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Susan Hegeman

To cite this article: Susan Hegeman (2015) A Sociological Imagination, Studia Neophilologica, 87:sup1, 97-103, DOI: 10.1080/00393274.2014.981960

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2014.981960

Published online: 10 Nov 2014.
A Sociological Imagination

SUSAN HEGEMAN*

In the context of the apparent closure of neoliberalism, I can think of no more profoundly humanist statement than “no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention” (Williams 1978: 125). Raymond Williams’s comment, which he thought important enough to render in italics, is a powerful reminder to those of us who analyze culture that we must both attempt to interpret the present, with all the hazards that entails, and – even more precariously – anticipate the ways in which the future may yet answer back to it. This small essay is written in the spirit of that important goal. I will first give one narrative of the cultural dominant of intellectual life in the twentieth-century United States, and then offer some thoughts on alternatives that may yet emerge, especially in the wake of the financial disaster of 2008. Because I am interested in the cultural dominant, I will take examples not only from academic intellectuals, but also from popular literature, the arts, and ultimately, from experimental social movements. I will therefore necessarily be skimming over the surface of a great deal of complexity, but my hope is that my map will open up interesting places for others to explore. In particular, I am interested in tracing the fate of the “sociological imagination,” which, as C. Wright Mills wrote a half century ago, “enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (1959: 5). It seems to me this sociological imagination was accessible in the early twentieth-century United States, and continues to be useful, if not crucial, in a moment like ours.

Like Mills, I’m uninterested in the classic disciplinary divisions between social scientific fields like anthropology and sociology. More important for me is the distinction between this mode of thought and a traditional humanism, in that the former understands humanity as always, already embedded in historically, spatially, and materially contingent social contexts. As such, this way of thinking represents something like a middle position between humanism and posthumanism, between the epistemological certitude of man on the one hand, and the “dissolution of the subject” on the other (Collins 2012: 47). It is also characterized by certain interpretive strategies and goals. For Mills, it was the project to “characterize societies as wholes” (1959: 17) that united literary travelers and historians like Tocqueville and Taine to the grand tradition of nineteenth-century social scientific thought, as represented by names like Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Mauss, and Veblen. But I would add that this mode of thought also includes the strategy of estranging received social common sense with the wealth of other possibilities enabled by experiences of cultural diversity. This is already present in the earliest example of anthropological writing, Montaigne’s famous “Of Cannibals,” in which native Brazilians, brought to the court of the French boy king Charles IX, are reported to wonder that the “injustice” of the monumental disparity of wealth that they see in France has not yet caused a violent insurrection (1958: 159).

*Susan Hegeman, University of Florida, United States, Email: shegeman@ufl.edu

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I’ve argued at length elsewhere that this form of estrangement, honed in the early twentieth-century United States by the Boasian anthropologists, was part and parcel of a modernist aesthetic and intellectual project (see Hegeman 1999). But by and large, Americans have been relatively resistant to both the totalizing and estranging impulses of the sociological imagination. The years around World War II, in which the United States consolidated its position as a global power, represent in particular a moment of strong divergence from the sociological imagination. During the war, the exigencies of propaganda and morale made the accustomed social scientific practice of holding one’s society open to examination through the strategy of cultural estrangement virtually politically untenable. That is, the very existence of Nazi Germany, and to a lesser extent Tojo’s Japan and Stalin’s Soviet Union, disallowed the conventional anthropological stance of cultural relativism, and thus strategies of intercultural comparison. But just as significantly, this ideological shift coincided with the dramatic growth and increased prestige of the social sciences in the United States. Mobilized into wartime bureaucracies, social scientists found new and expanding roles to play in such areas as cold war intelligence and the bureaucratic management of populations on the home front. Meanwhile, thanks to the GI Bill’s educational benefits, the sheer numbers of social scientists increased, and academic programs proliferated – especially in the new fields of “area studies” (Patterson 2001: 103–134; Wallerstein 1997: 195–231). Social science’s corresponding popular prestige at this time is reflected in the emergence of figures like Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, John Kenneth Galbraith, E. Franklin Frazier, and many others as popular experts on everything from race relations to sexuality and child rearing. Increasingly, American social scientists were finding a popular role as definers and propagators of behavioral norms.

