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Some Further Reflections on the Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology

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ABSTRACT
We respond to the two comments on our article 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology' from Rosemary Crompton (2008) and Richard Webber (2009) which have been published in *Sociology*, as well as issues arising from the wider debate generated by our article. We urge sociologists to recognize the gravity of the challenges posed by the proliferation of social data and to become more vociferous in contributing to political debates over method and data.

KEY WORDS
digitization / interviews / methodology / surveys

Welcome to the World of 'Knowing Capitalism'?

Let us begin with a few observations on the contemporary politics of social data which have come to our attention since 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology' was published in 2007.

Every 10 years since 1801 (apart from 1941) the British state has held a Census where every household is expected to complete a census return, and whose results have been used to monitor population change and have long been a staple of social science research. For the next Census, in 2011, the process of running the data collection will be subcontracted to a private contractor – one of the final two candidates being the arms contractor Lockheed Martin (http://censusalert.org.uk/). Alongside this 'privatization' of a previously unambiguous function of the state, a parliamentary committee (House of Commons, 2008) has floated the idea that the 2011 Census should be the last – to be replaced by linked administrative data records, which it thinks will provide more accurate accounts of the population.

As we write this article (September 2008), the lead story in the news is the loss of a memory stick – by an unspecified 'consultant' – which contains information on every convicted criminal in the UK, the latest in a long line of similar data losses of supposedly confidential personal information.

Tesco, the supermarket chain, has recently funded a new Sustainable Consumption Institute (http://www.sci.manchester.ac.uk/) at the University of Manchester. At the time of writing, discussions are ongoing about whether its vast database which derives from its loyalty card scheme might be made available to academic researchers. There is an argument that the success of Tesco in recent years lies in the ability of its subsidiary company, dunnhumby (http://www.dunnhumby.com/) to manipulate this data to provide rapid and detailed analysis of consumer behaviour.

As we both wait for our students to return after the summer vacation we learn from the *Times Higher Education Supplement* that some 88 per cent of them are likely to be on Facebook, one of the most popular commercial Web 2.0 social networking sites (Beer and Burrows, 2007), although they constitute but a small drop in the global ocean of 90 million 'active' Facebook users. Each has freely posted data about themselves – demographic, photographic, video, attitudinal and more – and also links to their 'friends' who offer up similar data and much of it is in the public realm. A few clicks is all it takes to see what books our new students are reading, what TV shows they are watching, what music they are listening to, and so on. As private sector marketers have known for some time, and as some quantitative sociologists have recently discovered (Kolek and Saunders, 2008; Liu, 2007), it is not too difficult a task to 'scrape' and analyse data from such sources with some effect.

A colleague has appeared as we draft this paper with his impressive new G3 Apple iPhone portending, we fear, a world of 'spimes', 'arphids' (RFIDs) and a new 'internet of things' (Beer, 2007; Burrows, 2009; Crang and Graham, 2007; Hayles, 2007; Sterling, 2005); a world of ubiquitous or ambient computing with which, we fear, we will soon have to familiarize ourselves.

Meanwhile, of course, and more mundanely, the Government's plans to introduce identity cards quietly continue (Bennett and Lyon, 2008).

We could go on.

Welcome to the world of 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift, 2005): a world inundated with complex processes of social and cultural digitization; a world in which commercial forces predominate; a world in which we, as sociologists, are losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of the 'social' as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous.

In our earlier article (Savage and Burrows, 2007) we argued that, confronted with these circumstances, sociologists needed to rethink their methodological practices in radically innovative ways, unfettered by some of the deeply rooted domain assumptions in our discipline that were so central to our methodological success in the 1960s and 1970s but which no longer pertain in the early years of the 21st century. In this brief paper we are pleased to have the chance to respond to the comments on our earlier article made by Rosemary Crompton (2008) and Richard Webber (2009), and to reflect a little more widely on the deliberately provocative arguments we put forward in that original piece.

