There are several reasons for this. First, sociology’s fragments must compete with all sorts of other fragments, some of which may well be perceived as more central to the professional enterprises concerned and to the problems of practice in them (medical ethics and law, for instance). Second, sociology itself is in disrepute among many
influential, if conservative, professionals, since its notoriety in the 1960s and 1970s. And third, the recent move away from more practical considerations of 'social arithmetic' towards cultural critique has further alienated more conservative elements in society.

But sociology of education is even more deeply marginalised from its constituency because, unlike, say, economic policy, the historical constitution of the core of practice in education has developed within an individualising culture as a practice focused not on aggregates or groups but on individuals. Furthermore, and more importantly perhaps, sociology's own internal dynamic as a systematic body of thought, or a would be science, has lent it characteristics which alienate it from the very possibility of discourse relevant to practice and the problematics of educational practitioners. I am thinking here of the relative absence of a micro-sociology within both sociology and sociology of education, the relative paucity of systematic links with psychology and the further disjunction between such micro-sociology as exists and macro sociology, as well as the apparent failure of sociology to define or agree upon the elementary events or units of the phenomena it studies.

Sociology of education is also marginalised within faculties of education, and education research institutes, its principal institutional locations. Again, there are several reasons for this. In Australia and the United Kingdom, sociology itself was a relative latecomer, and psychology of education was already well-established in faculties of education. More recently all the foundational studies including psychology of education have been somewhat increasingly marginalised, although the main curriculum of faculties of education as originally developed remains oriented to individual and small group situations.

At best, educators remain to be convinced that a sociological perspective can do anything more than explicate the general influences on students of social factors such as gender, race or class, or uncover aspects of the prior or extra educational formation of students via studies of socialisation, all of which factors and influences, in a sense, comprise starting points for educational transformation, or obstacles to it, rather than in themselves sources of hope or useful resources for practice. The recent fashion for radical posturing of a postmodern kind has not increased the perceived relevance of sociology of education either, since it is either effectively abandons knowledge and relevance claims altogether, or tacitly makes them while denying them.

The study of education is itself marginalised within the academy at large, (as education and its concerns is in certain ways marginalised within society). In current perceptions of most disciplinary academics, whether in arts faculties or elsewhere, education as a field of study is at best a grab bag of fragments, and is often something that is seen as professed by people who are perforce jacks of all trades but masters of none, or, in the case specifically of sociology, it is seen by other sociologists as an unfashionable sub discipline.
THE IRRELEVANCE OF SOCIOLOGY ON THE MODEL OF SCIENCE

A brief, perhaps bowdlerised account of my take on the history of sociology and of education may help us to gain deeper understanding of why I think this marginalisation has occurred and it may help to uncover some additional reasons for the (mis)perception that sociology has limited relevance for educators facing the urgent problems of daily practice.¹

Sociology has been successively a child of the Enlightenment, then of the Industrial Revolution, then the welfare state, the 1960s and finally, of the post 1968 disillusionment of the Sixties generation, and the turn to Marxism. In each of its incarnations, except perhaps in its most minimalist social arithmetic mode, it has so comported itself that its irrelevance to the practical issues of the day was virtually assured. This irrelevance was hard-won. It was achieved not despite the fact that it eagerly sought to be relevant and de jour, even avant-garde but because of the manner in which it did so. However, ironically, perhaps the solution to its problems may be found in return to its origins — a re capitulation of its first intent, but in the manner of being itself rather than trying to be a physics of society or an extension of either evolutionary biology or art criticism.

Sociology began as a series of extensions of Enlightenment claims from the natural sciences to the study of society. It was hoped to reproduce the same sort of progress in society as had been witnessed in science and technology and thereby to ameliorate the manifest ills of poverty, conflict and misunderstanding. It was a movement of philosophes and intellectuals and its model was first physics and later the newly fashionable theory of evolution. Of course, there was opposition to the dominant intellectual world view. Romanticism, conservativism and a variety of other views, competed with evolutionism and produced their own minority groups among social thinkers.

