

Introduction: Sociology as a Listener's Art

Our culture is one that speaks rather than listens. From reality TV to political rallies there is a clamour to be heard, to narrate and gain attention. Consumed and exposed by turns, 'reality' is reduced to revelation and voyeurism. The central contention of *The Art of Listening* is that this phenomenon is having severe and damaging consequences in a world that is increasingly globalized and where time and space are compressed. Listening to the world is not an automatic faculty but a skill that needs to be trained. This book is an attempt to think about what such training might include and how sociology could and should play a role in retuning our ears to the world. The question that *The Art of Listening* addresses is: how can we listen more carefully? Through a wide variety of examples, the book argues for an imaginative engagement with the social world, utilizing a range of media, verbal and non-verbal forms of representation. We need to find more considered ways to engage with the ordinary yet remarkable things found in everyday life. The scope of *The Art of Listening* ranges from the stories of desperate stowaways who seek asylum by hiding in the undercarriage of jet planes to young working-class people who use tattoos to commemorate lost love.

Many commentators have characterized modernity as an experience of distraction. In a variety of ways, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno emphasized that modern life scattered perceptions and fragmented experience. Adorno commented – in relation to the appreciation of music – that a 'regression in listening' had resulted in a kind of 'masochism in hearing'.¹ We become deaf not just to each other but also to the sounds all around us. In this opening chapter I will sketch out some of the main themes of the book. I will examine the role of sociology in offering a contrasting form of attention. This is a progressive listening in which hidden connections can be traced, providing new directions for thought and critique.

As the novelist Eudora Welty once put it, writing involves the process of listening *for* a story.² Such an imaginative attention takes notice of what might be at stake in the story itself and how its small details and events connect to larger sets of public issues. It is fed by sociological reading and a familiarity with sociology's toolbox of theories. Also, we are eavesdropping on the story

as partisans. The suggestion here is not quite the same as taking sides in research, an issue which has been debated at length in sociology.³ The listener's commitment to hearing places us on the side of the story from the outset. Yet, this is not a proposal for blind acceptance or unquestioning agreement. Being a partisan to the human story in all its manifold diversity does not exclude maintaining a critical orientation to it. As Eric Fromm pointed out in his discussion of psychoanalytic technique: 'Critical thinking is a quality, it's a faculty, it's an approach to the world, to everything; it's by no means critical in the sense of hostile, negativistic, nihilistic, but on the contrary critical thought stands in the service of life, in the service of removing obstacles to life individually and socially which paralyze us.'⁴

So, sociological listening is not simply a matter of transcription, or just emptying people of their expertise and wisdom. Unlike Fromm's psychoanalytic listening, it is not only about listening to one specific voice. It involves artfulness precisely because it isn't self-evident but a form of openness to others that needs to be crafted, a listening for the background and the half muted. Sociology has been diverted by an enchanted obsession with the spectacular, namely, the loudest voices, the biggest controversy and the most acute social concern. It bears remembering that the notion of the spectacular itself is a visual point of reference drawn from the Latin *spectare* – to watch. Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* talks about what he calls a panoramic exposition of being. This is produced in social encounters and embodied in the face of the other. Ultimately, he concludes, 'ethics is an optics'.⁵ Yet, ethics is not only about what is seen. *The Art of Listening* argues that thinking with all our senses can change our appreciation of ethics in a multicultural society. Also, I argue that social investigations that utilize a 'democracy of the senses' are likely to notice more and ask different questions of our world.⁶

Remarkable Things, Experts and Expertise

Some years ago a student gave me a copy of Jon McGregor's evocative first novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*. It tells of a street where the residents encounter each other closely, yet remain strangers. We often don't learn their names. One of the book's most compelling figures is a man with ruined hands. We never really find out why this loving father's hands are burnt beyond repair: we know his wife is dead, and we learn other details in passing, but most of his life remains opaque: he is the neighbour you see every day from the window, someone who is at once familiar and yet a complete mystery. Towards the end of the book he offers a lesson to his child:

He says my daughter, and all the love he has is wrapped up in the tone of his voice when he says those two words, he says my daughter you must always look with both of your eyes and listen with both of your ears. He says this is a very big world and there are many things you could miss if you are not careful. He says there are remarkable things all the time, right in front of us, but our eyes have like the clouds over the sun and our lives are paler and poorer if we do not see them for what they are.

He says, if nobody speaks of remarkable things, how can they be called remarkable?⁷

The man with the ruined hands knows his daughter doesn't understand him, but he wants to put these thoughts 'in the air' regardless. What I want to suggest is that sociology's task and challenge is formed somewhat in the same spirit. One key thread in all the subjects contained in this book is the attention to the hidden life of objects and places, the life that is either concealed within those objects or bleached from them by the formalities of power or the forgetfulness of conventional wisdom. It is a practice of scholarship that is committed to a profane illumination,⁸ of reading against the grain, which looks for the outside story that is part of the inside story.

I started out as an anthropologist, but I was more interested in what was going on at the local bus stop than some distant shore. The main ethic that I have carried with me from that training in anthropology is a commitment to engagement, of opening up a sometimes very uncertain space of dialogue and encounter with people in their ordinary circumstances of life. I guess I have practised what some people call an 'anthropology of the near', but I don't care much for the term, largely because of its attempts to make the commonplace ethnographically exotic.⁹ In 2002 I contributed to a conference on ethnography organized at the London School of Economics by my friend and colleague Claire Alexander. Ethnography is a style of social research that involves long-standing and intense participation in the cultural world being observed. A respected professor of sociology stood up and said boldly: 'the people are the experts in their own lives!' There was a murmur in the audience, not necessarily one of approval. I thought to myself, 'Hmm ... sounds good, nice radical gesture – the people are the experts in their own lives.' I started to think more carefully and came to a realization: being a professor of sociology is no necessary protection from saying utterly stupid things. If the people were experts in their own lives, love affairs would never end, we would never make mistakes, nor do things that injured our interests or did us harm. I am certainly not an expert in my own life, and who amongst us could make such a claim?

At the beginning of *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills characterizes the experience of modern life as analogous to a series of traps. Mills suggests that people are 'bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family,

neighbourhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators'.¹⁰ Far from being experts in our own lives, Mills argues that we are spectators, caught up in the web of history, imprisoned by the expectations of others. Published in 1959, the book is a stirring sociological manifesto and statement about the promise and potential of sociology. Mills evokes the atmosphere of an Edward Hopper painting. Hopper's characters appear similarly frozen in place, alone staring out of a window aimlessly, or isolated at work or in a train carriage, or simply motionless in the street. The task of sociology for Mills is to identify the larger social forces that furnish our most intimate private concerns, to translate the 'personal troubles' of biography into 'public issues' of history and society. This quality of mind, for those who possess it, 'often comes to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar ... Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again.'¹¹ I recognize that quality of astonishment that Mills writes about. It is the point at which we come to realize that the order of things is not a product of nature, but rather of history.

Mills names something powerful, but perhaps the scale has been transformed. In a world where there is increasing global interconnection in technology, and movement of information, there are ever more complex traps. The story of a young man whom I'll call Jonathan illustrates this profoundly. Jonathan lives in Anerley in suburban south London. He is twenty-five years old. He was living with his family in Uganda and studying for a degree in accountancy when his father – who was born in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) – came under suspicion for supporting rivals of the government and of using his transport business to traffic illegal goods across the border. Jonathan's mother was from Rwanda and he had a younger sister, who suffered from a kidney condition. They fled to France but Jonathan stayed behind because he needed to finish his dissertation and get his degree. He was 'interviewed' many times by the Ugandan police, beaten and tortured, but he stayed to collect his degree. He then joined his family in France using a passport that his father gave him. His parents later returned to Congo where they were both murdered. Leaving his fifteen-year-old sister with friends in Paris but promising he would send for her, Jonathan came to London. The immigration offices in Croydon, one of the southern suburbs of London, turned down his asylum claim first time around; they said his passport was a forgery. All he knew was that his father got his passport for him. He spent eight months in detention centres, moved from one to another. He then lived with a friend of his cousin whom he barely knew; he had been given her telephone number by a relative in the United States. She took him in even though he was almost a complete stranger. She told him that while he was in the detention centre his

sister had been taken ill and died. Jonathan sits alone in his room, he suffers from blackouts that sometimes last two or three days, and is haunted by feelings of guilt, trapped in an uncertain present. Some days he copes, others he does not. He has a letter that his sister wrote to him before she died and can't decide whether to open it or not.

The trap is not just a product of his individual choices. This sketch of a life reveals both the increasing interconnection of people and places – what we usually refer to as globalization – but also the thick lines drawn between people that determine who can move freely across the globe and who cannot. We can't understand these traps without understanding the wider political forces that structure the movement of people, as well as the definitions of citizenship and belonging. In order to make sense of this we need to develop a global sociological imagination subtle enough to prise open the public issues in these private troubles. Put simply, if asylum claims had been processed differently, Jonathan would have been able to see his sister one last time.¹²

My point is that the up-close worlds that people experience combine insight with blindness of comprehension and social deafness. Yet this does not mean that these up-close scenes are not worth taking seriously. Ulrich Beck refers to lived 'side effects' in 'the form of the farmer whose cows turn yellow next to a chemical factory'.¹³ These 'side effects', Beck maintains, 'have voices, faces, eyes and tears. And yet they must soon learn that their own statements and experiences are worth nothing so long as they collide with the established scientific naiveté.' He concludes: 'People themselves become small, private alternative experts in the risk of modernisation.'¹⁴ I may be labouring the point but this is not some authentic raw voice. Rather, it constitutes partial expertise that is nonetheless essential for those who care to take it seriously.

It is here too that we might start to think differently about the relationship between the observer and the observed and experiment with new forms of observation. This is particularly possible with the widespread and affordable nature of digital cameras and video and even mobile phones. Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment (VIA) based at Children's Hospital Boston provides a good example of a new kind of observation.¹⁵ VIA gives video cameras to young people, asking them to teach clinicians about the realities of their illness. The goal of VIA data collection is to obtain audiovisual documentation of the patient's day-to-day life experiences from the perspective of the patient, in the form of 'video diaries'.