Mills’ Sociological Imagination was largely a complaint against this instrumentalization of mid-twentieth-century social science and its newfound power and prestige, not as a capacious eye on society but a tool of hegemony: of marketing, governance, intelligence, and the social order. And yet Mills was no more optimistic about humanist intellectuals – who, in retrospect we now see, were also being incorporated into bureaucratic structures of their own, notably the university and the corporate media. Mills lamented,

What fiction, what journalism, what artistic endeavor, can compete with the historical reality and political facts of our time? What dramatic vision of hell can compete with the events of twentieth century war? What moral denunciations can measure up to the moral insensibility of men in the agonies of primary accumulation? (Mills 1959: 16)

Literature, he worried, had become a “minor art,” inadequate to the task of describing the complexity of contemporary social life.

We could object to Mills’ sentiment by referencing an individual favorite midcentury work of art, or perhaps by identifying in Mills a Lukács-like nostalgia for the imaginative totalities of nineteenth-century realism. But I think the more interesting insight to be drawn from his comment is that the American late-modernist separation of art from society, often characterized as an ideological impulse of the cold war, was not simply a product of new critical desires to rescue art from a fallen world, but a more generalized sentiment from across the political spectrum that art was somehow inadequate to the task of the sociological imagination. This partially rescues for me the otherwise numbingly banal midcentury handwringing over how the Nazi commandant could possibly enjoy Beethoven (what the British artist Banksy has recently brilliantly glossed, in a brilliant détournement of a tacky landscape painting, as the “Banality of the Banality of
Evil” [Stuart 2013]). In other words, Mills helps us see that it was not simply that art was intractably separated from morality, politics, or social life; it was that it was perhaps fundamentally incapable of bridging the gap between individual subjectivities and the perceived unrepresentability of the postwar social order.

I contend that this basic view of the irreconcilability of art and the social has been the intellectual dominant in the United States throughout the American century. I recognize that this is a potentially controversial claim, especially given the significant art and culture that accompanied or was inspired by such social movements as civil rights and black power, second-wave feminism, Chicano-Latino movements, and queer activism, among others. But the position of these movements and forms, relative to the dominant social and cultural order, was avowedly minoritarian: explicitly poised against or in light of a presumptive social order. As such, most multiculturalism has been readily absorbed into the cultural dominant, in the form of inclusive codices to business as usual, while the most radical elements of these movements – the Black Panthers, AIM, La Raza, Redstockings – were actively criminalized, and discredited (see Glick 1999).

Nowhere is this clearer than in the academic incorporation of these movements, which often began at the behest of student activists but then found their legitimation by incorporating the norms and structures of the academy as a whole. For example, Jane Gallop (1991) has shown at length how feminism achieved status in the literary academy largely via incorporating continental theory. While many good things can be said about this convergence, particularly how it forced a reconsideration of the subject, much of its critical edge was blunted. By the 1970s continental theory had been scrubbed of a good deal of its radicalism, and with it, a good deal of its own commitment to the sociological imagination (see Christofferson 2004). Theory, and postmodernism specifically, came to the United States possessing a characteristic “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard 1979), which the particularisms of multiculturalism ended up reinforcing. At least in regard to the broken dialectic of the subject and the social, postmodernism represents no break at all from American late modernism, but perhaps something more like another symptom of American global hegemonic reach during the longer cold war.

Which brings me (albeit hurriedly) to our neoliberal present, whose structures of feeling seem to revolve around temporal stasis and irresolvable historical inevitability. In addition to Margaret Thatcher’s famous slogan “TINA: There is No Alternative,” we find historical time expressed in terms of gerunds like “unwinding” and “dithering” (Packer 2013; Robinson 2012: 245), which suggest a prolonged, indeed barely perceptible sliding into some perpetual future.¹ Or, using a metaphors of extended illness, we are in a mode of what Laurent Berlant calls “slow death,” or what Eric Cazdyn denominates a “new chronic mode” of temporality, where resigned accommodation to a broken present seems less horrible than the annihilation represented by real historical rupture (Berlant 2011: 95–119; Cazdyn 2012: 5). Never as much as now have we seemed to need something like the sociological imagination, in order to confront this frustrating sense of historical closure.