However, as European and European derived societies industrialised and rationalised themselves, aided, no doubt, by the symbolic and material fruits of imperialism, sociology became governmentised. This had already occurred to anthropology. Sociology moved from being a vocation of liberal intellectuals to a profession of employed academics and government experts. As it concerned itself with problems of the centre, of the fallout of rapid industrialisation, of extension of the franchise, and political massification, it moved away from the broader concerns of comparative evolutionary anatomy of societies, to the problems of administering the state and the economy. Again there were oppositional views, and of course, evolutionary thought survived. The chief oppositional view of the industrialising phase of Metropolitan societies eventually emerged as a group of viewpoints in which Marx’s work played an important role. Others retreated from policy issues to the descriptive empiricism of the social survey.

As the problems of industrial society gave rise to what has been called the welfare state settlement, sociologists increasingly focused on the problems of redistribution and welfarism, conformity and deviance. In the United States, in the 1950s, sociologists in
great numbers retreated from theory into a kind of empirical descriptivism, under the impact, among other things, of McCarthyism. In the United States, an incipient Marxism became a fugitive from the FBI, and changed its name to 'critical theory'. Mainstream theory became a benign, even conservative Parsonian structural functionalism, which posed no threat to social order and connected in only honorific ways the wider structures and processes to daily life. C. W. Mills called for a 'theory of the middle range', because grand Parsonian theory did not connect with data, and mere data did not explain itself.

And what happened in the United States was important because ninety per cent of the world's English-speaking sociologists were American, and probably eighty per cent of all sociologists. American trends came to dominate world sociology. The 1960s revolt of the students was also an American export and it was in America, first of all, that emigre European sociologists introduced to the English-speaking world phenomenological and Marxian ideas which rapidly gained in influence as part of the 'countercultural' shift of the 1960s. However, back home in Europe a revived mainstream post World War Two European sociology remained resolutely logical empiricist for much longer than American sociology, although by the end of the 1970s, both had begun to capitulate to the 'new', phenomenological and Marxian sociology.

Critique had always been a part of sociology but under structural functionalism it was for a time reduced to critique of the poor and the deviant, the 'dysfunctional', and at best one which confined itself to identifying small pieces of grit in an otherwise ponderously benevolent social machine. The more grandiose understanding of critique which nineteenth century European sociologists had, grew out of their scientism and faith in rationality. The new, post-functionalist critique grew out of the legacy of European Marxism, imported to the United States by fugitives from fascism, expressing itself again more openly after the McCarthy era had ended and was later re-imported by Europe in the 1970s and 80s.

The problem with the older critique lay in its acceptance of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century triumphalist self-image of science and the positivist understanding of epistemology, expressed particularly in the importation of grand biological and mechanistic images and metaphors into social analysis by thinkers such as Comte and Spencer. This scientism was also shared by many of the minority and opposition voices in social analysis, such as that of the mature Marx, and those like Althusser, who continued in that tradition. In Marxist thought, scientism led to critique of the existing social order, because it privileged an alternative, historicist theory of social life, and evolution. It also negated its own critique because it argued that socialist intellectuals could only do science in their minds, as they contemplated historical forces at work. It was this that led, for example Castles and Wustenberg (1979), in The Education of the Future, to argue that there was no truly educative role for schools until after the revolution.

The problem with the functionalist, miniaturised version of sociology that succeeded the grand hopes of the nineteenth century, was not its becoming modesty or Popperian social engineering welfare state approach to social action. That was perhaps to be
welcomed. Unlike either the evolutionists or the Marxists it did not seek to prescribe for whole societies from the lofty heights of epistemological privilege. Its problem was that its modesty left it treating symptoms rather than diseases.