Each VIA participant is loaned a lightweight, handheld video camcorder and asked to 'teach your doctor about your life and your condition'. Seeking honest portrayals rather than professional production values, a field coordinator instructs participants how to operate the camcorders, but does not teach film-making technique or visual style. Participants are encouraged to tell their

stories, taping anything and everything they feel reveals their lives, dreams, successes and frustrations. What is so striking in the narratives is the way they combine rich insight into unspectacular details of living with serious illness with a yearning to communicate with their audience. There is an intense sense that the participants feel that 'I need you to know this'. Participants grab the camera in the middle of a traumatic attack of breathlessness or a bloody coughing episode and record it.

Thousands of hours of video footage is painstakingly logged and then analysed by a multidisciplinary team including clinicians and social researchers. The expertise of the patient is made accessible to the clinicians, often challenging their medical practice. At the same time Jennifer Patashnick, coordinator of VIA, comments that the video data often raise issues about the gap between the patients' 'stated knowledge and their behaviour'.¹⁶ The videotapes reveal the patient doing things that hurt themselves, consciously and unconsciously, sometimes out of frustration within the confines of conditions such as cystic fibrosis or acute asthma. On other occasions their 'bad choices' are a matter of refusing to be governed by doctors and medical authority. The patient is both expert and neophyte simultaneously. This complex combination is what I want to suggest sociological listening needs to engage with.

Scientists or sociologists also have to accept that their view of the world similarly combines insight and blindness. To me, to develop a sociological imagination is to attempt to see and listen on both of these horizons simultaneously,¹⁷ to pay attention to both the insights and the blindness in the accounts of the people who live the consequences of our uncertain world, and at the same time have the humility and the honesty to reflect on our own assumptions and prejudgements. Borrowing Monica Greco's beautiful phrase, we must never become 'ignorant of our ignorance'.¹⁸ None of us is expert in our own lives in the sense that the Foolish Professor meant it. Rather, we all possess expertise and social know-how; it's just that the understanding contained in it is incomplete. Perhaps the difference between a professor and a bus driver is that the professor can say stupid things with complete authority while the bus driver is not authorized to make brilliant insights. The difference is of course not about the quest for understanding, but instead the socially determined forms of authority. The bus driver's up-close reading of everyday life contains something worth listening to, but equally this view may be partial or distorted by prejudgements. The same is equally true of the professor. The trick is to make those insights speak to each other in the service of understanding.

I want to propose that, in the half century since C. Wright Mills suggested we are little more than spectators in our own lives, something else intervened.

Through the proliferation of media in our informational society we have become *spectators in the lives of other people*.

Spectators in the Lives of Others

Many sociologists have examined the ways in which observation and scrutiny are tied to government, control and power. As Michel Foucault pointed out, the power of Jeremy Bentham's model prison was based on total surveillance in what he called a Panopticon (all-seeing) structure.¹⁹ Here the prisoner is constantly aware of being open to scrutiny. But the Panopticon was also an elaborate listening device: the guards could listen and look at the prisoners but the prisoners could not see or hear them. Those following Foucault paid close attention to how power works through knowledge, through scrutiny and through the creation of conditions of self that in turn control and self-scrutinize. This metaphor has been applied to a full range of modern techniques of power, including CCTV and the role of biometric techniques – for example, fingerprint examining and iris testing – in verifying people's identities, which is something at the centre of the Labour government's identity card legislation and immigration control strategy.

The Norwegian criminologist Thomas Mathiesen suggests that Bentham and Foucault's powerful metaphor of surveillance also coincides with another kind of structure. It is not just 'the few' who are observing, taping and keeping records on 'the many', but 'the many' that now watch and scrutinize 'the few'. This he calls a synopticon – all-watching – society. It is not only that Big Brother is watching us – recalling George Orwell's famous prophecy. Rather *we* are watching *Big Brother*. Reality TV or 'extreme TV' is perhaps the best example of mass spectating. Mathiesen argues that public executions of the eighteenth century become 'as spectacles, peanuts compared to the executions (real or metaphoric) on the screens of modern television'.²⁰ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood point out that these programmes become moral dramas where lines are drawn between good and bad behaviour, good and bad taste, good and bad husbands and wives, good and bad fathers and mothers with the help of the obligatory expert.²¹ The expert can take the form of the nutritionist in shows like *You Are What You Eat*, the beauty coach in the case of *10 Years Younger* or the psychologist in *Family Contract* (BBC1). As far as I know, a sociologist has yet to be included in these programmes. Experts routinely reduce their protégés to tears before they remake them in the required image. This is largely concerned with the assertion of norms of conduct and selfhood, against which the earlier 'bad behaviour' is judged. There is also the excessive impulse to observe others as well as oneself in the rash of reality shows.

The reality TV format renders the mundane and trivial as prime time spectacular actuality. The determining power of the form itself was exemplified by the appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* of self-styled political firebrand George Galloway. The Respect Party MP had gained national notoriety in Britain for his defection from the Labour Party and his victory in the May 2005 general election, winning the Labour stronghold of Bethnal Green and Bow constituency in East London on an openly anti-Iraq War ticket. He was drawn to *Big Brother* for the opportunity he thought it posed to speak in an uncensored way to a mass audience. Through the Respect website he claimed: 'I will talk about racism, bigotry, poverty, the plight of Tower Hamlets, the poorest place in England.'²² This was far from reflected in his almost three-week-long stay before the *Big Brother* cameras. The most enduring image was of him dressed in a skin-tight red cat suit, pretending to purr and lick imaginary milk salaciously from the hands of actress Rula Lenska. Reflecting on Galloway's naïveté, Stuart Hall commented that this was the result of his mistaken view that *Big Brother* is 'an authentic site of the popular and that one could go into it and pass a message to the outside in an untransformed way. And the form completely defeated him.'²³ Political egoists and B-List celebrities are easy prey for the format, but there is also something more troubling and destructive at stake in the 'many watching the few'.

Public life degenerates into little more than a contemporary equivalent of the Victorian freak show. Unlike the purposeful testimony offered by participants in the VIA Project which challenges the preconceptions of its viewer, reality spectacles like *Big Brother* lead to a kind of moral cannibalism where the viewer is invited to nourish their moral probity by consuming images of badness, crime, vulgarity and degeneracy. This is the reality of the headline, the spectacle splashed over our newspaper on a daily basis. Sometimes these include tales of real cannibalism: 'I've Eaten My Girlfriend' read the headline of the *Daily Mirror* on 7 October 2004. This horrific story tells of armed robber Paul Durant, who confessed to eating parts of girlfriend Karen Durrell's body after he murdered her in Spain. I don't want to minimize the male violence and the human tragedy of this case, but stories of this kind frequently seem to command the headlines; they become the topic of everyday talk and the hook on which moral folk wisdom is hung. Martin Amis calls this the 'obscenification of life'.²⁴

I offer these examples as snapshots of what I think of as harmful aspects of the public life of the mind. Partly, what I find worrying in this trend is the confident certainties with which judgements are made. In the world of reality TV, tough moral certainties produce a kind of auction of authoritarianism that is pervasive not only in popular media but also in political debates. In a sense, one of the values of the kind of sociological listening I want to argue for is the

importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity. As Barry Smart comments, sociological thinking involves 'the necessity of learning to live without inherited guarantees or securities and with a pluralism of images and narratives of action, rationality and value'.²⁵ We don't live in a world that suffers from doubt, but one that suffers from certainty, false certainties that compensate for the well of worldly anxieties and worries.²⁶

My hunch is that moral cannibalism produces a situation in which the worst is always expected. 'The white streak in our fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all around it as dark as possible' wrote William Hazlitt in 1826.²⁷ Here Hazlitt points to the pleasure of hating and perhaps this is why the 'bad insider' or the 'unwanted outsider' has become such an important moral emblem or limit figure in today's world. The asylum seeker is always bogus, the single mother always a scrounger and so on – condemnation produces the appearance of brightened fortune. It is not simply a matter of quarrying into people's individual secrets but rather of connecting those biographies with a wider history of social, political and economic relations, to make 'private troubles' connect with shared public issues and global concerns. The solution to those troubles is not in the quality of the individual self, but rather in the realm of vital shared life.

The next section of the chapter contrasts the 'reality rush' of journalistic accounts of social life with academic representations and sociological practice. How do sociological accounts measure up to the competing representations in public circulation and how can we reach for a sociology that is vital and alive?

Life's Portrait and Arendt's Pearl Diver

The measurement of social life is a staple obsession of the conventional mass media. From political polls to eating patterns and the auditing of sexual mores, each new 'fact' is commented upon, assessed and scrutinized like jewels that one day hold the promised preciousness only to be cast out the next as counterfeit. An extraordinary surfeit of data is produced through the insatiable desire to know the latest news from the frontline of everyday life. Even war is as much about the management of information as it is of military strategy and manoeuvre. In May 2006 the suicides of three detainees held as 'enemy combatants' at the US base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was described by US officials as a 'good PR move to draw attention'.²⁸ For the British Muslim, Moazzam Begg, who spent three years in Guantanamo, imprisonment without charge or trial in a state of suspended life places the prisoners: 'in a worse situation than convicted criminals and [suicide is] an act of desperation'.²⁹ It

is revealing that suicide inside the camp is re-inscribed as 'info-war' by the US military, akin to a propaganda suicide bomb.

Sophisticated techniques such as opinion polls or MORI surveys contribute to this profusion of information often taking in large samples and principally interview based. C. Wright Mills referred to these styles of enquiry as 'empty forms of ingenuity'³⁰ producing an 'abstracted empiricism'. Deploying an elaborated methodological apparatus, the abstracted nature of these accounts is normally reported in statistical summaries, assertions of proportion and cross-classification. For Mills, they result in thin insight both philosophically and socially. Sociology and sociological research are often placed in an ambivalent relationship to the excess of popular empiricism, either ignored entirely, or confined to a limited 'sound bite'.