Early Responses to the 'Coming Crisis'

It is worth noting at the outset that the 'Coming Crisis' has attracted more immediate interest and controversy than anything either of has written before. This was evident from the initial referees' reports which we received, one of which saw our article as a major and vital intervention, another of which stated baldly that our article had no merit whatsoever.[1] On publication, the article was précised in the *Higher*, prompting an email from Kevin Schürer, Director of the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) and the UK Data Archive (UKDA) at the University of Essex, saying that he had thought much the same thing for years, and asking if we had any ideas about how the ESRC could better gain access to transactional and administrative data. (Unfortunately we were unable to help him in this regard.) Angela Dale, Director of the ESRC Research Methods Programme (http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/), used the arguments contained in the article to frame two organised discussions on 'radical data' and the 'future of survey methods'. Paul Barker, the former editor of *New Society*, and the celebrated race relations researcher Michael Banton got in touch to endorse our arguments about the central role of social science research in the 1960s. Contributors to the anniversary issue of *The Sociological Review* devoted to the history of British sociology felt the need to engage with our arguments (Law, 2008; Stanley, 2008). In short, whatever the quality of our article might have been, we certainly seemed to have touched a nerve.

It is important to note that our article was deliberately a think-piece rather than a scholarly article. This is not to say it does not rely on detailed scholarship, rather that we did not have the scope to report this in the article. Thus, Savage's forthcoming monograph – *Imagining the Modern Nation: Popular Identities and the Social Sciences in Post War England* (Savage, 2010 forthcoming, and see also Savage, 2008, 2009b) – reports his research on the history of social science research methods. Our arguments about the importance of geodemographics are also more fully elaborated elsewhere (Burrows, 2008; Burrows and Gane, 2006; Parker et al., 2007; Uprichard et al., 2009). Our aim was deliberately to take the opportunity to challenge any complacency among our fellow social scientists, and especially sociologists, that we have any intrinsic monopoly of social knowledge, and to make us more reflective about the dramatic challenges that new kinds of data and modes of analysis pose to us. It is an intriguing point that although sociologists have for so long announced that we are undergoing radical transformative change of one kind or another that they have not been attentive to the challenge this poses to sociological research data and methods themselves (see Savage, 2009b forthcoming). It transpires that others are asking similar questions.

Bruno Latour (2007), for example, has also come to emphasize how digitization reworks the very meaning of social relations. The ESRC increasingly takes seriously the challenge of accessing transactional and administrative data. The ESRC has recently commissioned a new Administrative Data Liaison Service (to be based at the University of St Andrews) and a Secure Data Service (to be based at the UKDA) informed by a wider National Strategy for Data Resources for Research in the Social Sciences developed by the UK Data Forum, a group which brings together the research councils, research foundations, a range of Government departments, the Office for National Statistics, and the devolved administrations (ESRC, no date; Jones and Elias, 2006).

These contextual points are important to make in the light of Rosemary Crompton's view that we are claiming that sociologists should abandon surveys. Since both of us have been extensively involved in analysing surveys during our careers (and plan to continue to be involved in the future), this would be a strange claim for us to make (see, for recent examples of our work, Bennett et al., 2009; Burrows, 2003; Ford et al., 2004). We certainly would not want our article to be read as a critique of quantitative analysis. Our point was rather that these familiar debates – quantitative versus qualitative – are now much less salient in a world of digitized information with much more interplay between numbers, narratives and images. We need to recognize that many powerful social agents no longer necessarily look to survey (and interview) findings in the way that they once did. Whatever we sociologists might think about the value of survey research is not really the point. Indeed, now is really not the time to rehearse yet again the old arguments about the value of (quantitative) surveys against (qualitative) case studies (or vice versa). What we need to recognize is that social research circuits now proliferate so extensively, using such a variety and range of methods, that we need to place our own internal sociological squabbles on one side and collectively consider how we deal with the fundamental challenge of dealing with the proliferation of social data.

Why Do We Think This?

Both interviews and surveys depend on the central role of *sampling*, which emerged during the 20th century, and especially in the years after the Second World War, as allowing the aggregation of social relations through the collection of data on a small number of people (see Desrosières, 1998; Osborne and Rose, 1997; Osborne et al., 2008; Savage, 2010 forthcoming). Sampling was a brilliant innovation that allowed the development of social indicators of the modern, rational, imagined nation. Benedict Anderson (1983) explores the paradox of nationalism: how can we feel so passionately that we belong to a nation when we know so few of our fellows? His answer is that narrative allows the imaginary connection of discrete monads into coherent national stories. Since the Second World War, sample surveys have been increasingly deployed to allow a similar process to take place, but in the name of science and rationality, rather than romantic national stories. Welters of social indicators, from the inflation rate to the crime rate, have been mobilized by the results of national surveys.