However, the fate of post 1960s sociology was that it was eventually to become as unfashionable as flared trousers. By the 1980s sociology, particularly in its Marxian forms, was in sufficient decline to give rise to symposia on the topic of the crises in both Marxism and sociology. Marxism was the wrong resource for revolution because in many of its versions it lacked the intellectual resources to connect with practice – it lacked a significant voluntaristic component in its theory of human action and it lacked both a micro-sociology and a convincing theory of culture. While retaining its lofty claims to special epistemological status, derived from the model of the sciences, it failed to offer an effective role for intellectuals. This, at the very time that the history and philosophy of science, as well as developments within physics, were showing us science’s feet of clay, and when intellectuals, especially in the English-speaking world, were searching for a lost significance. Worse than that, it encouraged intellectuals in their habitual and self-destructive delusions of moral superiority and in their tendency to reduce politics to the politics of the intellectuals, played out not in governments and economies but in control of academic associations and curricula. To some extent this decline was masked because the audience that most sociologists played to, each other and the students, were still relatively receptive. More recently, the students began to tire of the culture of complaint. The post 1960s conservative reaction, so tellingly prophesied by Habermasian theorists (e.g. Offe, 1977), delivered an historical coup de grace to the remnant warriors of the 1960s radical episode, who had abandoned the one set of resources that might have solved their problems, those provided by phenomenology (with the honourable exceptions of Enzo Paci (1972), and to a lesser extent, Gramsci). Many, many indeed of my fellow students from the Monash of the 1960s or my fellow academics from the left of the 1970s have gotten lost on the long march through the institutions. 2

The rise and seeming triumph of globalised market capitalism, the paring back of radical and oppositional tendencies in the academy and the arts, where these have not in fact been domesticated, and finally the rise of the intellectuals’ very own market ideology, so-called postmodernism, brings us to the present.

We can no longer count on the survival of any discipline in an academy increasingly driven by considerations of human capital formation and economic utility. Of course, there is no reason why sociology should survive let alone flourish, if it has little to offer, either in terms of the zeitgeist or in other more profound ways. But can we ask the question this way: what would sociology and sociology of education in particular have to be and achieve for it to be worth knowing?

**RECENT SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA**

Readers will have to form their own opinion of recent sociology of education in Australia, but in my view, when good work has been done it has often been despite its fashionable postmodern theoretical wrappings, and the finest work of the last decade uses theoretical
ideas that have been around for much longer than the French theorists we have heard so much of lately. It is not my intention to review the sociological work of the last decade or so. Much of it is very good, despite its loose wrap of fashionable theory. Perhaps the very best of it, such as Richard Teese’s Academic Success and Social Power, (2000) owes nothing to newer fashions in theory and much to the use of well tried middle range concepts, hard graft over many years in gathering social data, and persistence in working on a central educational social problem area rather than chasing the latest theoretical ambulances.

But it is not theory per se that I have objected to. Far from it. It is unanchored theory that is the problem. The grand theory that postmodernists repeatedly condemn, they appear condemned to repeat. In this for all their talk of reflexivity they lack reflection. Nor am I a critic-in-general of philosophical argument about methodological questions. Habermas’ ‘critical theory’ is really critical methodology. His discussion is about the nature and limits of our capacity to study ourselves. He calls this ‘reproductive science’ and conceives of it on the model of field linguistics and considers it to be critical theory proper as contrasted with specific historical/social critical analyses, which stand or fall on the basis of their fit with both our circumstances and our hopes. (See Habermas, 1982, vol. 1.)

TOWARDS A NEW ‘NEW SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION’

If the analysis to this point, crude and perhaps pessimistic caricature that it is, is of any value, then we should seek a sociology which has both a micro- and a macro-dimension – one that links wider social processes and structures to daily life and the problematics of people in it. The insights it provides should not be merely contemplative, provided from a standpoint putatively outside history but be connected with forms of practice and constituencies of practitioners and their present states of hope and understanding. It should not speak from a set of dubious claims to epistemic privilege but from claims that can be made good through an extension of the dialogue of everyday life rooted in the experience of policy makers, professionals, union leaders and politicians, among others, and the theoretical expression of this. But it must still make knowledge claims. It should not be so closely connected with the power centres of global capitalism that it becomes a captive to them and finally, it should acknowledge its reflective relationship to existing and dominant forces of the present social order, if only partially to free itself from them (Habermas, 1987: Lecture V).