Another style of empiricism that works in the opposite direction might be added to Mills' formulation. Rather than amalgamated patterns offered through numerical tables, 'intrusive empiricism' claims to know and judge the very soul of its subjects. It mines their secret failings, which in turn come to define the people scrutinized in this way. The journalistic exposé and reality TV ethnography crackle with controversy and are 'thick on empirical detail'. This intrusive salacious curiosity is aligned with the notion of moral cannibalism outlined earlier. These descriptions are so thick in detail that they occlude and hide what's at stake. They are by definition fast and produced with such swiftness that each is soon lost in a torrent of others. Intrusive empiricism is defined by revelation, occlusive detail, fast turnaround and an excess of 'data'. Although abstracted and intrusive empiricism are largely non-academic styles of fact making, academic research is not completely immune to it. However, what afflicts academic sociology is a counter-movement.

Portraits of the social world in academic sociology often seem *thin on empirical detail*. The sources of this syndrome are various. The high value placed on the usefulness and veracity of social theory moves the object of sociology away from embodied life towards the ethnography of ideas. Metatheoretical assessment emphasizing the re-reading of classical or contemporary theoretical treatises does not require an engagement beyond the library. The integrity of this style of work is beyond question, but it means that a sociologist can have a long and successful career without talking or listening sociologically to anyone beyond the seminar room or conference colloquia. The usefulness of theory lies in its ability to invite us to ask different questions of the social world. Hence the necessity and challenge to combine theoretical enquiry *and* empirical investigation in equal measure. The political and epistemological challenges to sociological authority also contribute to sociology's empirical deficit.

The inhibition with regard to describing others in social science is in part connected to critiques of the relationship between knowledge and power, or

what Anthony Giddens refers to as sociology's double hermeneutic. 'The point is not that there is no stable social world to know but that the knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable and mutable character' writes Giddens.³¹ The first part of this critique is the claim that sociology produces the object that it then proceeds to dissect analytically. Sociological methods here are not simply the keys used to unlock societies' secrets but actually create society in the process of understanding it. From a whole array of positions, including feminist deconstructionism and Foucauldianism, the sociological 'dream of omnipotence', to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, is brought into question. As Bourdieu suggests:

How can one avoid succumbing to this dream of omnipotence? I think it important above all to reflect not only on the limits of thought and of the powers of thought, but also on the conditions in which it is exercised, which lead so many thinkers to overstep the limits of a social experience that is necessarily partial and local, both geographically and socially.³²

Reflective frankness about the truths we claim brings inhibition as well as a benefit. Making the social world hold still for its portrait can seem like a gross violence, reducing its mutable flow to frozen moments preserved in the hoarfrost of realist description. Reading doctoral dissertations I am struck by an inhibition that students feel with regard to social description. As a result, little is offered to situate and describe the voices of the people that have been transcribed so faithfully on the page.

More often than not research findings are presented in the form of long block quotations from research respondents. These excerpts are expected simply to speak for themselves. The portraits of the research participants are sketched lightly if at all and the social location of the respondent lacks explication and contextual nuance. Sociological data is reduced to a series of disembodied quotations. This is a completely understandable consequence of trying to avoid what I have referred to as intrusive empiricism, but in the end the texture of the very lives we seek to render is flattened and glossed. Put crudely, the words of respondents will not carry vivid portrayals of their lives. American ethnographer Mitch Duneier makes this point: 'If you are going to get at the humanity of people, you can't just have a bunch of disembodied thoughts that come out of subject's mouths in interviews without ever developing characters and trying to show people as full human beings. In order to do that it is useful to have a character that lives in a text ...'³³ Put simply, quotation is not portraiture and it is the task of sociological writing to bring to life the people we work with and listen to.³⁴ For this reason I have used photography in this book both to enhance portraiture but also to communicate what

is outside language. This task need not involve a singular author or photographer but it does involve writing, representation, evocation and description. Duneier's work provides a very interesting model of shared sociological authorship and combining visual and written narratives.³⁵

The gesture towards more democratic forms of research practice may also contain ethical sleights of hand. Commonly today research participants are referred to as 'partners' or even 'co-workers'. Again, something very important is signalled in this move, namely a shift to dialogic or participatory forms of social investigation. Claiming that research participants are empowered through the research process conceals some of the inevitable unevenness of agreement, consent and participation. Similarly, researchers who claim a smooth passage to the ethnographic inside are fooling only themselves. Tacitly this kind of research ethos is coloured by the sentiment outlined by the Foolish Professor earlier. Even the most righteous researcher keeps a firm grasp on analytical control and sociological authority. Perhaps, abandoning radical pretence may be liberating and allow for greater candour about the limits of democracy in research and also, for that matter, in understanding and insight.

Taking dialogic methods seriously can sometimes lead to uncertain outcomes. One example comes to mind from a project on young people's notion of safety and danger discussed at length in Chapter 2. It concerned a young man called Lay. He was born in Nigeria and came to London when he was very young. He lives with his father, who is a security guard, in Deptford. Lay contributed to the project and submitted to the tacit forms of discipline involved in its exercises but his involvement was always playful. He promised to be involved but he never really participated. Faced with a series of researchers he subverted the ethnographic game. Initially he worked with my colleagues Lande Pratt and then Sarah Newlands. Both found it difficult to work with him; he was evasive and outrageously sexist. Lay was basically every researcher's nightmare. It got to the point where the research team said, 'we're just fed up with him, you deal with him!'

Lay had a lesson for us. Sometimes there is real value as a researcher in being made to feel a fool. Clifford Geertz describes this as one of the 'psychological fringe benefits' of being a researcher, it makes intellectuals endure the ridicule of others and particularly those people we have the impudence to write about.³⁶ I conducted the last interview. The purpose of the final session was to sum up the project and talk through issues that had emerged during the course of the year. The interview took place in the summer of 1997. Lay more or less submitted to the terms of the conversation. He said he'd enjoyed getting out of lessons but said such wildly disparate things that it was hard to gain any coherent account of what he felt about the issues 'we' were concerned with. In good dialogic style I ended 'Just to finish with, is there anything you

wanted to say but have not had an opportunity to?' Lay paused. With his hand he beckoned his white middle-aged interlocutor forward, as if about to whisper a secret. 'I hate white people', he said. Drawing his hand to his mouth in mock astonishment, he said: 'joke, joke'. Then again, 'They are buttock idiots ... only joking; only joking.' Lay is a trickster. He undermines playfully the implicit hierarchy between questioner and respondent. He fed us answers that would confound: for my female colleague it was sexist diatribes and with me he professed to 'hate white people'. In each case I think the words were hollow and their effect confined to the moral tableau of the 'interview' itself. True dialogue also means being open to the possibility that those involved will refuse to have dialogue or the participants whose integrity researchers so strenuously preserve may subvert the tacit rules of the ethnographic game itself. Lay helped identify some of our own illusions about or tensions within the project's participatory research design. We did experiment with the nature of observation through giving young people cameras and audio diaries. Nevertheless the young people produced the data and we wrote about it. Ultimately we fudged the issue of analytical authority which we held onto as researchers. In the end, admitting to the limits of dialogues in research is at the least a more honest way to proceed. Lay helped us face up to some of the delusion we entertained with regard to making the research process more democratic.

While cliché and 'fast food thinking' prevail in public discussions of social issues, one of the things that is precious about sociological judgement in contrast is its slowness of pace. I used to feel that this was a weakness. My sense then was that speed thinking or popular forms of research dissemination through journalism or media were necessary in order to make interventions on the public issues of the day. I now hold the opposite view. Of course this isn't always an affordable luxury. In areas of applied social science sociological production is incredibly fast where research reports and project evaluations have to be circulated to clients who require value for money. Equally, the research audit culture in European universities or 'publish or perish' tenure struggles in the United States mean that academics write in a climate of urgent haste that can affect adversely the quality of our endeavours. Not everyone is so keen to resist the hurry. There are plenty of academics who indulge in the temptations of punditry. I am not at all arguing for a retreat into the Ivory Tower, rather that attentive listening and sociological judgement takes time. A recent example comes to mind, which illustrates this point.

It was just a week or so after the 7 July 2005 London bombings. Many friends and colleagues were struggling to comprehend the significance of these events. The fact that the bombers were 'home grown', seemingly very ordinary young British Muslims, caused dismay in the media leading some to say that Britain's multiculturalism was the cause of the problem. The imminent threat of a

racist backlash loomed. By a coincidence an academic conference was scheduled to take place on Muslim masculinities just a few days later. Some of the organizers were keen to seize the opportunity created by the aftermath of the bombings in order to garner greater media attention and coverage. Others felt more ambivalent about the prospect of speaking so soon after the bombings and as a result several sociologists pulled out of the event. 'I feel like I need time to really think about this' a friend told me. 'All the things I felt certain about the state of British society are now not so clear.' Choosing silent reflection over premature guesswork, my friend was one of the contributors who withdrew and I think she made the correct principled decision. If sociology is to have any value it is in the insistence on reflective thinking sceptical of the way the meaning of such disasters is claimed by politicians and public commentators. The deliberate pace of scholarly work is to be cherished for its time-consuming craft and the opportunity it provides to point to the things that cannot be said otherwise. 'Not the least valuable thing about the reflection and thought that takes place in a university is that one has time to do it', wrote Edward Said.³⁷

To sum up, the non-academic and academic accounts of social life discussed here can be formulated as a pair of ideal types. The non-academic is defined by its focus, often intrusively, on uncovering scandalous revelations, thick on occlusive detail but containing truths that have short time spans. Contemporary academic research is characterized by its slow pace, cautious reflection and theoretical elaboration. The cautious sociologist can unwittingly end up producing accounts of social life that are thin on description, relying heavily on their informants' words to stand in for their portraits. There are strengths and weaknesses in both styles. This is reminiscent of the distinction made by Walter Benjamin between *commentary*, or the uncritical relay of information about the material of life, and *critique*, which interrogates myths, elisions and the enigma of life itself. For Benjamin this is analogous to the different orientations of the chemist and the alchemist to a burning funeral pyre. The chemist is concerned only with the wood and ash, while the alchemist focuses on the enigmatic energy of the flame itself. 'Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.'³⁸

Put crudely, the central claim of this chapter is that sociology should cast itself against the forms of *intrusive empiricism* and *moral cannibalism* widespread in the mass media. The ethos of sociology in contrast prizes patience, commitment to dialogue and careful and reflective claims to truth. The challenge for sociology, like that of the alchemist, is to develop a critique that captures life's light and heat. If the society of information produces an empirical surfeit, how should we as researchers relate to the profusion of talk and text, image

and sound? What kind of attention should be paid to the ash and flame? This raises questions emerging from some of the classical debates about the analytical status we give interview data or what kinds of truths we are looking or listening for.³⁹ My concern here is a different one, namely how the development of a sociological imagination also necessitates the art of discernment or a capacity to sift through the piles of information.