However, we now think that the power of sampling as the central method of aggregating national societies is being challenged through some of the practices of 'knowing capitalism' – outlined in the examples with which we opened this article – which wants to 'know everything' through a process of what we might term 'descriptive assemblage' (Savage, 2009a). When sample surveys were introduced in the postwar years, they were often championed by socialists who saw them as a means of constructing 'democratic' knowledge: regardless of your social position, you were as likely to be interviewed as anyone else. Surveys provided government with the means to by-pass Royal Commissions of the good and the great, notably during the 1960s when the *Plowden Report*, the *Crowther Report* and the *Radcliffe-Maud Report* all used surveys to make the case for modernization and reform with respect to education, the Civil Service, and local government. This almost messianic belief in the empowering role of sample surveys is evident in Catherine Marsh's (1982) still brilliant advocacy of *The Survey Method*. However, nowadays there is an endemic problem of falling response rates, which is often disproportionately found among the poor and marginal who do not want to be visible to government. By contrast, everyone who has a fixed address is arrayed to a postcode, and on the basis of this a vast array of data can be and – regardless of what we as sociologists think about it – is being, assembled. We are now seeing the return of a 'politics of population', which is not content to work with aggregated and anonymized indicators but is precisely concerned with the identification of individuals (see generally, Ruppert, 2007).

Some Implications

Richard Webber's piece is extremely valuable in allowing sociologists to reflect on the kind of challenges that 'complete data' on whole populations pose to social scientists. We are so routinized to the idea that we have to anonymize our sampled data that his point that, actually, people's names and addresses can be a rich research resource seems initially incredulous (although, in fact, there is a developing sociology of names to which his data closely speak, e.g. Janet Finch, 2008). Doesn't it shatter all our ethical beliefs about the need for anonymity and confidentiality? But the point again is that whatever we as academic sociologists think about confidentiality, actual social research – mostly led by private companies, but also by the government – feels no such qualms. They are precisely concerned to make households and individuals visible so that they can market and monitor effectively. Data is a commodity like anything else that can be traded, assembled, and used as a source of business intelligence. This is precisely the politics of researching 'whole populations'.

In this context, sociologists have the option of differentiating themselves entirely from these kinds of 'contaminated' data sources, sticking to their own tried and trusted methods and techniques, or seeking to get their hands 'dirty' by exploring the potential of such methods and the issues posed by their use. This latter strategy, we believe, does not necessarily mean deference to the market research or consultancy community; a process of selling our souls to the devil. It means instead taking up the cudgel of critical sociology, armed with sophisticated theoretical resources, to challenge the right of private companies to use informational data as they will and how they will. Currently, for instance, we do not know how robust the Mosaic postcode classifications are, or what precise algorithms are used in their construction. It also means engaging – in the spirit of the kind of 'public sociology' endorsed by Burawoy – with the data to produce alternative accounts that can then be made into interventions within the public arena. A good example is the fact that survey research is not a good tool to study elite groups, since by definition they are not a large group which is likely to show up on normal sample sizes (see Savage and Williams, 2008). However, studies of the characteristics of those who live in the most affluent postcode classifications can be one tool in making elites visible, and hence in questioning contemporary forms of inequality.

Here we find Webber's argument, that it is at least worth exploring how administrative data can be turned to sociological concerns, an invitation which we would like to accept (especially as it comes from someone who is located in the commercial sector). Webber illuminatingly examines how the address and name can be used to develop sociologically interesting findings even when data on an individual's social class, ethnicity and so forth are missing. It is worth underscoring the point we briefly made in the 'Coming Crisis' that this idea of not importing the standard sociological variables into our analytical repertoires is actually one which resonates with much recent sociological theorizing. Most visibly, Bruno Latour (2005) has argued against the value of 'depth models' in social science, and has argued instead for the need to develop an associational sociology which recognizes fluidity, contingency, and mobility. Arguably, the examples given by Webber indicate what this might mean in practice and also show that this need not mean that concerns with power and inequality are somehow jettisoned. Rather, taking up the arguments of Pierre Bourdieu, tensions are to be explored inductively, arraying them as if they are a field, and then seeking to interpret the relationships which are found without importing extraneous social variables reductively. We might also note that the long-held argument that it is vital to take space seriously can actually be practically, rather than just abstractly, elaborated through this kind of work, as Webber again makes clear. In short, our view is that much contemporary social theory would support the critical use of these new kinds of data sources.

