Reflection on the nature of the sociological imagination is common at the present time and integral to the position the discipline finds itself in. Millenarianism in sociology is rife as the discipline enters the new century, with observers employing typical end times thinking. Sociology in Britain is also entitled now to its royal letter as a centenarian, for it was first taught under its own name at the LSE in 1904, Liverpool in 1905 and Aberdeen in 1907, so the new millennium has combined with another rite of passage to actively encourage reflection.

There are various ways of representing these end times. One view is that social change within late modernity has proceeded at such a pace as to threaten sociology, for the very notion of society and ‘the social’ is under challenge from globalization and fluid mobilities and networks of exchange that render the idea of social structure irrelevant, stripping sociology of its subject matter. The discipline is also thought by some to have fragmented under the pressure of other disciplines that grew, at least in part, from it and are now devouring it – criminology, cultural studies and women’s studies are only the most obvious of sociology’s ‘parasitic others’. Once thought itself to be a parasite-cum-scavenger, as famously described by John Urry, sociology is now supposedly decomposing as others feast on its corpse. My metaphors are not running away with me here, for The Decomposition of Sociology was the title Irving L. Horowitz gave to his 1993 reflections on the discipline.

Sociologists tended to approach the millennium in two ways – nostalgia and futurology. The nostalgics are locked in idealizations of sociology’s golden age. Which era this is depends upon biography, particularly how old they now are and where they come from. The American Irving L. Horowitz, for example, laments the loss of 1950s US sociology. Another leading American from times past, Peter Berger, forty years on from writing his famous manifesto for sociology entitled Invitation to Sociology, posed the question of whatever happened to sociology, and concluded that it just is not like it was in the 1950s, when sociology wanted to be scientific and to engage in rigorous methodology. British nostalgics, on the other hand, tend to lament the 1960s. This period marked the first dramatic expansion of sociology in Britain and was the zenith of its popularity. But more than this, British nostalgics believe the 1960s marked the radicalization of sociology and it has never been the same since. The anti-positivism of the times saw a methodological break with orthodoxy, radical social theories emerged to challenge structural functionalism, and new interests and topics opened for sociological investigation – I recall as a new university student in 1970 reading about the sociology of dogs, the sociology of chairs and even the sociology of outer space. Sociology as a discipline was the ‘dangerous, deviant outsider’ and as its vanguard sociology staff dressed indistinguishably from students, delivered lectures with fags perpetually dangling from mouths, slept with their students and were as proud of talking in public about the invention of new sexual positions as about their latest article or book. I do not jest. Britain’s best nostalgic, or worst, depending upon
how you look at it – Laurie Taylor – structured his recent reflection on sociology in the *Times Higher* around a sexual encounter with one of his female postgraduate students.

Now, I risk heaping coals on my head at this point. Taylor has become the new Queen Mum, a national institution that no one dares criticize. But amidst all his undoubted humour – and he is very funny at times – there is a serious problem with his eulogy of 1960s sociology and his description elsewhere in the *Times Higher* of new generations of sociologists in his old department at York as ‘Thatcher’s children’. The problem is only partly his humour. I know he thinks that we should not take him seriously, but we need to question the negative impact he has when placing Poppleton-column material in serious articles about sociology. But the biggest problem is not his humour but his nostalgia. To plagiarize the famous pun, the problem with nostalgia is *not* that nostalgia is not the same any more, but that it should never be inflicted on other people. Nostalgia is everyone’s invention and someone’s golden age is rarely anyone else’s. The damage wrought by the nostalgics is *not* that they believe sociology has never been the same since they were young, that is what nostalgia is supposed to be about, after all, but that they perpetuate the myth in public that sociology has lost its critical edge and has sold out, although to what no one is agreed. If publicly parading one’s sexual adventures with a postgraduate student is a mark of 1960s radicalism, then let us move to futurology.