In Hannah Arendt's essay on Walter Benjamin she characterizes him as a 'pearl diver' who 'descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to the light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface'.⁴⁰ The empirical depths collected on life's surface cannot be described entirely. It is a matter of finding amid the profusion of informational debris 'thought fragments' that are the equivalent of the pearl diver's treasure. They do not illuminate the whole ocean floor, but rather they shine with histories and memories that have been transformed by the sociologist's craft.

Sociological listening is tied to the art of description. This is the kind of careful evocation described by Clifford Geertz in his notion of 'thick description'.⁴¹ Drawing on the philosophical writings of Gilbert Ryle, Geertz argued for the type of description that is microscopic and yet concerned with rescuing the content of social life 'from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms'.⁴² Thick descriptions of life are always interpretative and do not merely attempt to mirror a simple obdurate reality. They are selective and discerning but also require imagination and creativity. In W. G. Runciman's *Treatise on Social Theory*, he places great emphasis on artful description: 'it is no more a vice in sociological description that it should be literary than it is a virtue that it should be literal'.⁴³ It is the mutual implication of theoretical imagination and empirical detail that distinguishes the kind of description being suggested here. Conceptual and theoretical work should not climb to a level where the voices of the people concern become inaudible. Rather, theoretical ideas and concepts hover above the ethnographic ground in order to provide a vocabulary for its explication. This is a kind of description that is committed and dialogic but not just a matter of 'letting the research subjects speak'. It is informed by a commitment to patience, accuracy and critical judgement. Thick descriptions produced through deep sociological listening are ones that theorize as they describe and describe as they theorize.

A sceptical reader might ask who this listener is. What kind of presumption is being made about the attentive listener's social background? Is it not the modest witness, or the old 'man of science', characterized by Donna Haraway as the authorized ventriloquist, endowed with masculine humility and the temperament and power to establish the facts? 'He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his

objectivity', writes Haraway.⁴⁴ The listener here is not cast in such a form. Rather, sociological attention need not hide its authority in false diffidence; it is historically situated, reflective, contestable, uncomfortable, partisan and fraught. It can be exhausting and sometimes the sociological ear is simply full and the listener needs time to reflect for a while. In the first instance, the invitation to listen more is issued to sociologists and sociological researchers but it can be extended to include activists, journalists, artists, scholars, publics and even, perhaps, politicians. Its sense of purpose is best summed up as an attempt to remark upon the unremarkable, evidence the self-evident and relate the troubles contained in the smallest story to a larger, more worldly scale.

Private Troubles, Worldly Problems: Summary and Structure of the Book

Before moving on to introduce the structure of the book, I want to return to the nostrums of C. Wright Mills and in particular his invitation to turn 'personal troubles into public issues'.⁴⁵ My argument is that in the twenty-first century the quality and scale of these troubles have been transformed in ways that Mills could not have imagined. In particular, the shape of public life with all its troublesome elements does not fit into a stable local or even national entity. The challenge of sociological thinking is how to work in a post-national context where the nation state can no longer remain the prime container of sociological analysis. Put simply, 'the here' of any sociological problem or personal trouble is almost always connected to things happening beyond the boundaries of the nation. Michael Keith calls the connectedness the 'elsewhere of place and the global familiar'.⁴⁶ These connections are not as productive or positive as the twentieth-century court poets of globalization imagined.⁴⁷ Indeed, much of the discussion of globalization that took place in the 1990s has been overshadowed in the new century by the imperial project enacted by American interests in the name of the 'war on terror'. Indeed, the work of writers like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Paul Gilroy emphasizes both the emergence of new empires and the continued disruption of the present by the legacy of old ones.⁴⁸ As much as the here also contains the elsewhere, the now also contains the legacy of the past.

The scale of global sociology is precisely an attention to the implication of our most intimate and most local experiences in planetary networks and relationships. Sociological listening is needed today in order to admit the excluded, the looked past, to allow the 'out of place' a sense of belonging. This is not some quick or blithe or romantic 'one world' ethos in which the

wretched are listened to and heard. I am suggesting something much more difficult and disruptive: a form of active listening that challenges the listener's preconceptions and position while at the same time it engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard. It also means entering into difficult and challenging critical dialogue with one's enemies as well as one's allies.

In a sense, the task is to link individual biographies with larger social and historical forces and the public questions that are raised in their social, economic and political organization. It is the search for remarkable things that are otherwise not remarked upon. John Berger commented recently on how the parameters of public discussion are limited to the not too distant past and the near future.⁴⁹ A global sociological imagination offers the possibility of refiguring the relationship between the past and the present and the near and the far. The past refuses to stay in its place that is behind us, it is unstable. Equally the present cannot simply explain what is past from the point of the now. Rather as Walter Benjamin points out, 'Then and Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning'.⁵⁰ Those flashes contain insights and sociological gifts.

Similarly, I am arguing for a rethinking of the relationship between the near and the far. Georg Simmel wrote that the position of the stranger is constituted by what he called the 'synthesis of nearness and remoteness'. I think of Jonathan riding the bus through Penge while the other passengers sitting next to him have no sense of his transcontinental story. Simmel also argued that this union of closeness and remoteness is part of every human relationship: 'one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is also near'.⁵¹ This oscillation between the near and the far is to my mind the scale of global sociology. It is not just between people and places – it is also within us. Our own biographies contain the traces of a global history whether or not we are conscious of it. As C. Wright Mills pointed out over a half a century ago, we are also strangers to ourselves.

In the following passage from Hannah Arendt's *Essays on Understanding* we can hear the echo of both Benjamin and Simmel. For her, it is imagination that enables us to navigate our way through and this links back to Mills' sociological invitation. She writes:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.⁵²

Sociological listening involves such a movement between the boundaries of the personal and the public. As I have tried to show in this chapter it is important

to reflect upon the ways in which the personal troubles are made into media spectaculars and the harsh judgements that can follow from this. Consequently sociological listening needs to protect itself and those we listen to from such forms of violation. Nirmul Puwar puts the challenge in this way: 'How do we listen amid the risks of enacting symbolic and epistemic violence? How do we listen without objectifying and anthropologising the local global?'⁵³ Each of the following chapters attempts to answer this question and offer ways to engage with the social world through sound, vision and touch. Perhaps, one starting point in avoiding the violations identified by Puwar is to insist that our accounts are always incomplete.

'Reality is always more clever than the philosophy that impotently wishes to reflect it. That is why enlightenment is no seamless doctrinary construct but rather the constant illuminating dialogue that we are obliged to construct with ourselves and others' writes Jean Améry.⁵⁴ A survivor of the Nazi death camps, Améry ultimately is a defender of a vision of Enlightenment thinking, reason and logic even in the face of barbarism and the perversion of modernity that produced the camps. 'The light of the classical Enlightenment was no optical illusion, no hallucination. Where it threatens to disappear, humane consciousness becomes clouded. Whoever repudiates the Enlightenment is renouncing the education of the human race.'⁵⁵ What I find appealing is that he tried to defend humanism and the legacy of classical Enlightenment. His notion of radical humanism is summed up as a commitment to reason and logic and a clear-eyed unsentimental reflection on the kind of human beings we have become.

This resonates with an idea of sociology as part of this movement towards education and the significance of scholarly endeavour in the process. However, as Paul Rabinow has also argued, the daring light of the Enlightenment is at once arrogant and humble: 'It is arrogant in so far as it acts for humanity with the confidence that it is right; it is humble in that enlightenment is an infinite project whose achievement lies in the future.'⁵⁶ We cannot any longer claim to act for humanity with such certainty. Rather, it is necessary to think again about the variegated relationship between near and far and what it means to think on a global scale without the presumption of certain knowledge and the forms of arrogance referred to here.

Jonathan Crary points out in his book *Suspensions of Perception* that our practices of listening, looking at, or concentration on things are implicated in grids of power and knowledge and as a result are deeply historical in character. He describes a moment of suspension: 'a looking and listening so rapt that it is an exemption from ordinary condition, that it becomes a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time.'⁵⁷ I want to argue something similar in relation to sociological attention that is both situated in time and place, fixated on the

object of attention and yet at the same time ungrounded, mobile and characterized by imaginative movement through the past in and of the present. This is what I have tried to do in this book. While I have foregrounded listening sociological attention is not limited by it. As Margaret Mead commented, it is not confined only to a 'science of words' and or what I referred to earlier as mere transcription.⁵⁸ Rather, sociological attention involves a mode of thought that works within and through a 'democracy of the senses'.⁵⁹ It is for this reason that the accounts, while arguing for listening, also move between visual, aural and corporeal registers.

One of the ordinary virtues of sociology is its attention to making the familiar strange or to *evidence the self-evident*. The protagonist of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* describes himself as a 'Columbus of those near at hand'⁶⁰ and there is something in this that I think applies to sociology. Bellow, after all, has a degree in anthropology but, more relevantly, what I am suggesting is the training of a mode of attention in which the relationship to time and change might be apprehended and lost. The lives described in this book are now out of date and my attempts to apprehend them sociologically are like relics of a world that has already passed. Their time – that of the people discussed and described – moves faster than my capacity to apprehend it.