The resources for a sociology of this kind exist and can be further developed. Such a sociology couples the discursive and interpretive turn of phenomenology and poststructuralism with the culturalist rather than economic structuralism of post Marxist analyses, such as that of Habermas, (or Bourdieu). It speaks within a wider democratising discourse from the standpoint of an historically internal or immanent critique which is neo-pragmatist, and non-foundationalist, rather than positivist, in epistemological vision.
As we shall see, in this view, the paradigmatic empirical experience for those seeking social understanding is critical participation. The paradigmatic role is that of citizen, not intellectual or professional, and as we shall also see, the paradigmatic form of knowledge is educational knowledge, specifically, pedagogical knowledge. The key addressees of intellectuals are not other intellectuals, not even students, but citizens.

In this approach, from the margins of society, the academy, and even faculties of education, pedagogical analysis, in its various forms, moves to the centre of the picture (see Young, 1996).

Any body of knowledge if it is to be systematic and usefully related to action must relate to a set of phenomena of action or to levels of its organisation. It must also be related to the possibility of resolution of the human problems associated with the phenomena concerned, and if it is to survive in the academy or elsewhere and find economic support, it must do these things at least as well as other claimants to the same phenomena or problems. Sociology should show it is as useful as economics. Ideally, it should also be capable of reflecting the political interests of groups with little voice and of articulating strategies with such constituencies and actors. Like pedagogy, it should move from the present situation and condition of actors (the ‘known’) towards their hopes, via a critique that grows out of their experience (the ‘unknown’).

Fortunately, beneath the differences among sociologists I have outlined and running through its historical development there is one, broad, and significant area of common ground, and it is growing. The common ground is that social analysis is primarily about meaning – whether we speak of the development of cultural theory in post-Marxist thought, structural functionalism and action theory, postmodernism, phenomenology and ethnography, or the sociology of the linguistic interpretive turn – the common ground, which should also be the central ground of social analysis today is the production of meaning and the central and the only possible sensible object of our study is the meaningful utterance and its structuration in genres, episodes, roles and situations.

The business of sociology and education however, is not the primarily biological processes that all humans have in common, although knowing about these things is very useful. It is our differences that are crucial. The differences between ancient Egypt and modern New York, between Russians and Japanese are primarily cultural or informational, not genetic or physiological in origin. So too, pace Marx, are the differences between rich and poor. It is the software and the games we play that is our primary focus, because we can do more to change them and because historical and cross cultural variation in them encompasses most of the key issues of human performance and valuing. These aspects of our existence are no less ‘material’ than rocks and trees and a sociology which focuses on them no less materialist than Marx’s. From a scientific point of view, of course, we are also interested in the contribution of our hardware (our genetic heritage and our physiology) and only time will tell how hardware and software interact, although to date human hardware analysis has made little progress on the kind of questions that concern us most – questions of justice, suffering, respect and human cultural, political and economic flourishing.
Meaningful utterances are sociology’s atoms, its basic particle, their interpretation its theory of relativity, their change its technology, their use and structuration both its theory and its method. Utterances, if we may use the term broadly to refer to all action with semiological possibilities, are organised into interactive sequences on social occasions, in ascending layers of complexity and constraint. These are organised into what we have called social structures and sedimented into public meaning resources, including meaning production practices and physical artefacts, which together with practices, we call culture.

Meaning can be both creative and constraining – at the level of speech and language, at the level of talk sequences and practices, and also at the level of wider structural and social constraints and opportunities.

So finally we reach a true behaviourism – not a scientistic one – but one which acknowledges that the paradigmatic human behaviour is to produce a semiotic string as part of a transaction. It is immaterial (to coin a phrase) whether these transactions are epistemogenetic or ontogenetic, whether they create knowledge or identity, whether we are giving an account of transactional epistemology, following Dewey or Habermas or Giddens (1984), or an account of democratic problem-solving.