One way to confront this closure is to uncover the repressed sociological imagination of neoliberalism itself. We may as well begin with another of Thatcher’s famous neoliberal slogans: “There is no such thing as society.” Of course,

¹From the perspective of 2312, Robinson narrates, “How they despised the generations of the Dithering, who had heedlessly pushed the climate into a change with an unstoppable momentum to it, continuing not only into the present, but for centuries more to come” (Robinson 2012: 316).
what she meant was that there should be no such thing as a social welfare state. But what Thatcher also hinted at was something Michel Foucault had already identified in 1979 in regard to what he called “American neo-liberalism”: its radical propensity to replace all forms of interpretation of human sociality and behavior with some extrapolation of economics, the logic of the marketplace (Foucault 2008: 243). Neoliberalism, in other words, represents the triumph of a very specific understanding of humanity: the *Homo economicus* of Adam Smith’s invention, whose natural drive to “truck and barter” is tempered only by rational self-interest.

This allegiance to the conception of human beings as centrally and primarily rational, self-interested actors was integral to the financial disaster of 2008. Blind faith in *Homo economicus* drove neoliberalism’s architects and agents to see only the good in loosening the fetters on both capitalism’s instruments of creative destruction and the economic choices of individuals, who were now encouraged as never before to enter the financial markets, and thereby gamble with their homes, their retirement savings, and their emergency funds. But all this changed when the credit markets froze, investment firms collapsed, and countless people saw their lives and communities upturned in the economic chaos. *Homo economicus* was not simply rattled, but unseated. A small space, I believe, has finally opened up for new ways to understand the relationship of the subject and society.

A number of developments have pointed in this direction for some time, including the fairly decisive end of incredulity toward metanarrative, a significant intellectual push to rethink the social, as well as a drive to rethink the subject. When Lyotard wrote of the postmodern incredulity toward metanarrative, he was writing from within a late cold war context in which metanarrative constructions of all kinds were implicitly tarred with the brush of totalitarianism. Totalization was, de facto, totalitarian. The end of the cold war has helped to end this particular intellectual ban. Thus, in 2006, the Retort collective, which includes the art historian T. J. Clark, decisively wrote,

We take it the time is over when the mere mention of such categories [as “capitalism” and “primitive accumulation”] consigned one – in the hip academy, especially – irrevocably to the past. The past has become the present again: this is the mark of the moment we are trying to understand. (It is “the end of Grand Narratives” and “the trap of totalization” and “the radical irreducibility of the political” which now seem like period items.) (2006: 9)

Not surprisingly, then, many of the classic metanarratives have lately reemerged. For evidence of this, one need look no farther than the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list, which, in the spring of 2014, was topped by a book titled *Capital in the twenty-first century* (*New York Times* 2014). Clearly, the pressing desire to register certain recent massive global changes – in, for example, the

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2Following Cazdyn I am referring to the events of October 2008 as a financial “disaster,” and not a “crisis,” which is the common usage. Cazdyn points out that “crisis” is the common condition of capitalism, whereas “disaster” is when “the sustainable configuration of relations fail,” and is thereby temporarily made visible (Cazdyn 2012: 53–55).

3In addition to exemplifying the return of metanarratives, Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the twenty-first century* also participates in the trend toward interrogating neoliberal economics. From within the field of economics, Piketty critiques his discipline’s pretensions – especially in the United States – to scientific objectivity and its related blindness to social issues such as income inequality. He writes bluntly, “[t]he truth is that economics should never have sought to divorce itself from the other social sciences and can advance only in conjunction with them” (2014: 32).
climate, population flows, financial structures, and the global political system of sovereign nation-states has encouraged metanarrative usages like “modernity,” “globalization,” and the “anthropocene.” Correspondingly, popular social science continues apace in a virtual efflorescence of “big idea” thinking. One perhaps slightly under-discussed element of the current massive changes underway in intellectual life due to internet technologies—in the face of the decline of the traditional academic humanities, TV, and print journalism—is the creation of a new lucrative form of high-tech edutainment, in the TED talk and the corporate lecture circuit: a kind of monster hybrid of long-form journalism, highbrow chat show, self-help seminar, and academic lecture. The related crossover books, many by social scientists like Jared Diamond, or by social science interpreters like Malcolm Gladwell, are in this sense just the tip of the “big idea” iceberg. Big thinking is not only not banned these days, it’s hot.