The millennium made a big impression on sociologists. Most of the leading mainstream journals marked the event, and addresses by presidents of national and international associations of sociologists at around the turn of the century were used to reflect on sociology in the twenty-first century. Reading them now, it seems that futurologists came in three forms: (1) soothsayers; (2) new frontiers people; and (3) the popularizers. Soothsayers are sociological Mystic Megs, prompted by the idea of the millennium to reflect on what social life would be like some years into the future. For example, the BSA’s journal *Sociology*, in its February 2000 issue, asked a selection of sociologists to imagine what British society would be like in 2025. Full of pithy British realism, they identified the sometimes depressing state that is thought to lie ahead in education, poverty eradication, religion, medical care and the like. The American journal of reviews, *Contemporary Sociology*, in its January 2000 issue decided instead to focus on utopian visions and approached the twenty-first century with allusions back to the eighteenth in valorizing the equality, liberty and security that would be the achievements of the future. The *American Sociological Review*, in its February 2000 issue, had the honesty to admit that its soothsaying involved looking backward as well as forward and that the future heralded as much continuity as change.

The new frontiers people are the Trekkies, boldly taking sociology where it has not gone before. Two features characterize new frontiers people: a sense of sociology being in crisis, its survival threatened unless it is prepared to abandon present habitats; and a sense of optimism that sociology has within it the potential to exploit new frontiers and survive for yet more centuries. Of course, new frontiers people differ on the crisis that the past has supposedly wrought and on where the future solution lies. John Scott, for example, a former President of the British Sociological Association, writing in *Sociological Research Online*, analysed the crisis as sociology’s fragmentation, the loss of its special, privileged analytical framework as a result of parasitic others, and saw the solution as the development of a core teaching curriculum to give intellectual coherence to the discipline again. If this might be thought of as the problem of sociology beyond sociology, there is also the problem of sociology beyond societies. The *British Journal of Sociology*, in its first issue of 2000, reflected the concerns of its guest editor, John Urry, in wondering what would happen to sociology now that the idea of the social structure supposedly needs to be replaced with more fluid, flexible and mobile social exchanges, a theme that also dominated Alain Touraine’s Presidential address to the International Sociological Association.
in 2002, published in *Current Sociology* under the title ‘Sociology without societies’. According to Urry, the new mobile social relations require a new mobile sociology and in several writings he has championed this new frontier for us.

The popularizers have their champion in Michael Burawoy. In his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Burawoy took as his theme the need for ‘public sociology’ as he called it. His address has since been published in the *British Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* and he has given addresses on the same theme to regional associations of sociologists in the USA and to national associations overseas, such as the South African Sociological Association. These addresses have also been published extensively in leading journals, and the ASA has established a web blog on public sociology to which people throughout the world-wide sociological community can contribute. Liz Stanley took this as her theme too in responding to John Scott’s paper in *Sociological Research Online*. It involves a commitment to engagement in public issues; not an abandonment of the professional gains of sociology in the fields of methodology, theory and analysis, but their direction to understanding and ameliorating the topical issues and social problems that affect people and places. This resonates with sociologists like Steve Fuller and Frank Furedi who have both published in the past few years on the case for sociologists redefining their role in the twenty-first century to become public intellectuals.

One of the paradoxes of all this sociological futurology is that it ignores one of sociology’s truisms about social transitions – that they are always less dramatic than they are imagined to be. Millenniumitis led us to be over-dramatic. Fragmentation in sociology is not new; another of Liz Stanley’s points is that sociology has always been hybridic. Nor has there ever been a generation of sociologists that has not believed it was witnessing a crisis. I went up to university when Alvin Gouldner’s 1970 book, *The Coming Crisis of Sociology*, was in vogue, advocating the case then for a public sociology that was engaged with real life-world issues. All Gouldner did was to repeat the views of the archetypal popularizer of the 1950s, Charles Wright Mills, who in his famous 1959 volume, *The Sociological Imagination*, urged sociologists to become public intellectuals devoted to the analysis of public issues as they relate to people’s private troubles; and he said this in order to imitate the classic tradition of nineteenth-century European sociology that considered all sociology as public sociology. Social transitions, in other words, display as much continuity as change, and in this entire end times thinking it is worth drawing attention to how sociologists return to the past to envision sociology’s future.