Indeed the basic concepts of sociology, which transcend all other differences among sociologists, such as culture and society, are impossible to explicate in a manner connected with evidence without some tacit or explicit discussion of the nature and production of meaning. The problem with structural functional theory was not its abstractive layering of action, action sequences, roles, institutions and finally systems, but its failure adequately to explicate action itself. Although actions are defined as meaningful behaviour in structural functional theory, meaning is still a relatively primitive term, explicated to only a very limited degree within a conservative hermeneutics. However, within a moderate critical hermeneutics structural functional theory would not be conservative, because in this kind of hermeneutics, interpreters would not be oversocialised captives of institutionalised epistemes (as Foucault’s negative neo-functionalism would have it) but creative, liminal inhabitants of the system boundaries, who create new meanings, criticise the old, and struggle in and out of ideology and resistance. Living at the margins, far from being the disadvantage Foucault perceived, is a necessary condition of resistance to ideology and cultural creativity. The true postmodernism is not the bald antimodernism of much of Foucault or Derrida, but the abandonment of the enlightenment project of the materialization of social epistemology based on the extension of Physics, in favour of the linguistification of Physics (and human sciencing in general).

Phenomenology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, linguistic psychology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and systemic linguistics have all problematised meaning in similar transactional ways, and provide resources for its study.

Each of the dominant forms of sociological thought as well as the minority or oppositional views, can be characterised in terms of its account of the production, interpretation and change of meaning – in terms of its embedded hermeneutic theory.
If it is accepted that hermeneutic theory is at the heart of any sociology that is keen to avoid the critique that has been levelled against previous sociologies, and create a non-contemplative, relevant role for itself in contemporary circumstances, then we can not only characterise sociologies by their embedded hermeneutic theories, but go directly to hermeneutic theories themselves to see if we can find one which allows a new sociology to avoid past mistakes.

I have argued elsewhere that an appropriate hermeneutics for sociology is a moderate critical hermeneutics rather than a poststructuralist, radical sceptical anti-hermeneutic, a Marxist hermeneutic or a conservative one. (See Gallagher, 1992, 1996; Young, 1996). Habermas’s work provides the beginnings of a pragmatic or transactional theory of meaning derived from British linguistic theorists such as Austen and Grice, via Davidson. Drawing also on the work of Robert Brandom (1994), and recent post pragmatist theory, as well as Gallagher’s monumental attempt to examine the educational implications of various kinds of hermeneutics, I have begun to develop a moderate critical hermeneutics, modelled on pedagogical interaction. It is a hermeneutics that avoids the textualism of poststructuralism, so tellingly criticised by Rorty (1989).

In this hermeneutics, interpretation is not modelled on the metaphor of reading, with its intimation of an inward eye, essentially a contemplative metaphor, but on the transactional metaphor of pedagogy in which meaning making and taking is engaged, located, historical and transactional. As Gallagher has shown, this move to pedagogy takes us back to a time before Schleiermacher abandoned the medieval model of the disputatio in favour of the model of the lone reader. In this view, too, cultures are not reified into epistemes as the early Foucault would have it but are a source of resources, sedimented from past cognitive accomplishments and subject to change from both accommodative and adaptive processes, as in the early Geertz (1973) of The Religion of Java. (See discussion in Ch. 5 of Young, 1996 b).

In this view, the way in which hermeneutic theory deals with the three fundamental existential problems of communication which I have called the problems of difference, desire and dialectic, defines the theory and determines its possible usefulness.

All communication, all utterances have an ideographic as well as a social component. All cultural resources are decaying even as they are formed and made available. Derrida is right about one thing – meaning is always fleeing away – but Adorno said it before him (1973). And this does not mean that we cannot catch it. All it means is that we too stumble through the racing moments, in a moving struggle for an ever lost equilibrium. All communication is across time and difference – difference in outlook, culture, experience, status, gender, role, knowledge, age and purpose.