Each of the substantive chapters of *The Art of Listening* focuses on one issue, or a social phenomenon, drawn in most cases from London's cultural and political life. The intention here is not only to put forward an argument about immigration, racism or the modalities of love but also to exemplify a particular approach to sociological craft. In Chapter 1, a global sociological imagination is applied to contemporary debates about migration and mobility. Challenging the ways in which the notion of the 'immigrant' and 'asylum seeker' is framed at the level of politics and policy, it focuses on the experience of those people who are trapped, often fatally, at the border. In Chapter 2, urban boundaries and exclusions are discussed through an analysis of how young people navigate safe and dangerous places. Through a discussion of the *Finding a Way Home Project* it points to the ways in which 'observation' can be reinvented or rethought in social research. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which emotion and love are inscribed on the body. Here, working-class tattooing provides an example of affinities and expressions of love that operate outside speech and elaborated forms of language and where sociological listening and attention is not merely concerned with what is said. In Chapter 4 a street portraiture project conducted in London's East End offers an example of what might be called 'listening with the eye'. This chapter explores the potential that photography offers dialogical forms of research in which the look and the photograph become a gift that can be reciprocated between researcher and research participant. A photographic exhibition provided an opportunity for participants, photographers,

sociologists and local people all to be present in the discussion of its findings. The final empirical chapter discusses the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 London bombings. In particular it argues for the role that sociological listening might play in challenging the political copyrights that have laid claim to the meaning of these attacks and also their significance for British multiculturalism. The book concludes with a summary of the main arguments and a discussion of writing and the nature of scholarship itself.

I have argued that sociology is best envisaged as a listener's art and in this chapter I have sketched some of its qualities and contrasted them with news journalism and the pseudo-realities of extreme television. My own attempt to practise this art is demonstrated in the remaining pages of this book.

CHAPTER 1

Falling from the Sky¹

Bomb alerts are common at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) in Croydon, south London. Among the high-rise office blocks the Home Office administers immigration policy, constituting one of the largest employers in this part of the city. In 1938 George Orwell characterized southern England as 'the sleekest landscape in the world'.² Croydon at this time was a place of suburban somnolence and tranquillity. Orwell pondered:

the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policeman – all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.³

It was not just the howl of Nazi 'doodlebugs' that disturbed the suburban peace. The bulldozers and jackhammers tore away its fabric as the intense pace of the post-war reconstruction and urbanization erased and remade the landscape.

The 'redevelopment' of Croydon started in 1956. At the time central Croydon was also a place of nascent teenage rebellion. 'The youth of Croydon were notorious', remembered Jamie Reid, who grew up in Shirley:

The place was full of gangs: Pretty Boys, Cosh Boys and early Teddy Boys. Teenagers hung around the city centre and its coffee bars: for the price of a cup of coffee, they could sit around in a Lyons' Corner House all Saturday. They would parade the streets in their drapes: this was their patch. It was obvious that this sort of thing had to stop and the authorities found the perfect justification in one single incident.⁴

The 'incident' was the murder of a policeman on the rooftops of Croydon. The botched robbery involved Christopher Craig and Derek Bentley, both from Norbury. Craig had fired the fatal shot but because he was under age

Epilogue: The Craft

A few years ago I was invited to talk to a group of PhD students who had set up a kind of support group, a place to share ideas but also to invite speakers to come and talk about their research. On this occasion I was the invited guest speaker. I had finished my PhD over ten years before, but the anxiety in the room was all too familiar. We took our seats around a large circle of desks. The young scholars fished out pens and notebooks from their bags and readied themselves for the session. Looking at each other furtively, we exchanged smiles like wordless greetings. The chair of the session asked everyone to introduce themselves and say, in one sentence, what their PhD was about. I watched the contorted expressions on their faces as each graduate student struggled with this deceptively innocent form of torture. I racked my brains. What should I say? My heart started to palpitate in the way that it does at moments like this. Then it was my turn. 'My name is Les Back and I am a recovering PhD student.'

In this final part of the book I focus on the craft of scholarship and its challenges, perils and rewards. These reflections are aimed particularly at young scholars who are facing up to the prospect of doctoral research. Practising scholarship means having to cope with awkward questions. These are sometimes focused on your research, but they can come in a variety of forms. On the one hand, there is the presumption that study and the 'life of the mind' is akin to one long vacation. Here the university library is viewed as equivalent to a beachside holiday camp where students lay about all day reading books and drinking cocktails. PhD students in particular have to endure endless jokes about watching day-time TV and comments like: 'It must be nice not to work' or 'What do you do in the afternoons?' On the other hand, a PhD can seem to the outsider like a jail sentence. 'How long have you got to go?' they ask sadly as if referring to the days until release. The intention here is also to discuss the quality of sociological life and outline some controversies about scholarship, including those relating to academic language and the ethics and nature of criticism. Before moving on to these important topics I have a confession to make.

One of the reasons why I finished my own PhD was because it became something of an addiction: it was going to finish me, or I was going to finish

it! It took me much longer than it should have to complete my thesis. Graduate research students in my generation who studied during the 1970s and 1980s simply didn't finish. In fact, while many had been registered, no one had ever 'completed' a doctoral thesis in the Department of Social Anthropology at Goldsmiths College where I studied. Then one day my PhD supervisor, to whom this book is dedicated, said to me: 'Someone has got to finish and you are the closest!' So, it's a bit rich really that I am reflecting here on the things to do and the things to avoid in doctoral research. My conscience tells me I am not quite the right person to offer advice. I guess I did, in the end, finish but certainly not in an exemplary fashion.

I have, however, supervised many students to the successful completion of their doctorates and I read a lot of theses, having acted as an examiner for over seventy. At any given moment there are at least two bound volumes peering at me from across my desk. As I write this now four blue tomes are there in my peripheral vision pricking my conscience. I am not sure why I get asked so often to act as a reader and examiner. Sometimes I flatter myself with the idea that this is a reflection of respect and academic standing. Although I suspect I have a bit of a reputation for being a bit of a 'soft touch' academically and this is perhaps a more accurate explanation for the frequency of such requests. Regardless, each invitation is a compliment.

The first criterion for a student choosing or nominating a potential reader is that the examiner should *not* be a self-absorbed egoist. An academic whose first impulse is to gut a thesis for references to themselves in the bibliography would be automatically ruled out on this count. The second criterion is to avoid mercurial personalities and 'academic psychopaths'. This can seriously limit the field of potential candidates, but the last thing any students needs is to catch such a personality structure on a bad day. The ideal reader of a thesis is – to my mind – someone who will be critical but fair. So, whatever way you look at it, being asked to be an examiner is a compliment. It is one of the most pleasurable things in academic life to say at the end of a sometimes long and tense viva, 'Congratulations Dr ... we are recommending that your thesis be passed subject to minor typographical changes.'

Reading theses can also be an education beyond the specific content. Contained in each – positively or negatively – are insights into the form of the thesis itself as a particular kind of writing. Every time I read a thesis or have a PhD supervision meeting or attend a seminar with a group of postgraduates I add something else to this list of tips. So, what I have to offer you is a compendium of insights gathered as a bystander who has watched other people complete their PhDs with more grace and efficiency than I did my own.

Your PhD is a Career

I want to begin by quoting an extended passage from John Berger, which I mentioned very briefly in the previous chapter. It is taken from his book *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*:

What separates us from the characters about whom we write is not knowledge, either objective or subjective, but their experience of time in the story we are telling. This separation allows us, the storytellers, the power of knowing the whole. Yet, equally, this separation renders us powerless: we cannot control our characters, after the narration has begun. We are obliged to follow them, and this following is through and across the time, which they are living and which we oversee.

The time, and therefore the story, belongs to them. Yet the meaning of the story, what makes it worthy of being told, is what we can see and what inspires us because we are beyond its time.

Those who read or listen to our stories see everything as through a lens. This lens is the secret of narration, and it is ground anew in every story, ground between the temporal and the timeless.

If we storytellers are Death's Secretaries, we are so because, in our brief mortal lives, we are grinders of these lenses.¹

Berger is an art critic, a novelist and storyteller, a poet and writer of stunning proto-ethnographic documentary books. There are a number of things that I want to draw out with regard to sociological craft from this beautiful piece of prose.

Writing a PhD has a relationship to time in the way that Berger describes it. A thesis is also an exercise in storytelling. The people we listen to – what we call 'informants' in the trade – are like Berger's characters: we are the narrators who are outside of their time. This is a useful way of thinking about authorial responsibility: we are the authors and the lens grinders. In part the challenge of a PhD or any sociological study is: (a) to set up the framework for what we know, the structure of knowledge, usually referred to as epistemology; and (b) to establish a claim to what we see and hear through this epistemological lens or sensor. So the first thing I want to invite is an examination of the relationship between thinking, listening, writing and time.

Doing a PhD is about beginning a career, but not in the usual sense of the word. I don't mean the shallow vocationalism that government bodies like to encourage in the form of research training schemes and transferable skills. The notion of career that I want to focus on is not as a noun, that is to have a career, as a possession. Rather, I want to use career as a verb to describe intellectual movement, a kind of passage or pathway in thought. Each year of study is a particular type of journey: it has a departure and a destination.

In a crude sense the timetable for a full-time student looks something like this:

Year 1. Qualifying courses in 'research training' often involving advanced quantitative and qualitative method, specialist course that coincide with the student's research topic and a pilot study in which research techniques are applied.

Year 2. Read and review literature relevant to the proposed research, writing short papers and planning and refining your research strategy.

Year 3. Conduct research, draft thesis chapters and other materials for the MPhil/PhD upgrade viva voce sit the upgrading viva exam.

Year 4. 'Writing up', finalizing the thesis draft, nominating external examiners, entering your exam entry form, sitting the viva.

So there are stages and particular sets of issues that relate to each part of the PhD career. The sociological path can be frustrating. The extensive range of qualifying courses in research methods can seem like a futile distraction. Michael Burawoy comments:

A typical graduate student, perhaps inspired by an undergraduate teacher or burnt out from a draining social movement – enters graduate school with a critical disposition, wanting to learn more about the possibilities of social change ... There she confronts a succession of required courses, each with its own abstruse texts to be mastered or abstract techniques to be acquired ... It is as if graduate school is organized to winnow away at the moral commitments that inspired the interest in sociology in the first place.²

Maybe so, but the situation described here by Burawoy is the effect of the globalization of an American model of graduate education. In the face of this, graduate students do retain their moral and political commitment despite everything that may threaten to diminish them. Sometimes the sheer scale of challenge of PhD research and writing can seem overwhelming and daunting. If you feel overwhelmed, I think the best way to stay on the path is to concentrate only on the next step.