With these points in mind, we can usefully respond to some of Rosemary Crompton's particular concerns. It is to some extent surprising that someone who has been critical of the exclusive use of survey evidence in the sociology of stratification (Crompton, 2008) should now be so keen to endorse its centrality. We certainly agree with her that surveys are and will remain important. However, it is their unquestioning and assumed superiority that we would indeed wish to question (as indeed, she has herself done in much of her important writing on stratification). Crompton notes that the use of the sample survey is not peculiar to sociology. This is true, yet at the same time sample survey methods played an especially central role in defining an important part of the discipline's identity in the years after 1945.[2] The sample survey, rather than the regional or local survey, was a means by which sociologists could differentiate themselves from anthropologists and geographers. The first Director of the Government Social Survey, Louis Moss, joined the British Sociological Association. Sociologists such as Carr-Saunders and David Glass played a key role in the elaboration of a modern 'sociology of population' (Osborne and Rose, 2008). It was the sociologist Chelly Halsey who was the chief proselytizer for sample surveys during the 1950s and 1960s. By contrast, economists were much slower to become interested in the potential of survey micro-data, and only psephologists within political science have shown much interest in survey analysis. An interesting indicator of this historically powerful alliance within the academic establishment is that the British Academy Section S4 combines Sociology, Demography and Social Statistics.

It seems that just as Rosemary Crompton (2008) has criticized Goldthorpe and his associates for relying on occupation as the one best measure of class, so she is concerned to argue that postcode should not necessarily be seen as an alternative best measure. This is a salutary warning which we certainly take to heart. We would further agree with her that measures of occupational class remain valuable and should not simply be discarded (indeed, for a recent exploration of precisely these issues by one of the authors, see Le Roux et al., 2008, as well as Bennett et al., 2009). In fact, this lies at the heart of our strategic point, that we need to engage more energetically to explore the relationship between different measures of class, and across different types of data. The extent to which postcodes are salient in predicting a range of indicators is certainly something which needs further assessment: it need not be assumed at the outset that they necessarily are. This being said, on the basis of more conventional survey and interview methods, we have both recently written (Savage et al., 2005; Parker et al., 2007) about what we call the 'spatialization of class' hypothesis, in which residential location is viewed as central to people's social identity (see also, from a USA perspective, the more populist recent interventions of both Bishop, 2008, and Florida, 2008). There is good sociological warrant for seeing place and location as very much tied up with questions of class, and we therefore see good reasons why we should take these interests further using geodemographic data.

Crompton's point that 'local specificities do not travel very well' is interesting to reflect on in comparison with Webber's article. What Webber shows is that this kind of data actually allows local specificities to be revealed in ways that are largely opaque within more conventional survey analysis, which normally depends on aggregated spatial areas. Further, that it allows us a means of going beyond the rather standard 'national comparison' tradition of survey analysis, championed for instance by Ronald Inglehart. Given that the critique of 'methodological nationalism' is now so strong (e.g. Urry, 2000), this is surely something which social scientists should welcome.

Rosemary Crompton's concern to defend causality raises a host of important issues, some of which we discuss elsewhere (Osborne et al., 2008; Savage, 2009a; Uprichard et al., 2008). We need to correct her reading, that we claim we need to move away from the 'sole focus' on causality. In fact, this was our summary of Pickstone's argument, in his historical account that there have been different 'ways of knowing', and that we should not assume that the analytical or causal method has any necessary supremacy. Having made this correction, it is certainly true that part of our concern to debunk the complacency of social scientists was to problematize the almost unthinking veneration given to 'causality' by rather provocatively arguing that description is important. Again, this is a view which several eminent social and natural scientists embrace (see the discussion in Savage, 2009a) and which should not be denigrated in and of itself. The main point is that it is not helpful to contrast description with causality, in which the latter is necessarily the dominant term. If we are interested in the potential of critical methods of thinking about causality, rather than invoke variable centred accounts, then we are drawn to concepts from field theory or complexity theory both of which problematize a clear differentiation between descriptive and causal forms of analysis. This is clearly an area where a lot more thought needs to take place (which we have begun exploring in the Anniversary issue of *The Sociological Review* 56(4): 2008). We hope that readers of *Sociology* will be keen to join us on this journey.

Notes

1 We are grateful to the editors of the *Sociology* special issue, John Holmwood and Sue Scott, for siding with the sympathetic referee!

2 This is our response to Liz Stanley's (2008) argument that sociologists have always been marginal to official circuits of social knowledge. Although this is often true, in the middle years of the 20th century in the UK, sociologists did play key roles in developing a politics of population and in intervening in key governmental arenas. See Osborne and Rose (2008), as well as Savage (2010 forthcoming).

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