As far as reconsiderations of the subject are concerned, we could certainly point to new ideas of the “posthuman” that transcend the traditional species boundaries of subjectivity. More specifically regarding Adam Smith’s *Homo economicus*, the relatively new field of economic behaviorism, which focuses on the limits of human rationality and enlightened self-interest, has simultaneously become an important subfield and internal critique of classical economic theory. Books on these issues by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (*Thinking, fast and slow*, 2011), Dan Ariely (*Predicatably irrational*, 2008), and Nassim Nicholas Taleb (*Fooled by randomness*, 2001, and *The black swan*, 2007), among others, have garnered both academic respect and made it to the bestseller lists. Most significantly, it finally seems acceptable again in some political circles to propose that one function of government is to protect consumers and citizens from the irrational functioning of markets, bad actors, and their own potentially self-destructive economic behavior.

But what is a human, if not a rational, self-interested economic agent? This, of course, is a question that social scientists, humanists, and artists have all long entertained. Economic anthropologists and historians have pretty much demolished as a myth Adam Smith’s famous economic origin story about how primitive barter systems led, on grounds of efficiency, to the abstraction of a money economy (Graeber 2011: loc. 600; see also Humphrey & Hugh-Jones 1992). But more broadly—beginning with Marcel Mauss’ *The gift* (*Essai sur le don*, 1925)—a wide-ranging strain of thought has elaborated alternative theories and examples of human interaction, reciprocity, resource use, and social organization that radically estrange this long-held version of socio-economic common sense. Mauss himself was a political activist and a proponent of the cooperative movement. His interest in the Northwest Indian potlatch and Melanesian kula rings was therefore hardly a mere sojourn into exoticism; it was an investigation into how human economies extend beyond the ideological frameworks of rational choice and possessive individualism (Hart 2007). This is an urgent task of a renewed sociological imagination. But it is one that must somehow find common cause with artists, activists, and a larger society.

This is where the Occupy movement is interesting to me. Not because it represents a definitive political rupture of our time (far from it), but because it seems to contain the elements both for reconceptualizing humans in society, and for enacting it in both creative and political ways. At the heart of the Occupy movement there was at least one social scientist, the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, whose book *Debt: The first 5000 years* became a surprise hit during the Occupy year of 2011. An organizer of the New York demonstrations, Graeber also provided Occupy with some foundational political-economic
ground-clearing: his text framed debt not as an individual’s obligation to repay on penalty of legal action, but as the basis of all kinds of social obligation and reciprocity in general. This struck a chord with the debt-burdened members of the “GWAF generation” (“graduates without a future”); that is, the ambitious and creative, but underemployed aspirants to the now largely decomposed professional-managerial stratum of the middle class (Ehrenreich 2013). Famously, they formed the backbone of the Occupy movement. This movement, in turn, and particularly its encampments, became experiments in creating alternatives not only for community governance – the hand signals and general assemblies that got all that media attention were just that – but for human community built on radically alternative bases of sharing, giving, and reciprocity. Moreover – and it is here that I return to my larger narrative of the long twentieth century – Occupy appears in retrospect to be an intensely fertile laboratory for connecting art back up to the social – and sociological – imagination. Occupy offered up an explosion of intellectual activity and aesthetic expression, ranging from graphic design and literature and cultural criticism, to theatrical performances and high concept art installations. Established figures in diverse media and genres, including Shepard Fairey, Eric Drooker, Philip Glass, Talib Kweli, Tom Morello, and Pete Seeger demonstrated a living connection to older and other forms of politicized art (Sekoff 2012). But for every star associated with Occupy, there were legions of inspired young fine artists and graphic designers, musicians, dancers, puppeteers, and performance artists who were still grappling with forms of expression that directly addressed their political goals. Also, in insisting, as many did, on connecting art with public space, Occupy artists expressed a common mission not only of engaging in explicit social commentary but of revising the traditional economic structure of the practice of art, literature, and criticism. Perhaps this took place out of necessity: they have in many respects been “freed,” for better or worse, from the institutional fetters (and supports) of their elders. As Christopher Kulendran Thomas, a London-based visual artist put it: “I can’t see what will emerge afterwards, any more than I can see what the world economy might look like after Western dominance, but Occupy art can be seen as foreshadowing what replaces Contemporary Art” (qtd. in Mason 2012).

Whether or not, in years hence, we still think of something called Occupy art, or think of the Occupy movement as a central watershed moment, we should at least be cognizant of the fact that a whole generation of artists and intellectuals have cut their teeth in and around Occupy encampments and actions. It’s with them especially that I envision the efflorescence of a renewed sociological imagination, and therefore the end to the stasis of our eternal present.

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