What I want to suggest now is that there are things you can do to keep your project moving forward. I've tried to formulate these ideas as a series of aphorisms. They are just things that I've found myself saying and thinking over and over again, they are things that seem to make sense to me and that I've tried to use as the basis of my own craft. So, read them as offerings of consolation

from a fellow traveller who is still recovering from the malaise that scholarship inflicts upon us.

Ten Aphorisms

These are not commandments, I am not Moses and neither is anyone else. There is no formula; there is no equivalent to an 'intellectual colouring' book where you just fill in the blank pages of the thesis according to some pre-given palette of elements. There are lessons, there are common pitfalls, there are some things to be wary of, but, like scholarship itself, creative thinking does not involve any simple technocratic set of rules. The first thing I want to say is trust the blind energy that makes you keep working on your project.

1. Trust Your Own Interest

I am thinking here of the mysterious desire that keeps your attention focused, that keeps you looking up the next reference or wanting to do another interview. This interest is often opaque. Don't be thrown by the obscure or diffuse nature of what keeps you passionate about what you are doing. The indulgence of individual inquisitiveness is part of what is precious about doing sociological research. Also, the feeling that 'something isn't quite right' in the world, or, as Rachel Dunkley Jones put it recently, 'a sense of uncertainty about the things that everyone is so certain about' provides one kind of warrant for sociological investigation.³ For the best and most interesting research questions are there to be identified in these uncomfortable and edgy curiosities.

My doctoral research took me over seven years to complete, albeit as a part-time student. There were long periods when I was pretty sure that I didn't know what I was doing. It wasn't until I got to the end that I realized I knew all along what I was doing, it was just that I wasn't always aware of it. Your curiosity and intuition is a good guide and part of the challenge of scholarship is to train it so as to accumulate insight and understanding along the way.

2. Keep a Ledger of Your Thinking

The thing about ideas is that you can't will them to come. I am reminded of the great Dustin Hoffman movie *The Little Big Man*. The film adapted by Arthur Penn from Thomas Berger's novel of the same name stars Hoffman as Jack Crabb, the only white survivor of the Battle of Little Big Horn. Hoffman's character is taken in by an Indian band and schooled in their ancient tribal philosophy and culture. His adopted grandfather is very old and tired of life. He asks his

grandson to accompany him to the ancestral burial grounds. There he summons death and calls the spirits to take him. At the climax of an elaborate funereal soliloquy he lies down, closes his eyes and waits for death. After about five minutes he opens one eye, looks around startled and disappointed. He dusts himself off, gets up and says to his confused and relieved grandson: 'Am I still in this world?'

'Yes, Grandfather', says Jack Crabb.

The grandfather groans: 'I was afraid of that. Well, sometimes the magic works, sometimes it does not.'⁴

Academic work is like this. Sometimes the 'magic works', the ideas flow and then a few days later you can be pulling your hair out. Then in the middle of a creative drought you will be doing something else – shopping, being out on the town, or in the middle of a completely unrelated conversation when you should be paying attention to the person in front of you – and an idea will arrive. My advice is to be ready for this unexpected visitor. Carry a notebook all the time and keep a record of these ideas. You need to devise a system to record how your thinking evolves over time. C. Wright Mills referred to this as the practice of 'opening a file'. This is a place to arrest 'fringe thoughts', be they the by-product of an overheard conversation or stimulated by reading a novel or an idea that comes while daydreaming. Mills wrote: 'By keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflexive habits, you learn how to keep your inner world awake.'⁵

The other thing that I do which I think is a good habit – although it is not something I have advertised until now – is keep a notebook of new words or phrases. Don't just pass over words whose exact meaning you don't understand. Make a note, look them up later and expand your vocabulary. The temptation is just to pass over words you half know, but greater precision will improve both your understanding and expression.

3. Read Promiscuously with an Open Mind

I've never understood academics who claim to have stopped reading, or who say they 'don't have time to read'. I always think secretly when I hear this: 'if that's true, you're in the wrong business'. Reading is essential and I think it is important to be reading all the time. Read everything, read promiscuously, you never know where you'll find good ideas. Read inside your discipline and outside it. Read popular articles, novels, poetry – you can find a good turn of phrase in unexpected places.

Reading is the basic tool of sociological craft and I think we are always reading in at least two ways. The first is reading for ideas, leads – this is reading for the content of what is being communicated. The second is reading for style of argumentation and rhetoric. Here I am thinking of rhetoric as the

art of persuasion, not hollow sloganeering. The point is to read for tone and the aesthetic quality of the writing. One thing that I think is a really important and difficult problem is how to combine empirical and analytical elements in written argument. Learn from the ways other people resolve this dilemma.

Part of the challenge of a PhD is learning a new genre of writing. A PhD thesis has a different quality to an essay, a conference paper or journal article. It is not just a matter of expressing the content of your ideas or the things you have encountered but to become the author of book-length arguments. You have to learn to carry a coherent argument over 75,000–100,000 words. This involves learning the form as well as discovering the content and I want to return to this and the issue of form shortly.

4. Don't Become Addicted to the Library

Some pieces of theoretical or archival work can be entirely library-based. More often than not, your PhD will involve the generation of new primary research material. While I want to recommend you read widely, be suspicious of the false comforts of The Library. I want to call this the *perils of bibliophilia*. There is a wonderful short story by Jorge Luis Borges called 'The Library of Babel' in which he tells of a hellish search to find the one book that will unlock the secrets of an immense library.⁶ The curse in the story is that the search is eternal and doomed. The lesson in terms of sociological craft is that you won't find a book that will solve the problem that your thesis is concerned with because such a book remains to be written ... by you.

Bibliophilia also carries the danger of being dazzled by the aura of the latest explosively brilliant text you've read. This can sometimes result in inertia. 'I can never write anything as good as that, so I won't bother writing anything at all.' As much as I love the library and books, I have to tell you that you won't find the answers to the questions you want to pose there. What you will find on those musty shelves, and on pages that are yellowed by time, are other people's answers. This is an important distinction to make. One student told me recently that she found this observation profoundly depressing. Looked at another way it is also an opportunity and a calling.

Often a sociological thesis involves some level of empirical research in the form of interviewing people, surveys or participant observation. I often find myself saying to students at the end of their research: 'You won't find your thesis in the next book you read, you'll find it in your interview transcripts and your field note books.' There is a temptation when writing the initial chapters of a thesis to foreground the work that is already there in the library. This results in the deferral of argument or what might be called a *back loading*

syndrome. You can look at the table of contents of a thesis and spot this right away. Doctoral students often feel that they have to rehearse the arguments of everyone they have ever read before they say anything themselves. As a result a thesis can contain two or sometimes three literature review chapters. You simply don't need to do this. The result is that the contribution that you are making gets squeezed into the last few chapters and original insights do not have enough space to breathe. Your review of the literature needs to be purposeful in that it should show where the concerns of the thesis are placed within the intellectual landscape. It also needs to direct the reader to the gap in the existing literature that you aim to fill. It doesn't have to be exhaustive but it does have to define the intellectual agenda of the thesis. Otherwise the words of others fill your mouth like a kind of academic gag, making it very hard to find your own voice. Bibliophilia can stop you clearing your throat. I always think that you need to begin writing from your own individual concerns from the very first sentence of the thesis.

5. *Don't be Afraid to get Close to the Thing You're Trying to Understand*

Open yourself to the issues at the heart of your work and also to the people you work with. Raymond Williams wrote that: 'a writer's job is with individual meanings, and with making these meanings common'.⁷ This process of shuttling between the individual and the common is reminiscent of C. Wright Mills' sociological appeal to make 'personal troubles public issues'.⁸ It involves getting close, sometimes closer than is comfortable.

All researchers can feel a real sense of trepidation when it comes to beginning their research, particularly if this involves having to contact 'live people' who talk back. Just making a phone call can feel like moving a giant inert rock. If you suffer from this – and I certainly still do – I think it is important just to push yourself. Contact people without worrying too much, no commitment is necessarily binding and every choice can be changed. But you have to make a start in order to find out what is interesting and which leads are blind alleys.

Getting close to something also carries dangers, so be mindful of the specific risks involved in your project. Several years ago I was involved in a project on football and racism and received a concerted campaign of hate mail and harassment. If those pieces of hate mail had come in my mid twenties I wouldn't have been worried about them. I would have brushed it off as the twisted activities of a crazy right-wing maniac. But I had a six-year-old daughter at the time and my biggest fear was that she would pick up the phone one day and hear a tirade of racist bile. Get close, but also think about the risks of being open and getting close.

6. *Don't Become a Fieldwork Junkie*

The paradox of field research is that once you've made the sometimes terrifying leap into the messy daily realities of people's lives, it can seem almost impossible to give them up. There is always something else to do, another lead to follow up. This is the 'one more interview' syndrome. Remember it is not the quantity but the quality of what you write about that matters. One of the frightening things about doing a PhD, or a book, is that only a fraction of the empirical material you collect can be included. So, don't stay in the research phase longer than is necessary. Trust your supervisor's advice when s/he says 'You've done enough.'

This leads us to the next and perhaps biggest challenge, namely the writing of the thesis itself. We often talk about writing up research as if it is some kind of automatic process. PhD students are said to be in the 'writing-up stage' as if it were some natural phase in the postgraduate circle of life. There is nothing natural or automatic about writing a PhD thesis. In fact, it is – dare I say – profoundly unnatural to subject oneself to such forms of tortured isolation. I would like to propose you start writing from the very beginning and get into the habit of writing. Now, no one can bash out 2,500 words day after day. However, it is possible to make yourself write a little all the time. It is as much about a sense of being constantly engaged with the challenge of writing, as it is the production of useable or enduring prose.