Understanding is always problematic. It goes beyond the dictionary or abstract meaning of words to include much more, such as the occasional meaning of uttering the utterance in the context in which it was uttered – why is he telling me this now? All utterances, as most linguists agree, are multifunctional, simultaneously provoking meanings to do with the state of the world, the state of the speaker, and the relationship between speaker and hearer.
These properties of meaning mean that it is always differential, constructed, projective, and personal while it is also linked to the public domain, and is constantly brought transactionally back to the observable public space from which it begins, and in which it ends (as it must for creatures with mouths, eyes and ears and no reliable telepathy).

The key existential problem of meaning is that of understanding another person whose mind, whose experiences and perceived interests, is different from our own. This same problem gives rise to the key philosophical problem of providing an account of sameness of meaning, a problem which as not yet been adequately resolved.

But we desire others to understand us. Desire, the body and feeling is a little explored region for sociology. Until quite recently, sociology (and education) like a Victorian prude, did not like to think about anything below the forehead. But feeling is connected to thought. The body is a thought body as well as a felt one. And desire or Eros can be educated. In an uneducated Eros, as Garrison shows (1998), we desire others to relate to us as we want to be related to, to feel as we would have them feel, about us and about themselves, and to live in the world as we see it, as infants do. Expressed communicatively, this raises issues of power, and control of communication – issues of voice, cultural politics, media ownership, and communicative opportunity.

We have the option of making others mere reflections of ourselves, literally seeking to be God-like, of making ourselves in the image of another, in submission to them, or finding a unity, possibly one which preserves a complementary diversity, a balance between our world and identity constitutive power and that of the other – becoming democratic we could call this. But this would require an educated Eros.

Finally we possess the means of transacting these options, of making changes of meaning, or rather shaping and riding the inevitable flow of change - dialogue is both the necessary condition of meaning and of its change - dialogue, conversation or dialectic. Conversation is necessary to our humanity, the key question is the form that it takes. Habermas reserves the term conversation for communication which is genuinely illocutionary. Our communicative choices are defined by the poles of megalomania or mutuality, domination or democracy, dialogue or diatribe, conversation or control.

In sociology with a hermeneutic of this kind, links to daily life are triply preserved, thus countering sociology’s triple marginalisation.

First, the linkage between broader societal structures and daily conversation is preserved via a conception of structuration (Giddens, 1884). Practitioners play a special methodological role in a moderate critical hermeneutic because they are the critics, not the intellectuals, because the problems of their practice are the starting point of sociological work and its termination, and because the diversity of their settings and experiences are the touchstone of all theoretical constructions. Incidentally, this means that the forms of academic communication so valued by the bean counters measuring ‘productivity’ may be inappropriate measures of research output. Perhaps measures closer to those employed for artists and composers may be more useful indicators.
Second, the relationship between sociology of education and other disciplinary studies in faculties of education is changed radically because sociology having its own clear objects of study moves into a clear complementarity with other disciplines, and steps down from the former pedestal of assumed epistemic privilege implicit in its ideology critique role, taking up instead the role of assisting in the articulation of transactional problem solving processes of participants, which include ideology critique.

The conception of the transaction as the existential location both of ideology and critique is the philosophical core of a moderate critical hermeneutic. In Habermas's transactional validity conditional semantics, judgements of validity are the core part of acts of interpretation/co-construction, of identities, relationships, roles, and institutions. It is not possible to understand without phronesis, (judgement) and phronesis is not possible without poesis (artistic making). The art of understanding meanings is an art of making - of taking part in a certain sort of making, of a certain sort of world, in certain sorts of relationships and certain sorts of identities. In this view, ideology critique can only be done with others, not on them.

Third as education, and specifically pedagogical processes move to the centre of social understanding educators in general begin to speak with a distinctive voice. They are no longer mere compadrones, importing for their students the fruits of other disciplines – mere repeater stations for mathematics, history, languages etc.. They now have a specific body of knowledge of their own and it is the knowledge associated with the formation of ego-autonomous maturing inquirers – a distinctly hermeneutic and transactional knowledge: a craft skill of the formation of democratic citizens and problem solvers.