As one of the leading theoreticians based in British sociology, Steve Fuller’s latest book on these matters deserves serious attention, especially as he has already established himself as one of the discipline’s leading popularizers. He believes that sociologists should be public intellectuals and he has become associated with public debate on some controversial topics, such as intelligent design. The parallel with Mills is remarkable – not least in the way he evokes terms forever associated with Mills and in the courting of controversy – although there is one sense in which he differs from the early champion of sociology’s special imagination, for Fuller’s prose is akin to that which Mills berated. At the risk of gross simplification, Fuller’s analysis begins from the premise that the discipline faces a crisis and is in desperate search of an identity to fit it for the twenty-first century. The importance of it finding one cannot be under-estimated, for as Fuller portrays it, sociology’s role is nothing less than robust ‘defence of humanity’ – a notion redolent of Mills – although this is a phrase whose meaning Fuller takes for granted.

His analysis of the problem can hardly be faulted. Sociology as a discipline is under threat despite the continuing vividness of ‘society’ as a distinct intellectual domain of enquiry, a point on which he differs from some harbingers of the end times. He differs
too in his strong belief that sociology needs to resolve its crisis, since both socialism and the welfare state are under threat as the hitherto accepted vehicles for realizing human dignity and the ‘defence of humanity’, and in the strength of his commitment to the view that it can re-position its identity for the new century. The solution, however, is likely to be controversial, in that he calls for a repositioning of biology’s place within sociology and for Darwin to join Marx in the pantheon. The re-biologization of the social world – his phrase – is what makes sociology’s imagination ‘new’. Human beings need to be re-absorbed into the natural world. Darwinism, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology show how much of our humanity is biologically dependent and Fuller’s re-imagining of sociology involves working out the relationship between biological sciences and social life. This is different from Runciman’s valorization of cultural selection as a sociological process analogous to biological selection, for Fuller admits of no equivocation: the boundary between humans and animals needs to be re-theorized for not only do animals have societies and ‘human’ qualities (his phrase), people are subject to natural selection.

This is a challenging and provocative book that deserves to be carefully read rather than dismissed out of hand. I will permit myself three observations. First, it fits the norm of previous futurology in looking backwards to find a solution to sociology’s end times, in that the link between biology and sociology was one of the principal themes that spurred the sociological imagination in, for example, eighteenth-century Scotland, where people like Ferguson and Smith wrestled with the relationship between human nature and society, in nineteenth-century English sociology, such as Spencer’s social Darwinism, and in the early Eugenics movement that formed one of the intellectual pillars of the first British Sociological Society. To describe this heritage, as Fuller does, as the ‘hidden biological past of classical social theory’, is overstating the depth to which this work has been buried by the discipline’s radical social constructionism. That this past may be found wanting does not disguise that it is in the re-thinking of old issues that sociology’s future lies. Second, sociology’s need to re-engage with these issues and to revisit its social constructionism has come about because of the force of public debate, so that sociologists who aspire to be public intellectuals cannot avoid real-world issues that seem to presage the re-biologization of society. Animal rights, the meaning of brain death, cloning and the genome project, global environmental threats, among others, address the intellectual boundaries between the natural and social worlds. Issues at the forefront of scientific, environmental and medical knowledge have become matters of public debate and perforce have caused sociology to reconsider what human nature and society are and how social actors might be reabsorbed into the natural biological world. A commitment to public sociology seems to oblige the discipline to confront these issues. Finally, in making these arguments, Fuller seems to deliberately court controversy. These views will be objectionable to those of his peers still wedded to the radical social constructionism of conventional sociology but over and above this, Fuller is setting himself up when he writes that, shorn of the Holocaust, the Nazis were not all that bad. Couple this with his openness to the idea of intelligent design and we have the makings of an interesting public spat between sociologists, evocative of the period when Mills originally published *The Sociological Imagination*. The deliberately sought parallel with Mills thus extends even further. Mills was certainly deadly serious about most of the public controversies he was involved in, although he often teased for effect; I wonder which parts of his argument Fuller says for effect.

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