7. *Embrace the Challenge of Becoming a Writer*

Academic writers are often little more than figures of fun. Derided for the opacity of our jargon-filled books, we swim often unnoticed at the shallow end of the literary pond. To some degree it is our own fault because it seems that, to be a serious academic, you need to be a seriously bad writer. Anthropologist Brian Morris commented in his inaugural lecture in 1999: 'I try to write in a way that is lucid and readable ... I am continually rebuked for this and told to write in an academic style, that is with pretension and in scholastic jargon, for in academia, obscurantism is equated with intellectual profundity. This I refuse to do.'⁹ Russell Jacoby takes this a step further when he suggests that: 'academics invariably note that clarity is repressive, which becomes the standard alibi for half-written and sometimes unwritten prose.'¹⁰ Jacoby and Morris are absolutely right to admonish academic authors who often confuse 'being clear' with 'simplistic thinking'. Or, conversely, conflate 'being opaque and obtuse' with 'sophistication and insight'. However, there is also a case to be made for the importance and usefulness of complex writing and – dare I say – a literary value in academic style.

Sometimes difficult and abstract language serves a purpose. I think it is important to defend the necessity of this kind of writing. The two figures that loom in my mind around this issue are Theodor W. Adorno and George Orwell. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno makes a strong case for the necessity of difficult abstract language. 'The logic of the day, which makes so much of its clarity, has naively adopted this perverted notion of everyday speech ... Those who would escape it must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate.'¹¹ The insistence on communicability results in the betrayal of critical thinking. Common sense does little more than conserve the status quo. Feminist philosopher and critic Judith Butler, who has been pilloried for her difficult prose style, cites Adorno in her defence. She argues that the utility of 'unlovely' academic words is in the challenge they pose to common sense and in helping to 'make our way toward the politically new'.¹² So, there is a point to difficult language as the medium through which to express difficult and challenging ideas.

In contrast, George Orwell's extraordinary essay 'Politics and the English Language' offers a powerful critique of the corruption of language.¹³ I try to read it at least once a year. Orwell takes to pieces the language of totalitarian propagandists alongside a critical assessment of the writing of academics of his day like Professor Harold Laski who worked at the London School of Economics. 'If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should know better' wrote Orwell in 1947. My feeling is that we have to insist on having both Adorno and Orwell at our elbow as we write. Complex writing is necessary but so is clarity and the virtues contained in each can be debased. Pristine clarity or abstract complexity is no protection from writing truly awful things. James Miller points out that there is a further paradox in Adorno and Butler's defence of subversive difficulty. 'Does this mean that Adorno's and Butler's most challenging ideas, precisely because of their relative popularity among a not-insignificant number of left leaning intellectuals, have lost their antithetical use value and, by the infernal logic of exchange, been alienated and perhaps even dialectically transformed – turned into something hackneyed and predictable?'¹⁴ Miller argues that if we accept Adorno's logic then this conclusion is inevitable.

Writing a PhD is a literary event. The next question is: what kind of literary event is it? Russell Jacoby writes in his book *The Last Intellectuals* that the planning and execution of a doctoral thesis for young intellectuals is:

the cultural event and context of their lives. When completed it could not be ignored; the dissertation became part of them. The research style, the idiom, the sense of 'the discipline', and one's place within it: these branded their intellectual souls. And more:

the prolonged, often humiliating effort to write a thesis to be judged by one's doctoral advisory and a 'committee' of experts gave rise to a network of dense relations – and deference – that clung to their lives and future careers. Even if they wished, and frequently they did not, the younger intellectuals could not free themselves from this past.¹⁵

The PhD thesis, for Jacoby, is the equivalent of a 90,000-word literary suicide note. I do not share the view of this doomsayer. Neither do I accept that the acknowledgement of a great mentor or the intellectual craft of other academic writers necessarily condemns one to compliance or uncritical quietism. Writing a thesis marks the birth of a writer of book-length arguments. It does not necessarily determine the quality of that writer's work forever in the manner suggested by Jacoby. It is a place to try out ideas and experiment with thinking.

Crafting a thesis or a book involves finding an aesthetic or a style that you feel comfortable with. I study the style of the writers I admire the most, adapt and assimilate some of the 'tricks of their trade'. A successful PhD candidate, who is now a commissioning editor of a large academic press, wrote this advice in an email: 'The only piece of advice I'd give is write 500 words a day. Make yourself do it from day one.' The written word is our most basic tool and we need to be using it all the time as part of our routine. The novelist Stephen King makes a similar proposal in his book *On Writing*. An aspiring writer, King suggests, should set an achievable word target each day.¹⁶ Set a target and when you have met the target get up and do something else. Before leaving your computer always have the next thing that you want to write prepared, so as to make starting the following day easier. If you can do this on a routine basis the word count soon mounts up. If you do not start now the whole business of 'writing up' will loom like a large dark cloud on the horizon.

The best book I've come across that addresses these issues is Howard Becker's wonderful *Writing for Social Scientists*.¹⁷ There are hundreds of excellent tips alongside humorous reflections contained within its pages. I also find author memoirs good places to find inspiration as well as insight into the nature of their craft.¹⁸ Before ending I want to list a few observations or suggestions that relate to a thesis or sociological monograph. The first of these is start with questions and do not end with new ones. As a reader it can be very irritating to arrive at the concluding passages of a thesis only to be confronted with a new series of questions. A thesis requires answers, proposals, arguments this is why it is called – a thesis! So don't fudge the issue of taking a position by importing a new series of questions at the end. Equally, do not introduce key concepts at the end of the thesis. The place to define the conceptual toolbox of a thesis is in the literature review. If you introduce a major new

theoretical problematic or conceptual framework in the last few chapters a thesis can start to implode and crumble from the inside.

Don't rely on the reader to write your thesis for you. A related tendency in thesis writing is to defer the argument or to make it implicit. Remember the average examiner is overstretched, overcommitted and reading on the run. You don't want to alienate them or make them work hard to connect the elements within the overall thesis. Also, don't assume that the reader knows the literatures and key concepts you are working with. Sometimes PhD candidates are anxious about spelling out things that appear basic. Rather than insult their examiner's intelligence, they simply assume that the august reader will know about whatever detail is in question. I think it is better to run the risk of overstating your argument than leaving your point of view implicit or underwritten.

You need to keep directing your reader and it is useful to write into the text intellectual signposts that stop the reader from getting lost, or feeling that they cannot see the point of what they are reading. The thesis needs to have clear threads that unify and connect the chapters, and your argument needs to accumulate with each chapter. The temptation – particularly writing the early chapters – is to make all your big arguments at once. Sometimes the first chapter you write contains all the elements of the entire thesis. The trick is to pace the argument and this is very difficult to achieve. At best a thesis, or indeed a book, has the meter of a drum roll that builds and builds, getting louder and louder, until it reaches the intellectual equivalent of a final crash of cymbals.

I'd like to end this discussion with a comment made by one of my favourite writers, Primo Levi, who wrote: 'He who does not know how to communicate or communicates badly, in a code that belongs only to him and a few others, is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him. If he communicates badly deliberately, he is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labour, anguish, or boredom on his readers.'¹⁹ Whether we can avoid boring our readers is a moot point, but as a first principle we should try to avoid alienating them.

8. *Don't Carry the Burden of Originality*

Much is made about PhDs being an original piece of research. This expectation can be a real burden. In truth there are very few – if any – theses that are completely original. Like musical figures, ideas are borrowed and recombined. The novelty is in the combination, the particular insights and the counter-intuitive nature of the things that people say when we listen to them. So, don't

carry the burden of originality, follow your curiosity and your intuition: it will lead you to uncharted forms of thinking.

9. *Don't Try to Judge Your Own Work*

The sense of trying to establish the worth of what you've done can lead to intellectual paralysis. Let others decide. That's what your PhD supervisor is for, and ultimately, this is the function of your examiners. Just try to do your work to the best of your ability and let the reader be the judge. Do as much as you can and move on. Don't get mired in self-doubt because we can never really judge the quality of our own work because we are simply too close to it.

Scholarship necessitates responding to criticism and comments from our readers. In order to get the best out of ourselves we need to be open to constructive criticism. This is not always easy. I still recall the terrible sense of dread I felt studying the comments made by my supervisor on early drafts of my PhD. Looking at the pages slashed with red ink was almost physically painful and analogous to a kind of bloodletting. As my supervisor corrected the grammar and sentence structure she scribbled slogans of protests – 'jargon', 'unclear', 'turgid', 'meaning?' On one occasion she took her red pen to a passage that was in fact a quotation – almost page length – from a famous Marxist sociologist without realizing it. This was not an oversight on her part. She was a brilliant supervisor and a careful and thoughtful reader. She alerted me to the fact that in attempting to emulate a convoluted academic style I had lost sight of what I aimed to communicate. Scholarship requires responsible criticism but often we are confronted with rash dismissive remarks or clever jibes made in bad faith.

In a seminar academic allies can turn up like a visiting athletic team ready for a match. A kind of 'sports intellectualism' ensues where dialogue and argument is sidelined and discussion degenerates in an intellectual fixture. The most undermining question is celebrated among intellectual teammates with a series of metaphorical 'high fives'. In the end, this isn't about struggling to think about complex ideas or arguments, it is rather a matter of scoring points and deciding the contest's outcome. This raises broader issues about the nature and ethics of criticism. Criticism can serve as a means to bolster or enhance the critic's moral or political position. Criticism of this kind does not necessarily involve dialogue; all it needs is an opponent. The effect can be devastating to the person being criticized in this way.

After the publication of *White Collar*, C. Wright Mills received a particularly nasty review by Dwight Macdonald. In the early 1950s Macdonald was trying to distance himself from his left-wing friends. The review was damning but

contained hardly any reference to the content of the book itself. In a letter to his editor – William Miller – Mills wrote: ‘I can’t conceal that it hurts ... Doubtless I’ll get over it, but the thing temporarily incapacitates me. There’s only one question that seems important to me, and I’d be very grateful if you’d answer it: Can I learn anything from this review?’²⁰

The expectation behind Mills’ comment is that criticism is connected to learning and intellectual growth. Mills is so troubled by the review that he writes to Macdonald. ‘I don’t mind criticism if I can learn from it ... The only thing you left me to do is: close up shop.’²¹ Mills asks his former friend to prepare a constructive and practical critique and invites him to visit for dinner. The letter continues with a careful list of directions for Macdonald to follow for his journey from New York City to Mills’ country home in Pomona, New York State. The care taken over the detailed directions is warm, inviting and oddly hospitable for an author who has been so bruised by the guest he is inviting. The prelude of civility comes to an end with sharp words: ‘You’ll enjoy the country air, you ignorant, irresponsible bastard!’²² Needless to say Macdonald did not take up his invitation.