The methodological implications of this hermeneutic are profound, going well beyond endorsing many practices already anticipated by some educational researchers, such as the emphasis on ethnographic understanding, critical reflection, and research partnerships with the ‘subjects’ of research. If we consider the distinction between theory and method for a moment, problematic though it is, we can see what is at stake here. In the science of the internal psychic economy of the learner, educational psychology, concepts like attitude may be seen, in a certain light, as methodological or metatheoretical concepts, because they are defined methodologically and play an abstract role in theory. An attitude has classically being defined as a relatively stable tendency to behave in a certain way. Ontologically, an attitude is postulated to be something like either a kind or level of internal mental organisation. Theory though is about particular attitudes and connection with others and with various circumstances and cognitions.

In transactional analysis – social analysis – this is also the case. The concept of culture is a meta-theoretical or methodological concept, like mass, energy or reliability but the meaning action of conversations – the particular instances and realisations of meaning as located, historical, actional, – the meaning action of conversation, and its creative, constrained, shaped and shaping character – that is the stuff of theory and theories. In this last sense, the gap between theory and practice is non-existent. It is only in grand
theories, whether historicist (Marx), systemic (Parsons), sceptical (e.g. Foucauldian), or meta-methodological (e.g. Derrida) that the theory practice gap may appear and theory, separated from data becomes mere speculation. But in this latter context this gap should not be seen as a problem, because the appropriate test of meta-theory is its usefulness for theory building at a level deeply connected with experience. Here we may distinguish between Schutz’s (1973) carefully concrete cascade of primary, secondary, and tertiary analysis and theory with a capital T. Problems only appear when grand theory is mistaken for theory proper and data is forced into its mould.

As discussed above, Habermas argues that we must distinguish between reconstructive science, which is critical theory proper (that is, theory of critique), and better called critical meta-theory or critical methodology, and empirical critical theory, which is about actual social formations, discourses, and conversations and their histories. To avoid confusion, I sometimes think, only the latter should be called theory. The distinction here is very closely related to that employed centrally by Sartre in his treatise on method, between the pratico-inert and the realm available to political-cultural action. Methodological questions are subject to success criteria, but not manipulation. The success referred to is that of the theories that particular methods allow you to produce and use as a basis for action. Methods proper belong to the pratico-inert (although not entirely so, because they too have a history). But theoretical questions are questions of praxis and valuing. They are primarily moral and ethical questions about claims to live in certain ways through certain forms of cultural practice and the effects on human well-being of such ways of life. Theoretical questions are subject to non-empiricist empirical criteria concerning the evidence or otherwise of human flourishing. We find related useful resources in Burkhardt Holzner’s (1966) attempt to stand Berger and Luckmann (1966) on their heads, and in Enzo Paci’s phenomenological Marxism (1972).

However, perhaps the most profound implication of this hermeneutic and the sociology that is built upon it, apart from bringing educational phenomena into the centre of social analysis in general, is that the social phenomenon that is thus centred is one in which moral ethical meanings are structurally and semantically definitive. At its heart social analysis is educational analysis – a profoundly Deweyan insight – and in its nature educational analysis is fundamentally moral analysis, because distortions of illocutionary transactions can only occur asymmetrically, through the moral/ethical dimension of power overriding the illocutionary dimensions of expression and truthfulness. Ultimately, truth is not violent or oppressive. It can be a victim of distorted relationships among inquirers but never the victimiser. Or it can be the outcome of conversational relationships, providing we remember that in matters of moral and cultural changes - changes of meanings - we are all inquirers, researchers and subjects, all teachers and students.
NOTE

1. It should be obvious to anyone familiar with the work of R. W. Connell that there is a connection between what follows and Connell's analysis, however the reader should also be aware that there are many systematic differences between what follows and Connell's approach. My judgements of the performance of both sociology of education in general and of the value and influence of postmodernism are far more negative than Connell's, but I am grateful for his encouragement and criticism.

2. Monash University (Victoria) was the leading radical university in Australia during the late 1960s. Its student movements were at the forefront of confronting issues as widely ranging as Australia's participation in the Vietnam War through to internal university governance. (Editor)

REFERENCES