Jonathan Swift wrote in 1704 that he who ‘sets up to read only for an occasion of censure and reproof is a creature as barbarous as a judge who should take up a resolution to hang all men that came before him upon a trial’.²³ There is plenty of ‘censure’ and ‘reproof’ in academic life. The wide use of anonymous peer-review by publishers and journal editorial boards seems to encourage this kind of thing. Academics can indulge in intellectual sectarianism and snobbery hidden safely behind the curtain of anonymity. Brian Morris concludes in his brilliant critique of the abuses of anonymous academic reviewing that referees’ comments are often arbitrary, contradictory and rather inane.²⁴ So, a young scholar cannot take for granted that s/he will receive fair and consistent criticism. Faced with academic criticism the question posed by C. Wright Mills seems to me to be the right one, namely: ‘can I learn anything from it?’ Criticism is integral to scholarship and being open to criticism challenges us to think harder. Unthinking approval or uncritical applause is of little use, as Pierre Bourdieu commented: ‘truth isn’t measured in clapometers’.²⁵ You need to find an open-minded but critical reader whose judgement you can trust. Ideally your supervisor should fulfil this role, but most sociological writers rely on the critical view of at least one loyal critic who isn’t afraid to give an honest appraisal.

10. Have Faith in the Value of What You are Doing

Be comforted by the fact that there is real but elusive value in what you are doing. It is easy to lose sight of this. There is real value in completing a thesis

or a book, a value that is beyond financial or professional calculation. It is to be found in the moment when each writer finds his or her own voice, enriching the stories that we tell about ourselves and the world in which we live. To me there is something miraculous in this. Too often our own projects and literary endeavours feel useless or worthless. While one’s critics make their presence felt all too keenly, it is much harder to measure the silent approval of the readers who find value in our writing.

A graduate student who completed her thesis in 2004 told me a very moving story that illustrates the point I want to make here about the value of intellectual work. Her name is Emma Nugent. Her research is an ethnographic study of a magazine company and focuses on the ways workers are expected to be ‘creative’ all the damn time. Here some workers are described as ‘The Creatives’ to signal this emphasis. Before beginning her research, Emma had been a graphic designer but she left the company because she found the workplace suffocating. ‘Put downs’ and professional gaming had become integral to the culture of work. Emma returned to the company as an ethnographer to try to make sense of this place sociologically.²⁶ At the end of the project she gave her thesis to a friend to read, a professional proofreader, who had also worked at the company that formed the basis of the study. She wanted her friend’s help to try to make the thesis as readable as possible. When the corrected draft was returned, the proofreader said: ‘reading this has helped me forgive myself for that episode in my life’. That one unexpected comment vindicated Emma’s whole project and showed the value of what she had achieved. The fact that her thesis passed without any corrections is a minor detail by comparison. Emma’s story reminded me of Pierre Bourdieu’s claim that sociology is a martial art: ‘Like all martial arts it is to be used in self-defense and foul play is strictly forbidden.’²⁷

Dancing and Wrestling

When your research is going well it is a good dancing partner. When it is going badly it feels like you are being thrown around in some terrible intellectual equivalent of a wrestling match. You can’t see your opponent but you feel the force of their presence. The thing is you can never quite know when you are going to be dancing, or when you will be wrestling with your work. So, I think, it is best to be prepared for both, all the time.

Also, be prepared for a crisis of nerve, the sense that what you are doing is worthless or adds nothing to the existing literature. The thing is books lie, and so do theses. It is always a good idea at the beginning of your project to go and get half a dozen theses out of the library, a random sample. Truth is their

quality is really variable: there are stunning ones, competent ones and also quite a lot of mediocre ones. Between the words and pages are hidden torments and moments when the writer's spirits were low. Be comforted by the knowledge that the hidden ruins of confidence are there regardless of whether or not the author is willing to acknowledge them. George Orwell commented that: 'Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness.'²⁸

You will move on to other things and new interests but the problem with scholarship is that the completion of a project always lags behind the horizon of our interest. As a result we are usually thoroughly sick of what we are doing by the time we have to share it with anyone else. This is not an individual failing but part of scholarship itself. So do not worry if you get sick to death of your thesis because it is almost certainly a sign that you are moving closer to completing it. When you have polished and honed it, until you cannot read it any more, it is time to let it go and submit it to the glare of your examiner's attention.

Your PhD is the end of your formal induction into scholarship. I think it is really important to remember that it is your first piece of work and not your last. You do have to finish it and the thing that can be overwhelming is the sense that what you are doing is inconsequential. In contrast to the elegant pronouncements of other people, our own work can seem like a banal footnote. As I have already argued I think it is important to suspend personal judgement. Nikolas Rose pointed out, quite rightly, that there is a paradox at the heart of scholarship. A PhD, or for that matter a professorship, is judged to be an individual achievement. Yet, scholarship is a collective endeavour produced through the exchange of many tips, leads and hunches. Also, academic work is always conducted through reading the ideas of others, dialoguing with scholars both living and dead and sometimes contesting the veracity of their ideas.²⁹ I think one way to respond to a crisis of nerve is to be comforted by the knowledge that one is not doing sociology alone. We have the companionship of thinkers and writers who have struggled with similar problems. This larger project is summed up by Zygmunt Bauman: 'Doing sociology and writing sociology is aimed at disclosing the possibility of living together differently, with less misery or no misery: the possibility daily withheld, overlooked or unbelievably. Not-seeing, not-seeking and thereby suppressing this possibility is itself part of human misery and a major factor in its perpetuation.'³⁰ Do your work to the very best of your ability and then let it go to take its place within that greater sociological conversation about the possibility of living otherwise.

Notes

Prologue: Kierkegaard's Ruse

1. John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 38.
2. Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 103.
3. Dave Harper, 'Psychology and the "War on Terror"', *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 4 (2004): 1–10.
4. Following Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).
5. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 219.
6. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).
7. Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills (eds), *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 136.
8. Vron Ware and Les Back, *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). I don't mean to imply that this book is itself an example of ponderous prose and it was written out of a similar aspiration to the one being described here.
9. George Orwell, 'How the poor die' in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Volume 4* (London: Penguin Books, 1970 [1941]), pp. 261–72.
10. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 7; see also Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 65.
11. See also discussion of Kierkegaard's formulation in Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, p. 65.
12. César Vallejo, *The Complete Posthumous Poetry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978), p. 15.
13. Michael Young and Lesley Cullen, *A Good Death: Conversations with East Enders* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 198.
14. Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 36.
15. Derrida, 'Circumfession', p. 37.
16. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Phillip Roth's memoir *Patrimony: A True Story* (London: Vintage, 1999) is haunted by a similar double bind. Roth admits that this beautiful elegy is compromised by the fact that he had turned his father's illness into a literary muse even before his death from a

- brain tumour: 'in keeping with the unseemliness of my profession, I had been writing all the while he way ill and dying' (Roth, *Patrimony*, p. 237).
17. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 210.
 18. Bellow's comment forms the *leit-motif* of Martin Amis's book, *Experience* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 202. Amis never cites the source of the quotation. When he visited Goldsmiths in 2003 I asked him where Bellow had made the remark. Ever the name-dropper, he replied dismissively: 'Oh, I think it was in conversation.'
 19. Elizabeth Ford Pitorak, 'Care at the Time of Death', *American Journal of Nursing* 103, no. 7 (July 2003): 42–52.

Introduction: Sociology as a Listener's Art

1. Theodor W. Adorno 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression in Listening', in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 49.
2. Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
3. See Alvin Gouldner, 'The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State', *American Sociologist* 3, no. 2 (May 1968): 103–16 or more recently Michael Burawoy, 'For Public Sociology', *American Sociological Review*, 70, no. 1 (February 2005): 4–28.
4. Eric Fromm, *The Art of Listening* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 169.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: Essays in Exteriority* (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p. 29.
6. Following Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The Third Ear: On Listening to the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1985), p. 32.
7. Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 239.
8. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings: Volume 2 (1927–1934)* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 207–21.
9. Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
10. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 3.
11. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 8.
12. Since the time of this portrait – May 2005 – Jonathan has been deported.
13. Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), p. 60.
14. Beck, *The Risk Society*, p. 60.
15. For more details: <http://viaproject.org/>
16. Jennifer Patashnick 'Understanding Illness from the Patient's Perspective: Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment (VIA)', Redesigning the Observer: Live Sociology Seminar, University of Manchester, 30 April 2006.
17. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed Ward, 1975).
18. Monica Greco, 'On the Vitality of Vitalism', *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, no. 1 (2005): 15–27.
19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).
20. Thomas Mathiesen, 'The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited', *Theoretical Criminology*, 1–2 (1997): 231.
21. See <http://www.beonscreen.com/uk/user/all-reality-tv-shows-documentaries.asp>
22. 'Galloway gives his reasons for taking on Big Brother', *Respect: The Unity Coalition*, <http://www.respectcoalition.org/?ite=960>
23. Laurie Taylor 'Culture's Revenge: interview with Stuart Hall', *New Humanist*, March/April (2006): 16.
24. Martin Amis, 'Reading from "Yellow Dog"', Richard Hoggart Lecture, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 9 December 2003.
25. Barry Smart, 'Sociology, Ethics and The Present', *Thesis Eleven*, Number 30 (1991): 143.
26. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 2000).
27. William Hazlitt, 'On the Pleasure of Hating', in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Selected Essay of William Hazlitt* (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1944), p. 244.
28. 'Guantanamo suicides as "PR move"', BBC News On-Line <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5069230.stm>
29. 'Guantanamo suicides as "PR move"'.
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1 Falling from the Sky

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